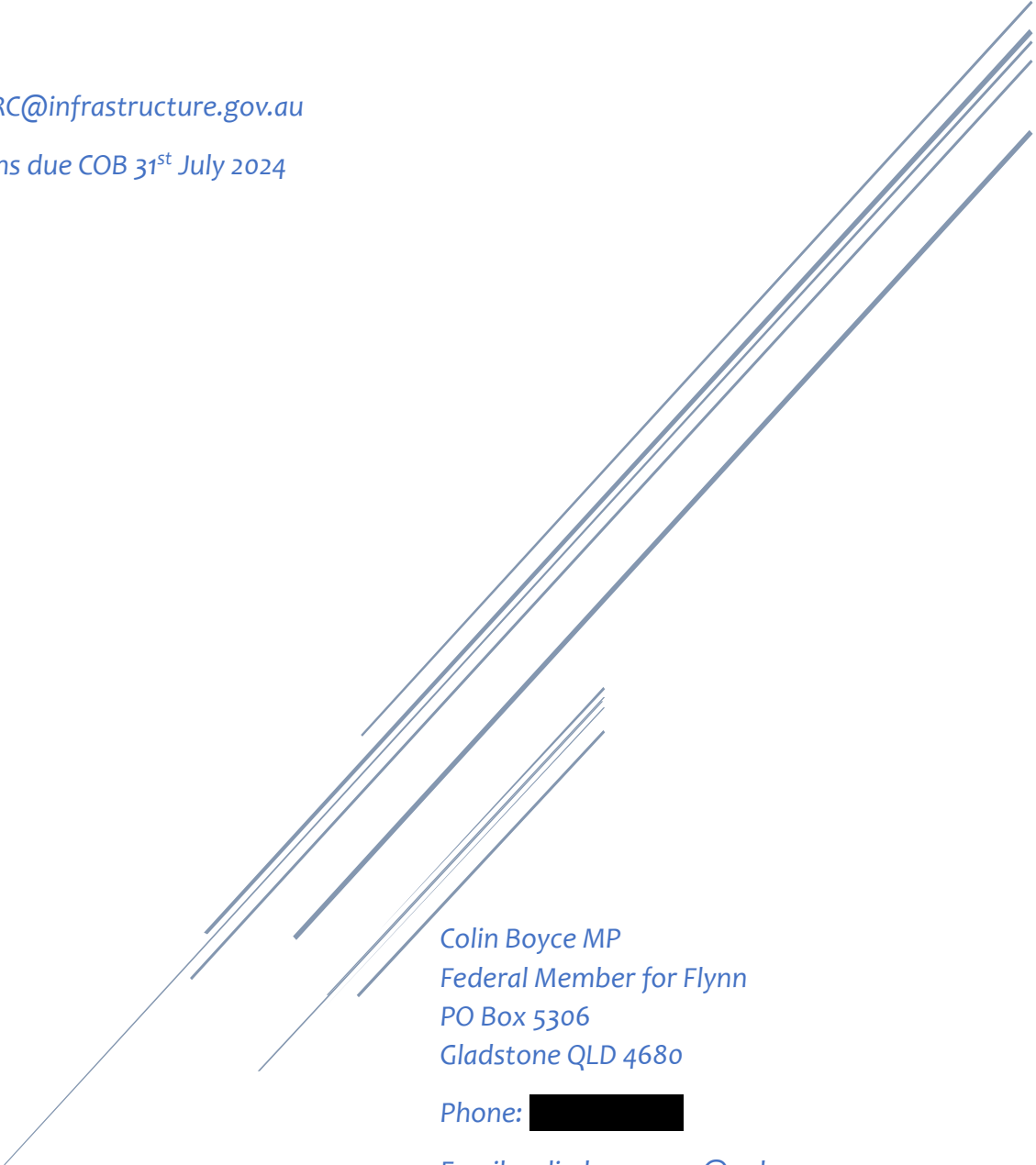


2024 REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW

2024 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review
Committee

Email: RTIRC@infrastructure.gov.au

Submissions due COB 31st July 2024



Colin Boyce MP
Federal Member for Flynn
PO Box 5306
Gladstone QLD 4680

Phone: [REDACTED]

Email: colin.boyce.mp@aph.gov.au

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Regional and Rural Connectivity Left Behind

Regional and rural telecommunications would have to be one of the biggest issues in my electorate of Flynn, no matter where you live.

