First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap: Discussion Paper

Inquiry by the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group

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). 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 its region as to appropriate legislation concerning their land.

Through our 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 9 designated regions, with over 300 outstations and homelands.

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-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 previous financial year alone.

Of the approximately 780,000 km² of land covered by the CLC region, 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[1]. 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] 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 Central Land Council (CLC) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap. The CLC thanks the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group (The Advisory Group) for their comprehensive research and analysis in the Initial Report (October 2023), highlighting the challenges and opportunities that exist for First Nations communities, and how these digital inclusion barriers can be addressed at the systems level.

The CLC endorses the key principles for the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap (FNDIR) including commitments to:

- A 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; and
- Centring First Nations consumer preferences

We welcome the Advisory Group's attention on supporting consumer benefits and aspirations over the needs of the sector. This important policy shift should prompt the sector to reach for higher standards, promote better digital inclusion and support many of our constituents to achieve their goals.

Equally important is the focus on access, affordability and digital ability. Whilst accountability is implied throughout the Advisory Group's Initial report 2023, and the FNDIR 2024, the CLC encourages the Advisory Group to consider including accountability as a fourth focus, to ensure:

- Corporate social responsibility for better outcomes in remote communities
- Responsiveness to communities' complaints, aspirations and needs
- A requirement to implement a place based approach to supporting digital inclusion
- A commitment and actions to progress the CTG National Agreement, specifically target 17
- Regular repairs and maintenance of infrastructure in remote communities

Whilst there is a long road ahead to equitable digital inclusion, the CLC recognises current efforts to reduce the digital divide such as the Australian Government's commitment of $68 million in the 2024-2025 budget measures to support First Nations Digital Inclusion[2], Telstra's commitment to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), as well as the 3 year extension of the 'Mapping the Digital Gap' project, run in partnership with the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) which will enable stronger accountability and tracking of progress towards digital inclusion.

In this submission, the focus is on the unique Central Australian context and the key themes emerging from the case studies provided. These include the aspirations of community members for economic and social participation, social inclusion and connectedness, maintaining connection with country and kin as well as to live safe and healthy lives. These aspirations, are what all Australians expect for themselves and their families. They are embedded in all people's human rights and are therefore appropriate expectations that to be collectively working towards. They are also embedded in the Closing the Gap (CTG) National Agreement[3].

In this modern context, digital inclusion and literacy are key to economic and social participation, and well-being and should to be balanced with provision of educations, skills and understanding of how to use digital technology in healthy and appropriate ways.

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[2] 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
[3] Closing the Gap National Agreement, 2020, https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement

Summary of Recommendations

1. Payphones are maintained on outstations/homelands.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. Trial sites within the CLC region are used as pilot programs to test and research the effectiveness and value of digital inclusion investment and strategies including the development and use of digital mentors as identified positions adequately renumerated.

7. 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.

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

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

10. Trial sites partner with community research projects such as **Yitaki-maninjaku, Warrirninjaku, Payirninjaku Manu Pina-jarrinjaku** (YWPP), to integrate participatory action research into their program and determine what digital literacy needs and opportunities exist in trial sites, with the view to utilising the learnings for broader application to the FNDIAG strategy work.

11. First Nations Digital Hub develop a First Nations consumer hotline.

12. The digital literacy strategy operate alongside and inform the Digital Inclusion Roadmap.

13. FNDIAG to formally recommend jurisdictional CTG Implementation Plans require a distinct strategy piece to align education, employment, income and digital inclusion/literacy goals.

14. FNDIAG to maintain pressure on the NTG and Commonwealth Governments to fully reinstate secondary education in NT remote communities to at least Year 10.

Recommendations Cont.

15. Universal service obligation (USO) should be regularly reviewed to align with advancement in technologies including mobile broadband and voice services. The CLC endorse 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.

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

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

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

19. Include 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.

20. Commonwealth to commit to ten year funding arrangements for First Nations media organisations, including allocations for generating new cultural content that supports the maintenance of cultural information.

21. 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.

22. The above mentioned digital inclusion strategy 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.

23. 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.

