



# TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL

*To lead, provide & facilitate a safe, sustainable and culturally vibrant community*

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2024 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications

GPO Box 594

CANBERRA ACT 2601

13<sup>th</sup> June 2024

Torres Shire Council (Council) is pleased to respond to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review.

Council notes that the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) is established every three years under Part 9B of the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* (Cth) to conduct a review into telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia, whose Terms of Reference are particularised below:

### **Terms of Reference for the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review**

1. The Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee must conduct a review of the adequacy of telecommunications services in regional, rural, and remote parts of Australia.
2. In determining the adequacy of those services, the Committee must have regard to whether people in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia have equitable access to telecommunications services that are significant to people in those parts of Australia, and currently available in one or more parts of urban Australia.
3. In conducting the review, the Committee must make provision for public consultation and consultation with people in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.
4. In conducting the Review, the Committee is to have regard to any policies of the Australian Government notified to it by the Minister for Communications, and such other matters as the Committee considers relevant. The Minister requests that you have regard to the following:
  - a. awareness and the impact of the Government's \$1.1 billion investment in improving regional communications, including the \$656 million Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia; extent to which this investment is addressing identified needs; and flexibility to address emerging needs and challenges;
  - b. the implications of, and opportunities presented by, changing and emerging technologies and broader market developments for regional communications policy settings and the design and delivery of regional communications programs;
  - c. attitudes of regional households, communities and businesses to; community awareness of; access to supporting technologies to support take-up of; and public sentiment on changing and emerging technologies;

- d. needs in First Nations communities, and the extent to which those needs are being met, taking into account initiatives across the Government;
- e. potential to fast track some USO modernisation outcomes, particularly within NBN Co's fixed wireless network footprint, which would build momentum for broader change; and
- f. the suitability of regional communications during emergencies and natural disasters, including reliability, resilience, speed and coverage.

The *Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia*, a significant initiative by the Australian Government, allocated more than \$1.1 billion to enhance mobile and broadband connectivity in rural and regional communities. Mobile Coverage Improvement: Council notes the plan allocates \$400 million to boost multi-carrier mobile coverage along regional roads, improve mobile services in underserved regional and remote areas, and enhance the resilience of communication facilities and public safety services, including through the Broadcasting Resilience Program.

Firstly, there is no multi-carrier presence in our Shire, with other carriers regularly losing connection and only Telstra remaining as a functioning carrier.

Secondly, remote workers struggle to maintain connection to the system. This extends to the "back of the island" on Thursday Island, in parts of the Council depot, parts of the Horn Island airport and depot precincts, quarry and landfill. This has resulted in community members purchasing *Starlink* or *Sky Muster* to overcome lack of connectivity with NBN Co broadband. Council notes that \$480 million was provided to NBN Co through the NBN Fixed Wireless and Satellite Upgrade Program. This investment upgrades 120,000 satellite premises to Fixed Wireless, enabling speeds of up to 100 Mbps for all premises in the expanded Fixed Wireless footprint and up to 250 Mbps for 85% of Fixed Wireless premises. Despite this funding support, the aforementioned circumvention occurs due to poor or no connectivity, or due to lack of information about NBN Co products and service.

So far as connectivity of communications during emergencies and natural disasters, including reliability, resilience, speed and coverage are concerned, internet and mobile services continue to have either connectivity problems: slow speeds, dropouts, short range of towers, blackouts. In 2021 Council suggested that it was necessary to integrate regional planning supported by Regional Technical Panels of all relevant stakeholders

There were significant weather impacts over the past wet season on satellite internet reliability. Now, as in 2021, the community must contend with no coverage for extended periods whilst having to also contend with episodic power failures. There are still extended periods where there is only coverage by one carrier.

Council notes that on **1<sup>st</sup> September 2024**, Telstra will be turning off the **3G network** in our region. This is the only current network of other carriers such as Optus. Council is concerned that not enough work has been done regarding communications testing and information that may have unintended consequences for our communities. One example is the impact in our region on **ocean signal distress beacons** (reliant on the **3G network**) known as **EPIRBs**. This situation must be addressed (if it has not already) as a matter of urgency.

