

Good afternoon everyone.

I would like to acknowledge and give thanks to the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and pay my respects to their connections to land, sea and community. I also pay my respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

It is really great to be here with you to talk about what I firmly believe are some of the most important issues of our time. Digital inclusion is NBN's reason for being. It is the reason our company was created, and why we exist today. Digital inclusion does not simply mean building a network, and the people will come.

Today, at the ACCANect conference, more so than any of the multitude of conferences I speak at, I always feel a meeting of like-minded people, and let me start by under-scoring how essential it is that we work together to ensure all Australians can access the digital opportunity that broadband access not only promises, but delivers.

I would also like to acknowledge and personally thank Teresa for her highly effective stewardship of ACCAN over the past decade and more. The fact that Telstra has appointed Teresa as their first Chief Advocacy Officer is testament to the great success that Teresa and ACCAN have achieved for countless Australians over the years. So, Teresa, I wish you every success in your new role.

To me, the important work done by ACCAN and other groups committed to social cohesion and inclusion, is closely tied to our stated purpose at NBN, which is to lift the digital capability of Australia.

As we increasingly transition to a digital economy it will become vital that we – and by we, I mean *we as an industry*: NBN as a Government Business Enterprise and instrument for the implementation of public policy, as internet providers, as advocacy groups and at local, state and federal government level - work together to ensure no Australian is left behind when it comes to unlocking the social and economic benefits made possible by broadband.

This has become more important than ever in these COVID times we now find ourselves in.

Since COVID struck more than 18 months ago, our social and economic reality has been turned upside down.

Social isolation has obviously increased. Economic dislocation has become more pronounced for many.

But thanks to the power of connectivity, most of us have been able to stay connected and productive.

In the home, we've converted spare bedrooms and co-opted kitchen tables as new offices and classrooms to accommodate our work and learn-from-home lifestyles.

Businesses have increasingly pivoted to the online world, to both connect with their regular customers and gain access to new ones.

And we have all come to realise the absolute necessity of broadband every time we dial into a Zoom or Microsoft Teams video call to connect with our colleagues, friends and love ones.

These seismic shifts in business and consumer behaviour have fuelled an intense period of acceleration and reliance on technology as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how critical it is to be connected.

According to research from McKinsey, COVID has triggered changes to technological adoption over the last 12 months that would otherwise have taken three to four years to play out.

And although it is fair to say that we did not foresee a pandemic as the catalyst for this widespread reliance on technology, we are so glad that we, as Australians, had the NBN network complete and ready, when the nation needed it most.

At NBN, we have been working towards this day for more than a decade.

Over the last 12 years we have rolled out our network to 12 million premises and connected more than 8.2 million homes and businesses – or approximately 17 million Australians - to the NBN network.

A little over a year ago we completed the initial build and then in December, the government declared the network should be treated as built and fully operational.

Since then, we have embarked on the next evolution of the network by committing \$4.5 billion to extend the reach and capability of the network, and to provide better competition and greater service to regional and rural Australia.

Just last week we released our latest Corporate Plan which shows that our network investments are on track to deliver download speeds of up to one gigabit per second to 75 per cent of our fixed line footprint by the end of 2023.

The release of our Corporate Plan also coincided with a new Statement of Expectations from the Government.

As you know, the Statement of Expectations sets out the Federal Government's policy objectives for NBN and serves to guide us as we become a sustainable service delivery organisation that meets customer demand now and into the future.

Operating a high-performing network for the benefit of customers, no matter where they are located in Australia, while also fostering competitive and efficient markets, has always been among our highest priorities.

And in line with the objectives of the Statement of Expectations, we remain deeply committed to meeting the current and future broadband needs of households and businesses across Australia, fostering productivity and innovation, and supporting the nation on its journey to becoming a leading digital economy.

This last point – on becoming a leading digital economy - is what I would like to focus on with my presentation today.

Because as important as it is to extend the reach of the NBN network as far as we can, it is just as vital that we continue to deliver products that meet the needs of all Australians.

This includes those living in apartments, large families, businesses of all sizes, and importantly the more vulnerable segments of our community who might not have the means or digital know-how to readily take up an NBN service.

To truly become a leading digital economy we need to foster digital equality. We must empower *all of our citizens* with the digital opportunity made possible by unfettered broadband access.

And so while we have done so much to connect in excess of 8.2 million homes and businesses to the NBN network today, there are still too many Australians who remain unconnected.

DIGITAL INCLUSION AND ABILITY

It's worth looking at the Australian Digital Inclusion Index to get a deeper understanding of the socio-demographics that are at play here when we talk about connecting the unconnected.

