

Response to the
Department of Communications, Information
Technology and the Arts discussion paper on

Backing Indigenous Ability

May 2006



Department of
Industry and Resources

INTRODUCTION

There are over 300 Indigenous communities in remote and rural Western Australia. In late 2003/early 2004, 274 communities participated in the Environmental Health Needs Survey (EHNS), representing almost 17,000 Indigenous people. Many of these 274 communities are in very remote areas of the State, with 80% of the Indigenous population living in communities of 50 or greater in size. Only about 50 communities are in or adjacent to established towns. In the Kimberley and Western Desert regions of the State, the Indigenous population forms at least 25% of the total population.

The EHNS report focused on environmental health, but also included an analysis of telecommunications services. This analysis showed that only 14% of communities had access to the Internet, with 18% having access to computers. Payphones were available in 47% of communities, and satellite phones in 24%.

There are some programs to address these issues, such as in parts of the Kimberley and in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, but much more needs to be done. Economic development of these Indigenous communities is a key current issue, with this development being hampered until telecommunications services improve. The communities will also require some capacity building assistance, to ensure that community members are able to more fully utilise these new telecommunication services once they become available – this should be an appropriate focus of the Backing Indigenous Ability Program and other Commonwealth and State Government initiatives. Community broadband access points, such as telecentres, will have a critical role to play.

PREVIOUS PROGRAMS

- 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?

Strengths of TAPRIC were that it recognised that the needs of Indigenous communities were not being met either commercially or through mainstream programs, and it started to focus on appropriate solutions for communities. This was especially true of the community phones program.

TAPRIC and other programs focusing on Indigenous communities fell short because it took too long to get out to communities, and yet the consultation periods and periods for community sign-up were too short. It was also severely hampered because the funding was very limited and tended to be directed at pilots or feasibility studies without the funding to turn this into a solution. The money was allocated into too many separate pots, with insufficient in each to address the necessary needs. The education and training segment seemed to fail to deliver real outcomes.

PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES

Our initial impression of the program's principles and objectives is that they appear to be sound. For any program to be successful, it needs to have the clear cooperation of the communities. Projects must be bottom-up, not top-down, but with a strong support network. Communities must have a stake in their future for the project to be sustainable. There cannot be a fly in – fly out mentality for program managers.

PROCESSES

Application processes must remain simple. There must be adequate time for consultation and sign-up that takes into consideration the length of time it takes for a community to consider, get advice on and endorse proposals – with meetings of the decision-making bodies generally a month apart. This is little different from the time that a local government authority would need to consult with its constituents, consider the issues and make a decision of commitment.

The identification of community champions is very important. There needs to be a person on the ground who can work with the communities, raise awareness, improve understanding (and possibly skills) and oversee progress.

Understanding, training and skills are vital for the sustainability of solutions – it is no good putting in a solution and walking away.

TELEPHONY

Telephony in Indigenous communities should be a priority of the entire Connect Australia package. Backing Indigenous Ability pre-supposes that Indigenous communities will be able to have their needs for mobile and broadband services addressed through the other elements of the package. There is a real danger that as these communities offer the least economic opportunities, they will be overlooked in the provision of solutions in favour of more populous and wealthy areas.

As many developing countries without basic infrastructure are finding, it is easier to introduce mobile telephony and to skip the need for digging in fixed line services. This is also true for Indigenous communities.

Telstra's own figures have shown that following the introduction of mobile telephony into Indigenous communities the usage has been treble what was expected. While a standard terrestrial phone service is desirable, the ability to install mobile towers easily and limit debt through pre-paid services makes mobile phones in Indigenous communities a quick fix and point-scorer for governments and carriers.

There are major Indigenous communities with populations over the current threshold of 310 that lack mobile telephony. They include Junjuwa (500), Kalumburu (450), Warburton (560) and Yandeyarra (320). Burringurrah and Jigalong are also actively seeking mobile phone service. The towns of Gascoyne Junction, Marble Bar, Sandstone, Menzies and Nullagine have sizeable Indigenous populations and also have the traffic and community interest to warrant coverage.

Mobile telephony may recoup some of its capital and recurrent expenditures through pre-paid services. After the capital injection, mobile telephony, satellite internet and services under other projects have to be either sustainable or sustained. The Commonwealth must realise that many of these projects will be unsustainable until the communities have a sound economic base, and it will be these services that will increase the likelihood of that economic base being established. For this reason and for equity in Indigenous communities, these projects must be maintained and sustained by the Commonwealth.

