

Submission to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

I have some significant concerns to raise in my submission, however I would like to start by commenting on the language, content, structure and number of questions outlined in the *Regional Telecommunications Review 2021: Issues Paper*, July 2021. I hesitated to continue with my submission, and I am a reasonably well-educated individual. For anyone who has experienced educational disadvantage, has English as a second language, or First Nations people, I would suggest some of these questions would present as a barrier to responding. I am continuing with my submission, but will not respond to all questions, as I don't understand the meaning of some of them. Please consider this and consult with rural, regional and remote communities in a more down to earth manner, otherwise the responses may not be representative of broader experiences and ideas.

Questions

1. What telecommunications services are required in regional Australia to meet current and future needs? Are there any things regional communities and businesses need to do, but can't, on their existing services?

We need consistent and reliable broadband, internet, and landline services to meet the need of individuals, business and communities. We need consistent access to television broadcasts, as it is often our only source of information during environmental disasters. Our small community at Tuross Head and nearby Moruya, on the south coast of NSW, often lose television reception across all stations, as well as having poor connectivity with broadband, mobile and fixed landline services. It worsens during periods of bad weather conditions.

I experience daily difficulties in conducting my counselling business and in my employment in aged care services due to lack of mobile service, lack of consistent broadband connectivity to provide Telehealth services, and being unable to contact vulnerable clients on landlines. The latter would previously have been a reliable option but is not in this area. I have not been able to contact Moruya Police station on several occasions, as landline services often do not work, and I was ringing for them to do a welfare check on a client with mental health concerns. This places clients, communities, and businesses at risk.

2. What changes in demand, barriers or challenges need to be addressed when it comes to telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia?

The barriers are lack of reliable and consistent services, regardless of the private provider used. Transition to NBN has been a disaster in my experience, with fibre to the node providing poorer connectivity than what was previously in place. We have gaps in mobile service reception, failing landline services, intermittent television reception and poor broadband connectivity. We have no power with private providers to resolve these issues as the cost of infrastructure means no change over time in resolving these issues.

During the 2019-2020 bushfires, we had an incredible breakdown in all forms of communication for a significant period of time, and this does not seem to be fully resolved.

3. How have the Government's policies and programs affected telecommunications service outcomes in regional, rural and remote Australia? How can these be improved?

Privatising telecommunications has been a disaster for regional, rural and remote communities and businesses. We have been left out in the cold and have no recourse to have ongoing issues of connectivity resolved. Government needs to play a greater role in ensuring there is adequate infrastructure and back up services for reliability, speed and consistent service delivery.

4. How do service reliability issues impact on regional communities and businesses? How do outages, including in natural disasters, impact on communities and businesses?

Reliability issues greatly affect business and service delivery, but compromise the very safety of our communities. The failure of telecommunication during the bushfires put us all at risk and we are lucky more lives were not lost, including my own. Until you are trapped in a bushfire zone, with imminent and immediate threat, with no forms of communication or warning systems available to you, you have no idea the horror that it brings and remains with you forever. I was hypervigilant during last summer watching and waiting for the fires to arrive, with our fire plan and evacuation strategy in place. What we did not account for was the failure of communication and warning systems that would leave us stranded directly in front of the raging fire at Surf Beach. We were lucky that someone else warned us it was less than a kilometre away and we fled to the beach and even luckier we had aerial water bombers nearby. There was no possibility of reaching the evacuation centre by then. It was not just the immediate safety issues that arose, but in the days and weeks following where we had no communication with the outside world. Our children and families had no idea if we were dead or alive, and we had no information about ongoing and imminent fire threats. It was a major contributing factor in my diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, and it is still difficult to write or think about this time. A lack of consistent telecommunication is now a constant source of stress for me personally and with my employment.

