



A submission on the

2024 Regional Telecommunications Review

Introduction

This submission by the Harrington and Surrounds Business and Community Association (the Association) is based on a written survey conducted by the Association between March and July this year.

Harrington is a town of 3,500 people located at the mouth of the Manning River on the Mid North Coast of NSW, 30km east-north-east of the major population centre of Taree. Surrounding smaller villages include Crowdy Head, Coopernook, Moorland and Lansdowne. At the 2021 census the median age of people in Harrington was 64, with 50% aged over 65. Tourism is an important contributor to the local economy.

The Association publishes a monthly magazine, *TellEverybody*, delivered free to Harrington and these surrounding villages. The survey was accessible in four ways: in the magazine from the March edition; on a dedicated “Our Phones Don’t Work” Facebook page; by email at ourphonesdontwork@gmail.com; and in person at a large market in Harrington on Easter Monday. The market drew a small number of survey respondents from beyond Harrington and the surrounding villages, but within our region.

The survey asked questions about: phone and internet problems across home phone, mobile phone, and internet connections; the frequency of problems; the impact of the problems on the resident respondents, their families, businesses, and visitors; the type of internet connection; service and carrier providers; and the name, contact phone number and address of respondents.

After the survey was launched, the Association came across findings from the NSW Connectivity Strategy’s Digital Connectivity Index. The findings of both this Index and the survey are summarised in our submission.

Based on these findings, the Association makes these conclusions about the following three Review Terms of Reference:

ToR 2: The people in our region DO NOT “have equitable access to telecommunication services that are significant to people in those parts of Australia and currently available in one or more parts of urban Australia.”

ToR 4f: Our “regional communications during emergencies and natural hazards, including reliability, resilience, speed, and coverage” ARE UNSUITABLE. (Note: the Association auspiced formation of the Harrington Resilience Association, which very-recently acquired a new UHF base station and portable radios to support communication with the community in the event of emergency situations. This radio network will go hand-in-hand with a “Neighbours Helping Neighbours” program launching in September.)

ToR 4c: Based on local knowledge, the Association believes a majority of people in our “regional households, communities and businesses” WOULD NOT HAVE THE NECESSARY KNOWLEDGE TO FORM “attitudes ... to: community awareness of access to supporting technologies to support take-up of, and public sentiment on changing and emerging technologies.”

The NSW Connectivity Strategy’s Digital Connectivity Index.

The Connectivity Strategy’s Digital Connectivity Index measures the quality of connectivity for mobile and fixed networks across three elements: access, affordability, and demographics. It incorporates factors such as coverage, speeds, choice, and performance.

The index score reflects a community’s ability to conduct digital activities such as working, video conferencing, accessing telehealth, online learning, and mobile internet usage. The maximum Index score is 100. The average Index score for Metropolitan suburbs in NSW is 64 for both networks.

Using the online Index tool, **Harrington’s Index score for both networks is 37, putting it in the 21-40 score bracket: “Below Average Communities with these scores are unlikely to be able to meaningfully conduct digital activities such as working, video conferencing, and accessing telehealth.”** Our survey confirms this finding.

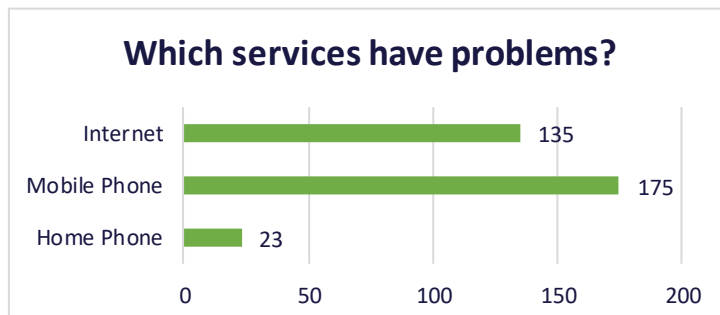
Across both networks, Harrington’s Index score for Access puts us (amazingly) in the Excellent category; for Affordability in the Above Average category; and for Demographics in the Poor category.

