



FIRST NATIONS
DIGITAL INCLUSION
ADVISORY GROUP

First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap

2026 and beyond



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A message from our co-chairs

Dear Minister,

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to our work and support for addressing the digital divide. We appreciate your valuable contributions to our work over the past two years and your advocacy for First Nations digital inclusion.

This roadmap outlines the path towards First Nations digital inclusion, and builds upon the First Nations Digital Inclusion Plan (2023-2026) as well as recommendations put forward in our initial report last year. Many of the recommendations in the initial report require further consideration and action by governments.

While the initial report represented a good starting point for progressing measures to support Target 17 in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the recommendations in the roadmap have a more long-term focus, looking to foster sustained and ongoing progress towards closing the digital divide.

The roadmap provides practical advice for how government and industry can close the digital divide, as well as recommendations on how to support First Nations innovation and excellence in the technology and communications sector. It draws on our extensive engagement with First Nations people and communities across Australia, the best available research and data on First Nations digital inclusion across Australia, and the expertise and knowledge of our members, as well as our Digital Inclusion Expert Panel.

We have appreciated having the opportunity to contribute to a number of other ongoing processes related to digital inclusion, including the Regional Telecommunications Review 2024, the review of the Universal Services Framework, the Remote and Regional Television Transmission and Reception Audit and the Community Broadcasting Sustainability Review.

These reviews, all being conducted concurrently, provide an unprecedented opportunity for policy and regulatory settings to be updated to better support First Nations digital inclusion. We look forward to seeing the outcomes of these processes and potential alignments with the roadmap recommendations.

Guided by this roadmap, we will continue to engage with stakeholders and communities across Australia to inform our continued advice to Government to help progress its recommendations. We look forward to continuing to engage with you and the Government throughout the next year, including on how the roadmap recommendations can be best implemented.

Yours sincerely,



Ms Dot West OAM



Associate Professor Lyndon Ormond-Parker

About Us



Advisory Group and Expert Panel members with Dr Jessa Rogers

The First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group and Expert Panel was established in January 2023 by the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, to provide advice on Target 17 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement): ‘By 2026, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equal levels of digital inclusion’.

This includes supporting the broader Outcome 17, which is about ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ‘have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives’.

Since our establishment, our Advisory Group membership has included: Ms Dot West OAM and Associate Professor Lyndon Ormond-Parker (co-chairs), Ms Naomi Moran, Dr Heron Loban, Professor Bronwyn Carlson, Ms Talei Elu and Mr Jerome Cubillo.

Our Digital Inclusion Expert Panel includes Mr Che Cockatoo-Collins, Ms Lauren Ganley, Ms Gillian Mailman, Professor Ellie Rennie, Mr Sam Dimarco, Mr Dan Lloyd, Mr Neil Turner, Dr Daniel Featherstone, Dr Scott Winch and Ms Cheryl Bailey.

Executive Summary

This roadmap aims to provide strategic direction for First Nations digital inclusion policy, not just for the immediate future, but for years to come. It will help ensure that momentum on First Nations digital inclusion continues, and the Advisory Group hopes that governments and industry continue to look to the principles outlined in the roadmap in developing policy, programs and products.

As we move closer towards closing the digital divide experienced by First Nations Australians, we expect to see government and industry go beyond providing basic services and digital support for First Nations people, moving towards supporting First Nations digital empowerment and excellence. This will include supporting First Nations people and businesses in building their capacity within the digital economy, supporting the preservation of culture via the use of digital technologies, supporting the First Nations media sector to thrive, and overall supporting First Nations people to get the most out of having access to the internet and the digital world in a way that is culturally appropriate and meaningful.

To support these outcomes, we believe it is important that the Australian Government, in collaboration with the Coalition of Peaks, considers the best way forward for the governance of Target 17 and its inclusion in future iterations of the National Agreement. We would also like to note that this roadmap is not a static document, and will continue to evolve to reflect changing circumstances. This should include regular updates to the roadmap as measures are introduced and more data is captured.

How can government and industry use this roadmap?

The recommendations outlined in the roadmap provide a framework for governments and industry to undertake more activities to support First Nations digital inclusion. For each key recommendation, suggestions are made for actions to be taken in the immediate, medium and long term, with the immediate actions providing a foundation for later ones.

We recognise that there are many different levers available to governments to progress these recommendations, including policy development, regulatory reform and provision of funding, and we encourage all governments to be innovative in determining the best path forward. We note that in some instances where industry is not delivering the required effort, governments may need to step in to regulate to ensure progress.

We propose that where industry can adopt recommendations in the short-term they should, while feeding outcomes back to government. As discussed at our workshops with the telecommunications industry, while industry may be better positioned to deploy some of these recommendations in the short-term, government may be in a better position to scale programs with a proven track record of success, such as community Wi-Fi and the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI).

We note that state and territory governments oversee various essential services necessary for digital inclusion, such as power supply, which is critical to all communications and broadcasting networks, devices and services. State and territory governments may also have the greatest visibility of where the gaps are in terms of digital inclusion in communities.

We urge state and territory governments to use the data they have to identify gaps in communities and work with communities to identify appropriate solutions, and we encourage best practice and lessons learnt to be shared across jurisdictions. We also note that the national leadership provided by the Australian Government is a key driver of change at the national level, and we urge all Commonwealth agencies to engage with our recommendations in a proactive and collaborative way.

How can communities use this roadmap?

While industry and government may be best placed for developing and deploying solutions, communities can draw upon this roadmap to advocate for their digital inclusion needs, identify appropriate solutions and have the right language to use in exploring partnerships with industry providers. The roadmap can provide the basis for government to deliver best practice programs for community organisations dependent on the digital economy.

For example, we encourage community organisations to use the recommendations and principles outlined in the roadmap to help guide conversations with service providers and other industry members, as well as government stakeholders, to ensure they are receiving the solutions that are right for them. This may include advocating for things such as new funding for infrastructure, but also advocacy for improved governance models and community oversight of the deployment of new programs

Principles for the roadmap

The following five principles have guided the development of our recommendations, with each principle informing the details of individual recommendations at the immediate, medium, and long-term level.

The importance of place-based approaches: this means partnering with First Nations communities for both the design and implementation of any program to ensure their unique needs, aspirations and environment are considered.

Centring First Nations consumer preferences: centring the unique preferences of First Nations consumers at both the community and individual level, e.g. acknowledging the preference for prepaid mobile plans over post-paid lock-in contracts.

Adopting a technology-agnostic approach to long-term recommendations and solutions: focusing on general approaches to policy and program design, rather than specific contemporary technical solutions to ensure the recommendations keep up with the rapidly changing pace of the communications landscape.

First Nations representation: the Advisory Group supports First Nations representation at the executive decision-making level in alignment with Priority Reform Three in the National Agreement.

Moving from Closing the Gap to innovation and excellence: this means fostering an empowered First Nations communications and digital technology sector by providing opportunities for enhancing technical skills, innovation and development within communities.

Snapshot of recommendations

Access and availability

1. Increase government funding for connectivity and broadcasting infrastructure in areas where industry co-investment is not feasible
2. Increase co-location and shared infrastructure in the telecommunications and broadcasting sector
3. Increase the sharing of mobile network infrastructure by telecommunications providers in regional and remote locations
4. Investigate options for increased spectrum availability for First Nations broadcasting and telecommunications
5. Ensure access to free-to-air television services
6. Improve the resilience of communications and broadcasting infrastructure, including the resilience of power supplies
7. Establish a program for place-based technicians for communications and broadcasting infrastructure repair, installation and maintenance
8. Expand community Wi-Fi networks to more underserved communities

Affordability

9. Trial a subsidised model of household connectivity in remote areas
10. Future proof handset devices used by First Nations consumers
11. Continue to provide non-digital modes of service delivery
12. Provide unmetered access to .gov.au domains. First Nations news services and a potential future First Nations domain
13. Increase and expand funding for in-home connectivity for low-income First Nations households
14. Establish a national device bank
15. Encourage telecommunications providers to offer prepaid broadband to First Nations consumers
16. Establish a Donate your Data scheme for First Nations Australians

Digital ability

17. Provide more funding for digital mentor programs
18. Provide digital training and support for target groups of First Nations Australians
19. Provide more funding for the First Nations Digital Support Hub
20. Provide place-based cyber safety initiatives

Information, news and media

21. Provide funding for First Nations radio services in areas where they are not present
22. Use First Nations media to raise awareness of programs and initiatives

Data

23. Establish data sharing arrangements between governments and telecommunications providers

- 24.** Commit to data sovereignty in government and industry programs which impact First Nations communities and organisations

Governance and advocacy

- 25.** Strengthen governance arrangements for Target 17 to support continued improvement of First Nations digital inclusion
-
- 26.** Encourage and support on-country employment and development
-
- 27.** Reallocate funds from fines to media and telecommunications companies for breaching regulatory codes which negatively impact First Nations people to community-controlled organisations to deliver digital inclusion and media and broadcasting programs
-
- 28.** Establish a fair pricing regime for telecommunications and IT services
-
- 29.** Conduct an economic analysis of the digital divide for First Nations Australians, including costs to close the gap and the cost of inaction
-
- 30.** Improve First Nations representation across the telecommunications sector
-

Introduction and Background

Target and Outcome 17

The National Agreement has been established to enable First Nations people and governments to work together to overcome the inequality experienced by First Nations Australians and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians.

