6 Communications services in remote Indigenous communities

Overview

This chapter reports on communications services in remote Indigenous communities, focusing specifically on the take-up and performance of telecommunications services and access to broadcasting services.

Remote Indigenous communities are among Australia's most disadvantaged groups. The government has recognised that these communities have special needs in relation to the provision and maintenance of telecommunications services.

Since 2002, ACMA has played a role in data collection and monitoring of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities. A separate report focusing on the availability and take-up of communications services in remote Indigenous communities will be released in early 2008.

Telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities are listed in the Telecommunications Action Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities (TAPRIC) database. ACMA licenses Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS) as community broadcasting services.

Telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities

Since 2002, ACMA has collected data about, and monitored the range and take-up of, telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities in response to recommendations of the Regional Telecommunications Inquiry (RTI) in its report *Connecting Regional Australia*. ACMA has implemented a monitoring and reporting framework that captures specific supply-side information about telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities.

In addition to the information reported in this chapter, ACMA anticipates publishing a separate report in 2008 entitled *Telecommunications in Remote Indigenous Communities*, providing more detailed information on the availability and take-up of telecommunications in remote Indigenous communities. In researching this report, ACMA staff visited Indigenous communities in the Tiwi Islands region of the Northern Territory to speak with community members about access to, take-up and use of, telecommunications services.

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A range of telecommunications services is available in remote Indigenous communities, including the standard telephone service (STS), payphones, mobile network coverage, pre-paid residential telephone services and community phones. In addition, internet facilities are available across various regions.

A government initiative to improve basic telecommunications services in these communities was the Community Phones Program (CPP) rollout, which was part of the Telecommunications Action Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities (TAPRIC). Under the CPP, Telstra was awarded a contract by the former Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts in 2005 under which it has installed 216 community phones in 124 remote communities in central Australia, Broome, Kununurra, Tennant Creek and the Tiwi Islands. Telstra has also itself installed an additional 20 community phones.

The CPP comprises the following trial initiatives:

– provision of community phones;

– robust phone casing;

– regional agents to help implement the program;

– Telstra Country Calling Line and Card services; and

– deployment of CDMA wireless local loop technology.

A community phone is a shared telephone service using a normal telephone handset but placed in a location where there is 24-hour access, with each community responsible for the care of the phone. Community phones have a robust steel phone casing designed to withstand extreme weather conditions and resist breakages. The phones provide a card-only service in that they require pre-paid calling cards to be used.

The Telstra Country Calling Line is a pre-paid residential telephone service where the customer opts to have the phone line rental charge debited from their Centrelink payments and where calls (other than emergency calls) can only be made using pre-paid cards. A tailored Country Calling Card was developed that enables people in remote Indigenous communities to make pre-paid calls from community phones, home telephones and payphones.

From June 2006 to June 2007, the number of payphones and InContact services provided by Telstra in remote Indigenous communities decreased, while the number of STSs increased (Table 6.1). InContact services are pre-paid residential telephone services provided to selected Indigenous communities under the iConnect project, funded under the Networking the Nation program.

Table 6.1: Number of services in remote Indigenous communities, 2006–07

	June 2006	June 2007	Change
Number of payphones	958	949	-11
Number of STSs (fixed/home phone)	17,045	17,549	+504
Number of InContact services	536	532	-4
Number of community phones	236	236	0
Number of Country Calling Lines	38	38	0

Source: TAPRIC database

Telstra explains the increase in STSs as being due to improved reporting on the number of services in communities, as well as actual improvements in the availability of services. The number of community phones and Country Calling Lines has not changed from June 2006 to June 2007, reflecting the completion of service delivery under the CPP.

ACMA conducts regular monitoring of the availability of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities listed in the TAPRIC database, which contains detailed information on more than 1,000 community-managed Indigenous communities. ACMA maintains a telecommunications-specific version of the TAPRIC database and analyses information on telecommunications availability collected from Telstra annually on communities listed in the database. Table 6.2 provides headline figures on access to telecommunications services in these communities.

Table 6.2: Communities listed in the TAPRIC database – community access to STSs, payphones and mobile coverage, June 2007

Community access to telecommunications	Communities reported	
	Number	%
STS, Country Calling Line and/or inContact	630	60
Payphone (Telstra or customer-operated) and/or community phone	604	57
Terrestrial mobile coverage	278	26

Source: Telstra

Payphone performance in remote Indigenous communities

As shown in Table 6.2, not all communities have access to fixed-line telephone services, which suggests that individual residential telephone take-up is relatively low. Payphones therefore serve as a proxy 'home phone' for many people living in remote Indigenous communities and play a more critical role as a 'lifeline service' than they do in other parts of Australia.

