



Media release 15 June 2016

Broadband for the Bush Forum– Digital journeys

Improving availability and affordability of services, setting minimum service standards and guarantees, advancing digital literacy and empowerment remain key priorities to bridge the digital divide between the bush and metropolitan areas.

Addressing these issues in a holistic way were identified as paramount to achieve digital inclusion in rural and remote Australia by Forum delegates at the fifth annual Forum of the Broadband for the Bush Alliance held in Brisbane from June 8-9. The Forum called for the development of a coordinated Remote Telecommunications Strategy and articulated a set of key recommendations, including:

- The establishment of an independent remote and rural telecommunications advisory body;
- Bipartisan support for continuation of the mobile black spot programme, not restricted by economic viability or technology;
- Expanded penetration of NBN fibre and wireless backhaul into remote and regional Australia to reduce Skymuster (satellite) congestion;
- Nbn should remain as a publicly owned utility; and
- Provision of universal unmetered, but not unlimited, access to on-line health, government services, education services and banking for remote residents and NGOs to help address the tyranny of distance.

The Forum heard that digital exclusion is closely related to social and economic marginalisation. With 1 in 5 Australians not digitally connected, Forum delegates put forward the need to recognise digital citizenship as a human right and called for the Universal Service Obligation to be underpinned by a set of principles to provide a minimum standard of internet connectivity as a human right in Australia.

Forum participants stressed the importance of people and relationships rather than technology alone to achieve digital social inclusion. Therefore, promoting the development of local content and projects, user-friendly applications and interactivity are essential to better engagement with ICTs and internet. This also led to representatives of Indigenous organisations calling for the establishment and funding of an Indigenous digital mentor program to build community capability and create new employment opportunities in remote areas.

Forum participants came from diverse sectors, including health, education, research, primary industries, consumers groups, small businesses and telecommunications and have formed working parties to continue working together beyond the Forum to further articulate solutions and lobby for the adoption of key policies by Government to achieve better digital inclusion in the bush. The Broadband for the Bush Alliance, a national, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to digitally advance rural and remote Australia will coordinate the effort and regularly report on progress.

Full list of Forum recommendations available at <http://bit.ly/29sktaR>

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