

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice
Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearings October 2011
Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy Portfolio
Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy

Question No: 306

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: Page 95 (18/10/2011)

Topic: Percentage of Metro Households converted to Digital

Senator MacDonald asked:

Senator IAN MACDONALD: Thank you for your answer to question No. 124 from last estimates, where I was asking for some figures on how many households in Queensland have converted to digital TV. Can you tell me what the current figure is on that same question?

Ms O'Loughlin: Yes, Senator. The current figures across regional Queensland indicate that 84 per cent of regional Queensland households have converted to digital. That was at the end of quarter 2.

Senator IAN MACDONALD: The end of September 2011?

Ms O'Loughlin: It would have been the end of June.

Ms O'Loughlin: The end of September figures are very close to being finalised and will be released very soon.

Senator IAN MACDONALD: You have not done the metropolitan areas yet—is that correct?

Ms O'Loughlin: We have done the metro areas. I do not believe I have that in my pack, as we have concentrated on regional ones, but we can certainly get that information for you.

Answer:

The latest Digital Tracker survey was completed at the end of September 2011. It found that the percentage of Households converted by metro area was:

- Brisbane 79 per cent
- Adelaide 87 per cent
- Darwin 89 per cent
- Melbourne 83 per cent
- Sydney 74 per cent

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Question No: 307

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: Pg 97

Topic: Businesses eligible for VAST

Senator MacDonald asked:

Senator IAN MACDONALD: So Indigenous businesses in remote Indigenous communities will not get this assistance.

Ms O'Loughlin: The support that we provide all over Australia does not provide support to business. It is based around households.

Senator IAN MACDONALD: But if they are Indigenous businesses in remote Indigenous communities? Perhaps you should take that on notice.

Mr Harris: I am pretty sure we are not doing businesses, Senator, but we will take that on notice.

Answer:

The Government does not fund business conversion to digital television anywhere in Australia, including for Indigenous businesses in Remote Indigenous Communities.

Assistance from the Satellite Subsidy Scheme is restricted to residential households and does not extend to businesses. However, under the Scheme, if a business owner resides on the business premises in an eligible area, they are eligible for an installation in that residence. This condition also applies within a Remote Indigenous Community.

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Question No: 308

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: Pg 99 (18/10/2011)

Topic: Local Governments and subsidy of Towers

Senator MacDonald asked:

Senator IAN MACDONALD: I have run out of time. Could you perhaps tell me on notice: these towers are being constructed by individual local governments, with absolutely no subsidy or assistance from the federal government but, as a result—

Mr Harris: I do not think so. I want to check this myself, but I believe some of these towers would have historically been supported by federal government programs.

Answer:

The Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy administered the analog Television Black Spots Program (TVBSP). The TVBSP provided funding for (a) the establishment of new analog self-help television retransmission facilities to be operated by councils and community groups and (b) the replacement of obsolete analog television retransmission equipment at existing self-help sites operated by community groups and councils. The TVBSP closed on 30 June 2005.

Following consultation with local Government self-help licensees in regional and remote Queensland, the following councils confirmed their intention to upgrade the listed towers to digital TV. Some of these services were funded under the TVBSP. No further Australian Government funding is being provided to assist the conversion of any of these towers to digital.

Council	Tower/Locality	Regional/remote television licence area	Funding provided under the TVBSP
Barcaldine Regional Council	Alpha	Remote	TVBSP – New service
	Aramac	Remote	TVBSP – Replacement of obsolete equipment at existing analog retransmission site (TVBSP – Replacement)
	Jericho	Remote	TVBSP – New service and TVBSP – Replacement
	Muttaburra	Remote	TVBSP – Replacement

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Council	Tower/Locality	Regional/remote television licence area	Funding provided under the TVBSP
Barcoo	Jundah	Remote	TVBSP – Replacement
	Stonehenge	Remote	No
	Windorah	Remote	TVBSP – Replacement
Blackall-Tambo	Tambo	Remote	No
Burke Shire Council	Burketown	Remote	No
Cairns Regional Council	Cow Bay	Remote	TVBSP – New service
	Daintree Village	Remote	TVBSP – New service
	Mossman South	Regional	TVBSP – New service
Carpentaria Shire Council	Karumba	Remote	No
	Normanton	Remote	No
Diamantina Shire Council	Bedourie	Remote	No
	Birdsville	Remote	No
Isaac Regional Council	Carmila	Remote	No
	Clairview	Remote	No
	St Lawrence	Remote	TVBSP – Replacement
Murweh Shire Council	Augathella	Remote	TVBSP – Replacement
	Morven	Remote	TVBSP – Replacement
North Burnett Regional Council	Bancroft	Regional	TVBSP – New
	Eidsvold	Regional	No
	Moonford	Regional	TVBSP – New
Paroo Shire Council	Eulo	Remote	TVBSP – Replacement
	Wyandra	Remote	No
	Yowah	Remote	TVBSP – Replacement
Quilpie Shire Council	Quilpie	Remote	TVBSP – New service and TVBSP – Replacement
Richmond Shire Council	Richmond	Remote	TVBSP – Replacement
Tablelands Regional Council	Chillagoe	Remote	TVBSP – New service and TVBSP – Replacement
	Speewah	Regional	TVBSP – New service

Funding for the conversion of the ABC and SBS self-help analog television services in Glenden (Isaac Regional Council) was provided by the Australian Government in the 2011-12 Budget.

