



AUSTRALIAN LOCAL
GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION



Best practice guide for Councils when initially dealing with NBN Co

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Local Government Guide

Introduction

The National Broadband Network (NBN) is a key initiative for the Commonwealth Government and for NBN Co which is tasked to build the network. To assist in creating a platform for the delivery of high speed broadband to families and businesses throughout Australia, NBN Co is seeking assistance from local governments to expedite the rollout whilst protecting amenities.

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) has produced this guide to provide councils with key engagement insights from several of the first release NBN Co trial site councils as to how they prepared and managed their interaction with NBN Co.

While recognising that there is no one size fits all approach for councils, this guide lists several approaches that councils can undertake when dealing with the NBN rollout. The approaches have been sourced from a mix of small and large councils and we hope that their views will prove useful.

In many ways, this engagement is a partnership where NBN Co provides valuable next generation broadband infrastructure and councils facilitate the network rollout and the corresponding benefits it brings to their communities. Indeed, all of the councils interviewed in this guide welcomed being selected as NBN Co trial sites and saw the rollout as a strong benefit for their community.

The overall feedback was that the engagement with NBN Co and the overall trial rollout was positive. However, many of the councils highlighted the need for preparation:

“At first we did not understand what the NBN could be used for. It’s very important to engage early with the community and establish an internal team to work through the implications for the community.”

Senior Economic Development Manager

“Establishing a single point of contact in the council to manage and lead this project was crucial.”

Manager Engineering & Transport

“The initial data requests from NBN Co were high and this was a taxing phase of the project. Understand the project early and make sure everyone in the council including the councillors are briefed”

Economic Development Manager

“We are a small council but I still recommend that councils take charge of the project, managing expectations and understanding what will be the impact to the town and wider community.”

Economic Development Office

Clearly, there are two key areas for consideration for councils yet to engage with NBN Co:

- **Preparation:** Be prepared for the project before it arrives in your area as the initial project learning curve, NBN Co's data requirements and council resource commitments are high; and
- **Communication:** Communicate to all stakeholders in your community about how council will manage the project from the initial planning stage right through to implementation and completion of the project.

Finally, although councils deal with infrastructure developments on a daily basis, it is important that the scale of the NBN rollout is put into perspective. The rollout is National and aims to supply fibre broadband connections to 93% of Australian premises, with the remaining 7% served by a mix of wireless mobile and satellite technologies. In total, NBN Co will cover 13 million premises by 2021 and involve the installation of 181,000 km of optical network cable and 57,000 km of transit fibre. For councils this implies that NBN Co will:

- Require a regional site for a Fibre Access Node.
- Provide a Fibre Distribution Hub for every 200 premises.
- Connect a Network Termination device to each premise.
- Require rights of way and access for the provision of backhaul transmission services to and throughout the area.
- Determine the optimal mix of underground vs overhead cable throughout the municipality.
- Carefully traverse heritage & environmentally significant regions and manage local planning codes.

For more information on the technical aspects and implications we recommend you read NBN Co's Information pack available at www.nbnco.com.au.

The remainder of this guide lists a series of suggested actions that councils can follow in preparing to deal and engage with NBN Co.

Preparation

In the initial engagement period, NBN Co requires councils to provide a wide range of local planning information. At the same time, local residents and businesses within the community will want to understand the impacts and benefits of the NBN rollout.

Any preparation that councils can undertake before they are contacted by NBN Co will help reduce the initial workload requirements and also allow councils to proactively manage the community engagement.

Consider the development of a local digital economy strategy

Councils generally understand that high speed broadband will provide benefits to their region over time but exactly how these benefits occur is often not clear to the local community, i.e. there is little experience as to how the community and local businesses can benefit from future broadband services.

A regionally based digital economy strategy that is part of the council's long term economic development strategy can provide an excellent vehicle to identify, communicate and consolidate the issues and opportunities that the NBN rollout will bring to the council and community.

