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Submission

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2026 Census Topic Consultation

Submission by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

About ACCAN

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (**ACCAN**) is the peak body that represents all consumers on communications issues including telecommunications, broadband and emerging new services. ACCAN provides a strong unified voice to industry and government as consumers work towards communications services that are trusted, inclusive and available for all.

Consumers need ACCAN to promote better consumer protection outcomes ensuring speedy responses to complaints and issues. ACCAN aims to empower consumers so that they are well informed and can make good choices about products and services. As a peak body, ACCAN will represent the views of its broad and diverse membership base to policy makers, government and industry to get better outcomes for all communications consumers.

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Executive Summary

ACCAN thanks the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) for the opportunity to make a submission to the 2026 Census topic consultation.¹ This submission was developed in consultation with various external stakeholders and organisations and received endorsement from the QUT Digital Media Research Centre (DRMC), the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA), the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision Making and Society (ADM+S), and the Centre for Inclusive Design (Cfid) (see Appendix A).

ACCAN strongly believes that digital inclusion must be a key focus in the 2026 Census. The collection of real-time national data on household internet access, connection types, and internet use, is critical in understanding how Australian households get and stay connected online. It is also critical in order to understand and address the digital inclusion barriers and opportunities they face. This is an essential aspect of the Australian Government's Digital Economy Strategy, and the Strategy's focus on boosting the productivity and living standards of Australians.²

The Australian Government has already implemented several initiatives to support digital inclusion throughout Australia. These include:

- Co-funding more than 1270 mobile base stations;
- Delivering 223 telecommunications projects in regional, rural, and remote communities;
- Generating more than \$875 million in investment as part of the Mobile Black Spot Program (Round 1 to 5A) and over \$413 million (GST exclusive) with the Regional Connectivity Program³; and
- Committing \$67.3 million to the Peri-Urban Mobile Program (PUMP) (Round 1 to 3).⁴

Within this context, ACCAN recommends the ABS collect information on household digital inclusion to better facilitate targeted investment into Australia's communications infrastructure. To improve the digital inclusion outcomes of Australians, including those in diverse communities, it is necessary for the 2026 Census to capture national data on digital inclusion.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *2026 Census topic consultation*, February 2023, <https://consult.abs.gov.au/census/2026-census-topic-consultation/>.

² Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Digital Economy Strategy 2030*, May 2021 <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-05/apo-nid312247.pdf>.

³ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 'Mobile Black Spot Program' (Web Page) <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-technology-communications/phone/mobile-services-coverage/mobile-black-spot-program>; Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 'Regional Connectivity Program' (Web Page) <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-communications-arts/internet/regional-connectivity-program>.

⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 'Peri-Urban Mobile Program' (Web Page) <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-technology-communications/phone/mobile-services-coverage/peri-urban-mobile-program>.

ACCAN recommends:

- Reinstating the 2016 Census question on household internet use;
- Establishing a question on the types of internet connectivity used within households; and
- Introducing a question on how households use the internet.

This data will be invaluable to better understand the types of digital inclusion opportunities and barriers facing Australian households. Information obtained with respect to First Nations peoples and people with disability will be particularly beneficial.

List of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That the 2026 ABS Census reinstate the 2016 Census question on household internet use.

Recommendation 2: That the 2026 ABS Census establish a question on the types of internet connectivity used within households.

Recommendation 3: That the 2026 ABS Census introduce a question on how households use the internet.

Household Internet Use

The ABS must collect and produce statistics on the internet access, connection types, and internet use of Australian households.

Since the 2016 Census the ABS has not included a question in its Census on household internet use. In the 2016 Census the following question was asked:

“59. Does any member of this household access the internet from this dwelling?”

- **Include internet access using desktop/laptop computers, mobile or smart phones, tablets, music or video players, gaming consoles, smart TVs etc.**
- **Include internet access through any type of connection including ADSL, fibre, cable, wireless, satellite and mobile broadband (3G/4G).**

Yes/No”⁵

The absence of a question on household internet use has made it difficult to collect and measure real-time national data on access to the internet throughout Australia. While we know that 11% of Australia’s population remains ‘highly digitally excluded’, and 14% of Australians need to pay more than 10% of their household income to gain quality, reliable connectivity.⁶ It is only with a comprehensive national data set on household internet use that we will be able to focus efforts to reduce the digital exclusion of these Australian households.