Apart from the Access score for Harrington, these results are unsurprising to the Association. **The Our Phones Don’t Work survey findings contradict the Excellent Access finding of the Connectivity Strategy.**

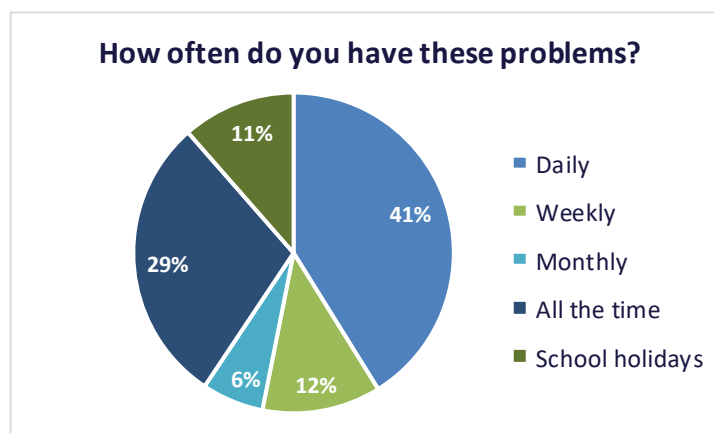
The Our Phones Don’t Work survey

Respondents representative of the survey area numbered 182. An Excel spreadsheet detailing all responses and labelled **“Our Phones Don’t Work Survey Data”** is provided as a separate upload to this submission. Survey percentages here have been rounded up or down, and the personal details of all respondents have been removed.

Network problems: The telecommunications network services experiencing problems are presented in the graph below. Of the respondents, 96% have mobile phone access problems, 76% have internet access problems, and 13% have fixed home phone access. **These results clearly demonstrate that the Connectivity Strategy’s “Excellent Access” rating is incorrect.**



Problem frequency: How often respondents have problems is presented in the pie chart below. The survey option for “Daily” was intended to be a “from-time-to-time” option, and should have been offered that way. The Association believes the “Daily” (41% of respondents) and “All the time” (29%) should probably be combined, representing a more-realistic figure of 70% of respondents experiencing problems most of the time.

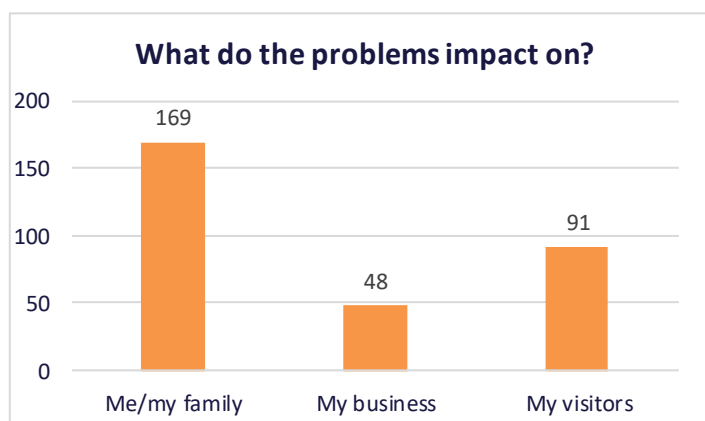


Type of impact: Analysis of the “Comments – Type of Impact” column in the spreadsheet shows a common range of network access problems, including:

- no access at all
- No access inside the house
- access only outside the house
- access only somewhere distant from the house
- regular drop-out of network connections
- slow internet speeds

These problems are worse during school and public holidays, and even after daytime working hours, as the networks become overloaded. Tourists and visiting family members are also impacted at these times, which in turn can have a detrimental impact on the local economy.

What is impacted? The graph below shows the board group that are impacted by access problems. The Me/my family impact represents 94% of all respondents, My visitors 50%, and My business 26%.



Analysis of the “Comments – Type of Impact” column in the spreadsheet shows that people’s lives are impacted by poor telecommunications access in many ways, including: interference in watching television; contact between family members and friends; everyday banking; external study; conduct of fixed and home businesses affecting an individual’s livelihood; and medical and other emergencies (such as flood and bushfire that Harrington is subject to).

