



9 August 2024

### ***2024 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review***

The Issues Paper for this review is a very useful summary of the “state of play” of regional telecommunications and government programs. While we have had a vague general awareness of programs – particularly the Mobile Black Spot Program – the Issues Paper is helpful in summarising government programs, commitments and the status of the rollout of different technologies.

#### **Equity of affordability in rural and regional areas**

Page 6 of the Issues Paper states that:

“Regional, rural and remote Australians rightly expect to be able to access affordable, adequate, reliable and resilient telecommunications services that meet their needs.”

With new options (such as fixed wireless and Low Earth Orbit satellite) becoming available, concerns are being expressed about the cost of such services for rural customers – particularly relative to the costs for services available in urban areas and towns.

There are concerns about the ongoing ability for rural customers to be able to choose a cheaper “basic” service and also for rural customers with less digital/technological capacity to be able to maintain their telecommunications.

For example Starlink type options are available in some of our areas with connectivity issues – at a cost of about \$125 per month (with unlimited internet) and with a “kit” costing around \$600. However cheaper options need to be available. For example, a cheaper option for a basic connection such as a simple phone line for those not requiring a fast unlimited internet connection (eg for only basic emails and internet searches using google) and affordable for low income households, comparable with plans available for urban households.

Costs for aerials and boosters for other rural customers in our area have been reported at around \$3800, while noting that it has been possible to obtain support for some of those costs. These are still significant outlays for rural customers in order to get services similar to those received in urban areas. In addition, information about support available does not seem to have been well disseminated.

Rural residents are also concerned about the capacity for **ongoing repairs and maintenance** by the various providers. This is alluded to in the Issues Paper via the question about a skilled workforce to maintain telecommunications infrastructure.

Perhaps a small cohort of local students could be offered school based apprenticeships or traineeships to be trained in the maintenance of telecommunications infrastructure across the different service providers.

Training in connectivity literacy could also be offered to senior students to extend this knowledge through our communities.

The concerns about ongoing rural repairs and maintenance are linked with significant concern about loss of – and/or failure to maintain – the copper network. This is also related to concerns about emergency situations, which are raised below.

### **Audit of mobile coverage and extension of connectivity literacy**

Due to concerns being raised about connectivity issues, we will be testing the demand for some meetings in our rural communities regarding telecommunications and connectivity. This will be done through our progress associations / hall committees / community clubs and farming networks, including producer groups.

It is noted that connectivity literacy could be extended through other community networks such as service groups (eg Lions, Rotary, Men’s Shed, churches), sporting clubs, other interest groups (such as art, craft and history groups) and senior citizens groups [REDACTED] as well.

We will invite Telstra and NBN to our community meetings and would be keen to report any further issues and examples raised at these meetings.

Better, more detailed mapping of connectivity gaps is supported in our region and we would be willing to assist where possible, including via these meetings and community networks.

In addition to the connectivity and cost (affordability) issues for our rural areas, there are also some issues to be discussed regarding bandwidth constraints in and around our towns during peak visitation periods such as holiday periods (as noted on page 8 of the Issues Paper under Network Capacity).

### **Digital inclusion**

The Issues Paper (page 10) recognises that “digital ability” and inclusion can be problematic for older people (which can extend beyond those over 75 years old), people with lower incomes, people with lower levels of education and mobile only users, as well as First Nations people. There is also a small group of people who choose not to adopt these technologies, whether due to health concerns, other concerns or just a general lack of willingness to adopt technology and/or change.

### **Rural hazards and emergencies**

The Issues Paper (page 6) recognises that:

“Regional Australia is disproportionately affected by natural hazards and emergencies...”

This also extends to road accidents and other accidents and other requirements for assistance including breakdowns on rural roads and properties. We have an example of a relatively busy rural road which is a black spot for mobile coverage. A rural landowner and business is not infrequently required to assist passing or stranded motorists, including in emergency situations. Through our community meetings, we could also map where these issues are arising across our district and would be keen to find solutions in order to manage these risks.

The Issues Paper acknowledges the high risk of loss of power and associated loss of telecommunications during emergencies and other incidents (including from technical power outages). There have been plenty of experiences of loss of power and loss of telecommunications in emergency situations in rural South Australia, which has hindered both response and recovery efforts.

It is important to also acknowledge that many incidents also involve issues with access; where access to affected areas is limited or completely cut off for significant amounts of time. This has implications for both restoration of power and telecommunications, as well as other elements of response and recovery. With any loss of fixed landlines or failure to maintain the copper network, it is critical to carefully think through the risks of loss of connectivity in emergency situations – and whether there is a need to maintain a basic network which is not reliant on power.

**Rural business reliance on connectivity**

The Issues Paper (page 8) notes that network reliability issues can hinder businesses’ ability to connect with clients and process customer payments. For rural businesses, this extends much further to communications with suppliers, service providers, employees, regulators (including to meet licensing and reporting obligations), market information and other information required by the business (including weather and emergency information) and broader banking and finance services, just for example.

One of our local producer groups [REDACTED] has a small network of weather stations and also has previously installed soil moisture monitors and there were some issues with connectivity which affected the telemetry capacity. This could be further explored at our community meetings too.

Thank you for the summary provided by the Issues Paper and we look forward to ongoing engagement and improvements in telecommunications in our area.

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Group Manager Economy & Community

Direct email: [REDACTED]

Direct mobile: [REDACTED]