

Connecting Communities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'The full value of broadband includes outcomes around an educated citizenship, an informed democracy, cultural understanding, community and inclusion, social capital, resilience and trust.'

UK Broadband Stakeholders' Group [Ref. 1]

'Talking to a doctor on screen? Just the same as being in room with them. Better, I felt I had more time with the consultant in Aberdeen than if I'd gone there.'

Tele-health patient [Ref. 2]

'Communities and citizens that lack high speed broadband access are at a deficit in comparison to their peers.'

London School of Economics [Ref. 3]

'We need to make sure that people aren't left behind as more and more services move online.'

David Cameron, UK Prime Minister [Ref. 4]

Citizenship in the era of high speed broadband

1. *Connecting Communities* is an independent review of the impact of broadband on communities in Britain and its implications for Australia. Commissioned by Huawei Australia and undertaken by former UK government advisor Dr Tim Williams, the report is for non-techies by a non-techie. Fast broadband and its impact are too significant to be left to geeks and engineers.
2. The report celebrates what people and communities do with broadband but focuses on two key UK agendas with relevance for Australia.
3. One is digital inclusion. The second is how ever-faster broadband is improving public service outcomes and the relationship between citizens and governments. The report shows the advantages and necessity in the modern world of a national broadband network with sufficient bandwidth. It is about citizenship for all in the digital era as it moves to highspeed broadband.
4. The report identifies significant benefits of ever faster broadband for UK communities:
 - *In health:* tele-health is saving lives now in remote communities in Scotland.
 - *In the care of the elderly:* telecare is now enabling 1.7 millions to stay in their communities, lead independent and sociable lives, making huge savings – and strengthening family cohesion.
 - *In the environment:* tele-conferencing and related home-working are already reducing emissions and congestion – and supporting greater community involvement.
 - *In education:* results improved by two grades and hard to reach kids got switched on – especially if they

had access to devices at home and school. Education is being transformed.

- *Older, disabled, the isolated*: all report improved well being from tele-care and greater connectivity, speaking to long-lost friends and family on Skype, getting involved in communities on-line.
- *Public service efficiencies*: the digitisation of X rays is saving money and lives; in Wales 22 local authorities and all public services are sharing one network, saving millions, improving quality; NHC Choices, a Facebook for health advice got 20 million hits in the severe 2010 winter, saving the NHS £44 million; a whole education service has enabled parents to apply for schoolplaces online, reducing costs, and disagreements.
- *Public servants and politicians*: are having to be more responsive, more immediately because of the instantaneous interactivity of fast broadband – and this is empowering people (and different kinds of people) too busy, too private or too remote to go to face to face meetings.

The report concludes that as bandwidth and speed increase such benefits will also increase.

UK Political Consensus

5. These benefits bring political consensus in the UK – the most active on-line population in Europe – in support of ‘superfast broadband’. Communities without it – particularly in remote areas – are vigorously campaigning for it to come faster. They don’t wish to be left behind.
6. The new government wants to complete the UK ‘superfast’ broadband network faster than planned as one of its ‘top priorities’. Previously two thirds of the UK population were to access broadband speeds at home of 50+ megabites per second (Mbps) by 2014.
7. The government is working with campaigning communities and companies like BT to reach that ‘final third’ quicker. It sees in local campaigns an example of its ‘Big Society’ where communities take more responsibility to solve problems – and it sees superfast broadband as strengthening those communities. It’s not hard to see why.
8. However, ten million Brits are not online. The report highlights efforts to ‘digitally include’ those experiencing

multiple deprivation, lacking skills or confidence to explore new media or living in remote locations.

Digital divides and future public services

9. This digital divide raises urgent questions about how public services, which in England already provide 90% of services online and which government wants to become ‘**digital by default**’, are able to engage and serve citizens equally. In the end fast broadband isn’t about technology, pipes in the dirt, downloading Spotify or dating online. It’s about citizenship in the networked nation.
10. Too much of the broadband debate has been on costs per metre and lengths of fibre when the real goal must be *use by people*. The report agrees with academics from Queensland University of Technology that ‘*a pre requisite for inclusion is access but the use and exploitation of networks also requires specific skills, literacies, information and knowledge*’. The building of a ‘network’ is essential but the real prize is a networked society. That requires a national commitment to digital inclusion.

Implications and recommendations for Australia: ensuring a bigger legacy

11. This moment of fast broadband is transformational for Australia, with more far reaching potential for reducing the ‘tyranny of distance’ geographically and socially than the UK. The report suggests that if the investment is significant so is the return, for the nation and not just Treasury, for people not just plumbing. The dangers of a divided society with differential access to modern public services *and* bandwidth needs to be avoided.
12. The great news for Australia? The lesson and warning from Britain is that you cannot build a networked society without a national broadband network of sufficient bandwidth. Australia’s building one.
13. Further good news: the many digital inclusion initiatives underway throughout Australia, and community activity on which to build, remains stronger here than in Britain. But some are facing acute challenges in indigenous communities and others.

The challenge is one of focus and coordination – and enthusing the nation as a whole about the possibilities as well as the necessity of fast broadband.

Recommendations include:

- **Establish a formal national survey** into current patterns of broadband use by individuals and diverse communities
- **Appointment of a National Digital Champion** by government – a distinguished lay enthusiast drawn from outside politics and the industry to help galvanise enthusiasm
- **A network of local and sector digital champions**
- **Set a target for all to be digitally literate by 2020 and establish the duty to draw up a digital participation plan** by all public service providers
- **Legislate so that the regulator ACMA (the Australian Communications and Media Authority) has a duty to promote digital inclusion**
- **All public agencies to review how new broadband capacity can transform the design and delivery of services** and the process of engagement
- **National and state summits of third sector organisations to share best-practice** and agree on plans of action for digital inclusion
- **A national annual digital participation week** with national awards
- **Concession Passes for over 65s**
- Establish a **national helpline to support those that are having difficulty accessing the internet**
- Facilitate a **volunteering program** so that young people and other volunteers can “buddy-up” with the elderly online
- **Government to commit to open source principles** and sharing data