**HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE
ON INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNICATIONS**

Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government

QUESTION 1

Have any of the Regional Development Australia (RDA) committees conducted large scale, statistically valid surveys to support improved information technology access as a priority listed in their plans?

GOVERNMENT POSITION

- Regional Development Australia (RDA) committees use a number of processes to assist in the development of their Regional Plans and Roadmaps, particularly in identifying regional issues and priorities. These include statistical surveys of stakeholders, economic, industry and demographical analysis, as well as conducting issues-based research, community workshops, interviews and focus groups. The RDA committees also rely on relevant available data sets, for example as provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and other local and regional plans. The specific processes undertaken by each of the RDA committees was not provided to the Department.

QUESTION 2

How many of the department's employees are based in Canberra vis-a-vis the rest of Australia and particularly regional Australia?

GOVERNMENT POSITION

- More than one third of the Department is located outside of Canberra. As at 9 May 2011, there were 483 employees of the Department, of which 310, or 64 per cent, were located in Canberra. The remaining 36 per cent of employees are mainly located at Christmas Island, as well as at Cocos Island, Perth, Bendigo, Orange, Newcastle, Townsville, Jervis Bay, Wollongong, Norfolk Island, Darwin and Hobart.

QUESTION 3

1. What access do the Indian Ocean Territories have to telecommunications and satellite?

2. There is a far from perfect phone network on the Cocos Keeling Islands. Do they have any internet coverage there through that service?

3. In terms of government facilities, though, I do note that some of them were using separate satellite links. Is that something you can tell us more about or are they all through the existing satellite service that is used by the majority of the people on Christmas Island? (provide details on how the other departments on Christmas Island are communicating).

GOVERNMENT POSITION

1) Mobile phone access is available in the Indian Ocean Territories however coverage and mobile phone features can be limited, when compared to mainland Australia. A local digital mobile phone network is operated on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands by a not-for-profit community

organisation, Christmas Island Internet Administration Ltd (CIIA). Access to this service is via registration with CIIA. It is possible to hire mobile phones locally.

Christmas Island mobile phone coverage uses a GSM service, specifically providing voice and SMS capability under the Telstra network. It is accessible with a Telstra handset or the use of international roaming. There is limited capacity for Blackberry devices to be used on the existing network. The Indian Ocean Territories are not currently able to receive 3G capabilities.

The internet in the Indian Ocean Territories is primarily accessed via satellite through a local internet service provider (ISP). The remote location, topography, population dispersal and small subscriber base provide technical, logistical and commercial challenges which increase costs of service delivery in the Indian Ocean Territories. This includes the cost of accessing satellites, which is considerably higher than equivalent services on mainland Australia. Satellite connections can experience transmission delays, or latency, which impact on the response time for internet and limits functionality. Increasing speed of wireless links or increasing bandwidth will not decrease latency.

2) The internet is delivered via satellite to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and is accessed through a wireless system from CIIA. Dial-up services are also available using the Telstra telephone network. The local mobile phone network is a separate service.

3) Some government agencies and larger organisations use other services for internet access as the capacity offered by CIIA is not sufficient to meet their needs or they have other contractual obligations. The Australian Government has sponsored upgrades to consolidate and improve communications on Christmas Island for Australian Government offices. The 'Christmas Island Whole of Government ICT Consolidation Project' is being managed by the Attorney-General's Department and is scheduled to be completed by mid 2013. It is likely that efficiencies achieved through this project will reduce occasional congestion through the local CIIA service.

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