



Greater Ballarat Alliance of Councils

2024 Regional Telecommunications
Submission



The Greater Ballarat Alliance of Councils (GBAC) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review. GBAC is an alliance of six regional and rural municipalities in Victoria, collaborating to ensure our communities receive essential services and infrastructure. GBAC is in a unique position to highlight the concerns of residents living outside Australia's metropolitan centres and provide insight into the digital connectivity and digital literacy issues facing our communities.

GBAC priorities

When advocating for an improvement in telecommunications, GBAC has three top priorities:

Critical infrastructure for industrial and commercial precincts:

As new industrial and commercial areas develop, reliable digital connectivity will be vital for their success and integration into the broader economic framework.

Increased capacity for growing areas:

Rapidly growing areas need increased capacity to support periods of high demand, including surges in activity for businesses, particularly those in tourism and events, as well as peak household usage during early evenings.

Dedicated funding for digital infrastructure:

GBAC advocates for the creation of a dedicated funding stream to roll out digital infrastructure across the region. This funding will ensure that all areas, regardless of their current connectivity status, receive the necessary investments to enhance their digital capabilities.

Submission response

In our submission, GBAC provides the Review Committee with some general commentary in response to the Australian Government's terms of reference:

*"the Committee must have regard to whether people in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia have equitable access to telecommunications services that are significant to people in those parts of Australia, and currently available in one or more parts of urban Australia"*¹ and specifically responding to items:

4a Awareness and impact of the Government's investment

4b Changing and emerging technologies

4c Attitudes and awareness in regional communities

4f Suitability of regional communications during emergencies

4a) Awareness and impact of the Government's investment

Since the last telecommunications review in 2021, the Government's \$1.1 billion investment in regional communications, including the \$656 million Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia, has had some impact within the GBAC region. Notable projects include **NBN Fibre Broadband Upgrade for Teesdale** (Golden Plains Shire) and **Telstra Mobile Voice and Data Project for Tylden** (Hepburn Shire Council).

However, despite these investments many of GBAC's community members and businesses continue to struggle with unreliable service, poor coverage, fragile network infrastructure, and limited connectivity consumer options.

¹ <https://www.rtirc.gov.au/terms-reference>

4b) Changing and emerging technologies

The rapid advancement of technology presents both opportunities and challenges for our regional and rural communities. The growing divide in telecommunication services between metropolitan and regional Australia highlights the barriers faced by GBAC communities, impacting liveability and infrastructure. Key issues include:

Business

Reliable telecommunications are essential for daily operations. Regional agricultural industries rely on internet-connected systems for managing livestock, gates, feed, water levels, irrigation, and soil moisture. Connectivity issues disrupt these systems, making it harder for businesses to operate, make decisions, and plan.

E-commerce

E-commerce has been mostly positive for our communities, enabling regional businesses reach wider markets, but unreliable internet complicates banking and bill-paying, forcing reliance on single distant locations like post offices and banks. This challenge is compounded by inadequate road and rail infrastructure between regional towns.

Education

Students without reliable internet struggle with homework and assignments, falling behind their peers. Poor connectivity also prevents remote access to further education, deepening educational disparities and worsening the skills shortage.

Tourism

Tourism is a primary economic driver for our region. However, telecommunication blackspots and service outages present significant challenges for business operators and tourists. Addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing visitor experiences and ensuring economic resilience.

Addressing telecommunication blackspots and service outages is not just a technical issue but also a crucial economic necessity for the GBAC region, as it will support local businesses, improve visitor experiences, and contribute to the overall economic resilience and growth of our communities.

Health

Reliable telecommunications are essential for delivering healthcare solutions, especially in areas with limited public transport options. Telehealth services are increasingly vital but face challenges due to connectivity issues.

Access to the latest technology is also critical for regional healthcare, as it supports telehealth, mobile applications, and AI interventions, which all require reliable, high-speed internet.

Recognising the limitations of small communities to co-invest in government funding support is essential. Programs like the **NBN Sky Muster satellite**, **Mobile Black Spot Program**, and various co-investment initiatives have improved connectivity, but further investment is needed.

Tourism Case Study:

In **Hepburn Shire Council**, tourism plays a crucial role in the local economy. On the weekends the population surges dramatically as tourists come to the region to enjoy the natural assets and attractions. This influx of people places immense pressure on telecommunication providers, leading to frequent instances of slow internet connections and strained network capacities.

During large-scale events like the Chill Out Festival in Daylesford, the surge in attendees often overwhelms local mobile phone services. At the 2024 festival, the high number of patrons led to significant strain on provider towers, making it nearly impossible for attendees to access phone services or send SMS messages reliably. This connectivity issue not only disrupted the festival experience, preventing people from coordinating with friends or sharing their moments online, but also posed a serious safety risk. In an emergency or disaster, the inability to communicate promptly and effectively could hinder emergency response efforts, putting lives at risk. Ensuring robust and scalable telecommunications infrastructure during such events, such as minimum rollout standards from 5G services in event focussed regional communities, is crucial for both the enjoyment and safety of all attendees.

