



Hot issues

Regional and Remote Digital Inclusion – Speech at the Country Women’s Association of Australia’s National Conference

Australia is becoming a more connected country than ever before. With approximately 14.2 million¹ Australians connected to the Internet, it is quickly becoming the vehicle for much of our communication, information and commerce. However, for many regional, rural and remote Australians, there are considerable barriers to engagement with the digital world.

ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin, spoke at the Country Women’s Association of Australia’s National Conference where she presented on the main barriers that prevent rural Australians from maximising the economic and social benefits that today’s telecommunication services can provide.

Infrastructure

In recent years, the Australian government has recognised the need to improve the quality of telecommunications infrastructure in regional, rural and remote Australia. In 2016-2017, a total of \$10.2 billion was invested in public and private communications infrastructure; much of this targeted at regional, rural and remote areas. This is the largest investment dedicated to telecommunications infrastructure in over 30 years² and has largely been spent on the rollout of the NBN.

Despite some teething problems, the NBN has had positive impacts for connectivity across the nation. It is estimated that the new network has resulted in 3,400 – 6,400 Australians working for themselves. Additionally, 1,900 – 5,400 businesses have been created in regions with high NBN roll-out (NBN Co. 2018a, p. 8).

For regional, rural and remote Australians, gaps in the existing communications infrastructure still present specific challenges. Mobile coverage gaps, a lack of services in remote Indigenous communities, and deteriorating fixed voice services are all issues that need to be addressed.

ACCAN supports the continued roll-out of the mobile black spot program to address coverage gaps, expanded access to public Wi-Fi in remote Indigenous communities, and a new universal service guarantee to support the delivery of a reliable voice and broadband services for regional Australians.

Affordability

Many consumers living in remote, rural and regional Australia are finding it difficult to afford the communication services that they need. To ensure continuous reliable coverage, many regional Australians are investing in multiple services (e.g. a fixed home voice service, an internet service and a mobile).

This multi-service premium also extends to devices. Rural and remote consumers and small businesses have to factor in redundancies for failing technology. From experience, they know they need to buy additional technology as a backup. According to research from *Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia*, 72 per cent of mobile broadband users had to purchase additional equipment at their own expense to access reliable coverage. We have estimated that the average regional consumer will pay approximately \$87 per month for necessary telecoms services such as voice, NBN satellite/fixed wireless and mobile. Alternatively, metropolitan consumer will only need to pay an average of \$65 per month, as they are able to rely on fewer products such as an NBN fixed line and mobile.

ACCAN recognises that the needs of Regional Australians aren't uniform. In order to avoid oversimplifications and generalisations about a large segment of Australia's population, ACCAN has analysed Australian Bureau of Statistics and other data, and used it to inform our [submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review](#).

Digital Literacy

Australia's digital literacy is quite strong by international standards. However, there are concerns that certain groups in Australia's regional, rural and remote areas (such as Indigenous Australians, pensioners, students, the unemployed and low income families) are at risk of being left behind when it comes to understanding the digital world.

We know that improving connectivity can dramatically improve people's lives, in particular through access to vital services such as health and education. Conversely, a lack of digital understanding can lead to digital exclusion which can leave consumers vulnerable to predatory practices.

In an effort to reduce Australia's digital divide, ACCAN supports the development of a comprehensive approach to digital literacy that recognises the complexities of providing training and education remotely, and seeks to leverage the existing significant investments in infrastructure.

What Are We Doing?

ACCAN is actively engaging with the Federal Government and the telecommunications industry to advocate for a number of changes that are aimed at promoting regional, rural and remote digital inclusion. These include:

- Calling for ongoing funding for mobile network expansion in regional areas through black spot programs;
- A review of affordability policies to address cost barriers for low income consumers;
- Creation and implementation of regulated standards to ensure vital broadband and voice services are reliable, and quickly fixed if faults arise;

- A new Universal Services Guarantee for voice and data services;
- Better information so that consumers can choose services that best suit their needs;
- Targeted strategies to increase digital literacy

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018

2 Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics (BITRE), 2017, Yearbook 2017: Australian Infrastructure Statistics, Statistical Report, BITRE, Canberra ACT