SHARED COMMUNITY PHONES

- 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?

Even if mobile telephony was provided in communities – and it is likely to be many decades before this is universal – there would still be a need for robust community phones. Many communities, particularly the smaller ones, do not have access to payphones or have inadequate access. Unless this is dealt with by an effective universal service obligation, community phones must be a priority.

The best way to prioritise communities is to do a needs analysis directly with the community. This activity requires personnel to go there, sit down, talk with and listen to communities. Appended to this paper is a list of communities, identified by contributors as priority communities. Further information on the specific needs of these communities will be provided as soon as resources allow.

It is appropriate for regional agents and ICCs to identify communities in need of community phones and assist them with an application. However, not all ICCs have taken an interest in telecommunications – many have been focused on the more immediate issues of health, law and order, and abuse. An alternative and complementary model may be for a funded position within each jurisdiction to work with ICCs, government agencies and local communities to identify needs.

An application-based process that is reliant on the communities to initiate is unlikely to capture the most disadvantaged, the most isolated or the smallest communities – the ones most in need of community phones. The above model, or one with regional agents, could provide the knowledge and the literacy to work with the communities on applications.

A tender process community by community would be too cumbersome, and a process where the successful tenderer for all installations is able to determine which sites are selected is likely to be inequitable. A better alternative would be a tender process that sets up a panel of providers. DCITA could then seek quotes from the organisations on the panel for each prioritised community and select the best response. In this way, niche providers that specialise in particular

geographic areas could be accommodated while also ensuring the best price for the independently determined recipient communities. The process would also be valid for the entire period of the funding, thus allowing communities where needs are identified later in the period to still have these needs addressed.

PUBLIC INTERNET ACCESS

- 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?

Any discrete Indigenous community with a population over 100 should be considered as an appropriate location for public Internet access. Remote Indigenous communities are exactly that, remote, and should be offered equitable services to that offered in larger population areas.

The WA telecentre model is an ideal platform for providing Internet access in larger remote communities. The telecentre model can provide a centralised environment for public access to the internet and also act as a “broadband gateway” for the whole of the community.

The telecentre MITEs (Modular Interactive Telecommunications Environment) are a self contained fully equipped building ready to be connected to electricity and telecommunications infrastructure. The MITE could be the point at which data bandwidth (minimum 2Mb up to 100Mb) enters a community and is then reticulated internally and also to the greater community. This reticulated bandwidth could be utilised by community administration, health services, police, school, church, businesses and visitors. All management and support of bandwidth could be through the Telecentre. This would require a technically skilled and competent manager.

Reticulation of bandwidth to the immediate community could be through either cable or wireless. Wireless reticulation options could be used for up to 50kms, a generally cheaper alternative.

This program could be utilised to upgrade existing broadband in telecentres currently in Indigenous communities and also to introduce new telecentres into Indigenous communities not currently part of the telecentre network. Expanded bandwidth (2Mb – 100Mb) could be used to meet all community broadband requirements such as internet, VOIP, data and videoconferencing. New telecentres would strengthen the links with Indigenous communities and provide greater access to services by remote peoples.

More time must be given in helping programs to bed down the development of these types of facilities. Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) has been very flexible and understanding to date, though the overarching issue is that much more time is required to get these facilities up and running amidst the complex geographic, social and cultural environments in many of these communities. More serious service delivery, social and organisational issues tend to take precedence, as would be expected. Longer implementation times are needed.

The cost of reaching a satisfactory level of trust involves lots of travel. This can be prohibitive and is often hard to obtain in funding requests. Regular trips to these communities are an essential part of establishing a reasonable level of trust that will underpin the progress of this type of project. This needs to be considered on a case by case basis – the success of the project should not be eroded through lack of capacity to get the "front end" right.

Supporting the technology is a complex issue. There must be the scope to build in extended periods of funding to help these communities manage their technology. This includes technical support, transport costs to ferry equipment back and forth as well as training. The existing *Future Skilling Outback WA* project is a good start, though this begins and concludes rather abruptly. The hope is that it will lead to a sustainable program once the Commonwealth funding has ceased.

There needs to be an ongoing subsidy to cover the cost of broadband used for videoconferencing and data download in public facilities. Full sustainability will never be obtained to cover the wide bandwidth costs in many remote Indigenous (and other) communities. Just to provide an "on all the time" videoconferencing service is very expensive, let alone all the internet and telephony requirements.

