An Australian Government Initiative

Regional Development Australia Barwon South West

Submission to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review 2024 (Issues paper April 2024) by Regional Development Australia Barwon South West

Regional Development Australia Barwon South West (RDA BSW) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review.

Equitable access to telecommunications services is an important issue identified by RDA BSW, which represents a diverse region including city-based centres, rural communities, and coastal areas. This varied demographic and economic landscape, encompassing agriculture, tourism, and manufacturing, highlights the need for reliable telecommunications infrastructure to support regional economic growth, education, and social inclusion. Ensuring this access is essential for bridging regional disparities and enabling all residents to fully participate in the digital economy and community life.

The responses to selected questions below are based on consultation and engagement with regional communities and stakeholders in the Barwon South West region including members of the Barwon Regional Partnership and the Great South Coast Regional Partnership.

Q1 What initiatives or tools could be implemented by the telecommunications industry or 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?

To improve connectivity literacy and help regional consumers and businesses understand their connectivity options, the telecommunications industry and governments could implement the following initiatives and tools:

- **Educational Programs:** Implement community education initiatives to raise awareness of digital connectivity options and benefits.
- **Community Workshops:** Facilitate workshops to inform and engage residents and businesses on digital infrastructure and services.
- **Online Tools and Resources:** Develop online platforms to help consumers compare service options and understand connectivity solutions.
- **Partnerships:** Encourage collaboration between government, industry, and local organisations to enhance digital knowledge and infrastructure use.

These initiatives will enhance digital literacy, empower consumers to make informed choices and improve connectivity access and quality across the Barwon South West region.

Where possible, educational programs should be provided or funded through existing networks and services to make them more easily accessible and to ensure there is capacity for ongoing and timely support when it is needed.

Q2 What further initiatives can be implemented to support First Nations communities in developing and leading their own digital inclusion solutions while ensuring cultural appropriateness?

To support First Nations communities in developing and leading digital inclusion:

- **Cultural Education Programs:** Develop programs integrating Indigenous knowledge and cultural values into digital literacy and skills training.

- **Community Partnerships:** Fund Indigenous organisations to be able to support the co-design of digital inclusion programs to ensure they are endorsed, supported, culturally appropriate and provide a culturally safe environment to meet and support community needs.
- **Infrastructure and Connectivity**: Prioritise infrastructure improvements in Indigenous communities to improve digital access and enable locally-led initiatives.
- **Supporting Digital Enterprises**: Encourage and support First Nations digital businesses and startups through funding and mentorship programs.

These initiatives aim to empower First Nations communities to lead their digital journeys while preserving cultural integrity.

Q3 How can government and industry address any misleading and inaccurate information surrounding telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote areas, to ensure consumers and businesses have access to reliable and unbiased information when making decisions about their connectivity options?

The majority of information that is easily accessible to consumers is carrier specific. Where this is the case, more needs to be done to showcase the breadth of options available and deliver an independent comparison tool to ensure comparison of the strengths, weaknesses and costs of alternate options.

To address misleading and inaccurate information about telecommunications services in regional, rural, and remote areas:

- **Accurate Service Mapping:** Ensure service maps and descriptions reflect actual user experiences, particularly in regional and rural areas.
- **Consumer Education:** Implement education campaigns to inform consumers about their rights, available services, and how to assess service quality.
- **Independent Audits:** Conduct independent audits to verify the accuracy of service providers' claims, ensuring transparency and reliability.

These initiatives aim to provide reliable and accurate information for consumers in regional areas.

Q4 Deploying and maintaining telecommunications infrastructure in remote areas requires a skilled workforce. What initiatives can be implemented to ensure there is a skilled workforce in regional and remote Australia capable of supporting the construction, maintenance and operation of futureproof telecommunications infrastructure?

To ensure a skilled workforce for telecommunications infrastructure in the Barwon South West region:

- **Local Training Opportunities**: Training programs should be offered locally, allowing residents to gain the skills needed to maintain and operate telecommunications infrastructure without needing to relocate. This approach makes training more accessible, strengthens community ties and ensures that the workforce is closely connected to the areas they serve.
- **Apprenticeships and Internships:** Establish apprenticeship and internship opportunities with local companies and educational institutions to provide hands-on experience and skill development.
- **Collaboration with Industry:** Partner with telecom companies to identify skill gaps and develop training programs that meet industry needs.
- **Support for Digital Literacy:** Increase digital literacy initiatives to equip the local workforce with the necessary skills for evolving technology requirements.
- **Strengthening Community Resilience**: By training local individuals, the region gains skilled workers and strengthens overall community resilience. A locally trained workforce can respond more quickly and effectively to infrastructure issues, minimising downtime and enhancing service reliability.

