

## **Backing Indigenous Ability**

### **Delivering a comprehensive telecommunications package in Indigenous Communities**

Response to the Discussion Paper from the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, March 2006 from the South Australian Government

#### **Background**

In this paper we have responded to key issues in implementing strategies and allocating resources to address the deficiencies in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) services in regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities, rather than addressing individual clauses from the Discussion Paper.

These issues relate specifically to the take-up and effective utilisation of digital, internet based communication. The BIA Discussion Paper also supports the development of comprehensive and inclusive implementation of community telephony. While access to telephone infrastructure is a significant issue in Aboriginal communities, as indicated in the TAPRIC review, it is important to note that emerging 3G mobile telephony and VoIP technologies may supersede current terrestrial phone services. Therefore, while basic levels of community telephony must be implemented and maintained for basic and emergency communication and access to services, the strategic significance of giving priority to the development of internet based communication and services in Aboriginal communities should not be underestimated.

This opportunity to create demand for ICTs in Aboriginal communities through the BIA package is a significant one. With a focus on developing culturally appropriate on-line content, community access computers and training programs, options for home computer access, and on-line communication models, the consequent increase in demand for infrastructure and services will support other aspects of the Connect Australia package and most importantly, assist the social and economic development of these communities.

#### **Discussion of the key issues for the implementation of the Backing Indigenous Ability package**

##### **1. Complementary Programs**

The four components of Connect Australia should be integrated and complementary. The other components of the Connect Australia package,

- Broadband Connect
- Clever Networks
- Mobile Connect

relate to infrastructure development that forms the basis on which activities funded by BIA can operate. These programs must ensure that ICT infrastructure in regional and

remote Aboriginal communities is sufficient to ensure that high quality internet based services and communication can be rolled out through the BIA program. A comprehensive and strategic view of ICT implementation should be maintained to ensure maximum coordination and collateral leverage.

## **2. Digital Divide**

The provision of adequate infrastructure is one aspect of the Digital Divide which the Connect Australia program seeks to address. As a digital divide initiative, this infrastructure rollout should be appropriate to the circumstances and needs of specific communities, not a “one-size-fits-all” solution.

It is vital to equally consider the capacity of community members to access this technology. This is the role of the BIA program. Awareness, training and confidence building for community members must be key elements of any program, if the infrastructure network is to be effectively utilised.

Thirdly, the provision of culturally appropriate on-line content and services is an essential aspect of the development of ICT literacy and use, in Aboriginal, as well as other, communities. Appropriate language, website structure and layout, accessible search facilitation, compelling content, and appropriate on-line service delivery must be encouraged to provide the incentive and impetus for the development of on-line skills and increased demand for internet access.

## **3. Community Ownership**

All initiatives funded under BIA should be scoped and delivered in close consultation with the communities themselves and where possible, implemented under Aboriginal ownership.

### **Equitable access to BIA initiatives**

The BIA program offers an opportunity for regional initiatives to be comprehensive and inclusive. In the past many communities or community sectors have missed out on accessing available programs. It is important to ensure that the BIA program avoids duplication of programs, and overservicing of some communities to the detriment of others.

This funding and the new arrangements in Aboriginal affairs represented by the structure of Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs), can enable a universal template for ICT implementation for local interpretation and rollout across all communities. That is, a basic level of service provision should be available for all communities, subject to local consultation and adaptation to local needs.

The complexity of Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) may preclude the use of this model for initial programs, although SRAs may be an option for subsequent sustainability initiatives.

Under BIA, provision should be made for appropriate communication of opportunities and initiatives to community members. The proposed “Community Champions” model

offers an opportunity to design a communications, demand brokerage and mentoring program which can have positive outcomes for the communities and the success of the program.

### **Community Champions**

A Community Champions program could be funded appropriately to include

- Regional agent role
- Provision of an adequate training program and certification
- On-going funding
- Negotiated outcomes

Any program needs to be adapted to local circumstances and sensitivities and a Community Champion model may not suit localities where there are strong and competitive family groups, for example, or where there is a dysfunctional community.

It will also be important to ensure as much as possible, the general acceptance of these identified champions to the whole community. Community councils, schools, TAFE, organisations could identify potential champions with a selection process managed by an independent body. A series of workshops with educationalists, business people, IT experts could audit IT capabilities of communities, identify new possibilities or improvements and support the 'champions' to promote new ways of doing things.

Critical factors to the success of engaging community champions include ensuring the elected champions are kept involved in all decision making and that they have consistent and long-term support. Indigenous bodies with knowledge of the local IT environment and an understanding of the level of capability of community members, should be the first contact point for a program of this nature.

However, the BIA program is an opportunity for the empowering of Indigenous communities, whatever the model used, where it is implemented under local leadership, identifies existing and potential interest and skill in local people, and, by extension, where it offers IT career pathways.

### **Community Access Facilities**

The BIA program provides a good opportunity to establish or support community access facilities so all the community can benefit. Program rollout should be through these places which are accepted as gathering spaces and accessible to all community members, thus reinforcing the place of digital communication in the community fabric. Acceptability to all community members and access for extended hours are key requirements for public access facilities, as is the provision of culturally appropriate support mechanisms.

One strategy to assist in community take-up of ICT could extend the pre-paid phone card model to include a user-pays system for internet access and other ICT services through these community access facilities.

