

## **Broadband for the Bush Alliance**

### **Better telecommunications for rural and remote Australians**

#### **A Broadband for the Bush Alliance policy paper**

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Broadband for the Bush Alliance is:

Australian Communications Consumers Action Network, Central Desert Shire Council, Central Land Council, Centre for Appropriate Technology, Centre for Remote Health, Desert Knowledge Australia, Frontier Services, Indigenous Remote Communications Association, Katherine Town Council, Ninti One, Regional Development Australia Northern Territory, Remote Area Planning and Development Board, Swinburne University of Technology

Facilitated by:



## Executive Overview

**The Broadband for the Bush Alliance (B4BA)** is an alliance of organisations that seeks to advance the digital capacity and capability of remote Australians. B4BA seeks the best possible communication outcomes for the 7% of Australians not currently scheduled to receive fibre to the premise through the National Broadband Network, and to advance unmet telephony needs, as a significant related issue.

### The unfinished business of the NBN: remote and rural Australia needs a dedicated communications strategy

For remote and rural Australia to participate successfully in the national and global digital economy, a targeted, evidence-based, well-resourced strategy is required. It should be recognised that policies and strategies aimed at the majority of Australians who live in major cities are not appropriate for remote and rural Australia.

The Government's and the Opposition's NBN plans need enhancement to include a strategy aimed at improving communications in remote and rural Australia by:

1. The expansion of mobile coverage
2. Getting digital infrastructure right – both the rational use of existing infrastructure and expanding infrastructure
3. Smart last mile solutions for small towns and communities
4. Affordable pricing for mobile calls in remote and rural Australia
5. Improved digital literacy
6. Good research to underpin remote communications policy
7. Improving Indigenous communications programs

Without a bespoke strategy, remote and rural Australia will be left to play 'catch up' with the rest of the world. It is critical the Federal Government work closely with organisations such as the Broadband for the Bush Alliance to develop a strategy that provides the best communications outcomes for remote and rural Australians.

There is a need for government to better understand remote regions' digital aspirations and priorities through a representative voice. Given this, we recommend that funding is provided to support the Broadband for the Bush Alliance, as a representative voice for remote digital communications.

## 1. The expansion of mobile coverage

As demand for access to broadband through mobile devices continues to grow, the time to invest in improved coverage is now. This point is strongly reflected in the findings of the 2011-2012 Regional Telecommunications Review (RTR)<sup>1</sup>, which show mobile communications to be the most important issue for remote and rural Australians.

Smartphones offer Australians untold opportunities to engage with the digital economy, and are fast becoming Australia's most valued communications device. As the Smartphone continues to

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<sup>1</sup> Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee; "2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review". Australian Government; 5th March 2012 - [http://www.rtirc.gov.au/2011-12\\_report/](http://www.rtirc.gov.au/2011-12_report/)

revolutionise the way in which we conduct our personal and professional lives, it is increasingly critical that mobile coverage is extended in remote and rural Australia.

It is clear that service providers will not independently invest in further coverage in remote and rural Australia. Government has an obligation to ensure those living in remote and rural Australia can improve their personal well-being and business productivity through mobile communications. Currently there is a very low penetration of cellular mobile coverage (by population and particularly by geographic coverage) in remote areas of Australia. Furthermore, remote Indigenous residents use mobile technology as their communications medium of choice for both voice calls and Internet access.

Given this, the Broadband for the Bush Alliance seeks Government policy that recognises the importance of mobile services to remote and rural Australia by supporting:

- Increased funding for additional mobile coverage in remote and rural areas.
- The rational use of existing infrastructure (such as towers and satellite capacity) to lower the cost of extending mobile coverage in remote areas. This should be underpinned by a joint government and industry feasibility assessment of providing lower cost backhaul for cellular mobile through a coordinated approach using both satellite and terrestrial microwave transmission technologies, to take advantage of the window of opportunity expected to be afforded by the launchings of the two new NBN Satellites. This extends RTR recommendation 4.5 to apply in remote areas.
- The initiation of a subsidy to part fund mobile phone call costs from remote areas designated as extended zones (see Section 4 for more detail).

The Broadband for the Bush Alliance's position on mobile coverage is further detailed in the paper *Extending remote and rural cellular coverage*.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Getting digital infrastructure right – both the rational use of existing infrastructure and expanding infrastructure

The terrestrial network infrastructure in remote Australia must be protected to give sustainable delivery of telecommunications services. The Alliance is concerned that the Government's focus on investment in the national broadband infrastructure ignores the need for continued upgrade and expansion of remote telecommunications infrastructure necessary to give the bush equivalence of access to an ever increasing number of telecommunications services. Without government funded programs and regulatory policies remote Australia will continue to be relegated as the forgotten region.

Furthermore, the NBN policy (the 1,000 premises rule) fails to connect remote towns and communities in proximity to existing optic fibre infrastructure, to the terrestrial NBN network. The NBN Co network extension policy is an add-on process that places financial burden on communities wishing to connect to NBN terrestrial services.

