

29 October 2021

Blair Exell,

CEO

National Indigenous Australians Agency

Charles Perkins House

16 Bowes Place

Woden ACT 2606

Australia

eSafety response to the NIAA's discussion paper on Indigenous Digital Inclusion

Dear Mr Exell:

I am writing to you in relation to the National Indigenous Australians Agency's (NIAA) discussion paper regarding the upcoming Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan. As Australia's eSafety Commissioner, I welcome the NIAA's public consultation to support those living in regional and remote communities in the area of access, affordability and digital ability, while also welcoming insights and evidence for digital inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban areas.

As Australia's national independent regulator for online safety, eSafety leads, coordinates, educates and advises on online safety issues and aims to empower all Australians to have safer, more positive online experiences.

We draw upon social, cultural, technological and regulatory initiatives and interventions. Through the key pillars of protection, prevention and proactive and systemic change, eSafety's aim is to minimise harm online.

eSafety's role in this space

We deliver a wide range of programs and resources to cater for all Australians. In the context of this review, I want to highlight how eSafety sees digital ability and safety as being critical components in the proposed Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan. I would also like to highlight the extensive work we have undertaken in this space to help break down the barriers for those from Indigenous Australian communities to have safer online experiences.

As Australia's leader in online safety, eSafety is well placed to support this work through a process of co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

eSafety undertakes an extensive research program to ensure its programs and resources are evidence based. This equips eSafety with the insights and knowledge it needs to understand the nature of online safety issues and design, implement and evaluate best possible solutions.

The issues and insights raised below draw from eSafety's research program, the full suite of which can be accessed on eSafety's website at <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research>.

At-risk groups

eSafety's research and experience points to the fact that online harms can disproportionately impact at-risk and diverse groups. This includes, but is not limited to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability and people who identify as LGBTQI+, as well as, depending on the circumstances, women, older people and children and young people.

Low digital literacy and lack of digital access are several of many factors that may place an individual at greater risk of experiencing or being seriously impacted by harmful online content or behaviour.

The factors can also be intersectional. This means that the layering of factors can increase a person's risk. There is also strong link between the inequality, discrimination and disrespect that underpins harms experienced online and harms experienced offline. This is why eSafety places a strong emphasis on capacity building.

Online experiences of Indigenous Australians

While eSafety's remit of online safety means our focus, in the context of this review, is digital ability, it is also important to acknowledge the interrelationship between digital access, affordability and ability. For example, as outlined below, we know device sharing is more common in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which is an access issue that becomes a risk factor for abuse in the context of domestic and family violence.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples use technology and social media in ways that differ across cultural and language groups, and across urban, regional and remote communities. Digital inclusion diminishes with remoteness, particularly in terms of access and affordability. There is a heavy reliance on mobile connectivity and the key barrier to digital inclusion is affordability, especially in relation to income. In addition to everyday communication, social media and online communication are used to maintain connections to community and share cultural knowledges and practices.

eSafety research shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are at increased risk of online hate involving racism, image-based abuse and online abuse. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults experience online hate speech at double the national average. Children and young people are at increased risk of cyberbullying, online racism and sexting or sharing intimate images.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women also experience online abuse and technology-facilitated abuse as part of family violence at much higher rates than the general population. Further, eSafety's research shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in remote and regional areas are vulnerable to technology-facilitated abuse because of a lack of education around identifying technology-facilitated abuse, and, particularly in remote areas, a lack of education about digital literacy and accessible services.

Cyberbullying, adult cyber abuse and technology-facilitated abuse often occur within and across kinship groups, clans and communities as well as between individuals. The use of mobile devices as the main means of accessing the internet, high rates of device sharing, and lower levels of literacy and digital literacy mean that online safety advice should be adapted in order to be culturally appropriate and effective.

Intergenerational trauma and racism also impact how online abuse is experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, amplifying the abuse and adding to the impact.

However, it is important to understand the nuances in the research: while eSafety's research shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience hate speech at double the national average, our research into digital confidence also shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a whole report considerably more confidence than Australians overall in knowing how to deal with specific online safety issues, including:

- how to protect their privacy online (24% strongly agree compared to 10% for adults overall)
- how to deal with being bullied or harassed (22% strongly agree compared to 13%)
- where to report a negative online incident (43% agree/14% strongly agree compared to 34% agree/9% strongly agree)
- what to do if someone is impersonating them online (35% agree/15% strongly agree compared to 28% agree/9% strongly agree)
- what to do if their personal information or images are circulated without consent (31% agree/15% strongly agree compared to 25% agree/9% strongly agree).

