



House Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications

Inquiry into the role and potential
of the National Broadband
Network

Department of Human Services
Submission

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1 Introduction

The Department of Human Services (DHS) and its service delivery agencies welcome the opportunity provided by the House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications Inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network (NBN).

Policy responsibility for programs and services that DHS delivers resides with numerous line agencies. It is the role of DHS to engage constructively on policy deliberations to provide the service delivery perspective. This submission will be confined to the service delivery elements of the role, potential and capacity of the NBN for the delivery of government services and programs, achieving health outcomes, and facilitating community and social benefits (Terms of Reference elements a, b and h respectively).

As a collection of the Australian Government's largest service delivery agencies, the Human Services portfolio is able to deliver its services through various customer access channels, including face to face consultation, call centre networks, online services. The portfolio also provides social support through social workers and rehabilitation experts to provide linkages with other assistance available in the community. In disaster situations, Human Services agencies can also provide case management services, providing one on one support through particularly difficult times such as drought, bushfire and flood.

The potential of the NBN to change how services and information can be delivered to Australians is an exciting opportunity for government and as the largest Commonwealth service delivery organisation, particularly exciting for DHS.

2 Current internet service delivery

2.1 DHS online services

DHS portfolio agencies offer a range of services online through agency websites and australia.gov.au. The Australian Government Online Service Point (AGOSP) Program and the work DHS is doing through the DHS Service Delivery Reform (SDR) agenda (see 3.1 below) will provide people with simple, convenient access to government information, messages and services.

2.1.1 Medicare Australia

Medicare Australia has a strong online capability available 24/7 operating in real time. Medicare Australia maintains a common payment system and robust, secure interactions with online users across a range of programs.

Medicare

Medicare Australia provides a number of secure online services for both individuals and health professionals in relation to the Medicare Program. For example, the Health Professional Online Services is a secure authenticated channel for health professionals to do a range of business with Medicare Australia including claiming Medicare rebates.

Online services for individuals allow members of the public to:

- Request a replacement or duplicate Medicare card
- Update your bank account details
- Update your personal details
- View your Medicare claims history (previous 12 months)
- View your Medicare Safety Net balance (current calendar year)
- View your Medicare benefit tax statement (current and previous financial year)
- In future, this will include online claiming of Medicare rebates.

Budget Initiative

- From 1 July 2010 under the “Connecting health services to the future” (Telehealth) budget measure both providers and individuals will be able to undertake a number of medical e-consultations using a video link. This measure will contribute to increased workforce capacity and provide an innovative solution to current service delivery barriers in outer metropolitan areas. The NBN provides significant infrastructure to enable better service delivery for the Telehealth initiative.

Aged Care

- Medicare Australia offers full online claiming for the aged care sector, allowing aged care providers to lodge, view and finalise residential and community aged care package provider claims online.
- Under the national rollout of the electronic Aged Care Client Record project, Aged Care Assessment Teams have the capability to electronically capture and lodge aged care client records information. It also allows aged care services to view aged care client records online to verify a client’s approval status.

Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme

- PBS Online allows general practitioners and pharmacies to claim for PBS items online. There are some general practitioners and pharmacies located in remote and rural areas that do not have access to the internet to enable them to make online claims. NBN in remote and rural areas will further increase the number of PBS claims made online.

Australian Organ Donor Register

- View your organ donor registration details

Australian Childhood Immunisation Register

- View your child's immunisation history statement (for children under 14 years)

Small Business Superannuation Clearing House

- Make employer superannuation payments online
- View history of payments made through the Clearing House

Other related websites

- *HealthInsite* offers a wide range of up to date and quality assessed information on important health topics such as diabetes, cancer, mental health and asthma.

- The *Australian Prescription Products Guide* is designed to inform consumers about prescription medicines. Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) provides information about the medicine and how to use it, their side effects, and precautions you should be aware of.
- The *MBS website* contains the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS), a listing of the Medicare services subsidised by the Australian Government.
- The *PBS website* contains the Schedule of Pharmaceutical Benefits, a listing of the medicines subsidised by the Australian Government.
- *Stay Smart Online* offers a range of information on how to keep you and your family secure online. Find information on securing your computer, shopping and banking safely online and protecting your children from unsuitable websites and emails.

