

REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW

Discussion paper

Purpose

The *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* (the Act) was amended in 2005 to establish the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (RTIRC). The Committee was established to review the adequacy of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia. Under the Act a review must be undertaken at least every three and a half years and the Australian Government must respond to the Committee's recommendations within six months of receiving the Committee's report.

The Act also established the \$2 billion Communications Fund to provide an ongoing stream of earnings to fund the Government's responses to Committee recommendations regarding telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia.

On 13 August 2007, the Government announced the membership of the Committee, which includes Dr Bill Glasson (Chair), Ms Alexandra Gartmann, Mr Mark Needham, Councillor Bruce Scott and Ms Josephine Stone.

The Committee has commenced its review and will report to the Government in March 2008.

This discussion paper is intended as a starting point for the Committee's consultations with stakeholders. As well as inviting written submissions, the Committee is planning a series of regional consultations to meet with stakeholders.

Input sought

You are invited to submit your views, in writing, to the Committee by **5pm, Friday, 7 December 2007**.

As a guide, a number of specific questions have been highlighted throughout the discussion paper. You are welcome to raise other issues relating to the adequacy of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.

Confidentiality

Submissions may be made publicly available on the RTIRC website. Those providing a submission should indicate clearly if any aspect of their submission should not be made public. Standard email disclaimers, such as those normally appearing at the end of an email, will not be considered confidentiality requests.

Where confidentiality is requested, submitters are encouraged to provide a public version of their submission that can be made available on the website. Please note that the Committee reserves the right not to publish documents or other information that it receives from industry or the public.

Submissions or comments submitted in response to this discussion paper will generally be subject to the provisions of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*.

Please note that a number of other telecommunications-related reviews are also currently underway. Unless you request otherwise, the information you provide may also be considered by those reviews.

Lodging your submission

Written submissions should include a completed submission cover sheet (Attachment A) and, where possible, be provided in an electronic form. Email submissions are preferred; however, hard copy submission will be accepted by post or fax. Please include a summary if your submission is longer than 10 pages.

Email: submissions@rtirc.gov.au

Post: Attention: RTIRC Secretariat
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For more information please contact the secretariat by email, secretariat@rtirc.gov.au or freecall 1800 064 851

16 October 2007

Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (RTIRC)

Terms of Reference

Sections 158P and 158Q of the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* (the Act) contain the terms of reference for the reviews.

1. The Committee must conduct a review of the adequacy of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.
2. In determining the adequacy of those services, the Committee must have regard to whether people in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia have equitable access to telecommunications services that are significant to people in those parts of Australia, and currently available in one or more parts of urban Australia.
3. In conducting the review, the Committee must make provision for public consultation and consultation with people in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.
4. In conducting the review, the Committee must have regard to any policies of the Australian Government notified to it by the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. The Committee may also have regard to other matters it considers relevant.
5. The Committee must prepare a report of the review and give it to the Minister. The report may set out recommendations to the Australian Government.
6. In formulating a recommendation that the Australian Government should take a particular action, the Committee must assess the costs and benefits of that action.

Regional Telecommunications Review

Discussion paper

1. Background

Information and communications technology (ICT) underpins Australia's ability to be innovative and globally competitive across all industry sectors. It also underpins the ability of all Australians to participate in, and contribute to, our society.

Telecommunications services provide the foundation for ensuring the delivery of the economic and social benefits of ICT across the community. The often vast distances between communities in Australia's regional, rural and more remote areas, and between these communities and metropolitan centres makes telecommunications services important for people living and working in these areas.

To address this issue, the Australian Government has a multi-layered approach for the delivery of telecommunications services. This approach encourages:

- the development of a robust competitive commercial environment
- the provision of basic services by maintaining an effective regulatory regime
- incentives that will encourage sustainable solutions
- targeted responses to meet particular needs
- policy responses achieved through partnerships engaging all levels of government and the private and public sector. Also, alliances with sections of society representing the academic, education and scientific community, the media, the creative and cultural sector, and the community-based non-profit sector
- the provision of information, support and training to encourage consumer awareness.

