

Comments on DCITA Broadband Connect/Clever Networks:

The Northern Territory has faces major disadvantages in its telecommunications infrastructure. These problems basically come down to two areas.

### **1. Darwin & Alice Springs.**

Darwin and Alice Springs are only serviced by optic fibre capacity supplied by one company (Telstra).

Experience in other parts of the country has shown that when non-traditional telecommunications suppliers enter a market pricing falls dramatically. Such suppliers include specialist carriers, and other non-carrier suppliers like railways and public utility companies.

This lack of competition severely impacts the ability for organisations to obtain effective access to high bandwidth services. This lack will have a major impact on the higher education and research sectors, to the point where many activities will no longer be feasible in the not too distant future. In the case of Charles Darwin University it will diminish our ability to compete nationally looking forward in a 3-5 year timeframe.

AREN funding was effective at getting most universities in Australia access to gigabit or better backbone networks with most deals involving either building new backbones or securing services in the order of 10 years or more. Due to the lack of alternative backbone services in the Territory the NT Research Education Network (NTREN) could only afford a 3 year rental option at 155Mbps with available AREN funding.

Similarly the Alice Springs CCIF build is only useful while the NTREN backhaul is in place. Partners utilising this CCIF network, including the CSIRO and the Desert Knowledge Precinct, will not be able to maintain their long term relevance if the speed and cost of backhaul services aren't improved in line with the rest of Australia.

The lack of backbone competition also affects ISPs ability to deliver services to small and medium customers. As access speeds increase, going from ADSL to ADSL2 and beyond, ISPs rely more and more on high bandwidth backbones. For example, currently there is only one Darwin ISP offering ADSL2 services (and only to people willing to bundle voice), No other ISPs have announced plans to bring ADSL2 to Darwin. ADSL2 is not offered anywhere in the NT outside Darwin (including Alice Springs)

Broadband is a moving target, with connection speeds steadily increasing. Addressing 'black-spots' with an aim to bringing connectivity up to the current standard provides solutions that are not sustainable, providing at best a band-aid. Solutions that are implemented need to address the underlying problems with an eye to enabling services to stay on par with the rest of the country.

## **2. Remote Areas**

The NT has significant problems with poor facilities in remote areas, in particular services delivered to Aboriginal communities. These communities have many real, significant challenges across the board including education, health, employment opportunities and social problems including alcohol and other substance abuse.

The provision of affordable services, particularly health and education can be helped by the provision of adequate telecommunications systems. Technologies like tele-medicine and remote teaching can boost the quality of the services offered.

Broadband can be seen as an enabler, and an important part of a solution to many of the real problems in these communities. While not the fix-all, it has an important part to play. This can be via better delivery of health and education and also by the provision of services to residents. This may be delivering to the houses of the staff who deliver the health, education and other services as well as the general population.

Adequate provision of Broadband services can also increase the employment opportunities in remote areas, as telecommunications can overcome the problems of distance.

For these reasons, governments tend to focus on telecommunications to the remote areas.

### **Conclusion.**

One problem in the NT is that this issue is seen as so important that the real issues covered above about Darwin & Alice Springs are ignored or considered as a lower priority. In truth neither can be neglected if the NT is to achieve parity with the rest of the country.

The NT is at a major disadvantage in terms of broadband facilities. Many of the problems in the NT are unique to the NT, however we feel that there is an opportunity with Connect Australia to address these issues.

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