

CommsDay Regional and Remote Forum
Address by Anna Perrin
NBN Co Chief Customer Officer



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1. Thanks and welcome

Thank you and as my colleague Gavin said, it's great to be here at such an exciting time for telecommunications, and particularly telecommunications in regional Australia.

These events bring us all together and as a result, are a great way for us to fast-track important conversations, and that seems particularly important when we are discussing connectivity beyond the urban fringe, where the size of our great nation makes it even harder to be together.

So, thanks Grahame and CommsDay for making this happen – and for bringing focus on Regional and Remote Australia.

So, there are really three parts to my talk today.

First, I want to look at the incredible changes underway in regional Australia.

For many years the demographic tide has flowed pretty much one way, drawing people from the bush to the big cities.

But since COVID and with pressure on our cities, the current is flowing the other way.

NBN's job, as the provider of wholesale broadband services, is to work with our retail partners to provide world class connectivity for those living in regional and rural Australia – this is currently around 7 million people, or about 28% of Australia's population¹ – as well as those planning to move there.

As demand for connectivity continues to go through the roof, we continue to introduce step changes in speed, resilience and capability.

So **secondly**, I want to talk about those things. And how **nbn** is better serving the needs of regional communities.

And finally, I want to ask what more can we – as a sector - do to support the millions of Australians living outside our cities.

¹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/rural-remote-australians/rural-and-remote-health>



A big part of that is how we collaborate both personally and as an industry – connections and connectivity matter.

For those of you that know me, you'll know I am passionate about collaboration and partnerships.

Collaboration matters to me, and it matters to NBN. But it is particularly important in regional and remote Australia given the size of our country.

2. Acknowledgement of Country

Of course, the ultimate story tellers, communicators, and collaborators are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Traditional Owners of these lands.

I want to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on today, the Ngunnawal [PRON: Nuna-wall] people, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

Creating and sustaining the longest continuous culture in the world isn't possible without innovating and inventing in ways that transcend generations...

And in ways that adapt in an environment that can be extraordinarily harsh, and is, at all times, constantly changing and unpredictable.

That, to me, is the ultimate act of collaboration and communicating.

3. Making the 'good life' even better

We're all here today to talk about connectivity in regional and rural Australia.

It's hard to think of a more exciting topic at a more important time.

Why?

Because we're seeing a surging demographic shift, something on a scale probably not seen in generations.

City-dwellers are moving to the regions, and regional people are choosing to stay.

The secret is most definitely out that regional Australia offers the 'good life'.

A place where community is strong, where jobs can be plentiful and where housing is more affordable and accessible than in our cities.



Recent research from Comm Bank and the Regional Australia Institute² points to city-to-regional relocations now sitting at their highest level since March 2022, and 80 per cent above the pre-Covid average.

The research says more than 35 per cent more people are moving from capital cities to the regions, than back in the opposite direction.

A big part of this change is that there seems to have been a collective realization that living in a place where you have to commute an hour each way to sit in an office in the CBD five days a week for the next 30 years of your work life.... isn't really that much fun after all!

Digital connectivity means you can choose to work where you want and it also offers new opportunities for businesses that want to set up in regional areas.

I personally love hearing stories from businesses that are harnessing the power of our network;

- Businesses like Grief Connect, based in Roelands WA, which provides online grief and bereavement support services for people in regional areas, services that would not otherwise be available.
- Businesses like GRO Rural, based in Tamworth, a digital platform designed to connect and empower professionals, service providers and businesses across Australia's rural, regional and agricultural sectors by offering tailored industry registries, networking opportunities and professional resources.
- And businesses like SimpliMove, in Armidale, a digital health application improving access to critical health advice and rehabilitation programs in the New England area, but with ambitions to provide a service across rural and regional Australia.

Digital connectivity is the great enabler that is making much of this possible.

For regional businesses in particular, rapidly improving connectivity is a game changer – and the opportunity in many places to now access city capabilities means new markets and investment, world class capabilities and productivity and the chance to compete for talent on a level playing field without having to locate/re-locate to the big city.

I love the idea that NBN is part of what makes all of this possible.

That makes me so proud.

² <https://www.commbank.com.au/articles/newsroom/2024/12/regional-movers-index-sept-qtr.html>



So there is no doubt there is a renaissance underway in regional Australia.

The question I want to turn to now is: what's is nbn doing?

4. Building a connected future

NBN Co has made extraordinary strides in connecting Australians, including those in regional and remote areas, places where fast broadband connectivity was once only a dream.

Today, more than 12 million homes and businesses have access to the nbn network - and 8.6 million are connected.

We carry around 80% of all internet traffic in Australia. That equates to around 20 million Australians using the nbn network every day, including many millions in regional Australia.

So much of the heavy lifting is done by fast fibre which we continue to roll deeper and deeper into regional and remote areas of Australia.

5. Fibre upgrade

A key focus for us is to continue to progress from Fibre to the Node and Fibre to the Curb to Fibre to the Premises – or, to put it another way, from Fast to Faster!