Context

Understanding context is essential to understanding the challenge and opportunities ahead. A key finding from the ADII 2023 report 'Measuring Australia's Digital Divide'[4], is 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. In remote Central Australia access to secondary schooling for young Aboriginal students is very limited. Since 2015, there has been a significant policy shift away from delivering secondary schooling in remote communities to preferencing attendance at boarding schools and a parallel process of withdrawing higher education/ VET opportunities within remote communities. These policy changes have restricted successful access to secondary education and further education which is compounded by high rates of income poverty, a very high cost of living and overpriced access to telecommunications. The following information provides a glimpse into these intersecting contextual challenges:

Northern Territory wide data:
- In 2021, 54.6% of Aboriginal people living in the NT experienced income poverty[5]
- 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[6]
- In term 1, 2024, the average school attendance rate of children enrolled in remote Aboriginal community schools (mostly Aboriginal students) was 45.1%[7]
- 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.[8]
- In 2021, 34.8% of young Aboriginal people in the NT aged 15-24 were engaged in education, employment or training, [9]
- In 2021, 34.3% of Aboriginal adults in the NT aged 25-64 were employed[10]
- 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%.[11]

As the data is disaggregated, these correlations are further exacerbated. See below for region specific data:

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 submission, however the CLC are aware that internet access continues to be an issue, as challenges regarding access is 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[12].
- Currently, there is no specific data available on the NTG website for remote year 12 graduations

[4] Measuring Australia's Digital Divide Report, 2023, pg.6, https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/download-reports/
[5] Dr Francis Markham, Submission into the Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia, 2023, Submission 251, page 4, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/PovertyinAustralia/Submissions
[6] NTG Department of Education, Enrolment and Attendance Data Term 1, 2024 https://education.nt.gov.au/statistics-research-and-strategies/enrolment-and-attendance
[7] Ibid
[8] 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
[9] Closing the Gap Data Dashboard, Socio-Economic Outcome #7, https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area7
[10] Closing the Gap Data Dashboard, Socio-Economic outcome #8 - https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area8
[11] Measuring Australia's Digital Divide, ADII 2023, pg.8,
[12] As per reference 1.

- In 2021, 80% of young people between 15 – 24 years of age, were not in education or employment[13].
- In 2021, 25.4% of adults between 25-64 years of age were employed[14]
- 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.[15]
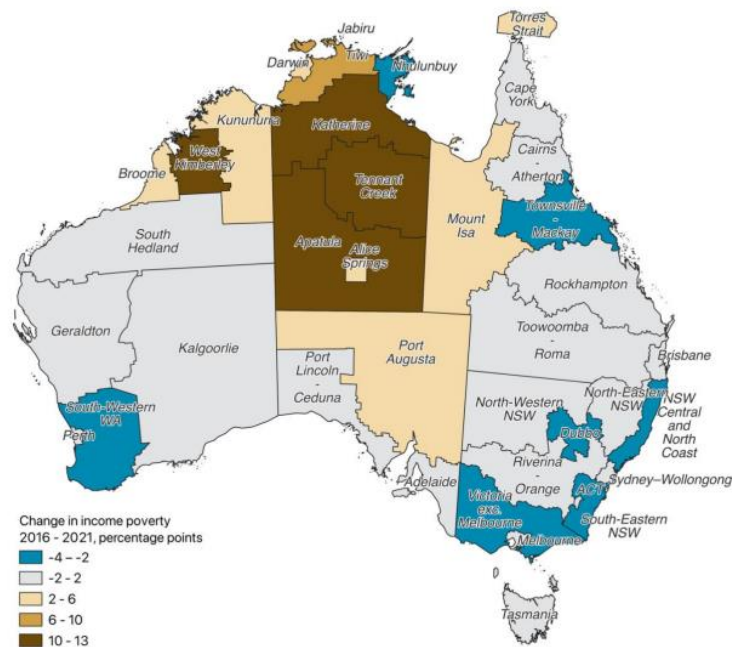

Figure 4: Change in Indigenous income poverty rates by Indigenous Region between the 2016 and 2021 Censuses

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[16]

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 Centrelink Service Centres[17] (CSS) in the CLC region, coupled with the lack of 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.

This data, supports the finding of the above-mentioned report 'Measuring Australia's Digital Divide' 2023, that there is a correlation between education, employment and digital inclusion. With education attendance and outcomes in remote NT schools shockingly low, alongside low remote community employment rates and high income poverty rates, it is not surprising that the ADII score is equally low.

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, Mrs

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[13] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Northern Territory Data, 2021 https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/IQS7
[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
[16] 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
[17] Services Australia. *Find Us: Services Australia*, https://findus.servicesaustralia.gov.au

Petrick's 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 in this submission) and wanting people to be socially connected and have the opportunity to support connection to country and kin (as outlined in case study #2 & 4).

See case studies below.

