



The Hon Alannah MacTiernan, Chair
Regional Telecommunications Review Independent Committee
via rtirc@infrastructure.gov.au

Dear Ms MacTiernan

The First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group (Advisory Group) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review (the review). We would also like to take the opportunity to thank the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) for its engagement with us to date.

As you know, the Advisory Group was established by the Minister for Communications to provide advice on progressing Target 17 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: equal levels of digital inclusion for First Nations Australians by 2026. This target underpins Outcome 17 of the National Agreement, which is focused on ensuring that First Nations Australians have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.

In October 2023, the Advisory Group published its initial report, which is available here: [Initial Report | First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group](#). Drawing on our recommendations, the 2024-2025 Commonwealth Budget announced \$68 million of funding for First Nations digital inclusion, which will be used to implement the following initiatives:

- \$40 million for the roll-out of free community Wi-Fi in remote communities, with \$20 million being allocated to a new contestable program, and \$20 million to provide free Wi-Fi to around 23 communities which will be delivered by NBN Co.
- \$22 million to establish a First Nations Digital Support Hub and a network of digital mentors
- \$6 million to expand the Australian Digital Inclusion Index to improve the national collection of data on First Nations digital inclusion.

While we were pleased to see these measures funded through the Budget, we are concerned that on their own, they will not be enough to address the entrenched inequality in connectivity options and services for First Nations people in regional and remote communities. We will continue to advocate strongly for further action, particularly in the context of the development of a First Nations digital inclusion roadmap, which we plan to launch at the end of this year. We will also work closely with the Government and First Nations stakeholders on the design and delivery of these measures.

The Advisory Group firmly believes that connectivity is a human right, and that all First Nations Australians should have access to affordable and reliable telecommunications, regardless of where they live. Through our consultations with First Nations people and stakeholders, we have heard that access, affordability and ability continue to be significant issues for many First Nations people and communities. We have heard that:

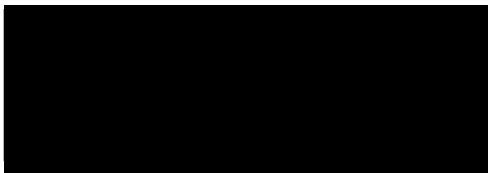


- access remains a key issue for many remote First Nations communities and homelands as they often lack the basic connectivity needed to make phone calls, including to triple zero. This creates significant public safety risks for those communities who have access to a singular mobile service, those without any mobile connectivity and/or a basic telephone service.
- affordability of quality connectivity and services continues to be a challenge, particularly for those using prepaid mobile services, on which there is a heavy reliance in many communities
- digital ability, including connectivity literacy, require further focus to ensure First Nations Australians are able to be online safely and effectively, and understand which connectivity solution or service is best suited to their needs.

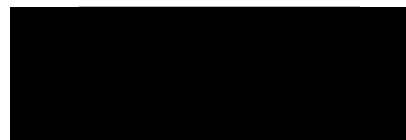
As you are aware, connectivity underpins many of the priorities in Closing the Gap, including health, education, employment, justice, language and culture and connection to Country. We urge the Committee to consider our comments and the opportunity they present to support equitable access to connectivity for First Nations people living in regional and remote areas, particularly in terms of section 4(d) of your Terms of Reference.

The Advisory Group would be happy to expand on the comments made within this letter at our joint meeting in Broome in August 2024. In the interim, if you have any queries, please contact our secretariat at [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely



Ms Dot West OAM
Co-chair
First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group



Associate Professor Lyndon Ormond-Parker
Co-chair
First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group



APPENDIX

Question 2: What further initiatives can be implemented to support First Nations communities in developing and leading their own digital inclusion solutions while ensuring cultural appropriateness?

The Advisory Group believes that the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) and other government programs need to be reviewed to reflect government and industry commitment to achieving Target 17, including through a much stronger focus on place-based solutions. We consider that place-based solutions are essential for the delivery of fit for purpose and culturally appropriate telecommunications solutions. The guidelines for funding programs should be reviewed to ensure they are culturally appropriate and flexible. This is explored further in our response to Question 18, below.

First Nations communities must be empowered to make informed choices, be part of the planning and design process, and have a final say on the outcome that are important to them. It is also critical that First Nations media and broadcasters be employed to ensure culturally appropriate targeted information to support the dissemination of digital inclusion solutions in communities.

