Discussion Paper – First Nations digital inclusion roadmap

1 May 2024

Introduction

The First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group (the Advisory Group) is seeking feedback on the key considerations that should be included in a long-term roadmap outlining the path towards First Nations digital inclusion.

The Advisory Group was established in January 2023 by the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications to focus on **Target 17** of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which aims for **equal levels of digital inclusion for First Nations people by 2026**. This includes supporting the broader **Outcome 17**, which is about ensuring First Nations people are able to access information and services **to make informed decisions about their own lives**.

The Advisory Group has been set up to provide advice to Minister Rowland MP on options to address barriers to digital inclusion as part of the Australian Government's commitment to Target 17. Following publication of its initial report in October 2023, the Advisory Group is now looking to develop a **long-term roadmap** towards First Nations digital inclusion, which will outline the path towards equal levels of digital inclusion for First Nations Australians in 2026 **and beyond.**

The Advisory Group notes the previous engagement conducted by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) to inform the First Nations Digital Inclusion Plan (the Plan), which was released by Minister Burney MP and Minister Rowland MP in July last year. The Plan provides a valuable framework for improving digital inclusion through to 2026, on which the Advisory Group will use to help build its long-term roadmap.

In developing its roadmap, the Advisory Group will consider broader government priorities, including the overarching Closing the Gap framework, the review of the Universal Services framework, the Regional Telecommunications Review, and the Community Broadcasting Sector Sustainability Review. The Regional Telecommunications Review, and our roadmap submissions process are led by expert committees advising the Government while the review of the Universal Services framework and Community Broadcasting Sector Sustainability Review are Government-led. As such, there is value in providing submissions to all of these reviews to ensure a First Nations voice in these processes. The roadmap will also consider the role that the First Nations media and broadcasting sector plays in keeping First Nations people and communities informed and connected.

The Advisory Group looks forward to hearing a variety of views on the key considerations for First Nations digital inclusion in the long term. This discussion paper has been provided as a starting point for those writing submissions, though organisations and individuals are welcome to submit ideas that are beyond the scope of the guiding questions that have been provided.

Key Principles for the Roadmap

The Advisory Group's long-term roadmap includes a number of key guiding principles, which stakeholders are encouraged to comment on, including:

- **the importance of place-based approaches:** this means partnering with First Nations communities for both the design and implementation of any program to ensure their unique needs, aspirations and environment are considered.

- **moving from Closing the Gap to innovation and excellence:** fostering an empowered First Nations communications and digital technology sector will be key to future proofing First Nations communities, by providing opportunities for enhancing technical skills,

innovation and development within communities. This will ensure First Nations people and communities are well equipped to adapt and thrive as technologies and consumer preferences change over time.

- **First Nations representation:** in key organisations across the telecommunications sector, government agencies, and in key organisations overseeing consumer rights and protections; this includes representation at the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) and the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO). The Advisory Group supports First Nations representation at the executive decision-making level. This would help in addressing Priority Reform Three of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which aims to make governments, their organisations and their institutions accountable for Closing the Gap and are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of First Nations people.

- **adopting a technology-agnostic approach to long-term recommendations and solutions**: by focussing on the individual needs of First Nations communities, rather than the individual technological solutions that are currently available. A focus on specific technology will fail to keep up with the rapidly changing pace of the communications landscape, and discourages place-based solutions for a 'one size fits all' approach.

- **centring First Nations consumer preferences**: the Advisory Group supports centring First Nations consumer preferences at both the community and individual level. This includes, for example, a preference for pre-paid mobile or data plans and not being locked into ongoing contracts.

First Nations digital inclusion in 2024

The Advisory Group's analysis of digital inclusion draws upon the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) methodology to measure and understand digital inclusion. Within this methodology, the three components of digital inclusion are defined as follows:

- access – a dimension concerning the types of digital connections and devices available, and how frequently they are used to get online. This is measured by four components: speed and data allowance, intensity and frequency of access, connection type and device.

- affordability – a dimension considering the financial means needed for a household to get online. This measure focusses on the percentage of household income required to purchase an 'internet package' that reflects quality and uninterrupted internet.

- digital ability – a dimension concerning the digital skills, knowledge and confidence needed to use the internet safely.

At a practical level, these three components interact in complex ways. For example, communities that have difficulty affording and accessing fixed line, satellite and fixed wireless services end up relying on mobile-only services, which tend to be much more expensive per gigabyte of data. These issues affect communities in the long-term. Having poor access to connectivity and devices, restricts education, business, economic and employment opportunities. This in turn limits people's opportunities for economic development, thus exacerbating affordability challenges.