The National Agreement has 19 national socio-economic targets across 17 socio-economic outcome areas that have an impact on life outcomes for First Nations people. Target 17 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits all levels of government to the goal of equal levels of digital inclusion for First Nations Australians by 2026. At a practical level, this means ensuring:

- availability: all communities have the connectivity they need
- access: all communities have the devices needed to get online
- affordability: all First Nations people are able to afford reliable internet services whether fixed line or mobile
- ability: all First Nations people have the skills to be online safely and effectively.

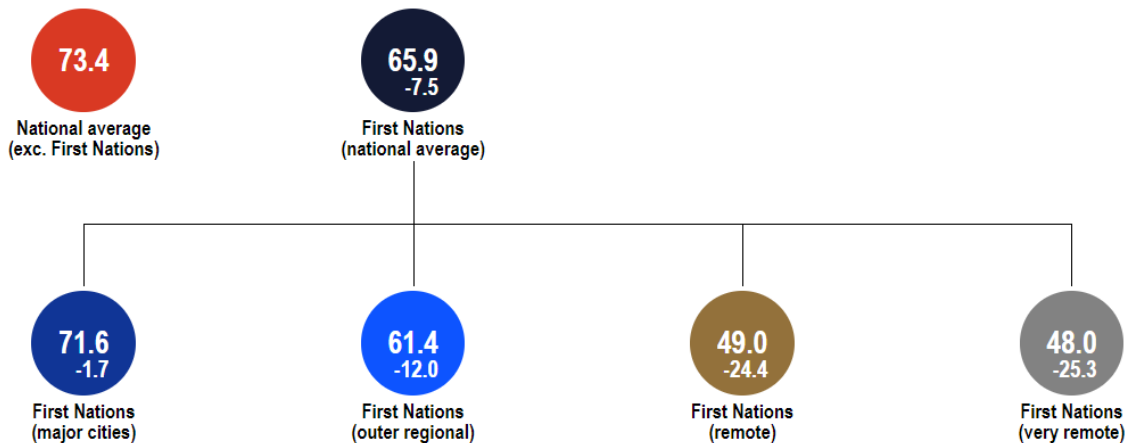
Target 17 supports Outcome 17, which is about ensuring First Nations people are able to access information and services to make informed decisions about their own lives. This includes access to government and community services, as well as First Nations media and other media services providing news and information.

In order to achieve Target 17, there will need to be significant new effort and funding for digital inclusion. To align effort towards achieving Target 17 and identify funding priorities, the Australian Government will need to work in partnership with communities, states and territories, the not-for-profit sector and industry.

More broadly, we acknowledge the findings of the Productivity Commission regarding the generally poor progress made by governments towards the Priority Reforms of the National Agreement, and believe that transformational change is needed to ensure the commitment to close the gap is realised.

Current situation

The baseline data for digital inclusion comes from the 2014-15 census data question on access to the internet at home, which was used for measuring progress towards Target 17. The census no longer asks this question on internet use. The Productivity Commission is now using data from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) as a supporting indicator. The latest ADII in 2023 shows a progressively widening digital gap experienced by First Nations Australians in regional, remote and very remote areas.



We note that while the digital gap increases with remoteness, this data does not sufficiently reflect the lived experiences of First Nations people living in regional and metropolitan areas. First Nations people living in more urban areas may experience different levels of digital exclusion and will therefore have different digital inclusion needs than those in regional and remote areas.

As we outlined in our initial report, the elements of digital inclusion (access, affordability and digital ability) often look different in a First Nations context, and these unique aspects must be considered in the development of suitable policy solutions.

Progress since our initial report

Our initial report provided government, industry and the not-for-profit sector with recommendations for action in the short-term, focusing on practical measures to address each element of digital inclusion. The report was received positively by stakeholders, with states and territories endorsing a number of key recommendations and actions following its release. The initial report has also formed the basis of the Data and Digital Ministers Meeting (DDMM) Digital Inclusion Working Group's work to date.

Based on the recommendations made in our initial report, the Australian Government has committed to investing \$68 million in the 2024-25 Budget on measures to support First Nations Digital Inclusion. This includes:

- \$40 million over four years for the roll-out of free community Wi-Fi in remote communities, with \$20 million being allocated to a new contestable program, and \$20 million to provide free Wi-Fi to around 23 communities which will be delivered by NBN Co
- \$18 million over three years to establish a network of digital mentors to increase access to online services and improve digital literacy and online safety among First Nations people
- \$4 million over three years to establish a First Nations Digital Support Hub to provide support digital ability and connectivity literacy for First Nations people and communities
- \$6 million over three years to expand the Australian Digital Inclusion Index to improve the national collection of data on First Nations digital inclusion.

We have provided advice to the Australian Government on the design and proposed delivery options of these budget measures. We appreciate the progress made to date, including the development of, and consultation on, guidelines for each measure. We also appreciate the Australian Government's commitment to continue to engage with First Nations people and communities in the implementation of these measures.

While these measures are a positive development towards achieving Target 17, the Advisory Group hopes to see continued and sustained funding for digital inclusion, as well as a continued commitment to sustainable and culturally appropriate policy and program design. It is our view that without additional future investment, it is unlikely that Target 17 will be met.

We are also pleased to have seen progress in a number of other areas, across both government and industry. This includes:

- dedicated funding under Round 3 of the RCP and Round 7 of the Mobile Black Spot Program for solutions that targeted mobile and broadband connectivity in First Nations communities
- consideration of the needs in First Nations communities as part of the Terms of Reference for the Regional Telecommunications Review, which is chaired by The Hon Alannah MacTiernan
- the inclusion of First Nations representation in government processes such as the Department of Finance Digital ID Expert Panel, the Australian Communications and Media Authority's Consumer Consultative Forum, NBN Co's Low Income and Digital Inclusion Forum, and the Low Earth Orbit satellite (LEOSat) working group

- the introduction by Telstra of a bespoke Pre-Paid Community Mobile Plan, targeted to Australians living in remote communities. We note that all existing plans (Telstra and Boost) will remain in-market and available to all customers in remote communities
- a strong focus on the needs of First Nations Australians through processes such as the review of the universal service framework and the Community Broadcasting Sector Sustainability Review.

Since our initial report was released, we also note the positive engagements we have had with State and Territory ministers, including through the Data and Digital Ministers Meeting. The Advisory Group appreciates the time that respective State and Territory Ministers have taken to discuss the initial report recommendations, and we hope to continue working with government to progress the recommendations outlined in the roadmap.

We also note the dedicated First Nations Digital Inclusion Forum held this year at CONVERGE24, jointly hosted by First Nations Media Australia (FNMA) and the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA). The Advisory Group supports ongoing annual forums on First Nations digital inclusion, through to 2026 and beyond.

We also encourage all government agencies to work collaboratively with First Nations people, the telecommunications sector and the First Nations media and broadcasting sector to accelerate progress towards closing the digital divide.

We note that there are recommendations in the initial report which have not been addressed, including revising the Telephone Allowance to reflect internet and mobile costs, general considerations regarding governance arrangements around Target 17, and recommendations around data sharing. The Advisory Group encourages governments and industry to continue to consider the recommendations outlined in the initial report alongside the recommendations in the roadmap.

Engagement with communities, industry and government

We have travelled extensively over the past year, hearing from First Nations people, government and industry across the country about their digital inclusion priorities.

Key opportunities and issues

We have been fortunate to engage with so many different and diverse communities and organisations throughout this year. While these communities and organisations have unique perspectives, they have all echoed the Advisory Group's calls for improved digital inclusion and access to information and services.

We have heard about:

- the need for culturally relevant and appropriate communication, and use of the First Nations media sector to communicate messages around connectivity, being safe online and consumer protections
- the need for government to work in partnership with communities and listen to their needs and priorities in designing policy and programs
- the impact that low levels of digital inclusion can have on a community, including vulnerability to scams and other online harms and a lack of access to online services
- the importance of ensuring communities can control their connectivity service, including restricting access to certain websites and being able to switch it off, as needed.

Where the Advisory Group has travelled this year:



We have met with a number of organisations, both in-person and online, including:

- media organisations
- land councils and Aboriginal Councils
- local councils
- states and territories
- education providers
- health providers
- peak bodies
- industry organisations.

Engagement with communities

The Advisory Group has had the privilege of visiting a number of regional and remote First Nations communities as part of our engagements this year.

Feedback has included:

- the limited digital connectivity in many remote communities and homelands, including poor quality and reliability of mobile service
- concerns about safety on major highways, regional and remote roads, and on open waters where there is often no connectivity

- digital literacy and the lack of appropriate or easy to understand communications from telecommunications providers
- concerns around device sharing and how this relates to online safety and potential harms
- positive stories about improved access to the internet and the flow-on effects, such as improved access to information, online services, education and employment
- concerns around the lack of appropriate avenues for raising complaints with service providers
- the importance of community-led digital inclusion initiatives around online safety and digital literacy
- the importance of the First Nations media sector in communicating public health and safety messaging in a culturally meaningful and effective way.

The Mitirlpa Program (Staying at Home)

Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa (KJ) is a First Nations organisation focusing on maintaining Martu culture and fostering sustainable economic growth in Martu communities in the Western Desert of the East Pilbara.

Martu living in remote communities face significant barriers to accessing fundamental services due to the digital divide. Challenges such as limited internet connectivity, insufficient digital infrastructure, and low digital literacy leave Martu at risk of social and economic exclusion, further exacerbated by geographical remoteness and limited access to identification documents.

