

Regional Telecommunications Review 2021



Response to Issues Paper from First Nations Media Australia



September 2021

Contact Details

Dennis Stokes

CEO

Level 2/70 Elder Street, Alice Springs NT 0870

PO Box 2731. Alice Springs NT 0871

Ph: 08 8952 6465

E: ceo@firstnationsmedia.org.au

W: www.firstnationsmedia.org.au

FNMA acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

This submission is made by First Nations Media Australia. Some members may make individual submissions in which case the First Nations Media Australia submission should not be taken to displace those submissions.

First Nations Media Australia (FNMA) is the peak body for the First Nations media and communications industry. Our purpose is empowering Australia's First Nations people through our culturally connected media industry. As at August 2021, FNMA's membership includes 62 organisations and 167 individuals who work in or alongside the community-controlled media industry as broadcasters, freelance journalists, photographers, filmmakers and allies.

First Nations Media Australia supports and amplifies the First Nations media sector and its objectives. Our activities include resource and policy development, skills development, networking events and meetings, content-sharing, promotion, regular communications, annual awards, research activities and representation.

As part of its industry leadership role, FNMA seeks to ensure First Nations communities have access to information required to make informed decisions, including access to public resources such as broadcast spectrum necessary to provide timely and relevant information to First Nations communities.

The crossover of infrastructure, digital literacy and access to information between telecommunications and media is significant. Therefore, First Nations Media Australia advocates for the digital inclusion and connectivity needs of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The scope of the First Nations media sector includes:

- **Television:** National free-to-air (NITV); satellite delivered narrowcast (ICTV) TV services; local narrowcast TV services (Goolarri TV at Broome, ICTV in Alice Springs and Broome and Larrakia TV at Darwin). The ICTV satellite TV service reaches 371,846 smartcards nation-wide as at April 2021, not including terrestrial services in Alice Springs and Broome.
- **Video & film production:** Production of culture and language-based content for broadcast & online distribution.
- **Print and Online:** A national newspaper (Koori Mail) alongside a strong web presence of journalistic sites such as IndigenousX, National Indigenous Times.
- First Nations media organisations have a strong **social media** following and publish content online daily.
- **Radio:** Over 230 radio broadcast sites coordinated by 35 licensed, community-owned, not-for-profit organisations. These radio services are able to reach around 320,000 First Nations people, including around 100,000 very hard to reach people in remote Indigenous communities, or approximately 48% of the First Nations population. Radio services are prevented from providing a primary radio service to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples due to a lack of funding and spectrum availability. Established stations broadcast live shows, plus interviews, radio documentaries, news, emergency information, community events, government and other messaging within community broadcasting guidelines through these platforms:
 - 157 stations broadcasting on FM
 - 4 stations broadcasting on AM
 - 13 broadcasting via VAST satellite, in addition to FM services.

- 5 metropolitan services broadcasting via DAB+, in addition to FM services in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and Darwin.
- Almost all offer online streaming via a dedicated station website.
- Many offer on-demand content either through the station's own website, or Soundcloud or podcast sites.
- 26 stations can be streamed via the indigiTUBE website and app. Some stations also have their own application or use the TuneIn or iHeartRadio apps to reach audiences.
- These channels offer a wide range of programming, including news and current affairs reporting from a First Nations perspective, in over 25 Indigenous languages nationally, including the first language of many people in remote communities.

The sector reaches significant audience share with 91% of people in remote First Nations communities being regular listeners to radio services and watching ICTV at least once per month.¹ In the remote context, First Nations media is the most reliable and ubiquitous radio and media service available to audiences. First Nations broadcasting returns an average \$2.87 in social outcomes for every \$1 invested, with many organisations returning a rate much higher than this nearly 3:1 average ratio.² The communications sector provides enabling services to support opportunities and outcomes in service sectors, such as health and education, and promotes inclusiveness and participation.³



About this submission

First Nations Media Australia thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide a written response to complement the verbal feedback provided in consultation discussions with Coalition of Peaks representatives and community groups in the Alice Springs region. This submission updates and adds to FNMA's response to the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review.

First Nations Media Australia has based the responses provided in this submission on consultation with media organisation members, inDigiMOB digital mentors and staff and participants in the Indigenous Digital Leadership Forum and Indigenous Focus Day sessions over the past couple of years. We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of views and ideas from representatives who attended these events in 2019, 2020 and 2021. This submission does not represent the views or concerns of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, nor should it be taken to displace any specific community-based submission. This submission does not address every consultation question posed in the Issues Paper but does address each of the issues being considered by the Committee through discussion of key themes.

¹ McNair yellowSquares, *Indigenous Communications and Media Survey*, 2016

² Social Ventures Australia, *More Than Radio – a community asset: Social Return on Investment Analyses of Indigenous Broadcasting Services*, 2017

³ Department of Communications and the Arts, *The Communications Sector: recent trends and developments*, Bureau of Communications Research, Commonwealth Government, Canberra, October 2016

Table of Contents

First Nations Media Australia	2
Scope of the First Nations media sector	2
About this submission	3
Communications & Closing the Gap	4
Recent Improvements	6
Mobile Blackspot Program	6
Regional Connectivity Program.....	7
Community phones & payphones.....	7
Sky Muster satellite.....	8
Policy	8
Adequacy	9
COVID-19	14
Opportunity	17
Awareness	19
Summary	22



Communications & Closing the Gap

Digital inclusion is recognised as one of the key social justice challenges facing policy makers and communities worldwide. It is about using technology as a channel to improve skills, to enhance quality of life, to drive education, access employment opportunities and promote social and economic wellbeing.⁴ Digital inclusion equates to social inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. Governments should be aware that inclusion is a process that evolves alongside technological change and the uses to which technologies are applied.⁵ FNMA's responses to the Issues Paper consultation questions take a wholistic view of digital inclusion and the communication requirements to ensure First Nations communities have not only the technology, but also the capacity to engage with digital services.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits Governments to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives (Outcome 17).⁶ This requires effective and reliable communication systems supporting the flow of accessible information to and from First Nations communities. FNMA defines communications in this context as follows:

⁴ Digital Inclusion Index, <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/about/about-digital-inclusion/>

⁵ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

⁶ Australian Governments, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020

1. **Digital Inclusion** - digital literacy/skills, affordability, awareness, online safety – which is increasingly being considered a basic human right and is essential to social inclusion;
2. **Access to Appropriate Online Services** - in telehealth, justice, education and training, Centrelink/ MyGov, banking, and other essential services where face-to-face delivery is not available locally. This requires free access, support with setup and training and helpdesk services for Indigenous language speakers;
3. **Telecommunications Access** – equity of access to communications infrastructure and appropriate services for: household or mobile telephony, broadband/internet, last mile sharing (eg WiFi) and/or community access information and communication technology equipment/facilities;
4. **Access to relevant news, information services and emergency warnings** – reliable and trusted media services delivered via appropriate means (radio, TV, online, print) and available in language where required;
5. **Appropriate delivery of media and information services** - Effective, community-controlled media services empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' self-determination, enable self-representation and promote social cohesion in the wider community.

