

My submission to the 2021 regional telecommunications review.

To begin I'd like to give background information on myself. I am a 37YO male living in Kununurra WA with my wife and young child and I work FIFO in a mine located 150kms south of Kununurra. Overall, we are small users of telecommunications but I hope you will be able to understand the problems we face living in a remote part of Australia in relation to telecommunications. I will give my responses and options to the questions listed in appendix A of the paper that are applicable to myself as an individual.

Q1

I feel the services we need in rural and remote areas is very simple, we need **reliability**. We regularly lose fixed line services when the main fibre line from down south is damaged, mobile services are often affected when that line is down and sometimes, we lose mobile services if the mobile towers or satellite dishes are damaged. Most of these down times are caused by natural events such as fire, flood, lightning or sometimes an accident but we are extremely vulnerable relying on the one line.

Another part of reliability is data speeds. A large number of rural and remote towns have large fluctuations in populations in tourist seasons. When we have high numbers of tourists in town the mobile data speeds become so slow it is almost unusable. In the past few weeks, I have been unable to receive MMS (picture messages) because of such slow download speeds. MMS messages are a 3G technology yet even with 4G I can't use this service due to slow data speeds.

Q2

Reliability, speed and additional backup options when a service goes down are the issues that need addressing most. As mentioned, outages and speed are the two most common problems we have, but slow repair times also affect us and there are very few alternate options available when they do go down.

On pg6 of the paper it mentions Telstras 3G services will be phased out and replaced with 4G by 2024. I find this a crazy alternative; we are replacing outdated technology with another outdated technology. Where is the sense in this, it's like we will always be chasing our own tails. I wouldn't be surprised if by 2024 we will have 6G. Maybe it's time to skip an outdated option such as 4G and move straight to 5G.

Q3

I don't know much about how Government policies have affected us but I know in WA we have had a blackspot program which means mobile towers have been installed along the major highways and in large communities so that has been a positive thing. I think these could be improved by allowing roaming. Roaming across available networks will greatly improve communications and mean we will not have to have separate sim cards when in different areas. A perfect example of this is the two roads leading south of Kununurra, the Great Northern Highway and the Gibb River Road. Telstra have the towers on the great Northern Highway while Optus have towers on the Gibb River Road. This means people living, working or traveling on the Gibb River Road will have to change sim cards when they lose Optus service and change to Telstra. It just doesn't make sense. I'm sure there will be additional charges but most people will not mind if they have maximum possible network coverage.

I also feel there should be a minimum voice service and data speed guarantee on mobile services similar to fixed services. At the moment it is my opinion the Telecommunication companies don't care as much about the level of service we get in remote areas as our customer base in so small. We also have far fewer carrier options; in fact, we only have Telstra if we leave town limits so it's basically "like it or lump it."

Q4

Reliability has a massive impact on services. It makes going to the shops harder when EFTPOS services are down in an age where cash is almost non-existent. Slower speeds also make it harder to access online services such as online banking, and shopping where slow speeds mean timeouts occur in checkout. I am regularly left not knowing if a payment or bank transfer has gone through and have even missed out on cheaper flights as the booking pages take so long to load.

Natural disasters would be the biggest cause of outages we face and due to this the wet season is when we have the most outages however as I mentioned when there are more people in town this causes the speed to slow dramatically.

Q5

I think having alternative options, such as a second fibre line perhaps feeding from Darwin or a different location could help us here in the Kimberley. Perhaps more satellite dishes or installations could also help with outages. Also, the current mobile network towers need to be upgraded or at least powered up more. According to Google Maps, I live 412 meters from the Telstra 4G mobile tower in Kununurra yet I only have 2 bars of signal. How can this be? 412m from the tower and at times I lose coverage enough to cause call dropouts. This also causes me problems at work. I have 4 bars of signal outside my room and 2 bars of signal inside my room yet I have call dropouts on every call. Same scenario with data speeds, 2 bars of signal yet less than 1mbps of download speed. It seems so much money is been invested in installing new mobile towers but they are being run so low can hardly keep up with demand.

Q7

More telecommunications companies servicing remote areas is the simplest answer to affordability. Its common knowledge competition is what drives prices down and better service up. That will also help with access but another option is roaming. If there is signal available on another network, I should be able to access it.

It's been noted in the paper that many prepaid options are more expensive than post paid services. Perhaps the prepaid options should be capped at the same price as similar post-paid services in remote areas. There should also be prepaid services offering only talk/text in areas that don't have enough data speed to warrant data on the plan. This is especially important in communities that only have 3G services.

Q11,12,13

I'd like to answer Q11, Q12 and Q13 as one. The blackout programs I have seen have made a massive difference to our area and given access to mobile networks to almost all areas where I travel. I feel when the government invests in building these mobile towers they should be made available to all carriers. If we had all three major carriers available at every mobile tower, we would have far greater options and freedoms. Aside from this, as mentioned, allow roaming.

Q14

Plans and services are constantly changing as well as pricing. I think it would be easier to understand plans, services offered and prices if there was a simple comparison tool for a set of generic options available in that area. This way the consumer can easier choose what they need and what is available to them. There also needs to be very clear "fine print" as well commitment terms and also what to do if there is an issue. I know when starting a new post-paid service, the mobile phone companies do a pro-rata bill. This always causes problems. This practice should be banned and perhaps replaced by an upfront amount then a monthly amount, as long as the included credit not exceeded, is charged every month. Also, when the term is finished any credit owing to the consumer needs to be refunded automatically. I know Telstra owe \$27.58 in credit from an old plan I had. This credit has been outstanding for over 12 months but I don't want to have to spend half an hour on hold waiting to organise a refund.

Q16

I'd like to give an example of an issue I have had in the past, in response to pg8 of the paper. A few years ago I had fixed line broadband internet connected to my house. One night the phone lines in town were struck by lightning. I went and bought a new modem as the one I had was destroyed as a result. For a year I was battling with Telstra to get my service working properly again. I had three technicians come to my house before they had a higher-level technician come. From the first time I called I explained the lightning strike. I spent hours on the phone trying to get it working again over a whole year. I got fed up with that and lodged a complaint with the telecommunications ombudsman and within a week Telstra sent the higher-level technician who found my cable damaged. The cable was replaced in 15 mins. This was only sorted out because of the ombudsman. Not long after getting this service repaired, I was out of contract so I cancelled this service.

Apart from the lightning strike I don't know if this issue is due to living in a remote area but I wanted to include it if the committee deems it necessary.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.