The Treasury
2022-23 Pre-Budget Submissions
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Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance Pre Budget Submission

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission.

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

Current barriers to digital inclusion mean that Australians are missing out on employment opportunities; businesses are not able to access the widest possible range of workers; students are not able to pivot to online learning when circumstances demand; and citizens are not able to access Government online information and services or public health services such as QR check ins.

Being digitally included means:
- having affordable access to high-quality internet, and as well as appropriate devices to utilise the internet.
- being able to use the internet in an accessible way, whether a person is living with disability, from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, or with other needs.
- having the ability, skills and confidence to complete tasks on and benefit from the internet.

The 2022-23 Federal Budget provides an opportunity to progress work to close the digital divide in Australia through the following measures as recommended by the ADIA for funding:
1. Create a **Whole-of-Government Digital Inclusion Plan**
2. Establish a **Digital Capabilities Framework**
3. Enshrine a **Low-Cost Broadband Option**
4. Enhance compliance with the **latest accessibility standards**
5. Support **Indigenous Digital Inclusion** including through greater data collection

The State of Digital Inclusion in Australia

The ADIA draws on a range of contemporary research in providing this submission, including but not limited to:

- The **Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII)** recently released the [2021 Report](#) which measures digital inclusion across the three dimensions of Access, Affordability and Digital Ability. The Index, which has been reporting since 2015, showed notable improvements in relation to overall Index score and the gap between metropolitan and regional areas. Whilst these improvements should be celebrated, there is still a long way to go in closing the digital divide, including in relation to indigenous populations.

- The **Good Things Foundation**'s [Digital Nation Australia 2021](#) report brought together over 70 pieces of research that highlight the impact of digital exclusion in Australia and noted that:
  - 30% of First Nations people have no household internet or phone connection.
  - Half of low-income households have trouble paying for home internet.
  - 80% of Australians 65 years and older have trouble keeping up with changes to technology.
  - 87% of Australian jobs require digital skills.
  - Less than 40% of Australians felt they could keep up with new technology.

- The Interim Report on **Telstra's Connected Students program** by **RMIT University** contributed evidence on the significance of affordability barriers for digital inclusion. The report shows that while low-income households highly value and prioritise internet connectivity in their spending, affordability barriers are not limited to or solely experienced by households in the lowest income bracket.

ADIA 2022-23 Budget Recommendations

1. **Create a Whole-of-Government Digital Inclusion Plan**

   A Whole-of-Government Digital Inclusion Plan that is managed by a dedicated departmental team will allow Australian businesses, nonprofits and government to work together in a coordinated manner to meaningfully narrow the digital divide. This could build from the Digital Economy Strategy such that it is a fulsomely articulated plan for how the digital divide will be narrowed across all areas.

   Currently, there are numerous programs and initiatives to increase digital inclusion. Some are national, some are targeted at particular demographics, some are short-term, some are online, some are group based. In totality, they lack coordination and there is not a common understanding of what the map of efforts looks like. The Federal Government alone has several departments working on projects looking at digital inclusion, without whole-of-government coordination. The projects span from Social Services to Health and Home Affairs, all working in silos without collaboration. This scattered approach to improving digital inclusion is not providing as much impact as it could with greater coordination. In addition, providing an overarching plan would enable the Government to harness community and industry efforts to amplify its own work.

One way to accomplish and deliver on such a Plan, would be to permanently appoint the Digital Technology Taskforce (DTT) within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. This team could then be responsible for:

- coordination across governments;
- coordination with private and community sectors;
- ongoing maintenance of the Digital Capabilities Framework (see below);
- implementing and maintaining a gap and overlap analysis of efforts to address digital inclusion;
- creating, maintaining and distributing a comparison tool for cost of internet access per gigabyte across service providers; and
- tracking of implementation and progress.

2. Establish a Digital Capabilities Framework

The establishment of a Digital Capabilities Framework would create a shared language around what it means to be a digitally capable individual. It would outline the digital skills associated with each level of learning or competency, and allow organisations to tailor their training programs to a common reference.

A Digital Capabilities Framework would support potential employers to clearly articulate levels of digital capability that are required for open roles, as well as have benefits in supporting job seekers in their pursuit of employment. Increasingly, not only must a person have internet access to find and apply for positions; they must have a level of digital capability in order to join businesses that have leveled up their digitalisation through the course of the pandemic. In fact, digital exclusion is a driver for unemployment.

As noted above, there are numerous Government programs aimed at increasing digital inclusion. The community and private sectors also put substantial resources into increasing digital capabilities with programs like Tech Savvy Seniors, Digital Springboard, Grow with Google, Accenture Digital Skills and Microsoft Digital Skills. However each organisation is defining their own goals and aiming to address different things. In sum, there are multiple efforts underway without a common understanding of what programs should aim to achieve. A clear, common focus would have a substantial impact on the efficacy of programs while still supporting approaches tailored to different audiences' needs.

Prioritising investment in developing and testing a National Digital Capabilities Framework would ensure Australia has a valuable reference document that:

A. informs digital capability training programs, including where provided by community organisations and the private sector;
B. builds a common language around development and attainment of digital capability. This would support people being able to clearly articulate their learning needs and

achievements. It would also form the basis for employers being able to describe the level of capability they need job applicants to have.