The Mitirlpa Program focuses on empowering Martu individuals by enhancing their digital skills and knowledge. The program provides tailored support to enable Martu to access essential services directly from their communities, reducing the need for disruptive and risky travel to nearby towns.

Key components of the program include improving access to digital connectivity, building digital skills and knowledge within the community, and advocating for systemic change to bridge the digital divide.

By fostering mentorship opportunities, the program also equips younger Martu with the skills to assist older community members, creating a cycle of learning and support. The Mitirlpa Program not only enhances access to essential services but also promotes dignity, independence, and equitable participation in Australia's digital society.

<https://www.kj.org.au/media-films/mitirlpa>



Natasha Williams and daughter

Engagement with the First Nations media and broadcasting sector

The Advisory Group has met with a number of media and broadcasting organisations, and all have expressed deep concerns for the future sustainability of the First Nations media and broadcasting sector.

We have heard a variety of issues, including:

- the imminent risk of closure that many organisations are facing due to a lack of increased and sustained funding for the sector
- problems with household access to free-to-air TV via the VAST satellite system and the need for consideration of a return to terrestrial rebroadcasting
- discontinuation of recruitment and mentorship programs for young people entering the industry due to a lack of funding
- organisations reconsidering their status as Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) due to being forced to compete with TAFEs who receive a greater portion of profile funding, as well as larger RTOs
- problems recruiting and retaining staff due to higher wages being offered in other sectors
- the need for government to improve how it uses First Nations media organisations to target messaging for First Nations people and communities.

“Self-empowerment and self-determination are fostered by providing the tools, training and resources necessary for First Nations peoples to tell their own stories, manage their own media, and build digital literacy from within their communities.”

First Nations Media Australia, submission to the roadmap

A number of the organisations we spoke to also provided submissions to the Community Broadcasting Sector Sustainability Review. In addition to the points above and as mentioned in our submission to the review, many in the industry are asking for:

- increased levels of funding, including for ongoing indexed funding for the Community Broadcasting Program and Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Program
- ongoing funding for an infrastructure and equipment upgrade program for First Nations media organisations
- a new broadcasting license for First Nations broadcasting services to recognise their role as essential services and to allow for more flexibility around revenue streams.

We thank all the media and broadcasting organisations that spoke to us and provided their feedback. We also note the level of consultation fatigue across the sector, as well as frustrations that the sector has been providing similar feedback for many years, including through FNMA’s Calls to Actions, with there still being little progress made on many of the issues raised.

Engagement with the telecommunications and IT industry

Since the Advisory Group was established, we have held three workshops with the telecommunications and IT sectors. These workshops have allowed us to build a relationship with these sectors and facilitate ongoing dialogue between the Advisory Group, industry, and government.

We have appreciated the industry’s willingness to participate in our workshops, which is testament to their commitment towards closing the gap. The workshops have also provided a chance to hold the industry to account, with organisations providing updates on their ongoing progress towards closing the digital divide.

Discussions at the industry workshops have included conversations around:

- ensuring communications between industry and communities is culturally effective and reflects how communities best receive information
- supporting and empowering the First Nations tech workforce
- advocacy being a shared role between industry, government and First Nations communities
- embedding the place-based needs of individual communities in product design from the earliest stage possible
- the importance of corporate social responsibility
- the barriers that First Nations consumers face in getting connected e.g. proof of identification, multifactor authentication
- the need to consider the historical experiences First Nations people have had with industry and government, and how to build trust in community.

This feedback has informed a number of recommendations in the roadmap, and we look forward to continuing to work with industry to progress some of the more technical aspects of the roadmap.

While we appreciate industry's efforts to date, we are keen to see its ambitions increase over time. In particular, we urge industry to more actively engage with First Nations people and communities to ensure connectivity solutions are effective and suit local needs and to create internal mechanisms for First Nations engagement and complaints resolution.

Engagement with the Commonwealth, states, territories, and local governments

A strong relationship between all levels of government will be crucial for achieving Target 17 and improving First Nations digital inclusion beyond 2026. We have appreciated meeting with representatives from the states and territories to discuss the various digital inclusion initiatives being implemented in their jurisdictions, as well as where they and the Australian Government can be better aligned. We have also appreciated meeting and hearing from local government organisations, who often have the most experience with delivering digital inclusion initiatives on the ground.

Feedback from government has included:

- the need for better alignment across and within governments, including to more effectively negotiate with the telecommunications industry on issues such as data sharing
- how to best align at the ministerial level
- how to make procurement processes more suitable to support First Nations businesses
- developing advice and policies around co-design
- considerations around data sharing and aligning data collection methodologies where possible
- developing a shared national understanding of what success looks like with respect to digital inclusion.

We are keen to continue to work with the states and territories on issues relating to First Nations digital inclusion, and encourage all jurisdictions to consider the recommendations in this roadmap and how they can support their delivery.

While we recognise all jurisdictions are implementing programs to support digital inclusion, we remain concerned that there are areas where there has been very little progress, such as the sharing of data with the Australian Government to include on the First Nations Connectivity Mapping Tool. We would reiterate that this roadmap provides a framework for all levels of government, not just the Commonwealth, and urge states and territories to increase their ambition in this space.

Policy settings across the telecommunications and media and broadcasting sectors

This roadmap has been developed at the same time that a number of significant reviews are taking place across government in the communications space, as well as in industry. This includes the review of the universal services framework, the Regional Telecommunications Review 2024, the Community Broadcasting Sustainability Review, the review of the Telecommunications Consumer Protection Code, the review of the Online Safety Act, the refresh of FNMA's Calls for Action, and the audit of the state of broadcasting transmission and reception infrastructure in regional and remote Australia, including in remote First Nations communities.

We recognise the importance of [contributing to these processes](#), with these reviews providing an unprecedented opportunity for the Government to update policy and regulatory settings to better support First Nations digital inclusion. The roadmap reinforces the recommendations made in our submissions to these relevant public consultations.

We hope to see these recommendations considered in the outcomes of the reviews listed above. More broadly, we recognise that as an enabler of broader progress towards Closing the Gap, the recommendations in this roadmap also need to be considered in the design and delivery of the Closing the Gap policy partnerships for languages, justice, social and emotional wellbeing, housing, and early childhood care and development.

The Advisory Group has worked to amplify the voices of those it has engaged with in communities and organisations across Australia. It is now time to see these voices and opinions reflected in the actions of all tiers of government and industry.

The need for action is clear

Closing the Gap is critical

Digital inclusion is not only a benefit in its own right, but a factor underpinning progress on a number of other Closing the Gap targets and outcomes. All of the Targets and Outcomes under the National Agreement are interdependent, and the Advisory Group encourages government to adopt this position in order to accelerate progress with respect to all aspects of Closing the Gap.

Outcome 1: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives.

“There are significant disparities in health outcomes between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian populations. In an increasingly digital world, it is important to look ahead and prevent the widening of this gap that may eventuate from inequal levels of digital inclusion.”

Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT), submission to the roadmap

Outcome 5 and 6: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential, and students reach their full potential through further education pathways

“After three decades of varied work experiences, one of our students, now in their 60s, made a life-changing decision to reignite their passion for learning. Enrolling in Tauondi's Skill Up pre-employment program, the student began a pathway to personal growth and

development. [...] For the first time, they engaged with technology, discovering new opportunities for learning and connection.”

Tauondi Aboriginal College, submission to the roadmap

Outcome 7: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are engaged in employment or education

“The Palm Island Digital Service program provides a culturally safe workplace that delivers tailored digital training, upskilling and employment opportunities to local people and builds community confidence, capacity and capability.”

Queensland Government Department of Employment, Small Business and Training.

Outcome 8: Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities

“[Resident] and her partner have established a campground on the property to host tourists, school groups [...]. There is no mobile reception at [...] the campground. [...] A reliable internet connection would give [resident] and her family more control and determination over the management, accessibility and unique vision of their campground business.”

Central Land Council (CLC), submission to the roadmap

Outcome 9: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need.

“They came in, installed it [VAST equipment at my house in 2013], it was all good and everything. But then within about a month of installation we had a power surge and mine blew out... I couldn't really afford [to] spend another \$4-500 the buy another VAST box.”

Bruce Harrigan, Wujal Wujal 2023 Outcomes Report, Mapping the Digital Gap Research Project

Outcomes 10 and 11: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people/young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

“Inability to pay for phones or phone bills can prevent healthcare providers from reaching individuals for follow-up care or welfare checks. IUIH's Prison Transition Service emphasises the importance of providing people with a phone or phone credit upon release to ensure they can be contacted.”

Institute for Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH), submission to the roadmap

“From a correctional services point of view, mobile service at outstations and some homelands will be beneficial as it would enable Electronic Monitoring to be used more widely. It costs approximately \$130,000 to keep an adult prisoner in prison for a year. There are significant savings in enabling more people to be on country on court orders, rather than in prison”

Wadeye community visit, NT Pilot Project August 2023

Outcome 13: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe.

