

Broadband for the Bush Alliance Closing the Gap on opportunity



Broadband for the Bush Forum III: Building a Better Digital Future

Alice Springs, 2014

Communiqué

This communiqué reflects the ideas and views that emerged out of the third Broadband for the Bush Forum: Building a Better Digital Economy which was held in Alice Springs on 30 April and 1 May 2014.

This document reflects the recommendations and solutions of a diverse, highly qualified group of people committed to achieving the best possible communications outcomes for remote Australians, generated through intensive small group sessions throughout the Forum.

In addition, key outcomes from the Indigenous Focus Day, held on the preceding day are also included.

The Alliance would welcome feedback and contributions on the ideas and recommendations contained in this document.



Broadband for the Bush Forum III all delegates on 1 May 2014, Alice Springs.

Broadband for the Bush Alliance is facilitated by:



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Preamble

The Broadband for the Bush Alliance (B4BA) is an alliance of organisations that seeks to advance the digital capacity and capability of remote Australians. B4BA seeks the best possible communication outcomes for the 7% of Australians not currently scheduled to receive fibre to the premise through the National Broadband Network, and to advance unmet telephony needs, as a significant related issue.

Nature of the recommendations

The recommendations outlined in this document are drawn from intensive small group Open Space sessions that followed panel sessions constructed around four themes:

1. Digital inclusion
2. Technology and policy
3. Digital economy
4. Digital services

The recommendations do not necessarily reflect the views of all of the members of those groups, or of every Forum participant.

The contents of this document do not necessarily represent the formalised shared position of members of the Broadband for the Bush Alliance.

This document and the other outputs of the Forum will be used as input to the Alliance to develop and enhance its position of a range of issues.

Overarching recommendations

Recommendation 1: Remote and outer rural Australia needs a dedicated communications strategy.

For remote and rural Australia to participate successfully in the national and global digital economy, a targeted strategy is required. It should be recognised that policies and strategies aimed at the majority of Australians who live in major cities are not appropriate for remote and rural Australia where there is market failure and very different circumstances.

The strategy should not be restricted to broadband only and should encompass:

- The expansion of mobile coverage
- Getting digital infrastructure right – both the rational use of existing infrastructure and expanding infrastructure
- Smart last mile solutions for small towns and communities
- Affordable pricing for mobile calls in remote and rural Australia
- Improved digital literacy
- Good research and evaluation to underpin remote communications policy
- Improving Indigenous communications programs.

Recommendation 2: Regional and place based solutions should be supported and encouraged.

Government and telecommunications providers should support, encourage and facilitate local co-designed approaches to get the best possible outcomes. For example, co-investment by local councils and communities, and in kind support through provision of land to enable lower cost installation of infrastructure.

Digital inclusion

Improved infrastructure does not equate to digital inclusion. Issues of access to ICTs, affordability, digital literacy and awareness limit usage for many people, particularly Indigenous, elderly, disabled and other vulnerable groups.

Recommendation 3: Expansion of Extended Zones program to remote mobile and pre-paid mobile services.

Affordability is critical for the sustained take-up of telecommunications services by vulnerable groups generally. In remote Australia, the existing Extended Zones scheme assists by reducing the cost of fixed line voice calls within the caller's zone to the cost of a local call. Mobile services have become the service mode of choice wherever coverage is available, with pre-paid services as the preferred billing method by many on low incomes, despite much higher timed call rates. We recommend that the Government introduce a subsidised structure equivalent to the extended zones scheme for mobile voice calls in remote areas of Australia.

Recommendation 4: A pre-paid NBN satellite billing model be developed.

Noting that pre-paid services are preferred by Indigenous households, both to avoid bill shock and to simplify account management, we recommend that the Government and NBN Co work with satellite Retail Service Providers to introduce a pre-paid broadband tariff model or models within the NBN Long Term Satellite service.

Recommendation 5: Income management models for communications services.

For people whose Centrelink benefits are income-managed, Internet account costs should be categorised as basic services so that they can pay for them using their Basics Card.

Recommendation 6: IT training and support programs for remote areas delivered by community organisations.

Current digital economy planning and training programs (Digital Hubs, Digital Enterprise, Digital Local Government) are limited to NBN fibre rollout sites. ICT training and awareness programs and support for digital economy plans are needed for the satellite and wireless delivery areas. These should have recurrent operational funding and be open for delivery by community organisations to ensure locally targeted delivery and capacity building across rural and remote Australia.

