



**Submission to the House Standing Committee on
Infrastructure and Communications**

Inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network

Prepared by the Inspire Foundation

Inspire Foundation
PO Box 1790
Rozelle NSW 2039
T. +61 2 8585 9300
F. +61 2 8585 9349
E. info@inspire.org.au
www.inspire.org.au

March, 2011

1 Introduction

The Inspire Foundation is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the House Standing Committee on infrastructure and communications' **Inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network**. We welcome this investigation, as we believe that the National Broadband Network (NBN) will create an infrastructure that has the potential to make a significant contribution to improved service delivery for promoting mental health and wellbeing among young Australians across geographical and social boundaries.

The Inspire Foundation is a national non-profit mental health organisation with the mission to help young people lead happier lives. Established in 1996 in direct response to Australia's then escalating rates of youth suicide, we were the first organisation in Australia to utilise the internet to deliver a mental health service. Our flagship program, **ReachOut.com**, is a proven, effective, early intervention service targeting young people aged 14-25.

Young people are at the centre of all Inspire does — as partners in the development and delivery of all our work. Our programs utilise young people's preferred medium — the Internet and related technologies — to reach young people, build trusted social brands that are part of their landscape, and target the factors that are known to positively impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Inspire's work is evidence-based and underpinned by research and evaluation, conducted in partnership with leading academic institutions and research centres.

In 2008 Inspire co-founded the Technology and Wellbeing Roundtable, an alliance of industry, research, non-profit and government organisations that view technology as an enabler of children and young people. The Roundtable is convened to promote to all sectors of the community the positive impact that technology can have on the lives of children and young people. The Inspire Foundation is also a member of the Safer Internet Group, which brings together Australia's leading sponsors of research, outreach and online safety campaigns to develop the Internet as a platform for education, communication and economic activity.

In addition, the Inspire Foundation last year led a successful bid to establish the Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing ('the CRC'), which includes a multidisciplinary team of academic partners including Orygen Youth Health Research Centre (Professor Pat McGorry and Professor Helen Herrman), Brain and Mind Research Institute (Professor Ian Hickie), and Australian National University (Professor Helen Christensen). International partners include the Inspire USA Foundation (Dr Susan Keys) who currently work with Johns Hopkins University (Professor Phil Leaf)¹.

The CRC research program is underpinned by a belief in the strengths and capacity of young people. The program acknowledges the importance of conducting empirical research but also has a broader mandate to translate already existing knowledge and new research into easily accessible products, services and policy that will benefit young people. The CRC is driven by young people, academics, youth organisations and services, business and government who share the vision for a society that embraces the potential of technology to connect communities and enable all young Australians to grow up safe, happy, healthy and resilient. The research program develops an International framework that explores the potential of technologies, the

¹ The CRC is worth \$100 million over five years, \$27 million of which has been contributed by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research. The CRC will launch in July 2011.

role it plays in the lives of young people and how its potential can be harnessed to address many of the major social challenges facing young people.

The information and recommendations presented in this submission have been developed as a result of Inspire's extensive experience working with young people and sector partners to deliver effective technology-based programs aimed at improving young people's mental health and wellbeing. Our research and experience in implementing Inspire's youth participation model means that the organisation has a unique contribution to make to this Inquiry in relation to the ways in which the NBN can be leveraged in the health and education sectors to deliver improved mental health outcomes for young people.

2 Achieving better mental health outcomes for young Australians

Technology has the power to transform the health and human services industry and address critical social challenges facing Australian society.

In Australia mental health disorders are the leading cause of disability among young people. The research shows that whilst one in four young people aged 16 to 24 experiences a mental disorder, 70% of those same young people are unable or unwilling to receive clinical care - a problem that is compounded in the case of young men and those living in rural and remote areas of Australia. Left untreated, mental health problems worsen, impacting significantly on the quality of a young person's life including their relationships with family and friends, and their eventual educational and vocational achievement. In 2009 mental illness cost Australia \$10.6 billion in lost productivity, underemployment, absenteeism, welfare payments, health care expenditure and carer costs.

Internet-based services are comparatively inexpensive, with the cost of e-mental health delivery up to 50 times more cost effective for governments than traditional mental health services. Furthermore, such online services are capable of handling very high volumes, and have been shown to be highly effective in engaging and empowering marginalised and traditionally 'hard to reach' groups by overcoming the geographical, logistical and even psychosocial barriers that may otherwise inhibit such groups from accessing offline health promotion programs or health care providers. Our experience with ReachOut.com is a case in point – close to 400 000 young people use the service each year (32.1% of whom live in rural and regional Australia), at a cost of just \$11.50 per young person per year.