Health Case Study:

Central Goldfields Shire has a median resident age of 52 years, notably higher than the median ages of 38 years across Victoria and 43 years in regional Victoria. The 2021 census revealed a significant increase in senior and elderly aged cohorts, with a notable increase in the proportion residents aged over 65 years. Furthermore, the 2021 census indicated that Central Goldfields Shire has higher rates in long-term physical and mental health conditions compared to the Victorian and national averages. Only 44.8% of its residents reported not having a long-term health condition, a significant drop from the Victorian average of 61% and the national average of 60.2%.

This ageing population trend will exert increasing pressure on healthcare and support services in the region. Older adults often have greater healthcare needs, including regular medical consultations, management of chronic conditions, and access to emergency services. Access to reliable telecommunications will be critical for these services such as telehealth, which has become an essential tool for providing medical care to elderly residents who may have mobility issues or live far from healthcare facilities. Telehealth services enable remote consultations, reducing the need for travel and making healthcare more accessible.

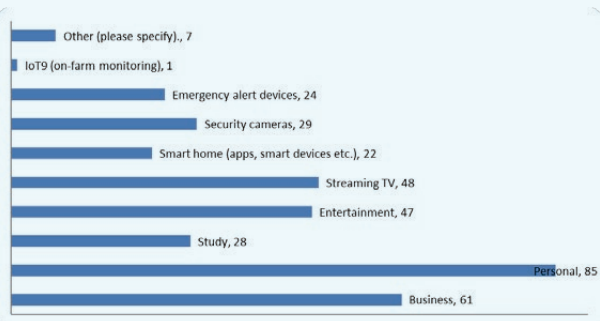
4c) Attitudes and awareness in regional communities

Our communities increasingly depend on connectivity for business, education, entertainment, and personal activities. COVID-19 has altered the reliance of GBAC communities on telecommunications for remote work, education, and social contact. Inconsistent connectivity hampers productivity, educational opportunities, and social connections, exacerbating isolation and reducing economic potential.

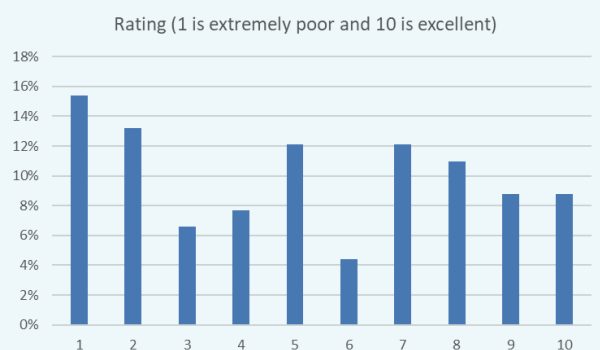
Case Study: Pyrenees Shire Council

The Pyrenees Shire Council has been working with Telstra and NBN to document a Pyrenees Shire Connectivity Plan. As part of the plan, the Council conducted a survey in June/July 2024 to better understand its residents' connectivity experiences. The survey revealed that 67% of residents primarily use the internet for business purposes, yet 54% rate their internet experience as below five out of ten. This indicates a significant gap between the necessity for reliable internet and the current quality of service being provided. The dissatisfaction highlights the urgent need for improved digital infrastructure to support the economic and personal needs of the community.

What is the primary reason you use the internet?



What is your current experience with internet connectivity?



4f) Suitability of regional communications during emergencies

Over the past three years, reliance on telecommunication services during emergencies has increased. However, network infrastructure vulnerabilities remain a significant concern. Reliable communication systems are crucial for accessing emergency services, real-time updates, and coordinating responses during natural disasters. Effective communication systems also enable emergency services to facilitate swift coordination, reducing response times and improving rescue operations' effectiveness.

Case Study: Trentham storms (2021)

The 2021 Trentham storm event resulted in a complete loss of telecommunications services for 48 hours, highlighting the critical need for resilient infrastructure. The outage included mobile phone reception, DSL-based internet services, landline phones, fixed NBN services, and power supply disruptions. Even days after the storm, many residents remained without essential services, leading to widespread business closures.

This event underscores the importance of reliable telecommunications for public safety during emergencies and GBAC encourages further exploration by the Australian Government on solutions such as universal roaming and access to satellite back up technologies such as StarLink Service.

Conclusion

Ensuring that GBAC's mobile and internet coverage matches metropolitan areas and can withstand emergencies is essential. Investment in robust digital connectivity via telecommunications infrastructure in GBAC's regions will enhance the economic prosperity, health, and wellbeing of our six local government areas. GBAC is optimistic that this investment will pave way for greater:

- Access to emergency services during natural disasters and accidents
- Access to work and education opportunities
- Access to healthcare and essential social services
- Support for regional and rural businesses
- Strengthening of local tourism economies.