

9 June 2006

Ms Karen Flick  
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Dear Karen

***Backing Indigenous Ability (BIA) Discussion Paper***

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the design of the *Backing Indigenous* program.

Telecommunications is an important issue for Indigenous community councils as it recognises the role telecommunications infrastructure plays in ensuring continued economic growth and improved service delivery within Australia. It is vitally important that both state and local governments are consulted at this early stage and that their recommendations are considered thoroughly.

The *BIA* discussion paper outlines the proposed policy and design principles of the program and seeks comments on these principles. In its response to the discussion paper, ALGA has focussed on the threshold issues and those questions that are directly relevant to Indigenous community councils. As such we have identified a number of recommendations that we hope will be considered by the Department.

Yours sincerely

Adrian Beresford-Wylie  
**Chief Executive**



# ALGA Response to the Backing Indigenous Ability (BIA) Discussion Paper

Prepared in consultation with the  
Local Government Association  
of the Northern Territory

## 1. Introduction

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) welcomes the announcement of the *Backing Indigenous Ability (BIA)* program that promised \$90 million to deliver a comprehensive package for telephones, Internet and video-conferencing in Indigenous communities and improved Indigenous radio and television services.

Local government recognises and supports the Australian Government and state and territory government's efforts to address the geographic isolation and economic disadvantages faced by remote communities. The BIA program will assist Indigenous communities by initially providing funding for telecommunications and information technology (the basis of this discussion paper) and at a later stage by providing funding to enable Indigenous communities to create and deliver radio and television services to their communities.

The *BIA* discussion paper outlines the proposed policy and design principles of the ICT component of the program and seeks comments on these principles. In its response to the discussion paper, ALGA has focussed on the threshold issues and those questions that are directly relevant to Indigenous community councils.

## 2. How will the Australian Government achieve the greatest benefits from *BIA Program*?

The Australian Government has in place a range of programs that are designed to help Indigenous communities achieve its telecommunications infrastructure goals. However, ALGA considers that the way the Australian Government funds ICT programs for Indigenous communities are not as effective as it could be.

ALGA considers that Australian Government agencies often implement programs in a way that shows a lack of understanding of how effective, long-term change can be achieved in Indigenous communities. In remote Australia economies of scale can not be achieved without the involvement of the whole Indigenous community – individuals, businesses, community groups and Indigenous councils – and in more remote areas the 'whole of region' or 'whole of state and territory' needs to be involved before outcomes become sustainable.

***Recommendation 1:*** Adopt whole of region or state/territory funding approach.

To address the need to achieve a sustainable outcome ALGA recommends that the available funding for *BIA* be allocated via a top down approach i.e. a 'whole of region' or a 'whole of state or territory approach' that does utilise the expertise of state and territory governments and state and territory Local Government Associations (LGAs) while not excluding individual Indigenous councils or any other community organisations.

Supporting Example:

The Local Government Association of the Northern Territory's NT Connect project has demonstrated the benefits of such an approach.

This project which was funded through the Networking the Nation Local Government Fund and took a 'whole of territory' approach to delivering 'reliable and appropriate IT

infrastructure and business systems for Community Councils.<sup>1</sup> This approach included providing and maintaining the telecommunications infrastructure required by the councils. The long-term success of this project will depend on Territory and Australian Government agencies using the ICT infrastructure established by LGANT. Without this support the sustainability of LGANT's network will require continual subsidies. Only a 'whole of government' approach which involves all levels of government can provide sustainable telecommunication solutions to remote communities.

It is also important to note that whilst it is reasonable for the Australian Government to expect that everything that can be done to ensure sustainability be done that it also accepts that many ICT problems facing Indigenous communities will not be solved within the life of the BIA program itself.

**Recommendation 2:** Align to other funding programs within an overall strategic framework for addressing the ICT capacity divide facing Indigenous communities

If *BIA* is going to be a success it needs to be developed in the context of a plethora of other funding programs that have been developed to help improve the ICT capacity of Indigenous communities. ALGA supports the NT Government recommendation (see below) that Indigenous communities be able to submit a single application for funding under all relevant Australian Government programs including the four elements of the Connect Australia package. However, ALGA recommends that regional or whole of state/territory applications based on a strategic framework for addressing the ICT capacity divide facing Indigenous communities be preferred to individual community applications. It is essential that if a single applications across more than one program is allowed that successful applicants are only required to report once on their application - avoiding the situation where applicants are required to report to each program where they have received funding.

