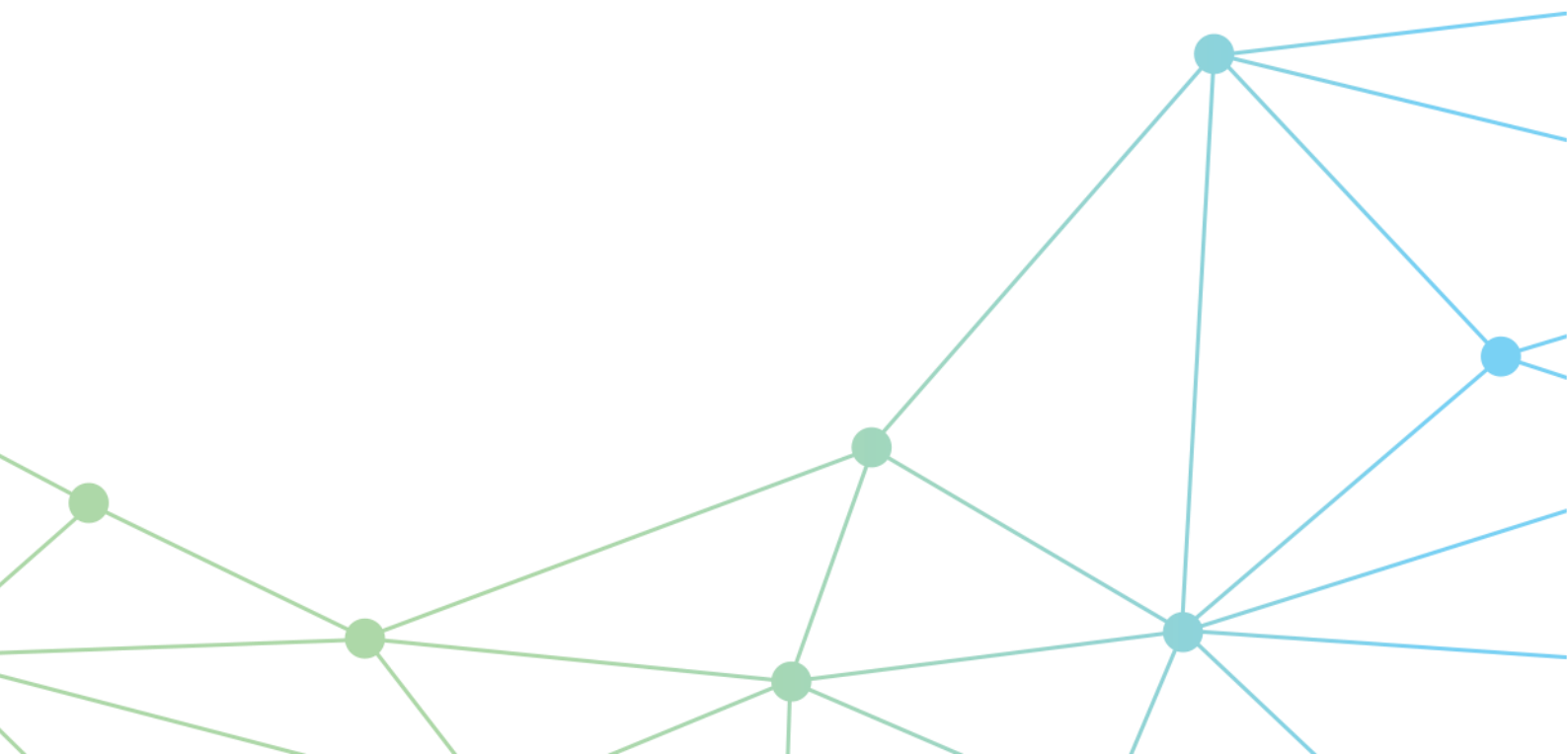**Australian Government**

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

Community Broadcasting Sector Sustainability Review

Findings report

March 2025

1. Table of Contents

2. Introduction

2.1 About the sustainability review

This findings report is part of the Community Broadcasting Sector Sustainability Review (sustainability review) conducted by the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts (the department) based on the Terms of Reference.[1] The department's overall objectives were to deliver advice to the Australian Government (the government) about the effectiveness of the Community Broadcasting Program (CBP) and options for consolidation of First Nations funding across government, and to identify options to support the sustainability of the community broadcasting and First Nations media sector (the sector).

Sustainability is the ability of the community broadcasting sector (sector) to stabilise its operations through reduced reliance on CBP and Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Program (IBMP) funding so it can achieve greater financial stability, and be less vulnerable to any future policy and funding changes.

The government acknowledges the vital role of the sector in promoting a diverse Australian media landscape, and amplifying stories that are not captured elsewhere. The government and the sector should consider how to maximise the impact of the CBP (section **4** refers) and the Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Program (IBMP, section **6** refers) while ensuring cost-effective investment.

In the 2022-23 Budget, the government committed to working with the sector to identify a sustainable funding base for the future. The government announced the sustainability review in October 2022, and the department has undertaken this review in 2 phases. Next steps following the consideration of the findings and recommendations in this report will be a matter for government.

2.1.1 Phase 1: independent evaluation

Phase 1 commenced in March 2023 with an independent evaluation of the CBP, commissioned by the department and undertaken by the Social Research Centre (SRC).[2] The evaluation found that while the CBP is mostly effective, has a range of positive impacts and funding has been vital for continuation of operations, it has not promoted sustainability through reducing reliance on grant funding and building station resilience.

