

12 June 2024

The Hon Alannah MacTiernan
Chair
Regional Independent Telecommunications Review Committee
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts
E: RTIRC@infrastructure.gov.au

Dear Chair

The Western Queensland Alliance of Councils (WQAC) welcomes the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review and is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission.

The Western Queensland Alliance of Councils ([WQAC](#)) is a collaboration between the North West Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils ([NWQROC](#)), the Central West Remote Area Planning and Development Board ([RAPAD](#)) and the South West Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils ([SWQROC](#)).

Our three bodies represent 24 Councils, growing two new members since our last submission in 2021¹. Our collaborative area covers more than 60 per cent of the Queensland State. Despite the geographic isolation, we are immensely proud of our [significant contribution](#) to the State and Australian domestic economic product. Australia's regional, rural, and remote communities have long understood the need to find ways to bridge gaps to ensure equity of essential services and drive social and economic outcomes. Telecommunications have provided regional Australia with one of the most significant opportunities to improve social and economic outcomes.

The WQAC members have been leading telecommunications advocates, exploiting the advantages of digital economics for many years. Reliable and high-speed connectivity is vital for Western Queensland to support public safety, day-to-day business, social inclusion, and access to essential health and education services. A testament to this was the development of a Digital Connectivity Blueprint and Terms of Reference², which we designed to overcome our region's challenges.

Our submission to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review outlined the challenges and opportunities, providing a pathway toward a cost-effective solution. So significant was our submission that the crux of the issue, the 'patchwork quilt' concept, became the cornerstone of the Hartsuyker Review. In essence, the uncoordinated delivery of telecommunications in Western Queensland had resulted in many missed opportunities. Regrettably, this ungainly approach to the planning, delivery and support of telecommunications in Western Queensland continues today.

While Western Queensland welcomes all telecommunication support, such as the increased investment of the National Broadband Network and the Mobile Black Spot Program, we are still underserved compared to the urban centres of South East Queensland. This disparity will continue to stifle economic conditions, public safety and contribute to a widening digital divide that will harm national cohesion over time. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2023³ reinforces our concern, showing a persistent gap between capital cities and other parts of states and territories.

¹ WQAC Submission to 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review, dated 30 Sep 21.

² Submitted to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review, dated 30 Sep 21.

³ [Home - Australian Digital Inclusion Index](#)

Extracts from ADII 2023 reveal the gaps between the national average and our 24 Councils.

Council	ADII	Below National Average
North West		
Burke Shire	65.0	-8.0
Carpentaria Shire	62.0	-11.2
Cloncurry Shire	67.8	-5.4
Croydon Shire	64.0	-9.2
Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire*	57.7	-15.5
Etheridge Shire	64.8	-8.4
Flinders Shire	64.6	-8.6
McKinlay Shire	70.5	-2.7
Mornington Shire*	55.6	-17.6
Mount Isa City	69.5	-3.7
Richmond Shire	67.6	-5.6
Central West		
Barcaldine Shire	66.3	-6.9
Barcoo Shire	67.7	-5.5
Blackall-Tambo Regional	63.2	-10.0
Boulia Shire	64.3	-8.9
Diamantina Shire	66.9	-6.3
Longreach Regional	68.0	-5.2
Winton Shire	65.0	-8.2
South West		
Balonne Shire	65.1	-8.1
Bulloo Shire	68.1	-5.1
Maranoa Regional	68.2	-5.0
Murweh Shire	64.7	-8.5
Paroo Shire	60.4	-12.8
Quilpie Shire	67.3	-5.9

Note: * First Nations communities

It is long understood that continuing with the same approach and expecting different outcomes is futile. Western Queensland will continue to see missed telecommunication opportunities because of the failure to empower local prioritisation and coordination to improve digital outcomes.

Digital connectivity continues to be a key priority for Western Queensland; access to fast, reliable, and affordable telecommunications continue to be a barrier to growing the economic and social potential of Western Queensland. Indeed, as industry, businesses and communities transition to net zero, targeted investment in telecommunication enabling infrastructure is essential to support existing and emerging industries including renewables achieve net zero emissions. As an example, the [NWQ Enabling Infrastructure Masterplan 2024](#) released on 30 May 2024 by the NWQROC, identifies telecommunications needs across the North West Minerals Province and the communities along the Flinders Highway to support the rollout and subsequent renewable industry expansion linked to the Copperstring 2032 high voltage powerline project being constructed from Townsville to Mount Isa.

While Low Earth Orbit (LEOSat) market entrants have brought, in part, a solution, the price point continues to compound already high costs for goods and services to and from Western Queensland. This situation constrains the growth potential of the State and Australian domestic economic product from Western Queensland.

The ongoing efforts by all levels of government remain vital to ensure fair and equitable digital connectivity for Western Queensland and our response recognises this is a complex challenge. The release of the Australian Government Digital Economy Strategy 2030⁴ has reinforced the aspiration for Australia to be a digital leader and is welcomed by Western Queensland.

