CENTRAL LAND COUNCIL

2024 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review

Issues Paper April 2024

Inquiry by the Committee for the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review

Submission from the Central Land Council

August 2024

Contents

About the Central Land Council

The Central Land Council (CLC) is a Commonwealth corporate entity established under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (ALRA). The CLC has statutory responsibilities for Aboriginal land acquisition and land management in the southern half of the NT. The CLC is also a Native Title Representative Body established under the Native Title Act 1993 (NTA). Our functions include protecting the interests of traditional owners of Aboriginal land and ascertaining and expressing the wishes and the opinion of Aboriginal people living in the region as to appropriate legislation concerning their land.

Through its Council of 90 delegates – directly elected by their communities – the CLC represents the interests and aspirations of approximately 20,000 traditional landowners and other Aboriginal people resident in its region. The CLC region has 30 remote Aboriginal communities across nine designated regions, with over 300 outstations and homelands[1].

We undertake a range of programs that reflect the priorities of and that benefit our constituents. Our ranger program employs more than 150 Aboriginal rangers to work on traditional country in culturally meaningful jobs. With the support of the CLC's Community Development Unit, traditional owners across our region have invested more than $245 million of their own income streams from royalties, leasing and parks rent in projects that include education, business and employment support, infrastructure, language and culture, homelands, essential services and health. $33.8 million was funded in the last financial year alone.

Of the approximately 780,000 km² of land covered by the CLC region (see map), more than half (417,318 km2) is Aboriginal land under the ALRA. In addition, rights have been asserted and won under the NTA, and traditional owners unable to claim land under the ALRA have succeeded in obtaining rights to small areas known as Community Living Areas, under NT legislation.

Our region supports the voices of 30 remote communities and 300 outstations and homelands, of which, 159 are registered with NTG[2]. We advocate for our people on a wide range of land-based, economic and socio-political issues to ensure that our families can continue to survive and thrive on their land.

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[1] The Central Land Council map, https://www.clc.org.au/governance-at-the-central-land-council/
[2] Registered Homelands are eligible for access to municipal and essential services funding. Eligibility is based on criteria including: primary place of residence and access to reliable water and power.

Executive Summary

The CLC thanks the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) for the opportunity to provide input to this review. We acknowledge the Committee's commitment to bringing First Nations peoples' perspectives into the discussion, and the focus on telecommunications services as being critical to people's economic and social wellbeing. The CLC has long advocated for telecommunications to be equitable, relevant and affordable. In 2007, the CLC made a submission to the Telecommunications Universal Services Obligation Review: Issues Paper[3] calling for:

> *"Telecommunications to be delivered in congruence with community aspirations and needs, rather than arbitrarily introducing technology to meet the needs of external based service providers"*[4].

Sadly, this call to action remains relevant 17 years on. The CLC remains vigilant in keeping this on the political agenda, reiterated in a recent submission to the Inquiry by the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group's (FNDIAG), Roadmap Discussion Paper (August 2024). The CLC endorses the key principles used by the FNDIAG when considering telecommunications policy and reform;

- Place based approach
- Moving beyond closing the gap to innovation and excellence
- First Nations representation
- Adopting a technology-agnostic approach to longer term recommendations and solutions
- Centring First Nations consumer preferences

Without a doubt, there are unique barriers for people residing in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, which requires systems reform. Our submission, focuses on putting the needs and aspirations of remote Aboriginal communities and individuals at the forefront of this discussion, by drawing the Committee's attention to the intersecting social determinants that need further consideration, as well as providing case studies to highlight the unique challenges and opportunities within our region.

We recognise the cumulative commitment over recent years by the Australian Government to service regional and rural communities, as well as elevating local voices and priorities in telecommunications discussions and planning. This commitment is also reflected in the Closing the Gap National Agreement to which all governments are signatory. The CLC recognises efforts by government/s, telecommunications companies and retailers to improve accessibility and support, such as; the Regional Investment Framework 2023, the investment into *Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia,* the Australian Government's $68 million investment in the 2024-2025 budget measures to support First Nations Digital Inclusion[5], Telstra's commitment to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), and the 3 year extension of the 'Mapping the Digital Gap' project. These commitments are enabling stronger public accountability and tracking of progress towards digital inclusion and are important steps toward equality of resourcing, and equity outcomes.

A place-based approach is an essential component to ensuring equity and equality with telecommunications infrastructure and services. With this in mind, the CLC requests the Committee reconsider including Alice Springs and/or Tennant Creek as sites for public consultations, as we note these are not currently included in the face-to-face stakeholder consultations.

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[3] Internal record, The Central Land Council Submission to the Telecommunications Universal Services Obligation review: Issues Paper, 1st November 2007.
[4] As per reference 3, page 9.
[5] First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group First Nations Digital Inclusion Measures, 5th June 2024
https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/have-your-say/roadmap-first-nations-digital-inclusion

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendations

1. Where service gaps exist, these places should be prioritised to support connection of Aboriginal communities, homelands and outstations to ensure safety, economic participation, access to appropriate supports and well-being.

2. Increase the scope and sample size of the ADII (as per FNDIAG Inclusion Measures 5th June 2024)[1] to have a broader representation of the population reflected in the research.

