



Secretariat
Coalition of Peaks

Via: secretariat@coalitionofpeaks.org.au

Dear Coalition of Peaks members and representatives from Commonwealth Treasury

The First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group (Advisory Group) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Scoping a Policy Partnership for First Nations Economic Development discussion paper (discussion paper). We would also like to thank Ms Jeanette Corbitt and Ms Catherine Liddle for meeting with us recently in Alice Springs, including to discuss the proposed Partnerships.

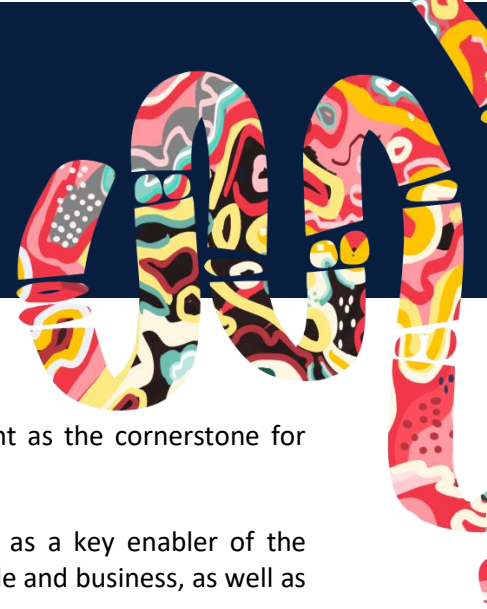
The Advisory Group was established by the Minister for Communications to provide advice on progressing Target 17 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which commits all levels of government to support equal levels of digital inclusion for First Nations Australians by 2026. Target 17 underpins Outcome 17 of the National Agreement, which is focused on ensuring First Nations Australians have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.

Our advice is founded on a strong belief that digital inclusion is a human right and is a key enabler of a number of Closing the Gap targets (for example, those relating to health and education outcomes) and of economic growth, cultural preservation and promotion, and social connectedness for First Nations Australians. While we recognise the ambition of reaching equal levels of digital inclusion by 2026, we also understand that the cost of inaction is far higher, given the economic, social and cultural impact of First Nations Australians not enjoying the benefits of being online.

In October 2023, the Advisory Group published its initial report, which recommended practical measures to address access, affordability and digital ability, as well as improve the collection of data to measure the digital divide. These recommendations helped inform funding of \$68 million in the 2024-25 Budget, which will be used to implement the following initiatives:

- \$20 million for the roll-out of free community Wi-Fi in remote communities through a new contestable program. This is in addition to the funding for free Wi-Fi to around 23 communities that is being delivered by NBN Co and announced in February 2024
- \$22 million to establish a First Nations Digital Support Hub and a network of digital mentors
- \$6 million to expand the Australian Digital Inclusion Index to improve the national collection of data on First Nations digital inclusion.

A copy of our initial report is available at [Initial Report | First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group](#) and we encourage you to consider its principles and recommendations in developing the scope and structure of the proposed Policy Partnership. In particular, we would draw your attention to the following issues raised in the report:



- the importance of place-based solutions and community empowerment as the cornerstone for effective governance and self-determination
- the high priority which should be given to improving digital inclusion as a key enabler of the employment and economic opportunities available to First Nations people and business, as well as their access to information and services
- the need to invest and utilise the reach and expertise of the First Nations media and broadcasting sector, including supporting training and employment for First Nations Australians across this sector
- improving alignment across government to ensure the benefits of investment and policy are maximised and focused on supporting the needs and interests of First Nations Australians.

More information on these recommendations is included in the **appendix** to this letter. We are also exploring these issues further in the context of developing a First Nations digital inclusion roadmap, and encourage you to review the discussion paper which we have released for public consultation. The discussion paper is available here: [A roadmap for First Nations digital inclusion | Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts.](#)

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss these matters further and to work together on improving economic development for First Nations Australians. If you would like to contact us, please email our secretariat 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



APPENDIX

Focus on place-based solutions, partnerships and local empowerment

With regard to the best approach to governance, we acknowledge the continued advocacy and leadership role of First Nations peak bodies in assisting government to work with First Nations people and communities at the local level. In our view, it is critical that First Nations communities are empowered to make informed choices, be part of the planning and design process, and have a final say on what they want to achieve when it comes to working with government and industry. It is also important to recognise the level of engagement/consultations across government at the moment, and to consider how this could be streamlined or better aligned to mitigate the risks of consultation fatigue.

While we know that there is no single answer to achieving the Closing the Gap Targets, we note that the best approaches are those in which service delivery is driven by First Nations businesses and the community-controlled sector. This can only be the case, however, when this sector is provided with the necessary resourcing and investment to build capacity, including attracting and retaining staff, and develop its expertise base. Where this happens, strong outcomes can, and have been, delivered for First Nations people and communities.