We are on track to make 3.5 million FTTN premises and 1.5 million FTTC premises eligible to upgrade to FTTP by the end of this year.

And as you heard from Gavin, in January this year, the Government also announced a further up to \$3 billion equity investment combined with more than \$800 million from NBN Co, to provide upgrade paths for the remaining homes and businesses on the FTTN network not covered by previous fibre upgrade programs.

Around 622,000 homes and businesses across the country stand to benefit from the joint investment, with more than half of these premises located in regional Australia.

By the end of 2030, 94 per cent of homes and businesses in the fixed line footprint will have access to near-gigabit or multi-gigabit speeds.

6. More speed

We are also very proud of our recent , our speed tier upgrade program.

Just to add a little more detail, we are going to increase the download and upload on our popular 100/20 Mbps product to make it 5 times faster – it will increase to 500/50 Mbps....



We will take 250/25 Mbps to 750/50 Mbps...a tripling and doubling of the download and upload speeds respectively.

And finally, we will double the upload on our near-gigabit product, whilst also introducing a new 2 gig speed tier.

All of this will be available to participating internet providers from September 14 at no additional wholesale cost.

When this launches the game will change for many millions of Australians we serve and we will have taken a huge step forward in uplifting the digital capability of Australia.

September 14 – put it in your calendar!

7. Fixed Wireless

Where fibre isn't available we have a world class Fixed Wireless network recently upgraded to deliver vastly increased speed and capacity.

Today more than 750,000 homes and businesses can access faster nbn network speeds through this network.

Fixed Wireless Home Fast is now available to approximately 90 per cent of the expanded Fixed Wireless footprint and is expected to offer potential maximum wholesale speeds of around 200-250/8-20 Mbps to eligible premises.

Fixed Wireless Superfast is planned to be available to approximately 80 per cent of the expanded Fixed Wireless footprint and is expected to offer potential maximum wholesale speeds of up to 400/10-40 Mbps to eligible premises.

Customers wanting to connect to our new Fixed Wireless services can check the availability on our website nbnco.com.au which will show you which Retailers you can contact to order a service. **nbn** will then send one of our expert technicians to do a signal check and if eligible they will do a free of charge professional installation at your home to help ensure the best possible service.

As a result of the expanded coverage about 120,000 premises previously served by nbn Sky Muster satellite can now access nbn Fixed Wireless and faster nbn broadband for the first time.

Within the remaining nbn Sky Muster satellite footprint, all eligible homes and businesses now have access to uncapped³ internet data and faster speeds.

³ Subject to Fair Use Policy and shaping



8. Supporting regional business

So what does all of that mean for Australian business, including the critical small business sector which are often called the ‘engine room’ of the economy, and with good reason.

After all, about 97 per cent of all Australian businesses are small businesses that employ less than 20 people⁴ and their needs are specific, and changing.

From a telecommunications perspective, they have growing connectivity needs that are typically higher in frequency and intensity, but they are often without the budgets to access higher priced enterprise grade products.

Small business connectivity needs have also been fuelled by sustained usage growth in cloud applications, file sharing and back up, the normalisation of remote working, a sustained shift from voice to video calling, growth in smart systems and IOT and the increasing adoption of AI applications.

All of these things would benefit from a reliable business connection with strong download and upload capabilities coupled with business service and support at the right price.

So if I had to summarise nbn’s focus on supporting business – including small business - into a few words they would be: **More Available and More Affordable**, to reflect the growing need.

Let me look at them separately.

More Available for business is through our fibre upgrade programs, our Fixed Wireless upgrades, our investments in HFC, our continued support for Business Fibre Zones, which I will explain shortly and our recent announcement of an additional 622,000 locations being upgraded, including approximately 100,000 business locations around the country.

With our regional customers absolutely front of mind we have also boosted the speeds and availability of our networks giving businesses the speeds they need to perform critical tasks like file sharing, data backup and video conferencing.

So while **More Availability** is a key focus for us, so too is making connectivity for regional business **More Affordable**.

More Affordable means wholesale pricing on Business Fibre Plans on average, have dropped by 35% from July 2023 to 2024. With an additional 21% reduction planned for later this year, meaning we will have almost halved the price overall.

⁴ <https://www.asbfeo.gov.au/small-business-data-portal/number-small-businesses-australia>



We have already seen uptake for Business Fibre double over the past 12 months, with 22,000 small and medium businesses now connected, and we expect this will continue to grow.

For big business we also remain committed to our Business Fibre Zones. These were designed to bring fibre to regional and non-regional business hubs where fibre is not available.

First launched in September 2020, Business Fibre Zones provide business customers with access to nbn's Enterprise Ethernet offering, which is a key enabler for large enterprise, providing an end-to-end fibre connection with symmetrical speeds up to 10GB, with options for eligible premises including a \$0 build and access to competitive pricing⁵.