The Advisory Group's initial report was released last year, and outlines a number of practical recommendations for addressing access to communications infrastructure, the affordability of these services, and digital ability. Broadly speaking, the recommendations in the report provide a basis for
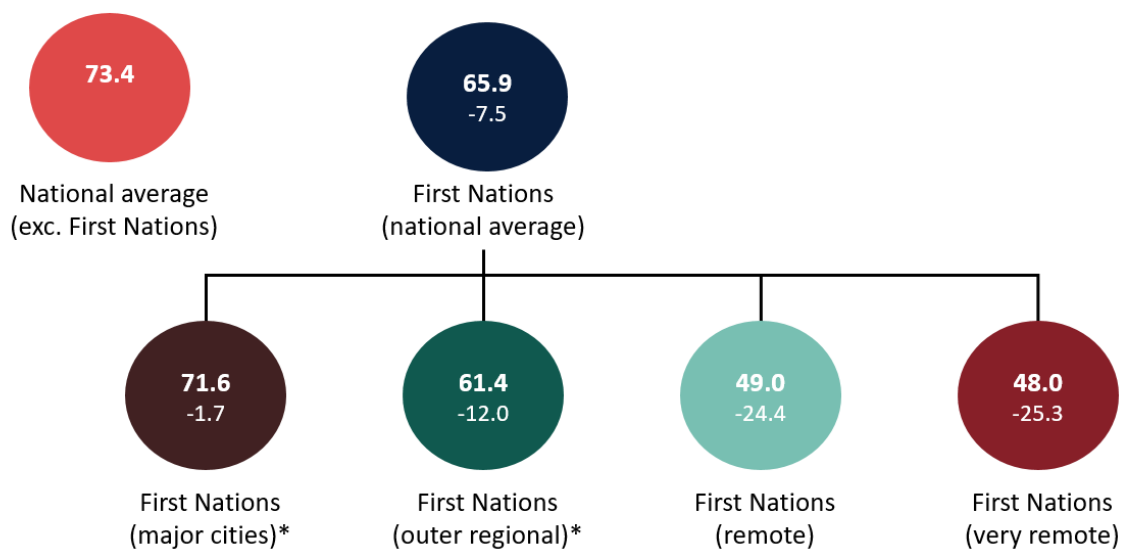
the Government's continued investment and collaboration with First Nations people around three key issues:

- the delivery of targeted measures to improve access to suitable connectivity, making sure it is affordable and fit for purpose, and that First Nations people are aware of their connectivity options and have the digital skills they need to be safe online.

- improving the national collection and use of data so that we can better assess the impact of measures delivered in community, as well as broader progress towards Target 17.

- ensuring genuine engagement and collaboration with First Nations people and communities, and supporting their access to government programs and opportunities.

The latest ADII, released in July 2023, shows the extent of the digital gap experienced by First Nations Australians (shown in the diagram below). The 2023 ADII also shows a progressively widening digital gap experienced by First Nations Australians in regional, remote and very remote areas.

73.4	65.9 -7.5			
National average (exc. First Nations)	First Nations (national average)			
	71.6 -1.7	61.4 -12.0	49.0 -24.4	48.0 -25.3
	First Nations (major cities)*	First Nations (outer regional)*	First Nations (remote)	First Nations (very remote)

A snapshot of the 2023 ADII First Nations results by geographic location

While the Advisory Group notes that the digital gap widens with remoteness, they also acknowledge that this data does not necessarily reflect the lived experiences of First Nations people living in regional and metropolitan areas, who may experience different levels of digital access, affordability and digital ability and therefore have different needs to people living in rural and remote areas.

In terms of **access**, First Nations people recorded a total score in the ADII of 64, which is 8.2 points below the national average of 72.1. In remote communities in particular, access is limited by a range of factors, including:

- limited mobile coverage and service quality issues

- network outages in areas with a lack of backup communications services

- low household uptake of fixed internet due to limited networks, higher cost for access relative to income, and challenges with signing up for services

- maintenance issues associated with Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) equipment, leading to an increase in mobile usage, adding strain to the already congested 4G network.

In remote communities, First Nations Australians face significant limitations in accessing reliable, robust and resilience telecommunications services. This is due to the limited market-based efficiencies associated with extending high-cost telecommunications infrastructure into remote, sparsely populated areas that offer low revenue opportunities to commercial operators.

The Advisory Group is aware of the importance of working in partnership with communities to improve appropriate access to services and devices in communities to ensure connectivity solutions are place-based, reflecting local needs and priorities.