2.1.2 Centrelink

Centrelink provides a broad range of services to customers online. Customers are able to access services from their homes or internet facility in any location. There are self service internet facilities available in some Centrelink offices, in Agent sites and some of the Access Point network sites across rural, regional and remote Australia. Customers are also able to read information in languages other than English through the online resources available.

The range of Centrelink Online Services options are:

- Claim a payment
- Report employment income
- Receive online letters
- Update/advise your details
- View/print your details
- Apply for an Advance Payment
- Request a document
- Request a replacement card

A person can claim online for a range of Centrelink payments. The list below shows all the payments that generally are able to be claimed online:

- Austudy
- Baby Bonus
- Child Care Benefit
- Family Tax Benefit
- Maternity Immunisation Allowance
- Youth Allowance
- Parental Leave Pay
- Age Pension

Centrelink online estimators lets customers estimate and compare payments and benefits that they may be able to receive, based on their current and proposed circumstances, including:

- Comparing Parental Leave Pay and Baby Bonus
- Estimating a Centrelink payment or benefit
- Estimating Family Assistance including Family Tax Benefit paid fortnightly and/or Child Care Benefit for approved child care
- Estimating Family Assistance and Child Support (if you receive or pay Child Support)

- Estimating Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate in a dollar amount, Child Care Benefit percentage, eligible Child Care Benefit hours, child care out of pocket expenses

In addition to the online services above, Centrelink provides information online on a range of services, not just for individuals, but aimed at businesses and community groups. For example the Customer Confirmation e-service (CCeS) provides registered organisations with real time customer information and can confirm a customer's eligibility for their concessions or services.

Other related websites

There are a number of related websites that assist families access information online, these include:

- The familyassist.gov.au website has been set up by the Australian Government to give Australian families better access to government services. Instead of going to different agencies to get family assistance, families are able to get all their payments from just one place - the Family Assistance Office.
- The mychild.gov.au website is Australia's online child care portal. Found on this website is information on different types of child care and how to get assistance with the cost of child care, including database searches to find local child care centres and in many cases, will also be able to find the services' vacancy and fee information.

2.1.3 Child Support Agency

CSAonline is a secure online service which enables customers to conduct their child support business at a convenient time.

Services available for individuals:

- Send and receive secure electronic messages
- View and update your personal CSA details
- View and print most CSA letters
- Advise us of any change in your care arrangements for the children
- Advise us of a Non Agency Payment
- Advise us of any information that might affect your income estimates
- Complete a general enquiry form to get in touch with CSA
- Access account details, including a history of payments made and received
- View when child support payments are due and the amount

Services available for International customers:

- Send and receive secure electronic messages
- View and update your personal CSA details
- Complete a general enquiry form to get in touch with CSA

Services available for employers:

- Send and receive secure electronic messages
- Submit your employee deductions
- View previous pay date details you sent us and use this as a record
- View and print most CSA letters
- Complete a general enquiry form to get in touch with CSA
- Complete a Confirmation of a Person's employment (EF1) form

2.1.4 Australian Hearing

Australian Hearing provides information available online on a range of Australian Hearing products and services; publications on hearing and hearing loss; and a 'contact us' facility.

2.1.5 CRS Australia

CRS Australia's website provides information on services for job seekers, employers and referrers. Visitors to the website are able to:

- Provide feedback
- Request further information
- Register a job vacancy
- Send a referral (for yourself or on behalf of a client/patient)
- Request an injury prevention service

2.2 Other Australian Government

DHS has links through delivering programs on behalf of numerous line departments across the Commonwealth Government. The availability of information on services and programs available on websites maintained by these agencies means that information held on DHS websites must be consistent with information held on other *.gov.au* domain websites. This poses a number of challenges, but also opportunities for the linking of information and referral to other sites for information and services.

