UNE-NBN Seminar Series – Tamworth

Keynote Address

Local Government and the National Broadband: How the Sector is Preparing to Capture the Benefits

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1. Introduction

I appreciate this opportunity to provide a broad local government perspective on how the sector is preparing for and considering the National Broadband Network (NBN) rollout and how local government might capture the benefits of high speed broadband. I speak as an experienced community leader who realises that communities are on the cusp of an exciting new digital era and who keenly wishes that communities secure maximum benefits from the technology.

In August 2011, Deloitte Access Economics (2011) in its *Connected Continent Report* stated

> The internet has transformed the Australian economy over the last 10 years, and is poised to play an even greater role in our daily lives and businesses as Australia positions itself to become a leading digital economy.

Worldwide, there is a wealth of evidence that municipal governments are heading towards a seamless transaction based relationship with their customers. Local jurisdictions are adopting varying forms of electronic transactions and participatory e-governance mechanisms. While researchers have argued that there has been increased variability and some relative weakness in electronic best practise performance, there is however, acknowledged rapid electronic performance improvements in citizen participation (Calista, Melitski, Holzer, & Manoharan, 2010).

On 22 June this year Minister Senator Conroy announced, as a key component of the National Digital Economy Strategy, a $17.1 million Digital Local Government Program to assist local councils take full advantage of the National Broadband Network (NBN). He nominated that the pathway would be through the development and upgrading of innovative online service delivery to homes and businesses (Conroy, 2011) as part of the Government's

goal that four out of five Australians would eventually choose to engage with the government through the internet or by other types of online service.

There has been substantial debate and conjecture at Regional Development Australia (RDA) Committee level, and also within local government, about what ought to be the role of local councils and RDA's in terms of the NBN fibre rollout and community broadband take-up of the technology. There has been considerable disquiet about how regions might be prioritised to receive the rollout, the locations of next stages of the rollout, and how RDA Committees and councils might promote and market the NBN. At the RDA level there has been a growing view that its engagement in promoting take-up is high risk in terms of RDA Committee credibility. However, in most respects my remarks about local government and the NBN apply also to RDA Committees.

The paper is divided into four parts. Section 1 outlines current options for interaction and cooperation with the NBN Co. Section 2 considers; the national level local government broadband policy viewpoint as determined by the Australian Local Government Association; actions currently being taken by some local councils aimed at ensuring greater community internet engagement with local governments for online service; and how councils are engaging communities and preparing to facilitate, develop and upgrade, innovative online service delivery to homes and businesses. Section 4 describes the RDA Northern Rivers Committee engagement in preparing its regional community to capture the benefits of high speed broadband. Section 5 provides brief concluding observations.

2. Local Government Interaction with the NBN Co

I commence with a brief consideration of some canvassed current opportunities for interaction with the NBN Co, as described recently by NBN's Duncan Bremner. There is much that local government can do in relation to the NBN planning process, and specifically, through provision of information to NBN Co and its contractors, in the nature of zoning maps and planning controls, identifying heritage conservation and environmentally significant areas, advising development application requirements as necessary, locating of Commonwealth land and facilities, and sites of major local development proposals or infrastructure locations and greenfield development areas (Bremner, 2011). Future

management of local government infrastructure now undoubtedly needs to closely consider NBN implementation.

NBN Co has developed a suite of community engagement guiding principles. It is appropriate that local government engages with the NBN to ensure that those worthy principles are fully observed and enacted before and during fibre rollout. For example, a well developed community engagement plan would show council leadership and explain the benefits of NBN services and also the impacts of the build phase (Australian Local Government Association & NBN Co Limited, 2011).

NBN Co has encouraged local councils yet to engage with the company to be prepared for the rollout project in council areas before it arrives, because NBN Co's data requirements and council resource commitments are high; and also to communicate to all stakeholders in communities about how councils will support the rollout from the initial stage through to implementation and completion (Australian Local Government Association, et al., 2011).