Affordable and accessible internet connection is an important part of increasing social, economic, and educational opportunities. This is a central aspect of the Australian Government’s Digital Economy Strategy, and its focus on boosting productivity and living standards.⁷

According to the 2021 Review of Census topic, the question on internet access in households was removed due to the increased mobile internet usage on personal devices outside the home.⁸ It is ACCAN’s view that to accurately measure digital inclusion at a national level, it is essential that a question on household internet use is reinstated. Firstly, the 2021 ABS Census survey only provides a limited snapshot of the activities and experiences of Australian households, which makes it difficult to capture real-time national data on digital inclusion throughout Australia. Secondly, the question from the 2016 Census on household internet use provided a valuable understanding of how many, and the diverse ways, Australian households accessed the internet. Thirdly, the 2016 household internet question spoke to the barriers some households had in affording internet access at home.

⁵ See question 59 from ABS, *Dwelling Internet Connection (NEDD)*, November 2017

<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2900.0main+features101302016>.

⁶ J Thomas, J Barraket, S Parkinson, C Wilson, I Holcombe-James, J Kennedy, K Mannell and A Brydon, *Measuring Australia’s digital divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2021*, Melbourne RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra, October 2021, p. 6, DOI: 10.25916/phgw-b725

https://h3e6r2c4.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ADII_2021_Summary-report_V1.pdf.

⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Digital Economy Strategy 2030*, May 2021 <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-05/apo-nid312247.pdf>.

⁸ ABS, *Review of 2021 Census topics*, March 2018

<https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/2021+census+review+of+topics>.

While ACCAN's Reliability Research Snapshot from 2022 revealed that mobile phone was considered the most essential connection type (84%), followed closely by home internet (82%).⁹ Without a national dataset, which is only available through ABS Census information, it is unclear what solutions need to be implemented to ensure all Australian households have internet access.

ACCAN's recent research has revealed that 90% of Australians think that telecommunications providers should provide an affordable internet plan as standard so that everyone can remain connected.¹⁰ Figures from ACCAN and the ABS reveal, that "despite an increase in remote learning, telehealth services, and work from home arrangements in the last two years there are still approximately 900,000 Australian households who do not have an in-home internet connection."¹¹ ACCAN's Affordability Research Snapshot found that 27% of consumers found their phone and internet services to be unaffordable, and that people on low incomes experienced greater difficulty affording their phone and internet services.¹²

It is important for the ABS to collect and publish up-to-date information on household internet use, as this data will be used to support the Australian Government's efforts to improving internet access by understanding how people stay connected at home.

The second part of the 2016 Census question on household internet use speaks to how people access the internet through different connection types and devices. ACCAN recommends that a separate question should be introduced in the 2026 Census to produce information on whether households use mobile internet, home internet or both to connect to the internet.

ACCAN's Affordability Research Snapshot also revealed that only 36% of respondents said that they use free public Wi-Fi services where they live (either regularly, sometimes, or occasionally). Almost one third (31%) of respondents did not know where to access free public Wi-Fi near where they live.¹³ This could imply that people use home internet more so than public Wi-Fi, and as a result do not know where there is free public Wi-Fi.

Including a question on internet connection types will also facilitate an understanding of the quality and reliability issues associated with internet connection options across Australia. ACCAN's Reliability Research Snapshot from August 2022 revealed that 69% of respondents living in regional and remote areas considered their internet services to be high quality and reliable, compared to 76% of respondents living in a capital city.¹⁴ This finding is significant because it reflects the connectivity

⁹ ACCAN, *ACCAN Research Snapshot: Consumer expectations – reliability and fairness*, August 2022, p. 7 <https://accan.org.au/files/Reports/ACCAN%202022%20Research%20Snapshot%20Reliability%20and%20Fairness.pdf>.

