

MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS

Question No. 2212

Senator the Hon David Shoebridge asked the Minister representing the Minister for Communications, in writing, on 26 June 2023:

1. Does the Government accept that digital connection is an essential service similar to utilities such as electricity and water connection.
2. Has the Department done any costings on the economic and social cost of digital exclusion, including:
 - a. impact on employment/employability;
 - b. impact on education/skills/training;
 - c. impact on access to government services, including health/telehealth services;
 - d. impact on access to emergency warnings and relief information; and
 - e. impact on economic growth.
3. Has the Department considered reinstating digital access questions into the census and what would be the cost to reinstate.
4. What federal government investment has been made into supporting digital inclusion for people on low incomes, particularly those in public housing.
5. Has the Department investigated Wi-Fi concessions.

Senator the Hon Murray Watt – The Minister representing the Minister for Communications, has provided the following answer to the honourable Senator’s question:

1. The Australian Government recognises that digital connectivity is a now essential for economic and social inclusion. The Minister for Communications has publicly stated on mobile and broadband connectivity:

“People expect it, they expect that they will have a reliable mobile service, irrespective of where they live and irrespective of whether or not they’re in a new or an established suburb. They expect that they will have water, electricity, and they also expect that they will have mobile connectivity.” (Address to the Local Government Association of Queensland, National Convention Centre, Canberra, 14 June 2023)

“In 2023, being connected to broadband is essential to maximise educational opportunities and take advantage of a digital society.” (Media Release, New Student Broadband Initiative Hits Key Milestone, 7 July 2023)

2. The Bureau of Communications, Arts and Regional Research (BCARR) in the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts has undertaken research on the affordability of telecommunications services for households including low-income households. Findings from the research are available in reports published on the BCARR’s website in 2017 and 2020, and available here: [Affordability of communications services | Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts](#)

The department is also aware of Australian and international research in relation to digital exclusion, and recognises the economic and social impacts. As a result, the department is supporting the delivery of the Government’s Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia to improve mobile and broadband connectivity and resilience in rural and regional Australia, as well as delivery of the initiatives identified under the response to questions 4 and 5. The National Broadband Network (NBN) is also offering every home and business in Australia access to fast internet services.

3. Decisions around the Census questionnaire, and the costs associated with them, are appropriately directed to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The ABS has recently undertaken consultation on the Census (28 February to 28 April 2023) to help inform its recommendations to the Government on topics that could be included in the Census, and will be undertaking a second phase of public consultation in mid-2023. This second phase of consultations will seek feedback on the shortlist of topics being considered for inclusion, change or exclusion in the 2026 Census.

The department has engaged with the ABS regarding reinstating previous Census questions or undertaking First Nation surveys to measure digital inclusion. The ABS has indicated that the upcoming National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS) 2023-24 will include questions on internet access.

The department continues to engage with the ABS, the Productivity Commission, Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) and with the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group (Advisory Group) on how to better measure digital access.

4. The Government is committed to ensuring all Australians have access to reliable and affordable internet services, including people on low incomes and those living in public housing. The Government is providing up to 30,000 unconnected families with school aged children a free NBN service at home for 12 months. NBN Co is implementing the School Student Broadband Initiative with the support of a \$4.5 million government grant. This is a targeted affordability measure to narrow the digital divide and boost education opportunities.

A number of organisations, including charities and public housing organisations, are participating in the initiative and play a key role identifying and nominating in need families that would benefit from a free NBN service. More information about the initiative is available at: www.infrastructure.gov.au/ssbi

The Government provides a Telephone Allowance payment to help eligible recipients of welfare payments to cover the costs of phone and internet plans.

There are also a number of independent websites that provide information to consumers about the cost, flexibility and control of various internet plans. ACCAN provides information online to help customers choose their preferred NBN plan. This can be accessed on ACCAN's website at: accan.org.au/consumer-information/talking-telco-tip-sheets/your-internet-and-home-phone/choosing-an-internet-plan

5. Wi-Fi is often provided free by businesses, local or state governments and community centres, although the quality of service, data limits and requiring users to agree to terms and conditions is a matter for individual entities. NBN has provided free Wi-Fi services into some First Nations communities as an effective way to improve digital inclusion in these communities.