The 'digital gap' between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and national average levels of digital inclusion is not closing. In 2020, Indigenous Australians were 7.9 points behind the national average for digital inclusion, diminishing even further with remoteness, particularly in terms of access and affordability.⁷ There is significant work to be done to address this digital gap, including:

1. the rollout of infrastructure to provide access to communications technologies;
2. building awareness within First Nations communities of relevant online services and uses;
3. developing appropriate resources and support mechanisms to help digital ability and address issues of cyber-safety, the spread of misinformation and online fraud; and
4. supporting access to and participation in First Nations media.

The Broadband for the Bush Alliance and FNMA have been calling for a dedicated Remote Telecommunications Policy and Strategy (RTPS) for some years, which should include:

- o Public Internet access through community WiFi and LTE systems;
- o Unmetered access to online government services, banking, education facilities etc;
- o Delivery of a variation on the Mobile Black Spots Program to target remote areas where there is market failure;
- o Roll-out of broadband services, including mobile coverage, to priority remote communities; and
- o NBN to begin a progressive terrestrial network expansion program to reduce satellite congestion, rain fade and to meet increasing demand by heavy users.

Communication expands opportunities for social and economic development, enterprise, employment and connection to the broader economy – each being areas of focus to address economic disadvantage. Effective communication is essential to the ongoing viability of First Nations communities. The Australian Government acknowledges digital inclusion and connectivity as a primary requirement for economic and social participation as the basis for telecommunications

⁷ Thomas, J, Barraker, J, Wilson CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, Australian Digital Inclusion Index, RMIT & Swinburne Universities, 2020

infrastructure investment over the past few years. However, FNMA cautions against an over-focus on economic development in the provision of telecommunications services. Telecommunication infrastructure and access development in northern Australia has largely focused on tourist routes, rather than on resident populations. FNMA reminds the Committee of the role of communications in enabling dispersed families to remain connected and Australia's unique First Nations culture and languages to continue and develop.

A significant proportion of Australians still do not have access to telecommunications services that the majority take for granted. More than 2.5million Australians are still not online⁸. And yet, an increasing reliance on digital devices and internet access to perform everyday activities such as shopping, banking or to access services pervades and brings with it a suite of new dependencies and risks. From power supplies, to weather, to system faults or cyber-attacks, to pandemics and health orders, a breakdown in one element of these interdependencies can have significant consequences for individuals.⁹

Recent Improvements

Before further discussing the as yet unmet needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote and regional areas, FNMA notes a number of improvements to regional telecommunications since the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review. There has been limited data collection on connectivity updated since 2016-2018. FNMA notes that the Australian Digital Inclusion Index is working to provide updated information currently, but that data is not yet available. Therefore, it is difficult to comment on improvements at a macro level at this point in time. However, the introduction of the NBN Sky Muster satellite, the Mobile Black Spot Program, the Community Phones Program, and various programs to provide shared WiFi services and access facilities have contributed to improved connectivity in remote Australia in recent years. There has been approximately \$155 million of investment in communications infrastructure for remote First Nations communities since 2015, excluding co-investment by telcos and the cost of the NBN Sky Muster satellites. Complimented by positive initiatives from NBNco, Telstra and other agencies to support community access and reduce affordability issues in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰

Mobile Blackspot Program

The Mobile Blackspot program and associated micro-cells have resulted in significantly increased telephone coverage in remote Australia over the past three years in regions where there is a market imperative to provide telephone access. As the program starts to reach areas of market failure, more support from Government will be required to subsidise essential telephony services to communities to deliver coverage benefits for non-commercial regional and remote areas and meet capital, operational and maintenance costs.

The Mobile Blackspot Program primarily supports larger remote communities (mostly over 2-300 people) and transport routes due to the high cost of base stations and the need for a demonstrated business model for a telco to maintain a service for a minimum of 10 years. The increased use of small cell technology, satellite or microwave backhaul and more flexible arrangements being

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Young, M & Smede, B, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

¹⁰ Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

proposed under the recently announced 5A program are welcome to increase access by smaller communities, however the market model means limited eligibility for most remote communities.¹¹

Regional Connectivity Program

The broadening of the Regional Connectivity Program guidelines was a welcome expansion that resulted in a number of remote communities being funded for telecommunications improvements. Projects such as: upgrades to fibre cabling in Arnhemland, including the upgrading of services in Yirrkala from Sky Muster to NBN fibre to the premises; a partnership between Activ8Me and the WA Government to provide community WiFi and VoIP phone in Kalumburu and Jigalong; Telstra mobile upgrades in Bidyadanga; the installation of a fixed wireless network from Halls Creek to support broadband and WiFi access in Billiluna, Balgo, Mulan and Ringer Soak, as well as fibre to the premises in Halls Creek; mobile upgrades to Pukatja and satellite small cells in five APY lands communities; and fixed wireless services in Naprunum with mobile upgrades at Aurukun and Mornington Island.¹² These projects received funding in June 2021 and are underway now with positive outcomes expected in the years ahead.

