FIRST NATIONS
DIGITAL INCLUSION
ADVISORY GROUP

30 September 2024

The 'Informing the Agenda' Project Team

Via: InformingTheAgenda@humanrights.gov.au

Dear team

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the process to inform the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's (the Commissioner) agenda. We are writing to you as co-chairs of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group (the Advisory Group).

The Advisory Group was established in January 2023 by the Minister for Communications, The Hon Michelle Rowland MP, to provide advice on supporting progress towards Outcome 17 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement). Outcome 17 seeks to ensure that First Nations Australians have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives. Aligned to this is Target 17, which aims for First Nations people to have equal levels of digital inclusion by 2026.

In October 2023, the Advisory Group published its initial report, available at Initial Report | First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group, which recommended practical measures to address access, affordability and digital ability, as well as improve the collection of data to measure the digital divide. The Advisory Group's position is that digital inclusion is a human right, which supports self-determination and empowerment for First Nations people and communities. Drawing on the recommendations in our initial report, the Australian Government has announced $68 million in funding for First Nations digital inclusion measures, including supporting improved connectivity in remote communities; establishing a Digital Support Hub and network of Digital Mentors; and improving the national collection of data in First Nations digital inclusion.

Digital inclusion underpins a range of benefits, including economic opportunities, access to information, and social connectedness. In closing the digital divide, we advocate for:

- place-based solutions and community empowerment
- targeted solutions to improve baseline connectivity and affordability
- culturally appropriate communication and engagement with First Nations people and communities
- ensuring consumer protections are robust and meet the needs of First Nations people
- improved alignment and collaboration across government and industry.

When considering the barriers to digital inclusion, it is important to keep in mind that these cut across access, affordability and digital ability. For example, living in an area where access to reliable internet is difficult to obtain and having limited financial means to gain and/or retain such access will mean that one is less likely to use networked, digital technologies (banking, MyGov). The likely outcome of

this is a reduced ability or inability to develop digital skills and literacies in a context of rapid changes and uptake of technologies across various aspects of economic, social, and civic life.

We believe that attention needs to be paid to ensure digital inclusion of First Nations people, particularly those in remote communities is achieved. First Nations people living in remote and very remote areas have very low levels of digital inclusion, averaging 25.3 points below the national average. This is a reflection on how many First Nations communities have missed out on key investments like the initial NBN rollout and where satellite solutions were unaffordable. Many regional and remote First Nations communities are now having to catch-up on baseline services many Australians take for granted. For example, there is over 300 discrete remote communities and outstation with no telephony services at all.

More specifically, digital inclusion as a human right should be guided by the goals and priorities set out in the National Agreement, particularly Priority Reform One (Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making) and Priority Reform Four (Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level). These priorities were also identified in the First Nations Digital Inclusion Plan 2023-2026 released last year by the National Indigenous Australians Agency.

We believe that digital inclusion is essential for the enjoyment of other rights, including freedom of expression, education, and participation in economic and political life. We recommend that the Commissioner:

- promote greater engagement with First Nations digital inclusion by calling attention to the lack of access to telecommunication infrastructure and the impact this has on a range of Closing the Gap areas
- advocate for policies that empower First Nations communities to design and control their digital futures, including having tools to make informed decisions and preserve their culture
- support reforms in government processes to ensure equitable access for Indigenous communities
- advocate for greater transparency and a more robust monitoring framework for digital inclusion to ensure that efforts to close the digital gap are tracked and evaluated.

In our advocacy role, we have strongly advised that all levels of government should shift away from a one-size-fits-all approach towards place-based solutions. This means considering and acknowledging the cultural, geographical, economic and aspirational uniqueness of each First Nations community. This involves being flexible on how government works with First Nations communities, empowering communities to be informed decision makers and working in partnership to achieve shared outcomes.

The Advisory Group is currently developing a First Nations digital inclusion roadmap which will provide advice to government, industry and communities on actions to address the digital divide beyond 2026. More information on this roadmap is available at A roadmap for First Nations digital inclusion | Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts.

If you would like clarification on any of our comments raised in this letter or would like to meet with us, please contact our secretariat at firstnationsdigitalinclusion@infrastructure.gov.au

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