¹⁰ ACCAN, *90 per cent of Australians think telcos should offer affordable internet plans*, July 2022 <https://accan.org.au/media-centre/media-releases/2004-90-of-australians-think-telcos-should-offer-affordable-internet-plans?highlight=WYJzbfWfc2hvdCJd>.

¹¹ ACCAN, *Around 900,000 Australian households still don't have in-home internet*, July 2022 <https://accan.org.au/media-centre/media-releases/1998-900k-households-with-no-internet?highlight=WYJzbfWfc2hvdCJd>.

¹² ACCAN, *ACCAN Research Snapshot: Affordability*, July 2022, p. 1 <https://accan.org.au/ACCAN%202022%20Research%20Snapshot%20Affordability.pdf>.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 10.

¹⁴ ACCAN, *ACCAN Research Snapshot: Consumer expectations – reliability and fairness*, August 2022, p. 3 <https://accan.org.au/files/Reports/ACCAN%202022%20Research%20Snapshot%20Reliability%20and%20Fairness.pdf>.

issues experienced by regional, rural and remote communities across Australia, and supports the Australian Government's efforts to address connectivity issues. These efforts include:

- Co-funding more than 1270 mobile base stations;
- Delivering 223 telecommunications projects in regional, rural, and remote communities;
- Generating more than \$875 million in investment as part of the Mobile Black Spot Program (Round 1 to 5A) and over \$413 million (GST exclusive) with the Regional Connectivity Program¹⁵; and
- Committing \$67.3 million to the PUMP (Round 1 to 3).¹⁶

Additionally, 88% of respondents to ACCAN's Reliability Research Snapshot said they expected their phone and internet services to work during emergency situations such as bushfires and floods.¹⁷ This reinforces the importance of measuring and improving the quality internet connection to keep communities safe and connected during emergency situations.

Alongside understanding how households access the internet, it is important to also ask what purposes these households use the internet for, including:

- Social and cultural activities;
- Education and employment;
- Healthcare needs; and
- Civic duties.

Generating data on how households use the internet will enable the Australian Government to better understand the barriers to digital inclusion in Australia, and the importance of providing quality and reliable internet access and connection to facilitate positive digital, social, and economic outcomes for Australians.

¹⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 'Mobile Black Spot Program' (Web Page) <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-technology-communications/phone/mobile-services-coverage/mobile-black-spot-program>; Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 'Regional Connectivity Program' (Web Page) <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-communications-arts/internet/regional-connectivity-program>.

¹⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 'Peri-Urban Mobile Program' (Web Page) <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-technology-communications/phone/mobile-services-coverage/peri-urban-mobile-program>

¹⁷ ACCAN, *ACCAN Research Snapshot: Consumer expectations – reliability and fairness*, August 2022, p. 2 <https://accan.org.au/files/Reports/ACCAN%202022%20Research%20Snapshot%20Reliability%20and%20Fairness.pdf>.

Digital Inclusion for First Nations Communities

The ABS must collect and produce statistics on the household internet access, connection types and internet use of First Nations communities. Providing this information will be critical towards ensuring First Nations communities remain connected and experience equal levels of digital inclusion.

One in four First Nations households still need access to the internet in Australia, while the digital divide for First Nations peoples and communities increases with remoteness, with only 49.9% of First Nations peoples living in very remote areas having access to the internet.¹⁸

According to Target 17 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, by 2026 First Nations peoples should have equal levels of digital inclusion compared to other Australians.¹⁹ The data being currently used to measure progress Target 17 is a baseline dataset from 2014-2015 generated from the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (**NATSISS**). The 2014-2015 baseline dataset indicates:

- Nationally in 2014-2015, 73.5% of First Nations peoples aged 15 years and over accessed the internet in their home;²⁰ and
- Nationally in 2014-2015, 48.8% of all First Nations peoples aged 15 years or older used the internet to access government information or services for private purposes. 43.9% used the internet to make lodgments to government and 24% used the internet to get government information or services.²¹

