

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS AND THE ARTS INQUIRY INTO THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC AND COMMERCIAL BROADCASTING, ONLINE CONTENT AND LIVE PRODUCTION TO RURAL AND REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

INTRODUCTION

The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) is the united voice of Local Government in Western Australia. The Association is an independent, membership-based group representing and supporting the work and interests of 139 Local Governments in Western Australia.

The Association provides an essential voice for over 1,200 elected members and approximately 14,500 Local Government employees as well as over 2 million constituents of Local Governments in Western Australia. The Association also provides professional advice and offers services that provide financial benefits to the Local Governments and the communities they serve.

During the public comment period for the inquiry into the 'Importance of Public and Commercial Broadcasting, Online Content and Live Production to Rural and Regional Australia, the Association encouraged comment from the Local Government sector to the inquiry and to inform a representative submission to the Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts. This submission reflects the main issues and concerns raised by the Association and the sector.

GENERAL COMMENT

By working for the Local Governments in Western Australia, and in this case those supporting Rural and Regional communities, WALGA shares the committees desire to understand how these important services are currently delivered to rural and regional Australia, and ensure that they have continued access to the arts, news and other services.

WALGA argues that broadcasting and access to the arts is crucial to establishing and maintaining community resilience.

'There is strong evidence supporting the principle that fostering creativity with the arts at the core at a young age will build the foundations of a resilient population, armed with capacities for critical inquiry, lateral thinking, innovation solutions and powerful communication. Shared experiences of cultural and creative pursuits has the potential to achieve social outcomes and help form an inclusive Western Australian identity.' (Arts Leadership Group, Strategic Directions Framework 2015-2030).

Supporting the importance of rural and regional communities' access to the arts, news and other services the Arts Leadership Group acknowledge that 'one of the most difficult challenges to 2030 will be how to achieve a critical mass of activity and supporting infrastructure in each regional centre at a quality equivalent to that expected by those in metropolitan areas.'

Cross sector, cross discipline partnerships, advocacy and the importance of ensuring current services are maintained and improved into the future become key aspects of this inquiry.

WALGA has long held policy positions on the importance of maintaining vibrant and diverse Rural and Regional communities, particularly advocating for appropriate community services such as library services, infrastructure such as roads, buildings and Airports and in more recent years supporting the highly regarded Royalties for Regions legislation that has provided well needed infrastructure, supported important services such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service and provided funding towards programs such as Creative Regions and Performing Arts Touring.

Infrastructure funded by Royalties for Regions further includes the Regional Mobile Communications Project improving mobile communications in selected locations in every region of Western Australia and health initiatives via the Southern Inland Health Initiative, all contributing to the vibrancy and diversity of Rural and Regional communities.

Further, the continued provision of high quality ABC and SBS television broadcasting, and importantly ABC radio to rural and regional areas, supported by high speed internet will provide equal opportunity to residents in our more remote areas.

ABC radio, in particular provides essential information services regarding emergencies (fires, extreme weather events such as cyclones) and the reporting of harvest bans during extreme hot and windy days, keeping our farmers well briefed on up to date weather conditions. The importance of ABC radio can be demonstrated by the following excerpts gathered during the Associations consultation process:

"The ABC offers a critical connection to the world and lessens isolation"

"We are so dependent on the ABC in the country ... if the power is cut and we only have batteries ABC is all we can access ... its [ABC radio] is more than a lifeline, it is many people's friend"

"Relevant content is paramount ... therefore local networks are also a critical part of the ABC structure"

"The ABC is listened to by many of our mine night shift truck drivers ... they enjoy the talk back show and quizzes far more than the uninterrupted music found on other channels"

The importance of continued high quality TV and Radio, including online content, to Rural and Regional Australia cannot be underestimated nor can the importance and relevance of local content to the viewer and listener.

The ABC Annual Report 2014 'Sharing Australian Stories' reveals that its 'funding was reduced in the May 2014 Federal Budget', and further 'It [the Government] has indicated it believes this cut should be funded by efficiency savings', and further 'In the early months of 2014, the Corporation participated in an Efficiency Study of the public broadcasters conducted by the Department of Communications. The draft report of that study suggested areas of the ABC's activities that might yield efficiency savings.

In his speech, The Future of our Public Broadcasters, the then Minister for Communications, the Hon. Malcolm Turnbull, stated "it is clear that there is a great opportunity for them to modernise their businesses without reducing the resources they have available for

programming”, this is good news to rural and regional Australia provided this also extends to transmission and maintenance of local content.

This desire is reflected in part of the then Minister’s speech and is worthy of including in this submission and reiterating to the Standing Committee:

“The ABC has the most extensive broadcasting network in rural and regional Australia—this is one of the ABC’s greatest strengths. The efficiency study noted that in the absence of commercial providers, the ABCs Local Radio service, particularly in regional and rural Australia, is relied upon for local news and the essential emergency broadcaster function.

The study notes this requires a physical presence at the local level, with its associated staff, operating and capital expenses. While the Study also suggests that the ABC should review the size and location of radio stations so that they match changing population sizes, it did not recommend any changes to the level of radio coverage in rural and regional areas.