These initiatives aim to build a local, skilled workforce capable of supporting the construction, maintenance and operation of futureproof telecommunications infrastructure in regional and remote areas.

Q5 Could the NBN fixed wireless network or other alternative networks be used to provide reliable and affordable voice services in remote areas? Are there any consumer safeguards or guarantees that need to remain or be changed under reformed universal service arrangements?

The NBN fixed wireless and alternative networks can provide reliable and affordable voice services in remote areas. Key considerations include:

- **Feasibility:** NBN fixed wireless and alternative networks like low Earth orbit satellites can be considered for providing voice services in remote areas. These technologies can help fill gaps where traditional infrastructure is lacking.
- **Accuracy of Information**: Improve the accuracy of service maps and descriptions provided by NBN and other providers to reflect actual user experiences. This helps in setting realistic expectations for consumers.
- **Service Reliability:** Ensuring reliable service, especially during peak times or emergencies, is important. This may involve establishing minimum standards for service availability and quality.

These considerations aim to provide reliable and affordable voice services while ensuring consumers have accurate and trustworthy information.

Q6 In modernising universal service arrangements, should access to public phone infrastructure continue and are there particular areas of need? Could technologies beyond traditional payphones be explored to meet this need?

In modernising universal service arrangements for the Barwon South West Region:

- **Continuation of Public Phone Infrastructure:** Continuing access to public phone infrastructure, particularly in remote and underserved areas, for emergency and essential communications.
- **Exploration of Alternative Technologies:** Explore alternative technologies such as low Earth orbit satellites, mobile hotspots, and community Wi-Fi networks to complement traditional payphones and provide reliable communication options.
- **Consumer Safeguards and Guarantees:** Ensure reformed universal service arrangements continue to protect consumer rights, including access to reliable communication services during emergencies and in areas with limited connectivity.

Continuing access to public phone infrastructure, especially in critical areas, along with exploring modern technologies, can ensure reliable communication in the Barwon South West Region.

Q7 What should the minimum internet speed guarantee be (currently a peak speed of 25/5 Mbps) to meet modern needs? Should minimum data download/upload allowances be regulated? What other factors are important, like latency, reliability and affordability?

For the Barwon South West region:

- **Minimum Internet Speed Guarantee:** Actual speeds can vary significantly depending on the specific area, type of connection (eg fibre, fixed wireless, satellite), and network congestion. There are noted issues with inconsistent service quality and network congestion, particularly during peak times. Increase the minimum speed guarantee to meet modern needs to support activities like remote work, online education and streaming.
- **Data Allowances:** There is emphasis on regulating minimum data download/upload allowances to ensure adequate access for all users and prevent data caps from limiting essential activities.
- **Reliable and affordable data access:** The reliability and affordability of data is critical to supporting connectivity. Lack of affordable access can be a barrier for lower-income families and can contribute to social disadvantage.

These recommendations aim to enhance digital infrastructure and connectivity in the Barwon South West region, ensuring that the community's digital needs are adequately met.

Q8 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?

To achieve equity in mobile services in regional, rural, and remote communities and on roads, the following are some suggestions:

- **Infrastructure Investment**: Prioritise funding for mobile towers and network expansions in underserved areas to ensure consistent coverage.
- **Technology Integration**: Utilise alternative technologies like low Earth orbit satellites to complement traditional networks and fill coverage gaps.
- **Public-Private Partnerships**: Encourage collaboration between government and telecom providers to share infrastructure and resources, maximising coverage and service quality.
- **Community Engagement**: Involve local communities in planning and decision-making processes to ensure solutions meet their specific needs and circumstances.

These initiatives aim to provide equitable access to mobile services, improving voice, data and SMS connectivity in these areas.

Q9 How can we ensure regional, rural and remote areas have access to the networks, equipment and capacity they need for improved household connectivity and to foster innovation and efficiency across regional industries, including for IoT applications?

