



Garth HAMILTON MP

Federal Member for **Groom**

Listening. Working for you!



The Chair

Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

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

GPO Box 594

Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Chair

2024 Regional Telecommunications Review

I am making this submission to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review on behalf of my electorate of Groom. I intend to underscore the views and experiences of people using telecommunications services in regional and rural Australia.

All Australians deserve access to a reliable and efficient telecommunications service. In regional, rural and remote areas, telecommunications services are even more critical as they enable access to many services which are not available on a face-to-face basis in these locations. In my electorate of Groom, located in regional Queensland, I am aware that this is not always the case, and that the 'digital divide' still exists.

The 2024 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Issues Paper (Issues Paper) released in April this year refers to "being and staying connected", yet in recent months, my office has received numerous complaints about failings in the provision of telecommunications services by carriers and providers.

In addition to constituent-specific issues, there have also been several systemic issues reported to my office. Issues have been experienced across all telecommunications carriers and providers including Telstra, Optus and Vodafone.

Planned communication tower outages

- Network disruptions due to communications towers being taken out of service, for planned maintenance or upgrade activities, without a back-up solution, are problematic.
 - The Toowoomba West mobile tower was taken out of service for an upgrade, however "some unexpected issues" meant that the upgrade took longer than planned. The tower ended up being out of service for February/April/March 2024. The outage impacted many residents in the Toowoomba suburbs of Torrington and Wilsonton, including residents in the Bridge Street Resort which is an Over 50s community living complex. Many of these residents are advanced in aged with health issues and were extremely concerned at having no phone coverage for emergency reasons.

- The Bloodwood Hill Radio Tower at Jondaryan was taken out of service in February 2024, impacting rural residents in Cecil Plains.
- The upgrading of Telstra equipment in Glenvale meant that residents in the region had little to no phone coverage for a period of six weeks in February/March 2024.
- The Mount Rascal Tower will be upgraded from 20 May to 31 May causing interruption to mobile services in the vicinity. My office has been advised that mobile handsets, EFTPOS machines and any device with a Telstra Mobile SIM will be impacted. Work will be undertaken mostly during daylight hours for health and safety reasons, however the lack of a backup solution is not ideal.

Unplanned communication outages

In February 2024, the Goombungee-Haden Show experienced significant network access issues on the night of its rodeo. The Society had advertised the availability of EFTPOS at the gate, and an on-site ATM for cash withdrawals. Unfortunately, the Society was forced to make the difficult decision to let people into the Show free of charge given credit card payments for entrance fees could not be processed.

The Society has estimated that the impact on the Show's profits was between \$5500 and \$6500 in lost entrance fees and reduced sales of food and drink. Although the problem was first thought to be a Telstra Outage, it later became apparent that it was an overloaded network given the increased number of people who attended the rodeo.

Individual and community-wide telecommunications issues

In addition to the larger systemic issues, there have been numerous issues reported by my constituents on an individual basis:

- Problems with getting an internet connection and maintaining the connection (Highfields, Geham, West Haldon, Wilsonton, Harristown, Glenvale, Newtown, Centenary Heights, Kearney's Spring, Westbrook, Blue Mountain Heights, Purrawunda, Brookstead, Goombungee, Pittsworth, Ramsay, Cabarlah)
- Intermittent or poor mobile phone service (Highfields, Geham, Harristown, Centenary Heights, Kleinton, Wilsonton, Cambooya, Glenvale, Brookstead, Newtown, West Haldon, Hodgson Vale, Westbrook, Blue Mountain Heights, Pittsworth, Cabarlah, Goombungee, Ramsay, parts of East Toowoomba)
- Business connection issues impacting operations (Highfields, Brookstead, Pittsworth)
- Low download speeds (Harristown)
- No reception in specific areas (West Haldon)
- Poorly maintained phone boxes in regional townships (Pittsworth)
- Lack of internet providers in particular areas (Highfields, Ramsay)
- Affordability issues with an internet/mobile connection (Wilsonton, Cabarlah, Glenvale, Pittsworth)
- Issues with payment plans and misalignment of customer expectations with those of carriers (Wilsonton)
- Place-based issues, such as poor mobile phone reception and slow internet speeds, impacting large parts or entire communities based on geographic locations (Glenvale, Wilsonton, Torrington, Jondaryan).

Some of the comments made by constituents in my electorate include:

I live near the Toowoomba showgrounds. Neither telstra or optus have been able to provide mobile coverage which enables me to have full bars of service for mobile calls inside my house. If my wifi is down in a power loss for example, I have very slow 4g internet. I have a 'landline' phone for wifi calling in an emergency in case I can't use 4g. Telstra claimed I needed to pay \$1000 for a booster – [this should] not be required as I live only 10km from Toowoomba CBD!

