

Serving the new economy...

The library and information sector plays an important part in providing public access to networked information. Therefore, ALIA members have a stake in ensuring there is equity in access to information through the provision of quality tele-communication services for all Australians.

In March 2000 the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator Richard Alston established the Telecommunication Service Inquiry (TSI) to assess the adequacy of telecommunications services in Australia.

The Chair of TSI, Mr Tim Besley, reported to the Commonwealth Government in September 2000. The inquiry handed down seventeen recommendations to provide a framework to ensure that telecommunication services will continue to improve for all Australians.

One of the major findings of the report was that there is greater deal of dissatisfaction with telecommunication services in rural and remote areas compared with metropolitan areas. Australians now expect not only a reliable telephone service, but access to the internet at reasonable speeds. Many users in rural areas experience slow data speeds and are further disadvantaged by not being able to access an Internet Service Provider (ISP) at local call rates.

In May 2001 Senator Alston announced the government's response to the TSI recommendations including some major funding initiatives.

\$1.63 million funding package was announced to improve telecommunication services in rural and regional Australia. Issues addressed included improvements to the basic telephone service, timeliness of installations and repairs, mobile phone coverage and access to internet services. Highlights of the package include:

- the Online Technical Assistance Program funding package of \$12 million which set the minimum internet access rate at a very low 19.2Kb for rural Australia.
- a new National Communications Fund which will allocate \$50 million in grants to assist regional communication projects particularly for the provision of education, health and community services.
- continued funding for key ICT programs including Networking the Nation (see details below) and Building on IT Strengths.

Library and information professionals working in non-metropolitan areas are acutely aware that basic telecommunications services continue to be unsatisfactory in many rural areas. In some areas poor infrastructure, low bandwidths and expensive

call charges restrict the services and facilities that can be made available by libraries and information providers to their communities.

The most pressing need for all regional and rural libraries and information providers is the cost of accessing to the internet. Existing call zones present a costly barrier to communications in rural and remote centres as many users are required to pay time charged STD rates to connect to their closest ISP.

In June the government also announced two major initiatives in relation to local calls. These initiatives will mean that as of 31 July many regional and rural libraries will be able to connect to their ISP at a local call rate.

The first initiative is aimed at regional communities from 31 July 2001. Users in remote area 'extended zones' will have access to untimed local calls in neighbouring extended zones. Under the agreement remote users have been guaranteed untimed local calls to at least one ISP.

The second initiative is designed to deliver savings to outer metropolitan and country customers. People living on the outskirts of capital cities are often in a different STD zone to the capital city. Under this initiative a flat rate 25 cent untimed call and a 99 cent capped three hour regional call was announced. Customers living in outer metropolitan areas who previously paid STD rates will now be able to call their central business district and inner suburbs for 25 cents.

Consistent with the recommendations of the TSI the government has referred recommendations relating to competition in tele-communication services and pay TV content to the Productivity Commission, which is expected to report in September 2001.

The government has also directed the Australian Communications Authority (ACA) to consider a number of the TSI's recommendations including a review of the Customer Service Guarantee and standard of service issues.

The TSI also recommended that a member of the ACA should be responsible for monitoring quality of service. In response to this recommendation the government has appointed Mr Alan Horsley previous managing director of the Telecommunication Users Group (ATUG) to this position.

The government will no doubt argue that the new economy is well served by the \$163 million investment in regional telecommunications infrastructure. While farmers, regional businesses and those of us who use mobiles on country trips will appreciate the better mobile phone coverage, this is not really an information economy breakthrough. ■

Networking the Nation

Networking the Nation (NTN) is a Commonwealth program for improvements to regional telecommunications infrastructure. The intention of the program is to help bridge the gap in telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia. NTN funds a range of projects from mobile telephone coverage through to internet public access points. The programs funding is \$250 million dollars over five years.

On 1 July the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator Richard Alston, announced \$51 million in funding for telecommunications projects in rural, regional and remote areas.

This round provided funding for 123 new telecommunications projects, taking the total of Networking the Nation projects to 616. Community groups, regional development organisa-

tions and local councils have been responsible for most of these initiatives.

Regional libraries have so far received more than \$20 million in funding from Networking the Nation. Networking the Nation encourages collaborative approaches and partnerships between the public and private sectors. A broad range of organisations can participate, including libraries and information services. Networking the Nation is currently ac-