Council wishes to restate our great concern that when telecommunications are lost/fail, our communities **cannot make any emergency calls to first responders**, and this is terribly dangerous and may be life threatening. This serious situation must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Council notes Terms of Reference (ToR) Section 5 as follows:

5. Taking into account Terms of Reference Section 4, the Committee is to consider and provide advice on:
  - a. telecommunications needs in regional Australia, gaps in services, and barriers to addressing needs, gaps and improvements in telecommunications outcomes;
  - b. changes or adjustments needed to existing Government policies and design and delivery of programs to ensure they continue to be effective; remain fit for purpose; are maximising the social and economic potential of regional Australia and of existing and emerging technologies; and deliver improved telecommunications outcomes;
  - c. policy settings that might be needed to support more rapid rollout of, and investment in, new and emerging telecommunications technologies in regional, rural and remote Australia, or to address emerging issues;
  - d. constraints and capacity of the telecommunications providers to deliver investment and improved services to meet the needs of regional Australia; and
  - e. the need for targeted place-based solutions, which may differ by region and remoteness.
6. The report may set out recommendations to the Australian Government.
7. In formulating a recommendation that the Australian Government should take a particular action, the Committee must assess the costs and benefits of that action.
8. The Committee must prepare a report of the review by 31 December 2024 or earlier and present it to the Minister for Communications.

In response to ToR Section 5, Council advises the following:

In 2021 Council advised the Committee as follows:

*Torres Shire Council stresses that failure in the delivery of efficient and effective telecommunications in our region, especially through Telstra, serves to undermine both our business efficiency and our connection to the world ..... Telstra ..... has not complied with the universal guarantee enshrined in the Telecommunications (Customer Service Guarantee) Standard 2011 ("the CSG Standard"), as amended and issued by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).*

Whilst Council now has an onsite server that has greatly improved performance, the following issues remain:

**Infrastructure and Assets:**

- Unreliability of internet and mobile services – slow speeds, dropouts, blackouts – change the range of towers, integrate regional planning supported by Regional Technical Panels of all relevant stakeholders.
- Significant weather impacts over the past wet season on satellite internet reliability.
- There is a need to modernise infrastructure.
- Optic fibre ought to be connected to premises.
- 2-speed internet service delivery (e.g. connections that some agencies can access versus the rest of the community) – internet service delivery be addressed so that consistency of accessibility is achieved.
- Last mile issues of connectivity (i.e. getting existing connections to reach properties) – connections reach properties.
- Limited mobile coverage= operationalise a strategy to expand coverage within the Shire and Region beyond part-town coverage.

- People are doubling up on devices and services due to reliability issues (for redundancy) to keep businesses operational and maintain core services (increased cost of being connected) – reduce cost to businesses and organisations by reducing cost of connection through efficient data delivery.
- Infrastructure (mobile and some broadband) exposed and damage to infrastructure takes a long time to repair, especially during disasters – infrastructure needs to be weather proofed to reduce exposure, delays and cost.
- Interdependency between mobile, internet and power connectivity mean all three can fail at once (as has occurred within the past month) – plan provision of all 3 services so that there is not simultaneous failure.
- Reliance on generators for energy links digital connectivity with outages of power and energy reliability – energy companies expand their service to remove reliance on generators, including the use of new technologies and energy innovations.
- Lack of clarity about infrastructure planning, investment and roll out for the region by telecommunication providers – provide clarity.
- Reliance on mobile phones to do business is not satisfactory due to data limits, coverage and affordability – diversify infrastructure.
- Lack of capacity of local communities to raise investment or co-contribute for infrastructure developments – factor into Commonwealth funding schemes.
- Need to co-ordinate infrastructure delivery in the region – one example is to ensure road infrastructure design and build is done with telecommunications.
- The shift of service delivery to on-line (e.g. My Gov) with e-government and limited on site services (banks, ATMs), has created anxiety about access failures.

#### **Affordability:**

- Data on mobile packages are limited and inadequate. In some cases, some members of the community have paid for data they are unable to use due to congestion and people give up on usage. Council hopes that there is an expansion of available data without price hikes.
- Few choices of retail services providers (especially for mobiles) to provide competition – expand providers to ensure competition.

#### **Technical support:**

- Remoteness contributes to the prolongation of already long service times for connectivity, installation and maintenance – establish benchmarks that are appropriate to the region to bring down the long service times currently being experienced.
- Council is intending to pursue digital hub funding to assist not only the Shire but the region to improve technical capability of users. Council intends to pursue funding for a Regional Tech Hub to support regional consumers in accessing advice and support on digital connectivity options, and to be a one stop information shop regarding NBN Co, mobile phones use etcetera.
- Council notes the preponderance of external rather than on-the-ground technical expertise in businesses, service agencies and government, with many agencies contracting consultants to support them remotely (as does Council). No doubt this is a feature of remote and rural regions throughout Australia and hence the Committee may recommend strategies to address technical literacy on-the-ground.