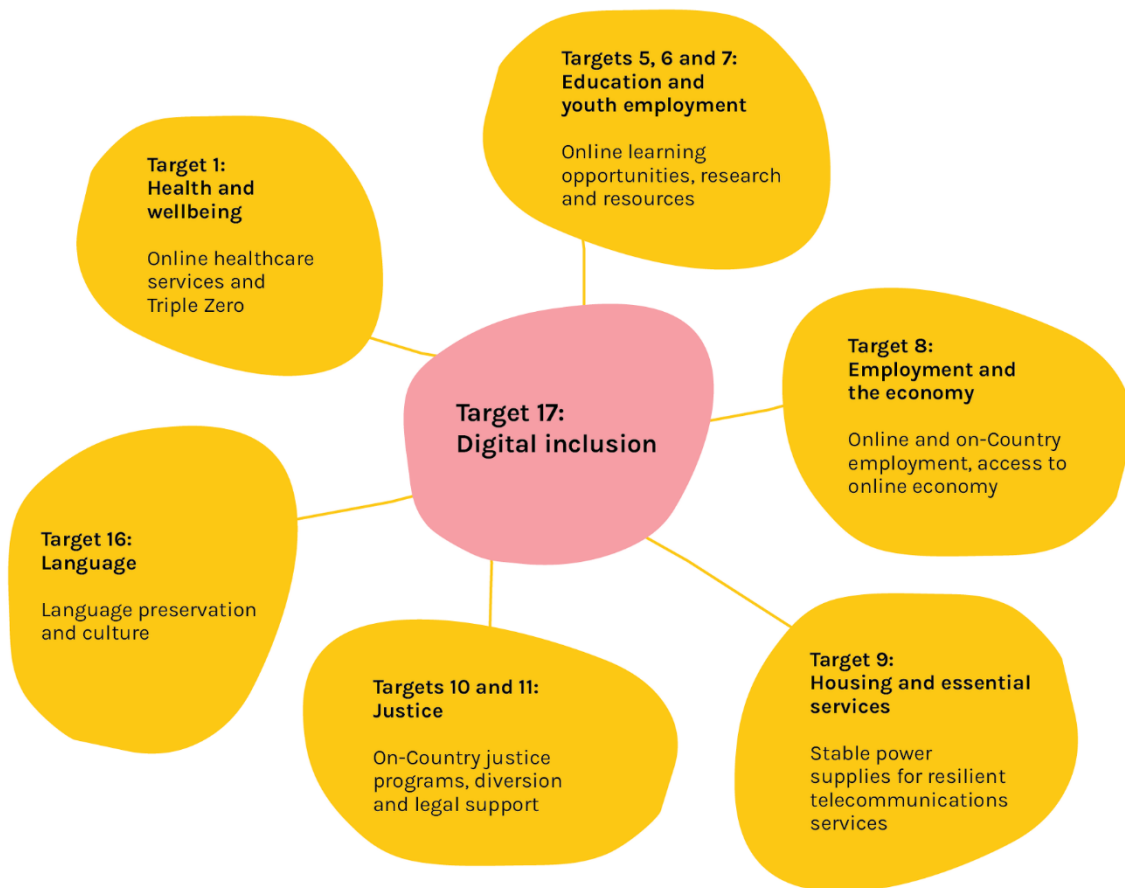
“Without the ability to call [the] police or safe house or any other support system we saw afterwards a lot of women saying, ‘Oh these people knew that we couldn’t call.’ So really opportunistic and quite violent behaviours, and a huge backlog of jobs just because people weren’t being able to report it.”

Laura Crossfield, Wadey Women’s Safe House, Wadey 2022 Outcomes Report, Mapping the Digital Gap Research Project

Outcome 16: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing.

“The Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Aboriginal Corporation (ARDs) was provided funding to produce Yolngu Matha news. [...] The programming has a positive impact on the broader community and helps to ensure that news and current affairs can be heard by community members in their first language.”

Community Broadcasting Foundation and Yolngu Matha News, submission to the roadmap



Given the unique position of Target 17 as a factor underpinning many of the other Targets and Outcomes, it is essential that action on First Nations digital inclusion is taken now and sustained into the future for there to be genuine progress towards achieving all of the Closing the Gap targets.

Importantly, achieving Target 17 is, to an extent, dependent on other Closing the Gap targets being met, e.g. Target 9b: By 2031, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households within discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities receive essential services that meet or exceed the relevant jurisdictional standard. Without appropriate access to power, housing and other essential services, ensuring access to reliable connectivity will be challenging.

Digital inclusion and human rights

It is the Advisory Group's position that digital inclusion is a human right, which supports self-determination and empowerment for First Nations people and communities. In the digital age, access to information and online services is an essential prerequisite for full participation in society, democracy and the economy.

Making sure that First Nations people are not left behind is crucial, and access to information and services is an integral part of this. To date, the Advisory Group has strongly advocated that digital inclusion be included in the Australian Human Rights Commission's forward agenda.

In 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet. Additionally, the United Nations Special Rapporteur in 2011 concluded that internet connectivity vastly expanded the capacity of individuals to enjoy their right to freedom of opinion and expression, which in turn enables other human rights, and boosts economic, social and political development.

“Digital inclusion for First Nations and other people living in regional, rural and remote areas is, in 2024, crucial to support the fulfilment of many economic, social and cultural rights, in relation to which Australia has obligations under a range of United Nations treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.”

Law Council of Australia, submission to the roadmap

In practice, realising this principle requires recognition by governments and industry that communications and broadcast infrastructure are essential services, in the same way that power and water supply are considered essential. We also note the strong dependencies between power and connectivity, with many stakeholders noting the impact of prolonged power outages on internet service, particularly in remote communities.

“When power to premises in remote locations can be unreliable, or unaffordable (to the point where First Nations people in remote communities are even making decisions not to buy or run refrigerators), paying for a fixed line or satellite-based service reliant on power is unlikely to rate as a top priority. This is where a holistic approach and collaborative effort is required, across the broad ecosystem of players, aimed at meeting all relevant Closing the Gap Targets and not just CTG17.”

Telstra, submission to the roadmap

Enabling social and economic opportunity

Improving digital inclusion for First Nations Australians will present countless opportunities for improved access to the economy and improved social wellbeing. At present, the relatively low levels of digital inclusion experienced by many First Nations Australians undermines their access to the economic benefits of being online, including job and education opportunities. It can also undermine the ability of First Nations businesses to take advantage of the opportunities being online offers in terms of innovation.

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.

While we are pleased to see progress on a policy partnership for economic self-determination, it is our strong view that this must incorporate digital connectivity and technologies as a key enabler of economic opportunities for First Nations Australians.

Being digitally included may look different for First Nations communities: it may not necessarily mean establishing conventional professional jobs in community, but may be done in a more creative and culturally appropriate way, as seen with the establishment of the Koonibba Test Range.

The Koonibba Test Range

Koonibba is located on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula, 800km west of Adelaide and 40km northwest of Ceduna.

NBN Co has worked with Koonibba Community Aboriginal Corporation to broaden community-wide Wi-Fi coverage, to enable residents' access to free internet for banking, healthcare and education, while also blocking harmful sites.

The Koonibba Community Aboriginal Corporation has also partnered with Southern Launch to develop the Koonibba Test Range, Australia's first licensed space launch facility.

The successful launch on May 2024 was an incredible achievement for the community and industry, attracting visitors from across Australia and Europe.

The partnerships are already delivering educational benefits for the town's small school and nearby Ceduna schools, as well as employment opportunities with plans for an Astronomical Centre and Observatory on the Koonibba lands to create ongoing awareness of Australia's First Nation people's relationship with space and increase ongoing tourism to the region.



Mr Corey McLennan, Chief Executive Officer, Koonibba Aboriginal Corporation, September 2024

“Connectivity and technology provide powerful tools for supporting and celebrating First Nations culture and in doing so can help to promote cultural resilience, advance Indigenous self-determination in the digital age, strengthen cultural identity, foster intergenerational knowledge transmission, and support First Nations participation in the global community.”

NSW Government Department of Customer Service, submission to the roadmap

Holding government to account

As noted in the Productivity Commission’s Review of the National Agreement, even though there are a range of accountability mechanisms in the National Agreement, they are not sufficient in influencing the type of change required to close the gap.

One recommendation in the Productivity Commission’s Review included strengthening and clarifying the objectives of the Priority Reforms. The Advisory Group strongly endorses the need for further action on the Priority Reforms across government and is of the view that the Priority Reforms underpin all work to close the gap, including Target 17.

Priority Reform 1 calls for **formal partnerships and shared decision making**, with governments sharing power and recognising that the right of First Nations people to have control over decisions that affect their lives is central to self-determination. The Advisory Group supports government and industry co-designing and working in collaboration with First Nations people and communities, and a number of our recommendations outline the importance of culturally appropriate co-design and place-based solutions.

Priority Reform 2 calls for **building the community-controlled sector**. The roadmap makes a number of recommendations in support of this Reform, encouraging government to think beyond closing the gap to supporting innovation and excellence into the future. This includes supporting the Indigenous technology and communications sector to develop and be sustainable.

Priority Reform 3 calls for **improving mainstream institutions** so that governments and their organisations are accountable for Closing the Gap and are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of First Nations people. The roadmap recommends that there be First Nations representation at the executive level in a number of Australian Government agencies, organisations in the telecommunications industry, and other relevant non-Government organisations, embedding this representation into their everyday functions.

Priority Reform 4 calls for **Indigenous Data Sovereignty to be recognised and supported**. Improving the national collection of data on First Nations digital inclusion is vital, and while we were pleased to see funding committed to improving the national collection of data on First Nations digital inclusion through the 2024-25 Budget, it is crucial that governments continue to measure trends over time – not just for Target 17 but for the Priority Reforms as well. Data sovereignty is also about ensuring First Nations people and communities have governance over knowledge, including how it is accessed, used and stored. The Advisory Group encourages all levels of government to consider how the capabilities and systems for Indigenous data governance can be best developed.

