



31 July 2018

The Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance
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2018 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
Department of Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2601

RE: Regional Telecommunications Review 2018 Issues Paper

Response from the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA)

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review 2018.

Regional and Remote Australia is not isolated from the national and international context and the need for it to be well considered and an essential part of the national telecommunications strategy is essential. While the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance has a national remit and concern we welcome the opportunity to make a submission focused on regional and remote Australia.

ADIA requests that the Committee recommend that the Minister for Regional Communications:

1. Commits to lifting Australia's digital inclusion ranking¹ from a poor 25th to within the top five by 2025 (a half a decade after the 'end date' of the nbn rollout)
2. Develop a Regional and Remote Digital Inclusion Strategy within the next 12 months with a focus on affordability, ability and accessibility, in consultation with all relevant stakeholders including industry, and
3. Fund the strategy through direct multi-year funding in the Budget through Australian Government investment and strategic partnerships with state and local government and other third parties as appropriate.

/over

¹ <https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com>, accessed 27/7/18

We submit that:

Government investment has been essential to ensure that regional and remote Australians and communities can realise a proportion of the telecommunications and technology benefits that their city cousins enjoy.

Participation in the digital world is now a ‘must’, not a ‘nice-to-have’. As the internet is increasingly an integral part of everyday life, disconnection impacts employment, social interaction, access to services, information, education and civic engagement.

We cannot afford for any Australian to be digitally excluded. But people living in regional and remote Australia are particularly vulnerable to being left behind, especially when other disadvantage is also experienced. Therefore, we submit that:

1. Regional and remote telecommunications and data needs to be **affordable** and that particular interventions by government are necessary to ensure this is the case,
2. The challenge of distance is a barrier to building digital **ability** in regional and particularly remote Australia. Place-based and other targeted strategies and resourcing are needed, and
3. Digital needs to be **accessible** – not only in terms of connectivity but also in terms of language and inclusive design so that culturally and linguistically diverse people and people with disability can readily access the digital world. Minimum standards should become policy.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index tells us that regional and remote Australians are significantly less included in the digital world. It references **affordability, ability** and **accessibility** as key drivers of being included and getting value from the digital world.²

A national commitment to significantly improve digital inclusion is needed.

A Regional and Remote Digital Inclusion Strategy with appropriate investment is needed.

About the ADIA

The Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA) is a shared initiative with participants from over four hundred business, government, academic and community organisations working together to accelerate action on digital inclusion. We work with other alliances and groups that share our vision to reduce the digital divide – for example we work closely with the Broadband for the Bush Alliance, who have particular expertise and understanding of regional, remote and indigenous telecommunications and digital inclusion issues.

Our vision is to reduce the digital divide and enable greater social and economic participation for all Australians. Visit www.digitalinclusion.org.au to find out more.

² <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/the-index-report/about-the-index/>, accessed 27/7/18

Background and context

The rollout of the National Broadband Network (nbn) is one of the largest and most complex infrastructure initiatives ever undertaken in Australia. On scheduled rollout completion in 2020, nbn's stated objective is to ensure all Australians have access to fast broadband. While we can be proud of the efforts taken to put broadband infrastructure into place, we should all be impatient for the key next step of bridging the divide and delivering broadband access to all Australians. Sadly, Australia still lags behind global peers on the important measures of broadband affordability, accessibility and digital ability. And this is even more so the case in regional and remote Australia.

On a global scale, Australia currently ranks a poor 25th on the Inclusive Internet Index, behind Bulgaria, Taiwan, Hungary and Russia³.

The ADIA believes all Australians should be able to make full use of digital technologies – and that includes regional and remote Australians.

Our collective commitment as a nation should be to deliver Australia from a 25th global ranking to being at least amongst the top five most internet inclusive nations in the world.

It is not an impossible task. Targeted action would see rapid advancement in ranking in the early stages of what needs to be a longer-term commitment to realising the social and economic returns of the nbn.

This commitment should be viewed as a project of comparable scale and complexity to putting the network infrastructure into place. It will take significant levels of Government attention and investment.

The Regional Telecommunications Review is an important opportunity to highlight the particular and exaggerated digital divide in regional and remote Australia and to develop active, tangible and achievable strategies to narrow the gap. Previous RTRs have led to significant policy and investment initiatives relating to mobile and other telecommunications infrastructure.

We submit that a similar commitment to policy and investment to address **affordability, ability and accessibility** in regional and remote Australia is a matter of urgency.

³ <https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com>, accessed 27/7/18

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Regional and remote communities can be particularly disadvantaged in terms of accessing and gaining the fullest value from telecommunications because of a range of factors.

