

Regional Telecommunications Review 2021.

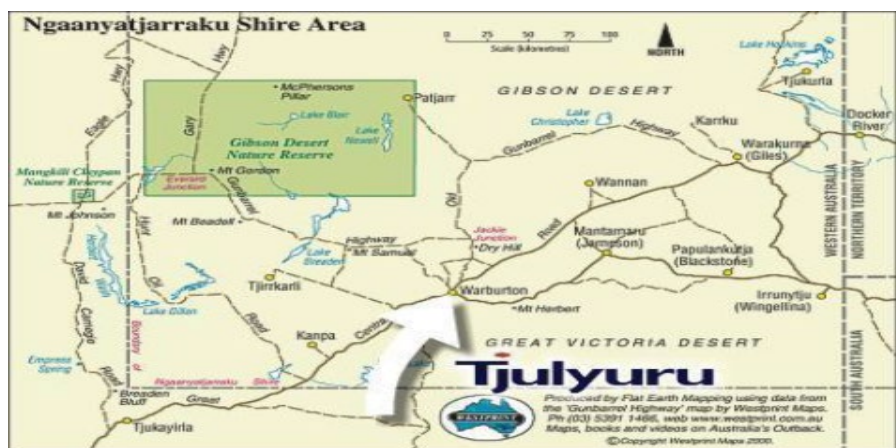
About the Shire

The Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku is responsible for the provision of "mainstream" local government and delivery of services to the ten communities and visitors within its boundaries. The Shire encompasses an area of 159,948 square kilometres and is located approximately 1,542km from Perth. The region itself is diverse in natural beauty from the magnificent Rawlinson ranges to the red sandy plains of the Gibson Desert.

The Shire is a unique local government in that its community of interest is contained within the traditional lands of the Ngaanyatjarra people of the Central Desert of Western Australia. The 99-year leases held by the Ngaanyatjarra Land Council on behalf of the traditional owners also form the boundaries of the Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku.

The Shire's main township is Warburton, which is also the largest of the 11 Indigenous communities within the Shire. Warburton is positioned 1,542kms north-east of Perth, 560kms of gravel road northeast of Laverton, 750kms north-east of Kalgoorlie and 1,050kms south-west of Alice Springs. Neighbouring shires include the Shire of Wiluna, Laverton, and East Pilbara. The Shire offices are in the Tjulyuru Cultural and Civic Centre in Warburton. In the ABS 2016 Census the Shire had an estimated residential population of 1,606 people, comprising of 49% male and 51% female residents and there are approximately 509 residential dwellings within the Shire.

In 2016 Aboriginal residents comprised of 86% of the Shires population, residing in ten communities: Blackstone, Kanpa, Jameson, Patjarr, Tjirrkarli, Tjukurla, Wanarn, Warburton, Warakurna, and Wingelina.



List of 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?

As described above the Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku is located in a remote Aboriginal community in Warburton, WA. The Shire requires broadband and mobile services for the community to conduct daily operations outside of the Shire. This level of access is also essential for health and safety as the Great Central Road is the third east / west access across Australia. In the Warburton we have access to ADSL1 which is totally congested, a Telstra phone exchange that is at its limit and 4G mobile services that is also congested later in the day when school age children and parents are home. Most other communities only have 3G access and Telstra can't tell us what will happen when they switch off that system. In between townsites there is no service, which is very difficult especially given the vast distances and remoteness of the area, and requirements for health and safety.

The following services are required:

- basic phone system is provided but an upgrade of the exchanges are required in all locations where it is fully utilised.
- 4G network with appropriate data bandwidths for all locations
- Access to the fibre optic which traverses the Great Central Road e.g. Access sits in a pit in Warburton township but can only afford to be accessed by State Government Departments with deep pockets. We would be willing to pay the capex cost of towers and microwave point to point fibre optic but the ongoing monthly access fee by Telstra is prohibitive.
- As the fibre traverses this road it could also be accessed to provide telecommunications to users of the road similar to what has been done between Halls Creek and Kununurra using the radio tower network.
- NBN Skymuster was ok but of late it seems to also get congested and reception seems much less reliable.
- Starlink is a development we are watching as it has potential with less latency, higher bandwidth and reasonable rates for larger data plans.