More generally, we think it is important that the Australian Government, and other parties to the National Agreement, consider how to best ensure transparency for progress, particularly in ways which are accessible to First Nations people and communities. The way in which data capabilities and systems to support Indigenous data governance more broadly are established is also important – this goes beyond the specific data sharing and requirements for Target 17.

Promoting innovation and excellence

Beyond closing the gap, our long-term vision is for First Nations communities and people to use digital technologies confidently and safely in their daily lives.

There are many innovative technologies already being used for language and cultural programs, land management, arts and design, media and music production, archiving, teaching resources and more. Our long-term goal is for remote communities to be actively involved in the IT, digital and creative industries and the development of digital tools and applications to support local needs and initiatives.

Cherbourg's Digital Service Centre

The Cherbourg First Nations Service Centre is part of a three-year pilot program designed to boost the economic development of Queensland First Nations communities through digital skills training and employment opportunities. Staff receive on-the-job training while achieving a Certificate III in Business qualification through TAFE Queensland.

The Digital Service Centre has created between 25 and 30 jobs, and has provided an opportunity for Cherbourg to participate in the digital economy.

The success of the Digital Service Centre model in Cherbourg can provide other communities with a basis for developing their own innovative solutions which promote the uptake of IT skills in community while also creating jobs and opportunities for more formal training and education.

The Digital Service Centre demonstrates how place-based solutions, delivered in consultation with community, provide culturally appropriate opportunities for improving digital inclusion that less targeted policy and programs might not be able to achieve as successfully.



Advisory Group members with employees of the Digital Service Centre in Cherbourg, July 2024

Components of digital inclusion

We have developed our recommendations in line with an expansive understanding of digital inclusion to not just include access, affordability and digital ability, but also the availability of services, products, media and information.

Core elements of digital inclusion:

- How people prefer to go online and which devices they choose to use
- The digital/technical skills and expertise of individuals, households and wider communities

This includes the components of:

Access: consumers can connect to the internet and broadcast services, in addition to standard voice services, and can acquire internet/mobile plans that meet their preferences. This also includes having access to devices that suit their needs and are fit for purpose.

Affordability: individuals, households and wider communities can purchase internet connections/plans and suitable devices to meet their needs.

Digital ability: individuals have the confidence and skills needed to have a safe and fulfilling online experience, supported by cybersecurity awareness and connectivity literacy.



Availability of information and services to support digital inclusion:

- The infrastructure and coverage in place in a given area provides connectivity which is reliable and fit for purpose
- The information, services and media available, including the platforms on which they are available

This includes the components of:

Availability: internet and broadcasting infrastructure, and resulting coverage, is in place. This also includes that services and products are available to communities and are reliable, scalable and fit for purpose.

Information, news and media: relevant, accessible, linguistically and culturally appropriate information, services, news and entertainment are available to communities through their preferred platform (online, radio, television, face-to-face).

Data: robust data on digital inclusion is available to industry and policy-makers to inform fit for purpose product design and program development. Data governance arrangements are in place in line with principles of Indigenous data sovereignty and Priority Reform 4.



Recommendations

Recommendations are made in the short, medium and long term to indicate the required sequencing to move towards equal levels of digital inclusion for First Nations Australians. If action is not taken in the immediate term, it will be difficult for recommendations in the medium and long term to be delivered.

Access and availability

1. Increase government funding for connectivity and broadcasting infrastructure in areas where industry co-investment is not feasible

Adjustments to the guidelines for the combined round of the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) Round 3 and Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP) resulted in over 30 per cent of funding available being awarded to solutions which would likely benefit First Nations communities, compared to a target of 15 per cent. While this is a positive start, future rounds of the MBSP, RCP and other programs should increase the ambition of funding targets with each subsequent round to support closing the digital divide between First Nations and other Australians. It is important that this is complemented by a dedicated program, covering both communications and broadcasting infrastructure, which is designed by and for First Nations people and communities.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments allocate a specific proportion of funding for communications infrastructure grants/programs for projects that will benefit First Nations communities.
- All governments and industry work with First Nations communities to ease the administrative burden when applying for grant or funding applications by streamlining processes, ensuring non-digital application options are available, and ensuring information is in plain English.
- All governments use their relative 'buying power' in procurement processes, incentivising telecommunications providers to share their data on their areas of coverage and actively share infrastructure in regional and remote areas.
- The Australian Government introduces a program for the building and upgrading of broadcast infrastructure, as well as ongoing indexation for the Indigenous Media and Broadcasting Program.

In the medium term we recommend:

- All governments consider removing the industry co-investment requirements, which can be a barrier to industry delivering projects in areas outside their commercial interest.
- All governments and industry consider how to raise awareness of programs and grants opportunities in First Nations communities, including through use of First Nations media, where possible.
- The Australian Government considers how to streamline funding to allow for simultaneous upgrading of broadcast infrastructure when undertaking communications upgrades/programs.
- Under this program, grants should also be available for First Nations media and broadcasters, regardless of location, to upgrade connectivity and broadcasting infrastructure in order to deliver essential media and news services.

In the long term we recommend:

- All governments consider how programs and grants opportunities can be designed in partnership with First Nations communities and support shared decision-making.

- The Australian Government, and states and territories, provide co-funding for a targeted First Nations program to deliver connectivity and broadcasting infrastructure in areas where co-investment by industry is not commercially viable, including ongoing maintenance.

2. Increase co-location and shared infrastructure in the telecommunications and broadcasting sector

Some regional and remote communities are served by multiple technology types. Although the presence of multiple telecommunications providers and technology types allows for primary and secondary forms of communication and increased resilience, it may indicate the inefficient use of infrastructure, uncoordinated maintenance and a “patchwork” of different communications and broadcast infrastructure. There is also an opportunity to utilise existing backhaul to connect nearby First Nations communities.

We note that the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts is in the process of reviewing regulations governing access to telecommunications facilities, including infrastructure sharing requirements under the Telecommunications Act, and look forward to hearing more when their report is finalised.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments encourage infrastructure sharing arrangements to enable the expansion of services (e.g. expanded fixed wireless into satellite footprint), utilising existing and legacy terrestrial infrastructure, including fibre optic networks in remote areas, dark fibre and mobile or broadcast towers, including those owned by private parties and communities.

In the medium term we recommend:

- All governments and industry continue to trial newer backhaul technologies, such as LEOSats and long-range microwave repeaters where traditional backhaul is too costly.

In the long term we recommend:

- The Australian Government encourage telecommunications providers to continue to co-locate and share infrastructure, including with broadcasters, in areas where there is no commercial incentive to deploy their own infrastructure.
- All governments and industry scale up deployment of newer backhaul technologies if trials are successful in terms of impact across both telecommunications and broadcasting.
- The Australian Government develops a program to remove and recycling outdated and unwanted communications infrastructure, such as satellite dishes and towers, to reduce clutter, safety risks and potential high wind impacts to roofs.

3. Increase the sharing of mobile network infrastructure by telecommunications providers in regional and remote locations

The Advisory Group supports greater sharing of network infrastructure by telecommunications providers, including mobile network operators (MNOs) in regional and remote areas, where this is complementary to ongoing MNO network investment incentives. This could significantly increase coverage, capacity and choice for First Nations consumers while decreasing the duplication of infrastructure deployment and therefore costs to the MNOs.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government work with the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) and industry on ways to encourage sharing of spectrum and infrastructure, including Multi Operator

Core Network (MCON) and roaming. We note that the ACCC has powers under the Competition and Consumer Act to declare services, it may be able to consider whether to declare roaming.

- Industry identify areas where MOCN is an option and undertake trials to understand its effectiveness and impact.

In the medium term we recommend:

- Telecommunications providers continue to develop innovative programs and approaches to sharing infrastructure in areas where deployment has historically not been a viable commercial choice.

4. Investigate options for increased spectrum availability for First Nations broadcasting and telecommunications

Spectrum is a fundamental requirement for all the wireless services which are critical in First Nations communities, including mobile services, broadcasting, fixed wireless and satellite. While spectrum in a variety of frequency bands has been made available under different licence types across Australia, there is a range of interconnected issues which can make deployment of mobile and fixed wireless services difficult in regional and remote areas, including access to preferred spectrum in desired locations, barriers to infrastructure deployment and challenging economics. Preferred spectrum in regional and remote areas can often include low-band spectrum which is generally suited to wide-area outdoor coverage and in-building penetration.

Recently the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) has undertaken a number of reviews which could deliver beneficial outcomes for First Nations communities, including exploring a range of options for long-term spectrum licensing, such as “use it or share it” and “use it or lose it” arrangements.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government engages with the ACMA on options for improving the availability of spectrum for First Nations communities as part of the Expiring Spectrum Licences process.
- The Australian Government engages with the ACMA on how spectrum allocation can be reprioritised to ensure allocation to First Nations services in large population centres where there is currently no First Nations radio presence. This could include re-prioritisation of spectrum
- The Australian Government engages with the ACMA on how to make spectrum available for Digital Terrestrial Television.

In the medium term we recommend:

- The ACMA ensure First Nations representation in their forums to ensure ongoing input from First Nations perspectives, including reviews and processes related to spectrum allocation and use.

In the long term we recommend:

- The ACMA agree to ongoing First Nations representation at the executive decision-making level.