The evaluation found that the CBP is only partially achieving its objectives. This includes that:

- the CBP can more effectively help grantees undertake day-to-day operations, development, capacity building and sector-wide projects
- the CBP can better identify and address emerging and unmet needs in the sector (e.g. operational costs, capacity building, self-sufficiency, community engagement, digital transformation and infrastructure)
- the grants assessment and decision-making processes could be more effective
- funding can be tailored to organisational needs, and focus on partnerships and networking to support content, knowledge and skill-sharing in the sector.

2.1.2 Phase 2: public consultation

Phase 2 was a public consultation led by a Discussion Paper between June and September 2024.[3] The Discussion Paper was supported by workshops and one-on-one meetings with community broadcasters, sector peak bodies, Remote Indigenous Media Organisations and First Nations media services. The department promoted this via its website and the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF), the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, and First Nations Media Australia (FNMA). Participation was voluntary.

----

[1] Terms of Reference
[2] Evaluation of the Community Broadcasting Program: Final Report—June 2024
[3] Sustainability review discussion paper—June 2024

The department received 31 submissions, with 26 of these public, consulted with representatives from 73 organisations through 11 workshops, and 42 organisations through one-on-one meetings. All participating organisations were eligible for the CBP, and 9 were eligible for the IBMP. The department has published all public submissions and group workshop summaries on its website.[4] The Minister for Communications, the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, also visited 3 community broadcasters.

2.2 Context

2.2.1 Community broadcasting

The *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (BSA) is the primary legislation that governs the sector. There are over 450 community radio services, 3 community television services, 9 sector peak bodies and one First Nations media organisation operating across Australia.

Community broadcasting services are provided for community purposes, are not operated for profit or as part of a profit-making enterprise, provide programs that are able to be received by commonly available equipment, are made available free to the general public, and comply with any determinations or clarifications under section 19 of the BSA in relation to community broadcasting services.

2.2.2 The Community Broadcasting Program

The CBP is the government's grants program to support a diverse, innovative and resilient community broadcasting sector. Since 1984, the CBF has distributed CBP funding to the sector through merit-based grants processes. In the 2022-23 Budget, the government committed an additional $4 million per year over the forward estimates to the CBP, and reintroduced ongoing indexation. In 2024-25, ongoing CBP funding was $22.6 million and will increase to $24.1 million in 2027-28.[5]

In December 2024, the government announced that the CBP will receive additional, non-ongoing funding of $15 million over 3 years from 2025-26 to 2027-28. This includes $3 million for community television.[6] This will take CBP funding to $85.8 million over 3 years.

There are 3 grant streams under the CBP: content, development and operations, and sector investment grants to support sector coordination and sector-wide development projects. There is also a First Nations Community Broadcasting Fund in the CBP, which accounts for $1.4 million of overall funding. This supports the production, broadcasting and dissemination of First Nations content.

The current granting arrangements with the CBF will end on 30 June 2025, and the government will establish new grant guidelines and a new grant agreement with the CBF to deliver the CBP from 1 July 2025 onwards. The sustainability review, Roadmap 2033, the Australian Government Grants Framework[7] and the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act) will inform this process.

2.2.3 The Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Program

The IBMP is the government's grants program to support the First Nations broadcasting and media sector. The IBMP helps the sector to remain an important communication mechanism in achieving Closing the Gap priorities, and to deliver culturally appropriate and accessible information. The IBMP is part of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS).[8]

Since 2019, the NIAA has distributed IBMP funding to the First Nations broadcasting and media sector. In 2024-25, around $22 million will be delivered through the IBMP to 49 services that support First Nations broadcasting and media. The current granting arrangements between NIAA and the grantees are multi-year arrangements ending on 30 June 2025, and the government will establish new grant guidelines and/or new

----

[4] Have your say | Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts
[5] Portfolio Budget Statements | Budget 2022-23; Portfolio Budget Statements | Budget 2024-25
[6] Charting the course for a diverse and sustainable news sector
[7] Australian Government Grants Framework | Department of Finance
[8] Indigenous Advancement Strategy | NIAA

grant agreements from 1 July 2025 onwards. The sustainability review, digital inclusion strategies, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the Australian Government Grants Framework and the PGPA Act will inform this process.

In December 2024, the government announced that the IBMP will receive additional, non-ongoing funding of $12 million over 3 years from 2025-26 to 2027-28.[6] This will take IBMP funding to $81 million over 3 years.

2.2.4　Roadmap 2033

The sector released its own roadmap in 2023, which identifies 4 key priorities: grow the sector's capability, celebrate the sector's identity and demonstrate impact, amplify diverse voices, and secure capacity to meet community need. Many of the submissions received in Phase 2 referenced Roadmap 2033's key strategic priorities, including:

- community broadcasting infrastructure being able to withstand disruption and natural disasters
- increasing the prominence of First Nations media
- utilising community media to counter the rise of misinformation and disinformation
- increasing collaborative capability and capacity to secure sponsorship, fundraising and other revenue
- increasing access to technology, resources and skills to deliver content across platforms
- a clear, evidence-based case for funding shifting from activities to outcomes
- developing a skilled and sustainable workforce that can adapt to evolving community needs.[9]

2.3　Scope

The scope of the sustainability review was limited to topics in the government's Communications portfolio and the Indigenous Australians portfolio, as related to community broadcasting, including:

- the effectiveness of the CBP
- how to increase sector sustainability, capability and capacity
- identifying emerging needs (e.g. local news and disaster response)
- a shared outcomes framework to help measure impact and inform decisions
- consideration of regulatory issues under the BSA
- First Nations broadcasting funding and licensing.