There are currently 142 Business Fibre Zones in regional Australia up from the 86 when the program first launched in 2020.

These remain an important part of our commitment to business across Australia ensuring that 90% of all business customers can access these very very fast speeds that this end of the market needs to be competitive and to do business.

9. Collaboration for the nation

I wanted to finish my remarks today by looking to the future and asking the key question: what else should we be thinking about to support connectivity in regional and remote Australia?

Much like Australia's first peoples, the only way we will succeed is by becoming excellent communicators and committed collaborators.

Why?

Because none of our organisations can build the brilliant, connected future for Australia on our own.

So this is not just about competition it's about the whole being greater than the sum of the parts – and understanding that working together to leverage and complement each other's strengths to benefit Australia and Australians.

10. Working better together

To bring this to life a bit more, one perspective is how nbn partners with its Retail Service Provider partners, or RSP's.

⁵ The Business Fibre Zone offering does not apply to unforeseeably complex premises, premises already served by other providers, data centres and temporary sites. In order to find out if a specific address is available for the nbn Business Fibre Initiative contact an nbn service provider.



I tell my team we don't want to be a good partner, we want to be a sensational partner.

Part of this is listening and really focusing on initiatives like reducing the complexity of our IT systems to simplify interfaces for retailers, as well as streamlining processes and systems.

Part of it is focussed on being much more planned and predictable, which might not sound earth shattering, but I know it's what Retailers desperately need from nbn.

And part of it is continuing to digitise our data and interactions with RSPs via APIs to allow for better real time issue response and being really transparent about how we measure the service we provide.

And of course it is **nbn** upgrading the network to meet the growing consumer and business connectivity needs, and then partnering with our RSPs to take up those new offerings to their customers.

And this can definitely be more of a challenge in regional and remote Australia.

At a more grassroots level, each year, our nbn Community Engagement Specialists attend hundreds of events across regional and rural Australia to connect with members of the community, and help them to learn more about making the most of their nbn experience. And of course we invite our partners to attend these sessions as well.

Since nbn local was formed in October 2017 we have run 1000s of sessions, across regional Australia.

11. Critical for customers - knowing what's available

But ensuring Australians – particularly those in regional and remote Australia know that **nbn** is available continues to be a communications challenge.

What I mean by that is that there are a lot of customers out there who don't know, or aren't sure, what services are available to them, or which technology best suits their needs.

The chain - from nbn, to retailer, to customer - can be confusing.

And the tech can be confusing too.

We know from the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee – RTIRC – that some people in regional Australia can be confused about whether **nbn** is available, or not.

But let me also quote the most recent RTIRC report to shine more light on this issue.



The report says, and I quote: “Broadband connectivity in regional Australia has greatly improved, it is now ubiquitous, but awareness and understanding of available options, especially regarding National Broadband Network services, remains limited.”

There are two points I would make on this:

Firstly, and to reiterate RTIRC, nbn is available everywhere and information about what nbn services you can access is available on our website; where it is, what it is, which retailers offer it.

It’s also important to understand nbn’s services are changing all the time.

We have built and operate a world leading network but I sometimes think we are fundamentally an engineering company – we’re not always good at marketing ourselves or telling our story. We are working on that!

Our Fixed Wireless upgrades are a perfect example of that.

What we’ve built is world leading and fundamentally better than what it replaced.

Yet we call it the same thing, so it’s not always easy to understand that a step change has occurred.

Again, we can do better at that.

Given all the upgrades we have made in regional Australia already and with more underway, the **nbn** network has changed, it is capable of more and is capable of serving Australians with high quality, reliable and fast broadband.

And it’s this message we are working with our RSPs to get out. This starts with RSPs productising and then selling solutions, so that when customers reach out they can access the **nbn**’s latest offerings.

Nbn needs to do more to tell our story and we will do that alongside our Retailers who are in market.

12. Conclusion - a future to build together

Let me finish by saying a totally connected Australia is no longer a pipedream.

It’s also exciting that we are, all of us, no longer heading into a digital revolution, we are living it, as the hyper-connected world that we have enabled, takes shape and continues to accelerate around us.

The challenge now is to make sure we’re also preparing for what’s ahead – for IoT and AR/VR and robotics and automation and all the other technology innovations coming over the hill – because technology innovation doesn’t stand still and in fact continues to accelerate.



Through all of this rapid change it is also critical that - as a sector and as a community – we continue to champion solutions that build digital inclusion.

Too often in times of change those left behind are those that can least afford to be.

And the idea that a business or consumer might miss out on getting the service they need simply because of a lack of information is something that my team and I will continue to work on both directly and in partnership with our Retail Partners.

Inclusion must always be a non-negotiable at the heart of every technological advance we pursue.

Nobody should ever be left behind.

Thanks again to CommsDay for the privilege of being able to speak here today – and for bringing us all together.

And thank you to all of our industry partners.

I look forward to continuing to work with you all and continuing to build a connected nation, for everyone, everywhere, all the time.

Thank you.

<ends>

