



Committee Secretary

Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

PO Box 6100

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

28 May 2024

Dear Committee Secretary

We are writing in our capacity as co-chairs of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group. As you may be aware, Minister Rowland established the Advisory Group in January 2023 to provide her with advice on ways to support progress towards Target 17 of the National Agreement for Closing the Gap, which aims for equal levels of digital inclusion for First Nations Australians by 2026. This target is part of Outcome 17, which aims to ensure First Nations Australians have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.

While we welcomed the announcement by Minister Rowland earlier this year regarding the establishment of an Industry Working Group in response to the forthcoming shutdown of the 3G network, as well as Telstra's decision to defer the shutdown of its 3G network to 31 August 2024, we continue to have concerns around the possible impact of the shutdown on First Nations people and communities. We understand this impact may be significant due to the:

- concentration of older, poor quality mobile devices in communities
- highly dispersed nature of the population
- lack of non-mobile connectivity options in remote areas
- financial burden to upgrade their devices.

These issues pose a challenge for First Nations people living in remote locations and an understanding of their lived experiences is essential consideration leading up to this shutdown. As an example in the Torres Strait, 3G coverage is relied on while out at sea, which will pose a safety issue should 3G be shut down without 4G coverage in its place

A targeted First Nations-led education and awareness campaign is essential to ensure First Nations people are aware of the shutdown and the potential implications for their handset. We also recommend consideration of a device guideline or code that embeds consumer safeguards, with 4G calling at a minimum.



If the shutdown is not managed appropriately, we are concerned that it will further entrench digital exclusion for First Nations people living in remote communities and homelands. If this was to occur, it could impact on the Government's ability to achieve Target 17 and, crucially, impact on public safety in some communities. For example, stakeholders have raised concerns with us that some Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs) are serviced by 3G routers which will leave these organisations and their communities without media coverage if they are not provided with alternative and sustainable means of connectivity. This is a significant risk if not addressed as a matter of urgency.

There is also significant concern that the 3G shutdown will negatively impact eftpos facilities in communities which already have limited banking access. Many remote communities rely on community stores and/or the post office to provide eftpos facilities to be able to pay for food and basic necessities. The potential impact of First Nations people and communities not having access to their own money is unacceptable, given the history of income management in our communities. We understand that the banks are not providing information as to which terminals or communities may be affected and we urge you to make findings that require this information to be provided as soon as possible.

The Advisory Group is closely monitoring the 3G shutdown. We would be happy to meet with the Committee to discuss the impact on First Nations people and their communities. If you would like clarification on any of our comments raised in this correspondence, we encourage you to contact our secretariat at firstnationsdigitalinclusion@infrastructure.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dot West'.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lyndon Ormond-Parker'.

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