In this day and age, it is reasonable to expect communication coverage, with working mobile phone and internet services. The lack of coverage experienced by many in rural and regional communities is simply unacceptable. I have had many constituents contact my office over the last 2 years with concerns ranging from living in a blackspot, decreasing service, the inability to contact the emergency services and being unable to get medical equipment to work because it cannot upload to the net.

In 2024, telecommunications have never been more important, with two factor authentication needed to access banking, MyGov and many other applications. Now with the Digital ID Bill passing in parliament this is only going to increase the need for reliable service in the regional and rural areas of Australia.

The Impact of a Lack of Telecommunications Services on the Economic and Social Circumstances of Those Who Live in Regional Australia.

Many of my constituents have told me that banks and government departments have gone solely digital. Yet, when many customers try to complete transactions or documents online, two-factor authentication is required. They are not able to complete these requests in regional Australia, as often the two-factor message does not come through or by the time they are received they have expired. This makes the running of a business almost impossible, where connectivity is unreliable or non-existent.

I have written to the committee of the Regional Telecommunications Review inviting them to visit the electorate of Flynn and hear from affected stakeholders firsthand.

The lack of access to telecommunications in regional and rural areas significantly impacts the residents' well-being by exacerbating feelings of isolation, increasing suicide rates, and complicating access to healthcare for the elderly and infirm. The large distances between properties further emphasise the importance of reliable telecommunications infrastructure to ensure that these communities are not left behind. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to improve connectivity and ensure that all residents, regardless of location, have access to the services and support they need.

The recent commitment by the government to cease cheques is another factor that thrusts the need for connectivity to the forefront.

Access to Triple Zero Emergency Calls

An example of a tragic incident that occurred because emergency services were not easily accessible by dialling triple zero, happened to a Flynn family in Malmoe, near Eidsvold. This family have spent considerable money on erecting boosters to gain mobile coverage on two of their properties, otherwise they would have no service at all. However, when they lose power, they also lose mobile coverage as the boosters shut down.

This family had a horrific incident where their elderly neighbour suffered a heart attack. Lucky, the father-in-law of the family arrived at their neighbours' home minutes after the attack, but with no phone service, he had to call on the UHF radio in his vehicle to alert his homestead and to get them to call for an ambulance before he started CPR. During this time the emergency services officer could not understand that the caller could not join the patient only 150 meters away, because there was no phone service once they left the boosted area around the house. The operator repeatedly asked for the person tending to the heart attack victim to answer questions, making him leave the patient to return to his vehicle and use the UHF to relay information to the homestead and then on to the operator. The paramedics arrived and upon transferring him to hospital later that evening unfortunately their neighbour passed away.

The Malmoe area had previously had mobile coverage and there is now nothing. This gentleman's heart attack may have been survivable if there had been mobile coverage at his home, with minutes wasted before commencing CPR spent trying to contact Triple Zero. In an emergency, life and death situations rely on good communication and every minute counts. The neighbours will always wonder if the outcome could have been different if they had been able to call 000 while starting CPR immediately.

Another example of the calls I receive, was from a distressed constituent to say that whilst traveling on the Kirwee Road (between Mt Perry and Eidsvold) they came across an accident. They found a couple on the side of the road; the man was bleeding heavily, and the lady could not get through to emergency services due to no coverage. They tried to call 000 and then 112 but still could not get through, they then tried another phone and with very patchy services managed to get through to 112. This took over an hour to relay the information and get an ambulance there, in 2024 this is simply unacceptable.

The Burnett Highway is another major issue for my constituents, with accidents on this main connection through Flynn also experiencing the same lack of connection in emergencies. Any accident occurring a few minutes outside of regional towns on this highway is unable to gain assistance without another vehicle driving to find service. There have been multiple calls about this issue over the years, with concerned constituents worried about preventable fatalities.

3G Shutdown

Just two examples of the contact my office has received by constituents affected by the 3G shutdown:

An elderly constituent from Diglum contacted me after the upgrade to 4G in her area left her without coverage that she previously had access to. Living alone over 40 minutes from the nearest township she relies on her phone service. When she approached Telstra about the situation, she was told that her antenna will no longer work because of the switch to 4G and she would need to buy a new one.

Due to poor coverage Bracewell constituents purchased, at considerable expense, a Telstra approved, Cel-fi 3G mobile signal booster so that they could receive calls within their home. With Telstra's rollout to replace the 3G network, this will lead them once again to be living without a working network in their area.

These unexpected costs are simply out of reach for those on the aged pension especially during this cost-of-living crisis we find ourselves in.

