



# Transforming Life Outside Cities: The Potential of Broadband Services

Submission by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network  
to the Standing Committee on Broadband in Rural and Regional Services



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The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is the peak body that represents all consumers on communications issues including telecommunications, broadband and emerging new services. ACCAN provides a strong unified voice to industry and government as consumers work towards availability, accessibility and affordability of communications services for all Australians.

Consumers need ACCAN to promote better consumer protection outcomes ensuring speedy responses to complaints and issues. ACCAN aims to empower consumers so that they are well informed and can make good choices about products and services. As a peak body, ACCAN will activate its broad and diverse membership base to campaign to get a better deal for all communications consumers.

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# Response to the Potential of Broadband Services

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The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) thanks the Standing Committee on Broadband in Rural and Regional Services for the opportunity to provide our comments to the inquiry *'Transforming Life outside cities: the potential of broadband services'*. We note the inquiry has three broad areas for comment, including;

- Improving government services and efficiency in service delivery, including in the areas of education, health and justice services
- Improving the level of engagement of rural and regional communities in public life through new technologies
- Investigating the potential economic benefits from new technology on commercial and business opportunities

ACCAN's vision is for accessible, available and affordable communication services for all Australians. We are very pleased that the Standing Committee is using this inquiry to identify opportunities for broadband services to better engage the community. This submission focuses on the opportunities available for the NSW Government to ensure more inclusive communications services, through its own websites and publications and its own purchasing power. We also showcase examples of broadband-based technologies available to assist people with disabilities communicate and stay connected.

## 1. E-Accessibility for Online Government Services

People with disabilities often experience multiple disadvantages such as lower employment levels and lower levels of technology uptake, which can be compounded by other factors like low English proficiency. Accessibility to online services offers enormous opportunities to minimise, or circumvent, such disadvantage. At present, there is less than 5 percent of printed material that is accessible for Australians who are vision impaired or have other print disabilities<sup>1</sup>. People with disabilities report frustration that they must continually request that government documents are presented online in multiple formats, including PDF, RTF, large print, MS word, and Braille. In the absence of this range of technical solutions, consumers with disabilities are facing high costs.

ACCAN supports the Federal Government's recent decision to make all government web sites compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 to its second highest AA level by 2015. Improving web site accessibility provides consumers with disabilities the opportunity to be equal participants in the digital information age and also creates a more socially inclusive society.

The NSW Government can ensure its online services are accessible by migrating all government websites to WCAG 2.0 AAA standard as soon as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> 2009, Blind Citizens Australia, *Blind Citizens Australia submission to PDF Accessibility Review*, page 3, viewed 11/11/09 [http://www.bca.org.au/natpol/access\\_info/2009%2010%2014%20PDF%20Accessibility%20Review.doc](http://www.bca.org.au/natpol/access_info/2009%2010%2014%20PDF%20Accessibility%20Review.doc)



## 2. Accessible Public Procurement Policy

The use of accessibility criteria in government procurement ensures the full participation of employees with disabilities and creates a powerful incentive for manufacturers to develop accessible products. In order that people with disabilities have the same opportunities in the workplace as other employees is essential that all information technology equipment is accessible. Government departments are in a position to set best practice standards and to lead by example.

Public procurement policies have been successfully deployed in other countries giving government employees with disabilities accessible information technology, software and equipment. The significant buying power of government agencies creates incentives for manufacturers to develop more accessible products, creating a powerful force in the market with economy-wide benefits. The USA was the first country to incorporate accessibility into public procurement in 1998.<sup>2</sup> Federal agencies are required to develop, procure, maintain, or use electronic and information technology in a way that ensures the participation of Federal employees with disabilities. The legislation covers all types of mainstream information technology and equipment such as office equipment, desktop computers, telecommunications equipment and software.

The European Union has also included accessibility requirements in its Public Procurement Directive.<sup>3</sup> Further direct guidance on accessibility will be provided through the December 2005 European Commission mandate (M/376) in the form of standard functional requirements across the European Union.

There are important social justice and economic grounds for pursuing an accessible procurement policy. In its *National Inquiry into Employment and Disabilities*, the then Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission recommended the government commence the process to adopt accessibility criteria in public procurement policies. Access Economics has estimated that in 2005 the potential lost taxation revenue of people with hearing loss due to their reduced paid workforce participation was \$2 billion.<sup>4</sup>

The US revision of its standards and guidelines and the European Union work under Mandate 376 are working concurrently and referentially to reach harmonised standards. With a far smaller market, Australia is well positioned to utilise these processes in implementing its own accessible procurement arrangements. The failure to implement an accessible procurement could risk Australia becoming the dumping ground for inaccessible products unable to be sold in major markets in North America and Europe. It is a timely opportunity to pursue an accessible procurement policy.

## 3. Accessible technologies

ACCAN recently released a report titled '*Broadband Solutions for Consumers with Disabilities*'. The objective of the research was to explore the potential for new technologies utilising high-speed broadband to transform the lives of people with disabilities. A copy of

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<sup>2</sup> This was achieved through the adoption of section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act 1974

<sup>3</sup> Article 23, Directive 2004/18/EC on the coordination of procedures for the award of public works contracts, public supply contracts and public service contract and Article 34,

<sup>4</sup> Access Economics, 2006, *Listen Hear! The economic impact and cost of hearing loss in Australia*



the full report is attached to this submission. The report includes the following opportunities for new technologies to assist consumers with disabilities.

### 3.1 Health services

The adoption of new, high-speed broadband in Australia may prove useful for consumers living in rural and remote areas. The great distance that many people must travel in regional Australia to access medical services can be overcome by 'face to face' via videophone consultations with doctors. Additionally, data from patient-worn monitoring equipment (heart rate, temperature, blood pressure monitors, etc.) to be transmitted continuously to the doctor's surgery will allow patients to be monitored regularly and eliminate the need for travel in rural areas. The high-speed fibre network will also allow patient data to be sent efficiently from hospitals to doctors and vice versa.

### 3.2 Education

Educational and employment opportunities for people in rural and remote NSW, with disabilities, have the potential to be significantly improved with new technological options that run on high-speed broadband. Accessible services that allow easy conversation and communication include the following possibilities:

- "a blind individual could listen to a verbal description of a colleague's diagram
- interactive training from the office equipment manufacturer could help the user to make the best use of the equipment.
- a blind person could use a voice-recognition system to convert the speech of a colleague into data, which can be stored so that it can be retrieved as Braille for later use."<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

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This submission outlines opportunities for the NSW government to facilitate a more inclusive society using the benefits of broadband services. We note, however, that the success of such initiatives ultimately depends on consumers having sufficient availability of broadband services at affordable prices. The Federal Government's proposed National Broadband Network goes a long way to delivering first class broadband in Australia but its high-speed fibre service is only intended to cover 90% of the population. ACCAN remains concerned about the adequacy of broadband services in regional and remote areas of Australia, where households have only been promised broadband services up to 12 megabits per second. We encourage the Standing Committee to continue to identify ways in which better broadband services can be secured for regional and remote Australia.

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<sup>5</sup> ACCAN, *Broadband Solutions for Consumers with Disabilities* Report, p.18