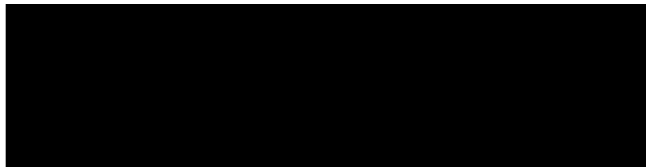




WEDDIN SHIRE COUNCIL



31 July 2024

2024 Regional Telecommunications Review
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts
GPO BOX 594
CANBERRA ACT 2601

<https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/have-your-say/2024-regional-telecommunications-review>

Dear 2024 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

Weddin Shire Council submission to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review

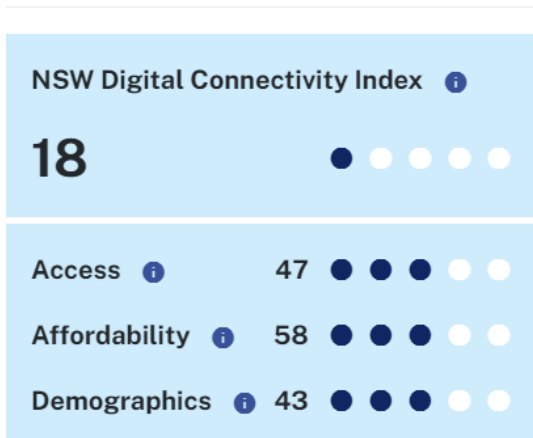
Background

The Weddin Shire is located in Central NSW 5 hours west of Sydney, and 2.5 hours north-west of Canberra. Weddin’s population is 3608, with the population centre in Grenfell (approximately 2000 people). There are four small villages; Bimbi (71 people), Caragabal (174 people), Greenethorpe (202 people) and Quandialla (163 people) with the remaining residents spread across the farming landscape. The main industry is agriculture.

The NSW Digital Connectivity Index, a tool developed by the NSW Telco Authority, measures the quality of digital connectivity across NSW for both the fixed and mobile networks, see Figure 1.

Weddin LGA scores for both On the Move and Stationary are considered ‘poor’ and communities with this score are considered highly unlikely to be able to support work from home or video conferencing.

Weddin



Weddin

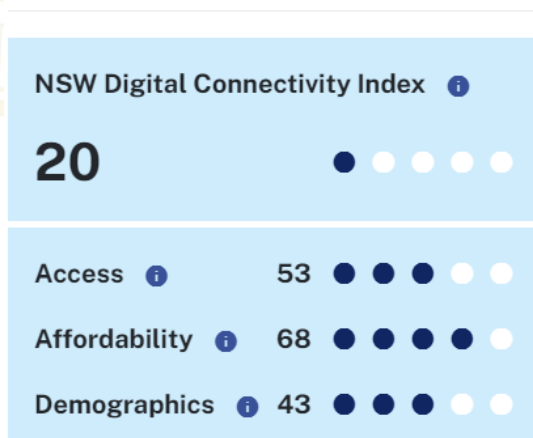


Figure 1. NSW Digital Connectivity Index for Weddin Shire 'On the Move' (left) and 'Stationary' (right).

Source: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/nsw-telco-authority/connectivity-leadership/nsw-digital-connectivity-index>

Parts of Grenfell's town centre have reasonable fixed line internet and 5G mobile coverage, however the majority of Weddin Shire receives satellite internet and patchy 4G mobile coverage with significant coverage gaps (see Figure 2). The situation in Weddin is an example of market failure; where the small population, their sparse distribution and challenging topography means that adequately addressing the needs of the community is not commercially viable for Telco's.