- Poor customer service and misinformation given by some providers – a one stop shop for consumer protection is required given that standards and laws pertaining to this matter traverse both the Commonwealth and the State.
- Improve customer service by reversing the current onus thus ensuring providers assist with addressing technical issues rather than having consumers trouble shoot.
- Ergon ensures technical staff are on the ground in the Shire and the region and the telcos should provide the same resourcing.
- All consumers should be aware of, and understand, the CSG (the community service guarantee). The CSG should be explained in ‘creole’ languages and the Kala Lagau Ya and Meriam dialects, as English is a second or third language for many in the Shire and the region. Information about making a complaint should be equally available and explained in in ‘creole’ languages and the Kala Lagau Ya and Meriam dialects.

### **Digital Literacy and Awareness:**

This remains an issue and the establishment of a digital hub will help alleviate the following problems:

- Lack of consumer knowledge and advice on getting/staying connected, trouble shooting, service complaints.
- Lack of information on what is available to the community in terms of internet and telephony services. Confusion about providers, packages, internet-mobile differences, options for connectivity will also be overcome with this accessible information.
- Lack of digital skills and increased digital divide both by generation, geography, employment categories, individuals and organisations and this negatively impacts on business opportunities, education and accessing social services.

### **Safety, Emergency and Border Security:**

Council continues to be concerned about these issues, and particularly:

- Interruptions to communications during accidents and health emergencies
- Limited access to information and alerts during disaster management and weather events
- Difficulty reporting safety issues across isolated roads and between islands in the Torres Strait.
- Difficulty reporting domestic and family violence and criminal activity.
- Difficulty reporting border security concerns.

### **Statistical Data**

Whilst Council in 2021 was able to provide the Committee with the following statistical data:

*56.9% of households with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons had internet access; and 75.8% of non-Indigenous households had internet access. "Therefore, the use rate of households with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons in the Torres Shire is 16.6% less than Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander households in the rest of Queensland and almost half that discrepancy (-8.4%) for non-Indigenous households".*




In 2024, this data is no longer available through the Queensland Government's regional profiles service/site. Council has successfully obtained the support of the Queensland

Statistician's Office, Queensland Treasury, to produce a Statistical Report Card on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August of each year to coincide with the anniversary of the First Island Councillors Conference that took place on Masig Island on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1937 comparing important socio-economic metrics in our region with the rest of Queensland to determine what has been made to close the gap. It is hoped that this useful telecommunications data will be included on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August report and may be cited in the next **Regional Telecommunications Review**.

Council is pleased to provide this 2024 Submission to the Committee.

Yours faithfully

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature of the Chief Executive Officer.  
**Chief Executive Officer**

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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# TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL

## DEPUTATION MEETING

Hon. Shannon Fentimen MP

Attorney General



8:45am, 15 July 2022

Council Chambers

**TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL**

**68 Douglas Street - Thursday Island**

**Queensland Australia 4875**



## TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Telecommunications*
2. *Tourism Project Update - \$1M Year of Tourism Fund*
3. *Winds of Zenadth Cultural Festival 2022*
4. *Thursday Island - Rosehill Boat Ramp*
5. *Torres Strait Vehicle Importation, Transfer and Use Policy*
6. *Climate Change – Torres Shire Update on CHAS Project*
7. *Torres Shire LGA Animal Management*
8. *Brisbane 2032*

## ITEM 1 – TELECOMMUNICATIONS IN THE TORRES STRAIT

Council and our communities have the same business, economic, educational, social and service delivery requirements as elsewhere in Australia. In our Shire and region, the quality and reliability of services fail, not only during storm events and cyclones, but absent these events. Community members and Council can report that there is unreliability of internet and mobile services with slow speeds, inadequate network capacity, dropouts, black spots and lack of geographical coverage.

In addition, there are safety concerns with the lack of reliable digital connectivity, especially in the context of COVID-19, but also in terms of family violence and policing, border security and biosecurity; brought into high relief in times of isolation. The problems experienced in the region also have terrible human costs, as noted by the coroner recently in the *Pana Boy* boating tragedy, where five people (including young children) lost their lives. The coroner determined that **poor mobile phone connectivity** in the region, along with the absence of an outer island ferry service and a cultural shift in marine safety were the three main contributing factors to the tragedy, requiring urgent attention.

