Submission – Data and Digital Government Strategy

25 July 2023

The Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the initial Data and Digital Government Strategy.

Connectivity in our First Nations communities is like a dot painting with a centre that radiates outwards, further and further. It is the means by which our communities can stay connected, inform and be informed, protect knowledge and customs and participate in the national and global economies. The task to stay connected is critical but not small.

Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group

The IRG is an expertise-based advisory group comprised of Indigenous leaders with experience in Indigenous economic development in Northern Australia. Current IRG members were appointed in 2019 to provide policy advice to the Minister for Northern Australia and the Minister for Indigenous Australians on practical actions to enhance the economic prosperity of Indigenous Australians in the north. IRG members are presented at **Attachment A**.

Northern Australia

Northern Australia comprises 59 per cent of Australia's landmass, defined as all of the Northern Territory, as well as the northern parts of Queensland and Western Australia that intersect with the Tropic of Capricorn, including the Indian Ocean Territories (see Figure 1).

Figure 1- Northern Australia[1]

The region is abundant with untapped potential and talented people. Northern Australia has a competitive advantage in resources, energy, agriculture, aquaculture and tourism and its proximity to Asia and the Pacific creates trade potential to drive Australia's economic growth over the next decade and beyond. This continues an established trade between Indigenous Australians and South East Asian peoples over millennia. Northern Australia is mineral rich with deposits of lithium and rare earth metals that will be vital to the electrification of the country as we move toward a net zero future.[2] It is on the frontline of the nation's defence, border protection and biosecurity and it is home to a young and growing Indigenous population which

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[1] Office of Northern Australia. (2021) *Developing Northern Australia* Retrieved from [ona-developing-northern-australia-fact-sheet-final.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au)](ona-developing-northern-australia-fact-sheet-final.pdf) (p.1)
[2] Invest Northern Territory. (2022) *Minerals*. Accessed on 24/10/2022. Retrieved from https://invest.nt.gov.au/infrastructure-and-key-sectors/key-sectors/minerals.

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will play an increasing role in its growth. Unlocking the north's potential is key to the development of the nation as a whole.

Developing the north, however, is not without its challenges. Northern Australia is home to only 1.3 million people or around 5.3 per cent of the Australian population.[3] Its sparse population, the vast distances between major centres and extreme weather conditions can make it difficult, and costly, to do business and to provide adequate social and economic infrastructure. Housing shortages and higher costs of living can make attracting and retaining a skilled workforce difficult[4] and can lead to a prevalence of fly-in, fly-out workers with the benefits of economic activity being siphoned away to southern centres.

Indigenous Australians have significant assets to bring to the Northern Australia development agenda. Indigenous people comprise 16 per cent of the Northern Australian population, far greater than the their three per cent share of the national population, and maintain rights or interests in around 78 per cent of the land mass in Northern Australia.[5] The Indigenous population is younger and growing at a faster rate than the rest of the Australian population.[6] Indigenous Australians are projected to constitute approximately half of the working age population of Northern Australia by 2050.[7] Outside of major population centres in Northern Australia this is already the case.[8]

Submission

The IRG welcome the significant opportunities afforded to First Nations communities and businesses through the Data and Digital Government Strategy. The task of improving connectivity, data sharing and government service delivery across regional, rural and remote Australia is significant.

Delivering for all people and business

The IRG acknowledges the Australian Government's intent to improve access and use of the vast amount of data that it holds. For First Nations communities, shared access to data is critical to improving livelihoods as it allows people to have a more active role in decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. By having access to relevant data, First Peoples can

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[3] Office of Northern Australia. (2021) *Developing Northern Australia*. Accessed on 29/10/2022. Retrieved from ona-developing-northern-australia-fact-sheet-final.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au) (p.1)

[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid

[6] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) in Australian Venture Consultants Pty Ltd, (2020) *A new framework for accelerated development of the Northern Australian Indigenous economy*, provided. Accessed on 26/10/2022. (p.38).

[7] Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia (2014) in Australian Venture Consultants Pty Ltd, (2020) *A new framework for accelerated development of the Northern Australian Indigenous economy*, provided. Accessed on 26/10/2022. (p.38).

[8] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) in Australian Venture Consultants Pty Ltd, (2020) *A new framework for accelerated development of the Northern Australian Indigenous economy*, provided. Accessed on 26/10/2022. (p.38).

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better understand their own needs, identify gaps in services, and develop targeted, fit-for-purpose solutions. Access to data also empowers communities with evidence of outcomes for policy and program design and implementation. Having access to digital connectivity in remote and regional communities will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people out of poverty. Through access to a reliable high-speed network Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can create commercial opportunities whilst living on country. It will help people create innovative and new economies online particularly in tourism, arts, culture, and digital technology.

