



*everyone's family*

## Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan

*Australian Government -National Indigenous Australians Agency*

Response to Discussion Paper – October 2021

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### Overview of The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity founded in 1922 to improve the lives of disadvantaged children in Australia. Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our mission is to create opportunities for them by providing long-term support for their participation in education. This mission is founded on the belief that every child deserves a chance to thrive and create a better future for themselves.

The Smith Family delivers programs in 90 communities across all states and territories in Australia. In 2020-21, The Smith Family supported over 220,000 children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals. More than 58,000 children and young people currently receive long term support through our *Learning for Life* program. Of these, 21.7% (12,500) are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

Further information on The Smith Family is available at [www.thesmithfamily.com.au](http://www.thesmithfamily.com.au).

### Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the National Indigenous Australians Agency consultations on the development of an Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan. We commend the NIAA for progressing work in response to recommendation 8 of the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review and see this work as a great opportunity to also contribute to considerations regarding digital inclusion of First Nations people as a key input to ensuring equal access to information and services in the National Closing the Gap Agreement Priority Reform 4.

The Smith Family is not an Aboriginal owned organisation. Our comments are provided from our position as an organisation who is committed to Reconciliation in Australia and to improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. We recognise that we are on a journey to increase our level of cultural competence and note that our comments are framed and shaped by this context.

Additionally, while we note that the discussion paper has a particular focus on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in regional and remote areas, The Smith Family works in the main with families and communities in outer metropolitan and regional areas of Australia and we note the significant ongoing disparity in digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in these areas. Given that the focus of our work is on ensuring that children and young people who experience disadvantage stay engaged in education, our comments are particularly framed with this lens, and respond to those questions in the discussion paper that are within the sphere of our work.

We make the following points in this submission:

- The framing and scope of the plan around issues of access, affordability and ability are appropriate.
- Digital exclusion is closely associated with poverty and broader social exclusion.
- Household Digital Exclusion has potential impact on opportunities for future generations.
- There should be a focus on alignment of the plan with current initiatives and implementation needs to be considered in the context of 'place'.

- While all sections of Australian society have a role to play in improving digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the plan should be informed by and governance arrangements support, ownership by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities.
- Appropriate investment in execution of The Plan will be required in order to drive progress.

We briefly expand on these points below.

### Framing and scope

The Smith Family broadly endorses the framing and scope of the proposed Plan. Alignment of focus on the three dimensions of digital inclusion, access affordability and digital ability, used by the Australian Digital Inclusion index positions the work well to align with already accepted framing currently utilised by a range of stakeholders in Australia.

While acknowledging the significant exclusion experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Remote and Rural parts of Australia as outlined in the discussion paper, we also point to the discrepancy in access and inclusion experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in those outer metropolitan and regional areas in which The Smith Family works and encourage their consideration in developing this plan. This is particularly important given the significant numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who live in these areas.

While acknowledging the importance of approaches that are culturally safe and informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander co-design, it is important that the plan seeks to leverage and add to the range of initiatives already underway rather than seeking to establish parallel infrastructure or processes. We note that the discussion paper sets out the current responsibility of various levels of government in ensuring digital inclusion and encourage consideration of the significant cross-over between responsibilities and those of telecommunications service providers. We support a national approach to enhance capability, service and protocol issues related to digital technology through the Data and Digital Ministers Meeting announced in 2020. Monitoring and review of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan should be a focus of this group.

### Digital inclusion and poverty

Many Australian children and young people live in low-income households, with the latest available data (from 2018) showing 1.2 million young Australians living in poverty. The 2020 ADII showed that households in the lowest income bracket who have primary and secondary school students living in them, have a digital inclusion score of 52.9. This is more than 10 points below the national average and 15.5 points lower than families with school-aged children in other income brackets.<sup>1</sup>

The 2021 ADII shows that 100% of Australians in the lowest income quintile, and 84% of those in the second lowest, would have to pay more than 5% of their household income to gain quality, reliable connectivity in 2021. They are particularly disadvantaged in the affordability dimension, which can have wide ranging impacts for the family and all its members.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J et al (2020) *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*.

The 2020 ADII shows that low-income families with school aged children:

- Are less likely than other similar families to have access to individual devices and data
- Spend a higher proportion of their income on internet access each month
- Are much more likely to be mobile-only internet users.

While there have been some positive changes in access spurred by the necessity to be online due to Covid 19, feedback from the families we work with demonstrated clearly significant challenges in households being able to support their children's learning. Issues included sharing one inadequate device across multiple children in a household, inadequate broadband access, and poor digital skills. The data is clear that parents in low-income families are less likely than parents in other income groups to have strong basic digital skills.

Earlier ADII, such as the 2019 data, showed that single parents with school aged children were more likely to be mobile-only contributing to their lower digital inclusion. Similarly, low-income households had much lower levels of digital inclusion compared to other Australians. This highlights that digital exclusion has been an issue for a significant number of Australians over time. It existed prior to COVID-19, with its exacerbation because of the pandemic.

A range of data, including the 2018 National Assessment Program Sample Assessment undertaken with students from Years 6 and 10, highlights that achievement in Information Communication Technology Literacy is significantly lower for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, relative to their more advantaged peers. This data was also collected well in advance of COVID. Their more limited access to digital technology at home and the more limited digital inclusion of their parents/carers is impacting on these children's skills and confidence in an area which is essential to 21<sup>st</sup> century economic and social participation.

Prior to the onset of Covid 19, 23% of the families supported by The Smith Family on our long-term *Learning for Life* program did not have a device with reliable connection to the internet at home. Current data shows a significant differential Indigeneity for *Learning for Life* families' digital access. While 13% of non Indigenous LfL students do not have a laptop/computer connected to the internet at home, the figure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LfL students is 22%.

