Telstra submission to the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group Discussion Paper – First Nations digital inclusion roadmap

PUBLIC VERSION

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Executive Summary

Telstra welcomes the chance to contribute our thoughts on the valuable Roadmap[1] the Advisory Group[2] is working on. We see great potential for the Roadmap to guide genuine progress towards the goal of First Nations people having affordable and reliable connectivity to phone, internet, TV and radio services so they can access the information needed for everyday life, which all Australians deserve.

If we were to call out just one thing as being foundational to the Roadmap, really moving the needle on Closing the Gap Target 17 (**CTG17**) – it would be **effective collaboration**. Achieving CTG17 needs collective problem solving. No organisation can deliver equality in First Nations digital access, affordability, and ability on its own. Communities, governments, industry, and others all need to start working better together than we ever have before.

We also endorse the shift in focus the Advisory Group have proposed to "*moving from Closing the Gap to innovation and excellence*". CTG17 is a means to an end. It is necessary to achieve Outcome 17 and it is an enabler for other important Closing the Gap targets, such as those relating to health, education, employment, justice, and the protection of First Nations culture. CTG17 is also key to ensuring First Nations people and communities are well equipped to **adapt and thrive into the future** as technologies and our world continue to change.

> "*If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.*" Lilla Watson[3]

Lastly, it is important the design and implementation of the Roadmap initiatives is **done in the right way**, reflecting the wisdom and experiences of First Nations people gained through 60,000+ years. This means establishing genuine partnerships with First Nations people and communities. And it means tailoring initiatives to reflect and learn from the unique local practices, needs, aspirations, and environment in each place and in each case. Benefitting not just First Nations people, but all of us.

Summary of Recommendations

In the body of our response, we outline a number of other practical suggestions the Advisory Group may consider as it develops the Roadmap. For ease, these are summarised below:

1. Clarify the five Principles are designed to **guide how** the goal of the Roadmap is achieved and understood.

2. Include the role digital inclusion plays **as an enabler** for other Closing the Gap targets (as a key component of the Principle "*moving from Closing the Gap to innovation and excellence*").

3. The Roadmap should recognise the **importance of place-based approaches.** It may also make sense to include **some "umbrella" style initiatives** designed to uplift national digital inclusion.

4. Above all, the Roadmap needs to form the **centrepoint of an aligned approach across Government** on First Nations digital inclusion policy and the delivery of relevant programs.

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[1] [roadmap-discussion-paper.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au)](roadmap-discussion-paper.pdf)

[2] First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group

[3] Words used by Lilla Watson*,* Aboriginal elder, activist and educator from Queensland, Australia - [About | Lilla: International Women's Network (wordpress.com)](About | Lilla: International Women's Network)

5. Plans in the Roadmap should **reflect the wisdom and experiences of First Nations people**, such as placing value on building relational connections in community.

6. The Roadmap should be aiming to find solutions that **complement the Universal Service framework,** rather than becoming a part of it.

7. We suggest consideration is given to **legislative amendments** to enshrine a First Nations voice amongst those proposing solutions in future **Regional Telecommunications Reviews**.

8. We support the recommendations in the Initial Report to improve the national **collection and use of data about First Nations digital inclusion**. This is essential to assess progress towards CTG17 and the impact of Roadmap initiatives; and to prioritise resources amongst initiatives. As part of our contribution to this, Telstra has committed further funding in FY25-28 to support continued Mapping the Digital Gap (**MtDG**) research.

9. There may be merit in the Advisory Group **establishing a telco infrastructure working group** where data on the current state of access and access improvement options can be pooled, to help inform future infrastructure co-investment/investment planning.

10. The Roadmap should use the **methodology from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII)** to measure and understand digital inclusion, supplemented with **additional metrics** in light of the **MtDG research.**

11. The ADII measures three aspects of digital inclusion: (1) access (2) affordability and (3) digital ability. We recommend the Roadmap describes these outcomes as is done in the simplified Discussion Paper, but adds in a reference to phone calls and messages and to affordability of access to TV and radio, as these are also key to CTG17:

    "Digital inclusion is about:
    - *having access to <u>phone calls, messages</u>, the internet, radio and TV*
    - *being able to afford access to <u>phone calls, messages</u>, the internet, <u>radio and TV content</u>*
    - *having the skills needed to use the internet and online services."*[4]

12. In the initial years, we recommend the Roadmap is largely focussed on **bringing the Initial Report recommendations to life,** including through **test and learn pilots.**

13. The recently announced $68 million of funding in the 2024-25 Budget on measures to support First Nations digital inclusion[5] is a very positive move. Telstra **welcomes the proposed measures**. We are delighted to be able to support the new network of digital mentors (Measure 3), with committed funding from 2025-2028 to support a National coordination Hub for the mentors.

14. Achieving **equality of access** to fit for purpose telecommunications infrastructure for First Nations communities will not happen without significant effort and expenditure. Industry absolutely has a role to play here, including through the use of efficient new technologies such as LEO satellites and by upgrading legacy 3G mobile services. But policy makers working on the Roadmap need to **understand the investment challenges** the telco industry in Australia faces, and to play their part in creating a positive investment environment. **Ongoing**

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[4] See original text at <u>roadmap-discussion-paper-simplified.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au)</u>, p. 1.
[5] See details at: <u>First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group First Nations Digital Inclusion Measures—5 June 2024 (infrastructure.gov.au)</u>

government co-investment support is also vital, through well designed programs that use public monies wisely.

15. We believe that **collaboratively developed guidelines** to streamline processes to protect cultural heritage sites when it comes to **deployments and upgrades** could result in more efficient and effective outcomes for First Nations communities.

16. The Roadmap offers a key opportunity to improve affordability of digital access through **collaboration to tackle some of the current root causes of unaffordability.** For reasons including convenience and portability, connectivity preferences are likely to stay centred around data usage via the pre-paid mobile network. But this shouldn't be due to barriers to take-up of other options, which could be more suitable. In this regard:

    a. We support the industry LEO satellite working group recommendation to "*Identify and remove barriers to providing* **pre-paid satellite internet services** *to consumers*" and suggest the Roadmap includes further work towards this goal. Alongside the ongoing service cost, the **upfront cost of the equipment** for LEO satellite services may be an additional barrier to take-up. Here, there may be a role to play for government.

    b. We support the Initial Report recommendations to **improve access to media content** through **existing broadcast channels** and Viewer Access Satellite Television (**VAST).**

    c. We welcome the recently announced Government initiatives to **extend access to free community Wi-Fi** to more communities. Telstra is also extending our rollout of free public **payphones equipped with free Telstra Wi-Fi.** We look forward to seeing details of the Government's contestable community Wi-Fi program. Telstra Purple has a public Wi-Fi solution in market designed to serve remote communities.

    d. In some cases, services that require power to the premises could be more affordable and suitable for community needs than mobile services or community Wi-Fi. We support the Initial Report recommendation for **power insecurity in communities** to be raised with state and territory Ministers as a factor hindering achievement of CTG17.