"The reason why we [restrict the Wi-Fi time is] we don't like kids waking up late. We like our kids to have a better school instead of sitting down on Wi-Fi all the time. [When the broadband comes] we don't want to see kids wake up all night, we don't want to see that happening in our community. Maybe [we turn the Internet off] a bit late, maybe 10:00pm … We want our community to live in peace, and to have respect [and] for the kids to learn the culture." (*Billy Gumana, CDP Supervisor / traditional owner, 2022*)

To date, government investment in communications infrastructure in remote communities has typically been a combination of grants-based funding programs (such as the Mobile Black Spots Program and Regional Connectivity Program), and the rollout of national infrastructure such as the National Broadband Network (NBN).

The Advisory Group is aware of the range of Wi-Fi and small cell mobile solutions being delivered in remote communities, including satellite small cell mobile hubs, NBN Community Wi-Fi, Telstra's community phone Wi-Fi hotspots, NIAA community payphones, and the Department of Social Services (DSS) Digital Connectivity Program, as well as state-based community Wi-Fi initiatives in Western Australia and Queensland. While these initiatives represent important progress in improving First Nations digital inclusion, consideration will need to be given to how these programs can be scaled up to include the 670 First Nations communities and homelands that do not fall within areas of mobile coverage.

On the issue of access, the Advisory Group looks forward to reading the findings from the public submissions process on the review of the universal service framework. This currently provides that all Australian homes and businesses can have reasonable access to both broadband and voice services, but does not include mobile services.

With many First Nations people favouring mobile services over other solutions, they are disproportionately affected by the current design of universal service arrangements. The Advisory Group's position is that the current universal services framework is not fit for purpose for First Nations people and communities, and that a reform of the framework provides an opportunity to resolve some of the most pressing digital inclusion issues that they face.

- **What are some examples of the digital divide between metro, regional and remote areas for First Nations people?**
- **How can we ensure government and industry design appropriate products and services to meet the needs of First Nations people?**
- **How do we balance a place-based approach with the need to improve digital inclusion at the national level?**

For many First Nations people and communities, **affordability** continues to impact on their ability to be digitally included. In 2023, First Nations people recorded an affordability score of 89.0, which is 6.1 points below the national average of 95.1. This is partially attributed to the prevalence of mobile-only and prepaid service use, which carries higher costs per gigabyte than fixed connections. Data from the Mapping the Digital Gap project indicates that around 90 per cent of mobile users in remote First Nations communities are using prepaid mobile services.

It is important to note that the ADII methodology for calculating the affordability metric is based on the total income and expenditure on telecommunications services per household. Given that some First Nations households have a large number of people living there, the data may not be truly reflecting of the extent to which affordability is an issue for First Nations people in accessing the internet.

The Mapping the Digital Gap 2023 Outcomes Report notes that 15.2 per cent of participants surveyed across the ten communities in the project reported either 'always' or 'often' sacrificing or cutting back on essential household costs, such as food and bills, to pay for internet access, compared to just 5.1 per cent of people surveyed at the national level.

*Mapping the Digital Gap, Wujal Wujal 2023
Community Update Report*

"I reckon everything should be like that [pre-paid]. It's what's accessible for people. Yeah, I reckon [Sky Muster] should be prepaid too… [It's like electricity and] the mobile that you got to top up every time, so I think everything else should be like that too, otherwise we're finding ourselves deep in debt when we commit to [post-paid] services like that, whereas with the top-ups we've got full control of it" (Katherine Gibson, Manager Wild Honey Café, Wujal Wujal, 2022)

Affordability continues to be a key issue due to:

- low household incomes and high costs of essential items and food, particularly in remote area

- high prepaid data costs

- wariness from communities about post-paid plans, following experiences of mis-selling practices among some retail service providers

- affordability and reliability of household power, particularly in remote communities.

In terms of **devices**, there are a number of organisations currently providing access to computers and tablets in communities, such as the Indigenous Knowledge Centres in Queensland and the Central Australian Youth Link Up Service (CAYLUS) in Central Australia. To help address the lack of appropriate devices in communities, the Advisory Group has recommended in its initial report that the Australian Government develop a **National Device Bank**. The National Device Bank would help provide low-income earners in First Nations communities with refurbished donated devices free of charge.