While The Smith Family was able to provide some short-term responses to address this challenge during COVID, we are aware that longer term, systematic solutions are needed.

### **Impact of digital exclusion on future generations.**

Children who grow up in households that are digitally excluded are at risk of poorer outcomes in the short and the long term. Children who do not have the opportunity to develop good digital skills are disadvantaged in relation to their immediate educational outcomes, and given that 87% of jobs in Australia now require digital skills<sup>2</sup>, the risk of transmission of intergenerational exclusion are clear.

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<sup>2</sup> Digital Nation 2021 Report – Good Things Foundation Australia: <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au/news/digital-nation-australia-2021/>

COVID19 necessitated all states and territories largely moving schools to remote learning. While the length of time remote learning was in place varied across states and territories and schools tried to limit the negative impact of remote learning on children, it is clear that many children have fallen behind as a result.

Research<sup>3</sup> commissioned by the Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) highlights that not all children are equally well placed to undertake remote learning, with those at particular risk including students living in poverty, those with a disability or additional learning needs, students in rural or remote parts of Australia and those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. These young people were already behind their peers educationally prior to COVID, with the gap extended due to remote learning.

- The **material divide** - gaps in basic resources of families needed to support home learning (e.g. desk, quiet place to study etc)
- The **digital divide** – gaps in Information and Communications Technology resources and knowhow
- The **skills and disposition divide** – students not equally equipped personally for home learning
- The **parental support divide** – some parents not well prepared and not able to manage or cope

While at an aggregate level, the 2021 NAPLAN data suggests limited difference in outcomes compared to 2019 NAPLAN, it is highly likely, including from data collected by The Smith Family on *Learning for Life* students that disaggregated NAPLAN data (due for release in December) will show a significant impact on students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. This is particularly concerning given the poorer outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students even prior to COVID.

For these reasons, digital exclusion needs to be framed in a broader understanding of the impacts of poverty and social exclusion and solutions should be delivered as part of holistic solutions rather than stand-alone considerations relating to service provision alone. This is particularly pertinent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, considering extended family relationships and their often overcrowded housing circumstances.

To address these issues The Smith Family has provided 5,200 Digital Inclusion Packs to families on our *Learning for Life* program across the past 18 months to partially help address the digital challenges of remote learning. These packs included a digital device, internet connection and technical support to help families better navigate remote learning, therefore contributing to enhancing the three dimensions of digital inclusion. 23% of these packs were distributed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children, recognising their levels of access. The packs were made possible through funding support from a major philanthropic Foundation and a national corporate. The long-standing relationship The Smith Family has with disadvantaged families through *Learning for Life* meant that the Digital Inclusion Packs could be quickly allocated to families significantly impacted by digital exclusion.

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/schools>

A further example of Not for Profit -Corporate partnerships to address the issue of digital access is the Optus Donate Your Data initiative. This provides eligible students on The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program with a free Optus Prepaid service with data, talk and text. They also have the opportunity to receive additional data that is donated by Optus customers. We currently have 22,000 students receiving circa 30GB of data per month through this initiative, more than 20% of whom are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

### Co-ordinating responses

While acknowledging the complexity of the current digital landscape and the rapidly changing nature of technology, The Smith Family urges a systematic and comprehensive approach to enhancing the digital inclusion of all Australians. A range of work has already commenced through, for example, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet's Digital Technology Taskforce, which was established in November 2019. A range of organisations such as the Australian Broadband Advisory Council and the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA), of which The Smith Family is a member, have made recommendations to support enhanced digital inclusion which will contribute to Australia becoming a digital economy by 2030. Enhanced digital inclusion is a key foundation for Australia reaching this goal.

Many organisations and sectors will need to contribute to achieving these goals, and as ADIA and others have indicated, a whole-of-government digital inclusion strategy or roadmap along with a Digital Capabilities Framework are foundational. Such a roadmap should include enhancing the digital technology uptake of organisations, including not-for-profits, given the increased efficiencies and effectiveness which can ensue.

Responses should also have a short and long term focus with a view to addressing immediate access challenges through place based, community focussed initiatives, while longer term solutions are in play. The Indigenous Digital Inclusion plan needs to have a specific focus on hearing from and meeting the specific needs of children and young people who are at risk of long-term digital exclusion and of missing out on opportunities to deeply immerse in technology and become the tech creators of the future. We must recognise that the 2030 labour force is being educated in Australian schools now.

### Implementing the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan

The development and implementation of the Plan provides an opportunity to ensure that the range of initiatives currently underway consider the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests and leadership need to be at the core of governance, planning and implementation. However, we believe that the Plan should seek to leverage rather than duplicate existing processes, and not add layers of complexity to the current already highly complex landscape. Implementation of the Plan should seek to engage with Aboriginal leadership through established mechanisms and streamline arrangements as part of a holistic solution.

It is also imperative that execution and monitoring of The Plan is sufficiently resourced. To assume that this work can be delivered with existing resources will ensure its failure.

### Conclusion

The Smith Family is encouraged to see a specific focus on the need to address digital exclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We are optimistic that a well-coordinated plan with clear goals and targets has the potential to catalyse and accelerate work in this area, addressing a significant barrier to inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Not only does it have the potential to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country, but to place their interests and involvement at the heart of future programs. In that sense we can do service by the sentiment in the Uluru Statement from The Heart, that Australia be a country walking in two worlds and respecting the cultures of Indigenous communities everywhere. We wish the NIAA well in its work and we are happy to make any further contribution or provide any further input if required.