Additionally, the 2016 Census “found a significant variation in First Nations households internet access based on location: 82.8% in major metropolitan areas access the internet, compared with 73.2% in regional areas, 61.3% in remote areas, and 49.9% in very remote areas”.²²

Since the data collected between 2014 and 2016 there has been no dataset that measures the digital inclusion of all First Nations communities in Australia. For example, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index’s (**ADII**) approach to measuring First Nations digital inclusion, does not provide “sufficient First Nations respondents to generate reliable data”, nor does it capture data on the varying levels of

¹⁸ World Vision Australia and Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, *Connecting on Country: Closing the digital divide for First Nations students in the age of COVID-19*, March 2021, pp. 5-6, <https://www.worldvision.com.au/docs/default-source/publications/government-submissions/connecting-on-country.pdf>.

¹⁹ Productivity Commission, *Socioeconomic outcome area 17*, <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/socioeconomic/outcome-area17>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, *Using the internet to access government services* <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/socioeconomic/outcome-area17/using-the-internet-to-access-government-services>.

²² ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S), *ADM+S submission to Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan discussion paper*, November 2021, p. 4 <https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/submissions/idip-sub-adms.pdf>

digital inclusion in remote First Nations communities.²³ This has made it difficult to accurately measure progress on the achievement of Target 17.

To mitigate this the Mapping the Digital Gap research project has been commissioned to provide quantitative, expansive longitudinal data on barriers to digital inclusion for 10 to 12 remote First Nations communities, from 2022–2024.²⁴ This data, however, will only provide a small snapshot of digital inclusion issues in specific First Nations communities.

It is therefore necessary for the ABS to produce information on First Nations communities' internet access and connectivity, to provide the Australian Government with ongoing data about the difficulties First Nations communities experience in connecting to the internet, particularly in remote areas.

Alongside understanding how First Nations communities access the internet, it is also important for the ABS to produce statistics on how these communities use the internet. This information will assist the Australian Government in understanding the importance of keeping First Nations communities connected online, and the benefits of this in improving digital inclusion outcomes across First Nations communities.

Capturing these aspects of digital inclusion in the 2026 Census will help to enhance the Australian Government's efforts to ensure First Nations communities have equal levels of digital inclusion as other Australians, by monitoring internet connectivity issues in these communities.

Digital Inclusion for People with Disability

It is necessary for the ABS to collect and produce statistics on the household internet access, connection types and internet use of people with disability. This data will play an important role in supporting the Australian Government to increase the digital, social, and economic inclusion of people with disability. Census questions on disability focus on:

- How many people live with disability;
- What type of disability they have;
- What level of social, educational and employment participation they have; and
- What support and assistance they require.²⁵

²³ Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S), *Mapping the digital gap: Background paper: Project objectives, context and methods*, October 2022, p. 12 <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2022-10/apo-nid319809.pdf>; National Indigenous Australians Agency, *Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan — discussion paper*, September 2021 p. 19 <https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/indigenous-digital-inclusion-plan-discussion-paper.pdf>.

²⁴ Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S), *Mapping the digital gap: Background paper: Project objectives, context and methods*, October 2022, p. 12 <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2022-10/apo-nid319809.pdf>.

²⁵ ABS, *Disability and carers: Census*, June 2022 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-and-carers-census/latest-release>.

The current Census questions fail to capture the level of digital inclusion experienced by people with disability across Australia. Data from the 2018 Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia survey highlights the digital exclusion faced by people with disability, as:

- 1.1 million (28.5%) people with disability did not use the internet;
- Over 250,000 people with disability lacked confidence or knowledge to use the internet;
- 1.4 million (38.4%) older Australians did not use the internet; and
- 1.0 million (27.1%) older people used social networking or chat rooms.²⁶

ACCAN has identified that access to technology is a basic human right for people with disabilities.²⁷ This enables the enjoyment of other human rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).²⁸ However, as the above data indicates, many people with disability continue to be digitally excluded and experience poor outcomes due to the “prohibitive costs of digital technologies, the limitations of current technologies and a lack of digital education and training.”²⁹