Case Studies

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

Spotted Tiger Outstation **200kms North-East of Alice Springs**
B. Petrick lives on Spotted Tiger Outstation on Akekawrrwenteme Ureyengeal Land Trust. Mrs Petrick's 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 Spotted Tiger Outstation 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. Mrs Petrick 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 Mrs Petrick's 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 Mrs Petrick 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 Mrs Petrick 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. Mrs Petrick's 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 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 which are clustered into two areas – north and south, which are about 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 couldn'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 Williams 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 sighted 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 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)[18] 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[19]. 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 with 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*' (Male, 20s, Yuendumu). We also draw on recent research[20] 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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[18] https://www.clc.org.au/wett/
[19] 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
[20] 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

Discussion and Recommendations

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE BETWEEN METRO, REGIONAL AND REMOTE AREAS FOR FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE?

See above case studies.

A challenge for the CLC is 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 interest – 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.

In addition to these, 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 (on the Plenty Highway). 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 Williams Family). Information provided by traditional owners has suggested that family members who experience chronic illnesses (such as diabetes, kidney disease, epilepsy) are reluctant to spend time on outstations with no telecommunications, as they worry for their safety is there is a medical emergency/episode.

> **Recommendations**
> 1. Payphones are maintained on outstations/homelands.
>
> 2. 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.
>
> 3. 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.
>
> 4. 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.
>
> 5. 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.

HOW CAN GOVERNMENT AND INDUSTRY EMPOWER COMMUNITIES TO NAVIGATE THE FINANCIAL SIDE OF GETTING AND STAYING CONNECTED?

Place-based approaches are essential to making sure that communities have appropriate infrastructure that is relevant to needs, aspirations and means. 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 re: income poverty cannot be ignored, and must be included in any planning of digital inclusion. The correlation between digital inclusion, education, employment and income also needs further consideration, as any plans relating to remote communities should factor in low local employment and digital literacy.

We also highlight that within the CLC region, there are four trial sites proposed for Utju/Areyonga, Munkarta, Ampilatjwatja and Arrerwer. These trial sites offer a valuable opportunity to support the aspirations of the 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.

As mentioned above, there were two locations in the CLC region that are included in the Mapping the Digital Gap Report, 2023. The first one being Tennant Creek and the second be in the remote community of Yuelamu. The report highlights significant issues for both communities, in particular the average monthly communication spend per household between $179 and $201. The government and industry need to ensure that there is affordable, equitable access via:

- Increasing DSS telephone allowance from a basic rate of $33.50 per quarter to $50 per month
- Introducing a government mandate that telecommunications companies and retailers make available affordable pre-paid broadband/internet services
- A requirement that telecommunications companies and retailers provide unmetered access to government websites and First Nations free-to-air television services.

Recommendations

6. Trial sites within the CLC region are used as pilot programs to test and research the effectiveness and value of digital inclusion investment and strategies including the development and use of digital mentors as identified positions adequately renumerated.

7. 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.

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

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

DIGITAL LITERACY – WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE AND HOW CAN WE STRENGTHEN CONNECTIVITY LITERACY FOR FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES, INCLUDING RAISING AWARENESS OF CONSUMER PROTECTIONS?

As per recommendations above regarding digital mentors, the CLC supports an opportunity, such as that proposed for the First Nations Digital Support Hub, to provide support and training to digital mentors, so they are able to support community members to access advice on the most suitable and cost-effective products and connectivity options available. Where there are limited options, the CLC recommends also providing awareness through digital mentors about consumer protections and rights, in line with the FNDIAG recommendation to further strengthen industry regulation, ensuring a new industry standard providing both protections and relief for customers who use prepaid services.

Projects such as the YWPP Community Research project can provide valuable insights into the needs and opportunities for digital literacy. Young people in particular are savvy with social media, and investment in building their capacity will generate positive outcomes in remote communities.

The trial sites mentioned above, provide a unique opportunity to test out what resources people need, in order to gain better connectivity literacy and better awareness of consumer protections. The First Nations Digital Hub should also incorporate a consumer hotline to minimise the amount of contact required with different consumer officials. As pointed out in a number of our case studies, the CLC has advocated on behalf of remote residents and will continue to do so, however if there was a consumer hotline to the hub, this would better enable people to advocate for themselves.

Recommendations

10. Trial sites partner with community research projects such as YWPP, to integrate participatory action research into their program and determine what digital literacy needs and opportunities exist in trial sites, with the view to utilising the learnings for broader application to the FNDIAG strategy work.

