



Australian Government

Office of the National Rural Health Commissioner

2024 Regional Telecommunications Review

Considerations for the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

The Office of the National Rural Health Commissioner

The *Health Insurance Act 1973* (the Act) provides the legislative basis for the appointment and the functions of the National Rural Health Commissioner (the Commissioner) and the Office of the National Rural Health Commissioner. In accordance with the Act, the functions of the Commissioner are to provide independent and objective advice in relation to rural health to the Minister responsible for rural health.

Background

Disparities in the reliability and speed of broadband Internet services available in metropolitan areas compared to rural and remote areas persist (Accenture 2024).¹ The opportunity for the *Regional Telecommunications Review* to recommend future focused strategies to ensure appropriately reliable and faster broadband speeds for services is welcomed. It is hoped that this Review will result in mechanisms to progress to improved accessibility (infrastructure, service offerings and comparative pricing) for populations outside NBN Co's *Fibre to the Premises* service areas. To this end, there are immediate and future rural-proofing considerations relating to the rural and remote health sector that are pertinent to ensure the viability of health services and related businesses, and equitable access to health care for consumers.

Australia's values in equity are within many public policies and perhaps in its most well-known unwavering commitment to universal health care. As times change, health service delivery has changed too. It will continue to do so at a rapid rate, not least because of associated and lucrative research and development in the sector, but also because Australians have a high utilisation rate of health services in comparison to other OECD countries (OECD 2024). The range and type of health care services will change as expectations of what universal health care is will augment in decades to come. With this comes opportunities, but also challenges, particularly for remote settings and communities. Reliance on technology in health care will only become greater and this increases the potential for greater disparities between remote, rural and metropolitan Australia. Rural and

¹ The NBN Co's commissioned Economic and Social Impact Report (2024) indicates that while productivity has lifted in regions such as Karratha, South Hedland, Mount Isa and Airlie, their average broadband speeds were between 26 Mbps to 32 Mbps, in comparison to places such as Coffs Harbour at 76 Mbps.



remote Australians already experience numerous barriers to access universal health care, and the transformation of health care into digitalised service delivery requires careful consideration on the impact that this will have for the rural and remote population without the necessary telecommunications infrastructure and services (AIHW 2024).

Opportunities

The USO is codified as a consumer protection but the establishment and maintenance of a USO embodies Australia's values in equity, specifically equitable access to telecommunication infrastructure and services. Since its establishment, there have been tectonic shifts in how communications occur within communities and services, and exponential growth in the use and reliance of broadband telecommunications networks and services. The current USO focus on fixed-lines and payphone standards is now less relevant because of recent changes in technologies and communication preferences across Australia. Rural and remote residents and services are no different and equally rely on broadband Internet and mobile networks. USO reform recognises this and infers that equitable access must now safeguard rural and remote Australians' and services' access to high-speed broadband Internet. Such reform can safeguard communication means and services which are increasingly digitalising their service offerings, particularly with initiatives such as the *National Digital Health Strategy* and *National Healthcare Interoperability Plan* (Australian Digital Health Agency 2023).

Rural and remote health services' intrinsic reliance on Internet to access medical records, operationalise health services or conduct telehealth via a software application for voice or video health consultation requires the USO to have good-quality mobile network and broadband connectivity embedded in its next iteration. There is also scope for how the provision of newer services such as commercially available low Earth orbit (LEO) satellite Internet services, with its widespread coverage, could be options within the USO to enable greater service choice to remote Australians and health services especially. While a shorter life expectancy is associated with LEO satellites and potentially its services, there are opportunities to improve the accessibility of Internet in remote areas through such means (refer to *Figure 1* which shows the Internet access disparities between major cities, regional areas to remote areas). The growth and availability of broadband speed in areas where economies of scale do not exist warrants consideration on comparative pricings from private Internet service providers because remote populations already experience Internet affordability issues (refer *Figure 2* based on 2022 Australian Digital Inclusion Index data).