Question 4: Deploying and maintaining telecommunications infrastructure in remote areas requires a skilled workforce. What initiatives can be implemented to ensure there is a skilled workforce in regional and remote Australia capable of supporting the construction, maintenance and operation of futureproof telecommunications infrastructure?

The Advisory Group strongly supports the development of a skilled telecommunications workforce in regional and remote areas, including in First Nations communities. Investment in skills and training would help support economic self-determination for those communities, and provide First Nations people with the opportunity to remain on country.

The creation of a skilled workforce will also address the current significant delays and costs of service and repairs to telecommunications infrastructure. Employing and training local First Nations staff would help ensure the cultural appropriateness of deployment of technologies, with those staff best placed to provide advice on issues including local areas of significance and community context and dynamics.

There is also a need for government to recognise the importance of the telecommunications, media and broadcasting sectors in remote First Nations communities and reflect this in national skills planning and strategies, including bilateral agreements with states and territories, and in the allocation of funding through programs such as the Community Development Program and Remote Jobs and Economic Development program.

Question 5: Could the NBN fixed wireless network or other alternative networks be used to provide reliable and affordable voice services in remote areas? Are there any consumer safeguards or guarantees that need to remain or be changed under reformed universal service arrangements?

The Advisory Group recommends that the Universal Services Obligation be modernised to capture emerging technologies and embed First Nations consumer protections. In our recent submission to government (available here: [Submissions | First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group](#)) we advise that First Nations people and communities often do not know that they have rights under the framework and as a result are unable to seek redress in the event that those rights are breached.



There is a clear need for a revised USO framework that embeds First Nations consumer protections at its core and which includes community outreach to raise awareness and visibility of these protections. We further suggest that the Telecommunications Consumer Protection Code and other consumer protections should be strengthened (including enforcement provisions) to prevent mis-selling of telecommunications products to First Nations consumers.

Consumer rights and awareness activities should be addressed with urgency. Telcos should be required to provide culturally appropriate consumer support and messaging, as well as equal protections and relief for pre-paid customers and LEOSat users, and support for consumers experiencing family violence. There is also a need for government policy and regulations to acknowledge the importance of resilience for telecommunications services and solutions, both with respect to energy and the effects of climate change.

Question 6: In modernising universal service arrangements, should access to public phone infrastructure continue and are there particular areas of need? Could technologies beyond traditional payphones be explored to meet this need?

Payphones remain an essential telecommunications solution for many remote First Nations communities and homelands. The 2023 Mapping the Digital Gap report identified that 43 per cent of the 1,545 First Nations communities and homelands across Australia have no mobile service. Within this cohort, some communities and homelands have only a shared public phone or had no telecommunications access at all.

Should payphones be removed, there is the risk that the digital divide for people in these communities will widen, and public safety undermined. It is the Advisory Group's recommendation that payphones continue to be deployed and should be fully funded, until an alternative approach or technology could be tried and tested in a variety of geographic and climatic conditions.

Question 8: How can we achieve equity with respect to mobile services (voice, data and SMS) in regional, rural and remote communities and on regional and remote roads?

Mapping the Digital Gap data indicates that about 90 per cent of mobile users in remote First Nations communities use prepaid mobile services. As the cost of prepaid services is higher than post-paid per gigabyte, the affordability of prepaid mobile services and the use of handsets by multiple family members is a key barrier to improving First Nations digital inclusion.

The Advisory Group has been working with industry on the issue of prepaid affordability through the Low Income Digital Inclusion Forum to address the inequity of prepaid costs and services. We recommend that the Committee consider making recommendations that support parity between prepaid and post-paid services or the requirement of dedicated products for First Nations users that reflect accessibility, affordability and equity issues.

We expect that the National Mobile Coverage Audit will identify significant mobile coverage gaps in regional and remote communities and on the roads that service them. These gaps should be identified as priorities for future funding rounds for regional connectivity programs. In addition to funding, the Advisory Group encourages the government to share the data collected by the National Mobile



Coverage Audit with First Nations communities as per Priority 4 of the National Agreement and provide the data to the department for inclusion in the [First Nations Data Map](#).

Question 9: How can we ensure regional, rural and remote areas have access to the networks, equipment and capacity they need for improved household connectivity and to foster innovation and efficiency across regional industries, including for IoT applications?