We recommend that:

1. The Telecommunications Universal Service Management Authority (TUSMA) is given access to capital (government or industry) to address substantive service failures through

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<sup>2</sup> Broadband for the Bush Alliance, 2013, *Extending remote and rural cellular coverage*, <http://www.desertknowledge.com.au/getattachment/Our-Programs/CollaborativeImpact/Broadband-for-the-Bush-Alliance/Extending-remote-and-rural-cellular-coverage-May-2013.pdf.aspx>

infrastructure upgrades/builds and soft upgrades. This is in keeping with Regional Telecommunications Review (RTR) Recommendation 2.4

2. The Government commits to infrastructure upgrades and to world's best practice with respect to equipment maintenance programs in remote regions.
3. The Government commits to invest in remote region black spot programs to address the provision of telecommunication infrastructure where commercial telecommunication companies require incentives to invest in priority new infrastructure (For example restoration/continuation of previous black spot programs).
4. The Government commits to allocating assistance funding to connect remote towns and communities to the NBN where existing optic fibre routes are in close proximity.

### **3. Smart last mile solutions for small towns and communities**

At present the national broadband network program is a one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the communications needs of small communities. For instance, direct-to-premises satellite services approach proposed for these communities under the NBN fails to take into account the possibility that sharing services may be appropriate in some circumstances. A government NBN policy is needed to give low cost broadband delivery platforms appropriate to smaller remote communities.

The Government should commit to assessing Wi-Fi and other platforms for their effectiveness for local access in remote communities, where backhaul exists.

### **4. Affordable pricing for mobile calls in remote and rural Australia**

The Government funded the 'extended zones' tariffing scheme in 2001 to provide STD calls at local call rates for fixed line telephone callers in remote telephone zones, to counteract the tyranny of distance. However, with the high uptake and both economic and social importance of mobile phones throughout Australia, the extended zones strategy is losing its effectiveness. Mobile phones have increasingly become the preferred option for providing basic telecommunications access, where coverage exists, particularly for those with limited home phone access.

The high cost of mobile calls has naturally become an issue for many users. There is no equivalent to the extended zones scheme for mobile users, who rely on their mobile phone as their standard telephone. There is thus a need to recognise mobile communication as a standard telephone service for remote Australians, requiring a cost reducing initiative, complementary to the fixed line extended zones scheme.

The Alliance recommends that:

- 1) Government, in conjunction with service providers, should introduce a mobile phone extended zone scheme for remote Australia.
- 2) Voice calls from mobile phones in extended zones should be capped at a local or comparable rate, to make the extended zone tariff technology neutral. This would ensure that people in remote areas, who rely on their mobile phone as their main communications device, are afforded reasonable access on an equitable basis to a standard telephone service.

### **5. Improved digital literacy**

#### **Remote and rural Australians**

Remote Australians must have the opportunity to develop skills to participate in the digital economy; to improve their economic and social advancement. Government must recognise the challenges and costs to rural and remote Australians to access digital training, to engage with experts and to gain the required skills.

This situation is further compounded by the fact that many of the existing digital programs are targeted exclusively at NBN early release sites, explicitly precluding towns and local governments not in these areas. This is an inequality that needs to be addressed if all Australians are to reap the benefits of the NBN.

We recommend Government invest in the programs detailed below to ensure remote and rural Australians have the opportunities to gain the skills to participate in the global digital economy.

1. Programs to improve online marketing, sales, customer service and other innovative online/social media techniques to remote located micro and small businesses to improve their competitive advantage.
2. Programs to stimulate awareness and provide subsidised training to micro and small businesses in remote regions to improve their knowledge on new and emerging online business engagement techniques. In keeping with RTR Recommendation 5.2.
3. A program to enhanced business networking opportunities for micro and small businesses in remote areas to enable them to seize the benefits of enhanced online presence.
4. A program to assist remote micro and small businesses develop competitive online strategies. This is in keeping with RTR recommendations 5.2, 5.4 & 5.7.
5. Programs to deliver awareness and training for residents on online/social media techniques to improve their knowledge and recognition of the social and community benefits of online presence. This is in keeping with RTR recommendations 5.2, 5.3, 5.4 and 5.6.
6. A Remote Digital program that targets select remote peak business bodies and remote peak community organisations to assist them effectively participate in the digital economy. The policy seeks to maximise the effective use of the national broadband satellite network and leverage learnings from other programs designed for metropolitan/regional areas.

### Remote Local Government

Remote local governments undertake more community service delivery functions than metropolitan councils to give their communities as many services as possible. Their remoteness introduces additional hardships to develop the skills required to fully engage in the digital economy. They face significant challenges and costs to access training in digital literacy, to engage with experts and to access the skills, knowledge and appropriate resources required to update their digital platforms.

Remote local governments must have digital wherewithal to participate in the digital economy. It is essential that strategies for online services and digital platforms are implemented to implement new services and improve their efficiency. To achieve this there is a need for targeted funding for remote Australian local governments to accelerate their digital literacy (capacity and capability).

Government should invest in the following digital programs to support remote and rural local governments.

1. Funding assistance to remote local governments for the creation of online strategies to guide improvement in their online presence and service to constituents. This objective is in keeping with RTR recommendations 5.2, 5.4 and 5.7.
2. A Local Government Remote Digital program to assist in effective participation in the digital economy. The program would customise existing programs for local government digital participation to a rural and remote local government context.
3. A Remote Mentor program that addresses the barriers remote and rural local governments face when accessing experts and knowledgeable persons with online experience. The program would offer assistance to local government or economic development organisation to facilitate the creation of remote mentor programs. This program is in keeping with RTR recommendation 5.6.

## 6. Good research to underpin ICT policy

Research focused on Australia's digital future should be included in Australia's research funding priority areas, as this is a significant issue for Australia both economically and socially.

Government should invest in the following research programs to ensure Australia's ICT policy is evidence based:

1. Increased research into broadband consumption and use, as well as applications, at the household and business level, in particular in remote and regional Australia.
2. A large scale longitudinal survey across remote Indigenous Australia to map how people access and use internet services and the effectiveness of these services in bridging the effects of distance and isolation. This responds to RTR recommendation 2.7.
3. More testing on NBN satellite infrastructure to identify performance and end user acceptance of the applications. This would give confidence to government agencies and small business in the use of high demand online applications.
4. More testing on the performance of desirable applications (such as HD video conferencing) for use by remote local government, remote economic development organisations, remote small business representative organisations, remote public and private service provider organisations, and end users.

These recommendations are consistent with RTR recommendations 5.7, 5.8, 5.9, 5.10 and 5.11.

## 7. Improving Indigenous communications programs

Over the years, governments have put in place a range of initiatives aimed at improving communications in remote Indigenous communities. However, high levels of digital inequality still exist in many communities around Australia. Indigenous Remote Media Association (IRMA) highlights this point, saying 'most remote Indigenous people currently have limited access and usage of ICTs', and further that, 'limited access to IT facilities, training, relevant on-line content and service delivery, and affordable broadband services will increase the digital divide'.<sup>3</sup> As the rest of Australia become increasingly connected to broadband through the rollout of the NBN, it is critical that government recognise the risk for remote Indigenous Australia if the divide does indeed increase, and continue to commit to addressing this issue.

With rollout of the Indigenous Communications Program (ICP) to new locations due to finish mid this year, it is critical that we reflect on the successes of the program, and discuss what improvements can be made for the future direction of remote Indigenous communications. Building on the notions of sustainability, recurrent well-directed funding, and effective and ongoing engagement with remote communities, there is an opportunity, through appropriate use of the NBN, to make significant and lasting improvements to remote Indigenous communications.

The Alliance proposes the following key features of future remote-focused programs:

- Indigenous and community organisations, and NGOs, to play a greater role in the program development and delivery;
- Funding should be targeted to suit the needs and different circumstances of individual remote communities;
- Relevant, ongoing training that empowers Indigenous people to take ownership and responsibility of community services;
- Improving mobile coverage as a key enabling technology for remote communities;

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<sup>3</sup> Indigenous Remote Media Association submission to 2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review, p12.

- Mobile phones are recognised as a standard telephone service for many remote Indigenous Australians, with a cost safeguard similar to the extended zones strategy.

Funding programs should expand from the community internet access centre model and associated training that have been the core elements of Government funded programs over the past 10 years, to also support other models for residents' access to broadband services including home access and access for portable/mobile devices. This is in keeping with RTR recommendation 2.6.

We propose the Government invest in improving Indigenous communications programs in the following ways:

1. Government should adopt a nationwide approach to encouraging engagement with the NBN in Indigenous communities. We propose the prompt development of an expanded remote Indigenous communications program to include appropriate models for internet access, last mile delivery (e.g. via mobile telephony and Wi-Fi), training and support (see also Digital Literacy in Section 5). This is in keeping with RTR recommendation 5.2.
2. Government should invest in the development of online applications of particular relevance to remote Indigenous residents. These should be developed with the aim of reducing the effects of isolation for Indigenous residents of remote areas. This would reduce the costs to Government associated with remote residents accessing health, education, employment and other government services.
3. Support for Aboriginal organisations to make greater use of communication infrastructure and applications to enhance their governance and business management processes.

The Broadband for the Bush Alliance's position on improving indigenous communications programs is further detailed in the paper *Rethinking the Indigenous Communications Program*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Broadband for the Bush Alliance, 2013, *Rethinking the Indigenous Communications Program*, <http://www.desertknowledge.com.au/getattachment/Our-Programs/CollaborativeImpact/Broadband-for-the-Bush-Alliance/Rethinking-the-Indigenous-Communications-Program-May-2013.pdf.aspx>