3. The next ABS Census to include a question on household internet access and use, to support CTG data collection.

4. This Committee support the work of the First Nations Digital Hub to develop a First Nations consumer hotline.

5. This Committee support the development of a digital literacy strategy to operate alongside and inform the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap.

6. In line with the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap, develop a First Nations Digital Hub that can work with governments, telecommunications companies and retailers to achieve Priority Reform 4 in Closing the Gap; shared access to data and information at a regional level.

7. The CLC is included in consultations to co-design the First Nations Digital Support Hub so that it meets the needs of Aboriginal people in Central Australia.

8. The Committee work with the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group to develop a digital inclusion strategy to include place based, specific goals to ensure that remote communities are given every available opportunity to utilise digital technology in ways that support cultural knowledge transfer.

9. There is a requirement in funding agreements such as the Regional Connectivity Program and Mobile Black Spot Program, that telecommunications companies and retailers consult with and have the support of Aboriginal communities and organisations to ensure a place-based approach, supporting the aspirations and needs of each community.

10. Update the DSS telephone allowance to provide all residents living in remote/very remote regions to access the full allowance, by removing the basic allowance rate.

11. Telecommunications companies and retailers to offer affordable prepaid broadband services.

12. Telecommunications companies and retailers provide unmetered access to government websites and First Nations free-to-air television services.

Recommendations cont'd

13. The Universal Service Obligation (USO) should be regularly reviewed to align with advancement in technologies including mobile broadband and voice services. The CLC endorses the ACCAN recommendations in their submission "Better delivery of universal services"[1]:

    - Focus on capabilities a USO should deliver, such as access to health services, education, economic opportunities, government services, and social connections.
    - Adopt a technology-neutral approach to the delivery of a standard communication service.
    - Develop a dynamic institutional framework that sets minimum standards for contemporary service needs and provides a framework for uplift in service capability and standards as technology and community expectations evolve.
    - Establish fit-for-purpose governance arrangements that ensure the USO provider is accountable and transparent.

14. The Committee to support the inclusion of youth specific goals in the Digital Inclusion Strategy/Roadmap to ensure the capacity building of young people with regards to their digital literacy, and other training opportunities that support future employment.

15. The Committee support continued advocacy to the NTG and Commonwealth Governments to fully reinstate secondary education in NT remote communities to at least Year 10.

16. Refocus existing roads funding programs to deliver new connectivity at roadside rest areas in underserviced regions, through technology that offers open access for mobile devices.

17. Telecommunications companies and retailers to include Target 17 of CTG National Agreement in their key corporate documents, their corporate plan and reconciliation action plans.

18. This consultation results in specific goals developed in partnership with remote communities, to ensure they are given every available opportunity to utilise digital technology in ways that support cultural knowledge transfer.

19. Payphones are maintained on outstations/homelands.

20. Establish a national connectivity strategy to set a consistent direction, guide policy and priorities for investment that can adapt to new and emerging technologies and consumer needs.

Context

As outlined in the 'Measuring the Digital Divide' ADII 2023 Report[6], it is important that telecommunications is not looked at in isolation, rather alongside a number of other policy areas and indicators that intersect, including the correlation between digital inclusion and the level of education, employment and income attainment i.e. those with a bachelor degree level of education score significantly higher on the index score (better access, affordability and digital ability) versus those who have not completed secondary school. Additionally, mobile-only users[7], very remote residents, those not in the labour force, residents in public housing, and First Nations peoples all experience less than average digital ability. The intersectionality of these factors starts to paint a much starker picture when we put this into the NT context.

Below is some key data that evidences the correlations identified above. The CLC encourages the Committee to consider this data when making their recommendations.

Northern Territory wide data:

- In 2021, 54.6% of Aboriginal people experienced income poverty[8]
- In 2021, 79.6% of very remote Aboriginal residents were residing in a social housing dwelling[9]
- In term 1, 2024, the average school attendance across NT primary and secondary schools for Aboriginal students was just 60% compared to 87% for non-Aboriginal students[10]
- In term 1, 2024, the average school attendance rate of children enrolled in remote Aboriginal community schools (mostly Aboriginal students) was 45.1%[11]
- In 2022, 18.8% of young Aboriginal people from remote and very remote NT communities completed year 12 compared to 63.9% in major centres.[12]
- In 2021, 34.8% of young Aboriginal people aged 15-24 were engaged in education, employment or training, [13]
- In 2021, 34.3% of Aboriginal adults aged 25-64 were employed[14]
- In 2023, the ADII score measuring access, affordability and digital ability assessed the NT as a whole as the lowest in the country at 69. By contrast the ADII average measure for First Nations people from Very Remote Australia averaged just 48% with a relative gap of 21.6%.[15]

As the data is disaggregated, these correlations are further exacerbated.