The department grouped these topics into 3 key priority areas:

- CBP funding, structure and outcomes
- Legislative and regulatory issues
- First Nations funding and licensing.

For topics that have touchpoints with the sector but are not within the remit of the Communications and Indigenous Australians portfolios, the department determined these to be out of scope. These are:

- the sector's implementation of Roadmap 2033
- state and territory laws regarding incorporated associations and deductible gift recipient (DGR) status
- the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission's (ACNC) review of charity size thresholds, reporting and compliance obligations
- the Productivity Commission's public inquiry into philanthropy
- the Department of Finance's review of the Australian Government advertising guidelines
- the Treasury's review of the DGR Register to streamline reporting arrangements.

----

[9] Roadmap 2033

3. Recommendations

3.1 For Australian Government consideration

Following its review, the department has made 4 recommendations across the 3 priority areas for the government to consider (**Table 1** refers). This has been informed by the Phase 1 independent evaluation report, the Phase 2 consultation, the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group Initial Report,[10] FNMA's 10 Calls to Action,[11] and Roadmap 2033.

Table 1: Recommendations for Australian Government consideration

Recommendation	Section
Priority Area 1: CBP funding, structure and outcomes	
1. The Australian Government to consider the findings of this report regarding CBP granting arrangements, funding priorities, granting streams, processes and outcomes.	4.2 4.3
Priority Area 2: Legislative and regulatory changes	
2. The Australian Government to consider the findings of this report regarding reforms to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (BSA) to allow the sector to stabilise and modernise its operations, and any updates to relevant community broadcasting guidelines and processes.	5.1 5.2
Priority Area 3: First Nations funding and licensing	
3. In alignment with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, the Australian Government to work in partnership to develop a First Nations broadcasting strategy that identifies the most appropriate portfolio lead and model to deliver IBMP funding.	6.1
4. The Australian Government to consider the findings of this report regarding legislative reforms to bring a First Nations broadcaster to licence areas that do not have one.	6.2

3.2 For community broadcasting sector consideration

This report also identifies further opportunities for sector peak bodies to offer additional support (**Table 2** refers). Consideration is at the discretion of each sector peak body and community broadcasters. This reflects the shared responsibility of government, funding bodies, sector peak bodies and community broadcasters to support the sustainability of the sector.

Table 2: Recommendations for community broadcasting sector consideration

Recommendation	Section
5. Increase revenue from other sources, including through selling content, collaboration with other community broadcasters and non-broadcasting organisations, and on-air and off-air promotional material.	4.1.2
6. Centralise services (e.g. technicians, journalists, data collection) for the benefit of a locality, region or the wider community broadcasting sector.	4.1.7
7. Support community broadcasters to understand legislation and licence conditions; and with business development, governance, revenue diversification and other needs to promote sustainability.	5.1

----

[10] First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group Initial Report 2023
[11] First Nations Media Australia Calls for Action 2018

4. Priority Area 1: Funding, structure and outcomes

Phase 1 found that the sector is over-reliant on CBP funding, and there are limitations to the CBP structure. Phase 2 found that the sustainability of the sector is impacted by a heavy reliance on a volunteer workforce with limited capacity, decreasing revenue streams, a lack of sound governance structures and business practices, and that demand for CBP funding exceeds the current funding level.

This does not necessarily reflect that the level of the CBP funding is insufficient for ensuring sustainability, but rather that the overall revenue available to the sector from all sources has lessened over time, and operational costs are increasing year-on-year.

There is an urgent need to increase workforce capability, implement sound governance structures and business practices, update the regulatory framework, and allocate the CBP funding in a way that balances short-term operations with long-term innovation and sustainability.

4.1 Funding

4.1.1 Reliance on funding

The evaluation of the CBP found that as a whole, the sector is currently over-reliant on CBP funding, and the CBP funding to date has not promoted sustainability. Between 2017-18 and 2022-23, the sector's need for CBP grants increased; however, the number of CBP grant applications decreased. Phase 2 found that some community broadcasters were not applying for CBP grants due to the high demand, and the low likelihood a grant application would be successful. Since 2023-24, there has been a 37% increase in demand for CBP funding year-on-year, including from First Nations broadcasters for operational costs. The CBF reported being unable to fund $10.4 million of grant applications in 2024-25. However, the need for CBP funding is likely much higher, as many community broadcasters reported not applying to the CBF for a grant despite not having another source of revenue.

For non-Indigenous community broadcasters, capacity and capability is inherently linked to its mostly volunteer workforce, and the availability of funding for paid positions. First Nations community broadcasters experience challenges with retaining personnel in paid positions because they are unable to offer competitive wages. While additional CBP funding would enhance the services delivered by community broadcasters and support an increase in paid positions, optimising the use of existing funds is also essential for achieving significant longer-term outcomes.