Regional and remote Australians are more likely to have less income than their city counterparts. Median equivalised household incomes in Australia's greater capital city areas, as a whole, are 18% higher than incomes in Australia excluding these capital cities⁴. As the bottom decile of households in Australia, by income, spend almost 10 per cent of their disposable incomes on telecommunications services, compared to 3.5 per cent for Australian households as a whole⁵, the concentration of low income households in regional and remote Australia makes digital **affordability** a key barrier to digital inclusion and a major cause for concern.

The fact that regional and remote Australia has a distinctly older age structure⁶ and infrastructural disparities, especially in areas excluded from the NBN's fixed footprint, between remote Australia and greater capital city areas are just some of the other known factors that contribute to the regional digital divide.

We welcome the government's commitment to the cyclic RTR and note the outcomes arising from previous reviews – the enhancements of the Mobile Blackspots program is just one example.

It is pleasing that the questions the Review Panel are seeking input on (Appendix 1, RTR Issues paper) and considering more than just connectivity. As outlined in the introduction, government's commitment through the nbn is significant and the positive impact in terms of connectivity has already been experienced and will build – notwithstanding some very important issues that will be highlighted in other respondents' submissions.

In order to realise the benefits of connectivity initiatives, people need to be able to afford to connect⁷, have the skills and knowledge to allow them to make best use of the connectivity, and be able to overcome other barriers to connection, like disability and language.

We submit that **affordability**, **ability** and **accessibility** need to be carefully considered if the full value-return both financially and socially of the nbn and other investments like the Mobile Blackspots program is to be realised in regional and remote Australia.

⁴ <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/6523.0Main+Features12015-16?OpenDocument>, accessed 31/07/2018

⁵ Bureau of Communications and Arts Research. (2017). Trends and drivers in the affordability of communications services for Australian households.

⁶ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3235.0>, accessed 31/07/2018

⁷ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-21/thousands-of-australian-families-cant-afford-home-internet/7185452>, accessed 31/07/2018

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Our participating partner, the Broadband for the Bush Alliance, has undertaken extensive consultation in relation to the RTR. ADIA was an active partner in their recent Broadband for the Bush Forum, held in Darwin, and participated in the engagements around developing a response to the RTR.

We are very supportive of the on-going efforts of the Broadband for the Bush Alliance and particularly its efforts to achieve the best possible telecommunications and digital inclusion for people living, travelling or working in regional and remote Australia.

We commend the Broadband for the Bush Alliance submission to the Review Panel, recognising their long-standing commitment to and expertise in seeking the best telecommunications and digital outcomes for the bush.

We explicitly highlight and reinforce their recommendation to establish a Regional Telecommunications Policy and submit that the establishment of a Regional and Remote Digital Inclusion Strategy and its appropriate resourcing and investment is critical.

This submission was drafted by the ADIA Collective Voice workgroup, drawing from our involvement with Broadband for the Bush and their submission, and modified consultation with the wider ADIA network, via our 500+ mailing list. The list of ADIA participants that explicitly support this submission is listed on the last page of this submission.

Recommendation: Regional and Remote Digital Inclusion Strategy and investment

Background: There is no coordinating strategy to build digital inclusion in regional and remote Australia. While there has been significant investment in physical infrastructure, investment in people's **ability** to gain value from and access the internet is done only marginally and sporadically. Neither is there a strategy around **affordability** in the bush. There are also specific **accessibility** issues in regional and remote Australia – for example, the lack of language and culturally appropriate digital service portals.

Submission:

1. The establishment of a Digital Inclusion Strategy for Regional and Remote Australia within 12 months
2. We recommend that this strategy explicitly address **affordability, ability** and **accessibility**, and
3. We recommend that additional and appropriate levels of resourcing across multi-year periods be directed to address affordability, ability and accessibility barriers in the bush – recognising the higher costs of doing business, isolation and market failure in the regions – particularly in remote areas. Digital Inclusion investments need to recognise the particular context of the regions and communities and the often-higher cost structures to deliver outcomes.

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Conclusion

The 2018 RTR is an historic opportunity to highlight the need for a coordinated and resourced strategy to address the affordability, ability and accessibility barriers to gaining the full value of the significant telecommunications and digital investments made in the Bush over recent years.

While significant connectivity investments will still need to be made, the value return is presently reduced because of digital inclusion barriers. These need to be strategically addressed so that every regional and remote Australian has a similar opportunity to enjoy, engage and derive benefit from our increasingly digital world.

The alternative is that some of Australia's most marginalised residents will become even more isolated, and the divide grow.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance would welcome the opportunity to engage further to discuss opportunities to help close the digital divide through improving digital affordability, accessibility and ability.

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