2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and
Communications
GPO Box 594
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Via Email: *secretariat@rtirc.gov.au*
Monday,, 20 September 2021

Re: Submission to 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review

Dear Sir/Madam

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback in relation to the 2021
Regional Telecommunications Review. It is acknowledged that a Regional
Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) is
established every three years under Part 9B of the *Telecommunications
(Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* to conduct a review into
telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.

It is understood that the following terms of reference (ToRs) are applicable to
the current review process:

a. the impact of the Government's policies and programs for improving
    connectivity, competition and digital literacy in regional, rural and remote
    areas, including rollout of the National Broadband Network, the Mobile
    Black Spot Program, the Regional Connectivity Program and the Regional
    Tech Hub;
b. insights from COVID-19 on consumer access to and usage of broadband
    and mobile technology in regional, rural and remote areas;
c. emerging technologies that could lead to significant changes in how
    telecommunications services are delivered in regional, rural and remote
    parts of Australia in the next 5-10 years;
d. service reliability and impacts on customers and communities in regional
    and remote areas.
e. ways in which State, Territory, and Federal programs to support regional
    connectivity could be further coordinated.

The following information is therefore submitted for RTIRCs consideration:

1. *Local Context*

Narrabri Shire is a local government area in the North West Slopes region of
NSW. The primary settlement of Narrabri is located adjacent to the Namoi
River and at the confluence of the Newell and Kamilaroi Highways. The local
government area (LGA) is strategically positioned halfway between Sydney and
Brisbane, and is considered to be resource-rich. Key local industries include
mining and agriculture. At the last census (2016) the resident population was
13,084 persons.

Narrabri Shire Council's vision is articulated in the Community Strategic Plan
as follows:

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PO Box 261, Narrabri NSW 2390

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"Narrabri Shire will be a strong and vibrant regional growth centre providing a quality living environment for the entire Shire community."

Narrabri has been recently announced as a special activation precinct (SAP) location. The master planning process for Narrabri is currently underway by NSW DPIE. Through the SAP process it is anticipated that energy-intensive industries and manufacturers, such as plastics, fertilisers and construction material producers will be able to confidently set up in Narrabri with access to commercial quantities of domestic market gas, enabled by the Narrabri Gas Project.

The precinct will also leverage key infrastructure such as the Inland Rail, the Narrabri West Walgett Railway line and the proposed Narrabri Industrial and Logistics Hub to give investors access to global supply chains and markets.

Further information is relation to the Narrabri SAP is available via:

https://www.nsw.gov.au/snowy-hydro-legacy-fund/special-activation-precincts/narrabri

2. *Impact of Policies and Programs – item (a)*

Progressive systems improvement through policy intervention has been evident, particularly since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. This significant disruptive event has necessitated streamlining and a rapid response to long-standing telecommunications issues. The following general observations are provided:

- The current Federal 'Black Spot' program has had an overall generally positive impact and therefore needs to be continued indefinitely.

- Local government needs to be provided with greater recognition in respect of its critical role as a key local stakeholder and change agent in both the development and delivery of telecommunications improvement and cognate support programs.

- The Regional Connectivity Program and the Regional Tech Hub has had no measurable impact or local relevance in respect of the Narrabri Shire Local Government Area (LGA). There is also limited awareness or understanding of these Programs at a local level. The concept is, however, generally supported.

- Digital literacy continues to be an ongoing challenge, particularly for older and CALD persons. Support measures in this space have been largely ineffective and future programs need to focus on leveraging existing local support networks.

3. *COVID-19 Insights – item (b)*

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a range of opportunities and constraints. These are summarised for the information of the Committee as follows:

- The pandemic continues to create widespread concern and economic hardship for rural and regional communities. Many companies, businesses and local government organisations already have business continuity plans (BCPs) in place, but these frequently do not address the fast-moving and unknown variables of an outbreak like COVID-19. Typical contingency plans are intended to ensure operational effectiveness following events such as natural disasters, cyber incidents and power outages, for example. Until recently, they have not taken into account the widespread quarantines, extended school closures, and additional travel restrictions that may occur in the case of a global health emergency The movement of the community into working from home has created unprecedented stress on an already inadequate infrastructure network. It should be noted that Narrabri is serviced by a single telecommunications tower which experiencing reduced bandwidth availability, and decreased reliability evident on a daily basis. Consequently, further urgent investment is needed in such infrastructure to cater for the current sustained and future demand.

- Cybersecurity risks are on the rise as a result of more people working and schooling remotely. Future investment in cybersecurity programs is, as a consequence, urgently needed.

- Remote work, online education and social distancing has created unprecedented demand for products and services delivered by the tech industry. Technological support has struggled to keep up with increased customer needs on applications.