However, there is a risk that increasing CBP funding to make up for the shortfall in non-government revenue may increase sector reliance and decrease the exploration of other revenue (e.g. sponsorship or donations) or sector-wide capacity building initiatives (e.g. governance and business support or centralised services). This would make the sector more vulnerable to changes in CBP funding in the future. There is a risk that increasing CBP funding could also lead to concerns about the sector's independence and impartiality, or the responsiveness of community broadcasters to the needs and interests of their local communities.

These risks could be mitigated by:

- increasing CBP funding for a non-ongoing period for set priorities (section **4.2.1** refers)
- providing sector peak bodies with increased funding for sector-wide initiatives which can directly support community broadcasters to improve governance, operations, programming and revenue
- providing stations with multi-year grants where year-on-year costs reduce over the funding period, and/or
- increasing funding for local and hyperlocal content relevant to community needs and interests.

Section **6.1.1** refers to IBMP funding.

4.1.2   Revenue diversification

Some community broadcasters experience challenges with securing revenue outside of the CBP due to low general awareness of community broadcasting by sponsors, low organisational capacity in business development, and legislative restrictions around sponsorships and community participation activities.

There are also limitations to the ability of some parts of the sector to diversify its revenue, due to:

- not having skilled personnel, or not having the capacity to pay skilled personnel
- having reached its on-air sponsorship limit and being unable to accept additional sponsorship
- low understanding of not-for-profit licence conditions (section **5.1.4** refers)
- changing market factors and challenges affecting the broader Australian media landscape
- wider revenue issues affecting the music, arts and cultural sectors following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite these limitations, the sector needs to be supported to pursue self-driven, non-government grant revenue to stabilise and modernise operations, and achieve long-term sustainability. This includes revenue from community events, concerts, fundraising, donations, and off-air promotional arrangements.

Funding and legislative amendments would better support the sector to diversify its revenue. These are:

- amending the sponsorship rules under the BSA (section **5.1.1** refers)
- changing the allocation of CBP funding to better support revenue diversification strategies (e.g. salaries, sponsorship and fundraising personnel) and training for personnel.

The sector can support its own revenue diversification by:

- selling its content to national and/or commercial broadcasters
- centralising personnel at sector body level or between multiple services (section **4.2.5** refers)
- collaborating with other services in matters such as governance, administration and sharing resources
- exploring mutually beneficial partnerships with non-broadcasting organisations (e.g. with universities to fund content production in exchange for providing placement opportunities for students, or with community or media organisations that provide another primary service).

Any arrangements with national or commercial broadcasters to acquire broadcasting rights to content would be through commercial negotiations between the content creators and those broadcasters.

The rules around advertising and sponsorship only apply to the community broadcasting service, and not any off-air or online activities. Therefore, community broadcasters could utilise off-air promotional arrangements via their website, social media or event set ups, ensuring that any arrangements are not for the purposes of providing services for profit or as part of a profit-making enterprise (section **5.1.4** refers).

4.2   Structure

4.2.1   Funding priorities

There were 6 funding priorities for the CBP that emerged throughout the sustainability review. These align with the ethos of community broadcasting, Australian Government priorities and Roadmap 2033. These are:

- workforce capability – paid personnel, pathways to support emerging talent, volunteer engagement strategies, governance and business support, Community Media Training Organisation training courses
- audio-visual content – the production, broadcasting and dissemination of television or video content
- news and public interest journalism – the production of content and salaries for journalists and producers
- transmission – emergency preparedness, back-up power/transmission, maintenance, technicians
- music, arts and culture – the production, broadcasting and dissemination of content, community events
- digital technology – expansion of digital projects, the Community Radio Plus and Community TV+ apps, expanding reach on other platforms, digital archiving and training.

4.2.2 Grant streams

The CBP grant streams are working well for applicants, and most of the sector supports the current CBP grant streams. In the development and operations stream, effective use of CBP funds entailed having paid staff to manage or support station operations, maintain equipment, travel to broadcast sites and manage volunteers.

The sector's commitment to producing local and hyperlocal programming that reflects community needs and interests is supported by the content stream, including First Nations content supported by the First Nations Community Broadcasting Fund. This is because some non-Indigenous broadcasters have First Nations content and support First Nations personnel, and they wish to continue fostering cultural understanding, empowering Indigenous voices, and contributing to a more inclusive media landscape.

However, some First Nations broadcasters recommended that the First Nations Community Broadcasting Fund be moved to the IBMP. There is a risk that reallocating this funding would remove access for First Nations personnel at non-Indigenous broadcasters, disadvantage First Nations content where a First Nations broadcasting service is not available, and limit the ability of non-Indigenous broadcasters to promote positive stories (e.g. through National Reconciliation Week or NAIDOC Week).

The sector investment stream is crucial for supporting sector peak bodies and to achieve the strategic goals in Roadmap 2033. There was consistent support for sector peak bodies to continue to receive CBP funding to assist with or implement governance, business planning, operational measures, and to facilitate collaboration, consortiums or intra-regional partnerships.

The multicultural and disability sub-sectors requested that the CBF consider changing these funding lines:

- change 'ethnic broadcasting' to 'multicultural' to align with modern language
- change 'Radio for the Print Handicapped' to 'disability' to reflect the different disabilities serviced.

