



National Indigenous Australians Agency  
[digitalinclusion@niaa.gov.au](mailto:digitalinclusion@niaa.gov.au)

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## **Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance submission on the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA) is a shared initiative with over 500 business, government, academic and community organisations working together to accelerate action on digital inclusion. Our member organisations conduct a variety of research and practical programs aimed at reducing the digital divide and enabling greater social and economic participation for everyone in Australia. ADIA is supported by Infoxchange, Google and Telstra. Australia Post was also a founding partner.

The ADIA is committed to working in partnership with the Government, the private sector and community organisations to improve levels of digital inclusion across Australia.

### **Introduction**

We welcome consultation on the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan, in pursuit of Target 17 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have equal levels of digital inclusion by 2026. This is an essential goal that will require sustained and concerted resources to achieve.

The latest Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) survey was [released](#) in October 2021 and showed:

- Digital inclusion at the national level is improving, from an average Index score of 67.5 in 2020, to 71.1 in 2021.
- The number of Australians who are highly excluded remains substantial: 11% of the Australian population is highly excluded, registering an Index score of 45 or below.
- People who fall into the lowest income quintile (57.7), people who rent from a public housing authority (57.2), people who did not complete secondary school (57.0), people over 75 years of age (53.5) and mobile-only users (43.4) are being left behind.
- The divide between metropolitan and regional areas has narrowed but remains marked. Regional areas record an Index score in 2021 of 67.4. This is 3.6 points less than the national average (71.1), and 5.5 points less than metropolitan Australia (72.9).
- Affordability remains central to closing the digital divide. Based on the Affordability measure, 14% of all Australians would need to pay more than 10% of their household income to gain

quality, reliable connectivity. For Australians in the lowest income quintile, most (67%) would have to pay more than 10% of their household income to gain this same connection.

- Digital Ability has slightly improved, with the national average increasing 0.8 points from 2020 to 64.4 in 2021. But the score for basic operational skills—such as downloading and opening files, connecting to the internet, and setting passwords—has fallen slightly: from 73.5 in 2020 to 73.1 in 2021. This is potentially related to a growth in new users due to the digital uplift of services during COVID-19.

### **A plan for the digital inclusion of Indigenous Australians**

Digital inclusion of Indigenous Australians is a key challenge for the nation. People living in Australia's 1,100 remote First Nations communities are among the most digitally excluded people in Australia. ADII data shows that the gap has been widening over recent years.

In addition, in its report [Connecting on Country](#), World Vision Australia and The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation examined how to close the gap for First Nations students in the era of COVID-19. The report showed:

- The digital divide between First Nations and non-First Nations students widened during COVID-19.
- The movement to online school halted education for many First Nations students.
- Data affordability is lower for First Nations people, due to reliance on mobile data to access the internet.

Delving deeper into access to the internet, James Cook University and Queensland University of Technology examined the digital connectivity challenges of 13 local government areas in Far North Queensland in their report [TCICA Region Telecommunications and Digital Connectivity: Final Report \(2021\)](#). Funded by the Torres and Cape Indigenous Councils Alliance (TCICA), this research found that:

- Indigenous communities, particularly in remote areas, face additional, unique barriers to digital inclusion.
- People in Indigenous communities do not feel heard by telecommunications providers.
- Community members suggest that the Universal Service Guarantee does not seem to be met in many communities, and telecommunications services are not adequate for 21st century needs.
- Community leaders believe that unequal access to digital technologies has limited the progress on closing the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.
- Digital inequality leads to poorer social and health outcomes in Indigenous communities.

The project culminated in a diversified strategy for improving access and affordability of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities, and overall digital inclusion, focused on:

- Infrastructure investment to disaster-proof (e.g. cyclones) and future-proof internet and telecommunications services.
- Improvements to affordability by moving away from a market-based approach to a public good approach for policy settings.

- Fostering digital skills and knowledge to improve customer awareness of service options, promote good trouble-shooting and cyber security practices, and enable people to use different types of devices.
- Developing indicators and benchmarks for minimum service guarantees that are appropriate for Indigenous communities.

### **The need for community engagement**

Ultimately, the approach taken in the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan needs to be devised in partnership with First Nations people. We encourage the voices of Indigenous Australians to be prioritised as the plan is developed.

For additional resources, we commend to you:

- ACCAN's [Remote Indigenous Communications Review](#) report (October 2020), written by Dr Daniel Featherstone who has highly regarded expertise including from his time working with First Nations Media Australia.
- First Nations Media Australia's 2021 [submission](#) to the Regional Telecommunications Review.
- ACCAN's 2021 [submission](#) to the Regional Telecommunications Review.

