

31 July 2024

2024 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communication and the
Arts
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2024 Regional Telecommunications Review

Dear Committee,

The National Rural Health Alliance (the Alliance) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review (the Review).

The Alliance is the peak body for rural, regional and remote health in Australia, comprising [52 Members](#). Our vision is for healthy and sustainable rural, remote and regional (hereafter rural) communities, which make up the over 7 million people residing outside our major cities, or approximately 30 per cent of the Australian population. We are focused on advancing rural health reform to achieve equitable health outcomes for rural communities. Our members include healthcare professionals, service providers, health and medical educators, researchers, medical and health practitioner students and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector.

It is of note that the almost 30 per cent of the population residing in rural Australia contribute proportionately more to the Australian economy than their metropolitan counterparts, generating at least 80 per cent of export revenue, nearly 50 per cent of tourism revenue and producing 90 per cent of the food we consume. The income derived from rural Australia is largely made up of industries such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry and resources, with exports from these industries valued at almost \$500 billion per year.¹

Despite this significant contribution, people living in rural areas have a higher burden of disease and limited access to healthcare services compared to people living urban areas. As rural communities tend to have few, if any, local health services in the area, digital connectivity is a crucial modern infrastructure which, amongst other things, improves health care access and outcomes. The Alliance notes that connectivity, reliability, accessibility, affordability and digital health literacy are enduring barriers to enabling rural

¹ National Rural Health Alliance. Rural Health in Australia Snapshot 2023. 2023 Dec.
<https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/ruralhealth-australia-snapshot>

communities' full participation in digital health, and many other areas which are key tenets in thriving economies and societies.

For further information, please refer to the [Alliance's fact sheet - Digital Health and Connectivity in Rural Australia](#).

As Australia continues to modernise digitisation in specific healthcare contexts, the issue of health equity has extended to digital environments which are enabled through telecommunications services. Thus, regional telecommunication is an important enabler of equity in healthcare in rural Australia.

In the Australian primary healthcare context, access to services is supported by digital health initiatives such as telehealth, electronic prescriptions and My Health Record, which all rely on good-quality mobile network and broadband connectivity. Telehealth, in particular, is a key initiative which enables the patient to access vital medical services where there are no local health services available, where in-person consultation is not feasible, or in conjunction with in-person healthcare. The ability to access telecommunications services, therefore, has a direct impact on the wellbeing of people living in rural areas, particularly where access is poor.

Furthermore, the Alliance noted in its [submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021](#) that the willingness and ability of medical and allied health providers (many of whom operate within sole trader, partnership or small business arrangements) to provide digital health solutions to rural communities can be hampered by lack of, or poor, telecommunications infrastructure and connectivity. This can lead to professional, financial and personal barriers to working in rural areas, exacerbating the ongoing workforce shortages in rural Australia across most professions - an issue that continues to impact healthcare service delivery in 2024.

Question 1: What initiatives or tools could be implemented by the telecommunications industry or the Australian Government to improve connectivity literacy and make it easier for regional consumers and businesses to understand their connectivity options and help them to choose affordable services that meet their needs?

Research indicates that not only is there a historic lack of robust telecommunications infrastructure in rural areas, but rural people, including farmers, tend to have fewer digital literacies and skills to effectively use digital connections and technologies.² Though the

² Marshall, A., Hay, R., Dale, A., Babacan, H., Dezuanni, M. (2024). Connectivity Literacy for Digital Inclusion in Rural Australia. In: Radovanović, D. (eds) Digital Literacy and Inclusion. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30808-6_10

urban/rural divide is narrowing, it has persisted particularly in the dimension of digital ability.³ The 2023 Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) has found that while the persistent divide between capital cities and other parts of the country has narrowed, the digital ability gap remains considerable and has increased from 7.0 to 7.7 points.⁴

The 2023 ADII also found that digital inclusion remains closely linked to age, and that the gap between younger and older Australians has grown, especially for digital ability. For people over the age of 75, disparities in digital ability (41.6 points below the national average) and access (18.0 points below the national average) are considerable. They also continue to experience higher levels of digital exclusion.⁵

In the era of information overload and the need to utilise digital tools for industry, education and social interaction in digital literacy is paramount. Digital literacy is the ability to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information using digital technologies safely, effectively and securely. Digital skills are not just learnt by having access to broadband or satellite services. Providing these is only halfway to delivering a service and access.

Digital skills training should be designed around the specific needs of a wide range of rural stakeholders, these include different industries, e.g. mining, rural enterprises to primary industries such as farming, fishing or forestry. In addition, there are those who live and work in remote communities, e.g. those who often have worse health outcomes, have less education access yet considerably add to the economy. In addition, Australia has a large Aboriginal population, indeed two-thirds of Australia's Aboriginal population live in rural and remote Australia, many of whom are living at the extreme end of the digital divide. Local government, business chambers, education facilities whether tertiary or secondary as well as other rural organisations also need training to enable themselves to deliver their services to rural communities.

The best, but not the only way, is to allow for place based grass roots decision on how communities develop their local 'digital champions' which can be individual and/or organisations, who help identify, design and deliver skills training. This needs to be part of the social contract of roll out of services whether by governments and/or industry.

