

Revisiting a Partnership Model for Remote Broadband Delivery

Broadband for the Bush Alliance 2013

The Australian Government have provided a 'one size fits all' solution to broadband delivery - the National Broadband Network. While this approach may meet the broadband needs of many Australians, there is little flexibility to address the diverse contexts and needs of remote and rural Australia.

The heavy investment in NBN has left almost no resources for alternate programs to address the specific infrastructure needs of the bush, including mobile telephony, fibre network extension or last mile delivery. In remote Indigenous communities, for example, there remains an unmet demand for basic telephony and a broadening digital divide due to market failure, neither of which is being adequately addressed by the NBN satellite solution or the USO.

By comparison, previous government programs have been designed to support locally identified communications infrastructure needs. For instance, the Coordinated Communications Infrastructure Fund (CCIF) enabled a partnership cost-sharing model involving Federal/State/local governments, community organisations and commercial providers. This enabled innovative and cost-effective solutions based on the needs and applications of local stakeholders.

An example of such a project was the Ngaanyatjarra Lands Telecommunications Project, which had cost sharing from 3 tiers of government, significant contribution by the successful provider, and strong community engagement throughout the project development. Completed in 2007, the \$6.5 million project resulted in a 400km extension on an existing fibre network to reach 6 communities, exchange upgrades to enable community-wide ADSL and high-speed service for schools, clinics and police stations. Additional pooled funds were used to provide a satellite solution to a further 6 communities and WiFi last-mile delivery to all 12 sites. Further WA government projects based on the now expanded fibre backbone enabled mobile telephony at the largest community Warburton in 2009, with the other five communities receiving mobile in 2013. Regionally tailored projects such as this are not possible under NBN or existing federal funding programs.

Currently some state, territory and local governments (e.g. WA, NT and Torres Strait) are going it alone to fund regional solutions for mobile telephony, wireless backhaul, community access facilities and last-mile distribution. With federal government contribution, solutions such as these could be supported to complement the NBN and coordinate with national programs and the USO.

The 2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review recommended a co-investment program between the Commonwealth and state/territory governments to expand the mobile coverage footprint in regional Australia (Rec 3.2). It also recommended a Network Extension policy for NBN with provision for community contributions (Rec. 4.7). While NBN have implemented a Network Extension plan to enable partnership funding to extend fibre network infrastructure, it is limited to a 50km zone beyond the periphery of fibre roll-out in towns and cities and currently does not apply to the remaining 85% of remote Australia.

Broadband for the Bush Alliance urges that partnership models and complementary government programs be re-established to ensure remote and rural Australia are a part of Australia's digital future.

Broadband for the Bush Alliance is:

Australian Communications Consumers Action Network, Broadband Today, 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:

