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2011 – 12 Regional Telecommunications Review

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I. THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

Question 1. How is the use of telecommunications services; and information and communication technology (ICT) evolving in different industry sectors and what is the impact of these changes in regional Australia?

The take up of ICT is not uniform across or within industry sectors. It is not uncommon to find some enterprises making fantastic use of ICT and capitalizing upon the administrative and marketing advantages that it provides, whilst other within the same sector are wedded to outdated administrative practices and see the advent of the 'online environment' as a threat to their business. The retail sector is a great example of this. Some retailers have embraced online sales and use it to broaden their marketing reach, whilst others see it as a threat to their very existence.

Due to the distances that often have to be travelled in regional areas to access goods and services, clever use of online services can do much to improve the lives of regional Australians. There are three key factors required to bring this about

- a) Access to reliable high speed broadband
- b) Active engagement by business operators and service providers to understand the online environment and to make services available
- c) Active engagement by consumers to have confidence to access these goods and services online.

Question 2. What is needed to extend and accelerate the role of telecommunications services and ICT in delivering benefits to regional economies?

Considerable energy and focus in regional areas is being spent on building the business case for NBN Co to deliver high speed broadband services to each region. Less energy is being directed towards engaging with local business operators and residents, or seeking incremental capacity improvements with existing broadband infrastructure.

Obviously regions who receive the NBN roll out sooner receive a digital advantage compared to those who do not. Considerably more energy needs to be spent working with the communities who will not be receiving high speed broadband for some time. This would enable them to identify opportunities to build relationships with 3rd party providers / wholesalers, and engage their communities in developing creative solutions in the absence of imminent high speed broadband roll out.

Currently the vast bulk of resources both in terms of funding and engagement appears to be going to initial broadband release sites.

Question 3. The committee would like to hear from businesses and organisations about their participation in, experiences of, and expectations about, the digital economy. Examples could relate to specific sectors such as agriculture, mining, manufacturing or retail; business-to-business activities; productivity; teleworking; and the development of new knowledge-based industries.

Bass Coast Shire Council undertook a comprehensive study in 2005 to identify development options for Bass Coast Shire from 2005 to 2030. (Dr Peter Brain – National Institute of Economic and Industry Research) The study projected 3 scenarios, and the one that was adopted by Council identified the need to attract knowledge based workers and industries to the Shire. A key factor in achieving this is the installation of high speed broadband to the Shire.

High speed broadband is considered essential for knowledge based workers to interact with the global market place and to be able to run their businesses effectively. It is also a key component in creating a good quality of life for residents by providing improved access to health and education, as well as government services and social connection.

Question 4. The NBN will help the range of online government services to continue to expand. The committee is interested in views and experiences about engaging with government services online, whether local, state or federal.

There is currently a high level of inconsistency about which government services are available on line. A survey conducted by Socom Pty Ltd of the six Gippsland Councils in November 2011 revealed wild variation and inconsistency in the availability and use of online services. The survey revealed that:

- All Councils have a website
- One Council has dedicated online portal for community feedback
- One streams live video of Council meetings
- Two Councils have used online surveys to gather community feedback (both in trial)
- One Council has no facilities for any online payments
- One Council is set to launch a mobile compatible website application
- Use of social media is minimal with one Council effectively banning its use
- One Mayor actively uses Twitter to engage
- None has a web portal regarding the digital economy (one under development)
- One publishes a community newsletter online
- One has a repository of audio files of interviews with Council on local radio available for download

Bass Coast Shire Council has an interactive online forum for community consultation. Other Gippsland Councils do not offer this service at this stage. Once there is a high level of conformity about accessing services and making payments online, consumers will gradually migrate to access and utilize services this way. Whilst there is a hap-hazard approach to this many consumers will tend to stick to the traditional payment and contact methods with which they are familiar.

Leadership from peak bodies such as the Municipal Association of Victoria and other similar national bodies will assist this process to happen in a coordinated and consistent fashion. Currently it is left up to each different area of government to migrate services online subject to their individual online policies and resources available to undertake the work.

Consumers have shown in other industries eg online banking, that they will utilize the services once they are reliable and ubiquitous.

Question 5. What are some examples of what you want to see happen to encourage greater participation in the digital economy by people living and working in regional Australia?

A digital literacy divide is evolving throughout the community. People who are familiar with computers, use them for work, social connection and accessing services will continue to be swept along as the broadband roll out progresses across Australia. These are the 'digital haves', who will gladly access new services and entertainment online and can afford the cost of these services.

There is however another group of people who for whatever reason never learnt to use a computer, don't have ready access to one, are in a region which is poorly serviced by the internet or simply can't afford a computer or the cost of internet services. A report released by DPCD (Department of Planning and Community Development) in 2011 titled *Change and Disadvantage in Regional Victoria* provides data about the number of households with no access to the internet. In metropolitan regions this is 39%. In Gippsland as a whole this is 46%, whilst in some towns in Bass Coast Shire it is as high as 62% (San Remo). Even in Wonthaggi, the commercial hub of the Shire, there are 59% of households with no access to the internet. Some of those that do have access are still limited to dial up internet access speeds.

These people will become increasingly left behind unless active programs are put in place to:

- a) Increase the computer literacy of people who are at the non user or basic user end of the spectrum
- b) Provide ready access to computers with high speed connections for people who are in remote /isolated locations or who don't have a computer.
- c) There is good communication about when remote communities in particular can expect upgraded internet services, as under the current model the NBN roll out will take up to the end of this decade to reach some regions.

There is also a great opportunity to address issues of social isolation by creating 'communities' around computer access and education through libraries, neighborhood houses, community centres etc.

Question 6. What are the main barriers to regional communities increasing their use of information and communications technologies and do you have any ideas for ways in which regional communities could progressively overcome these barriers?

In order to increase the use of ICT in regional areas opportunities must be created to expose local businesses and residents to innovative uses. Creating community hubs where they can access video conferencing, setting up free WiFi access in town centres and encouraging local suppliers to implement or extend their use of online ordering for goods and services are just a few examples of practical ways in which locals can embrace technology.

An 'ICT innovation community engagement plan', developed in each municipality or on a regional basis would identify many projects and practical uses which would expose locals to ICT innovation and increase their digital literacy.

2. REGIONAL HEALTH AND EDUCATION OUTCOMES

Question 7. Do you have ideas for ways in which high-speed broadband could enhance the delivery of education and healthcare outcomes in regional communities?

Education – The loss of many of the brightest youth from regional areas to pursue study and a career in regional centres, the metropolitan areas or overseas has long been an issue for regional and remote communities. Even more detrimental is the high deferral rate or not taking up their tertiary places at all due to the high cost of relocating to and living in the city. According to the study 'Deferring a university offer in regional Victoria' released in January 2011, the deferral rate for metropolitan students rose from 5.5% in 2004 to 8.7% in 2009. For regional students the rate went from 9.9% to 21.9% for the corresponding period. Clearly an alternative method of delivering the services to regional students is required.

High speed broadband offers the opportunity for students pursuing a range of careers and vocations to stay in their regional communities, and obtain their qualifications via online services. It also expands the range of training available beyond that offered at a specific institution and opens up global opportunities. It enables students to maintain links with their 'home' communities, and then to develop and use their skills for the benefit of that community.

Health – In a municipality such as Bass Coast, rates of disability and single people living alone over the age of 75 are considerably higher than the state average. In Wonthaggi, the commercial hub of the Shire, the percentage of the population over 75 years living alone is twice the state average (4.4% vs 2.2%) and this is not the highest in the Shire. The percentage of the community with a disability is as high as 10% in parts of the Shire, compared to the state average of 4.5% (Change and Disadvantage in Regional Victoria Report 2011) Public transport is also identified as a significant barrier to accessing services for many of these people. The net result is that for many of these people accessing health services is problematic, and in some cases they miss out all together.

Advancements in health service delivery based upon the availability of high speed broadband will have the potential to make access to basic and specialized health services significant more achievable for these people. Instead of having to find a way

to get to the nearest capital city for an appointment, it could be done via a video link at the local community centre. Home based applications will allow ongoing monitoring, with reduced need for health appointments simply for routine check ups.

Question 8. The committee would like to hear from individuals and organisations about their participation in, experiences of, and expectations about, online health and education service delivery.

The community benefits outlined in the response to Q7 above can only be achieved when two things happen. One is the installation of reliable high speed broadband , and the other is a significant increase in the level of access to services for the most disadvantaged in our communities, and an overall higher level of computer literacy. The community engagement and education program proposed in the response to question 6 will address these two factors if implemented successfully.

3. COMMUNICATIONS NEEDS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

4. DEVELOPMENTS IN THE TERRESTRIAL AND SATELLITE MOBILE PHONE SECTOR

Question 13. Have you been able to readily obtain information to improve your mobile phone coverage, such as using an external antenna or choosing particular phones that are better suited to rural or remote coverage?

Local providers Optus and Telstra provide limited information on Tower upgrades and improvements. These key providers even though improving coverage still do not consistently cover the Bass Coast region. Being just on the Metropolitan fringe, Bass Coast does not receive the coverage experienced by Melbourne residents. Bass Coast relies on a mixture of coverage's ranging from good to none. Coverage from various providers inconsistently across our region. Providers provide recommendations on devices, best suited to their services, but the inconsistency of coverage minimizes any advantage of mobility across our region.

Antennas have been trialed, with minimal success. Provider's inability to standardize connections across models of phones and antennas have caused many problems. The antenna connections proved unreliable physically in a mobile environment.

Question 14. Are you aware of emerging technologies or initiatives that could be used to improve mobile phone coverage in regional Australia?

There is limited information from key providers relating to our region as most media relates to improvements and initiatives available only to Melbourne regions. The cross utilization and sharing of towers would greatly improve coverage in our region.

Question 15. What have been your experiences with satellite mobile phones?

Satellite mobile phones have been trialed with limited success. Delays, coverage, quality and size were all regarded as limitations and poor experiences..