



Consumer Safeguards Review



Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications – Part C / Choice and Fairness

Consultation Paper

Response of First Nations Media
Australia

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Background

First Nations Media Australia (FNMA) is the peak body for the First Nations media and communications industry. In 2016 it transitioned to the national peak body for First Nations broadcasting, media and communications. It was founded in 2001 as the peak body for remote Indigenous media and communications and previously known as the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA).

First Nations broadcasters are not-for-profit community organisations providing a primary and essential service to their communities. First Nations Media Australia members include media organisations focused on radio, television, print and online platforms, individual broadcasters, producers, journalists, filmmakers and freelancers and supporters. The sector is based in local communities and employs local people as broadcasters and media producers. First Nations media services collectively reach nearly 50% of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population as the primary and often only source of information.

First Nations Media Australia manages inDigiMOB, a Telstra-funded digital inclusion program for remote communities in the Northern Territory. To date, inDigiMOB has delivered digital inclusion and cyber safety awareness training to 2,215 individuals across 20 communities in the Northern Territory, employing 112 Indigenous Digital Mentors in the process. This direct experience in providing digital literacy training in remote communities gives us insight into the gaps in phone and internet service delivery for remote Australians and the challenges facing regional providers.

As part of its industry leadership role, FNMA seeks to ensure First Nations communities have access to information to make informed decisions. This submission is informed by over 8 years of industry and community consultation about regional and remote connectivity issues. The crossover of infrastructure, digital literacy and access to information between telecommunications and media is significant. For this reason, First Nations Media Australia was a founding contributor to the Broadband for the Bush Alliance – a collective of 23 organisations focused on remote and regional connectivity within the satellite footprint under NBN - and the annual Broadband for the Bush Forum (up to 2018).



Comments

First Nations Media Australia (FNMA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications consultation paper. As advocates for regional connectivity, particularly in remote Indigenous communities, we have a dedicated interest in ensuring the interests of First Nations communities are protected from an equity and communication standpoint.

It is FNMA's view that full participation in the digital economy for remote and regional communities can be achieved through the following mechanisms:

- Rollout of NBN Public Interest Premises (PIP) to remote communities with populations of more than 50 people, including WiFi setup, using a Skymuster Plus backhaul.
- Unmetered access to government and key services and the option to purchase pre-paid vouchers to access other services and information.
- The rollout of Skymuster services to communities with a Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Service (RIBS) to enable upgrade of broadcast transmission and studio equipment and wide area network connectivity as a shared infrastructure outcome of the Regional Connectivity Program.
- The upgrade of RIBS broadcast facilities (with back-up battery or generator) and towers to enable co-location of small cell mobile and WiFi infrastructure
- The use of existing Telstra HCRC towers for high-capacity microwave links for extending backhaul for terrestrial broadband and mobile coverage.

It is with this position in mind that we approach some of the questions in the consultation paper. This submission does not seek to address all of the questions posed, rather it highlights just a few positions for the Department's consideration in approaching these issues.

Supported policy

- FNMA commends the commitment the Australian Government has made to date to the Mobile Black Spots Program and the Regional Connectivity Program.
- FNMA is pleased to see the Department exploring issues of affordability of broadband services, noting that is beyond the immediate scope of this consultation.
- In broad terms, FNMA supports the ACMA's engagement with industry in developing relevant codes and monitoring adherence. We prefer this model to self-regulation and self-correction in this space.

Concerns

- The TIO currently only acts on complaints lodged online or by phone, which potentially excludes vulnerable communities from making complaints should their telecommunication services be lacking. FNMA recommends a more proactive form of monitoring through regular reviews involving community consultation on the adequacy of services. We suggest an Indigenous Advisory Group to the TIO be established to advise on where investigations and remedial actions may be required.
- Noting positive increases in access to internet at home and the affordability of data at a national level, FNMA reminds the Department that there are many remote communities still left without reliable phone and/or internet services. More than 2.5million Australians are still not online¹. This includes 24.7% of Indigenous Australian households who do not access the internet from home, compared with the national average of 14.7%. Levels of home internet access for Indigenous Australian households diminish further with remoteness, with up to 45.2% of households in remote and very remote locations unable to access the internet². For equity, safety and economic development, service providers should be obligated to ensure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to reliable and affordable telecommunications services, including internet and data services, regardless of location.