Further, given the NBN rollout may take several years to implement (NBN Co have scheduled the rollout to occur over the next nine years), the local digital economy strategy can be based around a medium term vision and include a path for implementation. The plan could also provide guidance to stakeholders within the community in relation to the benefits that the digital economy (and in particular the NBN rollout) will bring to the region and the likely growth of the broadband footprint within the region.

Several councils have activities underway to develop their digital economy strategies including Sunshine Coast Council, City of Onkaparinga and Ipswich City Council.

Prepare local planning data

As part of the initial engagement process, NBN Co will seek a large amount of local planning information from the council. If councils prepare this information in advance then they have the opportunity to streamline the initial engagement with NBN Co while also making council stakeholders more aware of the rollout implications and opportunities for their region.

Our discussions with the first release councils and NBN Co have highlighted the requirement for the following data sets to be prepared by the council to assist NBN Co and its subcontractors:

- **Heritage precincts and environmentally significant zones:** This is an important issue for NBN Co network planning as these areas may not fall under the Low Impact Facilities determination of the Telecommunications Act (1997).
- **Location of existing ducts and any shared trench arrangements:** This information, if known by the council, may help to reduce NBN Co's network construction and the associated asset disruption to the council.
- **Planned site developments/Greenfield sites¹:** An existing development site may currently register as a single premise within NBN Co's planning system. However there may be development plans with council to build multiple premises on the site. This information is important for NBN Co's network planning if it is to provide fibre to each premise. NBN Co may also be able to coordinate build activities for these areas with the site developers and minimise asset disruption.
- **Overhead/underground power infrastructure:** While this information may not be known to the council, any pre-work the council can do with the local utilities may help NBN Co's network planning group to understand the local options around underground versus overhead cable provision.
- **Identification of current or planned council works for Co-investment:** Providing information about existing or planned council works may allow NBN Co to coordinate their network rollout and in turn minimise asset disruption. NBN Co is developing a Co-investment model for working with Councils on projects that provide a synergy with the NBN rollout to reduce the impact of the rollout on the community and reduce the implementation cost for both parties by sharing costs across common elements. (Some examples are: undergrounding power infrastructure, streetscape work, new bridge construction, roads widening or upgrades).
- **Identification of council facilities or sites that could be used by NBN Co:** This could include identification of vacant land for NBN Co equipment such as the Fibre Access Node (FAN) and council depots for storing equipment during the rollout phase.
- **Location of commonwealth land, education, health, government facilities and rental properties:** Council can help facilitate NBN Co engagement with public housing and real estate agents for non-private dwellings and rental properties. This will also help NBN Co manage the consent process which allows access to properties to install and connect the NBN service.
- **Council specific information such as local planning codes, zoning maps, local exemptions and development application procedures:** Councils can help NBN Co with the development application process for backhaul transmission (where there are possibly multiple land owners) and for the FAN site.

