National Indigenous Australians Agency
PO Box 2191
Canberra ACT 2600
digitalinclusion@niaa.gov.au

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Hitnet's submission to the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the plan. I also recently attended the workshop on 'accessing critical services' to provide some insights into what Hitnet has been doing in regional and remote Indigenous communities to deliver culturally appropriate information and services.

About Hitnet
Hitnet brings information and services to the hardest to reach communities. As governments and organisations are rapidly digitally transforming their services particularly as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, we break down barriers to provide connection, access and information.

Our Hitnet community digital platform delivers culturally appropriate health, social and cultural information in multiple languages to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members. The curated information is easily accessible through the Hitnet touchscreen hubs, the Hitnet mobile app and via a free WiFi hotspot that enables people to connect with their own devices. We are a one-stop digital shop for hard to reach communities.

One Stop Shop for Community Digital Services

Figure 1: Hitnet Hubs connecting, informing and engaging communities with digital information and services.

Reach and Audience

Our main audience is Aboriginal and Torres Islander children, teenagers and young parents, particularly in remote and regional locations.

Most communities where the forty Hitnet Hubs are located are extremely remote with less than 200 people, including Blackstone/Papulankutja (one of the most remote communities in Australia) and Saibai Island in the Torres Strait.

In this context, there were on average 1000 purposeful uses of each Hub for the year, with locally produced content being the most viewed. In 2020/21, our network has been impacted by COVID-19 with waiting rooms being closed and social distancing encouraged. In response we have developed the [Hitnet mobile app](1) to enable people to use their own devices to connect and be engaged.

Our response to the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan

We agree that digital inclusion has the potential to support and improve quality of life for Indigenous Australians by:

- Supporting business and enterprise development
- Enabling opportunities for learning and skills development
- Facilitating more efficient delivery and update of critical services, including healthcare,
- Supporting new ways to strengthen cultural identity, traditions and activities and enhance connections to community and country.

We suggest expanding point 1, as more broadly this includes the creation of real jobs in the digital economy in communities, where there are often few jobs available. For example, Hitnet require local staff to support our Hubs in communities (refer to Figure 2), also ThoughtWorks Australia (a partner of Hitnet) has recently setup a First Nations Near Delivery Centre[2] recruiting and supporting remotely distributed developers.

Figure 2: The opportunities for digital job development around the Hitnet Hubs

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[1] hitnet.app
[2] https://www.thoughtworks.com/jobs/3274750

Collecting data around digital inclusion should have a cultural overlay with meaningful uses of digital technology. This could include capturing stories, particularly in Indigenous language and connecting people to family and country, for example connecting families in communities with children at boarding school or keeping Indigenous people connected to country as we currently do with the Hitnet Hub at Cleveland Youth Detention Centre in Townsville.

To Appendix A and the Non-Government activities on page 23 it currently includes Digital Trackz which was developed by Hitnet with the Menzies School of Research in Darwin. It should be spelt 'Trakz' and is an app that can be found in both of the app stores. However, this is just one of many resources and services that Hitnet has developed over the years that cover access, affordability and ability that we will now summarise.

How Hitnet's services bridge the digital divide in Indigenous communities
Our Hitnet community digital platform supports all three of the ADII's areas of digital inclusion. It provides accessibility through the Hitnet touchscreen hubs, the mobile app and community WiFi hotspot that enables people to connect with their own devices.
The Hitnet Hubs and their WiFi are free to use for the community providing an easy on-ramp to the digital world for people with limited digital ability.
The cultural and social information available on the Hub touchscreen and via the Hitnet mobile app is all co-created in Indigenous communities and includes a My Place channel containing locally produced video stories.
Importantly, the community WiFi and mobile landing page are co-designed with each community so they set the parameters around its' use and tell us what are useful websites and apps that the community need to access. This includes easy access to government websites and services.
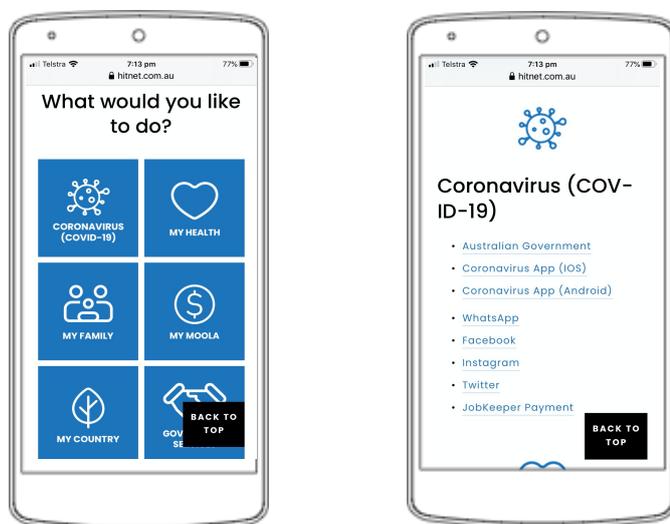