There must be an understanding that where infrastructure is required to house technology and associated services the process of establishing this can take some time and can be fraught with cost overruns and other issues. As an example, in one instance, with the Telecentres in Remote Indigenous Communities (TIRIC) project, the new building was completed to house the telecentre and some other services. Unfortunately the community administration got into financial

difficulties, funding was halted and the telecentre is unable to be opened until the audit investigation and related issues are resolved.

The comments in the previous section relating to the use of a funded position to identify needs and priorities and to assist communities with applications is also applicable here, as are the comments on an application process in both the above section and the section on Process.

What has not been addressed is the paying for broadband services on an ongoing basis for a public access facility with multiple users. Public internet access facilities must have access to a broadband package that allows for unlimited download at a reasonable price.

VIDEOCONFERENCING

- 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?

Western Australia's Telecentre Network has over a decade's experience in the application of videoconferencing to remote areas. The majority of the following section is based on their input to the discussion paper.

Personal computer (PC) webcams are a suitable method of providing personal videoconferencing (one-to-one conferencing from desktop PC to desktop PC). There are several issues relating to webcam based videoconferencing - the most important of which is lack of bandwidth. If webcam videoconferencing is

conducted on an existing local-area-network (LAN), there may be internal contention for bandwidth with other LAN users leading to degradation in service. Current broadband solutions in most Indigenous communities are satellite-based with up to 400 kbps available to the user. As this bandwidth is on a shared platform, high bandwidth demand by other external wide-area-network (WAN) users could compromise available bandwidth to the LAN. Low monthly bandwidth allowances for some satellite internet service providers (ISPs) (500Mb per month) could limit their ability to provide continuous full service. A 400 kbps videoconference would use approximately 144 Mb of bandwidth per hour.

Webcam-based videoconferencing should also include elements such as data sharing, document transfer, IRC (Internet Relay Chat), virtual whiteboard and high quality audio to ensure versatility and optimum value to the end-user. Programs such as Vmeeting and Centra7 will provide these capabilities.

The ideal bandwidth solution to support satellite-based videoconferencing is one which is always-on. This, however, costs approximately \$10,000 per month per site.

Satellite broadband is not sufficient to support full-size television-based videoconferencing. For videoconferences having two or more participants (at the remote location), a full-size TV based conferencing system using ISDN or IP platforms is preferred. ISDN/IP based videoconferencing raises other issues. ISDN call costs are approximately \$40 per hour with annualised costs of approx \$1,000 per site.

IP videoconferencing requires dedicated high bandwidth (320 kbps or greater). This level of bandwidth is unavailable in many remote Indigenous communities due to lack of suitable terrestrial telecommunications infrastructure (ISDN or ADSL).

Six telecentres in remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia do have satellite based IP videoconferencing capability. This is a reservation-type service: sites only pay for bandwidth used and bandwidth must be booked in advance. Bandwidth is then only enabled by the service provider for the booked period. The establishment costs for each site are approximately \$30,000 per site with annualised costs of approximately \$2,000 per site. Bandwidth costs are \$162.50 per hour plus bridge costs (up to \$60 per hour) as a bridge is needed to interface IP and ISDN calls, studio costs (up to \$200 per hour per site) and ISDN call costs of \$40 per hour.

Most IP based videoconferencing uses the World Wide Web as a communication/data channel therefore security may be an issue. This limits its usefulness for legal and health providers.

It is not the size of the community that determines the sustainability of videoconferencing. It is the use that can be made of the facilities by others, such

as government agencies. However, the very high costs of satellite-based bandwidth in remote communities make it even a challenge in affordability for agencies. While agencies can underpin the sustainability, they can not cross-subsidise the community for their usage costs of the service. Another limiting factor for agencies can be the lack of privacy when using the facilities for sensitive issues. Nonetheless, there should be wider recognition by government agencies of benefits of videoconferencing.

The majority of Indigenous communities in Western Australia could not provide a sustainable environment to support videoconferencing without substantial subsidy to make the bandwidth usage costs affordable.

ICCs, regional agents and government authorities can play an important part in identifying communities with a need for videoconferencing facilities. An application process for videoconferencing facilities would be appropriate, with the applicants partnering with a government agency or service provider.

As part of the application process, communities should explain how the facilities would be used. This should include use by both community members and other organisations, including government agencies. Applications should be supported by letters from these organisations. This would demonstrate that there has been clear thought given to how the facilities would operate within the community and who would use them. An agent may be needed to assist with this process.