The Australian Government reviewed telecommunications services across Australia in 2000 and 2002. In 2000, the Telecommunications Service Inquiry (TSI) was chaired by Mr M A (Tim) Besley. The TSI report can be found at www.telinqury.gov.au

In 2002, the Regional Telecommunications Inquiry (RTI) chaired by Mr Dick Estens, focused on the particular needs of people in regional, rural and remote Australia. The RTI report can also be found at www.telinqury.gov.au

The RTI concluded that, while the Government had responded positively and comprehensively to the TSI findings, further improvements were needed in a number of areas.

The Government accepted all recommendations in the RTI report and has implemented or initiated a number of new programs and other policy measures in response to the RTI recommendations.

The fast pace of technology change means that what is considered adequate today, may no longer be adequate within just a few years. It is important that today's telecommunications services and infrastructure do not become obsolete or impede the delivery of the services and speeds needed in the future. They will need to be robust, flexible, scalable, industry-driven and capable of being upgraded to meet future demands if people in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia are to be assured of continuing equitable access as technology evolves.

In determining the adequacy of telecommunications services available in regional, rural remote parts of Australia, the terms of reference for the review require the Committee to have regard to whether people in these areas have equitable access to telecommunications services that are significant to them and currently available in one or more parts of urban Australia.

The 2002 RTI review concluded that absolute equity with metropolitan areas was not possible for a number of reasons. These included ‘geographic isolation, the high cost of delivery in some areas, limitations of particular technologies (including where they are affected by climate or topography), and lack of commercial viability in some areas’¹. It suggested that a better assessment framework would focus on outcomes, such as ‘access to a level ... and ... price of service, across the key service areas that allows broad take-up, effective use ... and comparable consumer benefits’².

In undertaking its review, the Committee will have regard to the impact of Government policy and recently completed and ongoing programs such as the Broadband Connect (BC) Incentive Program, Australian Broadband Guarantee (ABG), the Broadband Connect Infrastructure Program’s (BCIP) OPEL Networks project, Mobile Connect (including the Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme and the Mobile Connect Infrastructure Program), Clever Networks, and the Backing Indigenous Ability Telecommunications Program.

A number of other related telecommunications reviews are also underway or proposed. These include the Universal Services Obligation (USO) review of access to essential telephone services and payphones (announced on 15 August 2007, submissions due 1 November 2007), the Expert Taskforce established to develop and manage the assessment process for the roll-out of new high-speed broadband network infrastructure for capital cities and major regional centres, and the proposed review of the ABG. It is intended that the Committee will have regular consultations with these other reviews and, where appropriate, its analysis will be informed by them.

The Committee is to provide its report to the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts in March 2008.

Questions:

Q 1.1 What telecommunications services do you consider most significant for regional, rural and remote areas?

Q 1.2 Do you consider that your current need for these telecommunications services is adequately met?

If not, please explain.

Q 1.3 What telecommunications services do you consider will be needed to meet your needs in the future?

Please explain.

Q 1.4 What would you consider to be ‘equitable’ access to telecommunications services for people in regional, rural and remote Australia?

¹ 2002 Regional Telecommunications Inquiry, *Connecting Regional Australia*, pp21, 22

² 2002 Regional Telecommunications Inquiry, *Connecting Regional Australia*, pp21, 22

2. Competition

Open competition works on the premise that strong infrastructure and service-based competition produces real benefits, including efficient prices and greater choice. It also promotes investment in new networks and services.

Overall, telecommunications prices have fallen by more than 26 per cent since 1997³ when the Australian Government opened the market to full competition. At the same time, there have been significant improvements with the quality of the service provided. This demonstrates why it is so important that competition is preserved in Australia.

The competition regulatory framework has three key elements:

- the telecommunications-specific access regime
- the telecommunications-specific competition rules
- the regulatory operational separation framework.

The access regime in Part XIC of the *Trade Practices Act 1974* empowers the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to declare certain carriage services to be 'declared' services. It establishes a regime under which service providers can obtain access to particular declared services, on agreed terms and conditions, in order to supply competitive services to end-users.

The ACCC may only declare a service to be a declared service where it is satisfied that it is in the long-term interest of end-users. This takes into account the objectives of promoting competition, connectivity between networks, and efficient use of and investment in telecommunications infrastructure.