**Recommendation 3:** Prefer applications which include partner organisations with a strong and enduring track record of previously providing ICT support to Indigenous communities. The building of trust with Indigenous communities is a process that takes time and can not be easily replicated by a new organisation that has no previous relationship with these communities. ALGA recommends that the BIA prefer applications from organisations including the state/territory Local Government Associations and state/territory governments that have an existing relationship with Indigenous communities and a track record of already delivering functional ICT solutions to Indigenous communities.

**Recommendation 4:** Require coordinated and targeted training to Indigenous communities. One of the major frustrations for Indigenous communities is uncoordinated training programs where training providers arrive with short notice expecting free accommodation. It is vital that training programs have the support of the communities and that the programs are promoted by the communities themselves. It is essential that all training programs provide different training approaches for different age groups and provide for separate training sessions for men and women and where possible are delivered in appropriate centres for both men and women.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.lgant.nt.gov.au/lgant/home/member\\_services/it\\_services/projects/nt\\_connect](http://www.lgant.nt.gov.au/lgant/home/member_services/it_services/projects/nt_connect)

**Recommendation 5:** Multiple public Internet access points are required in Indigenous communities.

Internet public access points need to be located in public buildings within communities and where possible multiple public access points need to be provided to allow for culturally sensitive access - for example a separate Internet access point located in the Women's centre within a community.

**Recommendation 6:** Publicly funded infrastructure should be accessible to all carriers.

Local government is also concerned with the accessibility of publicly funded infrastructure to all carriers. If *BIA* is going to meet its aim of developing a competitive and open market then the program principles should include a principle that ensures that publicly funded infrastructure of a non-active nature is practicably accessible by other providers/competitors in the market, without process, financial, or regulatory barriers preventing access.

In summary, to achieve the greatest benefits from the *BIA* program it needs to be allocated on a 'whole of region'/'whole of state' approach, coordinated with other programs, funding needs to be strategic and not allocated on an ad hoc or competitive basis and scale (particularly in remote areas) and a strategic context needs to be of greater consideration when designing the program. Further, any resulting infrastructure must be practicably accessible to the open market on an equitable basis.

### **Northern Territory Government response to Broadband Connect and Clever Networks discussion paper**

ALGA supports the following recommendations made by the Northern Territory Government in its response to the Broadband Connect and Clever Networks discussion paper:

*Issue: No competition in the remote NT telecommunications market.*

Recommendation: The Connect Australia package must;

Recognise the lack of competition in the NT telecommunications market and eliminate or minimise the requirement to tender for developments;

*Issue: Network infrastructure development and provision of appropriate services (including voice) to remote communities.*

Recommendation: The Connect Australia package must;

Accept single applications that source funding from one or more of the elements of the Connect Australia package, where appropriate;

Employ an evaluation process that considers as the primary assessment the benefits to the communities that the proposed project will service, rather than the number of services provided, number of people affected etc; and

Accepts applications that will deliver large scale network infrastructure development.

*Issue: Access in remote communities.*

Recommendation: The Connect Australia package must;

Provide for the development of community access points along with ongoing funding for support, for a period of at least two years.

Be cognisant of the unique needs and issues of specific locations and account for them in the assessment process, in particular in assessing the need for non Commonwealth contributions;

Accept applications from third parties, including the NT government on behalf of communities or regions; and

Support collaborative development of applications in remote communities by communities, NT government, and non-government bodies jointly.<sup>2</sup>

### **ALGA Response to questions in BIA paper**

- Q1 What did TAPRIC and previous initiatives do well? Where did TAPRIC and previous initiatives fall short?
- Q2 How can the design and delivery of Backing Indigenous Ability be optimised to achieve long term sustainable quality telecommunications solutions for Indigenous communities?

Response:

Q1. See Recommendations 1-6 above.

Q2. ALGA supports the use of community phones in smaller Indigenous communities. However, mobile phones are the preferred option in larger communities.

- Q3 Should the installation of community phones into Indigenous communities be regarded as a priority under Backing Indigenous Ability?
- Q4 Is it appropriate to use regional agents and ICCs to identify communities in need of community phones and to assist them in an application process? How else could priority communities in need of community phones be identified?
- Q5 Is it appropriate to use an application process to identify a need for a community phone? If so, what should be the key elements of the application process? What are the alternatives to using an application process?
- Q6 Once priority communities requiring a community phone are identified, what is the best way to facilitate provision of the phone? For example, should there be a tender process or some other approach?