The CLC region

As of 2024, there are 30 remote Aboriginal communities and over 300 homelands and outstations in the CLC region. Disaggregated region specific data was not available at the time of writing this

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[6] 4 Measuring Australia's Digital Divide Report, 2023, pg.6, https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/download-reports/
[7] 2024 Telecommunications Independent Review Issues paper, pg. 10
[8] Dr Francis Markham, Submission into the Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia, 2023, Submission 251, pg. 4, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/PovertyinAustralia/Submissions
[9] Closing the Gap Data Dashboard, Socio-Economic Outcome#9, https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area9/social-housing
[10] NTG Department of Education, Enrolment and Attendance Data Term 1, 2024 https://education.nt.gov.au/statistics-research-and-strategies/enrolment-and-attendance
[11] Ibid
[12] Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, Year 12 certification rates, 2022 https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/year-12-certification-rates
[13] Closing the Gap Data Dashboard, Socio-Economic Outcome #7, https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area7
[14] Closing the Gap Data Dashboard, Socio-Economic outcome #8 - https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area8
[15] Measuring Australia's Digital Divide, ADII 2023, pg.8.

submission, however the CLC is aware that internet access continues to be an issue, as challenges regarding access are consistently raised with the CLC in different forums. Data available includes:

- Income poverty rates in CLC remote communities increased by 10-13 % between 2016 and 2021 (see graph 1 below)
- In 2024, average primary and secondary school attendance for very remote communities was 45.1%, noting the majority of CLC communities fall into this category[16]
- Currently, there is no specific data available on the NTG website for remote year 12 graduations
- In 2021, 80% of young people between 15 – 24 years of age, were not in education or employment[17]
- In 2021, 25.4% of adults between 25-64 years of age were employed[18]
- ADII scores in 2022-2024 - 2 communities within the CLC region were surveyed as part of the 'Mapping the Digital Gap' project in 2022-2024. The remote community of Yuelamu had an index score of 45.2 and the regional centre of Tennant Creek scored 46.6[19]
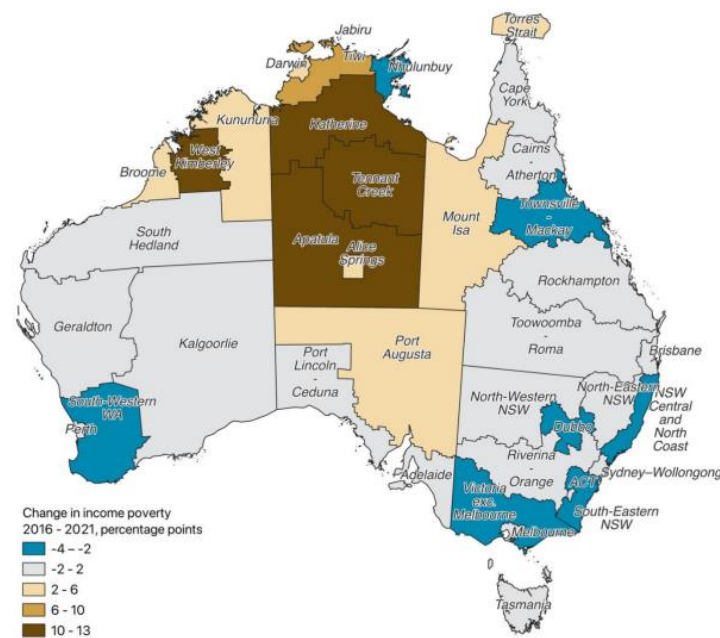

Figure 4: Change in Indigenous income poverty rates by Indigenous Region between the 2016 and 2021 Censuses

Graph 1 - Dr Francis Markham, Submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs' Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia, Figure 4, pg.7[20].

The above graph demonstrates that poverty in regional parts of the NT and WA is worsening. Markham identifies that unemployment is a key influencer of poverty, with many in remote First Nations communities disproportionately impacted. Whilst it isn't within the scope of this submission to examine this more extensively, it is an important point to draw on, as digital inclusion is a critical factor in being able to access employment and/or economically participate. Poverty also forces people to have more engagement with government services for subsistence. With only five physical, staffed

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[16] As per reference 1.
[17] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Northern Territory Data, 2021 https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/IQS7
[18] Closing the Gap Data Dashboard, Socio-economic Outcome#8, https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area8
[19] Measuring Australia's Digital Divide, ADII 2023
[20] Dr Francis Markham, Submission into the Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia, 2023, Submission 251, page 6, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/PovertyinAustralia/Submissions

Centrelink Service Centres[21] (CSS) in the CLC region, coupled with the gaps in digital access and the increasing requirement of government services such as Centrelink / MyGov for online access, this increases reliance of people on service providers for their internet access, perpetuating dependence. In this context, telecommunications becomes an enabler for many human rights such as; accessing education, self-determination, economic and political participation, equal access to public service and engagement in cultural activities to name a few[22]. As is highlighted in the case studies, it also supports people's right to security.

Juxtaposing this data are the aspirations of Aboriginal people living in our region. This includes the views of people who reside in remote communities who understand the importance and relevance of digital inclusion to fulfilling broader family and community economic plans and aspirations. For example, ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ aspiration of economic participation through her tourism business (highlighted in case study #1), of families wanting to protect and keep their families safe (as highlighted in all 4 case studies) and wanting people to be socially connected and have the opportunity to support connection to country and kin (as outlined in case studies #2 & 4).