These findings present a vital opportunity to harness the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to manage their online experiences.

eSafety's work in this space

eSafety has a strong focus on digital capacity building: giving individuals the skills and strategies to prevent and respond to harmful experiences online and engage online in ways likely to promote safe and positive online experiences.

Capacity building should be a lifelong process that begins at the earliest age possible. It should occur at the individual and community level and at a societal and cultural level. In other words, it needs to focus on building the capacity of the individual, but also of communities and society to understand, recognise and respond to harm online, including racism and abuse, and promote safer and more positive experiences. Close social networks and kinship structures within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are a source of strength to be harnessed.

eSafety has an extensive education and outreach program to support this stream of work. The four Rs of online safety — respect, responsibility, resilience and reasoning — are a basis for examining online information and making an informed judgement on an issue.

eSafety has worked with several Indigenous Australian communities to develop a range of targeted resources and initiatives to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia.

Importantly, eSafety engages with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through a strengths-based and co-design approach, which recognises the inherent strength and resilience of Indigenous Australian communities.

These include:

- **Elders and adults:** Your Online Journey, an app with step-by-step instructions and videos about digital literacy and online safety, a quick guide to image-based abuse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and tailored online safety advice for parents. Further work is also being done to deliver resources to support Elders in Alice Springs to recognise, call out and manage technology-facilitated abuse and the impacts of online abuse and fight videos.
- **Women:** allocation of 8 grants to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to co-design place-based resources and training. The grant projects, which will conclude in June 2022, are empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to identify and report technology-facilitated abuse. eSafety is supporting the ACCOs by providing specialist training.
- **Young people:** Be Deadly Online, an education program covering issues such as cyberbullying and sexting, developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- **Educators:** a professional learning webinar for teachers designed to support vulnerable student populations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. eSafety is also developing new educational resources that address the online safety needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and are inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.
- **Non-government organisations:** through the Online Safety Grants Program, Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media, First Nations Media Australia and the Institute for Urban Indigenous Health received a grant to work with Indigenous communities on online safety. Each project addresses key online issues, such as cyberbullying, faced by young people, elders, parents, carers and children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

This work is underpinned by extensive community consultation and research. Recent eSafety research reports in this space include:

- Technology-facilitated abuse among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from regional and remote areas, 2021¹
- Protecting Voices at Risk Online, 2020²
- Online safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in urban areas, 2019³

eSafety also delivers Be Connected, a digital literacy program aimed specifically at helping older and vulnerable Australians get online safety. To date, the program has developed over 500 learning resources

¹ <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/technology-facilitated-abuse-among-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-women>

² <https://www.esafety.gov.au/diverse-groups/protecting-voices-risk-online>

³ <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/online-safety-for-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-women-living-urban-areas>

and has reached over 1 million learners. A recent independent evaluation of Be Connected found that learners who participated in Be Connected showed significant improvement in a number of aspects of digital skills, digital confidence, social connectedness, reduced loneliness and increased online participation in social and economic activities.

Whole of community approach

To more broadly address online safety issues experienced by Indigenous Australians, it is important to consider the structural, systemic and social forms of inequality, discrimination and oppression that cause Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to experience higher levels of abuse online. A whole of community approach and systems approach is therefore needed to understand and address the underlying drivers of this behaviour, including racism and other intersecting factors.

Proactive measures

I do not shy away from acknowledging the consequences of harmful material online or the impacts of a lack of digital access, affordability and ability, especially in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. But it is also important to acknowledge the immense and increasingly essential benefits of being online. In addition, there are measures that can prevent, mitigate and address these issues, as I have outlined above.

As with all our work, eSafety supports a multi-faceted approach that explores how technology can both be a tool for, and extend upon, these underlying issues, while also serving as a means for positive and safe online experiences.

Opportunities to help inform NIAA's work

Whilst eSafety is proud of the work that we have undertaken to help Indigenous Australian communities get online safely, we acknowledge that more can be done to foster better collaboration across all levels of government to deliver effective and meaningful outcomes through a process of co-design with these communities.

I welcome the opportunity for eSafety to continue to engage with the NIAA on this important issue and would welcome eSafety's involvement in the upcoming roundtables that NIAA are hosting as part of this consultative process.

Yours sincerely,



Julie Inman Grant
eSafety Commissioner