With the changes to the 3G network, many farmers were unaware of the upgrades needed to their essential hardware for farm monitoring programs. This included automatic rainfall gauges, tank monitoring programs, security cameras, remote irrigation programs to name a few. All of these technological advances for farmers have been along the lines of best practice and quality improvements, for example, preventing the waste of water when irrigating and turning off automatically when levels of output and saturation have been reached. The tank monitoring systems ensure that cattle are never out of water, and that farmers who are going about their daily business are informed when there is a leak or a problem with a solar pump not sending water to the tanks. The automatic rainfall gauges are particularly helpful with Queensland's sporadic rainfall, where the neighbour may receive an inch of rain while you only get 5 mm. This affects the planned work for the day, as well as providing accurate measurements when the property gauges cannot be reached often enough to measure – e.g. in a cyclone or storm that prevents access to the gauge.

When the 3G closure was announced, testing of these products revealed that they were not going to work without substantial re-investment into newer hardware. For a tank monitoring system this included a new aerial and hardware, valued at almost \$2,000 just to operate the equipment that had already been purchased and was working perfectly. Irrigation Monitoring had higher cost increases to continue to do what it already was doing and doing well.

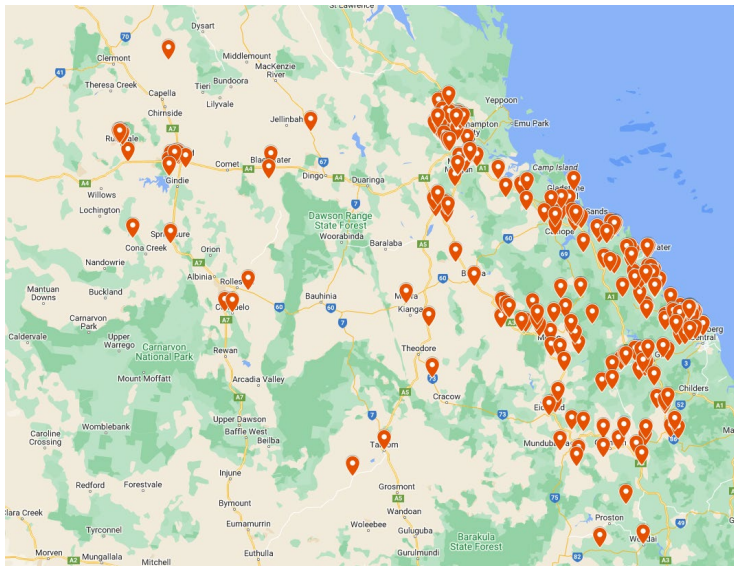
The costs of the 3G closure were again born by the farmers who have already spent the dollars to work with best practice and resource management, to continue to supply Australian families with high quality food and fodder.

Service Provisions and Coverage.

The problem with inadequate to non-existent service covers many wide geographical regional areas within my electorate of Flynn. Right around the electorate, I've had constituents contact my office regarding issues with unreliable or non-existent mobile coverage. It is simply ludicrous that there are so many people unable to access reliable coverage, as the Minister for Communication admits *“access to telecommunications is critical for every aspect of modern life, whether that's running a small business, keeping in touch with family and friends, accessing remote learning or telehealth”*.

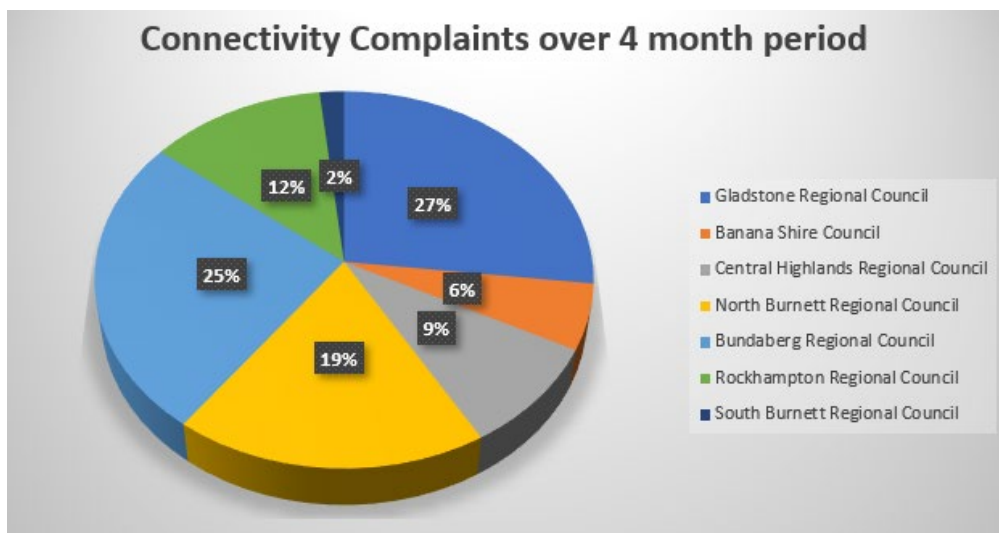
As the map overleaf shows, this is a widespread issue, with many residents unable to access mobile coverage at home or on the road.