3.7 million Australians do not access the Internet regularly, and the number of these people living in remote Australia is disproportionately high.

Recommendation 7: More government programs to support digital inclusion.

To encourage individual people in this group to seek Internet access, we recommend that Government digital inclusion programs should support the full range of Broadband Internet options, including community access centres or Internet cafes, home computing using fixed broadband connections, and smartphone and other portable devices accessing broadband services through either WiFi or mobile networks, as complementary access solutions.

Recommendation 8: Appropriate programs be established to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and digitally excluded groups.

We recommend that special consideration be given to making broadband services appropriate and accessible to all groups of users, including ESL speakers, people with disabilities, people with low socio-economic status, people with a low level of education, older Australians, and remote Indigenous people.

Technology and policy

With the coming of the NBN satellite servicing remote Australia, a huge opportunity exists to draw down maximum value for the bush but getting the technology and policy settings right are essential to ensure the greatest benefits are achieved.

Recommendation 9: Planning for the transition from the Interim Satellite Solution to the Long Term Satellite Solution should be made a priority.

Migration of existing retail customer satellite broadband services including ABG and ISS as well as new customers to LTSS will require the scheduling of upwards of 105,000 rooftop service installations by our estimate. Many of these customers are currently frustrated customers, which will put great pressure on the rollout schedule. Furthermore, installation resources in remote Australia are scarce and costly. Given the very short timescale from the present to late 2015 (18 months) to begin this migration, we recommend that transition planning, with particular emphasis on advice to the public, be made a very high priority for the switch-on of the NBN Long Term Satellite Solution.

Recommendation 10: A single interconnect point for the Long Term Satellite Solution.

The most effective and efficient means of interconnecting the NBN LTSS to retail service providers would be to minimise the number of interconnect points. We recommend a **single** interconnect point for LTSS because:

- the number of both end-customers and service providers will be relatively small compared to the situation for NBN fibre and fixed wireless services
- multiple points will be more costly and more time consuming for retail service providers seeking Australia-wide reach to implement, and these costs are likely to flow on to their consumers.

Recommendation 11: The establishment of an innovation budget for development of infrastructure solutions for remote areas.

Because of their small scale and often unique characteristics, remote areas often demand tailored telecommunications and broadband solutions, such as for last mile connectivity. An example of this approach would be a local community organisation proposing to aggregate traffic for its constituents for communal broadband access over a single higher capacity service at reduced cost compared to multiple individual satellite services. We recommend the Government establish an innovation budget for development of local infrastructure solutions for remote areas, which will not only assist in achieving the best outcome but may often result in lower cost.

Recommendation 12: Government and NBN Co engage with a broader range of the ICT industry.

Forum participants suggested that very large ICT industry content players and ICT vendors (apart from telcos) such as Google, Facebook, eBay, Cisco, could make a greater contribution to the NBN dialog.

We recommend that the Government identifies areas in which these players can contribute to the broader development of the NBN. For example, content vendors could be engaged in developing and trialling new applications or tailoring their existing applications, for example to maximise performance of those applications over NBN satellite links (analogue to the tailoring of applications that has taken place to adapt existing desktop applications for mobile use).

Recommendation 13: Government services be included in the demand estimate component of the business case for local area infrastructure investment, particularly in remote areas.

Governments are often the heaviest users of ICT broadband and telecommunications in remote areas, but their (current and longer term) needs are too often not included in establishing the case for ICT infrastructure or applications investment in a local area or region. In this way, the government component of that investment will effectively leverage improved community services. For example, aggregating forward commitments from a range of governments and departments ‘tipped the balance’ to secure substantial investments into the Ngaanyatjarra Lands Telecommunications Project, which led to fibre backhaul to six communities in one of the remotest regions in Australia.

Recommendation 14: Government use Communications Alliance to examine alternative, cost effective tailored ICT solutions for remote Australia.

The small, isolated population clusters scattered throughout remote Australia, many having unique circumstances means that ‘one size fits all’ solutions won’t achieve the best, most effective and lowest reasonable cost solutions. We recommend that the Government use Communications Alliance as a source of industry expertise for examining alternative interworking options such as satellite backhaul, modern microwave and small cell technologies as an opportunity for cost-effective expansion of mobile coverage in remote Australia.

Recommendation 15: Funding, similar to that available to very small remote Indigenous Communities to provide publicly accessible services such as WiFi hotspots, be extended to other remote local authorities.