With speeds of 100 megabits per second, the National Broadband Network presents the opportunity for existing online mental health programs such as ReachOut.com to deliver direct to people's homes the kind of interactive, high-speed, media-rich services that today we can only imagine. In this way, online services may be able to expand to include such features as:

- online therapy interventions and 'virtual' life training delivered via video;
- online high definition group therapy sessions linking people from anywhere in Australia;
- localised digital education campaigns; and
- a high level of personalised service, integrated across other technology platforms.

With our work to date demonstrating that online interventions form an essential first-line treatment/early intervention service for many Australians who currently miss out on effective care, such improvements have the potential to improve the reach and quality of such services, and thus make an appreciable positive impact on the overall health and wellbeing of Australia's population.

The National Broadband Network also presents opportunities for improved collaboration and data sharing between mental health providers, contributing to greater efficiency and effectiveness. As an example, one of the key program deliverables in the CRC will be the establishment of an online DataLab, containing the first consolidated Australian data on young people's technology use, to be made available to policy-makers, researchers and the community.

3 Improving teacher training to contribute to better mental health outcomes

Technology has the power to transform the professional development provided to teachers, thereby improving their mental health competencies.

Recognising that young people spend a significant proportion of their lives at school, and cognisant of the potential of schools to be an important setting for mental health promotion, Inspire has developed and continues to deliver the ReachOut Teachers Network (<http://teachers.reachoutpro.com.au>).

This service provides teachers with free access to professional development activities and teaching resources on youth mental health and a range of other issues that may impact on the wellbeing of young people, including alcohol and drugs, sexuality and cyberbullying. The online resources have been developed to enhance the effectiveness of mental health promotion and education programs that are delivered in school settings. The program delivery model of the ReachOut Teachers Network is primarily online as we know that online delivery creates greater levels of accessibility for teachers, particularly those based in regional and remote locations or in schools where relief teachers are difficult to source.

The National Broadband Network has the capacity to further enhance levels of accessibility to resources and online training for teachers. Levels of connectivity and bandwidth are inconsistent across the country currently. Regional and remote schools are often the schools with the most unreliable connections, yet it is these teachers that are most in need of accessing online resources and training due to their distance from key centres where professional development workshops are traditionally delivered. Our most recent ReachOut Teachers Network User Profiling Survey (February 2009) indicated that 9 out of 10 respondents would access professional development activities that were delivered online.

Online delivery of teacher training allows anytime, anywhere access to training. Teachers traditionally have been required to take time out of school, causing disruptions to the routine running of the school in order to access professional development activities. For teachers in rural, regional and remote schools, disruptions were even greater due to the travel time required to get to the major centres where the PD activities were being delivered. There are also significant costs incurred by schools and school sectors to run face-to-face workshops and pay for relief staff to cover the classes of attending teachers. The National Broadband

Network provides a cost effective and highly accessible alternative to traditional face-to-face workshops. The ability for synchronous video chat across high-speed connections improves the quality of the workshop through greater levels of interactivity amongst participants and the workshop facilitator. This is only possible with high-speed broadband.

High-speed internet connections will also open up the possibilities for the use of gaming technology as a teaching tool. Until now the inconsistent quality and slow speed of school internet connections has stifled many teachers' attempts to deliver game-based learning initiatives. One such example is the use of Inspire Foundation's ReachOut Central interactive game (<http://cdroc.reachout.com.au>). The ReachOut Teachers Network User Profiling Survey indicated that a common reason for teachers not using the game as a teaching tool was because of slow or inconsistent quality internet connection.

4 Conclusion

Inspire has been at the forefront of utilising the internet to deliver social benefit for over a decade. We remain enthusiastic about, and committed to utilising the power of technology to achieve social good - as evidenced by our role in the establishment of the CRC for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing.

Having demonstrated the possible using existing technology, we are confident that the National Broadband Network presents considerable opportunity to deliver mental health benefits. Specifically:

- **Consumers will benefit** from confidential, non-stigmatising, flexible, low-cost treatment and services provided either directly to their home. The National Broadband Network will extend these benefits to people and communities who are currently chronically underserved, and make improved service offerings possible.
- **The health system will benefit** through better access, integration and coordination, including facilitated pathways, continuity of care and follow-up, and practitioner training and support. Governments than traditional mental health services.
- **Teachers benefit** through access to vital mental health training delivered online, and access to a greater range of teaching resources. The National Broadband Network will ensure greater coverage and reliability in the delivery of both.
- **Australia as a whole benefits** as e-mental health has a significant and cost-effective contribution to make in reducing the far-reaching financial, productivity, and social costs of the growing mental health burden in Australia.