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 vast distances and the remoteness is the major barrier experienced in our Shire. Whilst the population to use the services isn't large the requirements of the community for basic services such as telehealth and business connectivity to the outside world is. For example we now sell our aboriginal artists paintings 'online'. The shire is responsible for the community and wellbeing, and access to better telecommunications will enhance this. The Shire also has many tourists traveling through the Shire which require access to broadband and mobile services.

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

The government programs are dependent on population volume and commercial viability for the telcos not on remoteness. The Shire is extremely remote, as such the need for good telecommunications is vital. We will never meet population guidelines; however, our need is great.

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 is a major issue for the Shire, as we experience outages on a regular basis. Approximately weekly. The speed of the broadband and mobile service is also an issue, as the current speeds aren't fast enough to run basic applications. An example:

- In January 2020 the Eyre Highway was closed in WA due to fires, at the same time the Great Northern Highway was closed due to floods in the Kimberley wet season. As the Great Central Road was the only east / west road access available people used it to return to WA after the Christmas break. There was then heavy rain from Kimberley tail end rains that turned the road into soup as it is not bituminised. At the same time the Telstra landline and mobile networks went down in SA as a telephone exchange there had battery backup failures. This also took out the line into parts of eastern WA including our Shire on a weekend. So we had no telecommunications to contact the NT side to tell them to put up road closed signs to stop directing tourists to get bogged in the soup. You can imagine how happy they were, that after battling this they arrive for fuel, food and accommodation to be told we have no phone lines so no Eftpos for ATM / Credit cards and only cash accepted. Furthermore the phones were down for weeks, this meant community members could not report to Centrelink so they get their dole money cut off, prisoners who were out on good behaviour bonds

could not do their phone ins with police now after them to lock them up again as they are in default of their bail conditions. The larger populated areas would now stand for this happening to them.

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

More mobile towers, better infrastructure, and better ongoing servicing. Please see previous comments.

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?

The Shire still experienced the same difficulties during Covid as this is normal poor level of service for us in the bush.

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

More mobile towers using the Radio towers tapped into the Fibre Optic on main roads such as the great central Road. Federal Government to intervene and create Universal Service Obligations with Telstra for us to access the Fibre Optic pit in towns such as Warburton at an affordable rate that makes commercial sense to us not just Telstra. Also USO for Telstra to upgrade its telephone exchanges so they don't always crash when the power goes off and their battery backups don't work and they are fully congested. And what will replace 3G when they close it.

8. How can investment in telecommunications infrastructure work with other programs and policies to encourage economic development in regional Australia?

The Shire has regional tourism with the Great Central Road, and improvements in the telecommunications services and the road network would make the travel more attractive to tourists. The current level is poor so it discourages tourists from making the journey as they do not feel safe without the access to broadband and mobile services which are accessible to other major highways.

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?

New investment and new technology will create greater competition and better solutions for remote communities. Currently the major players do not do enough for remote communities and therefore we are always behind in service provision. Elon Musks 'Starlink' internet is one product which will hopefully improve the services available.

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?

Elon Musks 'Starlink' internet is one product which will hopefully improve the services available. It would improve our business services and open up more technologies to improve community services like telemedicine, ability to communicate with Centrelink, Police, Courts, all the services a normal community has in its town but could be available electronically in the bush if connectivity was better.

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

Understand the need for remote communities and not be driven by population. Also see other comments in this paper.

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

Work together in partnership to deliver a coordinated response rather than a commercial response by Telstra who is the only provider in the bush.

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

Understand the need for remote communities and not be driven by population. Also see other suggestions in this paper.

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?

Currently consumers in remote communities don't have a choice they only get what is available. This is low level and not suitable for a variety of applications. The choices will only improve as more providers enter the industry, and it becomes more competitive.

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?

Once again limited by choice. See other comments in this paper.

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

Full access to coverage throughout the Shire, elimination of dead spots, speed, reliability and choice as per other comments in this paper.