While the strategy identifies that early engagement and co-design are required to ensure the public service is a trusted and transparent partner that puts people and business at the centre of policy, implementation, and delivery, the IRG believes that this could be strengthened by including the requirement for placed-based partnerships to be in place to ensure there is local engagement. The IRG considers that First Nations peoples should be actively involved in data collection, collation and storage that relates to them to ensure that culturally appropriate practices are in place at each step.

Priority reform four of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap is aimed at ensuring shared access to data and information. This reform recognises the importance of equitable access to accurate and comprehensive data for effective policy-making and service delivery.

This particular reform recognises the historical barriers that have limited First Nations Peoples' access to data. The reform aims to address the inequalities by promoting transparency and collaboration between government agencies, researchers, and First Nations communities. By working together, it becomes possible to collect accurate and culturally appropriate data that reflects the realities of First Nations People.

The IRG recommends that:

1. Place-based partnerships with First Nations communities should be in place to allow the collection, collation and storage of data that relates to us.

2. Culturally appropriate practices in the collection, collation and storage of data should be implemented and informed by local communities.

3. Consideration should be given to training, and learning and development opportunities for First Nations community members in the field of data management. This will ensure effective data management through the process of collecting, collating and storing information.

Simple and seamless services

The IRG acknowledge the Australian Government's ambition to modernise and embrace digital technologies to improve the delivery of policies and services for people and businesses. The 'tell us once' approach will improve efficiencies from a delivery perspective and improve the end-to-end user experience. For our communities, this is an important way forward in improving the often frequent and variable points of contact between First Nations people and government services.

Embracing digital technologies at the expense of other delivery methods, however, could result in unintended consequences for First Nations Australians. This is a particular issue given the poor status of the telecommunications system in regional, remote and First Nations communities across the north. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index[9] tells us that people living in one of the 1,100 First Nations remote communities across Australia are already amongst the most digitally excluded Australians, and that exclusion worsens with the degree of remoteness. Ongoing challenges relating to geographical remoteness, episodic weather events, infrastructure limitations, and funding constraints make it critical to prioritise equitable access to reliable telecommunications services for Indigenous communities in Northern Australia. This must occur in advance of increasing the delivery of government services utilising digital technologies. Ideally, First Nations people should be lead stakeholders in the development and implementation of the Strategy.

In recognition of this challenge, the Australian Government through the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Outcome 17) set a target of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having equal levels of digital inclusion by 2026.[10]

The IRG recommends that:

4. The Strategy acknowledges that without access to reliable and affordable telecommunications, First Nations people cannot be included. Further, that the implementation of best practice delivery of government services utilising digital technologies will have limited impact in First Nations communities where access continues to be the first order challenge.

5. Equitable access to reliable telecommunications services for First Nations communities be prioritised in advance of increasing the.

6. First Nations people be considered lead stakeholders to in the development and implementation of the Strategy.

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[9] Australian Digital Inclusion Index Accessed on 22 May 2023 from https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/
[10] National Agreement on Closing the Gap - Outcome 17 retrieved from https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/7-difference/b-targets/b17

In summary, prioritising improved telecommunications to enable improved service delivery and shared access to data and information are significant steps towards closing the gap for First Nations people. Shared data empowers communities with valuable insights necessary for informed decision-making while fostering collaboration between stakeholders. By addressing historical inequities in accessing data, this reform paves the way for more targeted approaches and partnerships that can lead to positive change in First Nations health, education, employment opportunities, and overall well-being.

First Nations communities in Northern Australia are accustomed to living in remote and rural locations and to transacting online (as digital access allow) on par with mainstream Australia as this is often the only way to access services and support. However, First Nations Northern Australians communities are not equipped equally to transition fully to digital services. There is an urgent need to plan for the future and a large part of that planning needs to include robust telecommunications infrastructure and culturally appropriate placed-based engagement.

We again thank you for the opportunity to comment on the initial strategy.

IRG members

- **Mr Colin Saltmere**, Chair - Managing Director of the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu Aboriginal Corporation, the Myuma and Rainbow Gateway companies, and Adjunct Professor with the University of Queensland's Aboriginal Environments Research Centre.

- **Ms Tara Craigie** – Managing Director of J&T Craigie Pty Ltd, Indigenous Engagement Consultant at AAM Investment Group, and President at Northern Cowboys Association and Founder of Territory Rodeo Services.

- **Mr Jerome Cubillo** - Chief Executive Officer of the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network, Chairperson of Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation (LNAC), and on the Board of Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation representing LNAC.

- **Mr Troy Fraser** - Chief Executive Officer at Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council and formerly worked as Community, Youth and Economic Development Manager at the Aboriginal Development Benefits Trust.

- **Mr Peter Jeffries** - Chief Executive Officer of Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation and has formerly worked with the WA Police Force, Rio Tinto, the Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation, Woodside and his own business offering consulting services and Aboriginal cultural tourism.

- **Ms Gillian Mailman** - Managing Director of Fibre Optics NQ, Chief Executive Officer of MJB Solutions Pty Ltd, Director of Indigenous Wealth Hub, and Director of Illuminate FNQ.