

18 January 2006

ACOSS Response to:
Broadband Connect and Clever Networks: Supporting Investment in Sustainable Broadband Infrastructure DCITA, November 2005.

About ACOSS

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) is the national peak council of the community welfare sector in Australia — the principal voice of low income and disadvantaged people in social and economic policy matters.

ACOSS aims to end poverty and help build a just and inclusive society that values difference and the right of all people and communities to the social and economic resources they need to control their own lives. ACOSS works in conjunction with its member organisations from the community sector and the State Councils of Social Service to act as a sector and to share information on broader political, economic and social issues.

As a peak body with a broad membership and sector-wide research, ACOSS acts as a centrepiece for information and strategy concerning Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for the community sector.

Access to and use of broadband and related information and communication technologies by low income Australians

ACOSS's key concern in relation to initiatives by the Federal Government regarding information and communications technologies (ICT) is the interests of low income Australians.

Currently there is a lack of ICT capacity among socially and economically disadvantaged Australians. There are whole social groups that have little experience or capability to engage online or use ICT generally. Half of Australian households do not have access to the internet.¹

The ABS study *Australia Online: How Australians are using Computers and the Internet* they found that certain groups were significantly less likely to use ICT, including:

- women, particularly older women;
- people living on low incomes;
- people with low levels of education;
- blue-collar workers;

¹ ABS 2004, *Household use of Information Technology*. Cat No 8146.0. Australian Government, Canberra.

- Indigenous Australians;
- people born overseas, particularly those born in southern and eastern Europe, north Africa and the Middle East;
- people who speak English poorly;
- people living in rural and regional Australia, and;
- unemployed Australians.

This research illustrates that the demographics of ICT use overlap with other forms of social and economic disadvantage.

Many of these disadvantaged groups could gain much from online engagement which would contribute to the building of social capital. For example, people with specific medical conditions have been able to connect and form new communities online that cross geographical and social boundaries. People with a disability, carers, parents with young children, people living in rural and remote areas, people from a non-English-speaking background and individuals who may not wish to disclose their group status could similarly benefit from increased access to ICT. Some case studies of groups of people with similar interest (e.g. depression sufferers) are found in a previous DCITA Discussion Paper (*The Role of ICT in Building Communities and Social Capital: A Discussion Paper*). ICT can create social networks that in the real world would be too costly and time-intensive to create and there should be more investment in this building of online social support networks.

While socio economic status is often a better indicator of ICT disadvantage than geographic location, many people in rural, regional and remote Australia are on low incomes and in areas where 'the market' alone has not or can not provide equitable access to ICT. The Internet offers an opportunity for many communities to overcome issues of remoteness or distance when accessing services, information and community building resources. Many key agencies that individuals interact with such as Centrelink and the Australian Taxation Office now offer more information and transactions online. The community sector has also followed this trend, with some services finding it cost effective to provide many elements of essential services such as health and education online. Programs of specific relevance to rural communities are also making increased use of ICT such as the National Livestock Identification Scheme. Without more affordable and accessible broadband and other services, such web-driven programs will be of limited relevance to many low income people and those living in rural, regional and remote areas.

As the peak council of community and welfare services, ACOSS's focus is not on the more technical issues such as what is the optimal technology to use in programs such as Broadband Connect and Clever Networks and supports the program goals of 'technology neutrality'. Instead, we welcome the opportunity to present DCITA with further information regarding access to ICT among low income Australians and explore future possibilities in the Connect Australia package for these disadvantaged consumers.

Broadband Connect

3.1 Policy objectives

ACOSS supports the focus in Broadband Connect's stated key policy objectives to 'support equitable access to broadband services for residential, small business and not-for-profit consumers across regional, rural and remote Australia' and that to 'ensure that high cost delivery areas receive services at prices comparable to metropolitan areas'.

The partial privatisation of telecommunication services and geographic and population spread across Australia necessitates an ongoing government role in ensuring provision of basic ICT services to all Australians. For example, strategic investment in connections such as satellite services for remote communities has been particularly important to enable Indigenous communities to access Internet and phone services.

3.2 Potential for innovation in program design

Many communities have benefited through the provision of broadband connections using funds from the HiBIS scheme. As identified by others, a key limit to the HiBIS scheme was the level of funding and the lack of linking HiBIS funds to actual need rather than funding applications. To address the equity and access issues of extending broadband and other services to all Australians, programs should monitor which areas are least serviced and target these accordingly so the Connect Australia initiatives are truly responsive to service gaps.