Supporting programs, including digital skills programs, tailored to First Nations communities will be a key plank of achieving Closing the Gap Target 17.

Working with local organisations within the 1,100 First Nations communities across Australia will be critical to the success of measures of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan. Acknowledging and leaning into the relationships those organisations have with their communities will lead to greater trust and engagement in the measures. It will also build capacity and capability at a local level to support long-term outcomes.

### **Data on digital inclusion of Indigenous Australians**

First Nations communities have been required to respond to the pandemic often without adequate communications. Meeting the challenge of Australia's Closing the Gap targets for digital inclusion will require a substantial effort to support the development of effective local strategies, combined with the necessary data collection to track outcomes at a national level.

While the [ADII](#) provides valuable insight into the dynamics of digital inclusion experienced across the country, the current survey sample poses some limitations for reporting on First Nations peoples' digital inclusion. The ADII draws on a national sample which does not provide sufficient First Nations respondents to generate reliable data. While the previous ADII reports showed the gap for First Nations people was widening (from 5.8 in 2018 to 7.9 in 2020), the 2021 report Index does not provide a comparative score for First Nations populations.

In 2018 and 2019, ADII case studies were conducted in the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of [Ali Curung in the Northern Territory](#), and [Pormpuraaw in far north Queensland](#).

These studies showed that digital inclusion for First Nations Australians diminishes with remoteness, particularly in terms of access and affordability. In both communities there was a heavy reliance on mobile connectivity and the key barrier to digital inclusion was affordability, especially in relation to income.

However, the research also showed high levels of digital ability, underlining the importance and potential benefits of digital services for remote communities. These factors vary greatly from site to site, so more detailed research is needed.

Currently underway is the Mapping the Digital Gap project, which is intended to make a contribution to the understanding of digital inclusion in remote communities, and to the development of the strategies which will be required to improve outcomes.

The Mapping The Digital Gap project, being undertaken through the [ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society](#) in partnership with [Telstra](#), is working with 10-12 remote communities over a four-year period (2021-2024) to:

- Generate a detailed account of the distribution of digital inclusion and the uses of digital services including news and media across 10-12 First Nations communities;
- Track changes in measures of digital inclusion for these communities over time; and
- Inform the development of appropriate local strategies for improving digital inclusion capabilities and services enabling informed decision-making in First Nations communities.

The research is currently in the first stage of data collection.

Given that this project will work with 10-12 communities, this is a very small portion of the 1,100 First Nations communities across Australia. There is a fundamental need for effective and comprehensive data collection around First Nations digital inclusion. There is a level of complexity, diversity and geography that requires concentrated resources to get a full picture. Further, this data collection should not just be about those in regional and remote parts of the country. Rather it should extend to Indigenous people right across the country, including in urban areas.

Lastly, we would highlight the need to resource data collection on progress made against the measures committed to in the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan so that the impact of those measures can be evaluated.

### **The plan as part of a wider strategy**

From a wider perspective, it is important that the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan forms part of a wider strategic approach to digital inclusion across Australian society.

Digital exclusion is evident across a wide range of Australians, as can be seen from the findings of the most recent ADII set out at the start of this submission.

Taking a piecemeal approach to different cohorts of digitally excluded Australians will mean that benefits of a coordinated, holistic approach are lost. Rather, plans for various cohorts should knit

together as part of an overarching strategic approach that provides a clear goal and understanding of what is to be achieved.

In 2020, the ADIA released a position paper - [A National Digital Inclusion Roadmap](#). In part, this paper shows that currently, there are numerous efforts underway across several sectors to increase digital capabilities. However they are uncoordinated and we do not have a common understanding of what the efforts look like. The ADIA compiled a list of over 60 of the most prominent Government, private and community programs, strategies and frameworks in the digital inclusion space. The Federal Government alone has several departments working on projects looking at digital inclusion, without whole-of-government coordination. The projects span from Social Services to Defence to Health, all working in silos without collaboration or a shared end goal. Each organisation providing programs in the corporate and community space is defining their own goals and aiming to address different things. Overall, there are multiple efforts underway with no guidance from the government on what the programs should aim to achieve. A clear, common focus would have a substantial impact on the efficacy of the programs while still supporting approaches tailored to different needs.

The ADIA is concerned that, whilst an essential goal, a further isolated plan for Indigenous Australians will only embed this fragmented approach. Rather, this plan should go hand-in-hand with Federal Government leadership in articulating the strategic approach to digital inclusion across Australia's society and economy.