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Question No: 309

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Australia Network

Senator Birmingham asked:

Given that a decision on the tender for the Australia Network is now more than a month overdue, and the decision deadline has already been deferred by more than three months, can the Government advise on when a decision will be made as to who will win the tender to run the Australia Network?

Answer:

The Government announced on 7 November 2011 that due to significant leaks of confidential information, that the Australian Network tender process has been terminated. This decision took into consideration legal advice provided by the Australian Government Solicitor.

The Government has now made a policy decision on the long term arrangements for the operation of the Australia Network that has resulted in it becoming a permanent feature of the ABC, Australia's national broadcaster.

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Question No: 310

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Australia Network

Senator Birmingham asked:

When did the independent panel report back to the Government regarding the Australia Network tender?

Answer:

30 August 2011

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Question No: 311

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Australia Network

Senator Birmingham asked:

Why hasn't the Government responded to that advice publicly or released its recommendations?

Answer:

See answer to Question on Notice 309.

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Question No: 312

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Australia Network

Senator Birmingham asked:

When will the Government release the recommendations?

Answer:

See answer to Question on Notice 309.

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Question No: 313

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Australia Network

Senator Birmingham asked:

If the Government disagrees with the panel's recommendations, will it release its reasons for doing so?

Answer:

See answer to Question on Notice 309.

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Question No: 314

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Australia Network

Senator Birmingham asked:

In the Government's press release announcing the amendment to Australia Network tender, it stated that given the changed international circumstances the decision-making power would be turned over to the Cabinet. The reasons the Government gave in the press release were 'the increasing influence of the key emerging markets on the global economy, significant political transformation occurring across the Middle East, and North Africa, and the need identified during recent consular crises for strengthened associated information services.' Given these are areas within the scope of the Foreign Minister's portfolio, could the Department outline why the Minister for Broadband, Communication and the Digital Economy is the best person to advise Cabinet on the tender process?

Answer:

See answer to Question on Notice 309.

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Question No: 315

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Australia Network

Senator Birmingham asked:

What is the cost to both the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, spent on the tender process?

Answer:

All costs relating to the involvement of the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy in the tender process have been accommodated within existing resources.

Costs relating to the tender process for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade are a matter for that Portfolio.

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Question No: 316

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Australia Network

Senator Birmingham asked:

Can the Government provide a breakdown of this expenditure?

Answer:

See answer to Question on Notice 315.

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Question No: 317

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Digital Radio

Senator Birmingham asked:

Please provide an update on the roll-out for digital radio. What plans exist to facilitate the rollout in outer-metropolitan areas – such as Mt Barker in South Australia – or even rural areas?

Answer:

The Australian Parliament passed legislation in May 2007 to implement a framework for the introduction of digital radio services that would operate alongside, rather than replace, existing analog (AM and FM) services. Under this framework, digital radio will be introduced in a staged manner, with services first introduced by broadcasters in areas where they are most likely to be commercially viable. For this reason, planning initially focused on the five mainland state capitals, with other areas to be considered subsequently on the basis of broadcaster interest. During May and June of 2009, digital radio services commenced in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney. Wide area community radio broadcasters in these markets launched digital services on 13 May 2011.

The legislation allows for broadcasters in areas outside of the five mainland state capitals, such as Mount Barker which is in the Murray Bridge licence area, to approach the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) about the planning of digital radio services in their area. However, there is currently a lack of suitable spectrum for digital radio, particularly in areas adjacent to the capital cities due to existing analog and digital television services. The situation is unlikely to improve before the switch off of analog television in 2013 and the restack of broadcasting services in 2014. On 14 July 2010, the Minister directed the ACMA, in planning metropolitan television services following the analog switch off, to consider making available 14 megahertz of spectrum to facilitate the future rollout of digital radio in regional Australia.

In addition to spectrum planning considerations, the rollout of digital radio in regional Australia is dependent on the availability of suitable technology. When the legislation was passed in 2007, a Parliamentary committee noted that it was too early to prescribe a technology for regional digital radio services. A particular concern was the capability of the technology being used in metropolitan areas to match the extensive coverage of some regional, particularly AM, radio services. The legislation therefore required that a review be conducted to examine the suitability of various digital radio technologies for regional Australia. The report of the review was tabled in Parliament on 12 October 2011. The review will inform the Government's decisions on digital radio for regional areas.