The Digital Service Centre in Cherbourg, Queensland, a collaboration between Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire, QLD government, Fujitsu and TAFE, is a great example of how partnership and engagement can deliver strong outcomes in terms of skills employment, and infrastructure investment¹. The establishment and ongoing success of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services in providing clinically effective, trusted and culturally appropriate care to First Nations people is a further example of the benefits of empowerment and control by communities.

Improve digital inclusion for First Nations people and businesses to take advantage of employment and economic opportunities

The 2023 results for the Australian Digital Inclusion Index, which measures levels of access, affordability and digital ability, shows there is a national gap of 7.5 for First Nations people, with a score of 65.9 compared to 73.4 for non-First Nations Australians. The gap progressively widens in regional, remote and very remote areas. First Nations people living in remote and very remote areas had particularly low levels of digital inclusion, averaging 24.8 points below the national non-First Nations average².

These relatively low levels of digital inclusion can mean that First Nations people are less able to enjoy the economic, social and cultural benefits of being online, including access to employment and online education. The lack of connectivity can also 'lock out' First Nations businesses from opportunities for digital innovation, particularly on country. We have heard from stakeholders, including the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network, of how this can impede economic growth more generally and lead to poorer employment outcomes for First Nations Australians.

¹ [New Cherbourg Service Centre opens creating jobs in remote Indigenous community | Advance Queensland | Queensland Government](#)

² [ADII 2023 report](#)



We believe improving digital inclusion could expand the visibility and international reach of local First Nations businesses such as cultural tourism, arts, bespoke industries such as forestry, fish and oyster farming, online businesses such as First Nations media, journalism, and digital services. More broadly, it would also generate improved employment opportunities for First Nations Australians, particularly those living on country. This could also be further enabled by a strong focus by government and industry on First Nations procurement to help build capacity for First Nations businesses.

Invest and utilise the reach and expertise of the First Nations Media and Broadcasting Sector

We wish to highlight the role of First Nations media and broadcasting sector as an area which could be a focus of the proposed Partnership. The First Nations media and broadcasting sector provides multiple avenues for employment and technical training, preserves First Nations culture and identity and bridges the communication divide between First Nations communities, government and industry. Given this, an issue which needs be considered is the way in which current guidelines can negatively impact on the First Nations media sector's ability to participate in whole of government advertising campaigns.

We believe there is a strong need to recognise the significant contribution this sector could make to training and job growth for First Nations Australians, including in remote communities. For example, Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs) could be resourced to deliver training in community which would help to both create technical jobs as well as support local media content. Similarly, we recommend the proposed Partnership also include a focus on the telecommunications sector, particularly in terms of supporting the development of skills to repair, maintain and install telecommunications infrastructure and hardware within communities. We have heard from stakeholders across the telecommunications sector that this would deliver significant benefits, particularly in terms of enabling faster response times to fix service outages. This is a critical issue in communities which rely on only one connectivity source.

Ensure First Nations people have a voice in key economic and employment policies

The Advisory Group encourages First Nations representation in key economic and employment policy areas to ensure genuine partnership and collaboration in line with Closing the Gap Priority Reform One: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making and Priority Reform Three: Transforming Government Organisations. Improving economic outcomes for First Nations people requires genuine collaboration and changing how governments work. For example, this can be achieved in ensuring First Nations people are represented and hired in key organisations and government agencies to allow policies, guidelines, marketing and procurement are developed and reviewed through a First Nations lens. This will help build connection and allow more effective engagement with First Nations communities and ultimately better value for money and outcomes.

Minimise the administrative burden on First Nations communities

The Advisory Group acknowledges that government bureaucracy provides a mechanism to facilitate and support program delivery in a transparent and accountable manner, however at times these mechanisms seem to work against the outcomes that government is trying to achieve. Government grants and funding opportunities can be 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 online government portals
- limited or no visibility of these opportunities due to lack of engagement with local First Nations media and broadcasters
- 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 is not asking for these important processes to be bypassed but for government to minimise the burden on local First Nations communities such as providing feedback, case managers, translation services or linking local communities with industry who wish to engage and work in partnership.

Improve both data sharing and distribution to local First Nations communities and organisations

In line with Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4: Shared access to data and information at a regional level, there is a real need for local First Nations communities and organisations to have access to data from both government and industry that is being used to implement programs, initiatives and policies. This is important as data on First Nations communities can easily be misinterpreted by government and industry and goes against data sovereignty. At the same time, it hinders the ability for shared decision-making and limits First Nations communities to have both an informed choice and advocate for their needs.

At the same time, both industry and government need to provide data in a way that is both accessible and useable to First nations communities. This can either be through training and empowering First Nations staff to manage and interpret the data, or hosting and presenting the data in a way that is easily navigable and understandable.