The problems experienced in our Shire and region have other economic costs, including opportunity costs, as well as lost strategic literacy through the absence of intergovernmental linkage associated with remote digital service delivery.

The other area to address is the service quality and social infrastructure gaps due to limited or mismatched telecommunications services/plan to meet remote, regional and rural consumer needs and the affordability of plans (particularly where there are redundancies and lack of access to local technical support).

To address these difficulties one important step is to encourage competition so that *Telstra* is not effectively afforded monopoly status in the Torres Strait. *Optus* (for example) regularly has no coverage in the Torres Strait.

### **Issues identified with the telecommunication infrastructure and assets**

- Unreliability of internet and mobile services – slow speeds, dropouts, short range of towers, blackouts.
- Weather impacts on satellite internet reliability, as the region is prone to heavy rain and cyclones – explore new technologies that remove the need to be satellite-dependent.
- Limited mobile coverage, particularly on the outskirts and out of town – operationalise a strategy to expand coverage within the Shire and Region beyond town-centric coverage.

- People are doubling up on devices and services due to reliability issues (for redundancy) to keep businesses operational and maintain core services (increased cost of being connected) – reduce cost to businesses and organisations by reducing cost of connection through efficient data delivery.
- Infrastructure (mobile and some broadband) exposed and damage to infrastructure takes a long time to repair, especially during disasters – infrastructure be weather proofed to reduce exposure, delays and cost.
- Interdependency between mobile, internet and power connectivity, means all three can fail at once – plan provision of all 3 services so that there is not simultaneous fail.
- Reliance on generators for energy links digital connectivity with outages of power and energy reliability – energy companies expand their service to remove reliance on generators, including the use of new technologies and energy innovations.
- Lack of clarity about infrastructure planning, investment and roll out for the region by telecommunication providers – provide clarity.
- The shift service delivery to on-line (e.g. My Gov) with e-government and limited on site services (banks, ATMs), remote work and COVID-19 measures have created anxiety about access and being left behind.
- Regional vulnerability to climate and weather requires greater investment to protect and maintain telecommunication infrastructure – invest.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Council seeks our Government Ministerial Champion to make representation on behalf of the people of Torres Strait for the same quality and reliability of telecommunications services as the rest of Australia.



## PROJECT INTRODUCTION – PROPOSED HAWAIKI NUI SUBMARINE CABLE IN THE TORRES STRAIT

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on a proposed submarine telecommunication cable through the Torres Strait.

The proposed cable is identified in green in Figure 1. The existing cable which came into service in 2018 is identified in white.