¹ Digital Inclusion Index, *Digital Inclusion in Australia*, <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/about/about-digital-inclusion/>

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2016

- FNMA commends Telstra's recent announcement of low income measures. However, industry cannot provide the range of solutions required for full digital inclusion. Further support is required from the Australian Government to address gaps in access, affordability, and digital literacy. This includes provision of unmetered access for remote communities to online services available to those living in regional and urban centers for free, such as MyGov, banking, libraries and health services. FNMA recommends the Universal Service Guarantee be expanded to include public internet access through community WiFi and LTE systems for remote communities.
- FNMA supports the continuation of low income measures for the remainder of the current USO contract period (to 2032). For many remote Indigenous people, a home telephone or mobile telephone service is the highest priority to enable unmediated communications with services and social networks across vast remote regions. Yet, after over 20 years of the Universal Services Obligation, 5 Regional Telecommunications Reviews and numerous other programs, over 30% of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are still without access to basic home telephony. In the Northern Territory there were 21 remote communities with no mobile phone service, 33 with no fixed internet service and 37 connected to the NBN via unreliable or unsuitable satellite services in 2018. While some progress has been made, two years on it is still too early to walk away from USO commitments in relation to simple provision voice services. VoIP services are still not an option in many remote and regional areas.
- A large proportion of small to medium sized remote First Nations communities (population between 50 and 200 approximately) are reliant on a single means of telecommunications access or have no access at all. Typically, where provided, this is a single payphone or community phone, connected via high capacity radio concentrator (HCRC) microwave link or satellite link respectively. The Homelands Review (2015/2016 data) found that around 80% of the approximately 400 occupied outstations/homelands in the Northern Territory (i.e. 320 outstation/homelands) did not have access to mobile coverage and fell into the single means of access category³. In total only 20% had mobile compared to approximately 81% of the broader Australian

³ The Northern Territory Homelands and Outstations Assets and Access Review (CAT, 2016) www.icat.org.au Centre for Appropriate Technology. Alice Springs. 2016

population. A similar situation exists in the Kimberley and North Queensland. Whilst this issue is being addressed through the Mobile Black Spots program, it is too soon to roll back current USO requirements in relation to public phone services until a proven reliable, universally accessible and affordable alternative is in place. There is a need to step up monitoring of the reliability and repair times for public phone services, with many communities reporting extended outages of public phones.

- Given the rise of mobile and broadband as a primary requirement for effective communications and access to services, the Department should consider expediting the transition from the USO to the Universal Services Guarantee to include the provision of mobile and data services. Beyond 2032, fixed-line telecommunication services may be a lesser priority. FNMA would support changes to the USO to reflect the evolving needs of consumers, so long as the policy objectives of universal access to communications services remain paramount in the obligation.
- It is also clear that infrastructure is not the only barrier to people being connected and able to access services, as show in the Australian Digital Inclusion Index. It would be timely to begin using the terms 'digital inclusion' within policy instruments like the USO/USG to ensure consideration of other factors such as affordability, last-mile access, accessibility by people with disabilities or CALD, digital literacy and awareness of relevant/ appropriate services and support.

Additional considerations

- The consultation paper does not address how the Australian Government intends to address underserved areas in relation to telecommunication requirements.
- More data collection (publicly available) is required to monitor and address the levels and quality of household communications access in remote and regional Australia. With measures for digital inclusion and access to information to be established under the renewed Closing the Gap framework, this is a timely opportunity for this to be a whole of government approach.
- FNMA recommends the Department proceeds with the transition to the Universal Services Guarantee to include the provision of mobile and data services and/or support affordable last-mile access to broadband in remote Indigenous communities.

- While we commend the Australian Government's commitment to developing an Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan, we note that there was no budget or timeframe associated with that plan when it was announced in March 2019 and no updates published since. FNMA urges that a fully funded and recurrent Indigenous Digital Inclusion Program be established as a matter of urgency to stem the growing digital gap between remote and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians.