5. Ensure access to free-to-air television services

Improving reliability and useability of VAST direct-to-home television reception equipment will ensure that First Nations communities can access free-to-air television services, including relevant and trusted news and information to make informed decisions about their lives, as well as entertainment. Improving access to free-to-air television would reduce the need for residents to pay to access these services using mobile or broadband data, and would ease mobile network congestion. Since the rollout of the VAST equipment in 2012-13 there has been no coordinated maintenance program, leaving responsibility of maintenance costs on households. This has resulted in over 60% of remote households no longer having VAST TV services

working. There are a number of issues with the VAST equipment, including costly replacement of set top boxes and difficult in navigating smart card activation processes.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government provide funding for the installation of digital television broadcast infrastructure in medium to large remote communities, including the installation of reception equipment on houses, to replace the use of VAST satellite equipment.
- The Australian Government establish a program for VAST direct-to-home upgrades to ensure equipment is working in small communities and homelands that are not upgraded to digital television broadcast.
- Industry look into how to improve the usability of VAST set top boxes, including removing the need for smart cards, and improving resilience to power surges.

In the medium term we recommend:

- The Australian Government provide funding to upgrade broadcast towers to enable television broadcast in sites without suitable infrastructure.
- The Australian Government consider ongoing funding to expand digital terrestrial television and VAST.

6. Improve the resilience of communications and broadcasting infrastructure, including the resilience of power supplies

Seasonal weather, natural disasters and power outages can cause communications and broadcasting infrastructure to go offline, which has at times led to life threatening situations and emergencies, particularly in remote areas. This can be compounded by the time it takes for technicians to be able to visit the community, as well as delays in the provision of required spare parts.

“Council wishes to restate our great concern that when telecommunications are lost/fail, our communities cannot make any emergency calls to first responders, and this is terribly dangerous and may be life threatening. This serious situation must be addressed as a matter of urgency.”

Torres Shire Council, submission to the roadmap

Ensuring the main power supply and back-up power and battery solutions for communications and broadcasting infrastructure will significantly reduce the number of disruptions to the network, and will also provide ample time for technicians to repair and restore services when there are outages.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments work together to ensure resilient power supply is an essential consideration in the deployment of communications infrastructure.
- The Australian Government expand government telecommunications resilience programs, such as Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation (TDRI) Program, to cover all First Nations communities of need.

In the medium term we recommend:

- The Australian Government engage with telecommunications providers to ensure regional and remote communities have appropriate back up connectivity options if primary services are offline
- States and Territories ensure primary communications infrastructure has reliable power supply that scales with increasing demands, and that is resilient to natural disasters.

In the long term we recommend:

- Power supplies in communities are resilient and locally sourced with renewable energy where possible.

7. Establish a program for place-based technicians for communications and broadcasting infrastructure repair, installation and maintenance

The Advisory Group supports training local place-based personnel to provide preliminary diagnoses, routine maintenance and simple repairs. This would improve the reliability of the infrastructure in community, decrease outage time, and would also reduce the costs incurred by industry to send technicians out to remote communities. Coordination of technical service delivery between telecommunications providers and broadcasters would also reduce the costs of technical visits and reduce the length of outages.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government work with industry to establish a funding pool from telecommunications providers to support the employment of on-site technical support in communities, to reduce need for travel to do assessment and basic repairs.
- The Australian Government consider how to utilise the Remote Jobs and Economic Development (RJED) Program and other employment programs to support local technicians in the telecommunications and media and broadcasting sectors. The Australian Government should also consider how to use existing employment programs to upskill suitable community members to fill technical support roles.

In the medium term we recommend:

- Telecommunications providers engage with media and broadcast organisations to explore options for technicians to work across sectors, particularly in remote areas, potentially through a forum jointly led by Communications Alliance and First Nations Media Australia.

In the long term we recommend:

- All governments and industry work together to support the development and sustainability of a First Nations technical service sector

8. Expand community Wi-Fi networks to more underserved communities

The Advisory Group has been pleased to see the rollout of Wi-Fi mesh networks in remote First Nations communities, and notes that this measure announced in the 2024-25 Budget was informed by recommendations made in the Advisory Group's initial report. Given the success of the community Wi-Fi network model in remote communities, we propose that this be expanded to other areas with significant First Nations populations, including urban and peri-urban centres with poor quality or unreliable connectivity.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments provide new investment for the rollout of Wi-Fi mesh networks to First Nations communities with low levels of access including in urban and peri-urban areas.

In the medium term we recommend:

- All governments, in partnership with telecommunications providers, consider how best to support First Nations people looking to transition from community Wi-Fi and other free connectivity schemes to private internet plans, such as more flexible prepaid options
- Telecommunications providers upgrade successful single point community Wi-Fi to Wi-Fi mesh to provide greater coverage, where appropriate.

In the long term we recommend:

- All governments and telecommunications providers, in consultation with First Nations communities and local government areas, provide funding and support for long term community Wi-Fi services, where requested, as a safety net for those who would otherwise be digitally excluded.

Affordability

9. Trial a subsidised model of household connectivity in remote areas

In Australia there is a significant number of First Nations communities for which the fixed service model of connectivity has not been suitable. While Low Earth Orbit satellite (LEOSats) connections for households and communities are being increasingly adopted, they are not always affordable for individual First Nations households in remote communities, and there is not currently a suitable prepaid LEOSat option available on the market.

There is an opportunity to trial a service providing high speed internet via LEOSats in underserved communities, either in key community facilities or specific First Nations communities that are reliant on satellite connectivity. The Advisory Group notes the Government's current work investigating the suitability of LEOSats, and looks forward to the release of the findings from these trials.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments consider partnering with a LEOSat provider to make internet service available to designated First Nations communities through Community Wi-Fi.
- All governments provide subsidies for the take up of LEOSats in First Nations community facilities, such as healthcare clinics, local media organisations, and libraries.
- The Australian Government provide subsidies for the take up of NBN SkyMuster in First Nations community facilities, such as healthcare clinics, local media organisations, and libraries.

In the medium term we recommend:

- All governments provide ongoing funding to scale up the provision of subsidies for LEOSats in First Nations communities more broadly.
- Telecommunications providers introduce different payment options for individual households connecting via LEOSat, such as prepaid.

In the long term we recommend:

- All governments partner with LEOSat providers to make internet available in designated regional and remote satellite-dependent communities in their jurisdictions at a reduced, fixed price per month, or via prepaid plan.

10. Future proof handset devices used by First Nations consumers

Due to a lack of affordable options, many First Nations consumers, particularly in remote communities, have to use outdated devices. With emerging uses for LEOSat technology at the consumer level, including for direct-to-device (D2D) texting and calling, it will be important to ensure First Nations Australians, are able to access D2D handsets. A trial of this technology would provide a valuable opportunity to understand its advantages and disadvantages, and would inform government and industry on how to best provide consumer-friendly D2D mobile devices if the technology is proven to be fit for purpose.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- Telecommunications providers identify opportunities to trial D2D services.

- Telecommunications providers consider options to ensure the affordability of D2D handsets, including prepaid services.

In the medium term we recommend:

- Telecommunications providers undertake trials of D2D services in First Nations communities.
- All governments work with telecommunications providers to ensure First Nations communities are able to access D2D services, with priority given to communities with no or limited connectivity.

In the long term we recommend:

- All governments work with telecommunications providers to make sure affordable D2D mobile devices are available in community stores, including with options for prepaid plans.

11. Continue to provide non-digital modes of service delivery

Digital modes of communications should be seen as complementary to traditional means of communication, such as community payphones, rather than as a replacement. Although digital services may provide savings and improved convenience for many digitally included Australians, it is vital to acknowledge that face-to-face and voice communication will continue to play a role in supporting digital excluded Australians, as well as those who prefer in-person communication. Government and industry services need to continue to provide direct in-person support and traditional means of telecommunication such as payphones in regional, rural and remote communities.

“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.”

Central Land Council, submission to the roadmap

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments engage with communities before closure/discontinuation of services and to provide fit-for-purpose place-based alternative delivery models where needed.
- In locations in which physical delivery is not possible, service providers should provide tailored, culturally appropriate online and telephone support that allows First Nations consumers to speak directly with a service delivery agent, rather than an automated machine.
- The Australian Government engage with telecommunications providers to ensure continued operation of community payphones on outstations/homelands.
- All government and service providers ensure call centres are staffed by First Nations people who can provide culturally relevant support.

In the medium and long term, we recommend that government and industry continue doing the above.

12. Provide unmetered access to .gov.au domains, First Nations news services and a potential future First Nations domain

Although government websites do not take up a significant amount of bandwidth, accessing them can be difficult for those with limited data allowances or those who experience frequent periods of being disconnected e.g. those on prepaid plans who cannot always recharge in time. Providing unmetered, or free access to users accessing government websites will provide a safety net for all disadvantaged Australians who have limited data allowances, meaning they will not have to ‘ration’ their finite data to access online government services, such as Centrelink or Medicare. Unmetered access to the streaming of news services such as National Indigenous Television (NITV) and Indigenous Community Television (ICTV)

would also ensure First Nations Australians have access to news and information that is culturally appropriate and relevant to them.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments work together with telecommunications providers, potentially via Communications Alliance, to consider a joined-up approach to providing unmetered access to government websites and First Nations news streaming services.

In the medium term we recommend:

- Pending the establishment of a First Nations domain namespace in the .au domain, unmetered access should be provided to First Nations websites.