Figure 1 demonstrates that accessibility to Internet in terms of speed and data allowance, intensity and frequency and types of connections decreases with rurality (Thomas, McCosker et al. 2023).

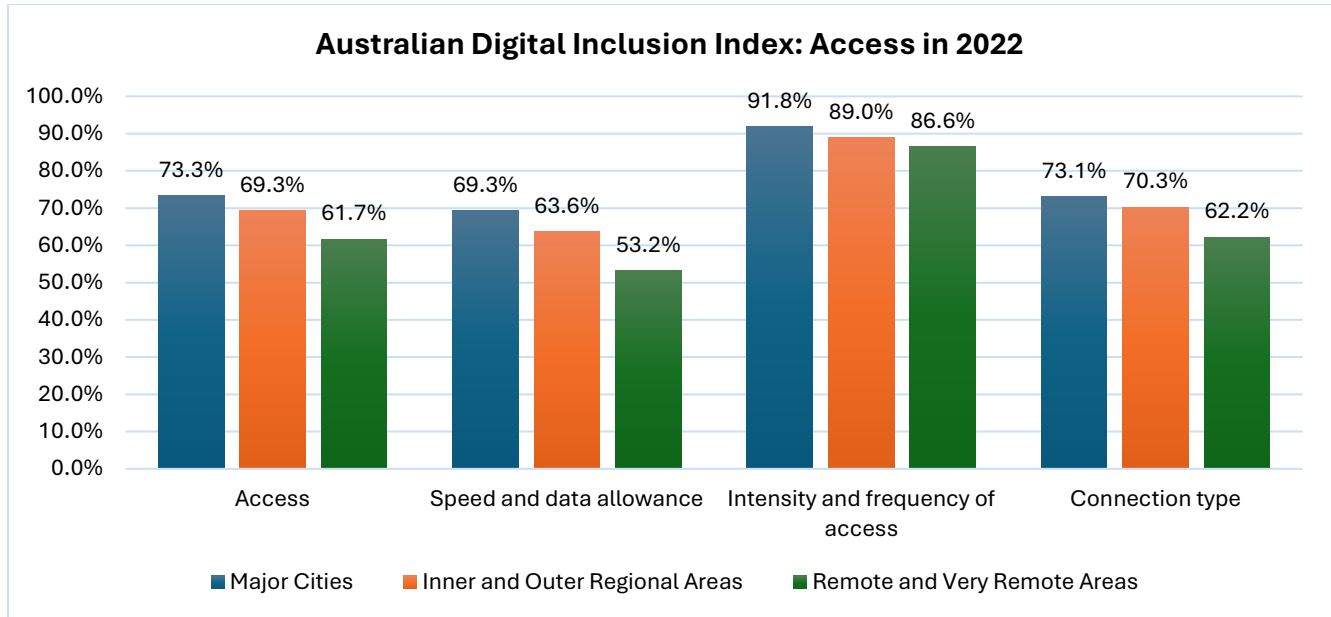
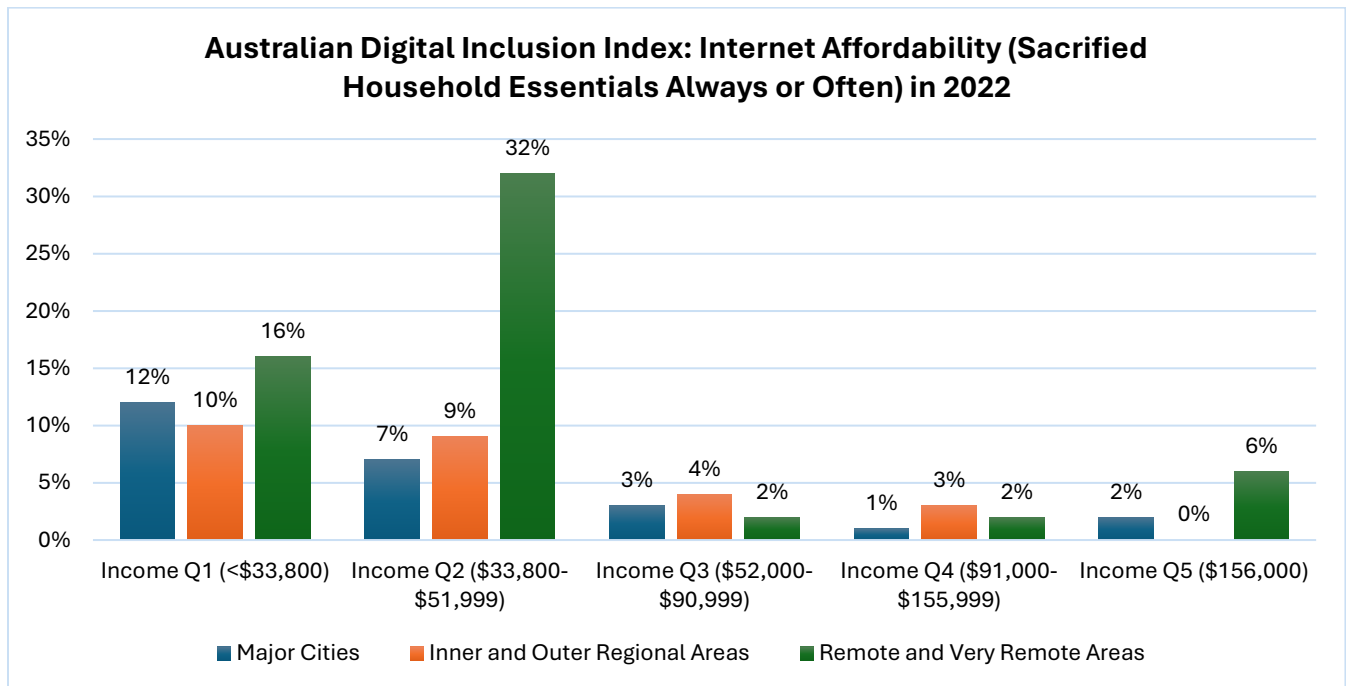