Given our commitment to the telecommunication reviews to date, we sought to aggregate some feedback from our members to ensure the committee could capture the lived experiences of digital connectivity in Western Queensland. The following quotes are a sample from the community through elected members of the Western Queensland councils. Names and details are withheld to protect privacy.

- *“We have been waiting for a tower to be fixed for nearly 2 years.”*
- *“Telstra Capacity is full for this site. The site and technology requirements have increased however access to telecommunications remains the same. Still waiting for RCP 1 funded backhaul project to be implemented.”*
- *“Where there is a phone tower, it is not able to meet the needs of the community and when we have large events there is so little service it is unviable.”*
- *“Expansion of new towers are 18 months behind schedule. Upgrade from 3G to 4G has been disruptive and ongoing. Dropout of service to individual towers still occur reasonably frequently.”*
- *“You don't have mobile coverage from Townsville to Mount Isa.”*
- *“We need strong reliable service that is cost effective. We have just received 4G and the rest of the world is moving onto 5G...”*

The trend within telecommunication globally is now best described as between Mobile Network Operators (MNO), retail carrier operators, and Mobile Network Infrastructure Providers (MNIPs), yet the approach to regional support programs has yet to pivot fully.

Mobile facilities were formerly deployed and owned by retail telecommunication carriers; however, the industry has pivoted toward a neutral host model in the last two to three years. The passive infrastructure (the tower/pole and the land around the asset) is deployed and owned by an MNIP, whilst the active infrastructure (antennas and telecommunications equipment) is deployed and owned by an MNO.

While the model has shifted for industry, Western Queensland has not significantly advanced as the 'patchwork quilt' approach remains the default model. As highlight in your own issues paper⁵ - *‘Despite this change in investment patterns, the level of impact private investment is having in providing new and improved*

⁴ [Technology | Department of Industry Science and Resources](#)

⁵ Regional Telecommunications Independent Review, Issues Paper April 2024, page 19.

connectivity for people in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia remains unclear. Investment by the commercial telecommunications market (MNO and MNIP) will always favour population density unless Western Queensland has the opportunity to aggregate demand and become a bargaining power.

There are many agendas in play and, in some cases, in direct conflict, creating a landscape of confusion and frustration. Western Queensland, since 2021, has stepped up to be accountable for delivering an improved outcome; however, support has not been forthcoming, and the 'patchwork quilt' has continued to expand. Western Queensland requests the committee consider more funding for coordination and governance at the regional level.

Western Queensland is better served through a locally focussed, strategically aligned eight-point approach, which seeks to 'Think strategically and deliver locally' through:

1. *Unified Governance.* WQAC proposes bringing together all stakeholders, across all levels of government, to achieve the vision that delivers a new connectivity model.
2. *Digital Demand.* WQAC will capture and forecast the region's digital demand across all stakeholder groups, including wholesale and retail demand.
3. *Digital Supply.* WQAC will engage with the industry to better position current and planned technologies that can achieve the vision.
4. *Policy Priorities.* WQAC will define pragmatic policy options to address the digital gap between supply and demand.
5. *Community Engagement.* Through its members, WQAC will engage with all stakeholder groups to determine the best way to achieve the vision.
6. *Investment.* WQAC will quantify the investment and fiscal process required to achieve the vision.
7. *Measurement.* WQAC will define a monitoring and evaluation method that aligns with current approaches defined for public sector expenditure.
8. *Risk Analysis.* WQAC will support a comprehensive risk management approach that seeks to mitigate the uncertainty such activity creates for its members.

Conclusion

The Western Queensland Alliance of Councils (WQAC) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review. Representing 24 councils across more than 60% of Queensland through our submission, the WQAC underscores the vital need for reliable and high-speed connectivity in supporting public safety, business operations, social inclusion, and access to essential health and education services. Our submission seeks to provide the committee with insight, answers, and challenges regarding your terms of reference.

Despite our efforts and previous submissions, the region continues to face a 'patchwork quilt' delivery of telecommunications, resulting in missed opportunities and persistent disparities compared to urban centres.

The recent Australian Digital Inclusion Index highlights this gap, which hampers local economies and public safety, contributing to a widening digital divide detrimental to national cohesion and economic stability.

Many of the questions posed in the issues paper⁶ could be directly addressed if given the autonomy to plan, design and deliver capabilities at a local level. The WQAC continues to offer to be a pilot model for a different approach to deliver an improved outcome. We request the committee again reviews our now dated, yet still relevant Digital Connectivity Blueprint and Terms of Reference as it addresses many of your questions.

We call on the committee to address these challenges by empowering local prioritisation and coordination to 'Think strategically and deliver locally,' ensuring Western Queensland can fully leverage telecommunications to drive economic and social potential. We urge all levels of government to support this vision for fair and equitable digital connectivity, reinforcing Australia's aspiration to be a digital leader.

For further information in relation to this submission please contact Greg Hoffman PSM, Executive Officer, NWQROC at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] will attend the Public Hearing in Mount Isa next Monday 17 June 2024.

Yours sincerely

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⁶ Regional Telecommunications Independent Review, Issues Paper April 2024.