

Submission 039

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KIAMA MUNICIPAL COUNCIL
your council, your community

Submission to the New Inquiry into the National Broadband Network

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Kiama Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the examination of the capacity of the National Broadband Network (NBN) to contribute to the delivery of government services and programs.

Council believes that the bandwidth and speeds provided through the NBN will have a dramatic impact on the way government does business in the future. Many operational services currently requiring face to face interaction will in future be available on line.

Council feels that this operational change will naturally occur over time. In this submission Council wishes to focus on what it sees as a quantum leap in the way in which councils (and other levels of government) might inform and engage with their communities.

Need

A key role of local government is to communicate, engage and inform the community. Kiama Council and we suspect all Councils have difficulty engaging the entire demographic, in particular:

Youth – 16 to 24 year olds are difficult to engage on a representative scale. The NBN provides for improved engagement through on line school based delivery; video creation competitions; inviting youth to submit video on issues and topics of interest to them; extension of youth centre activities, online youth news and forums.

24 to 36 year olds. Single people and working couples in this age group, often with young children, after school activities and generally busy lives are hard to engage. The NBN will allow targeted online engagement with a group who do not generally access “town hall” meetings, surveys or other traditional methods of engagement.

Indigenous residents – are generally not represented at wider community or access meetings. There is also a reluctance to interact within the ‘formal’ Council meeting or committee structure. Properly supported, indigenous communities could access a new and more relaxed method of engaging with Councils.

Residents with mobility issues such as the frail, aged or infirmed or those living in remote areas or just those people with transport limitations – provide both access to Council meetings, information and services such as the library ‘Storytime’ and the ability to provide feedback and upload questions and issues of concern.

Absentee landowners – Kiama, like many coastal LGAs, has a relatively large number of absentee landowners, many residing in Sydney. The NBN provides the potential for greatly enhanced two way engagement for these ratepayers.

Council Officers – currently those residents seeking to discuss more complicated issues such as planning are required to come to Council’s administration centre to meet with Council Officers. The NBN provides for on-line real-time meeting opportunities for all customers.

Opportunity

Communication

Councils have a broad mandate to engage in ongoing communication with their communities. Currently, this communication is generally focused on written information, whether it be delivered via mail, via newspaper publication, or through flyers and other documents picked up by ratepayers when they interact with Council (such as at the library) or increasingly from websites in pdf format.

The reality is, however, that audio-visual communication is much more effective in getting a message across to people. Unfortunately, until now the only option for Councils to communicate with their constituents in this way has been via television, which is either expensive (advertising) or where the delivery of the message is outside the Council's control (public relations).

The NBN provides an opportunity for Councils to engage with a wide variety of stakeholders using online video and streaming. This form of engagement would utilise the higher bandwidth of the NBN in both a downstream format for viewing recorded video and live streams and in an upstream direction for live event participation (interactive, non-video) as well as uploading video content and/or questions in a similar format to that which has proven so successful with the ABC's Q&A program. In effect it makes it possible for Councils to deliver their own platform for video communication, not unlike a television station, but on-demand and for a much lower capital cost. Through short, professionally developed and produced video content, and thanks to the download speeds afforded by the NBN, Councils could open up a new platform and channel of communication to their constituents and further, encourage and invite feedback from those constituents in an interactive format.

Consultation

Another key responsibility for local government is that of community consultation. The consultative processes of Councils are often centred around public exhibitions of plans and community meetings. However, these forums have limited effectiveness in engaging the many busy or absent residents of the LGA (such as people who commute to work outside the region, or those who have "holiday homes" in the area).

Through the use of video and interactive mechanisms supported by the NBN, Councils could work to deliver more equitable access and an engaging environment for community consultation, using digital channels to augment the traditional media.

In practical terms, this could mean videotaping and making available for online viewing the existing community meetings, or could involve producing videos that help to inform the community on issues such as significant planning or infrastructure proposals. From a community participation standpoint, the ability for people to combine inexpensive and now much more accessible video recording equipment – from mobile phones to inexpensive digital cameras – with the high speed NBN connections will allow people to upload video content for use in public debate, moderated and delivered through a public platform, as well as the ability for groups, particularly schools and other community groups, to produce their own, higher quality and community focused content, which would then be distributed through the Council's systems.

Technology

The technology to support the implementation of the above concept via the NBN is readily available. Utilising proprietary third party platforms and commercial cloud based products will negate the need for individual councils to invest in expensive servers or hosting infrastructure. Such a system is readily replicable and cost effective for individual councils.

Attached is a Kiama Council advertisement promoting upcoming Building and Development Workshop / Information Sessions. In the future by utilising the above concepts, the NBN could provide for:

- Live streaming of one or all sessions allowing remote viewing along with the ability to interact in real time by submitting questions / comments for consideration of the meeting as occurs during the ABC television Q&A program.
- Recording of the workshop or perhaps the “Information Component” and making this available for viewing at any time in a Council maintained “You Tube” environment.
- The potential for people not present at the meeting to upload pre-recorded or live video of issues / examples pertinent to the session.
- Potential cost savings by reducing the number of face to face sessions in recognition that a proportion of residents would participate via the methods outlined above.