



21 January 2016

The Hon Bronwyn Bishop MP  
Chairman  
House of Representatives Standing Committee  
Communications and the Arts  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Bishop

**LGAQ submission to the Inquiry into Broadcasting, Online Content and Live Production to Rural and Regional Australia**

The Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) welcomes the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts' inquiry into broadcasting, online content and live production to rural and regional Australia and appreciates the opportunity to make a submission.

The LGAQ is the peak body for local government in Queensland. It is a not-for-profit association set up solely to service councils and their individual needs. The LGAQ has been advising, supporting and representing local councils since 1896, allowing them to improve their operations and strengthen relationships with their communities. The LGAQ does this by connecting councils to people and places that count; supporting their drive to innovate and improve service delivery through smart services and sustainable solutions; and delivering them the means to achieve community, professional and political excellence.

As members of the Committee would no doubt be aware, Queensland is a highly decentralised state. 66 out of the 77 local governments in Queensland are located outside the south-east corner of the state. 33% of the state's population live outside south-east Queensland. The *Queensland Plan*, a 30-year vision for the state released in July 2014, includes a target to double Queensland's regional population.

Ensuring that people in rural and regional areas have good access to television and radio broadcasts, online content and live productions is, therefore, a matter of vital importance to Queensland communities. Three (3) issues of particular significance to rural and regional communities in Queensland are:

1. Provision of telecommunications infrastructure;
2. Adequate resourcing of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)'s services to regional Australia; and
3. Ongoing support for community and regional arts initiatives.

**1. Telecommunications infrastructure for rural and remote areas**

Robust and scalable telecommunication networks are critical pieces of infrastructure for entry to the digital economy and access to online content. Because of the large distance and small town centres, it is not commercially viable for the private sector to invest in rural and remote communities. Once the backbone network is built, it can then facilitate an evolving range of access technologies such as mobile phone base stations and exchange upgrades.

Investing in telecommunications infrastructure in rural and remote communities is vital to enable participation in the digital economy. Poor infrastructure is restricting access to new services, processes and a quality of life that is the norm for many communities in every other part of Australia. For example, Barcoo and Diamantina shires have been lobbying for more than 15 years to have funding to build optic fibre backhaul to their communities.

While it was pleasing to see that the two councils were successful in obtaining a funding contribution to the project through the most recent round of the National Stronger Regions Fund, the need remains for greater





recognition on the part of governments that telecommunications is an enabler of prosperity and economic growth, particularly for people in rural and regional areas, and that appropriate funding solutions must be provided in response to the connectivity and broadband speed problems experienced by people in remote and rural areas.

## **2. ABC services to regional Australia**

Queensland local governments are growing increasingly concerned about the ABC's ability to maintain its services to regional Australia. At the LGAQ Annual Conference held in Toowoomba in October 2015, councils passed a resolution that the LGAQ "call on the Federal Government to urgently review its planned funding cuts to the ABC and ensure the national broadcaster is adequately resourced so that it can retain its services to regional Australia". An identical resolution was passed at the Australian Local Government Association National General Assembly in Canberra in June 2015.

Rural and regional Australia rely on ABC services, not only to receive information but to have a voice on local issues of national significance such as drought, coal seam gas, fly-in fly-out challenges etc.

In many parts of regional and remote Australia, the ABC is the only broadcaster. Removing the local content and flavour of ABC services will serve to further isolate regional communities.

All Australians should have access to a local broadcaster that can keep them up-to-date on local issues and provide them with a voice. Having access to a locally based ABC service enables citizens to stay informed and fully participate in community life.

Another vital function of the ABC in rural and regional Australia is its role as an emergency broadcaster during natural disasters. Natural disasters in Queensland have had a significant impact in recent years with more than \$5.4 billion of local government assets requiring reinstatement between 2008-09 and 2013-14. The impact of course is not limited to local government assets but the flow on effect to agricultural production, mining, tourism and other industries. While the ABC has done an exemplary job fulfilling the emergency broadcaster role in recent years, further funding cuts or reallocations may have an impact on its ability to inform the community during times of disaster. Regional communities need to be re-assured that this essential service will not be affected by funding cuts.