Figure 1 Hawaiki Nui (green) with sister cable Hawaiki (white) installed in 2018

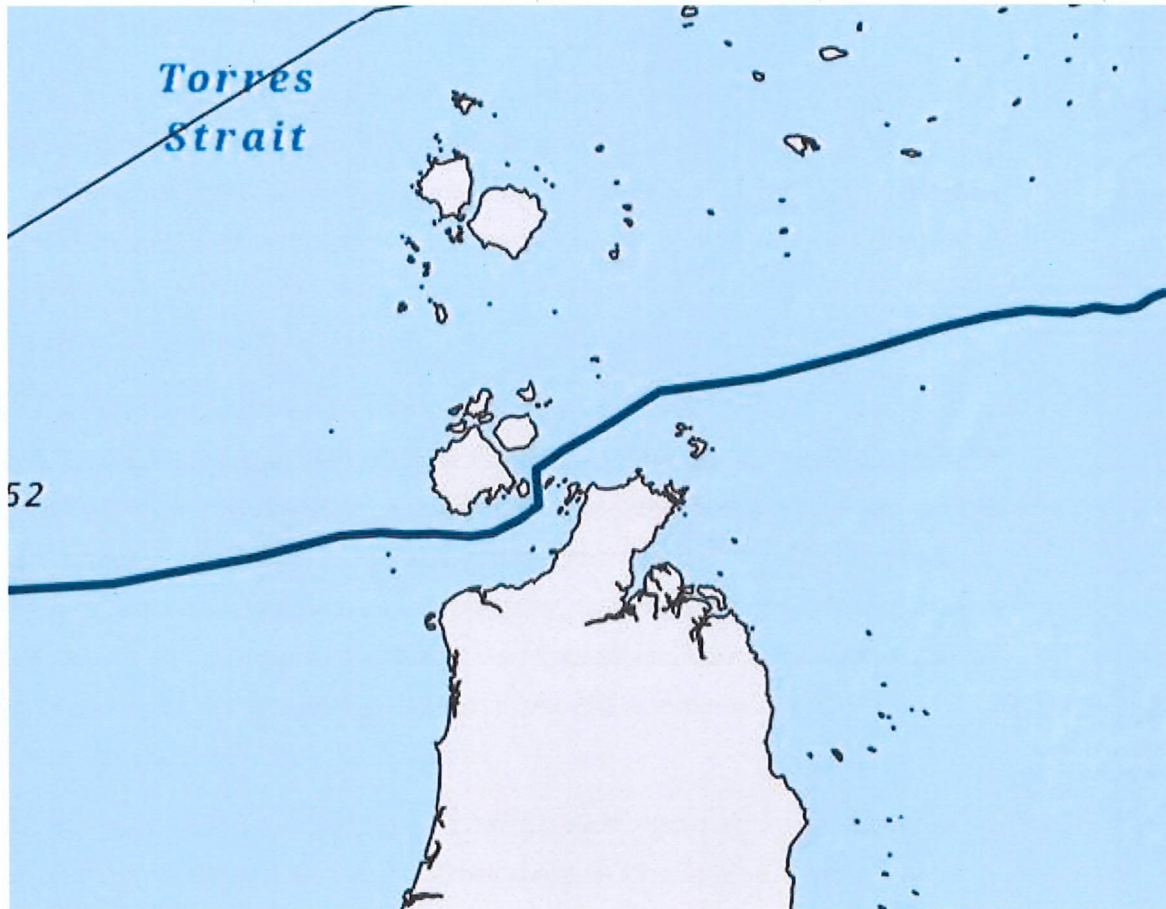
The high fibre count cable will extend from Sydney to California (USA), as well as connectivity to Hawaii, Darwin, Indonesia and Singapore. In addition, there will be connectivity from Sydney to New Zealand with a branch to Melbourne and a possible branch to Hobart.

The Cable will be one of the largest cable systems in the Asia-Pacific region. The Cable will be 25,000 kilometres long (not including the optional branches) and have a trunk capacity of 350 Terabits per second.

The Cable will be designed as a secure domestic network between the cities of Darwin, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne and a secure international network between Australia and Singapore, Australia and New Zealand and Australia and the USA.

A direct connection to islands in the Torres Strait is not proposed with domestic connections limited to major cities such as Darwin, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

The Cable will be the first telecommunications cable to be laid through the Torres Strait. Hawaiki is investigating a number of route options through the Torres Strait with the preferred alignment south of Prince of Wales Island and heading west to the Australian/PNG Exclusive Economic Zone. Refer Figure 2.



**Figure 2 – Proposed Hawaiki Nui Cable in the Torres Strait**

GHD Australia Pty Ltd have been engaged by Hawaiki to assist with approvals and stakeholder engagement. A copy of the correspondence dated 24 March 2022 introducing the project is provided in Attachment 1.

#### **Proposed installation and timeframes**

Where possible the Cable is proposed to be directly laid on the surface of the seabed through the Torres Strait. If this is not possible or practical, some of the Cable through the Torres Strait will be buried into the seabed at around 1.5 metres in depth.

Prior to installing a cable, a marine route survey will be undertaken along the preferred alignment and is proposed to occur in the period March to August 2023 with cable installation through the Torres Strait taking place late 2024 / early 2025 with the Cable ready for service by December 2025.

#### **Stakeholder Engagement**

GHD have engaged with relevant Commonwealth and State Governments to determine the approvals required as well as other key stakeholders in the region such as the Cape York Land Council, the Gur A Baradharaw Kod Torres Strait Sea and Land Council (GBK), TSRA, TSIRC and other key stakeholders.

A prelodgement meeting has been held with the State Development Assessment Agency (SARA) to determine State Government planning approvals. Formal prelodgement meeting minutes have not been finalised.

A project introduction meeting has been held with Council's Director Engineering and Infrastructure Services and Council's consultant Town Planner. It was requested that Torres Shire Council is kept up to date with the project as it moves through the approval process and cable installation.

Based on the information provided to date it is unlikely that Torres Shire Council will have an assessment role in the approvals process. Council will be kept informed as further information is provided.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Council Seeks Our Government Ministerial Champion to seek opportunities for Torres Strait to be Connected to the Hawaiki Nui Submarine Project.