Considerable economic benefits can derive to councils and communities given that, in some circumstances, local government will also have opportunity to engage in co-investment projects with NBN Co such as, for example, undergrounding of power, networks maintenance or upgrades, streetscape works, new bridges or road corridors and some land developments other than in greenfield sites. Fibre network extension may also be possible through third party proposals to extend the 'fibre footprint' beyond the intended 93% coverage, or to extend the fixed wireless coverage by co-funding additional infrastructure (Bremner, 2011).

In February 2011, the Allen Consulting Group (2011) in a Report prepared for the Department of Broadband, Communication and the Digital Economy, highlighted the extent of internet use among small business and community organisations in the five NBN first release areas. Focus groups primarily emphasised the importance of the internet for communications. In particular, email was regarded as critical and vital to business and organisation operations. However, the Report also demonstrated that much more needs to be done to convince business, workplaces and communities of the considerably broader benefits of Information Technology. This provides a significant role that local government ought to readily undertake.

3. Local Government Action to Capture NBN Benefits

Local government, the closest tier of government to community, has a vital role in shaping thinking about how best to realise the potential of the NBN. The evidence nationally is that the regard for, and community confidence in local government, is usually greater than that accorded to the States and Commonwealth. This strategic advantage should be maximised by local government and their communities in relation to NBN take-up.

It is evident that, only in recent times has much of local government seriously contemplated its role and the opportunities for capturing NBN benefits. While some councils have been proactive for years, most have been more actively engaged in lobbying for their local government area to be an early beneficiary of the fibre rollout. However, in approximately the past year, and especially since the commencement of the rollout, many councils have begun to seriously engage and consider their options.

3.1 Australian Local Government Association Broadband Policy and Advocacy

ALGA, the peak Australian local government organisation, has been active in advocating the establishment of high speed broadband, to enable greater connectivity, equitable delivery and price affordability across all communities in Australia. ALGA and the approximate 560 councils it represents, regards broadband as a key enabler of vital services. The organisation supports the need to focus on realising the opportunities, and understanding the potential that high speed broadband can provide to business, communities and governments including local government (McCaffery, 2011).

ALGA recently stated that local governments have identified a range of potential high speed broadband benefits to:

1. Extend and enhance the service delivery capabilities of local government to the community;
2. Realise efficiency and productivity gains with the aim of reducing the cost of service delivery;
3. Provide a greater level of communication and interaction between local government and the local community, thereby improving social and community cohesion;
4. Provide a community leadership and economic development role, particularly in regional areas, through facilitation of business networks and services;

5. Provide the ability to work more effectively across levels of government in delivering coordinated 'whole of government' 'joined-up' services at the local level and;

6. Reliable and affordable broadband will give the ability to all residents to conduct e-business with the private sector and governments at each tier (McCaffery, 2011).

We have known for some time of the great potential that broadband can deliver to local governments and their communities. Recognising that there is no one size fits all approach for councils, I now consider the activities of some local government councils and the RDA Committee I lead in their preparations to take maximum advantage of broadband rollout.

3.2 Broadband Today Alliance and Sunshine Coast Council (Queensland)

The Broadband Today Alliance is a consortium currently comprising 105 councils and 35 affiliate organisations from across Australia and which shares information and lessons from the early rollout of NBN. Alliance membership is open to any Australian local government, individual local government officers, other governments and relevant industry organisations, as affiliates. These Councils represent approximately 6.5 million or 1 in 3.5 Australians. The initiative is led by the Sunshine Coast Council as part of its Digital Economy Plan and commenced because the businesses and residents in that locality made it clear to the Council that they could not wait for the NBN rollout to create digital success for the Sunshine Coast region (Whereat, 2011).

The Alliance enables councils to communicate, collaborate, share knowledge, and exchange their local initiatives. It is also building locally developed intellectual property that can be shared and transferred to member localities. The Alliance website provides an excellent information resource and, among its other services, allows councils to become more aware and skilled in the use of applications of broadband and to translate this into digital success (Whereat, 2011).

An 'Answers' page on the Alliance website is a valuable information resource which addresses practically all those questions about broadband that you have encountered. The site explains for example, the technology; download and upload speeds; data security; data centres; how new residents connect to fibre; what the NBN will be used for; what it will deliver in new developments; land developer responsibilities; available training in the broadband industry; speed net testing; and how broadband will assist education and health. It is now clear that the collaborative alliance, which shares information, knowledge and

experience, has a critical mass of members and population and is playing a significant role in guiding and influencing policy on national delivery of NBN.