Community phones & payphones

A large proportion of small to medium sized remote First Nations communities, particularly those without mobile coverage, are reliant on a single means of telecommunications access or have no access at all. Typically, this is a single payphone or community phone, connected via high-capacity radio concentrator (HCRC) microwave link or satellite link respectively.¹³ The Community Phone Program and associated WiFi services are contracted to Activ8me. The program was initially designed to provide up to 301 fixed solar-powered phone booths to communities of less than 50 people. The booths are located in remote northern Australia, the Kimberley region in Western Australia, Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and Mornington Island off the Queensland coast. In February 2019, 98% of the phone booths had WiFi installed. Stage 2 of the program (2019/20) involved connecting 40 remote communities using the NBN satellite service. Another 14 communities were given access to public WiFi for the first time. The Commonwealth currently pays for 20 gigabytes of free data per month per community, with content filtering.¹⁴

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) also maintains about 245 payphones in the small communities. These services are also maintained by Activ8me. The ACMA Communications report 2018-19 claimed that there were 571 Telstra operated payphones and 246 non-Telstra payphones in remote Indigenous communities.¹⁵ The ACMA claims that Telstra met its USO payphone fault repair benchmark (80%) in time delay for repairs of 3 days for remote locations with a fault repair performance of 86.2%. Fault reporting is mostly via remote monitoring where the payphone calls back into its management system to advise of its status, a system that could potentially be extended to test internet services also. In June 2019, Telstra announced an upgrade to its public phone network nationally, with improvements to pricing and technology.¹⁶

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Australian Government, Regional Connectivity Program funded projects, June 2021, <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-technology-communications/internet/regional-connectivity-program>

¹³ Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Communications Report 2018-19*

¹⁶ Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

Further, the recent introduction of free use of Telstra payphones across Australia is a small concession for mis-selling practices, but one that is appreciated in remote communities where payphones are quite heavily relied upon. However, there remains significant safety concerns about the reliance on payphones as the only means of communications in small communities, with no backup option if they are not working.¹⁷

Sky Muster satellite

The NBN Sky Muster satellites have been a game changer in terms of speed, data limits, reliability and affordable services. Most domestic users have migrated to the Sky Muster services (12Mb/1MB and 25MB/5MB options) and have mostly reported that this has met their day-to-day broadband needs. NBNco supports about 100 First Nations communities to access services over the Sky Muster satellite through its Public Interest Premise (PIP) program. The program supports public WiFi through community centres and enables purchase of data by users through a voucher system. This was followed by the introduction of Sky Muster Plus in August 2019, to provide unmetered web browsing, emails and software updates and burst speeds above 25Mbps download and 5Mbps upload speed when network conditions allow. Since 1 April 2020, all traffic on Sky Muster Plus plans were unmetered except for video streaming and traffic via a VPN, both of which continue to be metered. Other enhancements include:

- a new 25GB+ entry plan offering 25GB of peak data and 25GB of off-peak data for video streaming and VPN traffic, to improve accessibility for lighter users;
- greater flexibility for RSPs to customise data allowances on their retail plans in increments of 5GB (starting from 25GB peak data/25GB off-peak data, up to 150GB peak/ 150GB off-peak);
- a 'top-up' feature, providing RSPs the option of offering 'top up' data, should their customers use their monthly metered data allowance (available in coming months).¹⁸

However, latency is still an issue and increasing demand for data will mean some users, particularly businesses will need higher data limits. Support for satellite backhaul is required to make these services reliable. In northern Australia where cyclones, storms and monsoonal weather can cut off communities for months, satellite services are particularly needed to receive critical emergency information. NBN Sky Muster services are especially susceptible to rain fade and can therefore be unavailable under heavy rainfall conditions.¹⁹ With the increased need to access services online, particularly videoconferencing for telehealth and education purposes, there is parallel exponential growth in the amount of data required to meet community demand. This means significantly greater download limits for PIP and public WiFi usage are needed, as well as expanded terrestrial NBN services in larger regional towns to address congestion issues. It is likely that Sky Muster solutions will need to be replaced by alternate technologies, such as Low Earth Orbit satellite options, to meet data needs and service reliability in the years ahead.

Policy

The 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review recommended a "targeted Indigenous Digital Inclusion program with a focus on access, affordability and digital ability to be developed in partnership with Indigenous communities." While this has taken some time to action, FNMA is

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

¹⁹ Ibid

pleased to see the NIAA is now taking steps towards the development of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan and looks forward to participating in the associated roundtable discussions over the coming months (October-November 2021). However, we remain concerned that the development of a plan is a preliminary step only and that no funding has been allocated as yet to implement the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan or its recommendations. A budget allocation will be required to ensure the plan currently in development doesn't stall at the implementation phase.

The establishment of the Australian Broadband Advisory Council to provide advice on measures to maximise the benefits of the NBN could also be a positive step forward toward helping Government understand the barriers to using the NBN and other networks, including financial and cultural issues, strategies to reduce such barriers and communication and outreach strategies.²⁰ However FNMA notes that the majority of the Council's proposed work will focus on key sectors of the economy, a running theme through much of the Government's actions toward digital inclusion to date, leaving many remote communities as outliers to policy considerations. FNMA is concerned that the focus on economic growth outcomes will accelerate inequitable access to social and financial services, including the NDIS.

While there have been improvements in the last three years in telecommunications access in many parts of Australia through the infrastructure projects discussed in this section, they only go partway to delivering effective digital inclusion outcomes. There are still significant limitations associated with the current infrastructure being used, issues of affordability, lack of last mile delivery or community access facilities, issues with service reliability and congestion, and barriers to engagement with online services. Some communities are also choosing to not accept infrastructure due to concerns around cyber-safety, potential impacts on cultural and social cohesion, and ongoing costs of services and equipment maintenance.²¹ The introduction of low-orbit satellites is going some way to addressing latency but could be used further as a backup for voice calls through the installation of cabling allowing communities to switch to satellite transmission when needed. A rollout of WiFi Mesh services should be implemented in communities not eligible for the Mobile Black Spots Program or Community Phones Program (typically sites with populations of between 50 and 250 people). A safety net approach is now needed to ensure a next-level digital divide is not set up between larger and smaller communities, or between service providers and First Nations households within communities.²²

Adequacy

Home phone and internet connectivity is limited or non-existent in many small to medium size communities, with reliance on public phones and WiFi services, where available. After over 20 years of the Universal Services Obligation, five Regional Telecommunications Reviews and numerous other programs, an estimated 30% of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are still without access to basic home telephony and/or internet.²³ The main type of internet availability is via use of mobile data, closely followed by public WiFi and NBN fixed line.²⁴ With less than a third of remote First Nations communities connected by fibre optic cable, there is heavy reliance on satellite and

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

microwave backhaul solutions.²⁵ This section discusses the adequacy of mobile phone and broadband services, service reliability and responses to the consultation questions relating to adequacy.