3 The future of DHS service channels

The Australian Government Information Management Office run e-Government Satisfaction surveys titled: *Australians' Use of and Satisfaction with e-Government Services*. In the last two surveys respondents have repeatedly requested simple access to government information and services. The survey reports a demand for more personalised services through a principal online entry point; people are frustrated by the need to visit multiple websites to get information and services relevant to them.

Online capability is an area of growth and high capability. The introduction of NBN will increase the opportunity for all DHS customers (individuals, businesses, healthcare and welfare providers and associated organisations) to more effectively and efficiently connect to the broad range of portfolio services.

The saturation of broadband across the community is important for the greatest impact. Some of the programs that will generate the best improvements and efficiencies in service delivery will be targeted at households that already utilise internet connections. For those areas of service delivery that are new to the online environment, we need to ensure that uptake is maximised and access to service infrastructure is an affordable commodity. This may involve discussions with policy departments about pricing models and potential household assistance packages.

Currently, there is a range of online functions that are not universally available across all portfolio agencies. The ability to bring services into the online environment will be limited by the nature and intention of some services. Whilst the decision to make certain services available online is not a

function of the NBN, the increased saturation and robustness of internet accessibility will improve both the ability of people to access these services and the cost effectiveness for Government of developing and providing them.

3.1 Service Delivery Reform

The DHS Service Delivery Reform (SDR) agenda was announced on 16 December 2009 with an agenda to fundamentally change the way portfolio agencies deliver services to our customers. SDR will increase the convenience for customers in their interactions with portfolio agencies by providing a single means for registration, validation and authentication across the Portfolio through the online channel. Giving citizens the choice to 'tell us once' when they require their details to be updated across the portfolio agencies will also enable agencies to have more accurate information on their customers.

To support SDR, DHS is developing strategies that support integrated service delivery channels for customer-centric services. Mindful of the balance between meeting government and customer needs and expectations, while achieving policy outcomes, the SDR agenda will leverage the benefits of the NBN to provide easily accessible online services and information.

The opportunities that the NBN presents align with the SDR strategic outcomes, which are:

1. Easy: It is easier for people to deal with government at a time and manner that suits their circumstances;
2. High Quality: People get quality services and intensive support at times in their lives when they need it;
3. Works for you: People can get service that ensures that they receive benefits and support in ways that work for them;
4. Access to services and support that enables people to fully participate in the economy and their community;
5. Greater use of new technologies to deliver new and existing services;
6. Greater opportunity for community and stakeholders to contribute to the design of services and service delivery;
7. A service delivery system which is more agile, flexible and responsive to changing policy and future needs; and
8. Reduction in the cost of service delivery for government and better allocation of resources to areas of highest need.

3.2 Harnessing opportunities

As part of SDR, DHS has developed a single portfolio website and telephone number to give the Australian people the means to access portfolio information, services and details about their transactions through one access point in their own time.

The single portfolio website promotes high quality information about Human Services portfolio services. Work on the single website is closely aligned with the AGOSP Program and the development of the australia.gov.au portal managed by the Department of Finance and Deregulation.

In addition, high speed broadband provides the portfolio with opportunities to increase service options for customers in the online environment. This includes:

- The use of real-time interactions and web 2.0 technologies for interactions with customers including: video conferencing; chat rooms and collaborative online workspaces.
- Enhanced ability to share and integrate information from across government and service providers. Customers would be able to utilise high bandwidth functionality including the ability to scan documents and present electronic evidence to support their interactions with the portfolio in real time. This can reduce the need for customers to attend offices in person which has benefits for particular customer and client cohorts.
- Authenticated information could be passed between agencies in real time, with customer consent, obviating the need for customers to physically provide certain types of validating documents.
- Active content that changes in real time based on the actions of the user allowing them to manage their own information; make claims; and identify and self assess eligibility. This includes tailoring the content to suit users' preferences, including their preferred language, what services are included and how they like to share their information.
- Ability for substantial mobile applications to be enabled by NBN such as mobile phone applications and other ubiquitous computing.
- Increased broadband coverage can be leveraged to provide more targeted services, particularly for people who are geographically isolated. This includes any planned growth in new suburban areas where broadband infrastructure is built into the suburban landscape.