Reported issues with Mobile Reception (4-month period)



The below table and pie chart show connectivity complaints my office received in just a 4-month period, split by Council area:

Council Area	Connectivity Complaints (4 months)
Gladstone Regional Council	62
Banana Shire Council	13
Central Highlands Regional Council	21
North Burnett Regional Council	43
Bundaberg Regional Council	59
Rockhampton Regional Council	29
South Burnett Regional Council	4
Total Submissions (first 4 months)	231



Efficacy and Capability in Disaster Situations

Mobile and internet reception is required daily to complete the most basic of tasks, but also for keeping updated on any potential or existing disaster situations. Australia is famously a land of 'droughts and flooding rains', where we experience cyclone seasons which can cause extreme destruction.

During disaster situations a lack of connectivity makes it difficult to organise evacuations, increases the risk of residents not receiving critical instructions on what to do, where to go or how to best protect themselves. Delayed information can lead to financial losses, especially in areas where weather situations can have a heavy impact on farming and small businesses. The uncertainty and lack of information during a disaster can cause significant stress and anxiety and can make residents feel even more vulnerable and isolated.

Adherence to, Adequacy of, and Opportunity to Improve Service Obligations

Telstra is expected to be under a Universal Service Obligation that they are not meeting and not acknowledging. For example, I have heard multiple times from regional customers that they are told to go to another provider, even though there aren't any in the area, as Telstra are unable to rectify their issues. Another common occurrence I hear is where customers are told they need to purchase expensive equipment to be able to access the service their neighbouring property can access for free. The other comment I hear is "it used to work fine but now it doesn't".

Telstra are also actively encouraging residents to cancel their landlines as these are older technology with difficulties in obtaining replacement parts for their aging systems. The cost of repairing and replacing the old copper lines that have given years of service is not in Telstra's best interest.

The sale of mobile phones is also unhelpful, with Telstra advertising that this is a mobile service and that it does not necessarily have to work at their home – it is a mobile device and will work where there is coverage. And that coverage cannot be guaranteed in all areas. These issues are heavily impacting our regional areas and creating the isolation and other issues that I have previously mentioned.

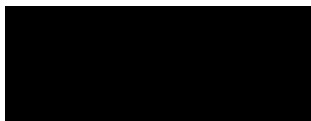
The performance criteria of this service obligation are based on fixed-line and payphone standards and benchmarks made under the Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999. As such this service seems outdated and I am encouraged to see the Minister for Communications is reviewing this USO, however I urge Telstra and the Minister to make sure that regional and rural Australians are not forgotten in this process. Landlines are integral to rural life, and they need to be maintained to a high standard which currently they are not. The new USO agreement needs to be changed to reflect the use of modern-day telecommunications, but still needs to uphold the importance of landlines and payphones, especially with the diminishing coverage in regional and rural Australia.

Conclusion

Not having a dependable phone service is undoubtedly isolating for individuals, stifling for business and potentially dangerous in any emergency. Landline telephones are often the only form of communication between one station and its neighbours and the outside world and these are in disrepair and can take weeks, sometimes months to fix when things go wrong. In rural areas, people live and work significant distances from service centres, and even further from regional towns and the need for reliable phone coverage is paramount and even more essential than in the cities. With banks and other essential services pushing for online over face-to-face assistance and closing branches in the regions, there needs to be wider spread phone coverage instead of reductions.

It is simply unthinkable that those in rural and regional areas are to be left with no communication capabilities or be ransomed at extortionate prices to gain access. It is quite clear to me that in regard to the big Telco's, the communications issue is one of economics rather than service delivery. I would argue that because of the enormous progression of technology and cost, Telco's are not interested in providing communications to communities where there is little or no economic benefit for them. This is why all service obligations should be reviewed to provide better communication outcomes, particularly for isolated communities.

Yours sincerely,



Colin Boyce MP
Federal Member for Flynn

Our ref: BOYCE Regional 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review