

Strathbogie Shire Submission: 2024 Independent Review into Telecommunications

Introduction

Strathbogie Shire has been actively pursuing improvements in both mobile telephone and digital connectivity for several years. Despite some progress, the Shire continues to suffer from “patchy” mobile coverage, which includes both connectivity and capacity constraints.

Geographical and Demographic Overview

Strathbogie Shire covers approximately 3,200 km², featuring a mix of mountainous terrain in the Strathbogie Ranges in the east and flat plains across the central part of the Shire. It is bordered by the Goulburn River region and the hilly escarpment of the Heathcote-Graytown National Park in the west. The Shire lies astride two major north-south transport corridors and has a population of 11,455 people.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Strathbogie Shire population grew by approximately 11.5% between the 2016 Census and the 2021 Census. This growth was much higher than predicted and one of the highest in Australia during that period. The growth trend is expected to continue, particularly in the town of Nagambie and its surrounds. Avenel and Euroa are also experiencing above-average growth.

In recent years, there have been over 1,000 residential planning permit applications approved for subdivision in and around Nagambie. These dwellings will likely exceed VIF projections by 2036. Significant numbers of approvals have also occurred for the towns of Avenel (107 lots) and Euroa (206 lots). Together with Nagambie, this would result in a population increase of 2,888 new residents, using the average persons per dwelling from the 2021 Census.

Nagambie is a popular tourist and event destination, experiencing large influxes of people during summer holidays and events. This influx regularly causes the mobile telephone service in the town to “freeze” due to the extra demand.

The median age of Strathbogie residents is 53, considerably higher than Victoria's regional median of 39 years.

Challenges and Risks

Strathbogie Shire comprises six small towns and several isolated localities across its central plain and the Strathbogie Ranges. The Shire is prone to both flooding and bushfires, and the community relies heavily on mobile telephone communication and mobile-based data services for information and direct communication with emergency services.

The Shire also has a fragile power supply and often experiences lengthy power outages, sometimes lasting over 24 hours. It is concerning that the mobile telephone towers across the region have limited operational time during power failures. Strathbogie Shire is part of the LEAPing into Resilience project, a joint initiative between Mansfield, Strathbogie, and Murrindindi Shire Councils funded by the Australian Government. The project is developing Local Emergency Action Plans (LEAPs). A major concern across participating communities

(Euroa, Avenel, Violet Town, Strathbogie Tableland, and Nagambie) is the loss of communications during emergencies or power outages.

These power outages leave the community unable to access the Vic Emergency app or use their mobile devices, putting people's welfare at increased risk.

Economic Development and Infrastructure Needs

Strathbogie Shire is a growing community with limited on-the-ground services. The Shire Council's Planning Department has conducted an economic analysis for a future industrial precinct in Nagambie, given that 30% of Australia's Gross Domestic Product traverses through the municipality. This analysis shows significant opportunities for freight and transportation companies. The Council is currently auditing infrastructure services to ensure appropriate infrastructure is in place to support business establishment and job creation amid ongoing residential growth. However, the lack of mobile telecommunications capacity and connectivity is likely to inhibit business development.

Mobile Telephone Communications

Due to difficult terrain and regional location, Strathbogie Shire has suffered from inadequate mobile telephone services for many years and currently has over 50 existing mobile telephone blackspots. While there have been some improvements under the Federal Mobile Telephone Blackspot Program, with extra services provided at Graytown, Creighton's Creek, and Ruffy, and funding for upgrades in Avenel, Avenel South, and Euroa North under the Regional Connectivity Program, many areas still lack coverage. Funding has also been provided to install a tower at Boho South in the Strathbogie Ranges, expected to be delivered by the end of 2025. However, there have been no further announcements about expanding the mobile network in the municipality.

We continue to advocate for the 50+ other sites across our municipality, prioritizing further coverage across the Strathbogie Ranges region and Mitchelton near Nagambie. Due to limited access to terrestrial NBN services and associated costs, many Strathbogie residents rely on mobile networks to access the Internet.