The *Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia* has enabled good investment by the NTG, Telstra and Optus through the Mobile Black Spot Program, and the Remote Connectivity Program to improve mobile phone coverage in the CLC region however it is important to acknowledge that telecommunications is not just about being connected to people and services. It is also about being connected to place. Technologies and connectivity provide tools and opportunities for continuity of connection to country, are great enablers of knowledge exchange and maintenance. There are many digital innovations coming from the Central Australian region that demonstrate this:

- The work of Senior Aboriginal Women from Central Australia, in collaboration with the National Museum of Australia (Neale and Kelly 2020[23]) using digital technology to combine western cartography with Aboriginal songs to create the *Songlines project; Tracking the Seven Sisters.*
- The Ara Irititja Digital Archive Project[24], based at the NPY Women's Council Aboriginal Corporation in Alice Springs, captures materials of cultural and historical significance through photographs, films, sound recording and documents for Anangu (local Aboriginal people) across the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara lands of Central Australia. The archive is also accessible at the CLC and in a number of community learning centres.

These are significant archives for families and communities, supporting cultural maintenance, language preservation and knowledge transfer, however they rely on access to reliable and affordable telecommunications infrastructure and services. Thus, telecommunications are not just a service, but another resource to support Aboriginal people's connection to country, to sustain cultural knowledge, and engage younger populations and the broader Australian society in such innovative processes and projects. As outlined in the case studies below, telecommunications also have the power to disable and/or enable people's connections to country and culture, by providing safety by way of reliable and affordable mobile and payphone access.

In order to fully appreciate the challenges and opportunities, our submission offers some case studies and a synopsis for your consideration.

[21] Services Australia. *Find Us: Services Australia*, https://findus.servicesaustralia.gov.au
[22] United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights
[23] Songlines; The Power and Promise; Knowledge in Country and the Third Archive, Chapter 3, 2020
[24] Ara Irititja https://irititja.com/

Case Studies

Case study #1 - Highlighting the need for digital inclusion to support economic participation and safety for residents at Spotted Tiger Outstation.

Spotted Tiger Outstation - 200kms North-East of Alice Springs
██████ lives on ██████████████████████ on Akekawrrwenteme Ureyengeal Land Trust. ██ ██████ family has lived there for six generations. She and her partner have established a campground on the property to host tourists, school groups and people attending the annual Harts Range Races. There is no mobile reception at ██████████████████ or the camp ground. About 10-15 years ago, the NBN funded an 'activ8me' phone, which is meant to provide free Wi-Fi and calls to landlines, and calls to mobiles via a phone card, which can be purchased at the Atitjere shop 8km away. ██████████ said this phone is very unreliable, and the Wi-Fi barely works. A technician has only come 2-3 times in the years since it was installed.
A lack of reliable infrastructure limits ██████████ ability to fulfil her economic aspirations for the campground, which has mistakenly been marked as free on various websites. A reliable internet connection would give ██████████ and her family more control and determination over the management, accessibility and unique vision of their campground business. Critically, they would be able to ensure all visitors pay for their campsite and usage of facilities, as the site isn't always monitored because their residence is away from the campsites. Mobile infrastructure would also increase safety. There are many hills and waterholes around the outstation, and ██████████ and other Traditional Owners have consistently expressed concerns about the lack of mobile service and the risk to their families and tourists if there is an emergency.
██████████ feedback provides insight into how the lack of mobile infrastructure affects her family, as the lack of connection makes it less appealing for her nieces to spend time on country, and limits visits by elderly people who want to spend time on country.

Case study # 2 – Highlighting the need for digital inclusion with social and economic participation, and safety.

Imangara Community Living Area - 200kms South-East of Tennant Creek
Imangara community has a population of around 80 people. It is approximately 30 kms from the closest remote community, Alekarenge. It doesn't have mobile reception, but there is a Wi-Fi hotspot supplied by Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service (CAYLUS) and a public phone. Community members have to stand next to the CAYLUS hotspot to access the internet.

At a community meeting in October 2022, Imangara residents told CLC community development staff that better reception is vital for:

• Emergencies, as the nearest health clinic is in Alekarenge, 30 kms away.

• To call 000, when people are sick or passing away.

• When the public phone does not work (for example when it is raining).

• Talking to the CLC and other organisations about meetings.

• Talking to families not living in the community.

- Checking on families who are travelling to make sure they are safe.

- Services and families who want to contact residents.

- Residents who want to contact their bank, Centrelink, the police and other services.

- Accessing entertainment.

Telstra has confirmed there are no plans to extend mobile service coverage to Imangara, and the community is unable to fund it themselves.

Case study #3 – Highlighting the need for digital inclusion with safety and ongoing connection with culture

Mt Eaglebeak Outstation - 250 kms North-East of Alice Springs
Mt Eaglebeak Outstation is about 250km north-east of Alice Springs, 40km from Atitjere/Harts Range with nine dwellings clustered into two areas – north and south (approx. 600m apart). People live in all dwellings across the north and southern areas. The outstation grows over summer with visitors from Queensland and Alice Springs, including senior elders with health conditions and mobility restrictions. Mt Eaglebeak has no mobile reception. A Telstra payphone was initially installed in the southern cluster, and then moved to the northern cluster. The phone only works intermittently, and Telstra has not actioned requests for maintenance. Residents want a second phone installed in the southern cluster, as there are concerns elderly residents can't walk the 600m to the phone in the northern cluster. The CLC recently contacted Telstra to put forward the community's request for a second phone and to add Wi-Fi. In response, Telstra said their data 'suggest[s] the site has a negative, net social benefit' which would sometimes prompt Telstra to remove the phone, but they wouldn't remove the phone in this instance. It is unclear to the CLC how Telstra assesses net social benefit; for residents, a second phone and mobile reception would ensure residents have a way to call for help in emergencies and has many other social benefits. Community development staff were also told by NIAA that new mobile infrastructure for Mt Eaglebeak would likely be delivered through the NT Government's small cell program in 2023. The CLC can confirm through enquiries that Mt Eaglebeak was not selected for the small cell program.