4.2.3 Granting processes

Some community broadcasters had a level of dissatisfaction with the grant application process due to perceived conflicts of interest that the CBF's peer assessors may have in their roles as staff, volunteers or Board members at applying organisations. However, other community broadcasters recognised the peer assessor model as crucial to the CBF making informed decisions based on its knowledge of the sector and the positive impact a successful grant would have on the applying organisation.

While most community broadcasters have a general awareness of the grants that the CBF makes available, there is some confusion about how the CBF decides on the funding quantum for each stream. Particularly whether sector demand influenced the funding allocation, and whether revenue and diversity information provided as part of the grant application influenced the outcome in any way.

Some community broadcasters also shared that their unstable financial situation and the duration between applying for a grant, receiving the funding, and acquitting the funds at the end of the grant cycle had negative impacts on day-to-day operations and their ability to use the grant for its intended purpose.

Some community broadcasters and sector peak bodies identified opportunities for the CBF to improve its granting processes, including:

- reviewing the funding quantum for each stream based on sector demand in the previous granting round
- notifying the sector how much funding is available under each stream for each grant round
- reviewing the application form to ensure questions are fit-for-purpose, culturally appropriate and in plain English; and removing questions that do not inform the assessment process
- allowing some flexibility in grant activities so community broadcasters can effectively respond to change
- mitigating actual or perceived conflicts by having a mix of peer assessors and independent assessors
- improving feedback to applicants with higher income if their application was unsuccessful on other criteria
- reviewing reporting requirements so as not to be overly burdensome on applicants and still ensure continued compliance with the CBP grant guidelines and grant agreement.

4.2.4 Multi-year and multi-organisation grants

Limited access to multi-year funding added to cyclical financial uncertainty and created insecurity for staffing, operations, infrastructure, and organisational development activities for some community broadcasters. This limited progression of their longer-term strategic objectives and building resilience. Further, multi-organisation grants place unforeseen administrative burden on a single grantee, as the current arrangements only allow one organisation to apply for the grant.

Some community broadcasters and sector peak bodies identified opportunities for the CBF to offer a higher proportion of multi-year grants, to allow more than one grantee to manage a grant, and to offer guidance on which organisation would be responsible for reporting and the acquittal of funds. However, there is a risk that multi-year or multi-organisation grants may have an adverse impact on CBP funding allocation and availability, and reduce access to one-year, single organisation and lesser value grants.

There is also a risk that multi-year grants may limit the CBF's ability to respond to the changing needs of the sector or changing market factors. The CBF should consider providing CBP funding to the sector in a way that balances urgent and long-term needs of the sector.

4.2.5 Centralised services

Some community broadcasters shared examples of partnerships which improved their operational or organisational resilience, including co-location and shared sites to mitigate transmission access issues, and resources such as technical staff to manage shared infrastructure. Successful partnerships or projects were more likely to occur when there was a state-based sector body, and/or an intra-regional partnership that was responsive to the specific needs of those organisations. However, there were some challenges with coordinating region-wide or sector-wide solutions. These include a low supply of technical staff, increased travel costs and geographic isolation of some broadcasters.

There are opportunities to centralise or share non-broadcasting services within the community broadcasting sector. This includes legal advice, workforce and human resources support, business development and marketing, and governance. These services could be tailored to each state and territory, considering legislation in each jurisdiction.

Most community broadcasters recognise that data will improve their ability to write successful grant applications, secure sponsorship, and allow them to better serve their community's needs and interests. There are opportunities for the sector to centralise efforts to standardise data collection, and use metrics that are familiar to other industries (e.g. marketing, advertising and media).

Sector peak bodies are crucial to effectively manage centralised services on behalf of community broadcasters. Centralised services managed by sector peak bodies would improve sustainability because:

- initiatives can be appropriately scaled, and delivered in collaboration
- they will allow better workforce planning, retention and engagement of appropriately skilled people
- they can coordinate more sector-wide events to facilitate partnerships and exchange best practice ideas
- they can support the sector to respond to needs as they arise (e.g. when there are legislative changes, when multiple services require assistance with the same topic or issue).

4.3   Outcomes

The Phase 1 independent evaluation was limited in its ability to assess impact due to low availability of CBP outcomes data and relevant benchmarks. The SRC found that the grant application process could be further streamlined, provide greater clarity on funding objectives and outcomes, target different applicant needs, and be adaptive to emerging needs.

The CBF is taking steps to sophisticate its granting processes in response to Phase 1 recommendations by developing an outcomes framework, and aligning its monitoring and evaluation approach to Roadmap 2033.

Some community broadcasters and sector peak bodies identified opportunities for the CBF to further align granting activities with outcomes by:

- developing an Outcomes Framework to assess the impact of CBP funding on sector sustainability
- reviewing existing funding lines and considering new priorities in line with section **4.2.1** and Roadmap 2033
- considering grant activities and their links to short-, medium- and long-term outcomes
- providing clear, transparent and timely guidance to applicants/grantees on the Outcomes Framework.

As the CBF is an independent entity, it is responsible for implementing any outcomes-based granting process based on its own assessment and merit criteria.

5. Priority Area 2: Legislative and regulatory issues

Legislative and regulatory issues affecting the sector were not in scope for Phase 1, however it did find that sponsorship arrangements under the BSA were limiting the sector's ability to increase its revenue from sources other than CBP and IBMP grants. Phase 2 confirmed that sponsorship issues could be addressed through legislation to offer additional sponsorship during peak listening times without increasing sponsorship overall, but this could pose regulatory challenges.