13. Increase and expand funding for in-home connectivity for low-income First Nations households

The School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI), providing families with household connectivity, has been successful in getting First Nations people and households connected. The SSBI and community Wi-Fi programs complement each other, with community Wi-Fi allowing members of the community to access the internet as a first step or safety net, while SSBI provides families with higher quality connectivity to support children's education in the comfort of their own homes. Making sure First Nations communities and households are set up to stay connected in the long-term will be vital in closing the digital divide and ensuring that progress is sustainable.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government expand the SSBI eligibility criteria and provide ongoing funding to include unconnected and disadvantaged First Nations households or establish a similar program for these households.

In the medium term we recommend:

- The Australian Government work with NBN Co and other telecommunications providers to consider how to transition consumers to affordable and culturally appropriate paid models of connectivity, and how to identify consumers for which this would be most appropriate.

14. Establish a national device bank

Access to digital devices is a key element of digital inclusion for First Nations Australians. Although there is some progress within some jurisdictions and at the national level through a device bank pilot by NBN Co and Work Ventures, more support is needed to scale up these initiatives. It is also important that there are standards in place regarding the quality/type of hardware that is distributed through a national device bank, and that it includes handsets with Direct To Device (D2D) capabilities in the future. The National Television and Computer Recycling Scheme (NTCRS) provides incentives for the recycling of digital devices, but does not provide an incentive for device reuse or refurbishment.

We note that establishing a national device bank may not require significant investment, and ask that governments commit to frameworks around device refurbishment and recycling as well.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments develop and commit to a framework for device donation and refurbishment, including around hardware standards and requirements for device longevity.

- Building on the device bank pilot, the Australian Government should establish a national device bank, including laptops, mobile phones, tablets and desktop computers, as well as pre-packaged software and software licences where applicable.
- The Australian Government should expand data reporting on the NTCRS to include reuse within NTCRS annual recycling targets.

In the medium term we recommend:

- The Australian Government fund the establishment of a First Nations-controlled organisation/service centre to undertake the refurbishment and distribution of devices.
- The national device bank engages with government agencies and industry to ensure they donate their devices, in line with all necessary cyber security requirements.

15. Encourage telecommunications providers to offer prepaid broadband to First Nations consumers

Most First Nations consumers rely on prepaid mobile plans, particularly in remote areas, even though these offer less value for money in terms of cost per gigabyte than post-paid plans. Although prepaid plans are a standard offering among most MNOs, this is not the case for household broadband and NBN services, with a majority of contracts being fixed and 'lock in'. While some retailers offer month-to-month no contract broadband services, these are often automatically charged to the customer's credit/debit card on file and pose a risk to customers who are not in a position to pay for ongoing internet usage. Barriers to post-paid plans, such as identification issues, also need to be addressed to support greater take up of those plans.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government engage with NBN Co and telecommunications providers on piloting a prepaid recharge style broadband service available to a wide range of consumers, including First Nations people. This could include options on changing the level of services to enable continuity of a basic service when a full service is not affordable.
- The Australian Government work with telecommunications providers, through the LEOSat Working Group, on options to trial a prepaid LEOSat service.

In the medium term we recommend:

- Following introduction of a prepaid product, telecommunications providers be pro-active in ensuring awareness of prepaid products, including in remote communities, and prepaid products should become a standard product offering across the sector.
- Telecommunications providers consider the unique consumption patterns and preferences among First Nations consumers and consider providing other bespoke support services for First Nations consumers.

16. Establish a Donate your Data scheme for First Nations Australians

There is limited information on how much data Australians use in comparison to how much data they are given for their mobile plans. However, anecdotally most Australians on higher end plans are unlikely to use the entirety of their allocated monthly data allowance, which provides an opportunity to donate and allocate their unused monthly data to other Australians. This would allow for Australians to play a direct part in helping address digital exclusion, with minimal or no impact on their ability to use their mobile plan as per their normal usage patterns.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government engage with telecommunications providers on mechanisms allowing consumers to donate their mobile data.

In the medium term we recommend:

- Telecommunications providers have a ‘donate your data’ option as part of their business as usual.
- Telecommunications providers remind customers at the end of their usage period with excess data which encourage them to donate their data.

Digital ability

17. Provide more funding for digital mentor programs

Digital mentors provide direct support and guidance for people getting online and seeking to improve their digital skills and abilities. There are a number of digital mentor programs across Australia, which have been well received, however, the Advisory Group recognises that the funding currently available means many communities, particularly those located remotely miss out on these programs. Therefore, a focus on remote communities is necessary. In addition to this focus and the need for more funding, it is also critical that there is flexibility in how digital mentors are employed and their role/functions, to ensure they are responsive to local needs and priorities. The Advisory Group welcomes the establishment of the digital mentors program announced in the 2024-25 Federal Budget.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government engage with states and territories on co-funding to expand the network of digital mentors announced in the 2024-25 Federal Budget.
- The Australian Government engage with states and territories to extend operational funding for the Digital Support Hub, which will provide technical and training assistance to the network of digital mentors.
- All governments improve alignment across their current programs to maximise outcomes and better coordinate funding.
- The Australian Government consider how to ensure a joined-up approach to the role of digital mentors, taking into account the need for technical support in areas such as health, education and banking, including educating First Nations people about their rights as consumers.

In the medium term we recommend:

- All governments review funding and guidelines for digital mentor programs on a regular basis to ensure it is suitable for individual First Nations community needs and the digital mentor programs are addressing digital inclusion at a place-based level.
- The Australian Government fund a trial to provide devices and training to existing facilities operated by First Nations community-controlled organisations as part of the expansion of the digital mentors program.

In the long term we recommend:

- The role that community-based organisations play in supporting digital ability is recognised, and a range of programs is appropriately funded to support those providing digital mentoring.
- The Australian Government expand the trial to other communities with appropriate facilities including coordinating with states and territories who have or are planning to implement similar programs.

In the long term we recommend:

- All governments engage with local government authorities in their jurisdictions to identify similar facilities where culturally relevant and safe digital ability training can be held.

18. Provide digital training and support for target groups of First Nations Australians

While the Advisory Group strongly supports the rollout of place-based programs and initiatives for First Nations digital inclusion, there is scope to further target more specific groups, including First Nations people with disabilities, older First Nations people, and First Nations people experiencing domestic/family violence. This recommendation draws upon successful targeted and bespoke digital inclusion initiatives, including BeConnected, Tech Savvy Seniors and Tech Savvy Communities, which provided more targeted training and guidance for older First Nations people and other Australians on cyber security, connectivity literacy and other basics such as sending emails and video calling.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments build upon existing digital inclusion initiatives targeted at a range of cohorts (including seniors, youth, those with disability and those experiencing domestic violence) to trial a version of each initiative with a First Nations focus.
- All governments focus on ensuring First Nations Australians in vulnerable settings, such as prison, women's refuges or out-of-family care are provided with connectivity to remain connected to family and country.
- All governments ensure that where connectivity is being provided to First Nations Australians in vulnerable settings that they are also providing digital and connectivity literacy training/support.

In the medium term we recommend:

- All governments consider how to expand safe centres in community for specific groups at higher risk of digital exclusion.

19. Provide more funding for the First Nations Digital Support Hub

More funding for the Digital Support Hub will help ensure its connectivity literacy efforts are coordinated and staffed by First Nations people and that it can operate beyond the current two-year funding period. It will also support it to undertake stakeholder and community outreach, including collaboration with consumer advocacy organisations such as the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN).

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government should work with the provider of the Digital Support Hub to ensure it leverages the expertise and of other organisations, and engages in community outreach to ensure awareness of its services.
- The Australian Government engage with consumer advocacy groups to ensure the First Nations Digital Support Hub can provide consistent and high-quality advice.

20. Provide place-based cyber safety initiatives

Although the ACCC and e-Safety Commissioner have a number of successful initiatives which reach out to First Nations consumers, issues such as scams and technology-assisted abuse such as cyber-bullying continue to be raised as barrier for First Nations people who wish to go online but are concerned about the potential negative impacts. Co-designing with community on cybersecurity programs for locally tailored

resources is needed. Consumer protection agencies provide an essential safety net for First Nations people and other Australians; however, it is important that these agencies are provided the resources to address and support consumers who become victims of online harms.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government should provide additional funding to allow the ACCC, the ACMA and e-Safety Commissioner to expand current First Nations initiatives or provide new targeted programs to address the concerns of First Nations people.
- All governments, as well as agencies such as the ACCC, ACMA and the eSafety Commissioner should utilise First Nations media and broadcasters to promote awareness of consumer protections and online safety, and engage with First Nations content creators to develop required content.

Information, news and media

21. Provide funding for First Nations radio services in areas where they are not present

First Nations media organisations play a vital role in ensuring First Nations people have access to the information and services they need to make informed decisions about their lives. With there being three capital cities in Australia that still do not have a First Nations radio service (Canberra, Hobart and Adelaide), the Advisory Group strongly encourages the Government to consider how to best support the sector in these locations as a priority.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government engage with First Nations Media Australia, the First Nations communities of Hobart, Canberra and Adelaide, and the ACMA to identify a way forward on establishing First Nations radio services in these cities.

In the medium term we recommend:

- The Australian Government makes changes to the Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Program guidelines to support the establishment, and ongoing funding, of First Nations media organisations in unmet major cities and regional centres with high First Nations populations (where there is demand for the service) and delivery of radio content online where broadcast is not possible.