Videoconferencing facilities should be located in neutral territory where community members do not feel intimidated. A decision on siting of the facilities needs to be made in consultation with government agencies that could be expected to make use of the facility and the community itself. Siting options will often be limited by the availability of suitable buildings.

TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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| 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?

ICCs, community champions and regional agents may not have the skills to identify priority areas for training and skills development in the area of telecommunications. This is particularly true of ICCs who are selected on very different criteria to undertake different tasks. Regional agents could be selected with this criterion in mind. Community champions would reveal themselves on a different basis, but may well become aware of the needs in this area.

Any training and skills development of this kind needs appropriate material to be developed to underpin the training – to ensure that the basics are delivered wherever they are needed and that there is resource material available once the trainer departs. However, care must be taken that the money is not spent on development of material, with nothing available for the training. There may well be existing training material or material that could be readily and cheaply adapted. There must be due regard paid to its use by a group which may have little written English.

For maximum effect, new projects emanating from Backing Indigenous Ability must coordinate with existing projects, such as Western Australia's *Future Skilling Outback WA* IT Skills and Training Project and the Indigenous Monetary Skills training project which is being developed by Reconciliation Australia. Programs like these should not be a one-off event. They should be analysed for models that work particularly well in Indigenous communities, and used as a launching pad for further training initiatives, to reinforce the skills provided, to provide the next level of skills and to provide training to additional people.

A grants program to individual communities does not address the fact that they generally do not have access to the skills and resources to make the training happen. The communities can be many hundreds of kilometres from the nearest potential trainer – even thousands of kilometres. Having a bucket of money at the community level will not necessarily attract someone with the necessary skills. The model used for *Future Skilling Outback WA* was to aggregate the training at a regional level to make it worthwhile for a trainer to deliver the program, while still ensuring that it was provided by someone with (relatively) local expertise and knowledge – and someone who could be available in the future to provide follow-on training.

A considerable amount of the funding available in Backing Indigenous Ability is to be spent on Indigenous broadcasting, including the upgrading of BRACS facilities. These facilities need to be maintained at the community level. Training for this should be incorporated in the training to be delivered under this aspect of the package – this would provide real skills in the community, possible employment and better management of the broadcasting facilities.

One of the biggest obstacles for the successful training and skills development is that it cannot be a one-off program. There needs to be follow-up support provided so people can reinforce and build on their skills, and so others in the community can gain the skills. An isolated program that lasts for a few days is not going to have a lasting impact.

COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

- 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?

Community champions, whether they are in Indigenous communities or small non-Indigenous communities, can play a vital role in raising awareness of technologies and benefits of its use, improving understanding and skills and aggregating the demand to underpin sustainable solutions. Coming from the community itself, they are in the best position to know local conditions and to understand how programs need to be adapted to meet local needs.

Community champions can also be a strong voice for the community in dealing with government agencies and other organisations. They could provide liaison services to assist agencies or organisations that are unfamiliar with the local conditions and customs to collaborate with communities. People could be engaged who have good knowledge of the community and the skills and knowledge to take information into this environment and generate debate and discussion about it.

An examination of the communities that have achieved the greatest advances in telecommunications will reveal the presence of a strong and effective community champion. The size of the community or the presence of communications facilities is not the critical issue in determining if a community champion is appropriate. A community champion has personal qualities that are critical to their success.

It may be that the delivery of *Future Skilling Outback WA* would be an excellent means of identifying community champions.

Community champions are a valuable concept. It is important that they be compensated adequately for their efforts.

CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE CONTENT

- 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?

Models to increase culturally appropriate content must appeal to the characteristics of the community. By doing so, it contextualises use of the internet in that community. Cultural appropriate content has been very successful in increasing demand for and use of the internet in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

DEMAND AGGREGATION

- 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?

Demand aggregation is also crucial to success of projects.

The discussion paper states, “One role for demand aggregation could be to combine the demand from these organisations into a package that would also provide for spare capacity to be made available, preferably for community use. In addition, it could assist communities obtain better quality and value for money when purchasing communications equipment and services.” The use of the term “spare capacity” assumes a model whereby government agencies are able to buy services for their own use and on-sell these to the community. This is, in fact, prohibited by the Telecommunications Act (it would require a carrier or carriage service provider licence) and by the contracts under which the government buys its services.