Following is a small selection of the 182 comments illustrating some of these impacts. Each paragraph is a different respondent:

Day-to day living

Absolute frustration when receiving and making calls on mobile, can cut out if you don’t stand still inside the house. Internet is slow to load and Apps on TV or phone.

Frustration with lack of internet when doing banking online. Sometimes no internet for weeks on end. Interrupted and unreliable service.

When NBN out no internet to do banking. NBN is slower than ADSL. Paying \$90 per month for poor OPTUS internet.

Unable to conduct online study due to poor speeds

Affects contacts with medical situations and contact with Family/Carers. Feeling shut off from the world.

Medical and other emergencies

Always have to take phone call outside or upstairs to get reception. During a medical episode I was unable to communicate with medical staff while in bed.

My husband is on dialysis and in case of emergency in unable to use his phone. While on dialysis he tends to watch movies but is unable to do so.

I live in Newcastle (Surgeon). I own a home in Harrington but with the poor mobile/Wifi means that I come up less. Very frustrating. Hospital staff cannot reach me on my mobile phone.

No way to contact emergency services.

During Covid I had to cancel treatments which required [telehealth] consultation with doctors. Was forced to travel towards Taree till I got service to take calls from doctors.

Every day my phone is a lifeline due to my disability, with poor to no service at all. My Vital Call medical alarm is also impacted.

Business

I run Teams Training sessions from home, the sessions stall (freeze) drop out and slow. Frustrating and impossible for me and student to have a normal training session.

Loss of trade \$1,000 a week

Card reader doesn't work. Unable to check bought product price. No banking – unable to pay bills.

Impacts my sales whilst at markets as I am unable to get connection for card sales

Accommodation provider – guests rely on mobile service for communication & entertainment. We have had to invest \$\$ in our own Wifi network to make up for the mobile service shortfall.