Regardless of the types of services that are available, a robust consumer protections framework is vital. In its initial report, the Advisory Group recommended that the Australian Government introduce regulatory reforms to strengthen consumer safeguards in the telecommunications space as they relate to First Nations customers, particularly those using prepaid services. The Advisory Group welcomes the progress made in this space since the release of the initial report, including the Telecommunications Consumer Protections (TCP) Code Review and the Government's decision to direct the ACMA to make an enforceable industry standard to ensure appropriate support is provided to customers experiencing financial hardship. The Advisory Group notes that regulatory reform is likely to only have a positive impact on consumers who already have services in place, and may not provide support for those whose financial situation prevents them from getting connected in the first place.

While solutions like community Wi-Fi can help bridge this connectivity gap, there can be a lack of coverage in households and private premises, which can force vulnerable members of the community to move into public locations to access the internet. This can be particularly problematic in situations involving family violence, and can prevent people in remote communities from adhering to cultural

practices such as avoidance. Although the Advisory Group supports investment in community Wi-Fi to address the digital divide, the importance of providing in-building coverage should not be overlooked.

The Advisory Group has also recommended that the Telephone Allowance, administered by DSS, be increased to reflect the modern monthly cost of staying connected via mobile. While subsidies would help alleviate the financial burden for many users, they do not address the broader structural issues that prohibit many First Nations people from getting and staying connected in the long-term.

The Advisory Group is interested in hearing perspectives on how the affordability aspect of First Nations digital inclusion can be addressed in the long term.

- **How can government and industry empower communities to navigate the financial side of getting and staying connected?**
- **How can industry be proactive in identifying where costs are prohibitive for First Nations consumers and find solutions?**

First Nations Australians scored lower on the **digital ability** dimension in the 2023 ADII, scoring 60.7, which is 4.3 points lower than the national average of 65.0. This reflects a current lack of basic digital literacy training targeted to First Nations people, as well as a lack of best practice principles to help guide the development and delivery of effective programs.

The gap in digital ability was found to increase with remoteness, with First Nations people living in very remote areas scoring 46.1 compared to other people in remote areas, who scored 63. This represents a relative gap of 16.9. This can be attributed to a lack of appropriate digital training or support, as well as the high-prevalence of mobile-only use and lower levels of English digital proficiency.

Broadly speaking, the main considerations with respect to digital ability include:

- the need for more training and support, especially for the elderly, people with disabilities, and community members with low English literacy
- the understanding of digital literacy as an enabler for personal agency and capability to access online information and services independently
- digital programs as enablers for opportunities towards skill development and creative/cultural content production in communities.

Digital tools are being used for language preservation and revitalization, including the Living First Language platforms and apps developed by the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, used in First Nations language centres.

This is not only important for maintaining culture, but also helps with promoting the uptake of new digital skills and knowledge in a way that is culturally relevant.

The Australian Literacy & Numeracy Foundation

Communities have also indicated that improved connectivity literacy is a critical element for addressing digital inclusion barriers. Connectivity literacy refers to the ability for individuals and communities to understand their connectivity needs and the options available to them. Communities that are unsupported to develop their connectivity literacy risk losing out on funding opportunities and forming partnerships with potential service providers and accessing more affordable and fit for purpose services. However, the concept of connectivity literacy implies that there are multiple options available and affordable for people, which maybe the case in urban areas, but not so in remote regions. As such, developing connectivity literacy is to some extent reliant on there being multiple appropriate and affordable services for consumers to choose from.

The Advisory Group is interested in understanding how industry and government can help foster digital and connectivity literacy among First Nations people and communities.

- **What does digital literacy look like for First Nations people and communities in 2026 and beyond?**
- **How can we strengthen the connectivity literacy of First Nations people and communities, including raising awareness of consumer protections?**
- **How can industry and government products and services be made more inclusive for those who have a low level of English literacy?**

Media and Broadcasting

The importance of the media and broadcasting sector in addressing the digital divide must not be understated. More specifically, the media and broadcasting sector plays a vital role in providing communities with important information, and contributes to preserving culture and language through storytelling and content creation.

First Nations community media provides information, news, education and entertainment, which directly supports Outcome 17. They also provide local employment opportunities, whether through content creation, local journalism and media production, or technical positions for maintenance and IT support.

It is the Advisory Group's position that First Nations media organisations are culturally rich but financially poor due to limited funding for wages and career development opportunities, thus preventing long-term sustainability, retention, and growth in the sector.

In First Nations communities where connectivity is congested or unreliable, traditional television and radio broadcasting reduces the strain on telecommunications infrastructure and provides a secondary source of communication in the event of natural disasters. However, this needs to be supported by making Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) simpler to use, as recommended in the Advisory Group's initial report. This includes removing the need for smart card activation and maintenance of reception equipment in general.