It also leaves unanswered such questions as: Who takes responsibility? Who pays? Who handles maintenance of the last mile? How is billing handled?

This also assumes that government agencies are able to get adequate services in the Indigenous communities. This is generally not the case, with government services suffering as a consequence.

A demand aggregation model based on all parties – government, community and any industry players – combining their demand into a bundle which then goes out to tender, leads to a better quality and more affordable service for all concerned. It can also provide the incentive, especially combined with a capital subsidy, for a supplier to make the investment in the community in quality communications infrastructure and services. The aggregation of demand, combined with anchor tenancy by State, Local and Commonwealth agencies has been vital to building an initially sustainable business case for the Ngaanyatjarra Lands Telecommunications Project, an earlier product of CCIF and State Government funding.

Successful demand aggregation of this type requires some knowledge or access to expertise in the area of contracting. Under the Broadband Development component of the Clever Networks program, a series of Broadband Development Project Officers will be appointed. A Telecommunications Development Indigenous Project Officer that could provide the expertise – technical and contractual – and support to the Community Champions would be an excellent initiative. The Officer would be in a position to provide the bridge between government agencies and the champion, as well as between champions in different communities, thus allowing an aggregation across a region and possible regional solutions.

INNOVATION AND FLEXIBILITY

- 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?

A number of innovative approaches have been mentioned earlier in the paper:

- *Future Skilling Outback WA*;
- Telecommunications Development Indigenous Project Officer; and
- The use of a telecentres as a community hub for the provision of services.

Wireless technology offers the greatest potential in Indigenous communities as many communities are without copper cable. It also offers greater flexibility, can cover a greater area at a lesser cost and allows for a mobile population. Backhaul still remains an issue.

FUNDING

- 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?

The major concern with the funding is that \$36.6 million is insufficient to address the telecommunications needs of all of the communities, even communities of over 100 people. There is a real danger that the money will be spread too thinly over the many areas that need to be addressed and this will impede the achievement of significant outcomes.

The Telecommunications Development Indigenous Project Officer could work with the community champions and organisations such as the ICCs and Regional Development Commissions on the development of grant applications. The champion would be able to provide the local expertise and knowledge, but the Project Officer is likely to be required to write the applications. It cannot realistically be expected that a community champion will be found who will be able to deliver on all of the areas covered in this discussion paper – let alone one in each community. There must be careful consideration given to which elements are essential in the champion and which areas can be supplemented by skills and professional expertise from other sources.

CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE SERVICES

- 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?

Face to face consultation is very important. Relationships need to be built and this cannot be done in a single visit. This necessarily means a very labour

intensive process. It is also expensive and extensive travel is involved. The results, however, are likely to be well worth the effort, including increasing the sustainability of the project.

The issue of allowing sufficient time for the community to properly consider proposals is covered under the section headed Process.

SUSTAINABILITY

- 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?

It needs to be recognised that there are locations where it will only be government spend that makes the provision of broadband sustainable within the community. Government, by acting as the anchor tenant, can provide the ongoing business case that ensures that broadband services will continue to be supplied. This applies to many small towns and Indigenous communities. All tiers of government must contribute, and so there needs to be coordination and collaboration on initiatives by Commonwealth, State and local governments, and agencies within these tiers of government. For example, all jurisdictions should undertake to notify all agencies under their authority of projects that are approved for funding and require that liaison takes place with the project proponents over all broadband activity or proposed activity within that region. This should minimise actions that are at cross-purposes or duplications, and maximise the benefits to all concerned.

Many Indigenous communities, particularly those that are more remote are currently experiencing a “cost-income squeeze” – costs are rising while incomes remain static. This is principally a consequence of the increase in fuel prices and the indirect flow-on impacts on power and freight costs.

Smaller remote communities, with a population of 150 or less, operate community stores to provide residents with food and other grocery items. Increased freight and power costs have significantly increased the operating costs of stores which, particularly in smaller stores which operate on small margins, are in-turn passed on to consumers through price increases. Residents of remote

communities mostly rely on welfare or CDEP payments for their income, and these payments are not adjusted to reflect cost increases. The consequence of the price rises is a reduction in the purchasing power of residents – their essential food and grocery expenditure now represents a higher proportion of their income. This in turn reduces discretionary income for non-essential items including travel and entertainment.

Community administrations are also confronting this problem of rising costs against fixed incomes and have limited capacity to provide community facilities at affordable prices.