17. The Roadmap should include initiatives to help improve awareness of how communities can **protect themselves from scams and cyber risks**, and from **harmful online content**, supported by the new First Nations Digital Mentoring Network and First Nations Tech Hub.[6]

18. The Roadmap could potentially showcase, as examples of **fostering the First Nations communications and digital technology sector**, our First Nations call centre, and community call centres owned by First Nations organisations and staffed with local people**.**

19. The Roadmap might include a potential **opportunity for industry** (through a First Nations led body like the Centre for Appropriate Technology (**CfAT**)), to create a **shared pool of skilled, place-based resources.**

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[6] See details of Measures 2 and 3 at: First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group First Nations Digital Inclusion Measures—5 June 2024 (infrastructure.gov.au)

Contents

1. Key principles for the Roadmap

1.1 Purpose of the Roadmap

Telstra welcomes the clear and practical way in which the purpose of the Roadmap has been described in the simplified Discussion Paper[7]:

> "*A roadmap is a plan that shows how to get to a goal.*
>
> *Our goal is for First Nations people to have affordable and reliable access to phone, internet and TV and radio services to enable them to have access to information needed for everyday life.*"

Telstra also supports the five key guiding principles (**Principles**) for the Roadmap set out in the full Discussion Paper.[8] We consider it vital there is a **laser focus** on achieving the primary purpose of the Roadmap, and recommend it is clarified that the Principles are designed to **guide how** this goal is achieved and understood.

1.2 Future proofing communities

Of the five Principles, the one that resonates most for Telstra is "*moving from Closing the Gap to innovation and excellence*". Closing the Gap Target 17 (**CTG17**) is a means to an end. It is necessary to achieve Outcome 17, where First Nations people can make informed decisions about their own lives. It is also key to **future proofing First Nations communities**, ensuring First Nations people and communities are well equipped to adapt and thrive as technologies and consumer preferences change over time.

Related to this, towards the end of the full Discussion Paper[9] it is mentioned that digital inclusion can function **as an enabler** for other important Closing the Gap targets, such as those relating to health, education, employment, justice, and the protection of First Nations culture. We suggest including this as a key component of the Principle "*moving from Closing the Gap to innovation and excellence*".

Potentially, the expanded Principle could be revised to read as below:

> "**moving from Closing the Gap to innovation and excellence**: *future proofing First Nations communities. Using the power of digital inclusion to achieve other Closing the Gap targets and ensuring First Nations people and communities are well equipped to adapt and thrive as technologies and consumer preferences change over time. Doing this by fostering an empowered First Nations communications and digital technology sector and providing opportunities for enhancing technical skills, innovation and development within communities.*"

1.3 A coordinated, holistic, place-based approach

Achieving CTG17 means improving digital inclusion for First Nations people all over Australia – in remote communities, regional areas, small towns, and cities.

Telstra agrees with the commentary in the full Discussion Paper that this will not be achieved through a "one-size-fits-all" approach. We support the guiding Principle for the Roadmap to recognise the

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[7] roadmap-discussion-paper-simplified.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au)

[8] roadmap-discussion-paper.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au)

[9] roadmap-discussion-paper.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au), pp10-11.

importance of place-based approaches; partnering with First Nations communities to ensure the design and implementation of any program reflects the unique local needs, aspirations, priorities, and environment of each community. This approach aligns with the ten ingredients for successful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policies and programs identified by Reconciliation Australia.[10]

A place-based approach to the Roadmap is also important to recognise the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (**ADII**)[11] and Mapping the Digital Gap (**MtDG**)[12] findings that the **digital gap widens with remoteness**. This means that priorities to achieve CTG17, such as achieving access to internet, radio and TV, may be different for First Nations people living in regional and metropolitan areas (with many already having access) compared to those living in remote and rural areas (with many still lacking access).

But it is also likely to be sensible for the Roadmap to include **some "umbrella" style initiatives** designed to uplift First Nations digital inclusion on a broader national scale. This may especially be true for initiatives designed to improve digital inclusion for other cross-cutting socio-economic cohorts, such as those on low-incomes or those low in English literacy.

Above all, the Roadmap needs to form the **centrepoint of an aligned approach across Government** on First Nations digital inclusion policy and the delivery of relevant programs (recommendation 1.7 in the Advisory Group's Initial Report[13]):

- The Initial Report identifies **significant overlap across agencies** in the First Nations digital inclusion space, particularly in how digital inclusion relates to other outcomes across health, education and welfare.

- We agree with the Advisory Group that there is great value in **avoiding the duplication of efforts and programs** addressing First Nations digital inclusion.

- We see a key role for the Roadmap in helping align the planned work targeting digital connectivity, affordability and skills by DITRDCA, the NIAA, the Department of Education, DSS, and State and Territory government agencies, as well as by the telecommunications industry and community organisations — to ensure the **benefits from effort and funding are maximised**.

1.4 Working in the right way

We encourage those working on the Roadmap to ensure the plans it includes reflect the wisdom and experiences of First Nations people gained through 60,000+ years. These include:

- Acknowledging the **value and importance of building relational connections** in community — building up trust within communities by getting to know people and protocols, becoming known and using age old techniques like yarning circles.[14]

- An awareness of the **long line of history** to every action proposed — before, during and after colonisation.

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[10] Respectful relationships | Sections | Share Our Pride

[11] Home - Australian Digital Inclusion Index

[12] Mapping the Digital Gap - ADM+S Centre

[13] Initial Report | First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group

[14] For those less familiar, to see as an example how UNSW Canberra are benefitting from this practice, see Yarning Circles: Indigenous Practices (unsw.edu.au)

- Embracing the significance and value of **country, family, community, cultural obligations and resource sharing** within communities.

- Solving problems **collectively**, to **generate benefits widely** and long into the future.

1.5 Relationship of the Roadmap with broader policy issues like USO reform

The full Discussion Paper mentions the relationship between the Roadmap and broader government priorities such as the Government's current review of the Universal Services framework, and the current triennial Regional Telecommunications Review.

Telstra agrees there is value in the Advisory Group providing submissions to these reviews to ensure a First Nations voice in those processes. We also agree the Roadmap needs to be informed by the Government's policy response to these reviews, to the extent this has a bearing on achieving CTG17.