Figure 3: Example of a co-designed mobile landing page, an on-ramp to the digital world for inexperienced internet users.
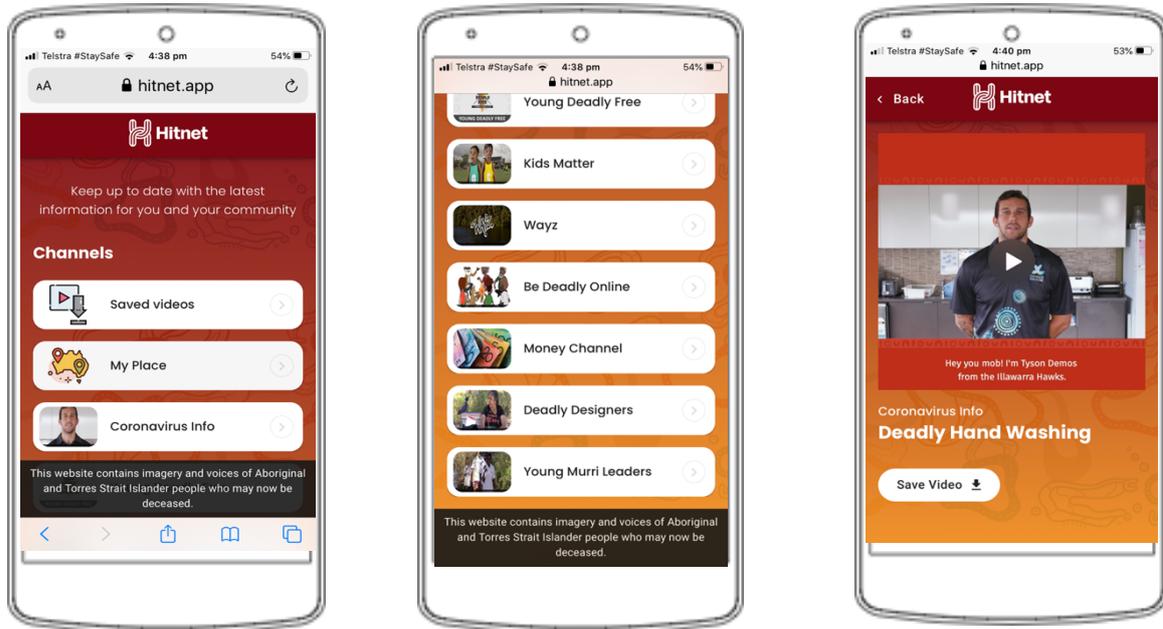
Figure 4: The Hitnet mobile app showing the main menu, a selection of content channels and video play screen for viewing or saving for later viewing.

Hitnet enables a digital ecosystem that can provide opportunity and prosperity for people living in these remote locations and welcomes the Government's Closing the Gap Target 17 "By 2026, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equal levels of digital inclusion".

We can provide education and job pathways for people to be part of the digital economy while staying in their communities connected to their family and country. Importantly the platform can generate jobs for local people as digital journalists, mentors and tech support.

Further information can be found on our website (hitnet.com.au), including access to a showcase of the cultural and social stories via the virtual community hub. We hope this feedback and information is useful and happy to have a follow up discussion.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Gibson
CEO & Co-founder