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.dcita.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/37598/71\\_NT\\_Government.pdf](http://www.dcita.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/37598/71_NT_Government.pdf)

Response:

Q3. See Q2 above.

Q4-6. See recommendations 1-6 above.

- Q7 Are hub communities the appropriate location for implementing public access Internet facilities? If so, how best can hub communities be prioritised as appropriate locations for new Internet access?
- Q8 Should ICCs, regional agents or other assistance be used to identify communities with a need for Internet facilities and assist them in an application process? How else could priority sites for Internet facilities be identified?
- Q9 Is it appropriate to use an application process for communities to identify a need for Internet facilities? If so, what should be the key elements of the application process? What alternative process could be used?
- Q10 Once implemented in a community, how best can the use of the facilities be encouraged? What arrangements such as Shared Responsibility Agreements or other local or regional agreements should be used for communities to support the installation and maintenance of Internet services?
- Q11 Are there more innovative models of delivering Internet access to Indigenous communities?

Q7-11. See recommendations 1-6 above.

- Q12 Are PC-based webcam videoconferencing facilities appropriate for Indigenous community needs? What parameters should be set for deciding when dedicated videoconferencing facilities need to be implemented into sites? What size of community is appropriate to receive videoconferencing facilities in the context of sustainability?
- Q13 What factors are contributing to the low use of videoconferencing facilities in many communities?
- Q14 Should ICCs, regional agents or other assistance be used to identify communities with a need for videoconferencing facilities? How else could priority locations for videoconferencing facilities be identified?
- Q15 What can be done to ensure that videoconferencing facilities introduced into a community are widely used? For example, how should the appropriate location of videoconferencing sites be decided?
- Q16 Is it appropriate to use an application process for communities to identify a need for videoconferencing facilities? If so, what should be the key elements of the application process? Should communities need to establish a certain level of demand for the facilities as part of the application process?
- Q17 What arrangements such as Shared Responsibility Agreements or other local or

regional agreements should be used for communities to support the installation and maintenance of videoconferencing facilities? What form should these take?

Q12-13. ALGA supports the provision of video-conferencing facilities if they are requested by the Indigenous communities and are supported by a comprehensive change management strategy which involves government agents using the technology themselves. It is not reasonable to expect Indigenous people to use the technology if it is not used by government employees working in Indigenous communities.

Q14-17. See recommendations 1-6 above.

Q18 How best can skill gaps be identified? Is it appropriate to use the ICCs, community champions and regional agents to identify priority areas for training and skills development in the area of telecommunications? How else could training and skills development needs of communities be identified?

Q19 What types of training and skills development sessions on telecommunications are appropriate and how should these be implemented? Are different approaches required for different age groups? What flexible or innovative approaches could be undertaken to identify and deliver training and development sessions?

Q20 Is a grants program an appropriate way to fund communities to deliver training and skills development sessions within accountability guidelines?

Q21 How could communities support appropriate training and skills development programs?

Q22 What obstacles exist for the successful delivery of training and skills development?

Q18-22. See recommendations 1-6 above.

The focus of all training should be on ICT not just on communications and should build on the experience of Indigenous communities using existing technologies. For example Indigenous communities are used to using cards to pay for the purchase of power and the use of pre-paid cards for mobile phones builds on this experience. Training programs are usually delivered in isolation to previous training programs and this is compounded by the failure of the competitive tender process which provides no weighting for organisations that have already successfully delivered training courses to Indigenous communities.

Q23 Are community champions an appropriate way to engage the community and assist them in using telecommunications technology? For what size of community would a community champion be appropriate? Would every Indigenous community with a phone, Internet or videoconferencing facility need access to a local champion?

- Q24 What roles could community champions play within communities?
- Q25 How could community champions be identified within regions and communities?
- Q26 What would be the best way to engage and compensate community champions for their role and how could their performance be monitored and assessed?

Q23-26. See recommendations 1-6 above.

It is important to establish reasonable expectations of community champions in use of ICT technologies. Unless a coordinated approach is taken to the delivery of all ICT based training programs it is difficult to see how a community champion program can be successful. Developing trust with a community requires a long-term approach which is not possible with separate training programs delivered by different organisations based on a competitive tender approach. Training programs that use a train the trainer approach and result in real long-term jobs are required.