1.5.1 Our position on USO reform

On Universal Services reform, Telstra respects the position of the Advisory Group that *"the current universal services framework is not fit for purpose for First Nations people and communities, and that a reform of the framework provides an opportunity to resolve some of the most pressing digital inclusion issues that they face"*.[15]

The Universal Service Obligation (**USO**) is a baseline fixed telephone guarantee for all Australian residents, no matter who they are or where they live and work, and there is an equivalent baseline broadband guarantee (the Statutory Infrastructure Provider (**SIP**) obligation). We know that these universal baseline guarantees do not address the needs of First Nations communities.

But we consider it is the *universal nature* of the USO and SIP (designed to provide the same baseline to everyone) that make them the wrong vehicles for providing the tailored, place-based connectivity solutions required by First Nations communities. We believe the best approach to finding solutions that will close the gap for First Nations communities is the Roadmap process - by designing and implementing solutions in partnership with communities to specifically reflect the needs and preferences of the First Nations people in those communities. In that regard, we consider the Roadmap should be aiming to find solutions that *complement* the Universal Service framework, rather than becoming a part of it.

1.5.2 Enshrining a First Nations voice within the RTIRC

In terms of the Regional Telecommunications Review, we suggest **consideration is given to legislative amendments** to ensure First Nations voices are amongst those proposing solutions to support CTG17 and to help Australia foster thriving regional, rural, and remote communities benefitting from the wisdom and contributions of First Nations people. Relevant amendments to Part 9B of *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* might include:

- s158P to cover *"reviews of regional <u>and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander</u> communications"*.

- s158T to require the RTIRC to include a member who is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person *"with knowledge of or experience in (a) matters affecting <u>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people</u> in regional, rural or remote parts of Australia; or (b) telecommunications"*.

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[15] [roadmap-discussion-paper.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au)](#), p 6

2. Data driven decision making

Telstra supports the recommendations in the Initial Report to improve the national collection and use of data about First Nations digital inclusion. This is essential to be able to assess progress towards CTG17. It is also needed to robustly assess the impact of digital inclusion measures delivered under the Roadmap and to help pinpoint where resources are best placed.

2.1 Continuing to map the digital gap in remote communities

For the last decade, the ADII has been a critical source of detailed information about the state of digital inclusion across Australia. It reveals detailed differences in levels of access, affordability, and digital ability between different socio-economic cohorts and provides an important starting point for developing effective, data driven policy responses to address digital inclusion gaps. Telstra is a proud founding sponsor and provider of funding for the ADII, produced in partnership with the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society at RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology.

However, as identified in the Advisory Group's Initial Report, there remains a lack of reliable data specifically on the First Nations digital inclusion gap in Australia.

To focus in more granular detail on First Nations communities, the ADII was complemented in 2021 by the MtDG research project[16]. The MtDG project is the first comprehensive study of digital inclusion in remote First Nations communities, providing critical data to track progress and inform evidence-based responses by government and industry to close the digital gap.

The MtDG project is conducted by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision Making and Society in partnership with Telstra. Telstra is proud to have been a driving force behind the MtDG project, and we are very grateful to our partners and the communities who have helped paint the most comprehensive picture of remote First Nations digital inclusion yet. Capturing invaluable insights from ten remote First Nations communities, the MtDG project provides critical data to track progress on remote digital inclusion and to inform evidence-based responses by government and industry to close the digital gap. In FY25-28 Telstra has committed further funding to support continued MtDG research.

Importantly, the MtDG research is a collaborative effort conducted in partnership with First Nations communities. The research team partners with local organisations and employs co-researchers in each community to ensure First Nations leadership is involved in all steps of the process, and local engagement in the project. In the spirit of First Nations data sovereignty and to support local planning and programs, detailed outcomes reports are provided back to each community. These reports provide full survey and qualitative research findings, an infrastructure and services audit, analysis of the factors impacting digital inclusion, and suggested strategies to address identified challenges through local digital inclusion plans.[17]

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[16] Mapping the Digital Gap - ADM+S Centre
[17] See further details in the 2023 Outcomes Report - apo-nid324397_0.pdf

2.2 Data to help prioritise efforts to improve access

A key challenge in having inadequate data on the First Nations digital inclusion gap in Australia is knowing how best to prioritise the significant investments needed to improve access to fit for purpose telecommunications infrastructure in First Nations communities.

To get things moving in the right direction, we see potential merit in the Advisory Group establishing a focussed telco industry infrastructure working group – to help pool data on the current state of telecommunications infrastructure in communities and to start to build up data on available options (and rough costings) to get it to where it needs to be. Such data would be valuable, for example, to help inform future government co-investment programs.

As an immediate focus, the working group might as an example start by considering the available data on how to provide suitable connectivity solutions to the ~670 communities we understand from the Advisory Group are without any connectivity today. Or, based on estimated community population sizes, to maximise public benefits, the focus might be narrowed to communities of a minimum threshold size – e.g., 50.

As well as the main providers of telecommunications and broadcast infrastructure in remote First Nations communities, the infrastructure working group could include relevant members of the Advisory Group and the DITRDCA. With additional appropriate support for this work from government, the dataset the working group might look to work up could potentially include:

- Data on communities (size, location, access, proximity to existing essential inputs like power etc).

- Range of potential solutions that might be suitable for access (e.g., nbn community Wi-Fi; mobile small cell; LEO satellite solution; full scale mobile tower; other).

- Approximate costing for each potential solution (potentially based on a few different categories of cost for each, depending on challenges that add cost).

With this data, there could then be engagement with the Australian Government on the scope of co-funding programs that might be considered for tender – and suitable collaboration with and contributions from State and Territory governments too.

3. Use of the ADII to measure and understand digital inclusion

3.1 The ADII methodology should be used, supplemented by MtDG research

Telstra supports the proposal for the Roadmap to draw upon the methodology used in the ADII to measure and understand digital inclusion. It is not possible to determine the extent to which CTG17 is being achieved without a methodology like this.

While the ADII is a critical source of detailed information about the state of digital inclusion across Australia, there remains a lack of reliable data on the First Nations digital inclusion gap in Australia.

Examples of the specific conditions in remote First Nations communities that are not revealed by the ADII data include the preference for mobile over fixed devices and connectivity, the composition of typical households and the implications for assessing the affordability of connectivity services, and the implications of those characteristics for the design and presentation of digital government services.

The MtDG research project helps to paint a fuller picture of digital inclusion and exclusion in remote First Nations communities. We therefore recommend the Roadmap uses the **methodology from the ADII** to measure and understand digital inclusion, supplemented with **additional metrics** in light of the **MtDG research**.

3.2 The three ADII elements of digital inclusion

Achieving equal levels of digital inclusion in Australia means that everyone can participate in our digital economy and our digitally connected society. The ADII measures three aspects of digital inclusion: (1) access (2) affordability and (3) digital ability.