In the 2014 Federal Budget, ABC and SBS funding was reduced by \$308 million over five (5) years (ABC \$254 million and SBS \$53.7 million). For the ABC this means it will receive \$5.22 billion over five (5) years rather than \$5.47 billion, a reduction of \$254 million or 4.6%. The funding cuts were made in response to the ABC and SBS Efficiency Study which concluded that the national broadcasters could realise substantial savings by making changes to back office functions and without reducing programming.

The LGAQ's representations with both the ABC and the Government have confirmed the disconnect between the positions of the two that had already been evident from public statements. The Government contends that the funding cuts need not lead to service changes and that decisions regarding which efficiencies would be implemented and when were matters for the ABC Board. The ABC, on the other hand, claims it will seek to protect content wherever possible but that there are clear examples in the Efficiency Study which would impact on the kinds of content the ABC can make and offer. The LGAQ fears that the ABC's regional services will suffer as a result of the 'buck passing' between the ABC and the Government.

Already this year, \$50 million worth of cuts to the ABC has seen the broadcaster close its Gladstone office and relocate its regional journalist to Rockhampton. There is now no local presence in and around Gladstone, an area undergoing major change and requiring a local voice.

The LGAQ supports calls to amend the ABC Charter contained in section 6 of the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983* to strengthen the ABC's mandate for the delivery of services to rural and regional Australia. This would highlight the Government's responsibility to provide adequate funding in support of the ABC's essential public service function for services in rural and regional Australia.

The LGAQ hopes this inquiry, combined with the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee's inquiry into the ABC Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015, will ensure that funding for the ABC's services to regional Australia is placed on a more certain footing.





Finally, it is worth mentioning that Queensland local governments make their own financial contributions to bringing broadcasting services to rural and remote communities, as providers of last resort. A survey conducted by the LGAQ in early 2015 revealed the 44 Queensland councils that responded to the survey spend around \$26 million annually on services traditionally provided by other spheres of government. This includes \$1.5 million annually on communication related services such as TV and radio rebroadcasting.

### **3. Community and regional arts initiatives**

The vital contribution of arts and culture to nurturing community well-being and building community resilience is well known.

Local government investment in arts and cultural infrastructure, programs and services at the local level is integral to building community cohesion, wellbeing and resilience; creating attractive places to live, work and visit; highlighting the creative talent, natural assets and unique cultures that exist in local communities; and strengthening the economic direction of Australia's diverse communities. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates local government expenditure on culture is \$1.3 billion across Australia.

The Australian, state, territory and local governments should continue to work together to support Australia's artists, creators, cultural institutions and creative industries to ensure Australians have access to our rich and diverse creative culture wherever they live. Frameworks such as the National Arts and Culture Accord can harness the respective roles and responsibilities of the Australian, state, territory and local governments to facilitate greater cooperation and affirm the centrality of the arts and culture to government policy and the contribution they make to community wellbeing.

Recognising that state and local government have shared and overlapping jurisdictions, the LGAQ supports the Accord and seeks to work collaboratively to achieve the most effective and efficient outcomes for Queensland communities.

At the state level, the LGAQ and Queensland Government signed a *Protocol between State and Local Government in Relation to Arts and Culture in Queensland* in 2014 and work together, through the Local Government Arts and Culture Reference Group, to monitor the outcomes and impact of the Protocol.

In terms of national funding for arts and culture, Queensland receives a disproportionate level of funding from the Australia Council for the Arts (\$17.6 million out of \$191.5 million in 2014-15, or approximately 9% of funding for 20% of the population). It would be beneficial if funding models were structured to ensure that population-based funding, alongside needs-based funding is offered.

It is important that the national cultural policy maintains a strong role for regional arts and a vision for arts and culture in rural and remote areas. Diversity is vital to the health of Australia's arts and cultural ecosystem, and support for the high arts and major performing arts companies must be balanced with ongoing support for community-developed arts and individual creative practitioners. Important community and regional arts initiatives that currently exist should continue to be funded and a focus maintained on the valuable role that the arts play in community development and social wellbeing.

If you wish to discuss the matters raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact Stephan Bohnen, Principal Advisor – Intergovernmental Relations, at

Yours sincerely

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GENERAL MANAGER - ADVOCACY