Under HiBIS, individual communities and corporate IT providers initiated applications for HiBIS funds to connect themselves to broadband. Many communities in rural and regional Australia reported a lack of choice compared to metropolitan consumers because the poor quality/speed of dial up services made broadband the only viable option for small businesses and community organisations seeking to use the Internet regularly. Choice of ICT services outside major cities in Australia has often been limited compared to other countries.

ACOSS's view is that greater equity could be provided by better and across-the-board standards for telecommunications corporations to meet service deficiencies. Legislative mechanisms such as the Universal Service Obligation (USO) and Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) should be retained to uphold minimum guarantees for low income consumers. These should stipulate that services should be made accessible to low income consumers and comparable in all areas of Australia for service standards such as high data transmission speeds, and reliable broadband and mobile telephone access.

In this process of attempting to make services in rural, regional and remote Australia comparable with those in urban areas, it may be ideal to use similar technologies to encourage an economy of scale that will

promote sustainability of broadband connections across Australia. There is also scope to broaden the USO levy to all telecommunications providers and use public funds raised by this levy as a source of ongoing financial support for greater access and affordability of services for the most disadvantaged Australians and the communities with the highest level of ICT disadvantage.

In using the CSG and USO to set minimum standards for consumers and for ICT companies to provide greater access to service across all parts of Australia and income groups, there is a need to ensure these standards include staged improvements and raising of standards to keep pace with technology and service development worldwide.

There is also a need to provide access to equipment and training to low income consumers and the organisations that they use to access services. Findings from ACOSS's research and surveys illustrate that the main barrier to the takeup of ICT by the community sector is the perceived costs extracted from funding and staff capacity. There is a national need for internal communication in the non profit sector, with demonstrated examples, of the potential of ICT. Peak bodies could communicate the benefits of ICT is through pointing out the cost/time savings to be made from better ICT usage to organisations with limited resources. It is desirable to coordinate the sector's transition to better use of ICT by sharing information and advice. This could save smaller organisations the hurt of learning through mistakes and capitalise on best practice already in the sector.

Clever Networks

4.4 The role of the brokers' network

A key challenge of the current DAB Program and future use of brokers is how they can reach community organisations and individuals outside of the main users of ICT within regional, rural and remote areas. Any revised role for brokers should include greater community engagement and education about ICT services.

It is ACOSS's view that a revised role for brokers should include targets for ICT engagement of the general community rather than just mainstream services and this should include a wide range of not-for-profit organisations including community services, social organisations and social networks.

In this regard, the role of the brokers should be seen as part of a broader process of engaging communities in greater use of ICT. This is best started by bringing existing networks between people (such as local parts of community organisations, schools, churches, day care centres and sporting venues) online. To engage, there then must be a process of demonstration of practical examples of how online interaction can have benefits beyond face-to-face interaction. Some of these benefits can be cost-time savings while others may be more about the quality of the interaction itself – such as communicating with a wider audience.

In the community sector itself, this process of engaging online and taking up new technologies has begun but is still in its infancy. Most best-practice initiatives are state-based. Compared to the UK and USA community online interaction is relatively small in Australia. There is an unmet need for a central information point for the community sector and the public generally on using ICT. In addition, there is still much that can and should be tried around business-community partnerships for increasing the capacity of people to use ICT. Just one example of a capacity-building strategy developed in partnership with business is IT For Communities in the UK

(<http://www.it4communities.org.uk/default.asp>) which links ICT professionals wishing to volunteer time, knowledge and practical help to community organisations. There is an untapped opportunity to engage people and communities online via the community sector in the nation as a whole and to further ICT use by the general population.

Targeting the delivery of key services through broadband

As discussed above, while there are significant cost-benefit gains to be made by increasing provision of services online, a large number of Australians currently have no access to the Internet and other ICT. So, the targeting of services through broadband must be accompanied by a greater effort, through measures such as described in this paper (section 3.2) to make ICT more affordable and accessible to low income Australians, including those living in rural, regional and remote Australia.

It is ACOSS's view that Clever Networks can and should play a role in community capacity building by increasing use of ICT in the not-for-profit sector as well as its stated objectives to enhance the delivery of mainstream services. This strategy would provide the greatest holistic community benefit and ensure the sustainability of networks in local areas.

Sustainability of new infrastructure or applications

As mentioned above (section 3.2) in order to foster trust and greater ICT engagement of the general community, infrastructure investment and legislative mechanisms should be continued to be used as a means by which Government can moderate the market to ensure all Australians have equitable access to ICT. A USO levy is one such means that could provide an ongoing source of funds to ensure such equity. With current increased competitiveness and reform in the telecommunications industry, there is an opportunity to enact measures that will provide an ongoing role for business in the sustainability and equity of ICT across Australia.

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