In addition to targeted investment to support improved access to connectivity, the Advisory Group recommends that the Committee support the establishment and funding of a National Device Bank, which was a key recommendation of our initial report (recommendation 1.13). We believe that access to devices is critical to ensuring people are able to make use of the connectivity available to them.

As the direct to device (D2D) market matures, it will be vital that a national device bank includes D2D-enabled handsets, for distribution to people in remote areas who need them most. If rolled out effectively, we believe D2D could play a key role in addressing the coverage gap for First Nations Australians.

We also recommend a focus on digital ability and connectivity literacy for people living in regional and remote areas. During our engagement with stakeholders and communities, we have seen the innovation that can occur when First Nations Australians have access to connectivity and training, such as the digital support centres in Cherbourg and Palm Island. We note that the Regional Tech Hub and the First Nations digital support hub, announced in the 2024-25 budget, will help address the need for digital and connectivity literacy support.

Question 12: What can be done to maximise access to multiple connectivity options in case of outages?

Due to their remoteness, geography and climatic conditions, many First Nations communities have unreliable access to telecommunications. This can be because of power surges, rain fade, latency, delayed repairs as well as weather conditions (such as the wet season and desert heat) frequently impact connectivity leaving communities unable to connect to voice or internet services. We are aware of frequent outages in communities such as Thursday Island and understand that this has a significant impact on people, businesses and organisations within the community.

To reduce the impact of outages, we believe that all First Nations communities should have access to both a primary and secondary form of connectivity. This could include, for example, Telstra mobile coverage supported by community Wi-Fi with satellite backhaul. With the increasing impact of climate change and natural disasters, this dual connectivity will be increasingly important to ensure public safety.

Question 18: What changes to Australian Government investment programs are required to ensure they are successful, efficient and effective in delivering improved, reliable and equitable telecommunications for regional, rural and remote consumers?

There is a need to redesign government programs to support First Nations communities to successfully navigate grants processes. Through our consultations with First Nations communities we have heard that the RCP grants process is difficult to access and navigate for applicants in remote areas and



homelands. This is due to a lack of/unstable connectivity, difficult to access application materials, a lack of culturally appropriate departmental supports and a lack of robust feedback at the end of grants processes.

We have identified that the following additional supports would help First Nations applicants to participate in RCP and other grants programs:

- providing RCP materials in easily understood English, and where relevant, providing translations for website content in local First Nations languages
- supporting RCP applications from communities with limited or no internet access or appropriate IT equipment e.g. via mail or telephone
- ensuring that First Nations voices are included when providing advice to the department's decision maker on the merits of applications. This could occur during the assessment phase and/or the briefing of the decision maker to help ensure the specific needs of First Nations people are considered
- providing First Nations communities with access to a fully funded delivery model, based on a Universal Service Obligation/human rights approach.

There is also a need for the RCP to provide appropriate funding to support emerging communications technologies in regional and remote areas. The Advisory Group has heard from telecommunications providers that RCP grants need to be flexible and recognise the unique cultural and geographical considerations of First Nations communities and that funding should be allocated on a needs and outcomes basis instead of being tied to a specific provider or technology. We consider that this will enable the roll out of emerging technologies and promote competition in remote communities.

Question 20: What other matters should the Committee consider in its review and why are they important?

It is essential that the Committee prioritises section 4(d) of its Terms of Reference, being that the “needs in First Nations communities, and the extent to which those needs are being met, taking into account initiatives across the Government” when developing its recommendations to the Minister.

Spectrum is another issue which we suggest needs to be considered by the Committee. We recently wrote to the Australia Communication Media Authority (ACMA) to recommend that spectrum allocations should be considered from a position of place-based solutions and in consultation with community, while the use it or lose it/use it or share it obligations should be included in future spectrum allocations/reallocations. We also believe that recognition must be given to First Nations air rights in consideration of spectrum matters, while a certain percentage (e.g. 20 per cent) of spectrum should be reserved or dedicated for town camps, remote and very remote First Nations communities and homelands.

The Advisory Group also urges the Committee to consider Target 17, Outcome 17 and National Priority Reforms 1, 3 and 4 of Closing the Gap when reviewing submissions and to consider how the Committee's recommendations will support access, affordability and digital ability for First Nations people and communities. We note that our comments and recommendations reflect the Advisory Group's belief



that connectivity is a human right, and urge the Committee to apply a similar lens to their own considerations.