Because of their isolation and limited commercial business local remote communities often require funding assistance to provide publicly accessible services such as free access WiFi hotspots to ‘kick start’ internet usage, access to e-government and provide the underpinnings for the digital economy. Such funding is being provided to a significant number of very small Remote Indigenous Communities (RICs), and some larger ones.

We recommend that this funding be extended to other local authorities such as local councils and equivalent RIC entities by further Commonwealth seed funding.

Recommendation 16: The Melbourne NBN Network Operations and Test facility be enhanced to include the performance testing of services based on satellite.

Melbourne NBN Network Operations and Test facility should be enhanced to include the performance testing of services based on satellite i.e. services that may need to operate at limited speeds under conditions such as rain fade.

Recommendation 17: That the scope for NBN Co be expanded to make it responsible for managing and providing satellite and other backhaul and associated infrastructure such as tower facilities for mobile coverage.

Recommendation 18: That funding for a formal survey of existing telecommunications infrastructure in small remote communities including Remote Indigenous Communities (of the type last conducted by ACMA for RICs in 2008) be included in the provision for the next Regional Telecommunications Review, to inform its findings.

Digital economy

Emerging broadband and telecommunications offer real opportunities to grow and strengthen remote economies and transform local businesses. Digital economic planning, business development and up-skilling in the bush are essential to realise the huge potential of the digital economy.

Recommendation 19: Use local organisations to build digital capability and uptake.

The focus for improving the digital capabilities of small regional businesses to be directed through existing industry associations and communities of interest with appropriate funding, or through commercial organisations that have a vested interest in raising the digital capabilities of such small businesses.

For example, the local chambers of commerce, RDAs and economic development organisations could provide the local community engagement, digital awareness and literacy training and capability development.

Recommendation 20: Up skill the 3 million Australians that really need it so that they can participate in the Digital First Strategy.

The focus for digital capability building should be directed towards those who are currently disadvantaged (e.g. seniors) and people in remote communities, and those 3.7 million Australians who are currently not online and the additional 3.7 million Australians who barely utilise their connection.

Recommendation 21: Remote communities should get involved in the digital economy now and not wait for the NBN.

There are many opportunities available to engage in the digital economy, even on slower connections. For example, cloud applications offer opportunities for productivity, market access and growth using existing connections.

Recommendation 22: Local community engagement, capacity building and digital enablement programs be implemented.

For example remote communities be assisted to develop their digital skills through flying squads that establish and support community champions and skill a cadre of locals to, in turn, support other locals to grow their digital awareness, literacy and digitally-enabled business capability.

Digital services

As more services move to digital delivery, communities and individuals that are not online risk further social and economic exclusion. Broadband is proving important for continuing professional development, online education, and mentoring support in remote areas. This presents an opportunity to strengthen existing local services, and to attract and retain workers.

Recommendation 23: Designated online services should be platform neutral and available through unmetered sites.

Recommendation 24: Ensure access points within communities are made available to enable access to digital services.

Recommendation 25: Where Government or large corporate capacity is provided, aggregation of usage and sharing capacity should be encouraged through incentives.

Recommendation 26: Support and enable communities to commence online digital interactions with existing technology, skills and infrastructure.

Recommendation 27: Ensure appropriate design of e-government and other services that takes into account usability, as well as the capabilities, range of connectivity modes, and privacy needs of end users.

Recommendation 28: Consider how existing infrastructure and spaces can support online learners.

The Broadband for the Bush Alliance would welcome feedback and contributions on this document. Please contact the Broadband for the Bush Alliance EO:

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Appendix 1: Summary of recommendations