As well as community access, there are several emerging programs for low cost and robust computers to be made available for populations of recognised need. Such programs, which generally target children through the school system, should be

investigated as part of the BIA rollout as a means to provide home computer access and increased on-line capacity in Aboriginal communities.

#### **4. Training and skills development**

As part of this program, basic ICT requirements for communities should be determined and basic standards of community capacity set as the benchmark for funding programs. The BIA program should embrace community, non-accredited skill development to generate increased acceptance of on-line information and services in remote regions. However, as previously indicated, it is also crucial to identify and support community members who have the interest and capacity to develop higher level skills and provide leadership in ICT use in their communities.

This new program provides an opportunity to focus on young men and women in communities who have some IT skills to train and mentor other community members. For example, staff employed in the Rural Transaction Centres in the Pitjantjatjara Lands, or identified community hubs in other communities, could undertake “train the trainer” courses to provide training to community members in a range of internet and PC skills. Staff in administrative positions in community organisations with spare capacity could be a useful source of suitable champions, although not exclusively so.

The corporate knowledge of regional agencies, including schools and TAFE, and staff employed through community organisations will be critical to a comprehensive skills analysis exercise. While the ICC structure seeks to provide a neutral and comprehensive administration of a region, not all ICCs have built up relationships with regional agencies and community based staff to successfully coordinate an exercise such as this. It will be important to ensure that the knowledge and expertise of relevant agencies are utilised. Some direction could be given by DCITA to ICCs to involve community agencies in the design and management of a skills audit, as well as consultation with elected community representatives.

Training and skills development should include PC and internet skills programs as well as structured traineeships and training programs to build the technical skills of community members with the aim of assisting local people to:

- Take over historically non-Indigenous roles in various agencies, where those roles have been predominantly technology/software driven
- Support local enterprises to better manage and to better access markets (eg. Art Centres) through more effective use of technology and the internet
- Support agencies where information requirements are becoming more sophisticated (eg. in land, water and health management)
- Offer basic IT support and trouble shooting roles within service agencies

Building the skills of communities to enable local people to undertake IT support and technical positions will be a challenge in some remote communities as it is with the delivery of many specialist areas of training. Programs should support strategies such as teaching to very small student groups, appropriate curriculum and teaching methods, need for ongoing support and mentoring, for example.

#### **5. Sustainability**

The discussion paper acknowledges the “complex geographic, demographic and social factors” which have impacted on implementing effective ICT in these communities in the past. These factors also directly influence the available resources for maintaining programs and infrastructure after the implementation stage.

While non-Indigenous communities commit to learning, replacement and renewal to maintain and develop living standards, many remote Indigenous communities do not have the resources to pay for this. One-off grants only provide an immediate and short-term solutions. This program needs to provide outcomes that can be maintained and sustained over the long-term . Perpetual funding for sustainability is required as well as capital injection. The \$2 million Telecommunications Future fund is an example of this approach.

Sustainability has many facets, of which financial sustainability is only one. Community acceptance and usage of a program is also a significant factor in its sustainability. On-going operational support is essential where ICT is acknowledged as a core requirement for social and economic wellbeing, and where the community has been engaged in the program.

One aspect of sustainability would be to support training and resourcing of small business opportunities within communities for the provision of

- Technical support
- Training
- Community access centre management (budgeting, volunteer management, marketing)

However, as has been acknowledged by the Indigenous Telecommunications Working Group, there are many remote communities where the viability of programs will be dependent on the provision of on-going operational funding, as a social justice strategy.

## **6. Videoconferencing**

While videoconferencing has been identified as a key target of this program, existing videoconferencing facilities have been under-utilised. While this may be because of a lack of skilled community staff members to manage the use of and maintain the equipment, it also may indicate that the current model of videoconferencing is not suitable for some uses or target populations. For example, the formality and expense of a specific public location, requiring a booking system and administrative intervention, may discourage some users and uses. Any video conferencing program should recognise the different uses for this technology, from high end requirements for health diagnosis and counselling, legal and formal education services, to the provision of low cost PC based programs as communication tools for on-line meetings, communication between families or communities and community education. These differing uses may require different systems and access arrangements.

## **7. Collaborative Programs**

The Discussion Paper identifies several areas where joint use of resources and facilities may be implemented and where collaborative programs should be considered. This principle is important and recognises that instances of duplication of services and resources have occurred in the past, and limited the effective reach of programs, and their sustainability.

The principles of accessing excess ICT capacity from agencies for community use, developing partnerships with telecommunications industries and negotiating cross-jurisdictional initiatives can provide a foundation for sustainable programs, community development and increased ICT capacity in Indigenous communities.

## **8. The Role of the Information Economy Directorate**

The Information Economy Directorate of the South Australian Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology, and in particular the Digital Bridge Unit within that directorate, is well placed to help the Australian Government achieve its objectives for the BIA program. Specifically, the DBU and its personnel have a strong track record of engagement and collaboration with regional communities and with Indigenous communities. The expertise that the DBU offers in community partnership building and program development is supported by the telecommunications infrastructure expertise of the Broadband SA team which is also within the IE Directorate. The IE Directorate manages a number of inter agency committees in telecommunications and in community partnerships that can be used as consultation mechanisms to effectively capture the views and recommendations of stakeholders.

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