For many remote First Nations people, a home telephone or mobile telephone service is the highest priority to enable unmediated communications with services and social networks across vast remote regions. Access to personal mobile phones is common with 35% of Indigenous Australians being mobile-only users.²⁶ A preference for prepaid mobile-only access by Indigenous Australians in remote communities is a response to affordability concerns. While these may reduce financial vulnerabilities by enabling more direct expenditure management than post-paid contracts, they exacerbate aspects of affordability related to value for expenditure.²⁷

FNMA is concerned about the transition from 3G to 4G services in remote communities. Basic 3G-only handsets are an affordable device for people living in remote communities and serve telephony purposes where internet access is a lower priority or not available at all. The issues paper outlines a planned decommissioning of the 3G network in 2024 but does not give a timeframe for the rollout of replacement 4G services or a guarantee of like for like coverage. This transition should be supported by:

1. An education campaign alerting 3G-only users of the planned change;
2. Subsidies for replacement devices to support residents in remote communities to transition to 4G receptive devices;
3. Policy provisions to protect the gains in mobile coverage, ensuring no rollback of services attributed to this change; and
4. Upgrades to longer life batteries to ensure services during extreme weather events and other disasters.

Despite the increase in mobile coverage, many remote sites reported patchy or unreliable mobile services with heavy congestion at peak use times due to limited backhaul capacity. Heavy congestion is also common on ADSL services.²⁸

Accessing the internet via personal mobile phones (that may also be shared with family) and via public WiFi, rather than through 'at home' or 'at work' connections on one's own device is more prevalent in rural and remote areas.²⁹ This presents significant safety issues for banking, Centrelink and other sensitive services. People with lower levels of income are more likely to use Android phones which are more susceptible to viruses and malware in using apps. People living in remote communities are less likely to subscribe to and less able to afford anti-virus software to protect against security threats. Public WiFi poses some similar security risks.

Further safety issues arise in the management of community wi-fi which can bring both positive and risk outcomes to community organisations. For example, Ngaanyatjarra Media facilitates the

²⁵ Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

²⁶ Young, M & Smede, B, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

²⁷ Thomas, J, Barraker, J, Wilson CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, Australian Digital Inclusion Index, RMIT & Swinburne Universities, 2020

²⁸ Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

²⁹ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

community WiFi network in Wingellina/Irrunytju and will turn off the service if there are concerns about online bullying or friction on social media within the community. However, staff can also become the focus of frustration when data limits are reached. The current data limit is 100GB per community each month, which can easily be used up within a couple of days. The average individual in Australia uses around 300GB per month.³⁰

Responses to consultation questions

1. What telecommunications services are required in regional Australia to meet current and future needs? Are there any things regional communities and businesses need to do, but can't, on their existing services?

- Increased mobile phone coverage through the extension of the Mobile Blackspot Program and Regional Connectivity Program to communities who have previously been ineligible due to commercial interest limitations. A revision of the program guidelines is required to meet the remaining need.
- Improved reliability of mobile coverage through a transition to 5G services.
- Continued support for community phone and payphones through the Universal Services Guarantee.
- Support for remote community members to make the transition from 3G to 4G or 5G services.
- Increased data for satellite services, including measures to reduce latency issues.
- Provide backup power measures to ensure continuity of phone systems during power outages and increasingly common extreme weather conditions.
- Increasingly, cloud-based services used by businesses require continuous connectivity, presenting a challenge for data storage, server access and system backups.
- Consumers are increasingly accessing their news and other media services via a mobile devices, including radio apps, streaming services and visual media. Similarly, essential broadcast services in remote and regional areas are increasingly dependent on IP systems, using satellite and broadband networks to support a broad range of broadcast activities now that POTS lines are no longer an option. Reliable telecommunications services are essential for the provision of vital media services in remote and regional areas.

2. What changes in demand, barriers or challenges need to be addressed when it comes to telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia?

- Significant increases to data availability to meet increasing demand from business, education services and individuals.
- Increased collaboration on the integration of technologies and their providers, for example using complementary satellite, fixed wire, microwave and WiFi options to ensure continual and reliable services for remote and regional communities. FNMA encourages a focus on localised solutions delivered by small providers to tailor technology responses to the needs of remote communities, including small cell networks, satellite options and regional network solutions.
- Similarly, increased collaboration on data collection, data-sharing and data sovereignty is required to identify gaps more easily in service provision and emerging needs and support community-driven solutions.

³⁰ Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Communications and media in Australia – Supply and use of Services*, 2019-20

- Issues of affordability, digital capacity and support for regional connectivity hubs are a significant barrier needing to be addressed. They are discussed in detail in the Opportunity and Awareness sections of this response.

3. How have the Government's policies and programs affected telecommunications service outcomes in regional, rural and remote Australia? How can these be improved?

FNMA recognises the lack of commercial incentive for telecommunication companies to expand their networks further in remote communities. However, telecommunications access is an essential service and digital inclusion is itself considered a human right and should therefore be a priority for Government support. Government must take action to address the impediments to accessing affordable communications and information services in terms of infrastructure, capacity and service reach, particularly for people living in communities where there is limited direct access to services. Without affordable digital inclusion, it becomes increasingly difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to live, learn, work, establish businesses and access essential services throughout Australia.

Government policies and programs must address inequality, taking steps to ensure the capacity for people living in remote communities to utilise digital services from an equity perspective. Currently, there is significant focus on the delivery of services, rather than whether the end-user of services has capacity to use those services. This results in community organisations such as Land Councils, health clinics, media and other community services being relied upon to act as intermediaries supporting people to engage with various services. Besides the security and privacy implications associated with this practice, it places additional burden on organisations to extend beyond their primary purpose and provide services that they are not resourced to cover.