Case study #4 – Highlighting the need for digital inclusion with connection to culture, well-being and safety.

Uluperte Homeland - 220 kms East of Alice Springs
Uluperte Homeland belongs to the ███████ family. It is a significant cultural site and has three houses. It has permanent water and a solar power system, but no mobile reception, with the nearest phone 40km away. The lack of mobile service is regularly cited as a hurdle to the traditional owners going to spend time on the homeland. Without phone service people feel worried for their safety. For some family members with permanent health conditions, the risk is too great to knowingly go out bush without being able to call for help if it's needed. In 2019, traditional owners decided to spend their own money on a Telstra Small Cell. The CLC, on behalf of Traditional Owners, liaised with Telstra on the project, but there were significant hurdles due to Telstra's regulatory obligations and the reality of installing infrastructure out bush.

Unfortunately, the CLC and Telstra were not able to come to agreement, consequently the project didn't go ahead.

Yitaki-maninjaku, Warrirninjaku, Payirninjaku Manu Pina-jarrinjaku (YWPP) - Community Research Project

The YWPP project, developed and administered by the CLC within the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust (WETT)[25] has been undertaking research within Warlpiri communities for the last 12 months. Early insights from this research suggest online engagement with administrative systems remain challenging for many people, requiring high levels of support in order to undertake online tasks such as banking and communication with government departments. Increased government expectations on citizens to engage with online systems rather than face-face, without adequate support, creates significant barriers to service access and outcomes. In this context, WETT funded learning centres in remote communities of Lajamanu, Nyirripi and Willowra have become de facto digital access hubs, filling an essential services gap by providing 1-1 support for community members to undertake administrative tasks online.

Whilst these challenges exist for many, evidence also suggests that young Aboriginal people are keeping pace with the latest global internet trends of interest to them, such as AFL players, hip-hop musicians and other social media influencers. Young people have high levels of digital literacy with regards to consuming, creating and sharing social media content. Young Warlpiri people, like their counterparts globally, are using technology to engage with a globalised online music, gaming and viral social media culture. While the Pintubi, Anmatjere, Warlpiri (PAW) Media and Communications play an important role in producing cultural audio-visual content, there appears to be a gap for cultural content on social media. Research demonstrates that cultural transmission and continuity promotes wellbeing and other socio-economic outcomes for Aboriginal people and that technology has potential to significantly influence cultural transmission, positively and negatively[26]. Innovative approaches to digital outreach and inclusion that build on young people's use of social media, would be an effective way to build on current digital literacy levels in remote communities.

Whilst advocating for digital inclusion, the CLC's constituents are also alarmed about the harms via social media bullying, misinformation and disinformation. Many YWPP research respondents have raised concerns about the impact of technology and internet connectivity on young people, reporting significant negative impacts on their socio-emotional wellbeing and participation in family and community life. Respondents linked regular late-night social media, gaming and internet use to disrupted school attendance. Furthermore, many respondents raised concerns that '*social media is changing young people's minds and making them forget culture*' (████████████. We also draw on recent research[27] that links the overuse of technologies with chronic sleep deprivation amongst young people, leading to detrimental impacts on cognitive ability, school performance and socio-emotional functioning. While further research is required, initial insights from the YWPP research tentatively confirms that trends in Warlpiri communities mirror these findings.

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[25] https://www.clc.org.au/wett/

[26] Shifting perceptions, shifting identities: Communication technologies and the altered social, cultural and linguistic ecology in a remote Indigenous context, Kral, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12087

[27] Reviewing the Impact of Social media on the Mental Health of Adolescents and Young Adults, Gupta, Jogdand and Kumar, 2022, https://doi.org/10.7759%2Fcureus.30143

Utju (Areyonga Community) – 240km west of Alice Springs
Utju (Areyonga) is a remote Aboriginal community west of Alice Springs with a population of 277 (2021 Census). The community members are predominantly Pitjantjatjara speakers with an average age of 31 years. While the local regional council offices have mobile and internet coverage through Starlink the majority of community members have no reliable access. The community is funded for a range of programs covering indigenous employment, health research, early childhood etc. The outcomes of these programs including children's learning in the home are limited by a lack of mobile and internet access enjoyed by most other NT residents including many other remote communities. The local community are frustrated that the issue remains unresolved. Local resident ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ commented, "Our kids went to Murray Bridge through school and met up with other students. It is hard for them to stay in contact. We need mobile and internet like everyone else. What we have is too small." (pers.comm 30.08.24)

Discussion and Recommendations

Gaps in services and improvements in telecommunications outcomes.

In order to address the gaps, we firstly need to understand what they are. A challenge for the CLC is to obtain a clear and comprehensive picture of current phone and internet provision across our region (in relation to both access and reliability). Information is often organised by funding stream or provider. A related challenge is accessing advice on technical solutions that are unbiased by telecommunications companies' commercial interests – particularly in a rapidly evolving technological landscape. The First Nations Digital Support Hub, funded in the 2024-2025 Federal Budget, has the potential to be a source of independent advice about appropriate solutions for Aboriginal communities and organisations in remote Australia.