In the EU living labs, fab-labs and training hubs have been developed with an approach in digital literacy that has various components:

³ Thomas J, Barraket J, Parkinson S, Wilson CK, Holcombe-James I, Kennedy J, Mannell K, Brydon A (2021) Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2021. RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra, Melbourne

⁴ Australian Digital Inclusion Index. Key findings 2023. Available from: <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/key-findings-and-next-steps/>

⁵ Australian Digital Inclusion Index. Key findings 2023. Available from: <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/key-findings-and-next-steps/>

- Targeting investments in broadband infrastructure
- Strategies to build digital skills
- Creating rural innovation ecosystems
- Building coordinated governance.⁶

In its submission to the Inquiry into the shutdown of the 3G mobile network (the Inquiry), the Rural Regional and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC) noted that connectivity literacy among consumers and across all levels of government remains a significant challenge, further complicating access and utilisation of these services.⁷ In this regard, the Alliance supports the RRRCC's implementation of Connectivity and Digital Literacy capacity building for rural Australia, as a means to achieving digital inclusion.

Question 8: How can we achieve equity with respect to mobile services (voice, data and SMS) in regional, rural and remote communities and on regional and remote roads?

The 3G network shutdown is an example of how phasing out of older mobile telecommunications technology to make way for newer technology has amplified inequity for people living in rural areas. This is due to a combination of several factors such as socioeconomic disadvantage, financial constraints in the face of cost-of-living pressures, and lack of retail providers in the area to discuss mobile service needs. In addition, it has meant that an upgrade has been forced on a significant number of people in the community, when a device and service is serving them well or well enough. It also highlights the risk for people who still rely on outdated devices in an emergency, or for their health monitoring device, particularly older Australians.

In terms of affordability, the 2023 ADII reports that substantial numbers of Australians continue to experience affordability stress, meaning they would need to pay more than 5% of their household income to maintain quality, reliable connectivity. These include people with disability and people over the age of 75.⁸

Indeed, the Alliance has received feedback that many older Australians are often unable to afford to upgrade their devices. They are less likely to be tech savvy and less likely to know who to turn to for assistance, at no cost. The Alliance supports measures that facilitate

⁶ European Network for Rural Development, 2018. *Smart Villages – how to ensure that digital strategies benefit rural communities*. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/sites/default/files/enrd_publications/smart-villages_orientations_digital-strategies.pdf

⁷ RRRCC Submission – Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee Inquiry into Shutdown of the 3G Mobile Network, 12 June 2024

⁸ Australian Digital Inclusion Index. Key findings 2023. Available from: <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/key-findings-and-next-steps/>

affordable, accessible and fit-for-purpose telecommunications services for people living in rural areas.

Equity needs to be achieved by ensuring where market fails or is thin, that companies and government steps in to ensure this does not occur. Australia has a social contract to deliver universal services to all Australians. It is a human rights issue that cannot be ignored. It is particularly pertinent, when Australia receives significant wealth from rural, remote and regional Australia, i.e. two-thirds of Australia's export income, 90% of the food Australia eats, 50% tourism income, despite only making up 30% of the population.

Question 18: What changes to Australian Government investment programs are required to ensure they are successful, efficient and effective in delivering improved, reliable and equitable telecommunications for regional, rural and remote consumers?

Whether enhancements or changes to telecommunications infrastructure are actualised in rural communities is intricately linked to issues around service suitability, reliability, consistency and affordability. On these measures, rural Australians continue to face significant disadvantage, and it is unsurprising that they are overall less digitally connected. From an economic and social sense, where market is thin and fails companies and government have a social contract to ensure that access and investments are equitable.

In its 2022 report, *Regional Strengths and Infrastructure Gaps*, Infrastructure Australia found that broadband and mobile connectivity is an enduring concern across many communities and increasingly crucial to the economic and social wellbeing of regional Australia, with increasing reliance on digital connectivity.⁹ Considering rural Australia's significant economic contribution, connectivity is a major economic enabler.

From the healthcare provider, rural community and individual patient perspectives, the Australian Government must continue to work with the telecommunications industry to ensure reliable telecommunications connectivity in rural areas. Equal access to digital technologies, along with ensuring affordability and digital literacy, can close healthcare disparities, empower patients, and improve health outcomes for all, particularly for people living in rural communities.

The Alliance also notes that low-quality connectivity outside of Australia's cities is an ongoing issue. Any changes to existing digital health technologies or development of new technologies that impact on availability and effectiveness of telecommunications connectivity in rural areas, in turn, may exacerbate poor access to on-demand digital health services for rural communities.

⁹© Infrastructure Australia 2022. [Regional Strengths and Infrastructure Gaps](#)

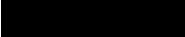
The Alliance supports measures to improve the 3 dimensions of digital inclusion: access, affordability and digital ability and literacy, and prioritisation of digital inclusion efforts to ensure that no one is left behind in this digital age of healthcare. Australia has a social contract to do so, with the rural population often forgotten, indeed underserved and unsupported.

While the Alliance's focus is on healthcare access, we understand that without healthy economic and social growth in rural, remote and regional Australia, we will not continue to be in the vibrant situation Australia is today. Digital access is a major aspect of this.

I would be pleased to provide further information on any of the information contained in this letter if required.

Yours sincerely,



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www.ruralhealth.org.au