Endemic in the transition to online-only services accelerated by responses to COVID-19, is an assumption of access. The type of device you own, can access or use, increasingly shapes the type of services and social and economic activities available to you. Many service providers assume that users will use a computer to connect through a broadband service however, as noted in the key issues paper, mobile phones remain the device more frequently used to connect to the internet. People are more likely to have access to a personal mobile phone in remote areas compared with urban areas where most people also have access to a personal laptop, or computer or a personal tablet. In remote/rural areas access to a personal laptop is extremely low and access to a personal tablet also very limited, preventing community members from becoming fluent and practised users of the key applications needed to engage in work and study.³¹

The assumptions and parameters underpinning the design of digital government services could be expanded to incorporate the use of First Nations languages audio and video. Whilst a language translator for Centrelink services is under development, it currently only focuses on the Chinese and Vietnamese languages. Such initiatives will require a greater commitment to funding, innovation, and overarching targets to achieve the digital inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.³²

³¹ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

³² Ibid

The 50/50 co-investment model adopted between the Commonwealth and jurisdictions to rollout telecommunications infrastructure is flawed and inequitable between the States and Territories, leading to significantly different outcomes for residents. FNMA refers to the Committee to ACCAN's review of State and Territory Programs in the Remote Indigenous Communications Review (October 2020) to understand the discrepancy between state-based programs.³³ Almost all are focussed on infrastructure solutions. It also places an onus on communities and community organisations to negotiate inter-governmental partnerships with limited capacity to attain commitments from both parties. Communications has long been the Commonwealth's remit and it should therefore be providing the majority, if not all, of the funding investment for regional telecommunications.

The model of providing infrastructure with no operational or maintenance support is also flawed from a user perspective. FNMA recommends the Commonwealth provide at least 80% of support required to:

1. Support backhaul for Sky Muster services;
2. Provide free public WiFi to all remote communities with unlimited data limits, allowing community members to purchase as much data as they need through token or pre-purchase arrangements;
3. Provide free access to essential services including education, banking, media, Centrelink, Medicare and other Government services;
4. Resolve last-mile access barriers and through supporting localised and shared-service solutions; and
5. Support a network of Digital Access Workers to provide workplace training and support services to facilitate participation in the digital economy in an ongoing way (discussed further under Opportunities).

Service reliability

4. How do service reliability issues impact on regional communities and businesses? How do outages, including in natural disasters, impact on communities and businesses?

Service outages in remote communities are quite common, impacting everything from phones to online banking, such as the capacity for people to make purchases using a Basics Card. FNMA members in the Torres Strait and the APY Lands report total outages that can last anywhere from an hour to several days while they have no capacity to report a fault or use their pre-paid phone credit trying to report intermittent faults. Fault rectification is a major area of consumer dissatisfaction, with regular referrals to the Ombudsman to have issues resolved and waiting up to 6 weeks for faults to be rectified.³⁴ Such outages, along with congestion on mobile phone networks, while frustrating, have become an unfairly accepted way of life in some remote regions, significantly hampering the reliability of businesses operating in the area and increasing risk during emergencies. Mobile towers typically run off solar power and have at least 24-hour battery back-up, but this may be challenged with extended weather events or where the mobile tower relies on local mains power. Heat, rain and fire events caused lengthy outages across East Arnhem Land and the Utopia Homelands in the summer of 2020, preventing residents from accessing money, purchasing food or contacting services. The same events also prevented technicians from accessing the communities to resolve the

³³ Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

³⁴ Ibid

issues. Extensive disruptions to access were also experienced right down the east coast (QLD, NSW and Vic) due to the Black Summer bushfires and some outages due to power failures.³⁵

5. How might such impacts be addressed to ensure greater reliability? How can the network resilience be addressed in regional areas?

Several First Nations media organisations operating remote transmitter sites have installed silence detectors which monitor the broadcast stream and alert station personnel if a broadcast service goes down. Telecommunications companies should be able to provide a similar service to test whether a service is active rather than relying on communities to report faults. Currently, to report a fault someone within a remote community would have to know which services were supposed to be available, who they should call to report a fault to and have access to a phone line to make that call which is often problematic if the whole system is down. Telecommunications companies should be able to see if data and/or phone services are being used within a community and quickly identify outages. For clarity, FNMA is not suggesting surveillance of individuals data or phone use. Provisions should be made to protect against data harvesting practices in this process. However, at a macro level we believe it should be technically possible for telcos to be alerted to issues and address them much faster than the current reliance on fault reports to improve reliability of services.

FNMA suggests the following steps be taken to address service reliability:

1. A full review of backup procedures for ADSL and 4G outages. For example, at Yuendumu in the Northern Territory, PAW Media has set up its telecommunications to default to Sky Muster when the 4G network drops out;
2. Implementation and reporting of remote monitoring of services to reduce fault-repair times;
3. Telecommunications companies be required to report on daily monitoring of service outages as part of the Universal Services Obligation;
4. Increased battery power and longer life batteries, complemented by solar power at exchanges to stabilise local power supplies;
5. Expand the rollout of fibre cabling to larger centres currently reliant on fixed wireless or satellite services; and
6. Support a training program for regional and community-based technicians to provide maintenance and technical services to both media and telecommunication services in remote communities with management of infrastructure and network maintenance through a central agency.

COVID-19

6. How did the use of digital services change for regional consumers and businesses during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? What insights for future service delivery does this provide?

Inequalities caused by a lack of reliable broadband services in regional areas have been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to an emerging tiered system with more Government services moving to online access only, community closures restricting travel and reduced maintenance for existing services. In this way, the pre-existing digital divide has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdown. While there has been an accelerated take up of digital services such as videoconferencing, remote server access, home schooling and telehealth for those with access and skills, communities that are disconnected are at a much greater disadvantage at this time. With service providers

³⁵ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

limiting travel to communities, many people were left without access to essential services. Very few remote First Nations people have the option of home schooling, working from home, or accessing basic services online. This issue is compounded by the closure of Shire/Council offices, schools and other service centres to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.³⁶

There is an increasing trend toward online services with fewer alternative options for people who can't connect. For example, during the pandemic there have been fewer phone operators available to provide phone support while offices have closed or reduced staffing. These trends are likely to continue and further entrench inequalities. First Nations media organisations in towns such as Wilcannia, Roebourne and Geraldton started presenting 'school of the air' programming by radio broadcast as part of the pandemic response to support education for children who did not have access to a computer and/or reliable internet services at home. These communities report NBN services are not available to households or strong enough to maintain videoconference or video streaming required for online classroom activities. Similarly, many boarding students returned home to remote communities at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. With not all students having access to stable internet connectivity, Yirara College in Alice Springs produced daily 30-minute video lessons, delivering classroom activities complemented by a printed lesson plan to allow students to work from home. The daily programs were aired on ICTV's VAST satellite service from Monday to Friday in a programming slot created especially for *Yirara2u*.