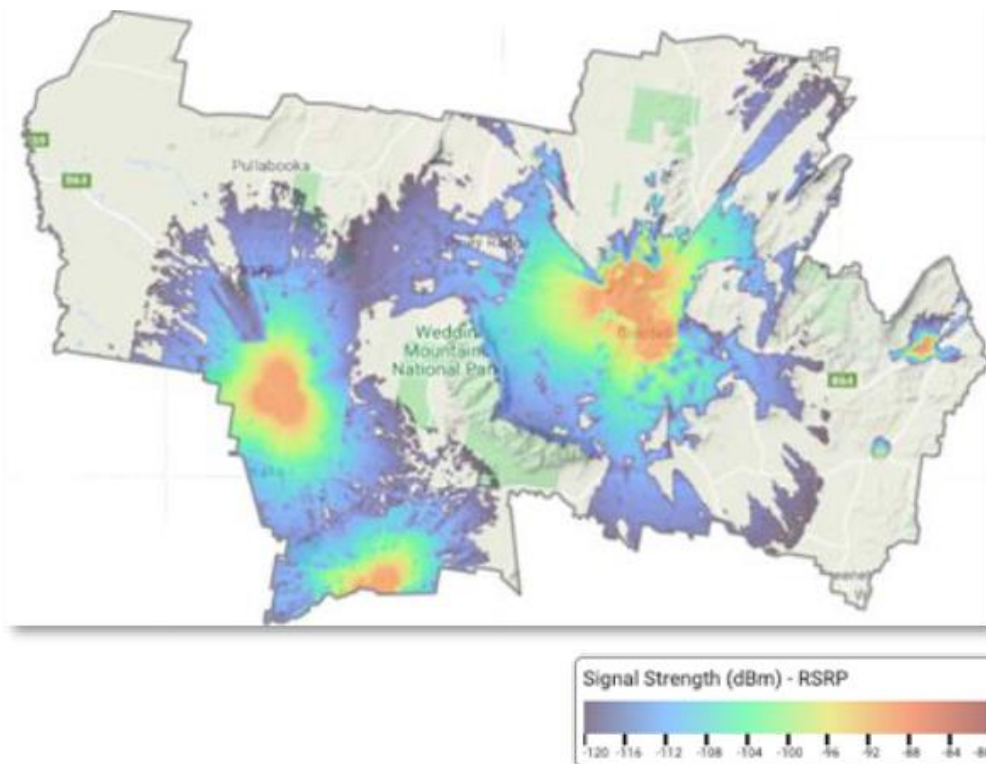


Figure 2. Estimated Mobile network coverage (all networks).

Source: Weddin Shire Council Digital Connectivity Strategy Report June 2021.

Since the introduction of Low Earth Orbiting (LEO) satellite internet, all of Weddin Shire can now be serviced with reliable high speed internet. Such is Weddin Shire Council's confidence in LEO satellite internet, Council has its own LEO connection used by administration staff when working in parts of the shire with known coverage gaps. Unfortunately it doesn't alleviate the issue with the majority of Councils road crews working in areas without telecommunications, especially with our graders operating electronics that rely on it.

While Weddin Shire is directly impacted by local deficiencies in both the mobile and fixed line services, the focus of this submission is on an innovative solution currently being delivered in Weddin Shire.

Weddin Shire Council Low Earth Orbiting Satellite Internet Subsidy

Council is delivering a pragmatic place based project; the Weddin Shire Council Low Earth Orbiting Satellite Internet Subsidy.

All Weddin Shire residents and businesses are eligible to apply to the Council program and receive a one off payment of up to \$1500, to cover upfront costs associated with the purchase of LEO satellite internet hardware and its installation. Ongoing monthly costs are excluded from the program and remain with the applicant. The program operates via reimbursement of eligible expenses into the bank account of the applicant. The program is available for new LEO connections and for LEO connections secured anytime since LEO satellite internet became available in Weddin Shire in 2021.

The scope of the project allows hardware costs such as the satellite dish, router, adapter, mount and cables and professional installation costs. The program has a total budget of \$150,000.

The program has an application form which must be completed and provided to Council for assessment. Several supporting documents are also required as part of the application including:

- Personal identification demonstrating the applicant is a resident of Weddin Shire
- A current rates notice demonstrating the applicant is the property owner. Rental tenants must provide confirmation the property owner has consented to the installation of a satellite dish.
- Invoice for hardware expenses
- Invoice for installation expenses
- Bank statements demonstrating transactions that correspond to the hardware and installation invoices.