I'm sure everyone here is familiar with the ADII, but for those who might not be, it is the annual report that provides the most comprehensive picture of Australia's online participation.

What it also shows is the gap between Australians who are digitally included and those who are not.

The latest Index shows that while all aspects of digital inclusion have been improving – 'digital ability' remains our weakest link.

‘Digital ability’ is not only about having the basic skills necessary to engage in common online activities, it’s also the attitudes and confidence to make the most of new technology.

Worryingly, this deficiency in ‘digital ability’ is disproportionately made up of Australians with low levels of income, those over 50, Indigenous Australians, people living with a disability, and those with lower levels of education.

The authors of the ADII note: “Less than half of all Australians believe that computers and technology give them more control over their lives and less than 40% feel they can keep up with a changing technological landscape.”

This has to change.

And it has to change now if we are to build the digitally inclusive society that I believe will be central to our economic recovery and prosperity in the years and decades ahead.

As I’ve already described, NBN has effectively completed the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of digital infrastructure delivery – but the new frontier is not just about affordability; it’s as much about decoding the ‘why’ for our entire population.

'Why' is not the simple mere difference of online news versus buying a hardcopy newspaper. It's bigger than that.

It's access to any information, any government service, a world of entertainment and online life-long learning.

It's the largely untapped potential that broadband connectivity and smart technology affords for Australians living with disability to be more self-sufficient, not less. It's about enabling older Australians with access to the digital tools they need to stay in touch with loved ones and access essential services.

NBN AND DIGITAL INCLUSION

At NBN, we have been on this journey for a number of years.

We have adjusted our wholesale prices with inclusion in mind, and we have provided financial relief to support customers through the impacts of COVID.

This week we will be releasing some new research that shows the relative affordability of Australian broadband. This research, which was commissioned by NBN and conducted by Accenture, shows that in a comparison of 13 OECD countries, Australia saw the largest improvement in affordability between fiscal 18 and fiscal 20, and ranks sixth overall across comparable speed tiers.

This research also shows that the average weekly household spend on services over the NBN is only 1.1 per cent of household income, compared with water (at 1.3 per cent) and electricity (1.6 per cent).

These are encouraging results when it comes to the overall affordability of the NBN network, but we know we need to do more.

So as we move into the next phase of the NBN, we will be redoubling our efforts to ensure Australians all over the nation can access the NBN network and the benefits it can unlock.

This of course, is not something that we can achieve by ourselves. It will require constant dialogue and collaboration among the industry, consumer groups and state and federal governments.

We have begun this process and through regular engagements with consumer groups and industry bodies, we have identified a range of issues that need to be addressed if we are to improve digital inclusion.

Through these conversations and our internal research, we know there are three main barriers when it comes to connecting the unconnected.

They are:

- The affordability factor: lacking the financial means or desire to pay for a connection.
- Secondly, the accessibility factor: lacking access to broadband, including hardware, installation, and other challenges.
- And finally the digital ability factor: which relates to confidence, digital skills and having the digital literacy to know about the benefits that a broadband connection can provide.

That these three factors continue to act as barriers to connection is not just a problem for our industry, it is a great concern for the nation as we look to accelerate our transition to a digital economy.

Being able to create new industries, employment opportunities and increasing productivity will be more important than ever as we recover from the impacts of COVID.

But failing to create the environment where all can participate will only hold us back.

Already we have seen COVID widen fault lines across class, race, age and gender.

And from this we have seen those who are well-off and secure in employment be disproportionately insulated from the more damaging effects of this pandemic. For example, financial markets, where assets are most likely to be owned by the very wealthy, have recovered much faster than job markets.

In contrast, many low-paying jobs in services and casual employment roles continue to feel the worst effects from COVID lockdowns.

If these trends continue, there is a real possibility we will see a “K-shaped recovery” in our economy where different communities and industries will experience different rates of recovery after COVID.

The best way to help close these gaps is through greater reach and use of broadband connectivity.

NBN'S DIGITAL INCLUSION PROGRAM

For our part, we are working on important initiatives to bridge some of these gaps.

While I can't unveil the full program today, I can provide a broad overview of how this program will address what we consider are the biggest barriers to digital inclusion.

As part of this program, we have identified six key segments that we believe will benefit the most from increasing the means to connect to broadband.

These six segments are:

- Health
- Education
- Social Housing
- Seniors and aged care
- Indigenous Communities; and
- The Regional divide.