3. **Enshrine a Low-Cost Broadband Option**

The implementation of affordability measures for internet connectivity will reduce barriers to accessing internet services and devices, and will support low income families to access the internet as an essential service in contemporary day-to-day life. As noted above, a lack of connectivity makes it more difficult for adults to find employment. It is also a barrier to accessing support services and staying connected to society.

Further, without affordable internet access and appropriate devices, children have a harder time keeping up at school. In fact a report by The Queensland Auditor General found that not all students have access to the internet at home and that the percentage of students without internet access increases for low-income households. The report shows that 10% of students in the lowest socioeconomic quintile did not have access to the internet at home, and 14% of students in the same cohort did not have access to a device.

According to a report published by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), low income individuals experience the following top three problems:
- 22% - running out of data,
- 20% - struggling to afford a phone or internet service,
- 16% - struggling to afford a device.

The ADIA recommends that those on low incomes should automatically be afforded discounts for their internet services. The ADIA is a signatory of ACCAN's No Australian Left Offline initiative (https://accan.org.au/no-australian-left-offline), which calls for a 50 mbps service for $30 per month to be available to households receiving income support.

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

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

Relatedly, device affordability is a significant barrier. According to the Interim Report on Telstra's Connected Students program by RMIT University, individual device access is critical to digital

inclusion and education. Again, there is an opportunity to spearhead efforts to support low-income and vulnerable populations to access devices.

4. **Upgrade all Federal websites to be compliant with the latest accessibility standards**

The presentation of information online poses difficulties to some users. Adherence to Accessibility Standards supports all demographics to use the internet, including but not limited to people living with disability, or from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Whilst the ADIA understands that through the Government's Digital Service Standard, all Australian Government agencies are required to meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 Level AA, there have been shortcomings. The Government continues to provide some inaccessible Government websites, often for important services. For example:
- The COVID Vaccine Eligibility Checker when first released was not compliant with WCAG or the Apple accessibility guidelines.
- The COVIDSafe app was inaccessible when first released.
- Scamwatch.gov.au uses graphics for example text messages and emails that are not compatible with screen readers for visually impaired Australians.

It is commendable that the Government brings accessibility features into later updates, however Government websites and apps need to be created with accessibility features from the beginning.

Therefore, the ADIA recommends moving toward all Federal, State and Local government websites being compliant with the latest accessibility standards (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines - WCAG 2.1); and ensuring whole of government adherence to the Australian Standard AS EN 301 549:2020 – Accessibility requirements for ICT products and services.

This will require prioritisation of accessibility in governance and culture efforts. For example, progress on accessibility could be reported on by each Department at Secretaries meetings. Setting the expectation and targets at the leadership level will drive culture and behavioural change.

5. **Indigenous Digital Inclusion**

Engagement with Australia's indigenous populations will support progress of efforts to ensure all Australians are supported when it comes to digital inclusion.

Digital inclusion of Indigenous Australians is a key challenge for the nation and people living in Australia's 1,100 remote First Nations communities are among the most digitally excluded people in Australia. First Nations communities have been required to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic often without adequate communications. Meeting the challenge of Australia's Closing

the Gap targets for digital inclusion will require a substantial effort to support the development of effective local strategies, combined with the necessary data collection to track outcomes at a national level.

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

Further highlighting the need for accurate data on digital inclusion of Indigenous Australians, the **Mapping The Digital Gap** project is currently being undertaken through the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society in partnership with Telstra. Just 12 of the 1,100 remote First Nations communities across Australia are engaged in the study, leaving a significant gap in indigenous populations' representation.

There is a fundamental need for effective and comprehensive data collection around First Nations digital inclusion, and this needs to be adequately funded. There is a level of complexity, diversity and geography that requires concentrated resources to get a full picture. Further, the ADIA recommends that this data collection should not just be about those in regional and remote parts of the country, rather it should extend to Indigenous people right across the country, including in urban areas.

<u>Endorsements and conclusion</u>

Multiple organisations have echoed the ADIA's recommendations, including:
- **Digital Transformation Expert Panel -** <u>The Learning Country</u> - The Expert Panel supports the creation of a Digital Capabilities Framework (Page 67).
- **Infrastructure Australia -** <u>2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan</u> - Infrastructure Australia supports a national digital inclusion strategy (Page 97).
- **Australian Broadband Advisory Council (ABAC) -** <u>Riding the Digital Wave: Report on COVID-19 Trends and Forward Work Program</u> - ABAC supports the creation of a Digital Capabilities Framework, a permanent low-cost broadband option and ensuring all websites are compliant with accessibility standards (Page 21).
- **NBN Futures Group and TelSoc -** <u>Towards a National Broadband Strategy for Australia</u> - The NBN Futures Group endorses the ADIA recommendations for a National Roadmap and a single government department to lead it (Pages 9 and 14).

Whilst many attempts have been made during the COVID-19 era thus far to ensure people have access to resources moving online, it is important that as society attempts to move into a "post-COVID-normal" we do not to become complacent around issues of digital inclusion and leave

communities behind, or fail to support continued knowledge and understanding as technology rapidly evolves.

Thank you for your consideration of our submission. We would be pleased to discuss these matters with you further.

Yours faithfully,

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