- Q27 What models of delivering increased culturally appropriate content to the Internet could be introduced under Backing Indigenous Ability?
- Q28 How could a grant or funding model to encourage development of culturally appropriate content be structured? What are the benefits and risks of the models?
- Q29 Will the ability to digitally record and archive culturally significant material encourage usage of Internet services?
- Q30 What funding approaches could be adopted to encourage the recording and archiving of culturally significant material under Backing Indigenous Ability?

Q27-30. See recommendations 1-6 above.

It is important that any funding of development of culturally appropriate content be undertaken with the understanding that each Indigenous community is able to determine and control who has access to this content. Communities should be able to restrict access to content to stand alone PCs within their own communities and no assumption should be made that content will be published to the Internet.

Q31 Who should facilitate demand aggregation within communities and regions? Is it appropriate that ICCs, regional agents and community champions assist with demand aggregation or should alternative models be implemented (for example using a demand aggregation broker)?

Q32 What other initiatives could assist in demand aggregation?

Q31-32. See recommendations 1-6 above.

Q33 What innovative and/or flexible approaches are being used elsewhere that could be used to deliver elements of Backing Indigenous Ability?

Q34 What technologies offer greater flexibility and why?

Q35 What are some innovative means of service delivery to provide telecommunications improvements to Indigenous communities?

Q36 What are some innovative approaches that could be used to fund communities in need under the Backing Indigenous Ability program?

Q33-36. See recommendations 1-6 above.

The Local Government Association of Northern Territory (LGANT) NT Connect program provides a very good model for delivering of programs to Indigenous communities. This approach is comprehensive and strategic and tackles fundamental ICT problems within Indigenous communities. The program could be extended to include all non government organisations providing services to Indigenous communities allowing a total approach to the delivery and support of ICT within Indigenous communities. Only an approach of this sort is likely to be sustainable.

Q37 How should funding be provided under Backing Indigenous Ability?

Q38 What type(s) of funding provision best suit each program element?

Q39 Should a mix of funding approaches be used?

Q40 How can communities be assisted to develop grants applications so as to compete on a more equal basis for funding?

Q37-40. See recommendations 1-6 above.

See also the NT Government recommendations above.

- Q41 In delivering Backing Indigenous Ability in a culturally appropriate manner, what should be done to enable acceptance and ownership of telecommunications technology to aid sustainability within Indigenous communities?
- Q42 What are some best practices in engaging communities in the planning, development and implementation stages of introducing or improving telecommunications technology?

Q37-40. See recommendations 1-6 above.  
See the LGANT NT Connect project.

- Q43 How can telecommunications services delivered to Indigenous communities become operationally and financially sustainable and remain sustainable beyond the life of the package?
- Q44 What innovative and flexible approaches could be used by communities to aid in the sustainability of telecommunications technology?
- Q45 How could telecommunications industry participants be encouraged to form partnerships with Indigenous communities? What form might these arrangements take?
- Q46 In what ways can local Indigenous Australians assist in service delivery of telecommunications in Indigenous communities?

Q43-46. See recommendations 1-6 above.  
See the LGANT NT Connect project.

- 47 How should Backing Indigenous Ability use arrangements such as Shared Responsibility Agreements to facilitate arrangements with communities?
- Q48 What elements of Backing Indigenous Ability should or should not be formalised through agreements with communities to share responsibilities and ensure appropriate service delivery?
- Q49 Would the use of Regional Partnership Agreements work within the Backing Indigenous Ability program and the wider *Connect Australia* package? If so, what form should these agreements take?

- 50 How can existing infrastructure and services in communities be used to provide access to a wider range of uses and users from the community?

- Q51 other key stakeholders that should be consulted (other than through this discussion paper and the consultation sessions planned for March and April identified at Section 8 below) in the design and implementation of Backing

Indigenous Ability?

Q52 How best can Backing Indigenous Ability link in with the other elements of *Connect Australia* to ensure an efficient and effective delivery of telecommunications into Indigenous communities?

Q53 How best can the progress of Backing Indigenous Ability be monitored and assessed? How often should a formal assessment of Backing Indigenous Ability be undertaken?

Q47-53. See recommendations 1-6 above.