Ongoing commitment to assessment, monitoring and evaluation is essential

The report on Measuring the Digital Gap 2023 has provided valuable insights into the affordability and accessibility of telecommunications. Research such as this needs to be extended beyond the current scope of 10 sites in order to develop a more comprehensive picture of the consumer narrative regarding telecommunications. There also needs to be a commitment to providing this information in ways that are easily understood, and consistent in the messaging.

Recommendations
1. Where service gaps exist, these places should be prioritised to support connection of Aboriginal communities, homelands and outstations to ensure safety, economic participation, access to appropriate supports and well-being.
2. Increase the scope and sample size of the ADII (as per FNDIAG Inclusion Measures 5th June 2024)[28] to have a broader representation of the population reflected in the research.
3. The next ABS Census to include a question on household internet access and use, to support CTG data collection.

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[28] FNDIAG Roadmap, Pg. 7 - https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/first-nations-digital-inclusion-advisory-group-first-nations-digital-inclusion-measures-5june2024.pdf

4. This Committee support the work of the First Nations Digital Hub to develop a First Nations consumer hotline.

5. This Committee support the development of a digital literacy strategy to operate alongside and inform the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap.

The Regional Tech Hub

The CLC recognises this as a good initiative, however for Aboriginal people within the CLC region, the suggestions from the FNDIAG's Roadmap have more relevance and meaning, such as:

- The development of a First Nations Digital Hub
- First Nations Consumer hotline set up through the above mentioned hub
- The establishment and use of First Nations Digital mentors within local communities to support improvement in knowledge sharing and consumer rights information.

Recommendations

1. In line with the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap, develop a First Nations Digital Hub that can work with governments, telecommunications companies and retailers to achieve Priority Reform 4 in Closing the Gap; shared access to data and information at a regional level.

2. The CLC is included in consultations to co-design the First Nations Digital Support Hub so that it meets the needs of Aboriginal people in Central Australia.

Place-based solutions

Place-based approaches are essential to making sure that communities have appropriate infrastructure that is relevant. Affordability is a key issue that requires a nuanced approach by telecommunications companies and retailers in different places. For example, in remote communities within the CLC region, the data regarding income poverty cannot be ignored, and must be included in any planning of digital inclusion. The correlation between digital inclusion, education, employment and housing also needs further consideration, including plans relating to remote communities factoring in local employment and digital literacy bespoke to that community's needs and aspirations.

We also highlight that within the CLC region, there are four trial sites proposed for Utju/Areyonga, Munkarta, Ampilatjwatja and Arrerwer being proposed. These trial sites offer a valuable opportunity for this Committee to recommend that any Telecommunications planning going forward, support the aspirations of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap, including:

- Investment in free community Wi-Fi, with input from the community residents as to how this Wi-Fi should be managed
- Development of a community network of paid digital mentors; identified positions, with translation skills
- Approach the trial sites from a community development perspective including key community members from the design, implementation and evaluation of the whole project, and

- The evaluation of the project include participatory action research to capture insights, with particular regard to how digital mentors can be best utilised from a National First Nations Digital Hub.

Recommendations

1. The Committee work with the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group to develop a digital inclusion strategy to include place-based, specific goals to ensure that remote communities are given every available opportunity to utilise digital technology in ways that support cultural knowledge transfer.

2. There is a requirement in funding agreements such as the Regional Connectivity Program and Mobile Black Spot Program, that telecommunications companies and retailers consult with and have the support of Aboriginal Communities and organisations to ensure a place based approach, supporting the aspirations and needs of each community.

The adequacy of, and equitable access to telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.

If we are to achieve equity with access to telecommunications services, we must first understand what this actually means. The Australian Human Rights Centre offers a clear definition of equity;
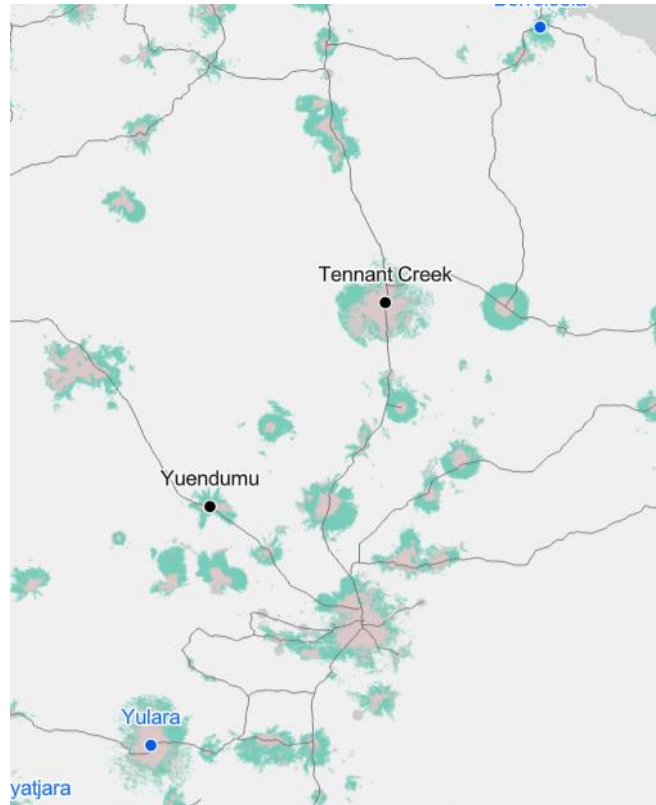
> *"Equity is about everyone achieving equal outcomes. We all have the same value and deserve a good life, but we all start from a different place"[29].*