Several key initiatives to ensure regional, rural, and remote areas have the necessary networks, equipment, and capacity are:

- **Prioritising High-Capacity Infrastructure**: Coordinating sharing of existing high-capacity digital infrastructure and investing in new technologies to address connectivity gaps, particularly in high-growth residential and tourism areas.
- **Leveraging New Technologies**: Using fast-response, reliable, and re-deployable infrastructure, such as low Earth orbit satellites to provide connectivity where traditional infrastructure is inadequate or costly.
- **Community Education and Engagement**: There is a call for educating and motivating communities to embrace digital opportunities, improving digital literacy and readiness for technological adoption, particularly in key sectors like agriculture and advanced manufacturing.
- **Creating Digital Hubs**: Establish co-working spaces and digital learning hubs, especially in underutilised public facilities to enhance connectivity and support digital skills development in the region.
- **Enhanced Collaboration and Proactive Planning**: The telecommunications sector needs to strengthen its networking with local communities and local government. This collaboration can help understand unique regional needs and support proactive new and upgraded infrastructure planning. By engaging with local stakeholders, the sector can better align its initiatives with community priorities, ensuring that investments are effective and beneficial. Public-private partnerships and local advisory committees can play a crucial role in facilitating the dialogue, enabling a more responsive and inclusive approach to infrastructure development. These steps will help bridge the digital divide and promote regional economic growth by enhancing digital infrastructure and capacity.

These initiatives aim to bridge the digital divide and support regional economic growth by enhancing digital infrastructure and capacity.

Q10 The cost of building and maintaining telecommunications infrastructure in rural and remote areas can be a barrier to offering better services. What can be done to improve the fixed broadband options available to regional, rural and remote Australians?

Recommendations for improving fixed broadband options in regional, rural, and remote areas:

- **Coordinated Use of Infrastructure**: Leverage existing high-capacity digital infrastructure, including public and private assets, to enhance broadband availability and reduce costs.

- **Investment in New Technologies**: Explore technologies like the low Earth orbit satellites to provide reliable connectivity in locations where traditional infrastructure is unavailable or unaffordable. These satellites could also improve connectivity in high-visitation and residential growth areas by diverting traffic from seasonally congested NBN and mobile networks.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Promote partnerships between government and telecom providers to share infrastructure and resources, improving service reach and quality.
- **Digital Education and Engagement**: Increase community awareness and education on the benefits of digital connectivity and alternative technologies.

These recommendations aim to expand broadband access and improve digital connectivity across regional, rural, and remote areas.

Q11 Have you had experience with new or alternate service providers such as Starlink or WISPs? If not, why not? What additional measures would persuade you to consider new technologies?

As discussed above, there is a role for governments to increase awareness of the range of telecommunications options available in regional and rural Australia. This includes providing detailed information on alternate service providers such as Starlink and WISPs and helping regional communities consider and compare these options. Case studies highlighting how these alternate providers and connection options have benefitted a range of communities including students, farmers, businesses and others, can be particularly informative.

Q12 What can be done to maximise access to multiple connectivity options in case of outages?

To maximize access to multiple connectivity options in case of outages:

- **Infrastructure Redundancy:** Implement backup systems such as portable or permanent generators and batteries to ensure network functionality during emergencies.
- **Public Safety Mobile Broadband:** Develop a national capability to enhance emergency services' communication and coordination in regional areas.
- **Temporary Disaster Roaming:** Allow temporary access to other mobile networks during emergencies, ensuring continuous connectivity.

These strategies aim to improve resilience and ensure continuous access to connectivity services during outages and emergencies.

Q13 What can be done to increase capacity and improve the reliability of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia?

Nil response

Q14 How can the energy and telecommunications sectors work more effectively, especially with respect to redundancy?

Nil response

Q15 What innovative solutions can be explored to ensure telecommunications infrastructure remains operational during and after natural disasters? How could partnerships with local communities improve the maintenance, security and availability of infrastructure

The following recommended solutions could be explored to ensure telecommunications infrastructure remains operational during and after natural disasters:

- **Use of Portable and Backup Systems**: Implement portable generators and battery backups to maintain power supply and ensure continuous telecommunications services during outages.
- **Coordination and Collaboration**: Encourage collaboration between telecommunications providers and local communities to share infrastructure resources and maintain service availability.
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- **Community Involvement**: Engage local communities in emergency planning and infrastructure maintenance to enhance security and response capabilities.

These recommended solutions aim to improve the resilience and reliability of telecommunications infrastructure in the region.

Q16 What lessons can be learned from private sector investment in regional telecommunications in closing the digital divide in regional and remote areas?

