## Introduction

Over the past six months the Pyrenees Shire Council has been developing a telecommunications "Digital Connectivity Action Plan" with the assistance of representatives from Telstra, NBNCo and Regional Tech Hub.

The purpose of this plan is to address the concerns expressed by the community about their limited access to mobile phone and internet services and to support them to achieve the level of connectivity businesses and community members require in this digital age to that which is enjoyed in metropolitan areas and regional cities.

It is expected this will boost productivity of agri-businesses and tourism operators and enhance the level of connectivity and wellbeing of members of the Pyrenees community.

The plan identifies the current challenges of telecommunications for our community which requires the Commonwealth to take actions to address these unmet demands, while Council will continue to commit to take action to support our communities and advocate for network improvements.

## The Problem

The 2021 ABS Census indicates that the Shires population of 7,671 has a median age of 50 years of age with median household incomes of $1,101- compared with $1,759- for Victoria and $1,746 for Australia.

We feel that it is important that these older members of the Australian community and those with lower household incomes are not left behind with access to reliable and high-quality telecommunications systems.

According to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index the level of **digital literacy in the Pyrenees Shire is a score of 56.6 against 66 across Victoria and 64.9 nationally.** A score of between 45 and below 61 is considered to be indicative of a community that is excluded.

Agriculture and tourism are two key economic drivers in the Pyrenees Shire, both of which depend on reliable telecommunications systems in order to drive productivity efficiencies and communicate effectively with clients.

With an ageing population and comparatively low household incomes, affordability of phone and internet is also essential for members of the community to remain connected and contribute to their wellbeing.
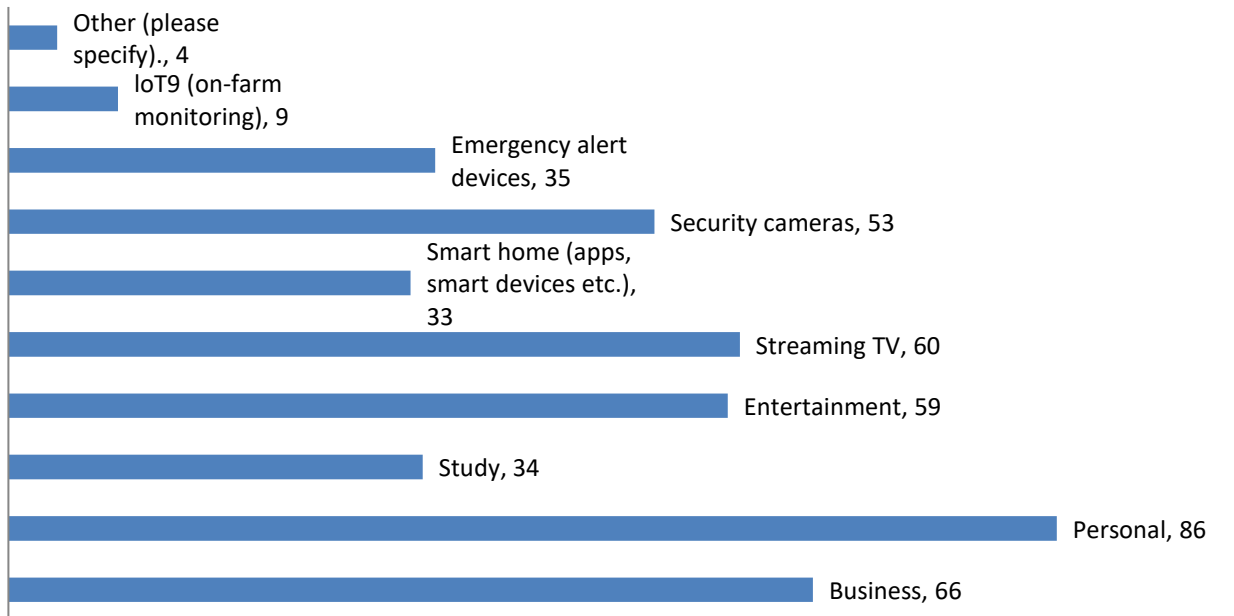
**Pyrenees** Shire Council

Through the development of Councils' digital connectivity plan feedback has recently been gathered from residents via:

- A targeted telecommunications survey, the results of which are summarised in this submission
- Drop-in sessions to locations across the Pyrenees Shire that are known to be telecommunications black spots
- Councils outreach "Community Cuppa" sessions held at locations across the Shire where connectivity is often problematic.