Where we are in Kleinton it is in a slight valley & is a total black spot. I have a 6 month old iPhone with 5G & I'm lucky to get one bar but walk a 100 mtrs or so up the road & it's 3-4 bars. I've constantly complained to Telstra but they don't care. We in Kleinton need a dedicated 5G tower or boost those in our area to pick up around my area.

After 6 years and two different cases with the ombudsman, we finally gave up on Telstra for our home internet. We have little to no phone service here 90% of the time, not satisfactory for what we have to pay. [Geham]

Internet costs are extremely high. I am a pensioner and require the internet for multiple reasons! I feel that the government should create discounted rates for pensioners. Also that internet costs should be cheaper for families with low income! Also costs of mobile services should be also be discounted for pensioners! Finally that in many areas in Toowoomba mobile phone connectivity is poor. It can vary from room to room in my house, and many other locations!

Mobile service in Highfields is very hit and miss. Disgusting for a developed nation. Our internet is slow.

At Goombungee we only have fixed wireless NBN. Installing a FTTN or FTTP within the town would be fantastic.

We have zero mobile phone reception and very intermittent nbn reception. Drop outs on mobile phone calls happens on every single call and the internet bus so unbelievably hit and miss. Telstra just tells us it is a problem with our equipment. 100% is an issue with the services offered, not our hardware. Neighbouring properties have the exact same issues. We are 600m from the New England highway, but may as well be in the middle of nowhere. [Cabarlah]

During 4g upgrade of Telstra in Glenvale and Wilsonton we lost usable mobile and 5g internet access for longer than the 11 days originally advised. I believe that towers had been damaged but all Telstra call centres could tell us was that there were no outages and denied any knowledge of the real issue. This went on for a couple of months. Issues were no access to 000 and where I live many residents have medical alerts which would not work as required.

Lucky if we get one bar of mobile reception and when the NBN stops working, which is a regular occurrence, our modem switches to 4g which means we have no internet as there is very little mobile reception. [Goombungee]

It took Telstra over 6 weeks to repair the tower in Glenvale (February to March 2024) with very little internet or no internet but we still got billed for that time.

I have 3 children with chronic diseases who are dependent on close monitoring. Their medical devices require internet to send me alerts when they are in a life-threatening episode. If these aren't able to be sent then things become dangerous and life-threatening. [Newtown]

We are located in the middle of the flat plain of the Darling Downs. We can see Pittsworth phone tower to the east and the Millmerran tower to the west but can hardly load a web page or hold a call in the paddock. We need boosters in our houses and sheds to get any access to phone reception. The NBN in our area is acceptable but is obviously a fixed service. [Brookstead]

On 14 March 2024, I wrote to the Minister for Communications, the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, regarding issues experienced by constituents in my electorate with their mobile phone connectivity. A response from the Minister on 9 April 2024 stated that Telstra were undertaking several simultaneous upgrades to facilities in my electorate, and there were “unforeseen issues”. The Minister also advised that temporary telecommunications facilities were unable to be deployed to provide interim coverage during the upgrade work. This is not satisfactory given the extended outage that impacted residents at Bridge Street Resort for a period of three months. I would have expected that a Telstra Outdoor Transportable Event Module (TOTEM) could have been deployed as a temporary solution to boost mobile coverage during this upgrade.

The Minister also advised that Telstra was offering impacted customers compensation on a case-by-case basis. Although major outages have been experienced in my electorate, I am not aware of any reduction in charges afforded to residents or business owners in my electorate by the carriers, and I am unaware of any constituents in my electorate who have received compensation for a loss of access to the telecommunications network (eg. residents in the Bridge Street Resort).

The Issues Paper references the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) and a reduction in complaints received in recent years “which indicates improved consumer experience”. I am not sure this is a logical conclusion given I am aware of a multitude of issues in my electorate.

My office is frequently required to escalate matters so that access to telecommunications services can be restored for constituents in the electorate. Although my office reports a high level of service from the telecommunications providers that are contacted in seeking to resolve these matters, it is disappointing that such involvement is necessary.

The unavailability of telecommunications services in rural, regional and remote locations has significant repercussions, especially in the case of those vulnerable or frail members of the community needing 24/7 access to emergency services support, business owners who require

access to online banking, or farmers on agricultural properties who work alone and may need assistance in the case of accidents.

It is important that telecommunications services policies and guidelines are developed in such a way so that those who live and work in rural, regional and remote areas have access equivalent to those who live and work in metropolitan regions. Digital inclusion is no longer a preference but a requirement in order to function effectively in contemporary society.

Through this submission, I seek to draw to your attention to the current state of telecommunications services in my electorate and the detrimental impacts on those in my community. Whilst these examples do not respond directly to questions in the Issues Paper, they seek to highlight the issues, barriers and challenges experienced by those living in rural, regional and remote Australia, and provide relevant information for consideration by the Review Committee.

Yours sincerely



GARTH HAMILTON MP
Federal Member for Groom

22 May 2024