3.3 City of Ipswich (Qld)

The City is part of the Western Corridor of SEQ, and the fastest growing region in Queensland. It has major projected greenfield residential areas and approximately 61% of the region's premises were unable to access broadband at its highest capacity. There was limited access to competitive fibre backhaul infrastructure and the region had broad areas of existing ADSL black spots (Schultz, 2011). For the past two years Ipswich has been very active in identifying high speed broadband needs. The Council developed an internal NBN business case, prepared a Western Corridor NBN Project proposal and in July 2010 Springfield and Toowoomba were announced as 2nd release NBN sites (Schultz, 2011).

Ipswich Council has provided considerable vital information to NBN Co in relation to the second release rollout areas. Some elements of the NBN fibre network will require Council development approval. Various Council requirements were worked through to ensure they did not cause rollout delays. Ipswich Council provides a global permit for works on road reserves, backs community consultation initiatives and gives support to securing premises owners consent to fibre installation within properties at time of network construction. Ipswich has adopted the catch cry to other councils to 'Put your NBN Co hat on' in terms of providing practical assistance to NBN Co. For example, Ipswich City is providing training and skilling to local business and industry to support NBN and future services. Its Digital Economy Strategy, which sits under its Infocity Plan – the Economic Development Plan for Ipswich City - identifies the next generation services, applications and toolsets that can be enabled by the NBN; how local capacity can be built by digital inclusion; and how to promote increased knowledge sector investment opportunities. Ipswich was the only Australian city selected as a Smart 21 Worldwide Intelligent Community for 2011 (Schultz, 2011).

3.4 Tweed Shire Council (NSW)

Tweed Shire is another narrative of a proactive council which experiences most of the broadband access and black spots issues as did Ipswich Council. Tweed Council has been aggressively using its position as a local government leader to advocate for improved services and to engage with its community and governments to secure better services. Two years ago, with support from the Tweed Economic Development Corporation, Tweed

Council developed a Telecommunications Infrastructure Action Plan to provide direction and advice on how to provide better telecommunications for the Tweed region and to examine the economic benefits that would be derived (Green, 2011).

Some actions identified in the Tweed Plan, and which have gradually been implemented include:

- Preparing policies within Council that support the development of communications precincts.
- Establishing regulatory controls on property developers.
- Establishing policies to develop fibre optic infrastructure to connect Council's branch offices as part of its own consumption requirements.
- Establishing policies to facilitate telecommunications ducting (i.e. pits and pipes) to be included in all future capital works programs.
- Establishing policies to make available volumetric spare capacity of Council owned ducting for use by other parties on commercial terms.
- Preparing a register of Council facilities that service providers can access for use to house telecommunications equipment.

3.5 Clarence Valley Council (NSW)

This Council, on the NSW Northern Rivers, participates in the Northern Rivers Broadband Councils Group and has allocated resources to undertake preliminary mapping and address multiple strategies and coordination across various council departments for the purpose of being NBN-ready (Fairweather, 2011). Council has commenced gathering community and business information and has added the online discussion Forum "Getting Up to Speed" to Clarence Conversations website. The Forum is designed to gauge community understanding of broadband and its benefits, and to quantify present digital services in terms of type, speed, reliability of internet connection, and mobile phone black spots, so that an infrastructure map can be developed to eventually drive NBN uptake (Fairweather, 2011). This site is achieving many hits through emails, texts and tweets. Council is also seeking to learn how the community views the importance of high speed broadband to their homes, workplaces and businesses.

Clarence Valley Council has allocated resources and has been addressing the following tasks:

- Identifying existing and future zoned development areas

- Mapping the location of areas marked for major development and estimated dates for construction
- Zoning and planning controls
- Development consent conditions
- Identifying heritage controls and environmentally sensitive areas
- Developing local policies on telecommunications and digital services infrastructure
- Determining existing Council infrastructure suitable for co-location and combined use of depots
- Powerlines mapping
- Indentifying co-investment opportunities, for example new streetscapes
- Mapping existing telecommunications towers and black spots, effectively using the 'Bang the Table' social media mechanism
- Identifying community facilities and high-end users e.g. health, aged care, education, and the financial and creative industries sectors (Fairweather, 2011).

