



Broadband for the Bush Alliance

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Please find below the response from the Broadband for the Bush Alliance to the ACCAN Review:

Consumer representation

1. Has ACCAN effectively performed the role of representing the interests of consumers in relation to telecommunications?

ACCAN has been effective in representing consumers' interests given resource and geographic limitations. ACCAN is based in Sydney so has limited understanding of rural and remote telecommunications issues due to the "dis-connect". ACCAN has addressed this deficiency by developing a close working relationship with Broadband for the Bush Alliance (B4BA) and using the information provided by B4BA effectively. In addition, ACCAN has worked with B4BA to establish an Indigenous Advisory Forum to address specific Indigenous needs.

2. Does ACCAN effectively engage with a broad range of stakeholders, including industry, government agencies and other consumer groups?

ACCAN has effectively engaged with a wide range of stakeholders (government, non-government, representative groups and consumer groups). However, the resources are not adequate to engage effectively with the rural and remote consumers. B4BA has self-funded their consumer consultation processes using very limited resources, but has developed an in depth understanding of rural and remote needs/issues largely through volunteer engagement. B4BA has provided extensive input to ACCAN through feedback on policy documents as well as reciprocal membership, collaboration and partnership.

3. Considering the consumer representation role performed by ACCAN, has ACCAN adopted an appropriate balance between representation of general consumers and representation of those with particular needs?

ACCAN has performed well as a consumer representative body and has endeavoured to increase engagement with Indigenous consumers through the establishment of an Indigenous Advisory Forum and collaboration on the Annual Indigenous Focus Day as part of the B4BA Forum. To engage with other rural and remote sectors ACCAN has relied heavily on B4BA. This input into ACCAN activities has been resourced through B4BA without financial support.

4. Is a telecommunications specific consumer representative body funded by Government required or:

- a. *Should Government fund representation only for a body or bodies representing consumers with particular needs?*
- b. *Could a telecommunications representation function be carried out by a general consumer body?*
- c. *Could Government more directly measure consumer views by undertaking its own consumer research?*

There is a definite need for independent (non-government) telecommunications representation.

To ensure effective engagement with stakeholders there needs to be a level of trust, good communication processes and established relationships with the representative body. Telecommunications services are complex and consumer confusion on their rights, contracts and service level often confusing. There is a plethora of changing technologies, issues, legislation, technical specifications and industry specific idiosyncrasies that a general consumer body or government agency would find very difficult to maintain its currency. Additionally, a government body or general consumer body would be unable to maintain the close working relationship with consumers, separating telecommunications issues from general consumer issues. The ACCAN/B4BA Model has resulted in a good understanding of telecommunications issues. Grass roots organisations and businesses need to have an established relationship with their representative body and it takes time and collaborative effort

to build “safe” communication channels. ACCAN and B4BA have established networks which are expanding to increase more rural and remote consumers.

This requirement for trust and relationship building is even more critical in relation to research. It is essential that research be managed by an independent body that can build effective and responsive communications networks and incorporate the outputs of that research into their advocacy role. The ACCAN/B4BA model further builds partnerships and engagement for the longer term.

Research needs to be done by researchers with specific skills and ability to respond effectively and quickly to issues as they arise as well as having a good understanding of the context in which they are doing the research. There is a strong trust relationship with ACCAN/B4BA by stakeholders and therefore engagement with the research is effective and perceived as being accurate and reliable.

Independent Grants Program and research

5. Have you seen any examples of how research funded through the IGP has influenced Government policy or the behaviour of industry? Could changes be made to the IGP to make the funded research projects more influential?

In general, ACCAN has provided tangible data and case studies to be used in their advocacy role as well as informing policy development. ACCAN has made the results of the research freely available which has resulted in an additional educational and awareness raising outcome. It is essential to obtain the on-ground stories to build an evidence base on which to advocate on consumers’ behalf.

6. Do you believe research funded through the IGP is useful to consumers? Could changes be made to the IGP to make the funded research projects more useful to consumers?

Yes, the programs funded through ACCAN have resulted in research being undertaken as well as raising consumer awareness. The Yarning and Learning project done by the Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media not only provided research outcomes but was a consumer education and awareness raising program producing a resource available in 7 Indigenous languages. This work demonstrated that involving consumers in research can also be a learning and awareness raising experience for the consumers.

7. Is it appropriate for the Government to continue to provide grants to a consumer representative group (or any other non-government body) to undertake research into telecommunications issues?

Yes, the model has worked but is under-resourced to effectively engage rural and remote consumers. B4BA have endeavoured to provide ACCAN with the required input through their own resources and it is strongly recommended that additional funding be provided to specifically target rural and remote engagement through B4BA.

8. If this is appropriate, what changes (if any) would you recommend to how the funding is provided and who it is provided to?

Increase resources to target rural and remote consumers through the B4BA and its extensive rural and remote networks. B4BA would work in collaboratively and in partnership with ACCAN sharing information and identifying specific remote consumer needs.

3. Should other activities be funded?

Should any other activities, other than consumer representation and research, be considered for funding under section 593 of the Telco Act? If so, what should these be and what would be the rationale for funding such activities be?

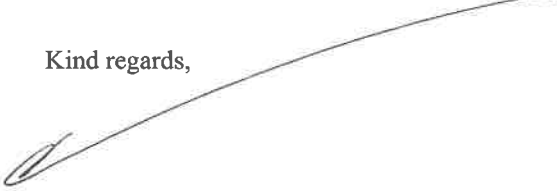
B4BA has identified that rural and remote telecommunications consumers have not effectively been represented except through B4BA activities. There exists a wide gap by policy officers in understanding the desires and understanding of the rural and remote sector. The continued introduction of complex digital services will widen that understanding gap.

B4BA fills this specific gap collating the needs and case studies of rural, remote stakeholders, including Indigenous consumers. B4BA has filled this role without resources representing diverse consumer needs e.g. remote Indigenous, health, education, emergency services, agriculture (including seafood) and businesses.

Should you have any further questions or queries please do not hesitate to contact the Executive Officer, Marianne St Clair on (08) 8946 7651 or info@broadbandforthebush.com.au

The B4BA Board and its members look forward to a response to our submission in the near future.

Kind regards,



Marianne St Clair,
Executive Officer

