

The Broadband for the Bush Alliance: unlocking the digital potential of the bush

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Access to reliable functional broadband and 3G/4G mobile services is the norm for most Australians. However, remote Australia has not been able to fully engage and participate in the digital revolution because of inadequate or lack thereof of telecommunications infrastructure, affordability issues and, for most, poor digital literacy. Given distance and isolation in the bush, broadband has an even greater potential to make a positive economic, social, and service delivery impact for people living in remote Australia. The Broadband for the Bush Alliance was formed in 2012 with the aim of advancing the digital capacity and capability of remote Australians through a range of activities, including policy formulation, lobbying activities, sharing knowledge and building expertise through activities such as: its annual forum, research and networking. Originally set up by six organisations, the Alliance membership is expanding and brings together a range of stakeholders with expertise in communications, remote service delivery, and community engagement. This paper seeks to give an overview of key policy recommendations developed by the Alliance and identified at the last Broadband for the Bush forum, which have potential to unlock the digital potential of the bush. This includes:

- need for a dedicated communications strategy for remote and outer rural Australia, which should encompass the expansion of mobile coverage, getting digital infrastructure right, developing smart last mile solutions for small towns and communities, affordable pricing for mobile calls in remote and rural Australia, improving digital literacy and improving Indigenous communications programs
- expansion of mobile coverage and expansion of Extended Zones program to remote mobile and pre-paid mobile services
- need for a range of billing models such as a pre-paid NBN satellite billing model to be developed, especially to meet the needs of Indigenous remote communities
- IT training and support programs for remote areas to be delivered by community organisations. 3.7 million Australians do not access the Internet regularly, and the number of these people living in remote Australia is disproportionately high

- planning for the transition from the Interim Satellite Solution to the Long Term Satellite Solution should be made a priority
- the establishment of an innovation budget for development of infrastructure solutions for remote areas. As a one size fits all approach fails in the bush, remote areas often demand tailored telecommunications and broadband solutions, such as for last mile connectivity.