Maximizing Connectivity Options

The system can become overloaded during high-demand periods, such as holidays with over 300,000 tourist visitations each year or during emergencies like bushfires and floods.

These concerns regarding system capacity and resilience are exacerbated by the unreliable power supply, known as the most problematic in Victoria. Some communities have experienced blackouts exceeding 24 hours. While mobile telephone towers generally have backup power supplies of batteries and sometimes generators, most batteries usually run down within hours, causing communication breakdowns. This is particularly concerning during emergencies.

There have been suggestions that Councils could be provided with "plug-in" generators to maintain power to some towers during power failures. While these generators would help, maintaining a communications network is not a local government responsibility. The Council lacks the technical expertise and funds to maintain generators long-term. It is strongly

recommended that extra resilience be built into the system, with generators for high-capacity batteries maintained by telecommunications providers or the Commonwealth Government.

Ensuring Access for Regional, Rural, and Remote Areas

Digital connectivity in Strathbogie Shire relies heavily on satellite or wireless technology, with fibre available only in Euroa and Nagambie. The fibre footprint does not extend throughout these towns, and expansion seems dependent on private development. Consequently, many residents switch to mobile networks for Internet services.

There is concern about the digital access of Kestrel Aviation, adjacent to Mangalore Airport, home to the state's aerial firefighting service, which controls approximately 80 aircraft assets during the fire season. Currently, Kestrel relies on a mobile signal for data access, which may fail during emergencies or power outages.

Many farmers rely on wireless/satellite technology for farm supply orders, crop planting, harvesting, and market access. This infrastructure is crucial for running modern farm businesses. High-altitude satellites like Skymuster have limited capacity, making online trade difficult for businesses. Many, including farmers, are turning to low-orbit satellite providers like Starlink or mobile networks to stay connected and competitive.

Extensive community consultation and advocacy for improved mobile connectivity and capacity in the region have been conducted. However, current connectivity and capacity levels are inadequate to meet Strathbogie Shire's present and future needs. While some progress has been made in mobile telecommunications, digital connectivity improvements are still at the negotiation stage and depend on Strathbogie Shire seeking funding to co-invest with NBN Co. Successful co-investment would result in infrastructure wholly owned by NBN Co, a government monopoly returning a commercial return to the organization.

Strategic Planning and Future Needs

Greater emphasis must be placed on strategic planning for regional telecommunications, focusing on future population growth rather than merely meeting existing needs. New and emerging technologies could improve regional telecommunications. With remote work, education, and housing pressures in major cities, more people are expected to move to regions within two hours of major metropolitan areas. However, planning for services and infrastructure to accommodate this shift has not been undertaken, leaving regional municipalities unable to offer the necessary services for relocation.

Shifting Responsibilities, Affordability, and Economic Development Hindrances

Smaller shires like Strathbogie are disadvantaged for several reasons. They are "cash and resource poor," making it difficult to fund or leverage funding for "co-investment," creating a barrier to accessing funding in many grant schemes. As larger LGAs and regional centers develop their digital and mobile telecommunications infrastructure, smaller LGAs fall behind in their ability to provide services and attract investment.

Strathbogie Shire, with its proximity to Melbourne, larger regional centers like Shepparton, and its location at the apex of two major road and rail corridors, is well-placed for residential

and commercial investment. However, this investment will be inhibited without improved digital and mobile communications access and capacity.

The recent surge in residential and commercial investment in regional Victoria underscores the need for mobile telephone and digital infrastructure. We urge the government to prioritize our concerns and provide equity to small local government areas by ensuring access to reliable, high-capacity, and affordable digital and telecommunications infrastructure.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Strathbogie Shire faces significant challenges in telecommunications, impacting its economic development, emergency response, and quality of life for residents. Strategic investment and planning are crucial to ensuring that the Shire can meet its current and future needs, fostering growth and resilience in the face of these challenges.

Strathbogie Shire Council