The program is administered by Council's Economic Development Officer, with applications approved by Council's General Manager. The program has been running for approximately 6 months. The project is a one off and will end when funding is exhausted.

To date the program has received 110 applications, and the average value of each reimbursement is \$800, below the \$1500 cap build in to the program's design. This has been a result of heavy discounting since LEO satellite internet entered the market and the product's ease of use, meaning people have self-installed their LEO hardware and did not seek professional installation.

Of the 110 applications received to date, 35 (32%) have been for brand new LEO connections and the remainder have been to reimburse existing LEO connections.

Of the 110 application received to date 22 (20%) have been professionally installed. The community has found LEO technology works adequately even when self-installed.

Of the 22 applicants who used the program to secure a new LEO connection, 13 (59%) used a professional installer. This indicates that the terms of the program did have a significant impact on the applicant's decision to seek professional installation.

Of the 110 applications received 32 (29%) claimed over \$1000 and 13 (12%) claimed the full \$1500 on offer.

A number of testimonials have been collected from successful applicants and these are attached at Appendix 1 of Council's submission.

Project Outcomes

The program is still running and the evaluation is yet to be conducted, however anecdotal trends can already be identified as a result of the program.

Although LEO satellite internet does not directly address mobile coverage challenges that exist in Weddin, the ability for applicants to utilise WiFi in and around their home to make and receive mobile calls, due to the low latency on a LEO satellite internet connection, has been an important outcome identified by applicants.

Some applicants have chosen to invest in additional hardware beyond the \$1500 limit of the program to stretch WiFi coverage from their farmhouse to additional sites important to the operation of their farm business, such as machinery sheds and sheep yards. This indicates that not only has the subsidy program been a catalyst for further investment, it has led to business efficiencies and improved safety outcomes, with more people having the ability to make emergency mobile calls from high risk worksites.

The program has allowed more people to work from home and to work at times of the day that suits their lifestyle, because LEO satellite internet connections allow multiple people to use devices simultaneously, without reliability or speed being impaired. For example, one young farming family near Caragabal have described the ability to undertake farm bookwork and banking when their children are in the house on devices as 'life changing' as previously their internet could only support one device at a time.

Some applicants have used the program to provide digital connectivity in farm worker housing. This has been offered as an 'employee incentive' to help attract and retain skilled staff, an important outcome given the existing skills shortage in regional NSW.

Limitations Identified

While many applicants have found their LEO connections to be very reliable and resilient even during adverse weather, some applicants have indicated that their LEO internet connection is still not 'perfect', and does occasionally drop out.

Grenfell was hit with a severe hail storm in December 2023 where 5cm diameter hail rendered LEO satellite dishes immediately ineffective, indicating they are vulnerable to the extremes of Australian conditions.

There are elderly people on fixed incomes in the community interested in the benefits a LEO satellite internet connection would offer, who have balked at the ongoing monthly fee. The ongoing cost of a LEO satellite internet connection is unaffordable for many in our disadvantaged community and cost remains a barrier to digital inclusion, even when upfront costs are eliminated through a program such as this one.

Some applicants expressed discomfort at a local Council administering a project with stringent identity and supporting document requirements. The requirement made some people uncomfortable for two reasons;

- 1) They distrust Council staff to maintain their confidentiality, and
- 2) They doubt Council's cyber security processes and the ability to keep personal data safe.

Although Council found processes to navigate these concerns, future scaling of a project such as this could consider administration through a more distanced level of Government, and via a portal where identity documentation is pre-populated, such as the Service NSW website.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the future of digital connectivity in regional Australia. Please contact Council's Economic Development Officer at [\[redacted\]](#) if you have particular questions about the Weddin Shire Council Low Earth Orbiting Satellite Internet Subsidy Program.