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Question No: 318, 319a

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: HAS

Senator Birmingham asked:

318

- a. How many installers have failed the on line accreditation test?
- b. What proportion of those attempting the test fail?
- c. Have any installers who have tried the test not eventually passed?
- d. What is the worth of an accreditation test if everyone that wants to pass eventually does so?

319

- a. What auditing of the on line test activities have been carried out to test any cheating via other people doing the online test for installers?

Answer:

Refer Question on Notice 169 (a-e), Budget Estimates Hearings May 2011.

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Question No: 319 b-c

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: HAS

Senator Birmingham asked:

- b. What auditing work has been done in the field to check the workmanship of the 37,000 installs that have been carried out so far?
- c. What field auditing is carried out to test whether installers being used under the Scheme actually have the required signal test meters and knowledge of how to use them when carrying out installations?

Answer:

- b. Refer Question on Notice 169 (f), Budget Estimates Hearings May 2011.
- c. Refer Question on Notice 169 (g), Budget Estimates Hearings May 2011.

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Question No: 320

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: HAS

Senator Birmingham asked:

How many accredited installers have been 'dis-accredited' as a result of faulty workmanship or lack of ability to undertake installation work at the required level so far? If the answer is none, is it not really fundamentally improbable that everything done under the HAS is beyond fault?

Answer:

Please refer to the answer to Question on Notice 169, Budget Estimates, May 2011. There have been no further instances of Household Assistance Scheme installers being disendorsed under the Antenna Installer Endorsement Scheme.

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Question No: 321

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: HAS

Senator Birmingham asked:

Has the department been asked to provide the Minister, any briefings on issues related to the digital television switchover? If so how many, since the announcement of the 2011-2012 Budget?

Answer:

Since the 2011-12 Federal Budget, the Department has provided 16 briefs to the Minister on aspects of the digital switchover.

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Question No: 322-325

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: HAS

Senator Birmingham asked:

322. The Digital Television Switchover Program was presented by the Treasurer and the Minister FaHCSIA as a program for senior Australians. Please provide the total number eligible for the program, and the number of eligible recipients who are eligible because they are on the Age Pension.
323. Please provide a breakdown of eligibility letters sent for the program by electorate.
324. What has been the participation level of the program as a percentage of acceptances from the eligibility letters letter sent by Centrelink?
325. Please provide a breakdown of installations by electorate.

Answer:

322. The estimated number of people who are potentially eligible for the scheme is 2.2 million. Of this, it is estimated that 54 per cent are recipients of the Age or Service Pensions.
323. Centrelink has advised this information is not currently available.
324. As at 21 October 2011, 419 588 eligibility letters had been sent to potentially eligible customers since the commencement of the program. Of these, 68 875 people or 16.41 per cent had opted into the scheme. The scheme is still open in regional Queensland, so these figures will change.
325. Installations by electorate as at 7 November 2011:

Electorate	Installations	Electorate	Installations
Ballarat	2917	Hinkler*	2963
Barker	3144	Indi	2983
Bendigo	3760	Kennedy*	1871
Blair*	6	La Trobe	2
Casey	6	Leichhardt*	1319
Capricornia*	1692	Mallee	4416
Corangamite	935	Maranoa*	2205
Dawson*	1378	McEwen	1016
Dunkley	1	McMillan	1639
Eden-Monaro	2	Murray	3824
Farrer	4418	New England	26

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Electorate	Installations	Electorate	Installations
Fisher*	12	Parkes	16
Flinders	5	Riverina	5
Flynn*	2394	Wakefield	129
Gippsland	4111	Wannon	2811
Grey	5839	Wide Bay*	1369
Groom*	1829	Wright*	474
Herbert*	1308		

*The scheme remains open in regional Queensland, so these figures may change.

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Question No: 326, 327, 328

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: HAS

Senator Birmingham asked:

326. What is the range on cost per installation? Lowest cost and highest cost.

327. How many installations have been at the highest cost?

328. What is the cost per unit of set-top boxes?

Answer:

326. Please refer to the answer to Question on Notice 119, Budget Estimates Hearings, May 2011.

327. As indicated in the answer to Question on Notice 119, the cost per installation varies considerably, depending upon the particular installation that is required for each household. A complex installation reflects the unique circumstances of the household. The Question appears to envisage that there is a fixed, or series of fixed, price points for installation, which is not necessarily the case.

328. The department is not in a position to publicise contracted set-top box prices because there are active tenders still under consideration. The price of the high definition set-top box includes the cost of a 12-month warranty and the provision of aftercare services and is therefore not comparable with a retail price point.

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Question No: 329

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: HAS

Senator Birmingham asked:

How many installations have the installers had to attend the property more than once?