Figure 2 demonstrates the disproportionate burden in regional and remote populations to access affordable Internet, measured to whether household essentials were always or often sacrificed to afford Internet service (Thomas, McCosker et al. 2023).





Equity in speed, reliability and affordability

The expansion of full fibre NBN and advancements in LEO satellite technologies has positively affected the speed, reliability and affordability in some regional, rural and remote communities. Yet disparities in broadband speed, the reliability and affordability of Internet is variable, with remote areas most disadvantaged as shown in *Figures 1* and *2*. Testing the capability of Internet service offerings in remote locations is needed to comprehensively understand benchmarks of equity of access in Australia, as remote areas have populations who experience ongoing reliability and affordability concerns. Recommendations must focus on ensuring rural and remote communities have services that are on par with what is available in metropolitan Australia and be affordable and resilient to ‘thin markets’ which are synonymous with being commercially unviable. A mechanism to identify and highlight areas of poor service and limited affordable providers must remain as a tool to ensure accountability for service gaps and financial solutions. The regulatory framework that underpins this remains a major tool for enforcement.

Disasters and emergencies

The Office of the National Rural Health Commissioner corroborates stakeholders in emphasising the importance of telecommunications (including mobile telephone) coverage and disaster planning to aid communities when impacted by natural disasters and emergencies. Additionally, preventative and operable plans should be well understood by communities to ensure any impacted telecommunications infrastructure and/or services are prioritised as soon as practical, and that communications strategies support access to vital community information sharing. This needs to include safeguarding radio transmissions as the national broadcaster and local community radio stations are critical information providers in such events. There is opportunity to consider what mechanism can be used to safeguard communities’ communications during times where critical information is paramount in ensuring their safety and wellbeing.

Thank you for your review and ongoing support of equitable access to telecommunications as one of the key planks of infrastructure for future care of rural and remote Australians.

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