As set out below, we recommend the Roadmap adopts the simple, practical description of these outcomes used in the simplified Discussion Paper, but adding in a reference to phone calls and messages and affordability of access to TV and radio as these remain key to CTG17:

> *"Digital inclusion is about:*
>
> • *having access to <u>phone calls, messages</u>, the internet, radio and TV*
>
> • *being able to afford access to <u>phone calls, messages</u>, the internet, <u>radio and TV content</u>*
>
> • *having the skills needed to use the internet and online services."*[18]

We recommend the Roadmap uses the methodology from the ADII to measure these three aspects of digital inclusion, supplemented with additional practical metrics in light of the MtDG research.

For example, the ADII methodology determines affordability based on total income and expenditure on telecommunications services per household. This metric may not paint a true picture of affordability for First Nations households with a large number of people living in them. Hence, this metric may be supplemented with an additional question asked in the MtDG research, of how often respondents either sacrificed or cut back on essential household costs, such as food and bills, to pay for internet access (with the answers 'always' or 'often' indicating unaffordability).

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[18] See original text at <u>roadmap-discussion-paper-simplified.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au)</u>, p. 1.

4. Building the Roadmap

4.1 Initial Report recommendations to form the Roadmap foundations

We congratulate the Advisory Group on its valuable work to research and prepare the Initial Report recommendations to improve digital, economic and social outcomes in First Nations communities. The Initial Report includes many thoughtful, practical recommendations; the overwhelming majority of which, if implemented, would help Australia to make genuine strides towards achieving CTG17.

In the initial years, we recommend the Roadmap is largely focussed on **bringing the Initial Report recommendations to life** - stress testing them for feasibility and value towards achieving CTG17; then rolling out those that are viable in pilot form so they can be further refined through a test and learn process.

In doing this, we recall the old saying "less haste, more speed". Australia's history of less successful efforts to close the gap for First Nations people tells us we should be wary of suggested "quick fixes". At all stages, programs must be designed and implemented in partnership with those on the ground in communities; informed by the asking of deep questions about what's really going on when it comes to root causes of issues, and about what outcomes are truly going to be most meaningful for those communities.

4.2 Starting to build out the Roadmap

When it comes to really moving the needle on CTG17 through improvements to telecommunications access, affordability and ability, no one organisation can achieve these outcomes alone. Industry players; government policies, programs and legislation; and community-based organisations all need to start working better together than they ever have before.

In response to the recommendations in the Initial Report, the Federal Government has recently announced it will invest $68 million in the 2024-25 Budget on measures to support First Nations digital inclusion.[19] Telstra welcomes these measures. We also support the Budget funding provided for the Advisory Group itself ($0.5m per year, to enable its valuable work to continue until 2026-27).

For our part, we want to play a leadership role in creating a better digital world for all Australians, and we are committed to helping achieve CTG17. We explain in sections 5 to 7 below the contributions Telstra is making to help build out the Roadmap, in response to the recommendations in the Initial Report and more generally to continue to promote First Nations digital inclusion. We also highlight where we see a role for others to play.

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[19] See details at: First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group First Nations Digital Inclusion Measures—5 June 2024 (infrastructure.gov.au)

5. Improving access to the internet, radio and TV

Telstra is deeply aware of the lifechanging impact that a lack of, or loss of, access to telecommunications services can have for First Nations people, especially for those living in remote communities. On average, Australians pick up their smartphone between 100 and 150 times per day to use data, make calls, and more.[20] Ubiquitous, reliable, secure, and continually improving telecommunications networks and services are a critical foundation enabling the activities of everyday life and work for all of us.

5.1 Australia's policy environment must support ongoing industry network investment

Over the seven years to the end of FY23, Telstra has invested $11 billion in improving and extending our mobile network (representing almost a fifth of our EBITDA over this period)[21], with $4 billion of this invested in regional and remote areas. Investing such large amounts of capital is what is needed to stay ahead of increasing data demands on mobile networks in particular. But it can be challenging.

Often the telco industry needs to invest large amounts up front with very long lead times before our services make it to market. That can be challenging in today's dynamic global market full of technology disruptions. Commercial realities are such that the Australian telecommunications industry has recently struggled to make investment returns above the costs of capital. The sheer vastness of Australia's geography is also a factor. Telstra's mobile network covers around 1 million square kilometres more than any other (an area larger than the entire size of 166 of 200 countries in the world), but even our terrestrial mobile network covers only about 37.5% of Australia's huge landmass.

Less noticeably but no less important, Telstra must also continue to invest in maintaining our mobile network and providing services in a footprint that extends around 1 million square kilometres further into the regional and remote parts of Australia than any other mobile network. In the vast majority of this 1 million sq. km, the residential population consists mainly of First Nations communities, where around 50,000 people live.[22]

One of the key things mobile network providers invest in is spectrum. No access to spectrum, no mobile service. It's that simple. The large investments we make in our spectrum licenses are vital to our ability to provide reliable, quality mobile services and to meet continued growth in data usage. Low band spectrum is the most important spectrum for the delivery of mobile services in regional and remote Australia. That's why, for example, in the 2021 850/900 MHz spectrum auction, Optus and Telstra spent (combined) more than *$2 billion* acquiring licenses to continue meeting service demand from our customers, particularly in regional areas.[23]

Policy makers working on the Roadmap need to understand the investment challenges the Australian telco industry faces, and to play their part in creating an attractive, positive environment that encourages ongoing private investment in telecommunications infrastructure and services.

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[20] Brass tacks: 5 things that go into running Australia's biggest mobile network (telstra.com.au)

[21]

Financial results - Telstra

[22] Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Indigenous Location (ILOC) definitions for locations/areas there are ~80 First Nations communities with >90 First Nations people, plus a number of regional towns with majority First Nations populations.