The NBNco offers some good examples of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic which could potentially be implemented in future service delivery options. Over 50 isolated communities were provided with community WiFi services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of those communities remain closed now and the health threat posed by the pandemic has not reduced considerably for many remote communities. Skymesh and Easyweb Digital are among the providers rolling this service out. NBNco is considering offering this as a product option in the future. The program was originally planned to continue to the end of September 2020 but has been extended. Under its legislation (NBNco not being an RSP), NBN co can only offer the services free of charge and is obliged to remove the infrastructure at the end of the support period.³⁷ The WiFi services are due to be removed after the pandemic, but recent policy transitions to living with the pandemic make it hard to define when the pandemic will be considered over. This may provide a case study for future legislative and/or policy amendments to facilitate the provision of telecommunications services in areas where there is little or no commercial viability, but a public interest imperative.

In 2020, NBNco established a \$150 million financial relief and assistance fund to help internet providers to support their residential and small and medium business customers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. NBNco also increased data download limits from 45GB to 90GB for standard NBN Sky Muster services to November 2020. Communities in Kowanyama, Yarrabah and Thursday Island were connected to enable delivery of online educational programs and deployment of Business Satellite Services at border closures.³⁸

During the pandemic, community members reported that public WiFi in some communities was turned off to stop people congregating in locations with a good signal to get access, breaching social

³⁶ Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

distancing requirements. The speed of NBN fixed line connections was reported to have slowed significantly during the pandemic lockdown due to congestion. The ACMA Supply and use of services report for 2019-20 shows data usage more than doubling per average individual last year.³⁹ Where there is existing mobile and WiFi services, these are being over-subscribed with the increased demand, and many are not affordable, particularly on pre-paid voucher platforms.⁴⁰

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated technology transformation towards the e-delivery of services that is unlikely to return to pre-pandemic conditions. In Wilcannia, for example, the Centrelink office closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak in the community, leaving people without internet access with no means of completing their Centrelink reporting requirements and therefore not receiving payments. It is a scenario FNMA has heard anecdotally from many communities and service providers over the past 18 months. For locations and people with limited, unreliable, or costly access to the internet, or lacking the devices, skills and knowledge needed to connect, the impact of such rapid transformation is yet to unfold.⁴¹

7. What can be done to improve the access and affordability of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities?

Access and affordability are inter-related and should be addressed together at a national level.⁴² Affordable access is the key to reducing the digital divide and closing the gap on First Nations disparity. The latest Closing the Gap figures highlight the need to address the underlying issue of poverty in First Nations communities that is contributing to delays in reaching Closing the Gap targets.

The costs associated with accessing data intensive online services are prohibitive, particularly if access is mobile only.⁴³ More than one third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have mobile-only service access (34.7%), compared to a national rate of one in five (20.4%). This reduces communications affordability, with pre-paid mobile data being poor value for money.⁴⁴ The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020 noted, “Indigenous Australians receive less data for each dollar of expenditure, as indicated by their Value of Expenditure component score (54.3), which is a notable 12.7 points lower than the national average (67.0). Mobile data costs substantially more per gigabyte than fixed broadband.”⁴⁵ Due to low and unreliable income, pre-paid services are typically used for mobile and internet access, where WiFi vouchers are available. There are also reports of high prices for WiFi data vouchers in some sites.⁴⁶

³⁹ Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Communications and media in Australia – Supply and use of Services*, 2019-20

⁴⁰ Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

⁴¹ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

⁴² Marshall, A, Dezuannia, M, Wockner, K, Babacan, H, Burgess, H, Crawford, F, Foth, M, Gregory, R, Mitchell, P, Neale, T, Rogers, S & Wallace, R, *Northern Australia Communications Analysis*, CRCNA, 2020

⁴³ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

⁴⁴ Rennie, Ellie, Thomas, Julian & Wilson, Chris, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and digital inclusion: what is the evidence and where is it?* RMIT, 2019

⁴⁵ Thomas, J, Barraker, J, Wilson CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, Australian Digital Inclusion Index, RMIT & Swinburne Universities, 2020

⁴⁶ Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

The difference in device access by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote areas compared to urban areas is suggestive of the difference in socio-economic opportunities experienced by those who reside in remote communities and towns and those in cities. It also highlights that affordability includes not just the cost of connectivity but also the cost of devices.⁴⁷ For this reason, FNMA suggests Government should provide support to individuals who are required to update their devices from 3G only devices to more expensive 4G and 5G devices to avoid leaving people behind when 3G services are shut down.

Aligned with principles of equity and economic development, Government should be subsidising data to provide free access to essential services for people living in remote communities who are disadvantaged by distance and cannot physically walk into a bank, a Centrelink office, a library, TAFE or a specialist health appointment. There should be no data charges to access education services, Government services, essential information services such as First Nations media or commerce services. Data alone will not resolve the complex set of digital inclusion barriers; community access facilities supported by dedicated personnel to facilitate engagement with the digital world will be required. This is explored further under Regional Development.

Finally, funding support for the implementation of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan currently in development through the NIAA will be essential to making progress beyond policy frameworks. A national digital inclusion strategy will need coordination with and input from the States and Territories. This is likely to include the development and implementation of localised digital inclusion plans, potentially carried out through Shire Councils and targeted programs to address gaps. It will be helpful to have access to the data collection actions undertaken through the National Agreement on Closing the Gap to support this work.

Opportunity

8. How can investment in telecommunications infrastructure work with other programs and policies to encourage economic development in regional Australia?

Government has invested heavily in the Mobile Black Spot Program and other infrastructure-based solutions to digital inclusion. Government services are increasingly operating at a distance from place and people. Meanwhile, responsibility for equitable access to services that are increasingly transitioning to an online-only model increasingly rests with communities and the service providers that have an onsite presence although no funding or remote support for digital access or awareness. Parallel investment is required in strategies and programs to keep people informed and to facilitate a network of Digital Support Officers (or similar) in communities as a dedicated role to support interaction with online systems.