Another important consideration for the First Nations media and broadcasting sector is supporting First Nations radio stations in urban, regional and remote environments. As noted by the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA), of the eight capital cities, three still do not have a full time First Nations radio service.

First Nations Media Australia's (FNMA) 9 Calls to Action have provided a valuable basis for considering how to best support the sector moving forward. While the Community Broadcasting Sector Sustainability Review is assessing policy, regulatory or other options to support the sustainability of community broadcasting, the Advisory Group is interested in collecting views on how the media and broadcasting sector can be further supported to thrive beyond 2026.

- **How can government and industry support First Nations media organisations to be sustainable in the long-term?**
- **How can First Nations media organisations be supported to skill and retain staff so that talent is not lost to other organisations?**
- **What is working well and what could be improved in the relationship between the media and broadcasting sector and the telecommunications sector?**

Other Closing the Gap targets

Although the Advisory Group's focus is primarily Target 17 and Outcome 17, members are interested in hearing more from stakeholders on how digital inclusion can function as an enabler for other Closing the Gap targets.

In particular, digital inclusion is related to:

- health (Target 1), with telehealth allowing for on Country care

- education (Targets 4, 5 and 6), with improved digital inclusion allowing for more opportunities for education and upskilling

- employment (Targets 7 and 8), with better connectivity allowing for on Country employment and a greater variety of job opportunities more generally

- justice (Targets 10, 11 and 12), with improved connectivity providing alternative pathways to justice, for example options for those in the justice system to rehabilitate on Country, and

- the protection of culture (Target 16), with digital technologies allowing for the digital preservation of First Nations languages and art, as well as the promotion of culture through broadcast and media channels.

For this roadmap, the Advisory Group is seeking views on how improved digital inclusion can help support all targets and priority areas across the Closing the Gap space.

- **How can the Advisory Group's roadmap help advocate for progress towards achieving targets under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap? How can digital inclusion support economic growth?**
- **What role can connectivity and technology play in supporting First Nations culture?**
- **How would digital inclusion support improved access to services?**

Measuring Digital Inclusion and Data Sovereignty

The Advisory Group's initial report recognised that the current data for measuring digital inclusion is poor, as also noted by the Productivity Commission. Target 17 uses the 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey which has not been updated since and only provides a measure of home access. Additionally, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) no longer provides a question on internet use in the census.

Although the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) provides a high-level overview of the current state of digital inclusion and potential baseline for First Nations and other Australians, it does not provide the full picture. Other considerations include:

- awareness of connectivity options and other opportunities such as better ways to access content and manage online safety and security

- appropriateness of devices, plans, websites, content and government services, which would be a good metric for government and industry, and

- adequate data for regional and metro areas with a larger sample size of First Nations people.

The Advisory Group is interested in your views on how to advocate for greater data collection, as well as best practice recommendations for sharing data with communities according to Priority Reform 4 (Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level).

The Advisory Group has previously heard from stakeholders about the importance of data collection being guided by the principles of data sovereignty and First Nations self-determination. This includes First Nations communities having access and control over data that pertains to them, along with the skills and ability to collect and store their own data. More specifically, Priority Reform Four aims to support First Nations Australians to have access to, and the capability to use, locally-relevant data and information to set and monitor the implementation of efforts to close the gap, their priorities, and drive their own development.

- **What do meaningful data sharing arrangements between government/industry and communities look like?**
- **What kinds of data would be most useful to you and your organisation or community?**

Providing a submission

The Advisory Group is seeking views on the points raised in this discussion paper. Key questions have been provided to help guide responses. Submitting organisations and individuals should not feel obligated to answer all questions presented, and the Advisory Group welcomes submissions on aspects of digital inclusion that span beyond what has been discussed in this paper.

You can either respond via the 'Have your say' page or via email to firstnationsdigitalinclusion@infrastructure.gov.au

Organisations and individuals can alternatively provide their submissions via mail to:

Digital Inclusion Section
Communications Infrastructure Division
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 594
Canberra ACT 2601

Please include:

- a contact name
- organisation name, if applicable
- contact details, including telephone number, postal and email addresses
- confirmation of whether or not your submission can be made public or if it is to be kept confidential.

Next Steps

The Advisory Group will consider your feedback in developing its draft long-term roadmap.

The Advisory Group anticipates that the roadmap will be launched in the second half of 2024. The roadmap will provide advice to the Government and industry on the practical actions they can consider to improve digital inclusion for First Nations people and communities, as well as the broader structural changes needed to ensure First Nations people and communities can be safety online and have access to information and services.