Answer:

Of the more than 59,100 installations performed under the Household Assistance Scheme, 3.8 per cent have received more than one visit.

The most common reason for multiple visits to a property is due to the home being unattended at the time of the scheduled appointment or the unavailability of a customer's authorised agent acting upon their behalf at the time of the scheduled appointment.

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Question No: 330

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: HAS

Senator Birmingham asked:

Are installers required to complete an identification and/or police check before they qualify for the scheme, and are therefore allowed to enter pensioners homes to install set top boxes?

Answer:

The department's HAS contracts require the service contractor to undertake a police check of all service contractor personnel that will enter customers' premises. The department has implemented procedures to ensure all service contractor personnel are approved by the department prior to undertaking works. This process includes the assessment of the sub-contractor's Antenna Installer Endorsement Scheme (AIES) status and their police certificate.

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Question No: 331 - 333

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Asbestos

Senator Birmingham asked:

331. Is the department aware of instances where Satellite installation has uncovered asbestos?

332. What procedures are in place for such an occasion?

333. Who bears any additional cost associated with such installations?

Answer:

331. Yes.

332. Under the contract to deliver installations under the Satellite Subsidy Scheme, the Department requires principal contractors to have safe work management systems in place which define procedures for installations in housing with Asbestos Containing Material (ACM) present or presumed. In Queensland, current safe work management systems require installers, once they have identified ACM in the installation area, to either:

- Undertake an alternative installation to avoid any ACM in the installation area
- Use approved safe methods for installing in areas where ACM is present or presumed if no alternative installation method is available

In conjunction with the Queensland State Government, a review of installation processes was recently completed, while all Queensland installations were suspended. Agreement has been reached with the Queensland Government that both contractors have suitable safe work methods in place to allow installations to recommence safely.

333. Any additional costs are covered by contractual arrangements between the department and principal contractors.

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Question No: 334

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Self Help Transmitters

Senator Birmingham asked:

Is the Department concerned that in many cases the cost of upgrading existing analogue self-help towers to digital, which networks haven't undertaken to do, is less than the cost of the subsidy payments to households for the Satellite Subsidy Scheme? In how many cases is this the case? Please provide details of each case?

Answer:

The department does not have evidence of cases where costs of upgrades are lower than the costs of Satellite Subsidy Scheme payments to households in an area, although some anecdotal information has been publicly released by local councils.

Precise cost comparisons are difficult to make because:

- there are different commercial vendors of technological solutions of varying quality and capability.
- the installation and operating cost of terrestrial facilities is highly variable, and will depend on what infrastructure needs to change and what can be retained from the analog facility
- the costs of installing satellite also varies depending on dish size, location (which influences labour costs) and other factors like the nature of the dwelling.
- each community has a different eligible population base which will affect the financial cost benefit analysis that the local council needs to consider.

The Government gave careful consideration to alternative approaches to convert communities to digital where local self-help facilities exist. It introduced the Satellite Subsidy Scheme to assist households in these areas convert to the Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) service.

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Question No: 335

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Self Help Transmitters

Senator Birmingham asked:

Has the department received requests for assistance to upgrade existing analogue self-help towers to digital from Councils or communities?

Answer:

Some council's in regional and remote areas of Queensland have requested Government assistance to upgrade local towers rather than households in these areas receiving assistance under the Satellite Subsidy Scheme to convert to the VAST service.

The Government has not agreed to provide assistance for these tower upgrades as it considers this would result in uncertain and inconsistent outcomes for consumers.

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Question No: 336-339

Program No. Program 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Audio Description Trial

Senator Fifield asked:

336:

- a. What is the status of the Government's commitment to a technical trial of audio description, which was due to begin in the second half of 2011?
- b. How is Government funding for the trial?

337:

- a. Which alternative funding sources were considered by the Minister in order to find funding for the technical trial of audio description?
- b. What is the expected start date for the trial?

338:

- a. What discussions has the Department had with the ABC about the audio description trial?
- b. On what dates did those discussions occur? Where did the meetings (if any) occur?

339: How many DBCDE staff are working on the development of the trial? What are their APS levels?

Answer:

The Government intends to commission a trial of audio description on ABC1, subject to funding approval. Options for funding are being considered.

The timetable for the trial will be determined by when such funding becomes available, and the time subsequently required by the ABC to commission content and to procure, test and install the necessary equipment.

Regular discussions with the ABC have occurred regarding the proposed trial commensurate with the current funding situation. Work associated with the proposed trial is being conducted as part of the normal business of the department, that is, no staff work exclusively on this task at this stage.

In the meantime, the department is in the process of engaging a consultant to identify consumer equipment (set-top boxes and televisions) able to receive receiver-mix audio description content, and develop accessible set-up manuals for that equipment. This will assist the public to engage with any future audio description trial.