Community hubs and media centres can provide secure and supervised spaces to host telecentres. However, it should be noted that public facilities are not suitable for all online activities, such as accessing telehealth and/or mental health services, nor are shared facilities secure for banking and financial transactions. People living in remote and regional communities should reasonably expect to be able to safely and securely access the same Government services as people living in urban centres, particularly when the distance to service barrier is removed in an online setting. Still, access to computers, laptops and the internet facilitated through community-based organisations is the

⁴⁷ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

primary way people in remote communities can access devices, secure internet, and services online.⁴⁸ These centres do require a support person to manage the facilities and assist users. Aligning with the priorities in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap to build the community-controlled sector, FNMA recommends that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations should be supported to provide essential connectivity services. This would include creating job opportunities to provide technical and fault support and working with community members to facilitate and navigate access to online services.

Digital engagement with online services often requires English literacy fluency. Where digital and English literacy is a barrier, access by alternative means such as phone support are woefully inadequate due to long wait times, poor customer service or use of virtual assistants.⁴⁹ Issues are encountered not only with online access to services but also with the alternative mechanisms to connect with services providers. Long wait times on phone calls, not being able to explain the issue they need assistance with and not being understood are pervasive issues requiring dedicated support beyond the ability to use devices, apps and email.⁵⁰

FNMA recommends a network of Digital Support Officers or Community Connectivity Mentors be established to support awareness and engagement with telecommunications for remote communities. This could follow a similar model to the Indigenous Rangers program, providing meaningful local employment opportunities for people living in remote communities. Employing local residents to undertake these roles will encourage Elders and other community leaders to engage with digital processes and are less likely to want to turn off access in communities in response to misinformation and cyber security risks. This form of people-centered approach to digital literacy needs would support the intergenerational transfer of knowledge as well as mitigating the risks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities emerging from the Government's digital transformation agenda. There is opportunity to include this role in measures currently in discussion around the Indigenous skills, engagement and employment program (ISEP). The ISEP could have a local focus for the development of digital skills within communities through the employment of Digital Mentors as an emerging skillset, particularly for the employment of young people.

12. How can different levels of Government, the telecommunications industry and regional communities better co-ordinate their efforts to improve telecommunications in regional Australia?

Beyond the expansion of mobile coverage and small cell satellites, the need for local digital inclusion plans and locally targeted digital skills solutions already discussed, there are efficiencies to be gained from the use of shared mast and tower facilities between media and telecommunication providers in remote communities. The regulatory environment does little to encourage shared access to available infrastructure.⁵¹ Potential collaborations between community-based organisations and telcos could be identified by the ACMA, or by telecommunications companies exploring existing community assets in scoping new infrastructure activities. The establishment of a First Nations Technology

⁴⁸ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Marshall, A, Dezuannia, M, Wockner, K, Babacan, H, Burgess, H, Crawford, F, Foth, M, Gregory, R, Mitchell, P, Neale, T, Rogers, S & Wallace, R, *Northern Australia Communications Analysis*, CRCNA, 2020

Council to coordinate communications programs for First Nations people is a potential means of facilitating collaboration opportunities.⁵²

There is some shared infrastructure between telecommunications and broadcasting that can be used to build on existing government investment in broadcast infrastructure and to generate maximum public value from new infrastructure rollouts. First Nations media organisations may be called upon for technical skills, capacity building activities and infrastructure requirements as part of the Government's proposed Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan. If this results in a funded program, it will present a potential opportunity to grow communications jobs through the provision of IT, technical and training expertise which could align with the ISEP.

Market based and technology driven solutions have seen the emergence of government and private sector partnerships in certain locations or with specific groups to address technology access and skills gaps and an increase in divergent programs and investments in each State and Territory.⁵³ However, without a cohesive policy guiding these funding activities, the projects are ad hoc with little coordination or complementarity. Further measures are required to address the issues of limited community access facilities, last-mile distribution, affordability for people on low incomes, low digital literacy, impacts of cyber-safety issues and online fraud, and accessibility of online services for people with limited English/text literacy or disabilities. A coordinated effort towards the digital inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is needed, which would likely include awareness campaigns on social media, radio, free to air TV and an ongoing program of in-community and face-to-face workshops.⁵⁴ To meet this need, FNMA supports the Developing Northern Australia CRC's recommendation to "devise, fund and support an inclusive digital inclusion ecosystem strategy across industry, all levels of government and the community sector."⁵⁵

Awareness

There is a lack of digital literacy education programs especially in remote areas, exacerbated by the withdrawal of Vocational Education & Training (VET) programs and the absence of digital inclusion policy and investments at all levels of government. This increases the burden on individuals and community-based organisations to facilitate digital engagement.⁵⁶

The 'Be Connected' program is funded to increase digital inclusion rates among older Australians to reduce vulnerability to scams, increase participation in society, decrease social isolation and reduce disadvantage. However, these are mainstream activities; they are not tailored to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, presenting a structural barrier to engagement of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in existing initiatives. More recent programs such as the 'Be Deadly Online' digital literacy initiative, the Government's online safety awareness campaign 'Keep Our Mob Safe Online' and a focus from the ACCC's Scamwatch website on First Nations communities each focus on safety education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is worth noting that each of these activities are online resources, reliant on a level of digital literacy

⁵² Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

⁵³ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Marshall, A, Dezuannia, M, Wockner, K, Babacan, H, Burgess, H, Crawford, F, Foth, M, Gregory, R, Mitchell, P, Neale, T, Rogers, S & Wallace, R, *Northern Australia Communications Analysis*, CRCNA, 2020

⁵⁶ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

and access assumptions. There is no funding provision for community training delivery to support engagement with the online resources available.

First Nations Media Australia has partnered with Telstra to support digital inclusion education activities in 18 remote communities and town camps across the Northern Territory through the inDigiMOB project. Telstra also funds digital inclusion programs in First Nations communities including Indigenous Digital Excellence (run by National Centre for Indigenous Excellence) and Deadly Digital Communities (run by State Library of Queensland).⁵⁷

inDigiMOB forms partnerships with communities and local organisations to create a suite of appropriate resources to meet the needs of individual communities for digital inclusion. Some examples include resources to help navigate online banking, use Google, avoid online scams, choose a phone plan, use social media safely and utilise map functions. The inDigiMOB model of digital mentors supported by workshop opportunities has been successful in some regions of the Northern Territory where it has been operating for 4 years now. inDigiMOB is not currently resourced to meet the demand in remote communities either geographically or in terms of service delivery. With support from Telstra, inDigiMOB has also started working with communities in South Australia and Western Australia, as well as the Northern Territory in response to interstate requests from communities. Workshops are reported as the best way in remote areas. The ability to use interpreters whilst facilitating community-based workshops and share information in languages other than English may be an important factor.⁵⁸

While the inDigiMOB program supports digital mentors to travel into communities for digital upskilling workshops, it is a piecemeal approach heavily constrained by funding resources. A sustained investment is required to support communities least served by telecommunication services to build relationships, develop regionally appropriate resources in local Indigenous languages and develop digital skills in an ongoing manner. Community-based digital literacy and mentoring programs are also supported by CRCNA.⁵⁹ There is significant potential to upscale a program like inDigiMOB, in partnership with Shire Councils to exponentially increase the delivery of digital skills workshops, supported by an ongoing Digital Support Officer available to each community to resolve some of the barriers facing digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in regional and remote communities. However this would need Government support rather than being left to corporations and/or communities to fund.