Indeed, the starting block for Aboriginal people living remotely is from a very different place and the current scenario identified throughout the contextual data provided, raises serious concerns about the inequality of outcomes within the Northern Territory, particularly for remote Aboriginal residents. This is evidenced in the recent outcomes of the 'Mapping the Digital Gap' project 2022-2024, which found that for people living in the NT, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) score measuring access, affordability and digital ability, was the lowest in the country at a total of 69. Included in this report, were 2 places that fall within the CLC region; the remote community of Yuelamu had an index score of 45.2 and the regional centre of Tennant Creek scored 46.6[30]. In terms of accessibility, we recall the case studies as per above, which provide live examples of how Wi-Fi access is not reliable. We also refer to the independent national audit of mobile coverage[31] undertaken by Accenture Australia. As per the below map, this audit provides valuable data for our region, reflecting that there is quite a way to go in connecting remote communities, homelands and outstations regarding mobile coverage.

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[29] Australian Human Rights Commission, Definition of Equity, https://humanrights.gov.au/
[30] Measuring Australia's Digital Divide, ADII 2023
[31] National Audit of Mobile Coverage, 2023, approximate CLC region, https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-communications-arts/better-connectivity-plan-regional-and-rural-australia/national-audit-mobile-coverage

Map 1 – National Audit of Mobile Coverage, 2023[32], Northern Territory, Central Land Council region

The findings from the Mapping the Digital Divide Gap Project, 2022-2024 also highlighted significant issues for both communities, including the average monthly communication spend per household sitting between $179 and $201. Despite this, the primary means of telecommunications for Aboriginal people living remotely in the NT remains the mobile phone. The use of mobile phones, and the high level of mobility of people transitioning throughout the region means that the current requirements of telecommunications services and infrastructure is not fit for purpose.

Recommendations

1. Update the DSS telephone allowance to provide all residents living in remote/very remote regions to access the full allowance, by removing the basic allowance rate.

2. Telecommunications companies and retailers to offer affordable prepaid broadband services.

3. Telecommunications companies and retailers provide unmetered access to government websites and First Nations free-to-air television services.

4. Universal service obligation (USO) should be regularly reviewed to align with advancement in technologies including mobile broadband and voice services. The CLC endorses the ACCAN recommendations in their submission "Better delivery of universal services"[33]:

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[32] National Audit of Mobile Coverage, 2023, approximate CLC region
https://spatial.infrastructure.gov.au/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=2c2a2ffb0a9d47e7b0e50590da86ee66
[33] ACCAN Submission to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, March 2024, https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/2279-better-delivery-of-universal-services

- Focus on capabilities a USO should deliver, such as access to health services, education, economic opportunities, government services, and social connections.
- Adopt a technology-neutral approach to the delivery of a standard communication service.
- Develop a dynamic institutional framework that sets minimum standards for contemporary service needs and provides a framework for uplift in service capability and standards as technology and community expectations evolve.
- Establish fit-for-purpose governance arrangements that ensure the USO provider is accountable and transparent.

Specific focus on youth

The CLC is gaining unique insights into the challenges faced by young Aboriginal people from remote communities, with respect to modern technology and the increasing requirements to access supports online. In terms of digital ability, the YWPP Community Research Project synopsis provided in the case studies section, captures early findings within an Aboriginal led and delivered research program within the CLC region, suggesting that for young people in particular, connectivity cannot be viewed in isolation, it must include a considered, place-based strategy that supports improved digital literacy. As pointed out in the contextual data, many young Aboriginal people in the CLC region do not attend secondary schooling, and /or do not have a local secondary school to attend. According to the Australian digital Inclusion Index, digital ability for those who did not complete secondary school was 26.4 points lower than the average[34]. Compounding this, are factors such as residing in a very remote location, not in the labour force, reside in public housing, identifying as First Nations and primarily a mobile only user, all of which apply to many young Aboriginal people in our region.

We know however the general Australian youth population between 18 and 34 age category, score 18 points above the average on digital abilities. This is a strength that can be built upon, particularly within remote communities where we know young people are accessing social media for entertainment and connection with friends, and often support others to navigate social media and digital devices.

Despite young people feeling confident to access social media for multiple reasons, they are identifying that online engagement with administrative systems is challenging. Systems such as MyGov are forcing the use of digital identity such as the anticipated roll out of TEx (Trust Exchange) referred to by Bill Shorten in his recent Press Club Speech[35], and online requirements for obtaining identification. This, coupled with digital exclusion, is creating conditions that are not enabling equality, let alone equity.

This narrative coming from young Aboriginal people in the CLC region is backed up by the ADII data that evidences the fore-mentioned CLC locations of Yuelamu and Tennant Creek, which are falling well below the average for digital ability; Yuelamu scored 39.8 and Tennant creek with a score of 52.6 points[36]. Digital ability is an important component to accompanying connectivity outcomes in remote communities, and to reduce harms as highlighted in the synopsis.