[23] 850/900 MHz band auction results | ACMA

5.2 Ongoing government co-investment is vital

Given the economic challenges of building, upgrading, and maintaining telecommunications infrastructure in some locations, Telstra **welcomes opportunities to partner with federal and state governments** to make the required investments. We consider Round 3 of the Federal Government's Regional Connectivity Co-Investment Program (**RCP3**) to be a good example of this process working well. 25 of the projects under RCP3, attracting $41.2 million in Federal Government funding support, are focussed on improving connectivity solutions in First Nations communities.[24]
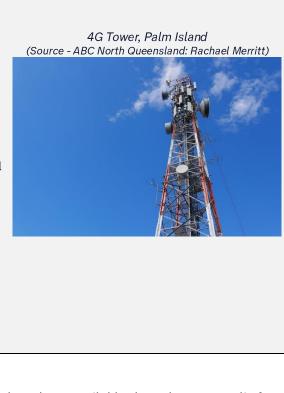
Some of the recent co-investment programs we have participated in to help close the digital divide in First Nations Communities include completed RCP projects such as the Arnhem Land Fibre Upgrade Project and major transmission upgrades to Aurukun, Palm Island and Lockhart River. **[c-i-c].[c-i-c]**

For all future co-investment programs, we agree with the recommendations in the Initial Report to ensure there is **First Nations input at all stages of the design and implementation**, noting the overall Closing the Gap findings that: *'...when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a genuine say in the design and delivery of services, better life outcomes are achieved.'*[25]

Box 1: Palm Island 4G Tower upgrade

Palm Island is a remote First Nations community with more than 2,500 residents off the coast of Townsville, North Queensland. The community is heavily reliant on mobile phone services and Telstra is the only telecommunications provider on the Island. Limitations of the telecommunications capacity to Palm Island became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where travel was restricted and reliance on the network increased. The provision of reliable internet coverage was identified as the Island's top priority infrastructure need in a 2019 report, which the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council commissioned. The report noted that improved internet coverage would benefit education and training, tourism, employment opportunities, investment attraction, and retail and small business establishment.

To support the ever-growing digital needs of this remote community, our RCP project saw us upgrade the 4GX base stations on the island and an upgrade of the backhaul capacity back to the mainland which included the construction of a new 40m tower. The upgrade provides improved capacity to the northern parts of the Palm Island community as it grows, and improved capacity to Palm Island exchange and mobile base station, which supports critical essential services, local businesses, and residents.

4G Tower, Palm Island
(Source - ABC North Queensland: Rachael Merritt)

5.3 Making use of satellite capabilities

nbn Sky Muster satellite (and fixed wireless) services have been available throughout Australia for

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[24] [Regional Connectivity Program | Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts](#)

[25] [1. Preamble | Closing the Gap](#)

many years. We note nbn and the Government have made significant investments in improving both services in recent years, and these are very welcome.[26]

Recently there have also been significant advancements in Low Earth Orbit (**LEO**) satellite technology. As recognised in the February 2024 report of the cross-industry LEO satellite working group convened by the Government (to which the Advisory Group has made valuable contributions),[27] LEO satellite services show strong potential for improving access to communications in remote areas. We recommend the Roadmap **embrace the potential offered by satellite technology** to help achieve CTG17.

The most prominent recent development has been the entry of Starlink into the Australian market, as the first of several expected **LEO-based satellite broadband** providers. Telstra has recently partnered with Starlink to provide Satellite Home Internet which includes a low latency, high quality voice (telephone) service.[28] The modem provided with this broadband product supports Wi-Fi that can be used with mobile devices within range in exactly the same way as the mobile network, including the ability to make calls and send text messages in addition to browsing the web.

LEO satellite backhaul also shows a lot of potential to benefit First Nations communities. Telstra has also partnered with LEO Satellite network OneWeb to provide additional capacity and backup for remotely located 4G mobile towers, improving user experience at the edges of our mobile footprint for all our mobile customers and those of Boost which operates on the Telstra Network.[29] We plan to connect hundreds of existing remote mobile base station sites currently using traditional satellite backhaul with OneWeb's LEO satellite solution by the end of 2025. This solution will increase our average backhaul bandwidth by at least 15 times and reduce latency by 10 times, improving the performance of real-time applications such as video calling.[30] There's also potential for the OneWeb backhaul solution to be used as a backup to improve reliability in areas where terrestrial backhaul is susceptible to natural disasters and communities find themselves in isolation.

Another important potential use for LEO satellite backhaul is to support free community Wi-Fi solutions in remote communities. Through Telstra Purple, we already have a public Wi-Fi solution in market that is designed to serve remote communities, making use of this capability in appropriate cases.

The arrival of direct to handset (**DTH**) LEO satellite technology in Australia from late 2024/early 2025 is also a significant development for how industry and policy makers think about **solving the problem of extending mobile coverage further into current remote area blackspots**, where many First Nations communities are located.

Some capability similar to DTH is already available today to customers with the latest iPhone generation devices. These capabilities include Apples SoS - allowing text messaging to emergency services and "find my friend" - which enables customer devices to send their location to other users

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[26] See further details at: Boosting speeds for Fixed Wireless customers | nbn (nbnco.com.au) and New satellite plans offer more choice and flexibility for regional Australia | nbn (nbnco.com.au)

[27] This report is available here: https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/department/media/publications/low-earth-orbit-satellite-working-group-2023-chairs-report

[28] Telstra Satellite Internet – powered by Starlink

[29] Telstra and OneWeb seal deal on delivering new satellite solutions.

[30] Telstra and OneWeb begin world's largest deployment of LEO backhaul with first voice call

when outside of mobile coverage. From late 2024, we expect to see LEO satellite based DTH for SMS text messaging to anyone become available, then with voice and possibly some limited data services by the end of 2025. Telstra is currently exploring the potential of LEO satellite DTH technology.[31] We expect to offer a full service in future once the capability is sufficiently developed to provide a good customer experience.

5.4 Closing 3G to make way for 4G and 5G services

Across the world, most mobile network operators are facing the same challenges of ongoing customer demands for more mobile network coverage and capacity, at the same time as managing the finite lives of their network equipment. They meet these challenges by upgrading their network equipment to add spectrum and/or take advantage of newer technologies and the capabilities they offer.

Telstra's planned 3G network closure, like the network closures we have done before it and other 3G network closures around the world, is essentially a function of this technology lifecycle. As a mobile technology closure in Australia, 3G will follow 2G which closed in 2016, and CDMA which was closed in 2008. Nearly all our customers now have 4G and 5G capable phones and in June 2024, less than one per cent of our network traffic was supported by our 3G network.

There are **clear benefits for our First Nations customers** from the investments we have made in rolling out 4G and 5G in regional and remote areas, and the **ability that closing our 3G network will give us** to re-farm our 850 MHz spectrum (and combine it with our other spectrum) to use in supplying 4G and 5G mobile services. 4G is around four times more spectrally efficient than 3G, with 5G being around 15 times more spectrally efficient, meaning they have much greater ability to meet ongoing customer demand growth. Indeed, our ability to meet increasing demand in recent years while also increasing average customer speeds at the same time would not have been possible without 4G and 5G technologies.

Telstra is keenly aware of the importance of doing everything possible to ensure our First Nations mobile customers are not left without service when we shut off our 3G network on 31 August 2024. At a minimum we will ensure 4G coverage is equivalent to 3G coverage by the time it is switched off. We are also helping customers with 3G-only mobile devices to replace them with 4G devices by providing around 12,000 new 4G devices free of charge to customers in need of them, including in remote areas.[32]

We have ensured our First Nations Connect staff are trained and familiar with our 3G closure, and the actions we need our First Nations customers to undertake to transition. Telstra's First Nations Connect phone line is dedicated to helping our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customers, respecting culture and community. This phone service has access to interpreter services for approximately 50 different First Nations languages and dialects. We have also created First Nation specific radio advertisements playing on 29 radio stations, as well as specific flyers and fridge magnets for distribution around First Nation communities to help raise awareness.

