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13<sup>th</sup> September 2020

Joint Parliamentary Standing Committee on the NBN  
Attention: Committee Secretariat  
P O Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Sent by email to: [nbn.joint@aph.gov.au](mailto:nbn.joint@aph.gov.au)

Dear Committee Members,

## **Submission to the Joint Parliamentary Standing Committee on the NBN by TelSoc**

This submission responds to the Committee's enquiry into various aspects of the NBN rollout and its call for further submissions by 15<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

TelSoc made a submission to the Committee in January this year and accepted an invitation by the Committee to appear before it, remotely, on 14<sup>th</sup> August. We thank the Committee for extending that invitation to engage on the important issues associated with the NBN.

### **TelSoc – who we are**

Once again, by way of reminder, TelSoc is the operating name of the Telecommunications Association Inc., a voluntary membership-based association of interested individuals who seek to discuss, research and advance issues associated with telecommunications and the digital economy. TelSoc and its predecessor organisations have operated in this field since 1874 (initially as the Telegraph Electrical Society). Many of our individual members were or are professionals working in the sector, including those with academic, research and operational interests that concern the sector.

TelSoc seeks engagement with policy makers and other stakeholders on telecommunications issues via its quarterly publication, the *Journal of Telecommunications and the Digital Economy*, and through various forums and other events that it organises. The *Journal* and its predecessors have been published continuously since 1935, initially in print and now online (<http://telsoc.org/journal>).

### **TelSoc's overall approach to NBN issues**

TelSoc is making this further submission to reinforce the key messages that we would hope that the Committee is able to adopt and to include in its reports.

TelSoc has no commercial interests in the telecommunications sector. Consequently, on issues associated with the NBN, TelSoc's interests are solely to ensure that policy frameworks are well considered, based on deep understanding of the issues, and produce outcomes that advance Australia's longer term social and economic needs. In that respect, we believe TelSoc's interests and goals align with those of the Committee.

Over many years, TelSoc and its predecessor organisations have promoted discussion and research into broadband themes through the *Journal*, supplemented by events programs.



More recently, a more focussed and directed initiative has been adopted by TelSoc – which it calls the NBN Futures project – to develop and concentrate attention on key issues as the NBN initial rollout draws to a conclusion and the Government is considering the future of NBN Co and the NBN.

The initial focus was on the future ownership options for the NBN but this has led to wider consideration of what objectives should be set for the continuing NBN (whether in public or private hands) and how they could best be achieved. A timeframe of the order of 10 years has been adopted to encourage a longer-term perspective.

Attached is an updated description of the NBN Futures project, and of the key issues that we have identified for further research and assessment to date. In recent months the project has explored a number of issues including:

- The way forward for the NBN and for national broadband development, including the use of 5G technologies, particular over a longer-term horizon. The need to develop and articulate a national strategy for the next 5 to 10 years is paramount, especially now that NBN Co has completed its initial network rollout.
- Specific social and economic issues such as telehealth and digital inclusion. A successful electronic forum was conducted on these issues with expert speakers on 18<sup>th</sup> August.

Also attached is our description of the outcomes of the NBN Futures project that we are planning to complete by the end of 2020.

At this stage we are able to summarise some of our key conclusions for the Committee as follows:

1. NBN Co is not in a position where it is ready for sale and, indeed, sale of the business should be taken off the agenda for the company at least for the next five years, and likely longer, pending the development of a comprehensive national broadband strategy that includes NBN Co and its future role as a major consideration.
2. The NBN is a substantial and long-term national infrastructure project and its future development needs to be guided by an equally substantial and long-term plan based on meeting national broadband objectives.
3. We need a bipartisan approach to the NBN to provide the focus and continuity that is needed to develop from our current position following the completion of the major initial rollout.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss further the important issues associated with NBN with the Committee and to share with the Committee the outcomes of our work during 2020, either at the end of the year or early in 2021.

Yours sincerely,

**Tim Herring**

TelSoc Executive Director

Attachment: NBN Futures Project – Planned Outcomes

## The NBN Futures Project and its Planned Outcomes

### A. The NBN Futures Project

The NBN Futures Project began as an idea put forward at the TelSoc Journal's Editorial Board (the *Journal of Telecommunications and the Digital Economy*) in February 2019: that the options for the future ownership and enhancement of the National Broadband Network should be researched and debated in a systematic way, through public lectures and policy articles published in the Journal.

It was decided to develop, by the end of 2020 for publication by early 2021, some well supported policy options that might influence both of the major political parties in future. Best endeavours are being made to seek bipartisan support for the project's recommendations.

To help develop these ideas it was decided to hold a series of public policy forums, under the TelSoc banner, and to transform as many of the presentations as possible into papers of record, published in the TelSoc journal (the *Journal of Telecommunications and the Digital Economy*). The Project Team also made a submission in January to the federal Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on the NBN, to alert relevant political advisors to the existence and potential of this project.