22. Use First Nations media to raise awareness of programs and initiatives

It was noted in consultations with First Nations communities that government and industry programs and initiatives are not reaching their intended audience, whether it be scam warnings, new infrastructure or programs that may address the digital divide like the School Student Broadband Initiative. Local First Nations radios, online content creators and TV which provide community news and entertainment in local languages are underutilised. This is exacerbated by government and industry websites that are difficult to navigate and using overly bureaucratic language.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments review their website accessibility requirements to ensure information is culturally appropriate for First Nations Australians and accessible to people with lower levels of digital inclusion.
- The Australian Government engages with the ACMA and telecommunications providers on strengthening provisions in the Telecommunications Consumer Protection Code for translation/accessibility of information, including Product Information Statements.

- The Australian Government reviews its Central Advertising System to more clearly identify the role and importance of First Nations media and broadcasters, including local production of advertising content.
- The Australian Government organises a roundtable with relevant agencies responsible for Closing the Gap Targets and representatives of the First Nations media sector.

In the medium term we recommend:

- All governments and telecommunications providers engage more closely with First Nations media and broadcasters, both to draw on their expertise and ensure open lines of communication.
- All governments ensure their advertising frameworks do not preclude agencies working directly with First Nations media and broadcasters on specific and targeted information campaigns.

Data

23. Establish data sharing arrangements between governments and telecommunications providers

Improving national data collection on internet and mobile coverage can help prioritise funding, address critical coverage gaps and prevent uncoordinated program delivery where some First Nations communities may receive double up funding or infrastructure while others miss out. Although coverage data is commercially sensitive, amalgamating the data to identify gaps and highlight programs and initiatives being undertaken in the area will provide better outcomes for First Nations communities while minimising misuse of resources by both government and industry

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments commit to including data sharing, particularly for the benefit of First Nations Australians, as a standing agenda item on the Regional Connectivity Ministers Roundtable and the Data and Digital Ministers Meeting.
- States and territories, and industry, provide relevant data sets to include on the First Nations connectivity map to allow First Nations communities access.

In the medium term we recommend:

- The Australian Government formalises a data sharing agreement, such as a Memorandum of Understanding, with states and territories.
- The Australian Government considers options to strengthen requirements on telecommunications providers to provide data to governments, with appropriate provisions for cost reimbursement.

In the long term we recommend:

- All governments and telecommunications providers commit to mature data governance models in line with Priority Reform 4.

24. Commit to data sovereignty in government and industry programs which impact First Nations communities and organisations

Data sovereignty should be embedded in nearly every Closing the Gap initiative including the recommendations in this Roadmap. This will allow First Nations communities to evaluate the success and how to improve future delivery while also minimising the risk of the data being misused or manipulated without being given appropriate context. It will also ensure First Nations people and communities having

ownership and governance over data and information, on their own terms, which will ensure First nations people can benefit from emerging technologies in a culturally appropriate and meaningful way.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments and telecommunications providers embed Priority Reform 4 and data sharing into the guidelines of connectivity and digital ability programs

In the medium term we recommend:

- Program delivery partners, whether it be industry or government, provide support and capacity building for First Nations communities on how to access and use their own data.

In the long term we recommend:

- All governments ensure First Nations communities can access their own relevant data from government and industry programs to allow for their own evaluation and decision making.

Governance and advocacy

25. Strengthen governance arrangements for Target 17 to support continued improvement of First Nations digital inclusion

As a critical enabler of access to information and services, ensuring that government arrangements for First Nations digital inclusion are effective and responsive to First Nations people and communities will be a matter for ongoing consideration. The Advisory Group is pleased that First Nations Media Australia, the peak body for the First Nations media and broadcasting sector, has recently added digital inclusion as one of its Calls to Action, however, we note the challenges facing many peak bodies, including FNMA, in terms of resourcing and capacity.

In the immediate term, we recommend:

- The Australian Government provides ongoing funding for the Advisory Group beyond 2027 to support its continued advocacy for First Nations digital inclusion, including stakeholder and community engagement, while a formal policy partnership is established.
- The Australian Government engages with the Coalition of Peaks on changing the measurement of Target 17 via the Productivity Commission to make the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (including Mapping the Digital Gap) the key data source.

In the medium term we recommend:

- The Australian Government engages with the Coalition of Peaks on establishing First Nations digital inclusion/media and broadcasting as a formal policy partnership under the National Agreement, which may include additional resourcing to build capacity for FNMA.
- Parties to the National Agreement considers whether current reporting requirements, through the Closing the Gap Annual Report and Implementations Plans are providing sufficient information to First Nations people and communities about progress towards each of the targets.

In the long term we recommend:

- Parties to the National Agreement consider the most appropriate way to include First Nations digital inclusion in future iterations of the Agreement, to ensure progress continues beyond 2026.
- The Australian Government continues to provide funding to its existing measure to improve the national collection of data through expansion of the Australian Digital Inclusion Index.

26. Encourage and support on-country employment and development

Supporting on-country employment that includes initial training, devices and ongoing technical support and learning opportunities can allow First Nations people to apply and expand their digital skills while addressing key employment gaps for government departments. This can further be expanded to digital initiatives and new technologies in other key employment areas such as Park Rangers and First responders.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- All governments review Working from Home policies to support on-country employment.

In the medium term we recommend:

- All governments develop formal advice on how to best support First Nations on-country employment, and pro-actively support on-country employment through utilising digital services and emerging technologies.

27. Reallocate funds from fines to media and telecommunications companies for breaching regulatory codes which negatively impact First Nations people to community-controlled organisations to deliver digital inclusion and media and broadcasting programs

The Advisory Group notes the decision on 31 October 2024 by the ACCC in relation to proceedings in the Federal Court alleging that Optus engaged in unconscionable conduct in relation to vulnerable customers, including First Nations consumers.

This comes several years after the Federal Court ordered that Telstra pay \$50 million in penalties for engaging in unconscionable conduct when it sold mobile contracts to more than 100 Indigenous consumers, in proceedings brought by the ACCC.

While the Advisory Group does not want to see more incidents of unconscionable conduct, it encourages the Government to use funds collected from such penalties for initiatives addressing the digital and communication divide. This would help ensure First Nations telecommunications and media consumers are empowered to make the most of the choices available to them.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government commits to using money from penalties paid by telecommunications and media providers for unconscionable conduct to First Nations people and/or other penalties in relation to First Nations people to fund digital and connectivity literacy and media awareness training. This training would be delivered by community-controlled organisations.
- Consideration should be given to ensuring penalties for unconscionable conduct also include undertakings to improve business practices, such as the introduction of First Nations advocacy and engagement mechanisms within organisations.

28. Establish a fair pricing regime for telecommunications and IT services

In light of the recent allegations of unconscionable conduct launched against Optus, the Advisory Group recognises the importance of transparency around the pricing of services, particularly for First Nations consumers. Information on pricing must be readily available in a way that is culturally appropriate and relevant for First Nations consumers.

The Advisory Group also notes the recent reports that the Australian Government may be considering a new bank levy to ensure the continued operation of regional and rural bank branches.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Australian Government explores options to require telecommunications and IT providers to provide transparency around all fees and charges and how/why these differ in remote locations.
- This could include requiring telecommunications providers to provide their pricing information on dedicated subpages on their websites for First Nations consumers, in language where possible, potentially through amendment to the Telecommunications Consumer Protection (TCP) Code.

In the medium term we recommend:

- The Australian Government require telecommunications providers to offer a range of plans at different price points, including for prepaid plans as outlined in recommendations 8, 9 and 16.

29. Conduct an economic analysis of the digital divide for First Nations Australians, including costs to close the gap and the cost of inaction

While the Advisory Group has welcomed the announcements in the 2024-25 Federal Budget around digital inclusion, further analysis on the social return on investment for funding towards First Nations digital inclusion would provide greater insight into how to close the digital divide. This, in turn, would provide another source of evidence for policy development for First Nations digital inclusion, and would ensure that efforts are being directed effectively.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts conduct an economic analysis of the digital divide for First Nations Australians. This would include both the costs to close the gap as well as the cost of inaction.

In the medium term we recommend:

- All levels of government consider the findings of this economic analysis in their policy development for First Nations digital inclusion initiatives.
- All levels of government align efforts across their respective agencies to address First Nations digital inclusion, acknowledging the intersection between digital inclusion and other policy areas across government.

30. Improve First Nations representation across the telecommunications sector

First Nations people have unique challenges when it comes to purchasing products, internet connection and getting assistance when things go wrong. This can include geographical constraints, language barriers, billing issues, cultural appropriateness and other barriers. For this reason, it would be beneficial for consumer and communications agencies such as the ACCC, ACMA, Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) and e-Safety Commission to have dedicated First Nations staff to assist First Nations consumers with complaints and seek avenues of redress. Higher level representation will help ensure that First Nations perspectives are considered.

In the immediate term we recommend:

- The TIO, ACMA and ACCC should consider ways to increase levels of First Nations staff across their agencies, including First Nations-specific teams or call centres.
- The Australian Government should engage with the telecommunications sector and First Nations stakeholders on possible options for a First Nations Internet Service Provider.
- The Australian Government should evaluate existing First Nations call centres and whether they are fit for purpose and can be expanded.

In the medium term we recommend:

- The Australian Government should consider introducing First Nations representation as a statutory requirement on the ACMA, ACCC and TIO.
- Telecommunications providers should consider enshrining in their corporate plans First Nations representation at the executive decision-making level in their organisations.
- The Australian Government and industry should provide funding and in-kind-support to First Nations organisations to develop the capabilities needed to be an ISP/RSP, including training and support in navigating relevant regulatory and legal requirements.
- All governments should provide support for a government service centre and hotline that can provide support to First nations people and Australians in accessing for all services, and which can be accessed by the community-controlled sector.