14. How can regional consumers be better supported to identify, choose and use the best connectivity options for their circumstances, as well as to understand and use their consumer rights?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities are particularly vulnerable to mis-selling by corporate telecommunications providers, as demonstrated recently by the fine of Telstra by ACCC, and to online scams and spam phishing. There has been a significant increase in phone scam reports from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2021, resulting in financial losses that have increased in total value from \$223,947 in 2020 to \$2.2 million in 2021 thus far.⁶⁰ It is

⁵⁷ Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

⁵⁸ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

⁵⁹ Marshall, A, Dezuannia, M, Wockner, K, Babacan, H, Burgess, H, Crawford, F, Foth, M, Gregory, R, Mitchell, P, Neale, T, Rogers, S & Wallace, R, *Northern Australia Communications Analysis*, CRCNA, 2020

⁶⁰ Williams, Tom, *Phone scams are 'exploding' and costing vulnerable Australians millions, new data shows*, ABC, 28 September 2021

clear that education and support systems are needed to curb this concerning increase. Government policies and programs currently focus on connectivity and access to telecommunications services through an infrastructure-led response, with almost no attention paid to digital ability, or the accessibility of online services to Indigenous language speakers or the risks of online activities including identity theft, scams and misinformation. Issues most often experienced in remote communities relating to telecommunications product choices include: signing up to contracts people cannot afford, unintentionally using a lot of data and running out of credit frequently, replacing phones and numbers frequently, no or forgotten email account, and difficulty reading or writing English.⁶¹

While Telstra is taking steps to rectify mis-selling issues within its business structure and has agreed to pay a \$50 million fine and improve engagement and sales practices, the 2018 ACCC findings only highlight the vulnerability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in remote areas, to profit-oriented businesses. It is not in the business interests of private telecommunications companies to provide consumers with transparency on the most affordable telecommunication packages available to them and there is an overwhelming array of satellite internet plans available, presenting a barrier to users for whom English may be a second, third or fourth language. Conversely, there is a lack of options and information about mobile phone plans in smaller communities, which limits ability to choose the most affordable or appropriate plan.⁶² This results in about half of First Nations families in remote communities experiencing issues relating to the billing systems of satellite internet plans in the first six months of being connected.⁶³

FNMA suggests the Government invest in a dedicated First Nations service through an unbiased third-party service organisation such as Choice or ACCAN to provide advice to consumers on the most suitable and most affordable telecommunications service for their region and required usage. In addition, education workshops for Shire Council staff and community leaders to outline options for improved telecommunications should be implemented as a means of upskilling communities to engage in decision-making about their telecommunications options and advise communities.

15. To what extent is public information on connectivity options, including predictive coverage data and speeds, sufficient to help regional customers make informed decisions? What other information is needed?

There is very little data available in the public domain to help communities or consumer advocate groups easily identify service and support gaps. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index is the most thorough analysis of digital inclusion available currently and is entirely funded by Telstra with a very limited sample size of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A supplementary 4-year project to map digital inclusion and media use in remote First Nations communities has been established by RMIT with Telstra funding support, but is limited to 10 remote communities. This needs to be expanded to give a more complete picture of issues and solutions across all 1,100 remote communities. The establishment of regional connectivity hubs through community centres could assist with the collection of this data information and with sharing data information with community members.

⁶¹ Young, Metta & Smede, Ben, *Indigenous community perspectives and experiences of digital inclusion*, ACCAN & FNMA, March 2021

⁶² Featherstone, Daniel, *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, ACCAN, October 2020

⁶³ Rennie, E, Hogan, E, Gregory, R, Crouch, A, Wright, A & Thomas, J, *Internet on the outstation*, Institute of Network Cultures, 2016

Summary

This submission has outlined suggestions for the Committee's consideration relating to the affordability and reliability of services, demand for data, centralised and collaborative approaches to current technical and consumer support issues and means to address digital ability limitations. A summary of the ideas outlined is listed for quick reference below:

1. Provide free public WiFi to all remote communities with unlimited data limits, allowing community members to purchase as much data as they need through voucher or pre-purchase arrangements;
2. Provide free access to essential services including education, banking, media, Centrelink, Medicare and other Government services;
3. Resolve last-mile access barriers and through supporting localised and shared-service solutions;
4. Support a network of Digital Support Officers or Community Connectivity Workers to support awareness, digital engagement and access to services for remote communities on an ongoing basis;
5. Undertake a full review of backup/redundancy procedures for ADSL and 4G outages;
6. Telecommunications providers be required to implement and report on remote monitoring of services to reduce fault-repair times by providers as part of the Universal Service Obligation;
7. Increased battery power and longer life batteries, complemented by solar power at exchanges to stabilise local power supplies and service reliability;
8. Expand the rollout of fibre optic cable to larger centres currently reliant on fixed wireless or satellite services;
9. Support a training program for emerging technicians to provide maintenance and technical services to both media and telecommunication services in remote communities with management of infrastructure and network maintenance through a central agency;
10. Provide support to individuals who are required to update their devices from 3G only devices to more expensive 4G and 5G devices;
11. Support the establishment of unbiased third-party service organisation to provide advice to consumers on the most suitable and most affordable telecommunications service for their region and required usage;
12. Support education workshops for Shire Council staff and community leaders to outline options for improved telecommunications;
13. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations should be supported to provide essential connectivity services;
14. Co-design and adequately fund an Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan with integrated state-based and localised plans tailored to local context; and
15. Focus on localised solutions delivered by small providers to tailor technology responses to the needs of remote communities, including small cell networks, satellite options and regional network solutions.