11. First Nations Digital Hub develop a First Nations consumer hotline.

12. The digital literacy strategy operate alongside and inform the Digital Inclusion Roadmap.

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?

Further consideration needs to be given to advancing a number of socio-economic outcomes and targets in parallel. If we circle back to the earlier contextual data provided, re: lack of access to education, low employment rates and poverty we can see evidence of the correlation between digital inclusion and education, employment and income. Jurisdictional implementation plans should be required to view goals and actions against these key areas in conjunction with one another, not in isolation. This could be a key advocacy area for the FNDIAG to focus on.

Whilst there is progress in terms of NTG and Commonwealth commitments to reinstate secondary education in remote NT communities, continued pressure is required to ensure that this remains a priority, particularly given that secondary schools provide a key opportunity for supporting digital access and literacy development.

As is highlighted in Case Study #1 - Spotted Tiger Outstation, Mrs Petrick and her husband have aspirations for a tourism venture on her property, however the lack of reliable digital infrastructure is affecting these economic aspirations, and economic participation in society. The Advisory Group can support remote resident's economic participation by:

- Advocating for a review of the USO to include mobile services and internet access
- Advocate for accountability of telecommunications companies and retailers to regularly repair and maintain digital inclusion infrastructure, and where this infrastructure is not providing reliable access, mandate a requirement, for telecommunications companies and retailers to find an alternative to that infrastructure within a reasonable timeframe.
- Support CTG Socio-Economic Outcome #17 by advocating for effective data collection, such as that identified on page 23 of the FNDIAG Initial Report to *"re-introduce and refine a census question on household internet use"*. This would provide a point in time piece of data that could be used alongside other key data, referenced throughout this submission.
- Employ digital mentors in remote communities, connected with the First Nations Digital Inclusion Hub, with will support economic growth and digital literacy.

Recommendations

13. FNDIAG to formally recommend jurisdictional CTG Implementation Plans require a distinct strategy piece to align education, employment, income and digital inclusion/literacy goals.

14. FNDIAG to maintain pressure on the NTG and Commonwealth Governments to fully reinstate secondary education in NT remote communities to at least Year 10.

15. Universal service obligation (USO) should be regularly reviewed to align with advancement in technologies including mobile broadband and voice services. The CLC endorse the ACCAN recommendations in their submission "Better delivery of universal services"[21]:

    - 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.

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

17. Increase the scope and sample size of the DII (as per FNDIAG Inclusion Measures 5th June 2024)[22] to have a broader representation of the population reflected in the research.

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

19. Include 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.

HOW CAN GOVERNMENT AND INDUSTRY SUPPORT FIRST NATION'S MEDIA ORGANISATIONS TO BE SUSTAINABLE IN THE LONG-TERM?

Governments have made a commitment by signing the Closing the Gap National Agreement, to do things differently. This includes longer term commitments to support First Nation's people and organisations, to undertake longer term projects that are meaningful. Longer term funding agreements are key to supporting media organisations to engage communities in meaningful projects that support the realisation of their aspirations.

Recommendation

20. Commonwealth to commit to ten year funding arrangements for First Nations media organisations, including allocations for generating new cultural content that supports the maintenance of cultural information.

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[21] 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
[22] Page 7 - https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/first-nations-digital-inclusion-advisory-group-first-nations-digital-inclusion-measures-5june2024.pdf

WHAT ROLE CAN CONNECTIVITY AND TECHNOLOGY PLAY IN SUPPORTING FIRST NATION'S CULTURE?

As referenced in the case studies, the ability to access a phone is vital to people feeling safe on country. In case study #4, Mt Eaglebeak station, we heard that elders visit during summer, however due to health issues, there are concerns by the general community for their safety. Case study #1 reflected that Mrs Petrick's nieces were reluctant to spend time on country with the family, due to there being no mobile/Wi-Fi access.

The lack of connection has a significant impact on people's behaviours and, as evidenced above, young people are at times, choosing not to spend time on country, with family, where a lot of cultural learning happens. Elders are also worried about spending time on country, albeit for different reasons, however it ultimately result in the same outcome, that digital exclusion negatively impacts cultural learning and knowledge transfer.

On the contrary, connectivity and technology can play an important role supporting First Nation's culture. As mentioned before, there are great examples of where cultural content, and knowledge have been captured and shared through digital platforms.

Recommendations

21. 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.

22. The above mentioned digital inclusion strategy 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.

23. 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.