While improved telecommunications services to remote communities offer the opportunity for residents to access services and develop their capacity, the reduction in discretionary income is likely to reduce the level of uptake. To achieve the objectives of providing a platform for community issues and building capability, it is not enough to only provide the capital funding for infrastructure.

It must be recognised that these communities will not become economically sustainable without telecommunications, and until they do, they will often not be able to generate sufficient disposable income to support the communications network and services. It is time the issue of supporting funding for communications services in Indigenous communities was addressed. This could even be tapered over a five to ten year timeframe.

The proposal for skilled local Indigenous contractors to assist in building sites for community phones is a good one. It is, however, a long term plan as there must be training and support provided.

Apart from the telecommunications industry, the Backing Indigenous Ability program can seek project support from industries in and near Indigenous communities. Western Australian projects seek to include mining companies for training and telecommunications support. Backhaul to mine-sites can conceivably be leveraged for the use of nearby communities. This could be a role for the Telecommunications Development Indigenous Project Officer.

WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT APPROACH

- Q47 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?

- Q50 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 Are there any 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?

Shared Responsibility Agreements could be used to facilitate arrangements with communities. Using Regional Partnership Agreements may work within the Backing Indigenous Ability program and the wider Connect Australia package. It must be remembered, however, that these should not be applied to what are essential services.

INTEGRATION WITH CONNECT AUSTRALIA

- 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?

The various branches of DCITA need to work together to ensure that the needs of Indigenous communities are not overlooked in the design of the programs for Broadband Connect, Clever Networks and Mobile Connect – and in the delivery of outcomes. The Indigenous Telecommunications Section will need to be proactive in this regard.

Those programs will need to provide for aspects which will increase the success of initiatives in Indigenous communities: greater face-to-face consultation, working with community champions, longer lead times to allow for proper consideration of proposals by communities and longer implementation times. They also need to recognise that Indigenous communities face particular problems of skills and awareness, lack of access to technical expertise and of sustainability.

CONSULTATIONS

The following have contributed to the preparation of this submission:

Department of Indigenous Affairs

Gascoyne Development Commission

Office of Aboriginal Economic Development – Department of Industry and Resources

Telecentres Support Branch – Department of Local Government and Regional Development

REFERENCES

Relevant documentation on issues raised in this submission. Copies available upon request.

1. Response to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Discussion Paper on Broadband Connect and Clever Networks: *Supporting Investment in Sustainable Broadband Infrastructure*

Department of Industry and Resources, January 2006

2. Response to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts discussion paper on Mobile Connect: *Improving Regional Mobile Phone Coverage*

Department of Industry and Resources, January 2006

3. Environmental Health Needs of Indigenous Communities in Western Australia

Environmental Health Needs Coordinating Committee, 2004

COMMUNITIES TO CONSIDER

This is an initial list of Western Australian communities for consideration for telecommunications initiatives.

Ardyaloon (One Arm Point)
Beagle Bay
Bidyadanga
Blackstone
Burringurrah
Coconut Wells
Cosmo Newberry
Derby
Djarindjin and Lombadina
Fitzroy Crossing
Halls Creek
Ilkurlka
Jameson
Jigalong
Junjuwa
Kalumburu
Kanawarratji
Kanpa
Kiwirrkurra
Kunawarritji
Kununurra
Looma and Camballin
Marble Bar
Menzies
MindiBungu (Billiluna)
Mulan
Nullagine
Oombulgurri
Patjarr
Punmu
Sandstone
Tjirrkarli
Tjukurla
Tjuntjuntjara
Twelve Mile
Wangkatjungka
Wannan
Warakurna
Warburton
Warmun (Turkey Creek)
Wingellina

Wirrimanu (Balgo)
Wyndham
Yandeyarra (Mugaringa)
Yiyili
Yungngora (Noonkanbah)

CONTACTS

For more information regarding this submission, please contact:

Dan Scherr
Senior Project Officer
Communications Technology Development Branch
Department of Industry and Resources
1 Adelaide Terrace
East Perth WA 6004
tel 08-9222-0430
fax 08-9222-6162
Dan.scherr@doir.wa.gov.au

or

Sheryl Siekierka
General Manager
Communications Technology Development Branch
Department of Industry and Resources
1 Adelaide Terrace
East Perth WA 6004
tel 08-9222-0432
fax 08-9222-6162
Sheryl.Siekierka@doir.wa.gov.au