First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group

Submission on draft guidelines for Round 3 of the Regional Connectivity Program

Introduction

The First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group (the Advisory Group) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft guidelines for Round 3 of the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) and acknowledges the strong commitment of the Australian Government to supporting digital inclusion for First Nations people and communities. The Advisory Group also welcomes the proposed earmarking of funding under Round 3 to support connectivity projects in First Nations communities, and recognises the rollout of funded projects should lead to improved telecommunications outcomes for those communities.

The Advisory Group is of the view, however, that achieving these outcomes depends, in part, on ensuring that the process for seeking grants through RCP Round 3 is both accessible and navigable for First Nations people and communities. Our view is that, at times, the process is overly complex and time-consuming, which is an issue when communities are relying on volunteers to draft, cost and submit applications. The Advisory Group wishes to highlight that:

- local communities can struggle with language and cultural barriers, and may have difficulty accessing GrantConnect

- there is a heavy administrative burden to acquire relevant paper work within the timeframes. This can be further hindered by the lack of IT equipment and stable internet in many communities

- there is a lack of consultative and feedback mechanisms to allow participating communities to have a say in the process, or to receive advice on how to improve their applications for consideration in future rounds.

The Advisory Group has observed that this can result in a process which seems weighted against applications by First Nations people and communities, and which favours large organisations (such as telecommunication providers) which tend to be more familiar with government processes and have the resourcing to ensure submissions reflect eligibility requirements and broader policy priorities.

About us

The First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group (the Advisory Group) has been established by the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, to create a partnership between the Australian Government and First Nations people to support work on Outcome 17 under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement).

The National Agreement commits parties to making progress towards the outcome that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives (Outcome 17). Sitting within Outcome 17 is Target 17, which aims for equal levels of digital inclusion for First Nations people by 2026.

The Advisory Group will provide advice to the Minister on issues relating to digital inclusion for First Nations people, including data gaps, and how they can be addressed at the national and community level.

Our views

The Regional Connectivity Program (RCP), including the Mobile Black Spot Program, provides a mechanism in which digitally excluded First Nations communities can seek funding to improve their communications infrastructure. The process to assess applications from these communities, however, does not necessarily reflect the broader context in which RCP is being delivered, including the Australian Government's commitment to support progress towards Target 17.

This could be rectified by including Target 17 as part of the intended outcomes of the RCP, and by including Target 17 as its own assessment criteria under 6.1 (Assessment Criteria for Regional Connectivity Solutions), rather than a sub-criterion under 6.1.2 (Social benefits of your project for the region). This will help make sure organisations, councils and other applicants consider how their proposal reflects this priority. Further consideration could also be given to how the RCP guidelines can reflect the priority reforms in the National Agreement.

The provision of additional support to First Nations applicants would also help support their ability to participate in RCP and other grants programs. As noted above, there are a number of barriers in place that can impact on the ability of First Nations communities to submit applications. At present, however, very little support is available to assist First Nations communities, including a lack of robust feedback for those which are unsuccessful on how they could improve their application for future consideration.

Without improved support mechanisms from the Department or the telecommunications sector, there is the risk that First Nations communities may face ongoing issues in successfully bidding for funding under the RCP. Another key consideration is ensuring that First Nations voices are included when providing advice to the decision maker on the merits of applications. First Nation representation – whether through the assessment phase and/or the briefing of the decision maker will help ensure the specific needs of First Nations people are considered, and ensure these merits and needs are not lost in the process.

Other areas of design to consider is supporting RCP applications from communities with limited or no internet access or appropriate IT equipment. The RCP application process heavily relies on GrantConnect without an offline or alternative solution such as mailing in applications.

Solutions to improve the RCP approach

On a broader level, the Advisory Group notes that a fully funded delivery model, based on a Universal Service Obligation/human rights approach, rather than a business case model for

remote communities would be the best approach to support communities. However, there are other ways the RCP can support communities throughout the process.

The development of a departmental First Nations technical hub to assist First Nation communities navigate the RCP would be a possible solution. This First Nations technical hub could:

- develop a first stage Expression of Interest (EoI) process for communities prior to their full application. The hub then supports the development an expanded application

- as part of this EoI phase, communities would be matched with the relevant telecommunication provider from their region/area to progress an application

- the hub could also assist with the development of detailed applications, and help contextualise the application in terms of specific needs/views in that community.

Following grant decisions and outcome letters, it would be important to allow community feedback on the process and support. Without this, the entire process is unlikely to deliver improved outcomes for First Nations communities in the future. On a more local level, providing translations (such as Yumplatok/Kriol) of the RCP or ensuring the website and RCP materials are provided in a culturally accessible and appropriate manner would greatly increase the approachability of the RCP. Consideration of advertising the RCP over local community radio would enable First Nations people to become better informed, but would require additional grant funding.

Contact details

The Chair of the Advisory Group, Ms Dorothy West OAM, would be happy to meet with relevant Departmental representatives to discuss the issues raised in this submission. The Chair can be contacted via FirstNationsDigitalInclusion@infrastructure.gov.au.

Please note it is the Advisory Group's preference for this submission to remain in-confidence as we are still considering our approach to the matters raised and would prefer not to pre-empt those discussions publicly at this stage.