5.5 Rolling out a brand-new fibre backbone network

Telstra is currently building a new high-speed, high-capacity intercity fibre network that will benefit regional communities as well as urban centres.[33] The new network will include around 250 offramps in

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[31] [What's next for Australia's best, largest and most reliable mobile network (telstra.com.au)](telstra.com.au)
[32] https://www.telstra.com.au/exchange/helping-customers-say-goodbye-to-3G
[33] https://www.telstra.com.au/exchange/intercity-fibre-network-update

regional centres along each route, and include a connection between Adelaide and Darwin. We're also building critical fibre infrastructure in the Pilbara region in Western Australia. The new connections will support the needs of our mobile network as demand grows and improve the redundancy and resilience of all our networks.

5.6 Working better with communities on deployments and upgrades

At times we are faced with challenges that impede or negate the progress of building or upgrading telecommunications infrastructure our customers and stakeholders have called for. The approval process, timing, and/or cost to access land, sometimes means that we are unable to proceed with the project. Regarding the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage sites, we understand and appreciate the criticality. We believe there may be room for the **streamlining of current processes** (approvals etc) through the establishment of **guidelines developed in collaboration with First Nations communities and stakeholder groups**, resulting in more efficient and effective outcomes for both communities and industry. We are progressing further collaborative work with community and stakeholder groups in this regard.

6. Improving affordability of access to the internet

The Bureau of Communications, Arts and Regional Research has found that, between 2006 and 2021, where 'all' members of a household were First Nations people, those households spent 1.4 percentage points more of their disposable income on telecommunications services than other households (4.9% compared to 3.5%).[34] This is only just below the 5% threshold the ADII considers to represent a household in telecommunications affordability stress.

We set out below the actions Telstra is taking, and some important recommendations for action by others, to improve the affordability of access to telecommunications services for First Nations people.

6.1 Making mobile services more affordable

Telstra is acutely aware of the concerns that have been raised about the high number of Pre-Paid Mobile data recharges and resulting high monthly cost for mobile services provided by Telstra impacting many First Nations customers, particularly those living in remote communities.

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> *"post-paid services — whether mobile or broadband — are typically cheaper per gigabyte than pre-paid...Our survey found only 14% of participants used post-paid ADSL or Sky Muster services, which provide cheaper data rates than individual pre-paid data"[35]*

As evidenced by the findings from the MtDG research, there are also other options for mobile voice and data services available in First Nations communities that may (depending on customer circumstances) represent the most cost-effective option. These include our existing postpaid plans, our other Pre-Paid Mobile plans, and mobile plans from Boost.

6.2 Other options for affordable voice and data connectivity

In addition to mobile services, other telecommunications options that can be effective (where available and made accessible) for reducing average household telecommunications spend in remote communities include nbn Sky Muster and Fixed Wireless services, noting that these are now complemented by the availability of new LEO satellite services. This includes Telstra's new Starlink Home Internet product.[36]

Free community Wi-Fi can also act as a data connectivity lifeline, supplementing the connectivity consumers are able to access through personal telecommunications services. We welcome recent initiatives by the Government to extend access to free community Wi-Fi services in more remote First Nations communities — including the community co-design work currently underway in partnership with nbn to roll this out in an additional 18 communities.[37] We understand the 2024/2025 Budget includes an additional $20 million in funding (over three years) for further rollout of free community Wi-Fi in more First Nations communities via a contestable program.[38] We look forward to the release of

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[34] telco-affordability-access-first-nations-households-june-2024-hilda.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au)

[35] Mapping the Digital Gap Outcomes Report 2023 - apo-nid324397 0.pdf, p 45

[36] Telstra Satellite Internet — powered by Starlink

[37] Narrowing the digital Gap through community Wi-Fi | Ministers for the Department of Infrastructure

[38] Boosting connectivity and safety for Australians | Ministers for the Department of Infrastructure

further details regarding this program. Through Telstra Purple, we already have a public Wi-Fi solution in market that is designed to serve remote communities.

Telstra is also expanding the rollout of free public payphones equipped with free Telstra Wi-Fi, which have now been installed in more than 20 remote communities and in 80 towns with greater than 10% of the population identifying as First Nations residents. Since August 2023, these popular free payphones have been installed in another 20 communities – with more planned in 2024 and 2025.[39]

6.3 Working better together to tackle root causes of digital unaffordability

In the Roadmap, we see a key opportunity for further collaborative efforts by industry, government, and First Nations community organisations to improve the affordability of digital access for First Nations communities. In particular, we see merit in **collaboration to tackle some of the current root causes of unaffordability**.

We expect that preferences of First Nations consumers are very likely to continue to be centred around data usage via the pre-paid mobile network. This is due to the combination of mobile convenience and portability; resilience to power shortages in the home; and the ease with which pre-payment via recharge supports shared use and variable customer financial circumstances.

However, we believe further efforts need to be made to ensure these preferences are not actually being driven by other factors – such as a lack of awareness of, access to, or trust in other options.

Where there is interest in other connectivity options better suited than the mobile network for access to data intensive content like broadcast media, or content streaming services, work should be done to **drill down further in understanding *why* those options are not in use**. Importantly in this regard, an expressed preference for "pre-paid mobile services" doesn't necessarily equate to a preference for telecommunications services delivered over a terrestrial mobile network. We expand on our thinking below.

6.3.1   A preference for mobile devices is not the same as for using a mobile network

Amongst Australia's general population, mobile devices are extremely commonly used to access data services delivered over fixed networks (via Wi-Fi). For example, in 2023, 95% of all Australian adults used a mobile phone to connect to the internet, but only 13% of data overall was downloaded using mobile networks (with the rest mainly downloaded over the nbn).[40] A preference for using mobile *devices* is thus not necessarily the same as a preference (or need) to access data using a mobile *network*.

6.3.2   The ability to pay upfront is not limited to mobile services

The ability to *pay upfront* for telecommunications services through pre-paid recharge is in no way inherently limited to mobile services. For example, in many countries around the world this form of pre-payment is used to make fixed line voice and broadband services more financially accessible to

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[39] [Digital inclusion in remote First Nations communities - Telstra](#)

[40] [ACMA_How we use the internet_Executive summary and key findings.pdf](#)

consumers and to avoid the barrier that credit and identification checks for postpaid services can present.[41]

We note that Recommendation 1.2 in the report of the cross-industry LEO satellite working group is "*Identify and remove barriers to providing pre-paid satellite internet services to consumers*". We support this recommendation and suggest the Roadmap includes further work towards this goal.