- Rec 1: Remote and outer rural Australia needs a dedicated communications strategy.
- Rec 2: Regional and place based solutions should be supported and encouraged.
- Rec 3: Expansion of Extended Zones program to remote mobile and pre-paid mobile services.
- Rec 4: A pre-paid NBN satellite billing model be developed.
- Rec 5: Income management models for communications services.
- Rec 6: IT training and support programs for remote areas delivered by community organisations.
- Rec 7: More government programs to support digital inclusion.
- Rec 8: Appropriate programs be established to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and digitally excluded groups.
- Rec 9: Planning for the transition from the Interim Satellite Solution to the Long Term Satellite Solution should be made a priority.
- Rec 10: A single interconnect point for the Long Term Satellite Solution.
- Rec 11: The establishment of an innovation budget for development of infrastructure solutions for remote areas.
- Rec 12: Government and NBN Co engage with a broader range of the ICT industry.
- Rec 13: Government services be included in the demand estimate component of the business case for local area infrastructure investment, particularly in remote areas.
- Rec 14: Government use Communications Alliance to examine alternative, cost effective tailored ICT solutions for remote Australia.
- Rec 15: Funding, similar to that available to very small remote Indigenous Communities to provide publicly accessible services such as WiFi hotspots be extended to other remote local authorities.
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- Rec 19: Use local organisations to build digital capability and uptake.
- Rec 20: Up skill the 3 million Australians that really need it so that they can participate in the Digital First Strategy.
- Rec 21: Remote communities should get involved in the digital economy now and not wait for the NBN.
- Rec 22: Local community engagement, capacity building and digital enablement programs be implemented.
- Rec 23: Designated online services should be platform neutral and available through unmetered sites.
- Rec 24: Ensure access points within communities are made available to enable access to digital services.
- Rec 25: Where Government or large corporate capacity is provided, aggregation of usage and sharing capacity should be encouraged through incentives.
- Rec 26: Support and enable communities to commence online digital interactions with existing technology, skills and infrastructure.
- Rec 27: Ensure appropriate design of e-government and other services that takes into account usability, as well as the capabilities, range of connectivity modes, and privacy needs of end users.
- Rec 28: Consider how existing infrastructure and spaces can support online learners.

Appendix 2: Key outcomes from the Indigenous Focus Day, 29 April 2014

The Focus Day aimed to provide an environment for Indigenous stakeholders to share knowledge about their experiences of communications technology in rural and remote areas. Challenges and obstacles for digital inclusion were identified, along with proposals for a way forward. The structure of the event revolved around four key themes vital to the involvement of indigenous people in the Australian digital landscape.

Affordability

Affordability is a significant issue, with cost barriers to telecommunications usage restricting access and inhibiting usage in Indigenous communities. A popular proposal to help to address cost barriers was the introduction of Fixed call rate on pre-paid mobile (currently \$2/minute), with the recommendation that this might perhaps occur under an Extended Zones model. Additionally, appropriate billing models, including aggregated billing and Centrelink debiting, were also suggested as ways to increase digital uptake and encourage debt management.

Accessibility

A clear indication from the workshop was that where there is access, there is rapid uptake of digital tools and applications and that improving inclusion will rely on technologies being 'Cheap, easy, simple'.

Mobile devices were identified as the key means of personal access to telecommunications and Internet by remote Indigenous people and it was argued that they should be seen as a primary service. Shared or aggregated usage of broadband services and local distribution via WiFi mesh were raised as viable options for satisfying the enormous demand for expansion of mobile coverage in remote communities. With media organisations and broadcast facilities suggested as the most appropriate access points for these shared usage models.

Additionally, community access centres were also noted to be important for first level engagement and provide learning centres, unmediated access to online services, peer learning and employment opportunities.

Awareness

Cyber-safety was a key issue and discussions indicated Participants noted that social media is highly popular as a tool for communication, language use and engagement, and the benefits can be positive if harnessed correctly. However, negative aspects such as bullying do exist and ongoing remote-focussed awareness campaigns and cultural authority models are needed to lessen the impact of these issues.

In addition policies and training are also needed to support communities in ownership and effective cultural management of content once in a digital and on-line environment, including recognition of ICIP. Ultimately the group recommended that a greater awareness of the benefits of online participation can be more effectively delivered by reviewing the Indigenous Communications Program to ensure the gap for digital inclusion is closing, not widening.

Appropriateness

Appropriate and culturally relevant content and technology, designed to overcome low literacy and language barriers, was noted as critical to the success of training programs and sustainable online engagement. A number of forms were suggested for these services from apps to community archives to online and media content. However, it was noted that online service delivery needs to recognise the current low levels of connectivity, access and awareness in remote communities. There are many areas for further action by Broadband for the Bush and its members arising from the Indigenous Focus Day. We will be revising our *Rethinking the Indigenous Communications Program* policy paper, and discussing options for increased affordability, accessibility, awareness and appropriateness with government and the telecommunications industry in the months ahead.



Appendix 3: Broadband for the Bush Forum III Sponsors

Gold sponsor



Silver sponsor



Bronze sponsor





Appendix 4: Broadband for the Bush Forum III Program

The program for the Broadband for the Bush Forum III: Building a Better Digital Future can be downloaded from the Broadband for the Bush Alliance website here:

http://broadbandforthebush.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Program_15Apr_small.pdf