9 December 2021

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Via email: IndigenousAffairs.reps@aph.gov.au

RE: How the corporate sector establishes models of best practice to foster better engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) thanks the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

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 availability, accessibility, and affordability of communications services for all Australians.

As the Standing Committee will be aware, in November 2020 Telstra was fined $50 million by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) for engaging in unconscionable conduct involving irresponsible and misleading sales practices targeted at First Nations consumers in SA, NT and WA. While we are aware that Telstra has since taken remediation actions and is working with the ACCC on this program of work, this case highlighted the significant consumer harm that can result from corporations not engaging appropriately with First Nations consumers.

Engaging meaningfully with First Nations peoples and centring their lived experiences in corporate practices and mechanisms is essential to prevent further harm to First Nations communications consumers. If this is done in a proactive and responsive manner, consumer detriment and subsequent litigation and reputational damage for the company (such as that seen in the Telstra case) need not occur. ACCAN considers it essential that the needs and experiences of First Nations communications consumers are appropriately addressed by the communications sector as a whole.

To assist the Standing Committee with its Inquiry, ACCAN would like to highlight the following submissions and research which speak to the current experiences of First Nations communications consumers, and how the corporate sector (and the communications sector, more specifically) could improve its engagement with and responsiveness to the needs of First Nations peoples.

Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan submission

ACCAN's Indigenous Steering Committee recently provided a response to the National Indigenous Australian Agency's consultation on the development of an Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan. This

submission[1] is founded on the position that digital inclusion efforts must be developed and led by First Nations peoples and community-controlled organisations. The Steering Committee recommended that funding be provided to First Nations communities and community-controlled organisations for them to lead digital inclusion efforts, and for investment in local-level, place-based and co-designed solutions to gaps in digital inclusion and connectivity.

Telecommunications Debt in Rural and Remote Indigenous Central Australian Communities

As part of our 2019 grant round, ACCAN provided funding to MoneyMob Talkabout to examine telecommunications debt in regional and remote First Nations communities in Central Australia. This report[2] specifically looked into mis-selling by telecommunications providers, particularly Telstra, and the resulting systemic debt and harms for First Nations consumers. This report will be of significant interest to the Standing Committee, and with MoneyMob's consent we include it as an attachment to our submission.

Remote Indigenous Communications Review

In June 2020, ACCAN commissioned a review[3] of programs that support telecommunications and internet access in Remote Indigenous Communities and any gaps or outstanding needs identified by community stakeholders. This review covered all current and past major remote Indigenous digital inclusion and infrastructure programs since the 1990s. The report provides a summary of the effectiveness of existing programs, and gaps within current state, territory and federal government and external investment in improving digital inclusion in Remote Indigenous Communities. This includes information about activities and programs undertaken by members of the telecommunications industry, including nbn Co, Telstra and APN/Activ8Me, among others.[4] Despite infrastructure being increasingly available in remote communities, this report found that there are still significant gaps in access and usage of communications technologies.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide information to this inquiry. Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require additional information about any of the resources we've identified in our submission.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Heron Loban
Chair, ACCAN Indigenous Steering Committee

---

[1] Available: https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/1944-indigenous-digital-inclusion-plan-submission
[2] Cartwright, Carolyn, and McAuliffe, Chanelle, 2020. *Telecommunications Debt in Rural and Remote Indigenous Central Australian Communities: Loans and Phones Project Phase 3*, MoneyMob Talkabout. Available: https://accan.org.au/grants/grants-projects/1614-telecommunications-debt-in-rural-and-remote-indigenous-central-australian-communities
[3] Featherstone, Daniel, 2020. *Remote Indigenous Communications Review: Telecommunications Programs and Current Needs for Remote Indigenous Communities*, Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, Sydney. Available: https://accan.org.au/accans-work/research/1821-remote-indigenous-communications-review-telecommunications-programs-and-current-needs-for-remote-indigenous-communities
[4] Section 3 of the review