6.3.3 The cost of using mobile data to access TV content can be best reduced by making TV content more accessible

The use of mobile data services in remote First Nations communities to access news and entertainment content (delivered to customers via free-to-air television and radio services in metropolitan areas) may be a "choice" borne much more of necessity than genuine preference. The MtDG research and FNDIAG Initial Report reveal there is much room for improvement to access media content through existing broadcast channels and Viewer Access Satellite Television (**VAST**)[42]. We welcome the recent legislative proposals introduced by the Government designed to expand access to VAST services in more remote locations.[43] Other important areas for improvement identified in the FNDIAG Initial Report include:

- Installing VAST equipment for households that have never had it installed previously.

- Supplying a more robust set-top box (satellite receiver) with built-in power surge protection, an enclosed smart card holder (to prevent the card from being removed) and a software change to reduce the need for smart card re-activation upon reset.

- Simplifying the process for activating smart cards so that they can be activated in sites without phone or Internet access.

- Establishing an ongoing monitoring and maintenance program to ensure that communities have timely and affordable access to technical services and replacement equipment in case of service failure.

6.3.4 Improvements in power availability and affordability have a big role to play

In some cases, research suggests First Nations consumer preferences for telecommunications services that can continue to be used outside the home are motivated by issues of power insecurity in the home. When power to premises in remote locations can be unreliable, or unaffordable (to the point where First Nations people in remote communities are even making decisions not to buy or run refrigerators), paying for a fixed line or satellite-based service reliant on power is unlikely to rate as a top priority. This is where a holistic approach and collaborative effort is required, across the broad ecosystem of players, aimed at meeting all relevant Closing the Gap Targets and not just CTG17.

We wholeheartedly endorse the recommendation in the Initial Report for the Australian Government to raise the issue of stable power supply to communities with state and territory Ministers as a factor that is hindering progress towards achieving CTG17.[44]

Telstra has been focussed on improving the power resilience of our networks for many years. However, the challenge we face is significant. Our network includes, for example, over 7,000 exchanges and

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[41] Prepaid fixed broadband plans available as an affordable flexible option internationally include: from Telikom in PNG - Telikom - Cheap Home Data; from BSNL in India - Prepaid Broadband Service (bsnl.co.in); from Our Telekom in Honiara - Our Telekom | Our Telekom rolls out High-speed Prepaid Broadband Service and from Cable & Wireless in the Seycheles - Prepaid Broadband - Powered by Cable & Wireless (cwseychelles.com).

[42] MySatTV

[43] New legislation to support access to broadcast television in regional Australia | Ministers for the Department of Infrastructure

[44] first-nations-digital-inclusion-advisory-group-initial-report.pdf (digitalinclusion.gov.au), pp 26-27.

General

shelters, and close to 12,000 mobiles sites. These network assets are spread across the furthest corners of Australia, powered by separate electricity networks in each state and territory - which are themselves of significant breadth and complexity. As a result of climate change, we are also seeing more frequent and extreme weather events, and these can impact both telecommunications and electricity networks over a wide area, sometimes in unexpected ways.

Last year Telstra experienced around 90,000 interruptions to our mains power supply. Localised outages across the mains power grid occur regularly for both planned and unplanned reasons. We've identified that while energy resilience has always been a significant risk for Telstra to manage, there is a need to think differently about how to prepare for emergencies, operate during them, and recover following the event. Furthermore, the telecommunications sector is a key part of that ecosystem but not the only part, which also includes communities, power companies and government. And everyone needs to do more.

To improve power reliability and resilience to First Nations communities, we believe there needs to be much less siloed effort than we see today.

Telstra has recently proposed the industry come together on the topic of energy resilience, to work towards developing a clear and aligned position that will help customers and local communities. To achieve this, Telstra has developed a draft action framework for discussion with industry, Government, energy suppliers and other key stakeholders. We would be delighted to keep the Advisory Group updated on our progress in this regard, and to hear any recommendations for solutions or issues to prioritise from the Advisory Group and our First Nations stakeholders.

6.3.5 Improving the affordability of devices to support digital inclusion

In some cases, preferences for accessing data using mobile handsets maybe motivated less by customer preferences for this form of device and more by affordability and availability barriers to other more suitable devices – such as laptops or desktop computers for schoolwork. As found in the MtDG 2023 Outcomes Report *"larger households correlate with lower levels of digital inclusion. This points to issues of overcrowded housing, shared devices, and a lack of computers or other devices"*.[45]

In the case of LEO satellite services, the upfront cost of the equipment may be an additional barrier alongside the ongoing monthly cost. Here, there **may be a role to play for government**, such as the recently announced initiative of the Queensland Government Customer and Digital Group to put $1.25million **towards funding Starlink satellite equipment**, installation and services in 17 Indigenous Councils in high priority remote First Nations community locations.[46]

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[45] apo-nid324397_0.pdf, p. 37.

[46] Starlink satellite initiative bringing immediate relief to digitally excluded First Nations communities - Ministerial Media Statements

7. Improving skills to use the internet and online services

7.1 Protecting First Nations people from scams and cyber risks

The issue of telecommunications scams is a topic of real concern for all of us – including for First Nations communities. In 2021, the ACCC's Scamwatch received 4,958 reports from First Nations people, with $4.8 million in losses. This represented a 43 per cent increase in reports and 142 per cent increase in losses since 2020. Younger First Nations people lost more money than older First Nations people, which is a reverse of the overall trend of financial losses to scams increasing with age. The most financially damaging scams for First Nations communities were investment scams, followed by phishing scams and romance scams.[47] By 2022, the amount reported lost by First Nations Australians had increased by another 5 per cent to $5.1 million, while the median loss for First Nations scam victims rose to $754, from $650 reported in 2021.[48]

Telstra invests in 24/7 network monitoring and blocking of scam calls, scam and malicious SMS and emails to protect our customers against scams – blocking millions every single day. To help our systems better learn what scams are trending to stop them reaching more people, in 2023 we introduced a new reporting number, so any customer on the Telstra network can report SMS and MMS scams to us. Customers forward SMS and MMS scams to 7226 (SCAM).[49] Since opening our 7226 scam reporting service in 2023, we've already seen around 400,000 potential scam messages reported.