¹ See also NBNCo fact sheet for New Developments, www.nbnco.com.au

Prepare a community engagement plan

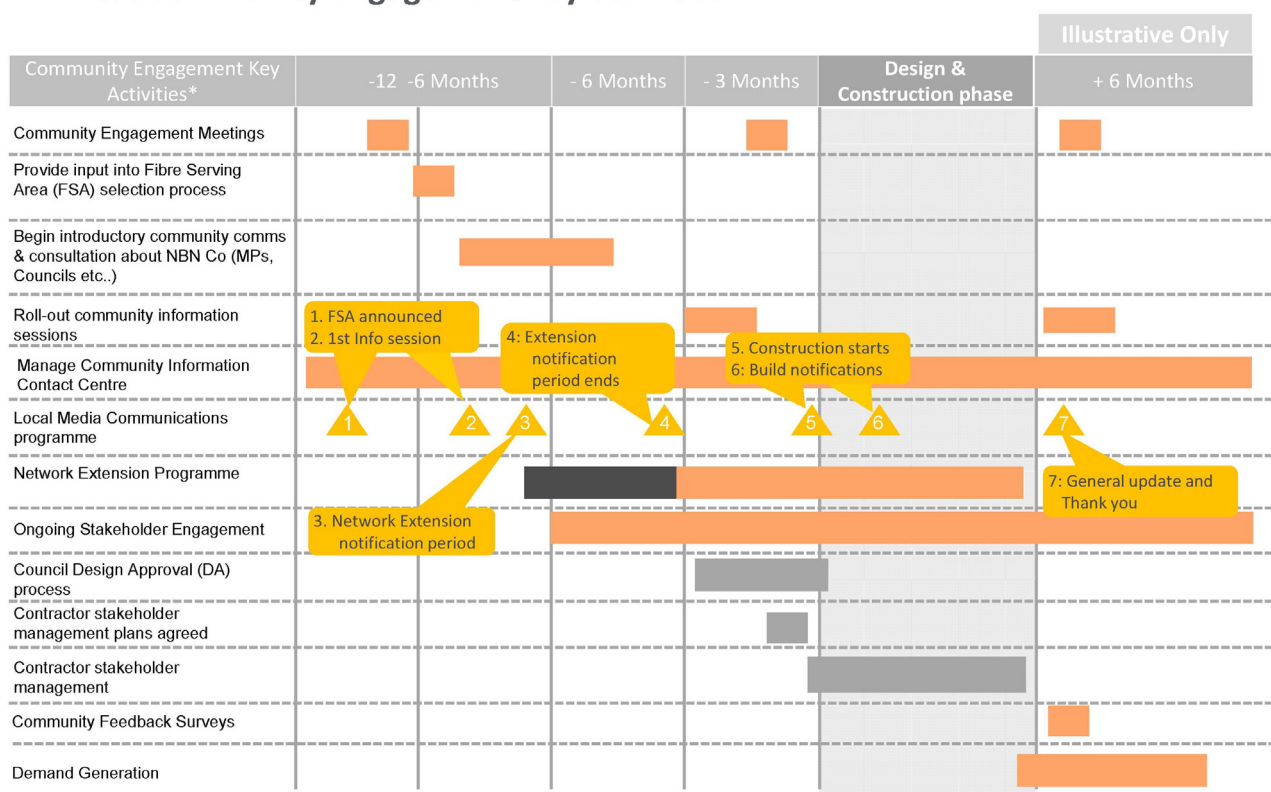
All councils interviewed for this guide highlighted the importance of communicating and engaging with the local community about this project, in particular:

- **Leadership:** Opportunity to show that council is taking a leadership role on the community impacts and benefits of the project and can be a point of contact for any issues raised by the community.
- **Benefits of NBN services:** Explain how the NBN rollout will enable new services for the community such as eEducation, eHealth and improved communication opportunities for local businesses. Where possible this should also link with any digital economy strategies that the council may be considering. There are several case studies on this topic available from NBN Co in its information pack².
- **Impacts of the build phase:** Explain and manage the impacts of the network build on the local community in terms of road works, traffic delays, infrastructure impacts such as additional cabling on power lines etc.

NBN Co has provided the following indicative planning guideline for communities which highlight the importance of pre-planning and can be used as a guide for council preparation.

Indicative community engagement plan

NBN Co: Community engagement key activities



Source: NBN Co

² For example see case studies: Small Business – remote working & increase international competitiveness, Education – teacher retention & remote field trips. www.nbnco.com.au

Council and NBN Co engagement

As well as a learning curve for the first release councils, the trial site projects also represented a learning experience for NBN Co.

The first release councils indicated that they would have liked more time to prepare and that the initial interfaces with NBN Co were not streamlined. However, the councils understood that these issues arose due to the fact they were the first release sites and they recognised that NBN Co would improve this interaction with future councils.

It is therefore important for councils to consider putting in place their NBN project engagement team in advance and to ensure that communication between the council and NBN Co is streamlined and structured in terms of accountabilities.