3.3 Service delivery productivity

There are a number of service delivery productivity opportunities that the NBN provides:

- High bandwidth internet capacity to the urban home presents a number of opportunities for flexible working arrangements.
- The NBN will deliver the potential for integrating services for citizens across levels of government and the not-for-profit sector through providing a secure and reliable online platform that can deliver blended information and communication services.
- Opportunity and capability to co-design services with customers online.
- Greater efficiencies and innovation from increasing the breadth and depth of information that DHS staff are able to access, process and analyse.

4 Challenges to service delivery in the online space

4.1 Addressing the digital divide

The 'digital divide' is a term commonly used to describe the inequalities that exist with respect to the use of Internet and other telecommunication services¹. It refers to the imbalance in both physical access to technology and the resources and skills needed to accrue benefits from use. A 2007 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report *Patterns of internet access in Australia*² revealed that, despite increases in internet access for all groups, very little had changed in terms of the nature of internet use disparities.

¹ Parliamentary Library 2001, available at: www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/cib/2001-02/02cib01.htm

² ABS 2006, Publication: 8146.0.55.001 - *Patterns of internet access in Australia 2006*

The starkest inequalities included:

- **Indigenous Australians** were 69 per cent less likely than non-Indigenous to have any internet connection and were about half as likely to have broadband access.
- **Geography** continued to impact on household internet connectivity. For example, 66 per cent of dwellings in major cities have access to the internet, compared to 42 per cent for very remote Australia.
- **Educational attainment** influenced overall and broadband internet access. For example, when controlling for other factors, persons with postgraduate qualifications had about 3.9 times the likelihood of having broadband compared with those without these qualifications. People with certificate level qualifications were about 1.2 times more likely to have access to any internet than those without.
- **Income** was considered the single largest determinant of internet access and broadband, with results showing that higher income increased the likelihood of a person having any internet connection. When all other variables were held constant, the likelihood of having any internet access for persons with the equivalised household income of \$1,000 to \$1,999 per week were about 2.7 times more than those earning less than \$599 per week.
- **Disability**: only 28 per cent of people requiring assistance with core activities had broadband access, in comparison with 48 per cent of people not needing assistance.
- **Single parent households** with dependent children under 15 years had 77 per cent internet and 52 per cent broadband access compared with 92 per cent and 68 per cent respectively for comparable dual parent households.

International studies mirror these findings among most countries in relation to income, education, ethnicity and geography.

Increasing age is another factor linked with diminished access to information and computing technologies. Improved service delivery will need to include enhanced support for older persons who may resist self-service options if they find technology confusing and hostile. Under SDR, where appropriate, older Australians will be encouraged and assisted to use tailored online channels starting in 2012. This includes having the portfolio website designed to meet their needs, the provision of publications online (such as *News for Seniors* and *Carer* magazine), and the availability of online support tools.

Telecommunications infrastructure is obviously a prerequisite to internet access. For example, if it is not possible to secure appropriate properties and high quality communications equipment and capacity in remote communities, then the implementation of enhanced service delivery functions could be adversely affected. Nevertheless, there is an inherent risk involved in focussing too heavily on the 'supply-side' issues of the digital divide, at the cost of addressing more complex 'demand-side' (social and economic) barriers such as low income, and a lack of technological skills and support.

In 2006 a Pew study called *The strength of internet ties*³ found that internet use provided online Americans with 'a path to resources, such as access to people who may have the right information to help deal with a health or medical issue or to confront a financial issue'. The results indicated that those connected to the internet were more likely to seek assistance on health, education, employment and financial issues. For one-third of those surveyed the internet had played a crucial or important role in helping them sort through their options on at least one of these issues. The report also found the social network of internet users to be significantly larger than non-users.

³ Pew Institute 2006, available at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2006/The-Strength-of-Internet-Ties.aspx>

This suggests that internet use can play an important role in facilitating social inclusion, particularly in the social, economic, political and cultural domains. However, this requires a concerted effort to address issues beyond access, by helping people develop the skills, literacy and knowledge needed for effective online engagement.