While many of the specific programs we are working on to improve digital inclusion across these segments are still in development, I will highlight two programs across social housing and connecting indigenous communities to give you a sense of some of the challenges we are looking to overcome, and the opportunity we are hoping to create.

SOCIAL HOUSING SUPPORT

In the social housing space, a Smart Public Housing Working Group has been established that brings together council, government, not-for-profit, industry and NBN to lead a Smart Public Housing Project.

This project sees NBN working together with Yarra Council and other stakeholders in Victoria with the objective to provide its public housing population with equitable access to digital services, skills and tools.

This program aims to expand access to digital education, foster employment opportunities and help increase access to devices for use by low-income residents.

The working group is also investigating several pilot initiatives including: a Community Connections Hub to link people with internet access, device libraries, computer technician support and first language digital literacy training.

And we are exploring the enablement of free WiFi in the communal areas of the Richmond Housing Estate to support digital access and digital literacy objectives.

It's still early days in terms of outcomes but by working closely with stakeholders and adopting a test and learn approach, NBN Co is seeking to better understand the needs and barriers for low income residents in accessing broadband services, with the intent to develop a scalable, sustainable and equitable solution that could be adopted across all social and affordable housing.

INDIGENOUS SUPPORT

We have also made good progress in our efforts to bring connectivity to many indigenous communities, particularly those in some of our most remote reaches.

Last year we commenced our Isolated Communities Project to help connect indigenous and remote communities that were isolating on country as a response to bio-security regulations during COVID-19.

In many circumstances, internet connectivity was limited within these communities so we worked to get them connected.

This was a significant issue for these communities as lockdowns meant many could not access the essential services they normally would through face-to-face visits.

Our nbn Local team worked closely with communities and state governments to identify those most in need of connectivity and then connected them via our Sky Muster satellite service.

Through this program, we installed community Wi-Fi services to more than 50 isolated community locations.

This has been a vital service for these communities and has helped ensure they remain in contact and have the broadband access they need to support essential services like digital health and online learning.

WORKING TOGETHER

I hope these examples give you a glimpse of the resources and efforts we are committing to as we work towards connecting the unconnected.

To me, they really underscore the importance of connectivity.

Of course, we still have much to do and we know these genuinely complex challenges and will require a multi-faceted response.

Low income offer

One of these complex areas worth discussing is the industry's development of a low-income product.

I appreciate ACCAN has been advocating for such a product for a number of years, and I strongly encourage them to continue doing so.

After all, every additional home and business that connects to the network, adds to the number of Australians receiving the social and economic benefits that fast broadband can unlock for people's health, connectivity, and livelihoods.

We are genuine in our support of a low income product and are here to assist in its ideation and delivery. But we must also consider that the success of a sustainable, low-income offer depends on much more than just NBN.

Even as a GBE that enacts important telecommunications policy, we have a requirement to be a financially sustainable business with products that make a return. To be clear on this point, this is not about making returns for returns' sake. We make returns so we can continue to reinvest in the network on behalf of all Australians.

This is why we need to look more broadly - to the industry, stakeholder groups, the regulator and government – so we can come together and jointly develop a low-income product that works for everyone.

To overcome these challenges, I think it would be unwise to leave it to the market alone to solve.

That's why it is so important to us at NBN that we maintain strong relationships with groups like ACCAN and are keen to work with the community organisations and networks they represent.

Throughout last year, and again this year, we are conducting roundtable meetings directly with the organisations that ACCAN represents in every state, many of whom are delegates here today.

Through these roundtables, we aim to better understand the very real challenges people are facing with regard to broadband connection, and to identify ways we can collectively work to address these. One of the outcomes of these conversations is the enablement of the Public Housing Wifi initiative I referred to earlier.

Like any complex challenge involving competing interests and a broad goal of improving societal wellbeing, increasing digital inclusion will take a collaborative approach involving governments, regulatory bodies, an engaged private sector, and civic participation.

While I believe we have the right ambition, as an industry we have a responsibility to explain how technology benefits human lives and our communities.

We need to be able to explain the benefits of technology not just in terms of capability, but in terms of how - and indeed 'if' - they advance human wellbeing and happiness.

We must ensure the benefits of new technology are made accessible to all, not just a select few.

We must manage the process of technological change so people do not feel they have been left behind, or anxious that they can't keep up.

We must ensure that new technology, such as AI and automation, do not perpetuate existing biases and inequities, nor create new ones.

And we must prioritise a safe, secure and trustworthy online environment.

Addressing these issues will give more Australians the confidence they need to make the most of the opportunities new technologies offer, and in turn maximise the benefits to our community and economy.

Thank you.