

Feedback on the Regional Connectivity Program Round 3 Draft Grant Opportunity Guidelines

The Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Regional Connectivity Program Round 3 Draft Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

Connectivity in our 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 seven Indigenous leaders with business acumen and experience in Indigenous economic development in Northern Australia. The IRG advises the Australian Government on northern development, maximising benefits and implementation of outcomes for First Nations people in Northern Australia. IRG members are listed at **Attachment A**.

Northern Australia

Northern Australia is the Northern Territory and those parts of Queensland (QLD) and Western Australia (WA) above, directly below or intersecting with the Tropic of Capricorn; the regional centres of Gladstone, QLD, Carnarvon, WA, and Exmouth, WA; the Local Government Areas of Meekatharra, WA; Wiluna, WA; the Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku, WA; and the Indian Ocean Territories of Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Island (see Figure 1). Northern Australia comprises 59 per cent of Australia's landmass.



Figure 1: Northern Australia

First Nations Australians comprise 16.5 per cent of the Northern Australian population. Around 78 per cent of the land in Northern Australia is recognised under native title or statutory land rights.

Feedback

The IRG acknowledges the significant opportunities afforded to First Nations communities and businesses through the Regional Connectivity and the Mobile Black Spot Programs. That said, the task of improving digital connectivity across regional, rural and remote Australia is enormous. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index tells us that people living in one of the 1,100 First Nations remote communities are among the most digitally excluded Australians, and that exclusion worsens with the degree of remoteness.

Connecting to opportunity

Digital connectivity for First Nations Australians can support access to education and training opportunities as well as improve access to health services including via telehealth systems. Beyond that, digital connectivity can enable First Nations people in regional and remote communities to participate and compete in the broader economy.

The COVID pandemic demonstrated that working from home, including operating businesses, is possible. There should be no barrier to First Nations people in regional and remote communities in Northern Australia working in jobs or service markets that are primarily located elsewhere – domestically or internationally. With the right infrastructure and skills, First Nations peoples in regional and remote areas could be programmers or developers, software engineers or cyber security specialists. Digital connectivity opens up opportunities for First Nations people to participate in the global economy and benefit from the technological revolution.

Recognising the opportunities afforded to First Nations communities and businesses through the proposed grants programs, the IRG recommends:

1. The Government utilise existing Indigenous networks, including Indigenous business networks or Chambers of Commerce, to raise awareness of the Regional Connectivity Program and the Mobile Black Spot Program.

Accounting for the costs

The IRG notes that Round 3 of the Regional Connectivity Program has up to \$150 million of funding available, including:

- \$100 million for Regional Connectivity Solutions, including indicative funding of \$15 million for solutions that improve telecommunications infrastructure in First Nations communities; and
- \$50 million for Mobile Black Spot Solutions, including indicative funding of \$7.5 million for solutions that provide new mobile coverage in First Nations communities.

These indicative funding allocations equate to 15 per cent of funds and while this is close to parity with the population share of First Nations people in remote communities across Australia (16 per cent), it is well below that in very remote communities (45 per cent).

Further, this does not account for the costs of delivering and maintaining services in remote and very remote areas where many First Nations people live. By their very nature, remote and very remote First Nations communities are challenged by the vast distances between communities and their city counterparts, resulting in high costs for the delivery of services, particularly on a per capita basis. In addition, much of the connectivity infrastructure in remote and very remote First Nations communities is outdated or insufficient – this is the really difficult stuff. For these reasons, the IRG strongly recommends that:

2. The share of funds set aside under both the Regional Connectivity Solutions and the Mobile Black Spot Solutions streams dedicated to First Nations communities and businesses be increased to 30 per cent of funding.

Community in the driver's seat

First Nations people living in remote communities want to utilise digital telecommunications just like other Australians, for basic banking and accessing government and other services online. In the case of natural disasters, such as the recent floods across the Kimberley and parts of the Northern Territory, access to reliable digital telecommunication services becomes critical to enable people in regional and remote communities to keep up to date with emergency service announcements and source response and recovery services including application for disaster payments.

There have been numerous reports and parliamentary inquiries into telecommunications focusing on regional and remote communities,¹ the most recent, the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review.² There appears to be an acknowledgment of community concerns in report recommendations but inadequacy in implementation. In the meantime, for example, First Nations people from surrounding communities that visit Alice Springs attribute the lack of reliable telecommunication and digital services as one of the main issues causing young people and family dislocation from their home communities and remaining in Alice Springs for extended periods of time.

The IRG note that funding through the Regional Connectivity Program should be used to respond to the specific needs, requirements, values and culture of the community in which they are expected to serve. Meaningful engagement is required to enable First Nations communities to outline the issues that need to be addressed, to understand the options available and to drive the identification of fit-for-purpose solutions. Ideally, First Nations people should be the applicants to the Program, although this is often not the case as programs are more accessible to larger organisations such as telecommunications providers and those with resources (staff and capability) available to pursue the application process. The IRG therefore recommends that:

3. Funds allocated under the Regional Connectivity Solutions and the Mobile Black Spot Solutions streams are solutions driven with First Nations people in the driver's seat.

.... And enabled to stay there

Maintaining infrastructure once installed is equally important to keep our communities connected. During the COVID outbreak in the remote community of Ampiliwatja approximately 300 kilometres east of Alice Springs and home to around 400 people, for example, the community experienced a two-month telecommunications blackout due to infrastructure failures in the region. This happened at a time when nationally and internationally towns and families were moving the entirety of their daily lives online. Community members explained, there was no landline, mobile or internet coverage, only the few that had satellite phones were contactable. Interestingly, the messenger application remained operational and provided the only lifeline to the outside world. The only ATM at the local store was not working the entire time complicating the purchase of food and fuel.

¹ Every three years, under Part 9B of the Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999, a Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) is formed to conduct a review into the adequacy of telecommunications in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.

² Review commenced on 2 June 2021 and deliver to Government in December 2021, tabled in Parliament on 14 Feb 2022

And again, during January 2023, communities on Cape York were without mobile coverage for up to six days due to Telstra outages in the region and reliance on fly-in-fly-out technicians to identify and fix the problem. This can be challenging in extreme weather circumstances such as those regularly experienced during a typical wet season.

The IRG recommends that:

4. The Regional Connectivity Program includes obligations to achieve Indigenous employment outcomes, including the training of local technicians, to enable issues to be identified and resolved more quickly.

The IRG again thanks you for the opportunity to comment on the guidelines in advance of them being finalised.

Attachment A

IRG members

The IRG comprises:

- 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.
- Ms Cara Peek - a multi-award-winning social disruptor from Remote Northern Australia. She identifies as a Yawuru/Bunuba woman, a successful lawyer, a diverse entrepreneurial leader, and an innovative Cultural Intelligence Strategist. Cara has worked closely with many regional communities across Australia, the U.S., and Canada as part of her personal mission to create deep, positive social change for First Peoples globally.