Recommendations

1. The Committee to support the inclusion of youth specific goals in the Digital Inclusion Strategy/Roadmap to ensure the capacity building of young people with regards to their digital literacy, and other training opportunities that support future employment.

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[34] Australian Digital Inclusion Index Interactive Dashboard, https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/dashboard/Digital.aspx
[35] Hon Bill Shorten MP, Press Club Speech, 13th August 2024, https://ministers.dss.gov.au/speeches/15616
[36] Australian Digital Inclusion Index Interactive Dashboard, https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/dashboard/FirstNations.aspx

> 2. The Committee to support continued advocacy to the NTG and Commonwealth Governments to fully reinstate secondary education in NT remote communities to at least Year 10.

Changes or adjustments needed to existing government policies and design and delivery of programs to ensure they continue to be effective, remain fit for purpose, maximise the social and economic potential of regional Australia and existing and emerging technologies, and deliver improved telecommunications outcomes.

The CLC echo calls by the Northern Territory Government to *"move away from the focus on connecting services to a premise",* to focus instead on new business models that can adapt to community needs, ensuring flexibility, affordability, and which support mobile connectivity. Whilst the Regional Investment Framework[37] includes the valuing of local voices and priorities, this needs to be backed by action, such as ensuring funding agreements require telecommunications companies and retailers to consult with, and have the support of Aboriginal communities and representative organisations. This localised, place based approach and implementation will ensure stronger accountability to Aboriginal communities regarding meeting needs and aspirations. It is no longer acceptable that companies can disregard their corporate social responsibility. There needs to be a close working relationship with remote communities and/or organisations that represent remote communities, to ensure localised knowledge and input is included in any telecommunications plans and changes.

As is pointed out in the Regional Investment Framework, the Australian Government is committed to implementing the policy of *"no-one held back and no-one left behind"*, therefore it is imperative that government/s prioritise their investment to underserviced regions, such as the CLC's and other remote and rural regions, regardless of the feasibility of a return on investment. The underlining principle for delivery of telecommunications should not be about economies of scale, but rather equitable access regardless of where somewhere lives.

In terms of improved telecommunications, the CLC highlights that the leading cause of death for Aboriginal children aged 1-14 years and older youth in the Northern Territory is road accidents. As at 19th of August 2024[38], the road fatality rate had increased by 477% from the previous year. This massive jump in the road fatality rate (noting a large percentage of these being in remote areas), coupled with a lack of access to telecommunications leaves people very vulnerable and unsafe, particularly is emergency situations. The CLC requests the Committee seriously consider this scenario when providing recommendations with regards to mobile phone coverage across major roads and highways.

The CLC urges the Committee to incorporate a commitment and plan regarding Closing the Gap Priority Reforms and Socio-Economic targets within the next Telecommunications Plan. This underscores the importance of digital access in support of progress against these reforms and targets, as well as bringing the telecommunications sector in line with the National Agreement.

Recommendations

> 1. Refocus existing roads funding programs to deliver new connectivity at roadside rest areas in underserviced regions, through technology that offers open access for mobile devices.

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[37] Australian Government Regional Investment Framework, 2023, https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/regional-investment-framework-july2023.pdf
[38] https://pfes.nt.gov.au/newsroom/road-toll

2. There is a requirement in funding agreements such as the Regional Connectivity Program and Mobile Black Spot Program, that telecommunications companies and retailers consult with and have the support of Aboriginal communities and organisations to ensure a place based approach, supporting the aspirations and needs of each community.

3. Telecommunications companies and retailers to include Target 17 of CTG National Agreement in their key corporate documents, their corporate plan and reconciliation action plans.

4. This consultation results in specific goals developed in partnership the remote communities, to ensure they are given every available opportunity to utilise digital technology in ways that support cultural knowledge transfer.

Access to public phone infrastructure

Traditional owners have in the past provided some valuable feedback which suggested that payphones at outstations are still an important part of the telecommunications network. This came up again recently with traditional owners at Walpeyangkere outstation (████████████████). The lack of telecommunications is one of the barriers to traditional owners spending time on the outstations (also highlighted above in case study #4 by the ████████████. Information provided by traditional owners has suggested that family members who experience chronic illnesses (████████████████ ████████████) are reluctant to spend time on outstations with no telecommunications, as they worry for their safety is there is a medical emergency/episode.

Recommendation

1. Payphones are maintained on outstations/homelands.

Better alignment with state, territory and local government planning and funding processes in delivering telecommunications services and infrastructure.

As our submission has identified, there are significant intersecting policy areas that require alignment to this telecommunications review. If we are to support meeting the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, and provide the most effective and cost-efficient reform for future telecommunications services, infrastructure and planning, then a refreshed Telecommunications Plan needs to align with the following initiatives:

- Housing and homelands investment within the NT over the next 10 years
- Closing the Gap National Agreement, NT Implementation Planning
- Current reforms being undertaken by the Department of Education re: policy shift to return secondary schooling to remote communities, and the potential telecommunications infrastructure this will require
- Remote Jobs and Economic Development – creation of employment
- National training hubs delivered by Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, the National Indigenous Australians Agency and the Commonwealth Department of Education.
- Existing remote adult education facilities

Recommendations

1. Establish a national connectivity strategy to set a consistent direction, guide policy and priorities for investment that can adapt to new and emerging technologies and consumer needs.