A summary of feedback from ninety responses to the telecommunications survey of our community found that:

- On a scale of one (extremely poor connectivity) to ten (excellent) nearly thirty percent chose a sore of one while more than half of the respondents rated their mobile and internet connectivity less than five
- Using the same scale as mentioned above fifty four percent of respondents rated their internet connectivity less than six.
- Of those who responded 61 people used their internet for business purposes, 85 for personal use and 28 for study.

**What needs are you likely to use the internet for in future?**

Other (please specify)., 4
IoT9 (on-farm monitoring), 9
Emergency alert devices, 35
Security cameras, 53
Smart home (apps, smart devices etc.), 33
Streaming TV, 60
Entertainment, 59
Study, 34
Personal, 86
Business, 66

**What is your current experience with mobile phone connectivity?**

Rating (1 is extremely poor and 10 is excellent)



Through our drop in sessions and Council's "Community Cuppa" events we are often made aware of the following mobile phone and internet concerns and issues:

- Mobile phone coverage remains limited in some rural locations across the Pyrenees Shire, irrespective of coverage maps from telecommunications companies indicating availability of 4G or 5G connectivity. In some cases these areas require booster aerials which come at additional costs to rural residents.
- Some telecommunications retailers provide limited mobile phone coverage outside of capital cities and larger regional centres meaning that people who are travelling parts of regional and rural Australia will not have mobile phone coverage at these times
- Some retail outlets selling lower priced Telstra phones provide limited access to the Telstra network which may be confined to larger regional centres or metropolitan locations
- Our older generations have relied for much of their lives on the copper wire network and landline phones which did not require upgrading. Some members of the community find keeping up with the evolution of telecommunications technology challenging and Council is providing educational sessions through its libraries to address this.
- Some community members find the functions on smart devices confusing to navigate and Councils education sessions mentioned above seek to address this.

**Regional Tech Hub Case Study**

After reviewing a survey by a local resident, Council reached out to better understand her needs. The lady concerned is ███████████, lives off-grid in ████████ with no mobile reception (a blackspot). Both she and her husband are pensioners. Their landline is failing, and her primary concern is connectivity during fire emergencies, especially since their landline failed during the recent bushfires in February 2024. It was suggested she contact the Regional Tech Hub to explore her options.

Follow-up: The resident noted that the Regional Tech Hub was very helpful, providing sound advice and options to improve her connectivity. She noted they took time to understand her circumstances and were very clear on the advice.  The resident and her husband are currently deciding on the best option and mentioned that the landline is currently working but emphasized that cost is a significant barrier to deciding on the new options.  She also noted that her elderly friends have noted the cost barrier as a concern and are in similar situations, particularly with the closure of 3G and the need to upgrade their phones to function on 4G.

## Recommendations

From the feedback provided by the Pyrenees community and the observations of council staff we present here a list of recommendations for improved telecommunications outcomes.

1. During the work Council has been progressing over recent months there have been frequent occasions where residents have been referred to Regional Tech Hub to identify connectivity solutions for mobile phone and internet. We have found their service and support to be excellent. Council recommends that Regional Tech Hub continue to be provided the funding that is essential to continue this service for the benefit of rural and remote residents throughout Australia.

2. Council strongly recommends a collaborative approach be taken by all telecommunications providers via the colocation of telecommunications infrastructure on towers and wireless aerials throughout rural and regional Australia.