The Australian Government has announced that it will review the telecommunications competition regulatory regime again in 2009.

Questions:

Q 2.1 Do you consider competition to be important for telecommunications infrastructure and/or services in regional, rural and remote areas?

Please outline what you consider to be the main benefits or disadvantages.

Q 2.2 How can competition be better encouraged in regional, rural and remote areas?

³ Minister for Telecommunications, Information Technology and the Arts, *Australia Connected: Broadband for all Australians*, address to the National Press Club, 27 June 2007

3. Consumer protection

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) estimates that there were approximately 11.26 million fixed voice services in Australia at 30 June 2006. This is 1.8 per cent less than in 2005⁴.

The take-up of mobile telephones, convergence of communications and computer technologies, and the introduction of new telephony services such as voice over internet protocol (VOIP), such as Skype, has led some consumers to use these new services for many of their telephone calls rather than traditional fixed phone services.

The Government has put in place a range of safeguards to support delivery of reliable basic telephone services, including the Universal Service Obligation (USO), the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG), the Network Reliability Framework (NRF), retail price regulation, access to alternative and interim services, and priority assistance for customers with life threatening health problems. In addition, the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) provides an independent means for investigation of certain consumer complaints.

The USO requires Telstra, as the current primary universal service provider, to take all reasonable steps to ensure all people have reasonable access to standard telephone services and payphones. The cost of supplying any loss-making services under the USO is shared among carriers. There is no requirement that the USO be delivered via a particular technology. The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has announced a review of the USO and the release of an issues paper for public comment. Further information is available at www.dcita.gov.au/uso

The USO also covers the provision of payphones. The RTI concluded that, while the need for payphones was falling because of increased use of mobile phones, they remain an important means of ensuring equitable access to telephone services. This is particularly the case in areas with limited mobile coverage and where low incomes preclude any other telephone access. Payphone revenues are also falling as a result of the increased use of calling cards and other free-to-caller services which reduce the revenue to the payphone operator⁵.

In June 2006, there were 58 230 payphones⁶ in total in Australia. Telstra is currently the primary universal service provider of payphones across Australia. In this role, Telstra is required, in some circumstances, to provide payphones in unprofitable locations. Telstra's current standard marketing plan (available at www.telstra.com.au/universalservice/standard.htm) provides a guide to the sorts of situations in which Telstra may provide a payphone and its supply and repair performance targets.

In June 2006, Telstra provided 9383 payphones in rural and remote Australia⁷. A large number of payphones are also provided by independent businesses, such as hotels and clubs, which provide a

⁴ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission/Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Communications Infrastructure and Services Availability in Australia 2006-07*, p27

⁵ Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, *Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation (USO) Review Issues Paper*, section 3.2, p14

⁶ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission/Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Communications Infrastructure and Services Availability in Australia 2006-07*, p28

⁷ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission/Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Communications Infrastructure and Services Availability in Australia 2006-07*, p28

payphone as a service to their customers. The number of payphones provided by Telstra and other providers has fallen steadily over the past five years⁸.

The CSG requires telephone companies to pay financial compensation to customers where certain minimum performance requirements, including the time taken to connect or repair fixed phone services, are not met. The CSG is intended to provide incentives for telephone companies to improve their service, as well as providing some redress to customers. The CSG is not intended to be a comprehensive compensation scheme, and it does not detract from compensation consumers may be able to obtain through other means.

In addition to the CSG, the NRF was put in place to monitor and improve the reliability of telephone services provided by Telstra, both in regional and metropolitan areas. The NRF came into effect on 1 January 2003 and requires Telstra to meet performance standards, particularly in relation to multiple faults, for its seven million residential and small business customers.

Details of Telstra's performance against the NRF are available at www.telstra.com.au/servicereports/index.htm

The 10 year Extended Zones contract between the Australian Government and Telstra, signed in 2001, requires Telstra to provide:

- calls within extended zones in remote areas of Australia at the untimed local call rate
- enhanced service offerings (including new service connection times, always on internet access and improved dial-up internet access speeds)
- an upgrade of the telephone network in remote areas.