3.6 Regional Development Australia Northern Rivers (RDANR)

A high priority of the RDA Committee I Chair, in its regional leadership capacity, is the securing of high speed broadband for the benefit of, the 300,000 people who live in the Northern Rivers region of NSW. An early action of the RDA Committee was to participate in what has become known as the Eastern Regional Digital Corridor collaboration, which had the single focus of securing early rollout along the NSW coast from Tweed to Gosford (Regional Futures Institute Southern Cross University, 2010). Southern Cross University and four RDAs continue to collaborate for this purpose. This initiative, known as Go Broadband, is led by the Regional Futures Institute at Southern Cross University, with which the RDA Committee has established a sound working relationship.

RDA Northern Rivers has undertaken practical measures to assist the local councils in the region to prepare themselves and their communities for broadband take-up. For example it has facilitated the Northern Rivers Broadband Councils Group I referred to earlier, and which is a group of all Northern Rivers councils, includes politicians and State and Commonwealth agencies, and is working cooperatively to prepare for the NBN rollout and to improve telecommunications across the region. RDANR is now co-ordinating a regional approach to the implementation of NBN on the Northern Rivers and has oversight of

developing a regional Broadband Action Plan. It is encouraging to observe how energetically and cooperatively the membership of Northern Rivers Broadband Group is functioning.

4. Conclusion

I am regularly questioned about how, in specific terms, the internet and higher speed broadband will bring real, tangible and lasting benefits to local businesses and communities. It is incumbent on the local government sector to take the lead to a greater extent than is now occurring, to capture broadband benefits for communities. For example, the Allen Consulting Group suggests that local governments should be consulting with their communities about the opportunities for greater interaction with customers and service recipients regarding:

1. The ability to sell or market their products online with a greater use of graphics, high-definition video and other multi-media;
2. The potential for tools that enhance person-to-person visual communication to bring groups and individuals together;
3. Profiling for television ads based on specific characteristics of the viewer's own browsing and viewing habits as a new way to market products;
4. Use of Point of View technology to enhance online shopping experiences; and
5. Development of smart phone-like applications and products (Allen Consulting Group, 2011).

An April 2011 study by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (Archer, 2011) examined the impact that broadband technology was having on the information and communications technology capabilities of regional industries. It identified a number of constraints. Reducing the impacts of those constraints will be important. The Corporation's view should be supported that local government ought to be involved in an advocacy role for their communities to lobby for interventions to:

1. Minimise the transaction costs and knowledge barriers involved for business owners in understanding technology options and how they relate to their business situation;
2. Stimulate the development of a local commercial innovation system, driven through engagement by local ICT providers with rural businesses;

3. Quantify productivity gains from commonly used ICT innovations to better estimate the value of broadband connection to rural industry; and

4. Ensure information and applications are integrated with broadband technology use, to support management of matters where there is a significant public good component, (Archer, 2011).

In August 2011, Deloitte Access Economics (2011) noted that 'The direct contribution of the internet to the Australian economy is set to increase by $20 billion over the next five years, from $50 billion to roughly $70 billion'. The former Premier of Tasmania, Hon David Bartlett recently opined that 'The winners of NBN are not those communities cabled first, but those that get prepared with a Digital Economy Strategy to renew their economies and industries so as to create new investment and job opportunities'(Green, 2011).

The NBN rollout is a project which many in local government and their communities now recognise will touch all aspects of our economy and society, and has the potential to allow Australia to become a global leader in terms of capacity and enjoyment of truly high speed carrier grade video, data and voice services (Australian Government Department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy, 2011). It is clear that high speed broadband will make a major difference to the lives, lifestyles and wellbeing of most Australians. There exists in communities an ever heightening expectation of an exciting, more productive knowledge based future. There is no doubt that local government must engage. In many localities the sector is already playing a vital role at the local community coalface level to ensure that the benefits of broadband will be equitably and widely enjoyed.

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