The following lessons can be learned from private sector investment in regional telecommunications to help close the digital divide:

- **Collaboration with Local Communities**: Private sector investments involving local communities in planning and implementation tend to have better outcomes. This collaboration helps ensure that the services meet the area's specific needs.
- **Use of Alternative Technologies**: Adopting alternative technologies, such as low Earth orbit satellites, effectively improved connectivity in areas where traditional infrastructure is either unavailable or inadequate.
- **Strategic Partnerships**: Forming partnerships between private companies and public entities can leverage existing infrastructure, reduce costs, and expand service reach, demonstrating the effectiveness of coordinated efforts in infrastructure development.

These lessons highlight the importance of community involvement, technological innovation, and strategic partnerships in enhancing digital connectivity in regional and remote areas.

Q17 What has been your experience as a consumer of Australian Government programs aimed at improving regional communications? What improvements would you suggest?

Some insights into experiences and suggestions for Australian Government programs aimed at improving regional communications:

- **Unreliable Connectivity**: There are significant issues with unreliable internet access in high-growth residential and tourism areas, affecting residents and businesses including inconsistent service during peak times, which is not reflected in official coverage maps. To enhance coverage and reliability, improve the accuracy of coverage maps ensuring that they reflect actual user experiences.
- **Digital Education Programs**: The lack of digital skills and awareness about available technologies is a barrier. Community education and digital literacy programs are needed to help residents and businesses make better use of available digital infrastructure. Increase efforts in community education to raise awareness about digital solutions and how to use them effectively.
- **Private Infrastructure Utilisation**: Private digital infrastructure is underutilised, which could be better coordinated with public assets to enhance service delivery. Facilitate better public and private infrastructure use to improve connectivity and service reliability.

These suggestions aim to address the identified gaps and improve the overall effectiveness of regional communication programs.

Q18 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?

Suggested changes to Australian Government investment programs to ensure successful, efficient, and effective delivery of improved telecommunications for the Barwon South West region:

- **Coordination of Public and Private Infrastructure**: Improve coordination and sharing of existing public and private digital infrastructure. This can maximise the use of existing assets and reduce redundancy, ensuring efficient use of resources.
- **Investment in New Technologies**: Government programs should prioritise investment in new and emerging technologies, such as low Earth orbit satellites, to address connectivity gaps and reduce congestion, particularly in high-growth residential and tourism areas.

- **Community Education and Engagement**: Include programs that educate and motivate the community about the benefits and opportunities of digital connectivity, which can help increase digital literacy and adoption.
- **Flexible and Targeted Funding**: Flexibility in funding to support digital infrastructure projects that meet the specific needs of key economic sectors and regions, ensuring that investment aligns with local priorities and conditions.

These changes aim to enhance the effectiveness of government programs in delivering reliable and equitable telecommunications services across the region.

Q19 How could Australian Government programs better align with state, territory and local government planning and funding processes in delivering telecommunications services and infrastructure?

Suggested changes to better align Australian Government programs with state, territory, and local government planning and funding processes for delivering telecommunications services and infrastructure in the Barwon South West region:

- **Coordinated Infrastructure Use:** Establish a coordinated approach for sharing public and private digital infrastructure, ensuring that investments are aligned and resources are maximised across all levels of government.
- **Integration with Local Priorities:** Align government programs with the specific digital infrastructure needs and strategic economic directions identified by local and regional plans, such as the Barwon Regional Economic Development Strategy.
- **Community Engagement and Education:** Improve community education programs to improve understanding and utilisation of available digital technologies, ensuring that local communities are actively involved in the planning and decision-making processes.

These strategies aim to streamline efforts, avoid duplication, and ensure that telecommunications infrastructure projects are effectively meeting the needs of the Barwon South West region.

Q20 What other matters should the Committee consider in its review and why are they important?

Nil response

Equitable access to telecommunications services is not just a matter of convenience but a fundamental necessity for the Barwon South West region's growth and sustainability. The diverse needs of city-based centres, rural communities, and coastal areas require tailored infrastructure investments to ensure that all residents and businesses can participate in the digital economy. Addressing these disparities will enhance educational opportunities, economic development, and social inclusion, making the region more resilient. It is crucial to prioritise telecommunications improvements in policy and planning to bridge the digital divide and support the region's future.

If you have any further enquiries about this submission, [redacted], Chair of RDA BSW, can be contacted via email rda.barwonsouthwest@rdv.vic.gov.au.