The Government provided \$150 million under the agreement for the infrastructure upgrade required to provide these services.

Questions:

Q 3.1 Do you consider access to a fixed telephone service to be important?

Please explain.

Q 3.2 Have you experienced difficulties in obtaining adequate access to a fixed telephone service?

If so, please outline the issue or problem.

Q 3.3 Do you consider fixed telephone services in regional, rural and remote Australia to be reasonably available?

If not, which areas do you consider need priority attention and why?

Q 3.4 Have you recently experienced any serious or extended service faults or difficulties?

If so, do you consider that they were well handled?

⁸ Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, *Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation Review Issues Paper*, Figure 4: "Number of Telstra and non-Telstra payphones, 2000 to 2006, p16

Q 3.5 Are the current priority service arrangements for people with a life-threatening illness adequate and accessible?

Q 3.6 Is access to a payphone important to you?

If so, please explain why.

Q 3.7 Have you experienced difficulties in locating, accessing or using a payphone?

If so, please outline the difficulties experienced.

Q 3.8 Do you currently make use of new technologies such as voice over internet protocol (VOIP), such as Skype or Engin, for your voice calls?

Q 3.9 Do you consider that the increasing availability of VOIP services is becoming an adequate substitute for your fixed service?

Please explain.

Q 3.10 Do you consider that the consumer protections in place allow for delivery of adequate fixed telephone services and payphones in regional, rural and remote areas?

Q 3.11 Have you had a need to access the services offered by the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO)?

4. Targeted funding

Encouraging competition in regional, rural and remote areas is a key factor in improved delivery of advanced services such as mobile phone coverage and access to broadband. Where under-served areas exist, the Australian Government uses targeted funding to improve access to services and in some cases stimulate competition.

Mobile phones

Mobile phones are becoming an increasingly large part of Australian business and community life. The number of mobile phone services in operation across Australia grew by seven per cent in 2005–06 to 19.7 million (GSM—15.5 million, CDMA—1.8 million, 3G—1.6 million)⁹.

At the end of January 2007 there were four mobile carriers operating seven mobile networks¹⁰ and covering around 20 per cent of Australia's landmass¹¹. GSM networks are available to 96 per cent of the population and carriers are upgrading their GSM networks to improve their data carriage capabilities¹². Telstra has introduced a 3G network, called Next G, to replace its CDMA network once the new network provides the same or better coverage and services as CDMA. Vodafone, Hutchison and Optus also have 3G networks that currently provide coverage in metropolitan areas. Optus also announced in January 2007 that it is working to extend its 3G coverage over the next three years to match the 96 per cent population coverage of its GSM network.

The 3G networks are designed to carry voice and data, as well as higher bandwidth services. This means that 3G services can provide access to data and the internet through a mobile handset, a mobile handset operating as a modem for a laptop or personal computer, or a data card inserted into a laptop or personal computer.

In its consideration of the implications of new technologies for the USO, the USO Review's issues paper discusses this technological convergence in mobile networks, which are now designed to support applications such as text, broadband and video. It notes that, for many people, a mobile phone is their most important telephone service and that increased mobile phone coverage means that people are becoming less reliant on their landlines by substituting them with mobile phones.

As customers move from GSM and CDMA to 3G services, the range of data services available is increasing substantially to include, for example, video calling, multi-media messaging (MMS) and internet browsing. In September 2006 the Australian Government announced plans to auction two bands of spectrum for an expanded range of services that could include mobile television services.

However, large distances and low population densities mean that it will never be commercially viable to achieve 100 per cent terrestrial mobile phone coverage across Australia. However, as noted by the 2002 RTI report (Finding 3.1), industry cost and revenue structures at that time meant that, even with additional Government support for capital costs, it was difficult to further extend

⁹ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission/Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Communications Infrastructure and Services Availability in Australia 2006-07*, p22

¹⁰ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission/Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Communications Infrastructure and Services Availability in Australia 2006-07*, p18

¹¹ Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, "Annual Report 2005-06", accessed 13/9/07 from http://www.dcita.gov.au/departments/governance_and_administration/annual_reports/2005-2006_annual_report/section_2_performance_review/outcome_3/administered_items3

¹² Australian Competition and Consumer Commission/Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Communications Infrastructure and Services Availability in Australia 2006-07*, p18

terrestrial mobile coverage. An additional \$15.6 million was provided as part of the Government's response to the RTI report for the extension of mobile phone infrastructure in regional Australia.