NBN Co engagement team structures

The NBN Co project engagement structures that were implemented by the first release councils interviewed for this guide were all quite similar.

Whether large or small, councils generally had the following core team members with the larger councils then incorporating additional team members for community consultation and IT/GIS impacts.

In all cases there needed to be a clearly defined single point of accountability for the NBN project within the council and this was especially the case for larger councils to avoid any duplication of efforts or conflicting messages. The single point of contact was generally the council economic development manager or general manager.

Core team members consisted of:

- **Economic development manager:** Manage the overall project and internal stakeholders, community liaison and communication, information collection and prime interface with NBN Co.
- **Planning and environment manager:** Assess the development application and proactively engage in the planning process with NBN Co.
- **Engineering and works manager:** Work with NBN Co's prime build contractor during implementation process.

Additional team members consisted of:

- **Community consultation manager:** Manage the engagement with the community to ensure residents, businesses and community groups are kept up to date on NBN opportunities, rollout impacts etc. This can be done via council newsletters, public meetings, community groups and local business groups. In small councils this was the job of the economic development manager while larger councils typically had a dedicated team member.
- **IT/Knowledge manager:** Ensure geographical information system (GIS) is updated and relevant to NBN Co.

Councils should consider in advance who the single point of contact will be and the formation of the NBN Co engagement team. This is especially important for smaller councils where resources can often be already stretched.

The workload demands of the first release councils also varied throughout the course of the project and in line with the project phases, e.g.:

- **Information collection phase:** This was a high engagement period for the economic development manager but also for the wider team members and councillors in order to understand the project scope and implications;
- **Planning phase:** High engagement period for the planning and environment manager interacting with the NBN Co planning team for development applications and other council planning issues; and
- **Build phase:** High engagement period for the engineering and works manager interacting with the prime contractor and to ensure a smooth network rollout with the community.

Although the project phases required different resources, all councils interviewed stressed the continued need for a single point of accountability within the council and that regular meetings with NBN Co and its prime contractor occur throughout the project.

We note that while none of the councils interviewed required additional staff to manage the NBN project, all councils stated that the workload was significant in the early stages of the project and although the workload intensity dropped off after the initial engagement period, it still remained constant throughout the project. This meant that many councils had to prioritise the NBN Co project across the range of other projects they were managing.

Apart from resourcing, the councils interviewed for this paper stated that no other major costs were incurred in managing the project. However, in-kind support was given by many councils in terms of advertising, organisation of community forums and use of library space for education material.

Finally, all councils agreed that once the initial understanding of the NBN build was clear, the project could be regarded as 'medium complexity' compared to the range of other council infrastructure and planning projects.

Councils should consider how the above workload demands will impact their current business load and how they will deal with this through their engagement team.

Collaboration with other councils

Some councils interviewed for this report collaborated with each other to share their experiences of the NBN Co build and to discuss the potential benefits and opportunities for their community.

The collaboration process can also extend to other community groups. An example of this approach is the Broadband Today³ Alliance which provides information on the NBN and the impacts and opportunities for businesses and the wider community.

Councils should consider opportunities for collaboration as a means to potentially decrease the initial workload and to understand the community opportunities of the NBN rollout.

³ www.broadbandtoday.com.au - This is an initiative led by the Sunshine Coast Council as part of its Digital Economy Plan.

NBN Co and council collaboration

Given the close working relationship between NBN Co and councils, NBN Co has produced a stakeholder management list of possible areas for collaboration. These lists have been reproduced below to show the wide range of possible areas that councils could collaborate with NBN Co – subject to resourcing constraints.