In the ADIA's view, the Digital Economy Strategy being developed within the Digital Technologies Taskforce of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet is an opportunity to assess and coordinate efforts across the digital inclusion space. Without this leadership, the current scattered approach will not provide as much of an impact as it could and will still leave the most vulnerable people behind.

### **Recommendations of the ADIA**

The core recommendations of the ADIA are to:

- **Create a Whole-of-Government Digital Inclusion Strategy** run by a dedicated departmental team so Australian businesses, nonprofits and government can work in a coordinated manner.
- **Establish a Digital Capabilities Framework** to provide a common understanding of what it means to be a digitally capable individual. A framework would outline which digital skills are associated with which level of learning or competency and allow organisations to tailor their training programs to a common reference, ensuring everyone is working towards the same goal.

In the view of the ADIA, it is important the Framework is driven - or at least endorsed - by the Government. With a myriad of programs currently underway, and inevitably more on the horizon, it is necessary to have a Government-backed shared understanding. This would support organisations working on the ground with Indigenous Australians to help them

develop their digital ability, which as the Consultation Paper notes, is an important protective factor in mitigating online harm and risks.

- **Enshrine a Low-Cost Broadband Option** for vulnerable Australians that still delivers quality speeds. The ADIA is a signatory of ACCAN's [No Australia Left Offline](#) initiative, which calls for a 50 mbps service for \$30 per month available to households receiving financial support from government.

The strong recommendation is for this to be a fixed broadband connection. As the Consultation Paper acknowledges, mobile-only use can lead to people being excluded from the advantage of fixed broadband services. This is exacerbated by the fact that many if not most digitally excluded groups are using pre-paid mobile, putting them in a situation where their cost per gigabyte is extremely restrictive.

Affordability can also be a heightened issue in remote areas. It may be that investments need to be made in place-based solutions such as pay-as-you-go community WiFi. There is an opportunity to identify and fund free public WiFi access points in community centres, libraries and payphone locations.

Ultimately, there is a need to make affordability an imperative across both fixed broadband and mobile.

Relatedly, device affordability is a significant barrier to entry. Again, there is an opportunity to spearhead efforts to support low-income and vulnerable populations to access devices.

- **Upgrade all Federal Websites to be Compliant** with the latest web content accessibility guidelines and build new websites and platforms to be accessible from release. Accessibility should not be an afterthought and all Government services should be built for all Australians.

The Government continues to have some inaccessible Government websites, often for important services. For example:

- The COVIDSafe app was inaccessible when first released
- The COVID Vaccine Eligibility Checker when first released was not compliant with WCAG or the Apple accessibility guidelines.
- Scamwatch.gov.au uses graphics for example text messages and emails that are not compatible with screen readers for visually impaired Australians.

The Government often brings accessibility features into later updates, however it is disappointing that the website and apps are not created with accessibility features from the beginning.

In order to make substantial steps towards achieving accessibility, the Government should move towards all federal, state, and local government websites being compliant with accessibility standards - or the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines - WCAG 2.1.

## Support for the ADIA recommendations

Multiple organisations have echoed the ADIA's policy recommendations, including:

- **Australian Broadband Advisory Council (ABAC)** - [Riding the Digital Wave: Report on COVID-19 Trends and Forward Work Program](#) - ABAC supports the creation of a Digital Capabilities Framework, a permanent low-cost broadband option and ensuring all websites are compliant with accessibility standards. (Page 21)
- **Digital Transformation Experts Panel** - [The Learning Country](#) - Supports the creation of a Digital Capabilities Framework. (Page 67)
- **Infrastructure Australia** - [2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan](#) - Supports a national digital inclusion strategy. (Page 97)
- **NBN Futures Group & TelSoc** - [Towards a National Broadband Strategy for Australia](#) - Endorses the ADIA recommendations for a National Roadmap and a single government department to lead the Roadmap. (Pages 9 & 14)

## Conclusion

In summary, the ADIA's recommendations with regards to the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan are:

- Consult and co-design with First Nations people.
- Partner with First Nations organisations and communities.
- Invest in gathering and understanding the data.
- Invest in evaluation of measures taken under the Plan.
- Ensure the Plan is part of a wider strategy on Digital Inclusion.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide these comments. We would like to acknowledge the contributions of our members in providing these views.

Yours faithfully



David Spriggs  
CEO, Infoxchange  
Chair, Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance



Ishtar Vij  
Director, Eloquium Group  
Convenor, Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance