Submission 119
Date received: 25/02/2011

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Infrastructure and Communications
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Friday, 25 February 2011

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: Inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network

The Australian Federation of Deaf Societies (AFDS) is pleased to provide the attached comments for the consideration of the inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network.

AFDS is the peak body representing the interests of organisations providing services to the Australian Deaf community. Consisting of the state Deaf Societies of New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia, the Federation was formed in 1966 with the principle objective of improving Commonwealth and State government awareness of issues relating to the sector. As deaf societies we provide a broad range of services to the Deaf community including employment, welfare and sign language interpreting and are therefore well placed to provide advice on issues relating to the delivery of services in the sector.

AFDS also works closely with other service providers in the sector, including Deaf Australia (formerly the Australian Association of the Deaf) and the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association (ASLIA).

AFDS believe that the National Broadband Network is an important technological investment that will benefit all Australians but is particularly important for the Deaf and hard of hearing community in allowing them to communicate freely and in their language of choice.

Attached is our response to the terms of reference for the committee, we would be pleased to provide the Inquiry with any further information or to expand on our submission in a hearing in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Sharon Everson
SECRETARY/TREASURER
AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF DEAF SOCIETIES

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The Australian Federation of Deaf Societies submission to the Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications New Inquiry into the National Broadband Network

The Australian Federation of Deaf Societies (AFDS) was established in 1966 to meet the needs of organisations providing services to the Australian Deaf Community. The vision of the Australian Federation of Deaf Societies is for access and equality for all.

Member organisations include:

- Deaf Society of New South Wales
- Deaf Services Queensland
- Royal South Australian Deaf Society (Deaf CanDo)
- Tasmanian Deaf Society (TasDeaf)
- Victorian Deaf Society (VicDeaf)
- Western Australian Deaf Society (WADeaf)

AFDS welcomes the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications New Inquiry into the National Broadband Network (NBN) and thanks the committee for the opportunity to present a submission on the many issues of relevance to the inquiry.

Our submission will focus on the following areas:

a) The delivery of government services and programs;
b) Achieving health outcomes;
c) Improving the educational resources and training available for teachers and students;
e) Impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities;
f) Impacting business efficiencies and revenues, particularly for small and medium business, and Australia's export market;
g) Interaction with research and development and related innovation investments;
h) Facilitating community and social benefits; and
i) The optimal capacity and technology requirements of a network to deliver these outcomes.

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Introduction

The AFDS supports the installation of the NBN and envisages that it will have many positive impacts for the deaf and hard of hearing community, particularly in allowing deaf signing people to communicate online in Auslan. This is likely to have major social, employment, and educational benefits for deaf and hard of hearing people.

AUSLAN is the sign language most used by the Australian deaf signing community; it is a visual language which uses hand movements, facial expression and body language to express meaning. Auslan is distinct from spoken or written English, its grammar and vocabulary often does not have direct English equivalents and vice versa.

The press conferences held by the Queensland Premier Anna Bligh during the recent Queensland floods and cyclone Yasi demonstrate the importance of information being provided to the deaf community in Auslan. Deaf Services Queensland provided volunteer interpreters for the press conferences in response to feedback from several deaf people in the community who said they felt they were not getting the immediate information they needed.

Given the visual nature of Auslan, the potential for the NBN to allow deaf and hard of hearing people to communicate using video conferencing and other video communication tools such as Skype is likely to be the biggest benefit for the deaf community. This will be particularly useful for providing remote interpreting, although there is a general interpreter shortage it is most acute in country areas where local interpreters may not be available. For example, in Queensland the population is spread throughout many urban and rural centres - it has the largest percentage of population outside of its capital. Specialised interpreters tend to be in capital cities, but their skills are in demand in all communities

The NBN's capacity for simultaneous high speed uploading/downloading will greatly improve access to these forms of communication, especially because unlike the current network, speeds will not be affected during peak periods, meaning a much more reliable and consistent service will be available. The NBN will also reach 100% of the population (93% through FTTP and the remaining 7% through wireless and satellite technologies) meaning that individuals will be able to access the network and these forms of communication anywhere and anytime.

Whilst the NBN is likely to bring with it many benefits, we feel it is important to stress that the construction of the network alone is not sufficient. In order for its full potential to be achieved, it must be ensured that access to the NBN is affordable, and allows equal access to all people, regardless of the socio economic status, education, and location.

For example, in isolated areas where people currently may not even have access to ADSL, the implementation of the new network may not achieve any real benefit unless it is also accompanied with training programs educating people about how to utilise the internet and modern computer technology, and this is likely to be one of the major challenges that organisations supporting these communities will face. This will be particularly challenging in terms of addressing the needs of deaf people in these communities, where in order for training to be really effective it needs to be delivered in Auslan. Additionally, in order for internet content to be truly accessible to the deaf

community much more information needs to be made available in Auslan format, which is rarely the case at the moment.

AFDS would welcome the opportunity to support the technology implementation with appropriate training and support, potentially on a similar basis to how we already support other technologies for communication, such as the National Relay Service (NRS) across Australia.

Our submission will now address the various areas of the inquiry.

The delivery of government services and programs

As Deaf Societies we provide a broad range of services to the Deaf community including employment, information services, audiology, welfare, advocacy and sign language interpreting. Many of these services are funded by Federal and State Government.

One of the key areas in which we envisage the NBN will benefit the deaf community is through increased access to better communication through services such as Video Relay Interpreting (VRI) and VRI through Skype (VRS), and other video conferencing software, allowing communication in Auslan without the need for all parties to be physically present in the same location. Through the use of VRI and VRS, government services/programs, health services, educational, resources etc can be more accessible to deaf people.

In 2009, the Department of Human Services (DHS) implemented a trial VRI service across six sites in Melbourne and throughout regional Victoria. Community members, interpreters and service providers were asked to provide their feedback about the service which was overwhelmingly positive. This feedback was compiled in a report compiled by BSR Solutions (Department of Human Services, Victoria *Evaluation Report of Video Relay Interpreting (VRI) Project* 2010). Some of the comments recorded were:

- *"Having VRI services is worthwhile,*
- *Signing, finger spelling, facial expressions and gestures are all easy to understand in VRI interpreting sessions,*
- *They are comfortable enough using VRI to give information and make decisions,*
- *Making appointments is easy and it is also possible to have the date and time that the community member wants*
- *They don't have to ask friends to help with interpreting,*
- *Improved access for community members to interpreter services*
- *Savings in travel time and travel costs*
- *The communication is very clear. I have an idea in the future that the interpreter could have a headphone and talk with the doctor. I would not need to be in the same room as the doctor. The service could be a combination of phone and video relay and I could make phone calls to anybody."*

This feedback indicates that communities are likely to embrace the use of this kind of technology as it becomes more available and that there is significant demand for VRI interpreting, and that VRI is beneficial in improving access for all parties.

Some future applications could be the use of VRI in hospitals, schools, courts/legal settings, medical centres and workplaces, which could reduce waiting times for an interpreter to attend on site. In future it may also be possible for the internet to be used to deliver warnings or information during emergency situations or natural disasters.

VRI and VRS will greatly reduce the need for interpreters to travel to regional areas to deliver services in person and will provide greater efficiencies for work outcomes, as well as significant cost reductions for businesses, deaf organisations and individuals. This will enable us to service a greater proportion of the community and extend outreach programs, particularly in regional areas where there is a shortage of qualified interpreters.

AFDS member organisations are currently providing VRI and VRS services that are restricted substantially because of the lack of reliable broadband access.

In addition, the NBN will offer the opportunity for substantial improvement in the services offered through other government funded organisations such as the NRS. The NRS is provides phone services for people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment using TTY, MSN and online chat, and telephones with adjustable volume control etc... These services lag behind those available in other nations such as the United Kingdom and United States where sign language interpreters are available on demand through VRS. As such we feel that the construction of the NBN is crucial as it will allow the expansion of services currently offered by organisations such as the NRS to include VRS interpreting, improving the level of services available in Australia to match those of other nations.

Achieving health outcomes

Whereas currently patients in remote areas may need to travel large distances in order to access specialist care, in future they may be able to increasingly access medical services remotely online.

VRI and VRS can be used in hospitals and medical centres, allowing them to access interpreting in emergency situations and to conduct consultations without the need to wait for an interpreter to attend on site.

For the deaf and hard of hearing community, the ability to receive Audiology and Speech Pathology consultations remotely would be another major benefit. In Victoria, a speech pathologist in Melbourne recently completed a session with a Deaf patient in Shepparton using Video Relay, and there is increasing demand for this type of service. Counselling services are also provided through this technology where face to face service may not be possible.

Although the NBN may provide many great opportunities for improvements in the provision of health care and access to services, it will never replace the role of face to face communication, particularly in key areas such as mental health, where the relationship between patient and doctor relies on a high level of trust and confidentiality. While we support the use of technology to improve access to services we feel that wherever possible it is still preferable that people are able to access advice and support in person and that communities and service providers are supported by the government to continue to do this.

Improving the educational resources and training available for teachers and students

An improved broadband network will make a greater variety of educational services and resources available to the deaf community, through live captioning, VRI interpreting as well as access to online education.

For example, VRI has recently been used to deliver a workshop that was based in Melbourne about writing a Will to deaf individuals throughout regional Victoria. Importantly, VRI allows people in remote areas to actively participate in workshops, giving them the ability to ask questions and be involved throughout, as opposed to simply uploading a video or distributing a DVD, where this is not possible. In this way, VRI allows deaf people to be involved and interact in a way that other technologies don't.

Whereas this technology already allows the kind of application described above, it currently requires participants to travel to a designated VRI site equipped with an internet connection with sufficient bandwidth to allow for the concurrent uploading and downloading required at both ends. The benefit of the NBN is likely to be that rather than needing to travel to a designated location, individuals could connect from a location of their choice, which would likely result in a much larger pool of participants.

Improving access to education and delivery of content will also impact the learning outcomes of deaf individuals; in the long term this is likely to have profound benefits in terms of their employment outcomes, life skills and contributions in their communities. It would support the effectiveness of "centres of excellence" in deaf education to support students beyond the walls of the organisation.

Impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities

Effective communication is critical in any workplace. Deaf people in hearing organisations often struggle to gain access to interpreting and can be disadvantaged in comparison to hearing colleagues by not receiving the same level of information and feedback relating to their work. Over time this can affect their job security and long term employment outcomes.

Although there is some funding available for interpreting in the workplace, for people in remote areas the travel costs associated with paying an interpreter to visit the workplace are often prohibitive, and may only cover interpreting expenses for a few visits across an entire year.

Video Relay Interpreting (VRI) is technology that allows interpreters, deaf and hearing people to communicate through video link and removes the need for an interpreter to travel to a deaf person, and therefore removes associated travel costs, making access to interpreting more viable. Although VRI is being trialled in some areas, access is currently limited to specified sites that have connections capable of handling the upload and download speeds required for clear communication using VRI, and employers are often reluctant to travel to these sites in order conduct meetings/training sessions etc...

The NBN will enable businesses to conduct their meetings onsite and connect with interpreters through VRI without the inconvenience of travelling to fixed sites. This will give employers and employees more flexibility and greatly improve communication,

which is likely to result in better employment outcomes. It will also provide better value for money for current Government programs such as the Employment Assistance Fund.

Impacting business efficiencies and revenues, particularly for small and medium business, and Australia's export market

Not only will the NBN mean that services can be provided to the community remotely, it will also allow staff training to be delivered remotely as well. Up skilling of staff becomes easier, more cost and time effective, and there are possibilites for other uses e.g. NAATI assessment (the national interpreter accreditation program). This offers the potential to increase business efficiency internally, as well as the opportunity to increase efficiency in the provision of services to the community.

Interaction with research and development and related innovation investments

The NBN will allow for research affecting the deaf community to be conducted on a national scale and will reach a greater portion of the Deaf community. Importantly, surveys will be able to be conducted online in Auslan format, in the language most used by the deaf community which will ensure more accurate and meaningful responses and collection of data. It may also be possible for participants to submit their responses in Auslan allowing them to communicate in their language of choice.

This would provide a clearer snapshot of what's happening in the community and assist Deaf organisations as well as the government to identify programs and initiatives that will have the most benefit and impact.

Further existing research programs, such as those conducted by the Hearing Cooperative Research Centre, which involve AFDS member organisations, will be better enabled to achieve desired research outcomes at a reduced cost.

Facilitating community and social benefits

This is the area in which we envisage the NBN will have the most impact for deaf and hard of hearing people.

The ability to communicate and interact with others is important to all people. Deaf people are no different, but they can find it difficult and often impossible, to communicate through methods traditionally used by hearing people such as the telephone, and written forms of communication can also prove difficult as English is often a second language for deaf people with grammatical structures vastly different to Auslan. This can isolate deaf people from their community and put them at risk through chronic homelessness, mental illness and un/underemployment.

Through the use of online communication software and websites, e.g. Skype, Auslan blogs/logs etc deaf individuals will be able to have better communication with each other and with others within their community, resulting in a greater sense of inclusion. Deaf people across Australia will be able to connect with one another and share information and experiences, as well as participate in social events, online groups and workshops.

For deaf people this is likely to result in a much greater sense of self esteem and self worth, greater knowledge of their rights and responsibilities, as well as encouraging

them to achieve their personal goals and form stronger relationships with those around them. This will benefit and strengthen both individuals and communities.

There is strong research that identifies “social connectedness” as the primary factor that supports personal happiness. As previously mentioned face to face contact is always preferred, however the effect of better on line access will support “social connectedness” at both a virtual and personal level. Technology used well can support improved opportunities for personal contact. This is already well established in the deaf community through the use of social media. The NBN would add a significant additional option.

Raising the profile and normalising the use of Auslan are key to bridging the gap between hearing and deaf cultures in Australia. Through the use of the technologies that will be available as a result of the NBN, Auslan will hopefully become more reconisable in the wider community as a language that is relevant and important to the deaf community and will assist in improving the status of deaf people within their communities.

The optimal capacity and technology requirements of a network to deliver these outcomes.

The most important feature of the NBN will be its synchronous upload/download speeds/capability. Currently some plans offer fast download speeds, but uploads on consumer plans are typically slow which affects the quality of Auslan communication online.

The Australian Communications Exchange (ACE) is currently trialing a VRS service and advises that the upload speed is critical as it needs to be more than 384 kbps to assist smooth sign language communication across the Internet.. Whilst ADSL2+ is currently capable of delivering these speeds it is affected by traffic during peak periods. The benefit of the NBN is that upload/download speeds should not be affected by peak traffic and should therefore provide a more reliable and consistent service.

In addition to the construction of the network, end users will require access to modems and computers capable of processing information at the speed it is downloaded. It is also vitally important that Internet Service Providers make plans available to consumers at affordable prices, and with a variety of download/upload configurations available.

AFDS thanks the Committee for the consideration of our submission and we would welcome an opportunity to present in person to the Committee. We can be contacted through the AFDS Secretariat located in Sydney on (02) 8833 3613.