

2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Shire of Yalgoo

The Shire of Yalgoo is a regional local government in the pastoral mid west region of Western Australia. Our local government area sits across hundreds of kilometers of state highway and apart from mine sites there are 2 key mobile towers that support our towns and the wider 33,000 square kilometers. Neighbouring local governments such as Sandstone have not yet been moved from 3G to 4G so we are well aware of commercial realities in this region.

It was good to see the utilisation of online meeting technology during this year's consultation. For the individual submission format, it worked well and highlighted that these types of services, when usable, are a fantastic alternative to long hours of regional travel.

The Shire of Yalgoo, along with its ratepayers and many other local governments, believe that Telstra is extremely difficult to co-ordinate with and contact. Comments during the consultation from Telstra, that infrastructure faults should be raised with political representatives of the region, are ludicrous. Most other utility bodies such as Water Corporation, Western Power or Horizon Power all have representatives that make regular contact with local government. This is on top of those services taking faults, local knowledge and reports on widespread issues seriously.

When local governments report known issues with a phone exchange or tower to Telstra, the most common response is asking whether we have tried to turn our handset off and on again. Fault call wait times are often extremely long, especially considering the one mobile phone tower for 50km may not be working. Suggestions to improve this would be a WA/State based case manager for damage or faults rather than being bounced between overseas and Queensland offices.

The inability to co-ordinate with Telstra or other telecommunications companies creates complications during disasters and emergency situations (an example most recently was after Cyclone Seroja this year). Simple power or access issues could be more easily cleared up if there were known contacts and better coordination. There is a clear disconnect between combat agencies and telecommunications utility providers, especially when compared to other utilities.

Capacity of the mobile network is another concern locally. Vehicle numbers along Great Northern Highway have increased 50% in the past 3 years since the introduction of the areas first mobile towers. There is very limited stakeholder engagement with Telstra who are a monopoly in regional Australia. We do not know if towers at mine sites will be decommissioned when the mines transition to care and maintenance as it is impossible to know who to ask. Local Governments should not hold responsibility for telecommunications. Easier pathways should exist to report and request information related to key infrastructure, such as the addition and removal of mine site towers that

may be relied on by emergency service workers. Conversely being able to more easily report network faults, particularly when local governments receive multiple reports should have an easier process.

With a large influx of regional travelers due to COVID-19 limiting other travel, there is extremely limited education on how the mobile network operates. More education is required so that people are encouraged to look at coverage maps when planning trips. It is sometimes difficult to find coverage maps for smaller operators. In an emergency people panic and do not think clearly. There should be a campaign to explain that even though your non-Telstra phone has no bars/signal you may still be able to make a 000 call through another carriers tower. Older phones used to display "Emergency Calls Only" which may no longer be standardised across smart phones. The limited coverage by other service providers in no way helps with serious but non-life threatening situations like car breakdowns, that result in a waste of emergency responders time.

It has been seen regionally that there is a lack of diversity in power systems and backup systems for exchanges and mobile towers. For comparison new Water Corporation systems from Meekatharra to Sandstone have Grid, Solar and Diesel backup.

There is a significant lack of network resilience. Exchanges are historically single town to town connections. When one link in the chain is damaged or without power there appears to be no option to reroute through another area. Again, this was proven with Cyclone Seroja.

Lastly we are concerned that switching off 3G in fringe areas or areas reliant on a single tower will reduce the coverage area. A smaller area throughout Yalgoo is unlikely to impact a number of system users but it could reduce coverage of roads which in the past has been a significant consideration for receiving blackspot funding.

The Yalgoo Shire Council thanks the Review Committee for their time in receiving this submission and conducting effective public consultation.