Many key terms relating to the sector are not defined in the BSA. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) has produced guidelines based on the BSA's explanatory memoranda to assist licensees in avoiding potential non-compliance, and may be referred to by the ACMA when assessing an application for the allocation of a new community broadcasting licence or for renewal. Phase 2 found that the sector would benefit from more clarity in the BSA about key terms such as 'sponsorship', 'community service announcement', 'community participation' and 'not-for-profit'. This would support the sector to identify and make informed decisions on paid content that align with their licence conditions. In turn, this will benefit their revenue diversification and long-term sustainability.

Some community broadcasters identified opportunities to enhance the licence renewal process so as to reduce the administrative burden on licensees. This may require a combination of legislative and administrative changes.

5.1 Licence conditions

5.1.1 Sponsorship limit

Most community broadcasters and sector peak bodies are of the view that amending the current sponsorship announcement time limits would mitigate over-reliance on CBP funding, as well as enable community broadcasters to be more effective in planning and undertaking their activities year-to-year, and improve their organisational resilience to achieve long-term sustainability.

The current 5-minute (radio) and 7-minute (television) limit restricts the ability of some community broadcasters to generate more revenue, where their goal is to reinvest these funds into operations or content. These community broadcasters focus on offering sponsorship opportunities in peak listening times to increase their cost-benefit appeal, and the likelihood that the businesses they target will engage as sponsors. These community broadcasters are often reliant on funding from government grants to make up revenue they otherwise could have secured through sponsorship.

An increase to the sponsorship limit may not be a fit-for-purpose solution, as most community broadcasters are not using 100 per cent of the hourly limit every hour. Community radio broadcasters were more likely to use the whole 5 minutes per hour in peak listening hours (i.e. breakfast, morning, afternoon and drive) than at other times. Furthermore, there is a risk that increasing the hourly sponsorship limit could be seen as encroaching on the commercial broadcasting sector by raising competition for advertising revenue, and going against the community ethos of the sector.

Amendments to the sponsorship limit should balance the sector's ability to increase revenue, maintaining a point of difference from commercial broadcasters, maintaining its community ethos, and supporting the co-regulatory regime by ensuring the feasibility of making and investigating complaints. This could be achieved by removing the hourly limit and replacing it with a daily limit of 120 minutes (radio) and 168 minutes (television) with a maximum hourly limit of up to 8 minutes (radio) and up to 10 minutes (television) and either averaged over 24 hours, or in 4-hour blocks.

5.1.2   Definition of 'sponsorship' and associated terms

Some community broadcasters and sector peak bodies perceive the ambiguity of Schedule 2 of the BSA as a challenge for compliance with community broadcasting licence conditions. They noted difficulty in determining whether paid content aimed at reaching specific audiences (e.g. regional, remote and First Nations communities) is considered to be 'community service announcements', 'community promotional material', 'sponsorship' or 'advertising'.

Excluding this content from sponsorship in the BSA would provide community broadcasters with clearer guidance on how to handle this content in the context of the sponsorship limit. It would also allow community broadcasters to secure additional revenue above the 5-minute sponsorship limit, contributing to their financial stability. Legislative definitions should be sufficient to provide clear direction, yet broad enough to adapt to the evolving needs of the sector and future technological advancements. They should also align with advertising obligations imposed under Schedule 2 of the *Competition and Consumer Act 2010*.

Any legislative change is likely to prompt a review of guidance materials, however there is also a need for sector-led training and support for community broadcasters to better understand and apply the legislation.

5.1.3   Definition of 'community participation' and associated terms

The sector does not support community participation tiers for metropolitan, sub-metropolitan, regional and remote licences. The intent of community participation tiers was to place more emphasis on the quantum of community participation for community broadcasters in highly-populated licence areas and less so those in sparsely-populated areas. It was noted that this could make rural and remote communities particularly vulnerable to not having their needs and interests met by their community broadcaster, which may be the only broadcaster in that licence area.

Instead, most of the sector views the current legislative provisions on community participation as not supporting the various ways local communities engage with their community broadcaster, particularly for First Nations communities. It found that it focused too narrowly on volunteer involvement in station operations and programming, and did not consider other ways communities engage (e.g. subscribers, sponsors, donors, social media followers, and event attendees).

The Christian sub-sector considers that having a diverse range of subscribers, sponsors and donors generally indicates strong community support because it suggests the community broadcaster's mission and work resonate with many people, and they are willing to financially contribute to, or support, its cause. As such, it has called for subscribers, sponsors and donors to be included as community participation. However, there is a risk that subscribers, sponsors and donors may not be local, so it is important that community participation promotes the local and hyperlocal focus of the sector.

A definition for 'First Nations community participation' would allow a community broadcaster with an Indigenous community interest (or a potential First Nations broadcasting category in section **6.2**) to have a point of difference from general community broadcasting licences. Any definition considered should support the governance arrangements of most community broadcasters with a First Nations interest. The majority of these are either First Nations community-controlled organisations or Aboriginal Shire Councils, which, by definition,[12] represent and are connected to the communities they serve.

As such, any legislative definition for 'community participation' or 'First Nations community participation' should balance volunteers involved in operations and programming, local community members who are involved in other ways, and the governance structure of licensees. Such definitions should also be sufficient to provide clear guidance to the sector, yet broad enough to acknowledge the different ways local communities engage.

