

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE NATIONAL CAPITAL
AND EXTERNAL TERRITORIES**

Inquiry into the changing economic environment in the Indian Ocean Territories

Questions on Notice

October 2009

Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy

1. Can you update the Committee on the status of mobile services on the Cocos Islands and whether residents would be eligible for a satellite phone subsidy?

We understand the Cocos and Keeling Islands do not have access to mainland mobile networks. We also understand that the local mobile service has a limited range.

Where people do not have coverage from a terrestrial mobile service, they may be eligible for the Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme. To be eligible, applicants must live, work or operate a business in an area of Australia not served by a terrestrial mobile phone service, including Australia's external territories, air space and Exclusive Economic Zone. For those parts of the Islands that do not have a working mobile phone service, residents would be eligible for a subsidy.

2. What options are available for securing broadband connectivity at an affordable price and reliable mobile services on Cocos Islands? What can be done now in anticipation of the NBN? What are the possible implications of the satellite connectivity requirements of the Attorney-General's Department for the provision of commercial broadband services on the Islands?

Both the Indian Ocean external territories fall within the scope of the Australian Broadband Guarantee and the Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme. These programs operate as 'safety nets', ensuring access to subsidised services where they are not provided commercially to the standards specified under the respective program guidelines (see answers to Q1, Q3 and Q4 for more detail).

We understand that the Attorney-General's Department is currently reviewing its telecommunications requirements in the Territories in the context of the Gershon Review of the Australian Government's Use of Information and Communication Technology.

3. The Committee has been advised that the Christmas Island Internet Association is considering withdrawing from service provision. Would Christmas Island and Cocos Islands be eligible for support under the ABG? Could the Department advise what registered ABG satellite providers have coverage over these islands? Can APN service the footprint of the Islands?

While both these Indian Ocean external territories fall within the scope of the Australian Broadband Guarantee (ABG), the Christmas Island Internet Association currently provides commercial broadband services that meet the ABG definition of a metro-comparable service. These services, provided through local wireless networks with satellite links back to mainland Australia, are currently available to the vast majority of premises on both these territories.

The only premises potentially eligible for subsidised services under the ABG would be any residential or small business premises that are not able to access these commercial services. Currently, no ABG provider has registered these territories as service areas because there is no business case to do so, given existing commercial coverage. There are also technical impediments for some providers, including APN, because the territories fall outside coverage of the IPStar satellite.

If the Christmas Island Internet Association were to confirm its withdrawal from service provision as indicated to the Committee, subject to funds availability, the ABG program could seek expressions of interest from providers registered under the program to provide services to these territories. At least one provider has previously expressed interest in providing services under the ABG for these territories, if there were no metro-comparable services being offered commercially.

4. What is the Department's view about the relationship between an immediate solution and the longer term NBN roll-out?

The Government has announced its objective to achieve 90% coverage of the National Broadband Network (NBN) through fibre to the premises (FTTP), with the remaining 10% coverage to be delivered through next generation wireless and satellite technologies offering speeds of 12 megabits per second or more.

The specific areas to be part of the 10% coverage, the technologies available in particular areas, detailed operational arrangements and transition path to next generation technologies will be considered as part of the Implementation Study, scheduled to report in early 2010.

5. The Committee has been advised that the islands receive a digital satellite signal but can only reticulate this signal around the islands in analogue mode. What is the Department's understanding and what can be done about it?

Residents of Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands currently receive analog television broadcasts that are local terrestrial retransmissions of the Remote WA satellite service (ABC, SBS, Networks 7 and 9). These signals are obtained via the Optus Aurora satellite service and re-broadcast in analog mode from local facilities. The transmitter licences are held by the Attorney General's Department.

The Government is currently in discussions with broadcasters about the implementation of a satellite suite of digital free to air television services that would be available throughout Australia and address areas of local signal deficiency, including areas served by retransmission facilities which are not owned by broadcasters. Although details are still to be determined, the expectation is that the coverage of these satellite services would extend to the Indian Ocean Territories in the same way as the current Optus Aurora service.

The Australian Government switchover timetable sets out a region-by-region transition to digital television allowing Australians ample notice to become ready for analog switch-off. Switchover in Remote and Regional Western Australia, from where the Indian Ocean Territories receive their services, will be between 1 July and 31 December 2013. The specific date for analog switch-off within this six month period will take into account local market circumstances and community feedback. The Department will consult with the Attorney-General's Department on the most appropriate arrangements for transmissions in Christmas and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands well in advance of the switchover date.

6. The committee has been advised that the local community radio station on Christmas Island is sharing frequency with the WA ABC local radio station. Residents have complained about this restriction. What can be done?

Spectrum planning issues are a matter for the Australian Communications and Media Authority. We understand the Chair of the Committee has raised a number of issues with the Chair of the ACMA directly and the Authority is currently preparing its response to the Committee. We have asked the ACMA to also provide advice on this matter in its response to the Committee.