Over recent years, the Australian Government has provided targeted funding of around \$175 million to support the extension of mobile phone coverage in regional areas. The most recent funding is being provided through the Mobile Connect program, which was announced as part of the 2005 Connect Australia initiative. The greater data capabilities of 3G technologies have altered the financial structures for mobile operators such that further expansion of mobile networks may become more commercially feasible.

Under the Mobile Connect program, at least \$20 million remains available to extend mobile phone coverage along highways and in smaller regional communities where a case for strategic location or economic importance can be established and where services will have ongoing commercial viability.

Meanwhile, in areas that are sparsely populated or have little passing traffic, the only commercially viable option for mobile phone services is via satellite. Satellite mobile phone services cover the entire Australian landmass and population and are available from a number of providers. The Australian Government operates a Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme to assist consumers in remote areas to purchase a satellite handset.

Questions:

Q 4.1 Do you consider mobile phone coverage in regional, rural and remote Australia to be reasonably available?

If not, which areas do you consider need priority attention and why?

Q 4.2 Is adequate service being delivered through the combination of targeted funding for additional mobile phone coverage and satellite phone subsidies?

Q 4.3 To what extent do you consider that the available range of mobile phone service and charging options meets the needs of people in regional, rural and remote areas?

Q 4.4 In what sorts of circumstances would you consider that advanced mobile services may be able to provide an adequate substitute for fixed voice and/or broadband services?

Broadband and internet

Along with mobile telecommunications technology, innovative use of the internet and broadband technologies is creating economic and social opportunities across Australia. Information and communications technologies are the modern equivalent of road, port, rail and education infrastructure.

These technologies are enhancing communications. They are providing better access to government and health services, opening up new educational and business opportunities, and transforming the way we work, learn, interact, are entertained and participate in the national and global economies.

People in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia are using the internet for banking, researching equipment prices, centralising stock quality information, and operating in international supply chains and grain markets. They are using it for attracting customers, school homework,

sending x-rays to medical specialists, checking the weather, tendering for contracts, teleworking, games, music and talking with friends and relatives.

The Australian Government has facilitated the take-up of these new opportunities by supporting the roll-out of enhanced services through programs such as the Higher Bandwidth Incentive Scheme (\$157.8 million), the Broadband Connect Incentive Program (\$277.8 million), the Co-ordinated Communications Infrastructure Fund (\$23.7 million), the Demand Aggregation Brokers (\$8.4 million) program, the Clever Networks program (\$113 million), and the Advanced Networks Program (\$60 million).

However, communications technologies continue to evolve and it is critical that infrastructure decisions made today make allowance for the need to be flexible and 'upgradeable'. While earlier areas of Government support focused on consumer subsidies to encourage take-up, Government support is now focusing on high-speed, wholesale broadband network capability through the Australia Connected program. It has also moved to focus on the use of broadband for improved services delivery, in particular through the Clever Networks program.

Australia Connected includes:

- a new, privately built, commercial, fast fibre network in all capital cities and major regional centres
- a new, competitive, open access, scalable, wholesale broadband network in regional Australia to extend high speed broadband coverage to 99 per cent of premises in Australia at prices and speeds comparable to those available in metropolitan areas. The Government is contributing \$958 million (including \$600 million through the Broadband Connect Infrastructure Program) to the over \$900 million being invested by OPEL Networks (a joint venture between Optus and rural group, Elders) to provide the network by June 2009 using a mix of ADSL2+ and WiMAX technologies
- a broadband subsidy of up to \$2750 per premises for the estimated remaining one per cent of premises to provide affordable access to metro-comparable broadband services in difficult to reach areas under the Australian Broadband Guarantee
- legislation to preserve the capital of the \$2 billion Communications Fund in order to provide an ongoing, targeted funding source for future technological upgrades of regional, rural and remote telecommunications infrastructure
- Broadband Now, a new one-stop help centre with a telephone hotline and website information for consumers about broadband services in their area.