----

[12] [Closing the Gap Grants Prioritisation Guide](#)

5.1.4   Definition of 'not-for-profit' and associated terms

Community broadcasters remain committed to not-for-profit values. Sector peak bodies encourage eligible community broadcasters to register as a charity, and obtain deductible gift recipient (DGR) status under the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (ACNC Act). Most community broadcasters are registered charities and/or have DGR status, and must comply with the ACNC Act.

Any legislative definition or guidance of 'not for profit' in the context of community broadcasting should align with the ACNC Act and other Commonwealth requirements, and consider activities specific to community broadcasters (i.e. using sponsorship revenue to reinvest in station operations, programming or capital works). It should also speak to the use of the broadcasting service and online/digital platforms, station websites or social media for promotional arrangements. This would support the sector to differentiate between revenue and profit, and make informed decisions on revenue-raising opportunities.

Some community broadcasters prefer to mitigate perceived or actual risks of non-compliance with the 'not-for-profit' licence condition by avoiding legitimate sponsorship or other revenue-raising opportunities that are permissible under their licence. This highlights an opportunity for sector peak bodies to help their members to navigate not-for-profit obligations, particularly differentiating between 'revenue' and 'profit', so it does not impact upon the ability to seek legitimate revenue.

5.2   Licensing processes

While the sector welcomed the ACMA's recent streamlining of its licence renewal form, some community broadcasters continue to find the licence application and renewal process burdensome due to the amount of information requested. This is particularly the case for community broadcasters that have less than one full-time staff member or are volunteer-run, hold multiple licences all of which need to be renewed at the same time, or whose personnel experience language and literacy barriers.

The ACMA follows the legislative provisions in the BSA in regards to its licensing and renewals processes.

Some community broadcasters identified opportunities to improve the licensing renewal process, including:

• allowing services with multiple licences to renew all licences they hold using one form
• fast-tracking renewals for licensees compliant with licence conditions, at low-risk of non-compliance, or without any major changes in technical requirements, infrastructure or equipment since the last renewal
• staggering licence renewals throughout the year so that licensees can assist each other
• facilitating early intervention for permanent licensees experiencing difficulties in meeting licence conditions to transfer the licence to another organisation to ensure continuity and stability for personnel.

Some of these improvements may require legislative change, and those changes should align with other crucial elements of the licensing regime such as licence duration and renewal application processes. Taking an early intervention approach would also require the development of criteria and processes to determine licensees at risk of non-compliance and what constitutes a major change since the last renewal. Any reform to the licensing processes in the BSA should balance the needs of community broadcasters with public interest standards, quality broadcasting services, and diversity in the media landscape.

Some community broadcasters also identified opportunities for sector peak bodies to provide additional support with licence applications and renewals; particularly with implementing sound governance structures, business practices, policies, and procedures to support compliance with licence conditions.

6. Priority Area 3: First Nations funding and licensing

First Nations funding through the IBMP and First Nations broadcasting licences were not in scope for Phase 1 of the sustainability review.

The First Nations broadcasting and media sector is a vital community resource. The sector promotes connection to culture and language, and supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have access to information and services. This enables informed decision-making by sharing local stories, news and information. Remote First Nations broadcasting services often provide a primary media source for their communities due to limited access to television, the internet and other radio broadcast services.

The First Nations broadcasting and media sector is disproportionately impacted by sector-wide challenges affecting long-term sustainability. This is due to their often rural or remote location, challenges with revenue diversification, and the generally low socioeconomic status of the communities they serve. The First Nations broadcasting and media sector identified opportunities to improve the funding priorities and administration of the IBMP to achieve long-term sector sustainability. It also called to establish a funding model that reflects principles of self-determination and shared decision-making, introduce a First Nations broadcasting licence category under the BSA, and bring services to licence areas that do not have a First Nations broadcaster.

6.1 Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Program

6.1.1 Funding

First Nations broadcasters are disproportionately impacted by the funding constraints faced by the broader community broadcasting sector (section **3.1** refers). First Nations broadcasters operating in regional or remote locations raised that their operating costs are significantly higher as personnel and resources are difficult to source, and services are more vulnerable to severe weather and natural disasters. Further, revenue diversification is particularly challenging in these contexts due to the generally low socioeconomic status of the communities they serve and fewer potential sponsors available in their communities. This results in less opportunity to supplement government funding with membership fees, sponsorship or fundraising.

The NIAA receives regular requests for funding that cannot be met from current IBMP funding. As such, there is increasing demand for supplementary funding through the CBP for quick response, development and operations, and content funding.

6.1.2 Priorities

From Phase 2 consultation with First Nations broadcasters, there were 5 priorities emerging for the IBMP:

- operations
- workforce capability (e.g. staff recruitment, retention, training and development)
- news and journalism
- replacement and maintenance of ageing infrastructure
- establishment of new First Nations broadcasting services in licence areas not currently serviced.

To improve flexibility to respond to supplementary funding requests, the IBMP funding would be best administered via a mix of longer-term base funding for operations and competitive supplementary funding for infrastructure, workforce development and other sector priorities. The First Nations broadcasting and media sector has raised that the existing funding base is not responsive to emerging needs.

In turn, any changes made by the NIAA to IBMP funding would need to consider allocation in the context of existing funding constraints, and any challenges associated with lowering current operational funding levels to meet strategic priorities across the sector through targeted projects.