3. The "Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters" (STAND) program has been funded by the Commonwealth for a limited period of three years which is due to expire in December 2025. Over the past five years Pyrenees Shire has experienced major bushfires in December 2019, floods in October – November 2022, and major bushfires again in February 2024. The floods in particular impacted communities

across the breadth of the Shire and the bushfire risk evidenced in 2019 and 2024 highlights this a high risk for all communities across the municipality. Council recommends ongoing funding support by the Commonwealth to continue the STAND program.

4. Natural disasters such as floods and fires are frequent occurrences in rural settings and robust telecommunications systems are essential to provide community warnings during these events. Power outages often impact on telecommunications systems during these events and ongoing research and development of telecommunications systems that can operate when grid power is not available is considered a necessity.

5. Ongoing education is required to update members of rural communities about ongoing changes due to the evolution of telecommunications technology, whether that be closure of the 3G network or the functionality of smart devices which many members of the community are unfamiliar with. Support for educational programs of this type is strongly recommended.

6. A number of non-urban residents who have subscribed to the NBN Skymesh satellite system have not found this to be a positive experience and either remain frustrated or are subscribing to alternative internet technology. The poor experience of many of the people who continue to experience unsatisfactory internet connectivity irrespective of the provider is illustrated by community feedback through Councils survey. In some of these cases there is need for one on one support and we have found Regional Tech Hub as an excellent resource where residents have been unable to resolve issues through their telecommunications retailer. There are some scenarios where there is a need for further education of the community on what existing technology is available.
Resources are required whether the solutions require new telecommunication infrastructure, educational programs or ongoing support and independence of the Regional Tech Hub.

7. Lower household incomes of residents across the Pyrenees compared to Victoria and Australia are seen as a cost barrier for many people in the Pyrenees Shire. For example booster devices available from Telstra can cost in excess of $2,000-. Updating aerials from 3G, changing phones etc. and the costs of installing aerials and other devices to support better connectivity are either not always affordable or have not worked successfully. Future technological advances which take into consideration the digital divide that is occurring at present due to affordability issues would be highly desirable.

8. The nucleus of the Pyrenees Wine Region is located at Moonambel with seven cellar doors and a township population of 185 people. The town also has nature-based attractions, hosts music events and draws visitors from Melbourne and larger regional centres throughout western Victoria. The local telecommunications systems however currently limit the telecommunications capacity to that of the residential population of 185 people. This becomes problematic when visitors arrive on weekends and during holiday periods to find they are without mobile phone coverage. While there has been an upgrade at Moonambel through the Mobile Communications Black Spot Program that was launched in June 2017, Council continues to receive regular feedback from the local community and wineries within a six-kilometre radius of town that the problem has not been resolved. Council therefore recommends investment by the Commonwealth, in the telecommunications infrastructure that is required to address the needs of the local wineries, agricultural sector and tourism operators whose businesses are located outside of the township. Bushfire Management overlays over significant parts of the township and surrounding district (refer Appendix A) also emphasise considerations for community safety to be taken into account with mobile phone connectivity.

9. For those on low income or pensions, the Commonwealth could subsidise satellite connections for residents in regional areas who live in blackspots and have limited connectivity options.

   For example, Telstra now offers satellite home internet for $125- per month. This plan includes:

   a. A broadband internet and phone service powered by the Starlink satellite network
   b. A standard internet service
   c. A standard phone service
   d. MessageBank®
   e. Calling Number Display
   f. More details can be found here:
      https://www.telstra.com.au/internet/starlink

   The up front **hardware cost of $599 is likely to be a financial barrier**. Given the cost to Telstra to maintain and repair the faults to landlines in regional areas, subsidising the hardware for those on low incomes and also subsidising the monthly cost could be a game-changer for our region (considering landline costs are $50 per month). Additionally, with a satellite connection, residents can remain connected via their mobiles during emergencies as long as the modem is connected to a generator, which is also very feasible for those off-grid.

APPENDIX A

Moonambel Bushfire Management Overlay