The \$113 million Clever Networks program consists of two elements:

- The Innovative Services Delivery element co-funds projects to support the delivery of improved government services to regional, rural and remote Australia. Successful projects will enhance services such as virtual healthcare, remotely accessible interactive education services and delivery of integrated state-wide emergency services
- The Broadband Development element, was set up to establish a network to assist regional communities to enhance understanding of, access to and use of broadband. The Broadband Development Network will comprise up to 25 individuals across Australia who will help improve skills and capabilities, enhance business practices and aggregate demand in under-served communities.

The Australian Government has also allocated \$189 million for the NetAlert–Protecting Australian Families Online program as part of its ongoing commitment to providing a safe online environment

for Australian families and children. This program includes a National Filter Scheme to provide free PC filters for families and libraries, as well as a requirement for Internet Service Providers to offer a filtered service. The program also includes a large-scale education and awareness campaign and additional funding for the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Communications and Media Authority. Filters and internet safety advice are provided through an Australian Government portal, www.netalert.gov.au, and a free Government helpline, 1800 880 176.

Questions:

Q 4.5 Do you consider access to, and the reliability and quality of, internet and broadband services to be adequate in regional, rural and remote Australia?

If not, please outline the issues and locations you consider need priority attention and why?

Q 4.6 Do you consider that the Australian Government programs provided to assist consumers and small businesses to make effective use of higher bandwidth services have been effective and appropriately targeted?

Q 4.7 Is the availability of computers an issue in rural, regional and remote areas?

Q 4.8 Do you consider that broadband is an important enabler for the delivery of better health, education, community and emergency services in regional, rural and remote Australia?

5. Targeted responses for particular groups

Remote Indigenous communities

As noted by the RTI, Indigenous communities are more often disadvantaged by lower average incomes, lower standards of education, higher levels of unemployment, poorer housing conditions and higher levels of poor health, as well as by location, than other sectors of the Australian community.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has reported¹³ that 92 960 people lived in 1187 discrete Indigenous communities in Australia in 2006. Of these, 630 communities (53 per cent) reported public access to a telephone within the community and 136 (11 per cent) had public access to the Internet. A total of 1112 communities (94 per cent), with a total population of 80 490 people (87 per cent), were located in remote or very remote areas—with most communities having populations of fewer than 50 people. Telstra's standard marketing plan sets out criteria for payphone delivery in Indigenous communities. It is available at www.telstra.com.au/universalservice

The Australian Government's \$8.3 million 2002 Telecommunications Action Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities (TAPRIC) aimed to improve telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities. Projects included support for public internet access and for the installation of 216 community phones in 124 communities. Community phones are public phones operated using a prepaid card and housed in a robust case to protect them from the environment and damage.

The \$36.6 million Backing Indigenous Ability (BIA) Telecommunications program, launched on 23 February 2007, builds on TAPRIC to deliver a comprehensive package to provide assistance in areas such as telephones, internet access, videoconferencing, ICT training and development of online content for remote Indigenous communities. A number of funding rounds will be held for the program, with outcomes of Round 1 announced by the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts on 6 September 2007 and Round 2 expected to be released shortly.

Under the telephones element of the program, further community phones will be provided to an estimated 300 remote Indigenous communities. The Government is also planning to provide satellite handsets to smaller remote communities, with details to be announced shortly. Further information on BIA can be found at www.dcita.gov.au/bia

Questions:

Q 5.1 Do you consider access to fixed, pay and mobile phone services to be adequate in regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities?

If not, which areas do you consider need priority attention and why?

Q 5.2 Do you consider that Internet access is adequate for regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities?

If not, which areas need priority attention and how might access be reasonably provided?

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cat. No. 4710.0, *Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, Australia, 2006*, reissued 20 August 2007, accessed on 22 August 2007 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4710.0Main+Features22006?OpenDocument>

Disability

Using telephones, computers and the internet is not straightforward for many people with disabilities.