The development of a First Nations Broadcasting Strategy (strategy) would support the IBMP to be responsive to sector priorities and would improve transparency of funding decisions. The NIAA has committed to working in partnership with FNMA and the sector to develop the strategy.

This would allow the government and the First Nations sector to jointly progress opportunities identified through the sustainability review, and improve the efficacy of First Nations funding distribution to align with sector-identified priorities.

The strategy would serve as the mechanism for the government to consider a new funding model for the IBMP, and its consolidation into the Communications portfolio, if appropriate (section **6.1.3** refers).

6.1.3   Program structure

Successive reviews[13] into the First Nations broadcasting and media sector have called to consolidate the IBMP into one portfolio to maximise impact. This could involve transferring portfolio responsibility of the IBMP to the Communications portfolio. This would mean the Minister for Communications and the department would have responsibility for both the CBP and the IBMP.

While the First Nations broadcasting and media sector has mixed views on portfolio consolidation, there is general support to establish a First Nations funding model that reflects principles of self-determination and shared decision-making, with funding allocation directed or recommended by First Nations stakeholders. This would align with:

- Closing the Gap Priority Reform 1: partnership and shared decision-making, and Priority Reform 2: building the community-controlled sector
- the CBP model, administered by the CBF and utilising a peer assessment process so that funding decisions are community-led
- the strategic goals in Roadmap 2033.

The IBMP model could share features of the CBP model, such as:

- establishing processes to support delivery of IBMP funding to the First Nations sector (i.e. allocations, applications, assessment, decision-making and reporting)
- operating separately to sector bodies representing individual members' interests to mitigate perceived or actual conflicts if its members are also applicants
- granting arrangements with the Commonwealth via a closed, non-competitive grant.

Establishing the funding model and transferring the IBMP to the Communications portfolio are matters for government consideration. These may progress at the same time, in any order or independently of each other; however, should not precede the strategy (section **6.1.2** refers).

The government could then consider whether the Indigenous Australians or Communications portfolio would oversee the IBMP, including having consideration for:

- the wider IAS under which the IBMP is funded would remain in the Indigenous Australians portfolio, and therefore, the IBMP funding would be separated from the IAS
- the funding body maintaining the current IBMP grant agreements for the duration of the granting period
- the funding body providing culturally appropriate grant administration support to the First Nations sector.

----

[13] First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group Initial Report 2023; First Nations Media Australia Calls for Action 2018; Review of Australian Government Investment in the Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Sector 2010; Digital Dreaming: A National Review of Indigenous Media and Communications 1999

If the IBMP is consolidated into the Communications portfolio before establishing the funding model, the CBF could become the interim funding body. The department has a longstanding arrangement with the CBF to administer the CBP and could use these arrangements in the short-term for the IBMP. However, some First Nations broadcasters do not view the CBF as an appropriate long-term funding body for the IBMP as it is not a First Nations organisation.

6.2   Licensing

The First Nations broadcasting and media sector is a vital community resource. The sector promotes connection to culture and language, and supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have access to information and services. This enables informed decision-making by sharing local stories, news and information. Remote First Nations broadcasting services often provide a primary media source for their communities due to limited access to television, the internet and other radio broadcast services.

FNMA and some First Nations broadcasters view a First Nations broadcasting category as crucial for ensuring self-determination, editorial control over local First Nations content, and bringing First Nations services to areas where there is an identified need and available spectrum.

Changes to legislation, including the BSA and the *Radiocommunications Act 1992* (Radiocommunications Act), would be required to create a First Nations broadcasting category, however this would not guarantee access to spectrum. For example, there is no or limited spectrum availability for a new wide-area First Nations broadcaster in metropolitan and regional areas, nor is spectrum expected to become available.

In many regional licence areas, spectrum has been temporarily made available for First Nations broadcasters through temporary community broadcasting licences (TCBLs). The BSA does not currently permit spectrum planning for First Nations services on a long-term basis. The government could issue a directive to prioritise spectrum allocation to First Nations broadcasters, however there is a significant risk that the commercial broadcasting sector would have a negative response.

In lieu of this, to bring First Nations community broadcasting services to licence areas where spectrum is available, the government could consider issuing digital-only radio broadcasting licences where there is an operating multiplex with capacity. This could also assist with transitioning First Nations broadcasters from TCBLs to permanent digital licences. However, digital radio has rolled out in very few regional areas and no remote areas due to the costs to industry in establishing the infrastructure. The legislative framework envisages that community and First Nations broadcasters establish digital radio services in partnership with commercial and/or national broadcasters.

The government could consider introducing a First Nations licence category under the BSA, and then amending the Radiocommunications Act to allow the category 3 digital multiplex to be used by First Nations broadcasters. This would prioritise First Nations broadcasters, and as space allows, could be extended to other community broadcasters. While there is some spectrum availability on this multiplex, the department is yet to consult national broadcasters and assess the third-party contract arrangements to permit use of this multiplex by community broadcasters with digital-only licences.

Alternatively, First Nations services can be provided via online services (e.g. an app or website) without licences, any planning by the ACMA or changes to legislation. However, online services may not be a fit-for-purpose option for First Nations broadcasters, as digital inclusion remains an issue across metropolitan, rural and remote First Nations communities due to a lack of reliable access to the internet.