Future service offers under NBN-enabled services will need to be carefully monitored against the risk of widening the 'digital divide'. A key risk is that increasing demand for sophisticated applications and content requiring faster connection speeds may drive technological solutions that will reduce accessibility for remote-area or disadvantaged customers. Several SDR Reform projects will increase quality service delivery to people who are socially or geographically isolated. Some of these initiatives aim to leverage the NBN at the organisational, rather than the individual level, in order to lessen some of these potential impacts.

4.2 Building access in the community

The NBN will provide the necessary coverage and bandwidth to enable high quality face-to-face interactions between customers in their home, government service delivery providers and community providers. The greater availability of high speed, quality, reliable connections will help drive changes to the way services have traditionally been delivered. This will allow more hours per year for customer service by reducing travel time and travel costs for both the customer and the service provider.

The Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) produced a publication in late 2009, exploring Australians' use and satisfaction with e-government services provided through telephone and the internet. The report shows that there is a strong correlation between use of communication technologies and age, with nearly all those under 55 involved in some form of activity (via the telephone or internet) at least once a month. Although those aged 65 or more may remain the lowest users of these technologies, they are the group who has seen the biggest increase in usage of telephony and online services, rising from 49 per cent in 2008 to 59 per cent in 2009. Those in older age groups are also making increased use of communication technologies such as email, SMS, and social networking sites.

Interestingly, the AGIMO report also indicated that while in previous studies the internet was the most frequently used channel for contacting the government among those aged 18 to 44, it is now also the most frequently used channel amongst those in the 55 to 64 years age group. One of the principles of SDR is greater community engagement and empowerment in government service design and delivery. The potential future uses of the NBN and the tailoring of government services delivered by the Human Services Portfolio provide opportunities for direct collaboration with the community.

As part of SDR the Portfolio is applying a co-design methodology to ensure community input into the ways its service (including via the NBN) could be improved enabling a better customer service experience and access to government. Co-design is a systematic approach to bring user understanding into the design process from conception to implementation. This is achieved through involving the user in the design of solutions so that the output best meets their needs, is user-friendly, and achieves the desired outcomes. It is 'user-based' design to develop effective and efficient solutions or outcomes. It means engaging with individuals and groups from the beginning to the end of the process.

A successful transformation to full utilisation of ICT technologies will require management of some challenging issues. These range from clarifying and communicating what the NBN will do and can

enable, to practical issues such as resolution of digital identification and authentication concerns. This will overcome the impact of ‘siloes’ organisational structures and supporting business cultural change within the service delivery environment.

4.3 Facilitating equitable access

Australia has a diverse mix of cultures with one quarter of all Australian residents born overseas (2006 Census). Many online translated communication products available to people who do not read or write English well are in the form of podcasts, streaming video or radio, fact sheets and interactive training. They take time to download and consume valuable data space. The NBN presents the opportunity to improve the delivery of services to diverse Australians by providing faster access to translated online products. High-quality online interactions enable linguistic barriers to be transcended and the risk of social exclusion reduced.

For people with communication difficulties or communication disability, the provision of support services online that utilise the full suite of communication products and assistance available will help bridge communication and information divides and barriers.

5 Conclusion

DHS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry into the role and potential of the NBN. It is timely given the focus by the Portfolio at the present time on SDR and the ways in which services to the community are provided. The NBN is an initiative that provides a greater on-line capability that can be leveraged in the design and delivery of future government services.

Designing the future service delivery system needs to harness our understanding of how services contribute to outcomes and how we can use the best possible technological and social platforms to deliver these outcomes. The NBN will fulfil an important role in delivering services and enable DHS to better deliver to the Australian people the services and information they need in a manner that they choose and help to shape.

6 Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Concerted effort is required to build community capacity to utilise online services. A person’s ability to access services needs to be recognised in how we provide services, particularly for those who are, or are at risk of digital exclusion.

Recommendation 2

Government services should reflect community expectations of accessibility and ease of use. Involving the community in developing these services and platforms is important.