The RTI concluded that Telstra has made a strong effort to meet the needs of people with disabilities, with the provision of customer premises equipment in regional areas generally adequate (Finding 2.2). However, it recommended that Telstra and the Australian Government continue to consult people with disabilities in regard to addressing service concerns and improvements, and national policy issues (Recommendation 2.1).

Telstra provides eligible customers with a disability or special needs, including those who cannot use a standard telephone because they are deaf or have a hearing, speech, vision or mobility impairment, with alternative equipment at the same price as a standard handset. This includes a text device such as a teletypewriter (TTY) or modem, or a big button phone. Optus also provides some equipment for people with a disability.

To enable text and voice telephony users to communicate with each other and the wider Australian community, the National Relay Service (NRS) provides text to voice and voice to text relay through specialised call centres. The NRS relay operators provide a bridge between users of text devices and other telephone users, as well as assisting people with speech impairments to communicate using the telephone. The NRS is available to all metropolitan and regional, rural and remote consumers.

Telstra, Optus and Primus offer speedier connections and repairs and a greater level of reliability for people with diagnosed life-threatening medical conditions who depend on a reliable telephone service to call for assistance when needed.

Questions:

Q 5.3 Are telecommunications and Internet services adequately available and accessible for people with disabilities living in regional, rural and remote Australia?

6. Consumer education and awareness

Training

Information technology (IT) training and technical/customer support are important aspects of empowering communities to make the most of their access and utilisation of improved telecommunications and internet services. However, training opportunities may be less readily available in rural and remote areas and more isolated users often need to travel large distances to attend courses. It is also more difficult to arrange for a technical specialist to visit in order to assist with telephone, computer and internet connection problems.

In May 2004, the Australian Government announced that it would provide \$8.8 million through the IT Training and Technical Support program for projects that will assist people and organisations in very remote areas of Australia. To date IT training and technical support has been provided to a total of 10 312 people in very remote parts of Australia. The program concludes in December 2007.

Telecommunications consumer information

In mid-2007, the Australian Government provided a booklet to all regional, rural and remote households providing information on consumer safeguards, including regulated and targeted funding safeguards. The purpose of the booklet is to raise consumer awareness of these safeguards and how to access them.

Extensive information is also available from the websites of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, www.dcita.gov.au, and the Australian Communications and Media Authority, www.acma.gov.au

Questions:

Q 6.1 Is access to IT training and technical and customer support adequate in regional, rural and remote areas?

If not, how can it be improved?

Q 6.2 Is adequate information available for telecommunications consumers?

If not, how can it be improved?

7. Other issues

A number of specific questions have been highlighted in this discussion paper as a guide. However, you may wish to raise other issues with the Committee that relating to the adequacy of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.

Questions:

Q 7.1 Bearing in mind the issues raised in this discussion paper, do you consider that people in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia currently have equitable access to telecommunications services?

Q 7.2 Is there any other matter that you would like to raise and which you feel has not been covered by this Discussion Paper?

If so, please outline the issue.

Abbreviations

3G	Third generation mobile telecommunications
ABG	Australian Broadband Guarantee
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCC	Australian Competition and Consumer Commission
ACMA	Australian Communications and Media Authority
ADSL	Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line
ANP	Advanced Networks Program
ARCS	Analogue radio concentrator system
BC	Broadband Connect
BCIP	Broadband Connect Infrastructure Program
BIA	Backing Indigenous Ability
CCIF	Co-ordinated Communications Infrastructure Fund
CDMA	Code Division Multiple Access
CSG	Customer Service Guarantee
DAB	Demand Aggregation Brokers
DCITA	Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
DRCS	Digital radio concentrator system
GSM	Global System for Mobile Communication
HiBIS	Higher Bandwidth Incentive Scheme
IAP	Internet Assistance Program
ICT	Information and communications technology
IT	Information technology
NRF	Network Reliability Framework
NRS	National Relay Service
PC	Personal Computer
RTI	Regional Telecommunications Inquiry

RTIRC	Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee
TAPRIC	Telecommunications Action Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities
TIO	Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman
TSI	Telecommunications Service Inquiry
TTY	Teletypewriter
USO	Universal Service Obligation
VOIP	Voice over internet protocol
WiMAX	Worldwide interoperability for Microwave Access

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