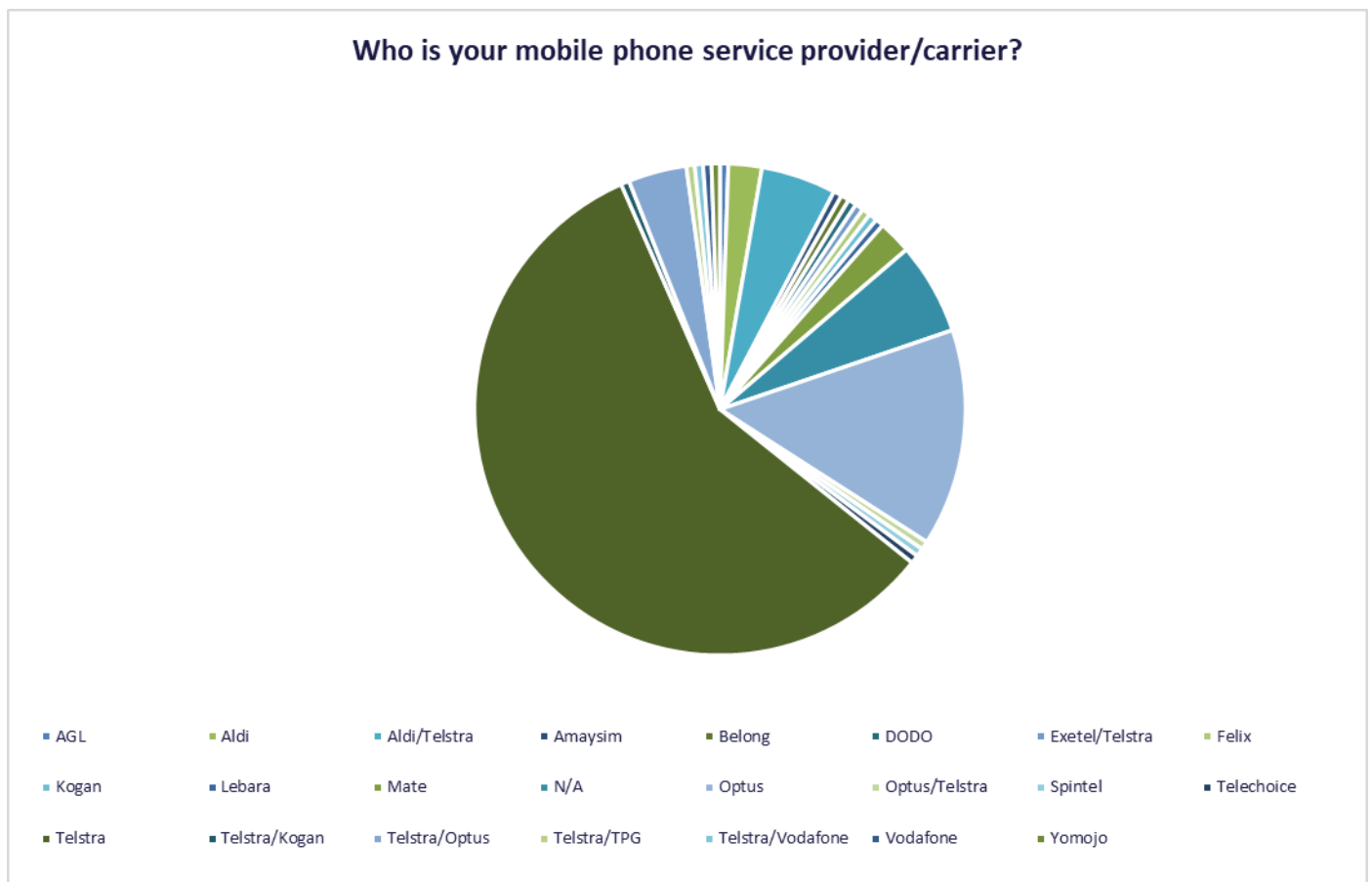
Our home phone no longer works, it has been fixed multiple times. We have given up! Our internet is slow or doesn't work on a weekly basis, we have to restart our router once or twice a week. Getting NBN has been slightly better with the drop-outs, however that slows up once everyone is home from work. When you are paying for the highest speed and can't upload files in the evening, something is wrong! Mobile reception is a joke. I can't sit in my home office and speak on my mobile. It constantly cuts out.

Impact is estimated at a loss of \$10,000 plus per annum.

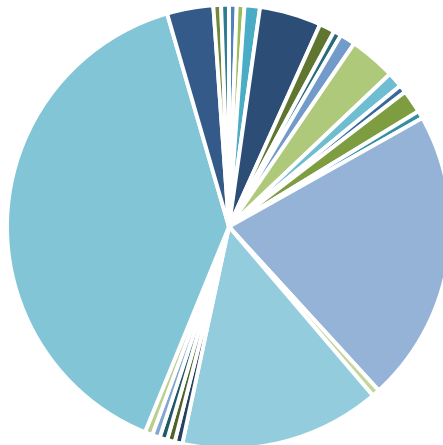
Could average a loss of \$500 per week to my business.

Mobile phone service provider/carrier: Respondents listed 23 different mobile phone service providers/carriers, shown in the pie chart below. Telstra (dark green) at 58% was the most-used, with Optus four times smaller at just 14%. For the other 21 provider/carriers, hover your mouse over each one to see its percentage market share.

Internet service provider/carrier: The graph below shows Telstra was again the market leader, with a 39% share, followed by Optus with 15%. The mid-blue pie slice (21%) is “N/A” – presumably respondents who did not know the answer to this question.



Who is your internet service provider/carrier?



- Activ8me
- AGL
- Aussie
- DODO
- Exetel
- Exetel/Telstra
- Foxtel
- inet
- Intermode
- Iprimus
- Mate
- Mint
- N/A
- NBN
- Optus
- Skymaster
- Southern Phones
- Spintel
- Spintel/Skymaster
- Starlink
- Telstra
- TPG
- TSN
- Vodafone

Please do not hesitate to contact me about any aspect of the Association's submission, by email to chamberharrington@gmail.com, or phone [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
President.
26th July, 2024