**The first NBN Futures public forum**, held at RMIT University on 31 July 2019, concentrated on examining the options for eventual ownership of the completed NBN. Chaired by John Burke, it included presentations by Peter Gerrand, Jim Holmes, Graeme Samuel AC and Michael Cosgrave (ACCC). [Here is an overview](#) of that Forum.

**The second NBN Futures public forum**, held at RMIT on 22 October 2019, focussed on realising the user potential of the NBN. It featured presentations by Teresa Corbin (CEO, ACCAN), Chris Wilson (on the Australian Digital Inclusion Index) and Murray Milner (on the New Zealand broadband market experience). Once again, there is [an overview](#).

**The third NBN Futures public forum**, '[Learning from International Experience](#)', was held on 25 February 2020, again at RMIT, featuring Richard Ferrers (on international league tables) and Murray Milner (on lessons from the successful New Zealand Ultra Fast Broadband program), with discussion from Jim Holmes (Incyte Consulting). An overview is available in the [Journal](#).

**The fourth NBN Futures public forum**: 'Social and Economic Considerations: Telehealth and Digital Inclusion', was held on 18 August 2020 by videoconference. The speakers were Professor Anthony Smith (from the University of Queensland Telehealth Centre), Professor Peter Brooks (from Northern Health, Victoria) and Ms Ishtar Vij, coordinator of the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance.

**Project Membership**: Active members of the NBN Futures Group, in alphabetical order, have been: Emeritus Professor Trevor Barr, John Burke (convenor), Dr Leith Campbell, John Costa, Dr Richard Ferrers, Professor Peter Gerrand, Andrew Hamilton, Peter Hitchiner, Tim Herring, Dr Jim Holmes, Allan Horsley, Dr Murray Milner and Dr Craig Watkins. <https://telsoc.org/blog/nbn-futures-project>

## **B. Planned Outcomes by End of 2020**

### **1. Audience for our work**

- The primary audiences are
  - the Commonwealth Government and the Commonwealth Parliament, where responsibility resides for communications services, national social welfare and the national economy and therefore for developing appropriate plans for establishing policy settings and for delivering outcomes via broadband; and
  - NBN Co, which has substantial discretion in implementation and interpretation of any Plan, a situation that is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.
- The secondary audience comprises all stakeholders and influencers of national policy and outcomes for broadband services and infrastructure, including other service providers, media and the general public.
- We seek to engage with the widest audience possible, which means understanding the various issues and interests involved as well as sharing our research and perspectives.

### **2. Format of Deliverable**

- The deliverable will be a manageable and short briefing pack
- Supported by more evidence in supplementary in-depth documents
- Tone will be inclusive and couched to seek and maximise bipartisan support.

### **3. Overview of Deliverable**

- We will prepare key planning inputs to inform and support a long-term national broadband strategy incorporating a rolling development plan for NBN, covering at least 10 years
- We will emphasise that the NBN is critical long-term infrastructure and recognise that for the next period NBN Co and its effectiveness will be central achieving national broadband strategic goals
- We will propose plans and pathways for the long term
- Our planning inputs will be as concrete as possible, will seek to achieve defined social and economic objectives, will be as rigorous as possible, and will encourage bipartisan support
- The Strategy must be resilient and adaptable, informed by rigorous technical, economic and social research
- The role of the Commonwealth Government and Parliament in providing leadership is critical, but leadership is needed at other levels as well.

### **4. Proposed Supporting Documents and Papers**

- Vision and Objectives for the NBN including –
  - Broad role in supporting Australia's digital society and digital economy
  - Technical performance and service quality goals over the next 10 years
  - A statement of expectations for Australian Broadband in 2030
- Social and economic benefits of national broadband networks
- Technical upgrade pathways, including consideration of new technologies such as –
  - New fixed access network technologies
  - 5G (both in relation to mobile services and more generally)
  - Satellites, both Geostationary and LEOs
- Financial considerations
- Ownership options

At the initial forum in July 2019 a number of ownership options were considered:

- Remaining in public ownership
- Merger with another entity, such as Telstra's backhaul network operation, InfraCo
- Sale in the near to medium term

There are other options, as well as permutations.

**5. Timing**

- We have nominally set the end of 2020 as a target time for public dissemination of the deliverables.
- This means in effect public release in February 2021.

**6. What might be left to 2021 and beyond**

The work of the NBN Futures Group will continue into 2021 and beyond, and will adapt to reflect the evolution of specific issues on which the NBN Futures Group considers that it can make a difference and add value. These issues are likely to include technology futures and also more systematic and coordinated arrangements for the study of social and economic benefits of broadband.