In addition, reliability of services impacts on my employment, small business and community in the following ways:

- a) Safety issues when travelling across the Eurobodalla and more broadly in New South Wales. There are mobile blackspots where there is no reception and impacts on safety and navigation. I am reluctant to home visit aged care clients in remote areas due to lack of mobile reception, as I would be unable to call for assistance if I broke down or if a client was aggressive. This results in less service delivery for some vulnerable clients.
- b) Delivery of adequate and appropriate mental health and aged care services is variable due to poor telecommunications. Telehealth sessions are often disrupted or impossible, causing clients significant distress. It is a constant source of stress in conducting my business and I have lost business during the Covid 19 lockdown as services cannot be delivered reliably or effectively. Keeping in contact with aged care clients and providing appropriate services is similarly affected with poor landline services, mobile reception and internet access. This places some of the communities most vulnerable people at greater risk.
- c) People with complex and chronic health conditions need access to health services and this can be limited when telehealth services fail. This especially applies during environmental disasters and Covid 19 impacts on face to face service delivery.

5. How might such impacts be addressed to ensure greater reliability? How can the network resilience be addressed in regional areas?

We will only have greater reliability if the government takes a greater role in ensuring we have these services available to us, with adequate infrastructure. We need back up power and

telecommunications supply, so we do not lose services during natural disasters. We need it for our business and the safety and wellbeing of our communities.

6. How did the use of digital services change for regional consumers and businesses during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? What insights for future service delivery does this provide?

We are so reliant on digital services for everything, as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic, and I experience multiple daily failures in telecommunications as result of systems being overloaded with demand. We need it for news, to conduct business, for employment, ordering online groceries, for social contact, schooling and so it goes on. It is critical that we have better infrastructure and reliable services going forward, as I do not see my business services returning to face-to-face delivery for a significant period of time and I work from home in my employment as well.

7. What can be done to improve the access and affordability of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities?

I think Indigenous communities should have access to affordable and subsidised telecommunication services and technology. They are the most disadvantaged group in Australia and how can they access health information, education, or conduct employment or business when they have less availability than the rest of us? This is an area that needs investment by the government to help close the gap, not just lip service.

8. How can investment in telecommunications infrastructure work with other programs and policies to encourage economic development in regional Australia?
9. What role could innovation, including new models, alternative investors or new ways of doing business, play to encourage investment in regional telecommunications infrastructure? What are the barriers?

Stop looking at privatisation and the free market to resolve this issue. It has been clearly demonstrated that it does not work in resolving issues for regional, remote, and rural areas and we will continue to be disadvantaged if the government continues to take this line. We need government investment and surety of service, not the whim of private investors who, at the end of the day, are seeking to make a large profit, not provide the best service possible for our communities.

10. To what extent will new technologies enable significant change to the delivery of telecommunications services in regional Australia over the next 5-10 years? Are there any barriers to accessing these technologies?

The NBN was a new technology and it failed.

11. How can Government better support the rapid rollout of and investment in new telecommunications solutions in regional areas?

Fund it.

12. How can different levels of Government, the telecommunications industry and regional communities better co-ordinate their efforts to improve telecommunications in regional Australia?

You cannot expect this combination to work in coordinating efforts if the outcomes are driven by profit making by investors. It is the antithesis of meeting the complex telecommunication needs of our businesses and communities.

13. What changes to Government investment programs are required to ensure they continue to be effective in delivering improved telecommunications?

14. How can regional consumers be better supported to identify, choose and use the best connectivity options for their circumstances, as well as to understand and use their consumer rights?

As a consumer, it does not matter which provider you choose, they all use the same infrastructure and can only give approximations as to your coverage and service quality. Thinking we can be better informed and make better choices is shifting responsibility for endemic issues, and ignoring the total lack of adequate and appropriate telecommunications infrastructure in our communities.

15. To what extent is public information on connectivity options, including predictive coverage data and speeds, sufficient to help regional customers make informed decisions? What other information is needed?

It is not adequate and nor does it make a difference. The information provided is totally irrelevant, because when you question speed, reliability or failures in the system, the answer comes down to failures in infrastructure and geographic location. How can we make informed decisions when there is no difference in what is available to us? I know because I have tried five different providers since moving to the south coast in 2017.

16. What other matters should the Committee consider in its review and why are they important?

Please see my opening comments in how you seek information from the community. Given Covid 19, it is impossible to hold community forums, however using plain language on social media, print and radio with different options on how to submit information would broaden the responses. For someone without consistent broadband or literacy issues for example, the Committee needs to have an alternative way to ask questions and seek responses.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

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