Although our goal is for our customers to never even notice this work, Telstra also invests a lot of time, effort, and money in keeping all Australians safe by sustaining and uplifting the security and cyber resilience of our networks. The money we earn from providing our services helps us do this valuable work. Telstra's network is large and complex, and we touch the lives of every Australian every day. We recognise it's vital for us to keep that network as safe and secure as we possibly can. That's why we invest so much in cybersecurity – building processes and investing in our people over decades to protect our own network and those of our customers. For example, in addition to our work to block scams, Telstra's Cleaner Pipes initiative works to reduce instances of customer data being compromised through malware, ransomware, and phishing by using tools such as Domain Name Server (**DNS**) filtering.

However, one of the most valuable things First Nations communities can do to help **protect themselves from scams and cyber risks is to learn some simple practical tips**, like how to create hard-to-crack passwords. For a starting place, some really good information can be found on the Regional Tech Hub's website[50], as well as on Telstra's website.[51] We recommend the Roadmap includes this guidance, supported by the new First Nations Digital Mentoring Network and First Nations Tech Hub the Government is helping to fund.[52]

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[47] Scam losses to culturally diverse communities, people with disability and Indigenous Australians almost doubled in 2021 | ACCC

[48] ACCC calls for united front as scammers steal over $3bn from Australians | ACCC

[49] Keep snitching on scammers: how our new 7226 reporting number is fighting off SMS and MMS Scams (telstra.com.au)

[50] Keeping you safe online - Regional Tech Hub

[51] See e.g. Cyber Security and Safety from Telstra

[52] See details of Measures 2 and 3 at: First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group First Nations Digital Inclusion Measures—5 June 2024 (infrastructure.gov.au)

7.2 Helping First Nations people to stay safe online

Digital ability includes knowing how to stay safe online. An important aspect to this is having the digital ability to know how to protect yourself and your family from harmful online content and behaviour. There are some absolutely fantastic resources on this for parents, young people, educators, First Nations communities and others on the **website of the e-safety commissioner** – e.g. at First Nations | eSafety Commissioner. Telstra also publishes a host of information designed to help our customers get involved to keep themselves and their families safe online.[53] We encourage the Roadmap to include initiatives to **help raise awareness of this material** and share knowledge within First Nations communities.

7.3 Generating tech know-how and employment to support thriving communities

Telstra's many First Nations digital inclusion programs[54] focus on working with community to understand how they want to use digital services. These include inDigiMOB,[55] a pioneering project addressing digital inclusion and cyber safety awareness delivered by First Nations Media Australia. They also include our Community Services Program, a telecommunications literacy initiative, delivered in 20 remote communities in FY24 across the Northern Territory, South Australia, and Western Australia, engaging with over 2,800 First Nations customers.

Alongside digital training, Telstra has begun a concerted program to deliver telecommunications advice and support to First Nations customers through our First Nations call centre, and through community call centres owned by local First Nations organisations and staffed with local people. The Roadmap may want to **showcase these examples,** for other service providers to consider in seeking to **foster an empowered First Nations communications and digital technology sector**.

- In 2021, Telstra established our **First Nations Connect centre in Darwin**, which provides advice and support for First Nations communities. Telstra receives an estimated 40,000 calls to the centre each year.

- In 2023, Telstra launched **two community owned call centres** – the first was on Palm Island, a small community off the coast of Townsville. The centre has delivered jobs and training for 20 local operators in a newly constructed retail precinct in the island's town centre.[56] The second centre was launched in Jumbun – a small community located halfway between Cairns and Townsville.[57] These community-based contact centres help Telstra serve our customers better, they attract and retain great local talent, and we can also help communities build self-sustainable local businesses.

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[53] See e.g. - Our tips to keep your little ones safe online - Telstra

[54] First Nations Australians Community Engagement and Programs - Telstra

[55] inDigiMOB – Digital inclusion in remote communities

[56] See details of this joint initiative between Telstra, community and government stakeholders at: Palm Island Digital Service Centre Case Study | TAFE Queensland (tafeqld.edu.au)

[57] See home (jumbun.com.au)

In FY25, Telstra has a large number of remote community visits programmed to take place in the Northern Territory and Queensland. These visits provide the opportunity for us to engage directly with First Nations communities and provide support and advice. This includes information on our 3G network shutdown and ensuring customers have 4G compatible devices; assisting customers with historical debts or payment issues by connecting them to our First Nation Connect Centre; explaining various mobile phone recharge options; answer any questions; and providing contact information for our First Nations Connect call centres in Darwin, Jumbun, and Palm Island.

Looking to the future, and to **more ways in which we can partner with remote First Nations communities to help them thrive**, we are excited at the opportunity to be involved in the Government's major new initiative to establish a network of First Nations digital mentors.[58] Telstra will **fund a National Coordination Hub** to support the place-based digital mentors, who will receive salary support from the Federal Government. Telstra has committed funding from 2025-2028 to support the Hub, and this is a key element of the actions we are taking in response to the Advisory Group's recommendations in the Initial Report.

Telstra also notes the Government has recently announced a new **Remote Jobs and Economic Development Program**, designed to help close the gap in employment outcomes in remote communities by creating 3,000 jobs in remote Australia.[59] We see promising potential in programs like this to uplift the telecommunications related skills and experience base within remote First Nations communities, setting these communities up to meet CTG17 and for a thriving digital future. We recommend they are included in the Roadmap.

Telstra has partnered with the Centre for Appropriate Technology (**CfAT**)[60] in Alice Springs to pilot a remote tech training program. Telstra will provide support for training and other necessary qualifications for First Nations trainees to work on our network infrastructure.

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[58] See Measure 3 - First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group First Nations Digital Inclusion Measures—5 June 2024 (infrastructure.gov.au)

[59] Next steps on closing the gap: delivering remote jobs | Ministers for the Department of Infrastructure

[60] CfAT is a Registered Training Organisation

General

Telecommunications providers such as Telstra and nbn rely on fly-in fly-out labour to work on and maintain network infrastructure in remote locations. There may be a future **opportunity for industry to join forces**, and through a First Nations led program such as the CFAT program, create a **shared pool of skilled, place-based resources that industry can access**. The skills and experience gained could also support digital inclusion action plans for First Nations communities, as recommended in the MtDG research, to develop and lead their own digital inclusion solutions while ensuring cultural appropriateness.

Lastly, we note that closing the digital divide between First Nations and all Australian students is an important but often overlooked part of closing the gap in First Nations education outcomes more generally[61] – a foundational element in fostering an empowered First Nations communications and digital technology sector to help communities adapt and thrive into the future. We acknowledge the Government's School Student Broadband Initiative (**SSBI**)[62], has been designed with such considerations in mind. Telstra is proud to have been able to support the SSBI through our Belong brand.[63]

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[61] See e.g. the findings by World Vision - in connecting-on-country.pdf (worldvision.com.au)

[62] School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) | Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

[63] School Student Broadband Initiative | Belong