Table 6.3 shows the time taken to repair Telstra-operated payphones in remote Indigenous communities against Telstra's Standard Marketing Plan (SMP) time frame of three working days of being notified of the fault, compared with other locations. It shows that Telstra's payphone fault repair performance in remote Indigenous communities was lower than in remote areas, and significantly lower than in rural and urban areas. The impact of payphone faults is greater in remote Indigenous communities, given the greater reliance on payphones, particularly where there is no access to other telecommunications services.

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Table 6.3: Frequency distribution – time taken to repair Telstra payphones, 2006–07

	Remote Indigenous communities (%)	Remote (%)	Rural (%	Urban (%)
Within time frame in Telstra's SMP (before the end of three full working days)	66	70	85	88
– plus one working day	8	7	5	6
– plus two working days	5	5	4	3
– plus three working days	4	4	2	1
– plus four working days	3	3	1	1
– plus five working days	3	2	1	0
– plus six or more working days	10	9	3	1

Source: Telstra

Broadcasting services in remote Indigenous communities

Remote Indigenous communities can access broadcasts from two sources:

– Remote Area Broadcast Services (RABS)—television and radio services delivered via satellite to either terrestrial transmitters for re-broadcasting, or directly into communities using satellite dishes; and

– Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS)—operate as community broadcasters rebroadcasting the RABS service, plus some community content.

RABS are retransmissions of national and remote commercial broadcaster analog services. Terrestrial retransmission is usually by community or Indigenous groups, or local councils in areas not covered by the national or commercial broadcasters.

RABS viewers receive the same television programming as those served by the terrestrial analog services transmitted by the ABC and SBS across Australia, by Imparja and Seven Central in the Remote Central and Eastern licence area, and by Prime and WIN in the Remote/Regional Western Australia licence area. The satellite broadcasts are encrypted to restrict reception to those licence areas. Users require an authorised decoder and smartcard.

Imparja Television distributes National Indigenous Television (NITV), which was launched in July 2007, and eight community radio feeds.

RIBS (previously known as BRACS under the Broadcasting in Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme), are licensed by ACMA as community broadcasting services. At June 2007, there were 162 licensed RIBS in remote Indigenous communities throughout Australia, comprising 79 television broadcasting licences and 83 radio broadcasting licences. A complete list of community broadcasters is available from the ACMA website.

Funding of $89.9 million for communications in Indigenous communities was provided under the Backing Indigenous Ability (BIA) program. Commencing on 1 July 2006 and running for four years, the program covers both broadcasting and telecommunications services and will be implemented through specially appointed Regional Agents.

The broadcasting component of the BIA program will receive $53.3 million to replace radio infrastructure and strengthen access to the cultural benefits of Indigenous television. This funding is split between the NITV ($50.0 million) and the Indigenous Remote Radio Replacement (IRRR) program ($3.3 million), which will run over three years. The Community Broadcasting Foundation will allocate the government funds for the rollout of transmitters in RIBS communities.

The $36.6 million allocated to the telecommunications component of the BIA program will support telephones, internet, videoconferencing, training and online content development, primarily for remote Indigenous communities.

Further information about services in remote Indigenous communities

www.acma.gov.au/commsreport

Data updates

ABS, Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey), 2006

Documents

– ABS, 4710.0 – *Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, Australia*, 2006, April 2007

– ACA, *Review of Payphone Policy 2003*, March 2004

– ACMA, *Communications Infrastructure and Services Availability in Australia 2006–07*, June 2007

– ACMA, *Telecommunications in Remote Indigenous Communities*, late 2007

– DCITA, discussion paper, Backing Indigenous Ability: Delivering a Comprehensive Telecommunications Package in Indigenous Communities, March 2006

– DCITA, report of the *Review of the Indigenous Broadcasting Programme*, May 2007

– DCITA, *Review of the Operation of the Universal Service Obligation and Customer Service Guarantee*, 7 April 2004

Organisations

– Australian Indigenous Communication Association (www.aica.asn.au)

– Community Broadcasting Foundation Ltd (www.cbf.com.au)

– Indigenous Community Television (www.ictv.net.au)

– National Indigenous Television (www.nitv.org.au)

– National Indigenous Council (www.oipc.gov.au)

– National Indigenous Radio Service (www.nirs.com.au)

– Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (www.oipc.gov.au)

– Department of Broadband, Communications and Digital EconomyIndigenous Programs (www.dbcde.gov.au/indigenous_programs)

– Imparja Television (www.imparja.com)

– Southern Cross Broadcasting (www.southerncrossbroadcasting.com.au)