The latest data from the ADII 2021 reveal that 23% of people with disability are highly digitally excluded.³⁰ Additionally, data from the 2020 ADII, indicates that the digital divide is continuing to increase for people with disability, and that “Australians with disability spend a greater proportion of their household income on internet access than the Australian average and receive less data for each dollar of expenditure than the average.”³¹

These figures speak to the digital divide experienced by people with disability, due to difficulties in affording and utilising internet services. To assist the Australian Government in reducing the digital exclusion of people with disability, it is necessary for the ABS to produce information on how this cohort access the internet and what they use the internet for, including whether they access online support services for their needs. Producing this information will enable the Australian Government to continue to work towards improving the digital, social, and economic inclusion of people with disability.

²⁶ ABS, *Use of information technology by people with disability, older people and primary carers*, July 2020 <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/use-information-technology-people-disability-older-people-and-primary-carers>.

²⁷ ACCAN, *ACCAN submission to Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-2031 Guiding Principles Consultation*, November 2022, p. 4 <https://accan.org.au/files/Submissions/2022/ACCAN%20Australias%202021-2031%20Disability%20Strategy%20Submission%20Nov%202022.pdf>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ J Thomas, J Barraket, S Parkinson, C Wilson, I Holcombe-James, J Kennedy, K Mannell and A Brydon, *Measuring Australia’s digital divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2021*, Melbourne RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra, October 2021, p. 5, DOI: 10.25916/phgw-b725 https://h3e6r2c4.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ADII_2021_Summary-report_V1.pdf.

³¹ J Thomas, J Barraket, CK Wilson, I Holcombe-James, J Kennedy, E Rennie, S Ewing and T MacDonald, *Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, October 2020, p. 20, DOI: 10.25916/5f6eb9949c832 <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2020-10/apo-nid308474.pdf>.

In summary, the ABS 2026 Census must collect and produce real-time national data on household internet access, connection types, and internet use throughout Australia. This data will assist the ongoing efforts of the Australian Government in identifying and responding to the digital inclusion barriers and opportunities faced by Australians, including First Nations peoples and people with disability.

Appendices

Appendix A: CfID Letter of Support



Re: ACCAN 2026 Census Submission

Centre for Inclusive Design (CfID) endorsement of submission by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

Access to internet services, be it phone or computer, has become an important part of increasing social, economic, and educational opportunities, and an essential service during emergencies, especially natural disasters.

CfID shares ACCAN's concerns around the lack of census questions on digital inclusion. This includes household internet use, as well as a lack of recent data on Target 17 of the Closing the Gap Strategy on digital inclusion for First Nations communities, and usage and accessibility by people with a disability. Providing this information will be critical towards ensuring First Nations communities remain connected and experience equal levels of digital inclusion and help address shortfalls experienced by people with a disability.

As ACCAN explains, one in four First Nations households still need access to the internet in Australia. The digital divide for First Nations peoples and communities also increases with remoteness, with only 49.9 per cent of First Nations peoples living in very remote areas have access to the internet. And, many people with disability, continue to be digitally excluded and experience poor outcomes due to the 'prohibitive costs of digital technologies, the limitations of current technologies and a lack of digital education and training.' Available, affordable, and accessible communications goods and services are essential for people with disability to be able to participate equally in society.

CfID fully supports ACCAN's submission to ABS on the topic of digital inclusion to map the digital landscape, address the issues so all Australia's, as is their right, have affordable and reliable access to internet services.

CfID works to create policies, products, services and experiences with inclusivity in mind, delivering outcomes of the highest standard, resulting in an ever-growing evidence base for the benefits of inclusive design. By incorporating inclusive design more people can access and use the environments, products and services they need.

Yours Sincerely

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The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is Australia's peak communication consumer organisation. The operation of ACCAN is made possible by funding provided by the Commonwealth of Australia under section 593 of the Telecommunications Act 1997. This funding is recovered from charges on telecommunications carriers.

ACCAN is committed to reconciliation that acknowledges Australia's past and values the unique culture and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. [Read our RAP](#)