NBN Co – Council Collaboration groups (Source: NBN Co Information Pack)

Council Stakeholder Group	Activity	Comments
Mayor and CEO	Media opportunities and communication of NBN related information, including direct communications	- Assist in identifying stakeholders, associations, community and business groups, champions etc. - Provide advice on legacy issues - Assist in identifying local opportunities for communication channels (events / festivals markets) - Assistance with opt-in consent program (where implemented) - Briefs to council
Corporate services	Planning, data, infrastructure development	- Planning - Development approvals - Heritage, environmental, native vegetation - Statutory and structure planning - Greenfield developments - Infrastructure projects - Council civil works - Forward scheduling of works - Road closures and traffic management - Notifications - GIS Officer - Access to council GIS data and overlays - Economic development - Local opportunities (events / festivals markets) - Speaking and promotional opportunities - Opt-in consent program (where implemented) - Databases - Rates database (property owners) - Stakeholders and business groups contacts - Health, education and emergency services contacts
Media and communications	Media and marketing opportunities	- Media releases - Photo opportunities - Information flow (internal council and community) - Media channels - Legacy issues (previous infrastructure projects) - Local media opportunities (events / festivals markets) - Opt-in consent program (where implemented) - Translation and storyboarding assistance
Library	Collateral and venue hire	- Storyboards and static displays - Community information sessions / briefings
Community health (aged care)	As above	- Translation and storyboarding assistance - Effective engagement strategies - Storyboards and displays - Community information sessions

NBN Co Implementation Phase

In terms of overall timing, the councils interviewed for this report indicated the following timescales for the planning and construction phases of the trial sites:

- **Planning Phase:** Depending on the level of council preparation and geographical differences, this phase lasted approximately 3 – 6 months.
- **Construction Phase:** Depending on the number of target premises and geographical differences, this phase lasted approximately 6 – 12 months (although some were still ongoing).

While NBN Co manages the planning phase of the project, construction will be done by NBN Co's prime contractor for that region and the associated sub-contractors to the prime contractor.

Most of the councils interviewed were generally happy with the level of professionalism of the prime contractor (chosen by NBN Co) and the sub-contractors to the prime contractor. However, this did vary from council to council as different prime contractors were used.

As discussed above, a clear project team and regular community and NBN Co engagement helped deliver the project more smoothly, however councils highlighted the following areas for additional focus:

- **Information handover period:** With good preparation this workload can be minimised but it does represent a high period of activity. This can also include identification of specific build options (including location and acquisition of FAN sites), accelerating the development application approval process and checking that the initial footprint maps from NBN Co match the council information (which was not always the case).
- **Prime contractor communication with local residents:** It was important to ensure consistent levels of community communication - especially around community build impacts such as power outages for local businesses and traffic management which had caused issues for some councils;
- **Sub contractor monitoring:** Some councils indicated that they had started to supervise (via asset protection officers) the sub-contractor(s) to ensure that they were meeting council standards in regard to the NBN Co build. While this is similar to any infrastructure project, councils emphasized the potential increase in workload for council works staff for this project.
- **Opportunities from the build phase:** Councils also noted that the build phase provided opportunities for local business to support the build, e.g. sub-contracting to the prime contractor and short term accommodation opportunities for the network build employees.

We note that NBN Co has provided details about the network infrastructure, above ground and under ground network construction, construction activities and environmental planning in its NBN information pack (available at www.nbnco.com.au).

In summary, there was general agreement from the councils that the first release NBN rollout involved a great deal of preparation and learning. However all councils agreed that these aspects would be minimised for additional rollout phases – moving the complexity of the engagement to low-medium and decreasing the planning phase timeframes by an estimated 50%.

Councils also agreed that the overall engagement structures they employed with NBN Co worked well and that they would not need to change the structures for future rollouts – however many felt it would be necessary to engage a full time officer to manage the project.

Future councils should therefore consider the overall council workload, resource implications and data requirements when preparing to engage with NBN Co. While this is an opportunity to deliver an important piece of residential and business infrastructure to the community, it also has a relatively high cost on council resources. Any preparation councils can undertake in advance of this engagement will help smooth out the resource load and overall delivery of the project – to the benefit of the community.

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