There is nothing more clearly within the letter and spirit of the ABC’s charter than its local radio services in regional and rural Australia. With the enormous flexibility offered by the Internet and digital technologies coupled with the enthusiasm for story telling of their local news teams, without further expense we should see more local news with pictures on the air and on the net.”

The Association, in supporting the importance of maintaining vibrant and diverse Rural and Regional communities, would strongly advocate that any efficiencies sought not impact on these communities.

Additionally, it is extremely important that enablers such as the infrastructure proposed by the NBN rollout are appropriate to the needs of Rural and Regional Australians to access online content.

The value of culture to society, and how to measure this value was so important to the Department of Culture and the Arts (DCA), along with its private partners, that they developed the Public Value Measurement Framework. This in itself contributes to the importance of Public and Commercial Broadcasting, Online Content and Live Production to Rural and Regional Australia.

WALGA ADVOCACY POSITIONS

WALGA, via its State Council and determined by the Zone governance process formulate advocacy and policy positions over the depth and breadth of Local Governments services and activities. For the purposes of this inquiry it is worthy to outline some that relate to rural and regional Western Australia and may contribute to the National discussion.

The Association recognises that equitable long term funding arrangements for maintenance and renewal of regional facilities are required to ensure that this infrastructure is sustainable and thus has the following advocacy positions to support this ethos.

- The Association supports Local Government initiatives and infrastructure that contribute to health and wellbeing of the community, in particular, advocacy for better

planning and support for community infrastructure and investment by the State, Commonwealth and private partners.

Public libraries and Community Resource Centres are seen as primary points of access for an extensive and diverse range of current information, meeting the business, recreational, cultural and lifelong learning needs of members of the community, no matter their economic or social status, cultural or language background, level of ability or geographical location. The Association supports this via the following advocacy position.

- The Association supports the provision of Public Library services in Western Australia through a formal partnership between Local Government and the State Government of Western Australia governed by the *Library Board Act 1951*.

The Royalties for Regions legislation ensures that 25 percent of the State's mining and onshore petroleum royalties are being returned to regional areas as an investment in projects, infrastructure and services. In the first four years of Royalties for Regions, Local Governments in Western Australia were able to access the Country Local Government Fund (CLGF). The primary objective of the CLGF was to address the infrastructure needs across the country local government sector. This fund is being phased out, however given its valued contribution to the sector, the Association holds the following advocacy position:

- The Country Local Government Fund should be reinstated at a level commensurate with its original intent of addressing country Local Governments' infrastructure backlog.

Local Government recognises the value and contribution of tourism to the development of sustainable communities.

SUPPORTING ORGANISATIONS

To ensure WALGA keeps abreast of current trends and that the communities of Western Australia have continued access to the arts, news and other services, it either has membership to, or access to, several organisations in this space. The following gives insight to just a few of these and the focus of their work.

Arts Leadership Group

The Arts Leadership Group (ALG) was formed to provide long term strategic direction for the arts and cultural sector in Western Australia.

ALG's vision is 'For Western Australia to be the best place it can be to live, work and play thanks to the contribution of its arts, culture and creative industries.'

The aim of ALG 'must be to encourage and harness these growing inter-connections, enabling our creative people to work across art forms, cultural disciplines and new distribution channels to excite, engage and educate our citizens and visitors.'

The ALG in its Strategic Directions Framework outlines that 'in the past five years, the value of film and television production in the State has been \$188.97 million from a ScreenWest Investment of \$23.82 million'. Although the exact 'value' in terms of rural and regional WA is not stated, it would be reasonable to infer that there has been an inherent value borne.

Further, 'regional Western Australians are more likely to perceive a big impact of the arts in bringing visitors to their community (51% compared with 40% of Western Australians as a whole)'.

FORM

FORM is an independent, non-profit cultural organisation established in 1968 that develops and advocates for excellence in creativity and artistic practice in Western Australia.

Their activities span high-level artist development and exhibitions, place-making and strategy, social and multicultural engagement, cultural infrastructure development, Aboriginal cultural maintenance, research, and advocacy. All of these activities are connected by the exploration of artistic excellence, whether through processes or outcomes.

FORM has offices and a gallery space on Murray Street Perth, the Courthouse Gallery and Visitor Centre in Port Hedland, and Spinifex Hill Studios in South Hedland. Their programming spans regional and metropolitan Western Australia.

An example of work in rural and regional Western Australia can be accessed at: <http://www.form.net.au/2015/05/public-art-in-the-wheatbelt/>

NBN Co

The nbn™ network is Australia's new landline phone and internet network. It is designed to provide access to all the benefits of fast and reliable internet services, wherever people live.

CONCLUSION

WALGA has long held policy positions on the importance of maintaining vibrant and diverse Rural and Regional communities.

Ensuring that these positions are upheld the Association contributes to cross sector, cross discipline partnerships, advocating for current services to be maintained and improved into the future.

The continued provision of high quality ABC and SBS television broadcasting, and importantly ABC radio to rural and regional areas, supported by high speed internet will provide equal opportunity to residents in our more remote areas.

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