- Appropriate mechanisms should be implemented to ensure increased funding for research and innovation conducted by universities, public research institutes and firms both during and following the aftermath of the pandemic.

- It is necessary for the Government to undertake the necessary actions to ensure that underpinning science, technological and innovation (STI) systems and frameworks become more inclusive to support diverse career paths. Systematic and collaborative approaches should also be employed to telecommunications policies to transition towards more sustainable, inclusive and resilient futures.

- Support to innovative businesses most affected by the pandemic should be strengthened with the view of appropriately safeguarding competitive markets.

- Working from home has allowed for more flexible work arrangements and increased diversity in STI, which has theoretically enabled the delivery and improvement of services such as telehealth and greater involvement of those with care responsibilities and located within rural/regional areas.

- It is also acknowledged that changes to patterns of working have reduced demand on office space. However, this, in turn, can have deleterious impacts on vibrancy of regional and rural centres and can create a range of economic challenges.

- Impacts on staff and community mental health due to long-term effects of isolation require consideration. Mental health services in rural and regional areas are facing unprecedented demand.

- The longer-term impacts of the pandemic on innovation performance will differ across rural and regional areas, depending on reliance on heavily hit sectors such as tourism. An opportunity exists for rural and remote areas to take advantage of the current COVID-exodus from metropolitan centres and adopt remote working policies and incentives. This would also serve a dual purpose of filling long-term skills gaps and shortages in parts of rural and regional Australia

4. Emerging Technologies – item (c)

The following emerging technologies and solutions have been identified as having relevance to the Narrabri Shire LGA:

- The emerging data centre concept in the 'Leading Edge' model is considered to be an exciting development and opportunity, particularly in the opportunities presented in the fostering of agricultural-allied technological solutions and commensurate innovations. The first data centre of its type is being constructed within the Tamworth Local Government Area (LGA), and the construction of a similar centre within the Narrabri LGA is supported.

- The NSW Planning Portal has recently been introduced with generally positive feedback from the local business sector. Further refinement of the system is needed to improve useability and market needs. The system is creating efficiencies in development assessment processes and a step towards the harmonisation of the diverse and complex planning systems across NSW.

5. Service reliability and impacts – item (d)

A range of barriers continue to exist in regional communities in respect of increasing use of digital technologies and overall service reliability. These barriers and respective challenges are summarised herewith:

- Lack of appropriate technical information and appropriate guidance and support with respect to installation, access and troubleshooting within the current telecommunications system.

- Ongoing cost disparities between regional/rural areas continues. In regional and rural areas it remains very expensive to access telecommunications services. Financial subsidies need to be urgently considered to 'bridge the gap' to improve equity of access within rural and regional communities such as the Narrabri Shire. Furthermore, only one service provider (Telstra) currently exists within Narrabri, with no other active competitors in the mobile phone service space, leading to ongoing price gouging and poorer service standards due to the absence of competition in the marketplace.

- Lack of reliability of telecommunications services, generally. As an example, a widespread power outage in a township in proximity to the Narrabri LGA was recently programmed by the local electricity service provider Essential Energy. This outage was widely communicated, including to the primary provider, Telstra. Given the sustained nature of this outage for major maintenance works it was recommended to this particular provider that appropriate mitigations be put in place to check and manage as required the system 'back up' batteries. This was not undertaken, and the batteries subsequently failed resulting in the entire community being without telecommunications for over 24 hours until the electricity supply was restored. Industry accountability therefore needs to be significantly improved.

- Reliability of telecommunications during emergency events remains a significant concern. Narrabri is heavily flood prone, and a major flood event coupled with a telecommunications failure would create significant risk to the local population. A coordinated approach is needed across all emergency service organisations to ensure that these risks are appropriately managed, with appropriate use of the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) framework. Telstra has become progressively less involved with local LEMC activities which creates a sustained response impediment and substantial community risk.

- Mobile overage remains sporadic within our Region, and a number of blackspots affecting smaller population settlements remain. Refer previous commentary regarding the ongoing relevance and need for a suitably agile mobile black spot program.

- The community has continued to express their frustration in navigating a very complex system of information over several service providers as part of their individual decision-making processes. Access to information also frequently relies on sporadic and unreliable internet access for supporting guidelines, collateral and dissemination channels.

- The ageing population of our LGA makes access a challenge, generally. Older community members are often fearful of making incorrect choices with respect to telecommunications, which can in turn can lead to an inability or unwillingness to take up new technology, or, adopting technology that might better suit their needs. There is often little support by way of training or education in respect of such services. This contributes to increased social isolation and community risk, generally.

- Reporting faults through the Telstra 1300 number remains difficult and convoluted. The complexity in the system in reporting faults and outages often results in customers 'giving up' part way through the process.

- The Telecommunications vernacular is littered with complex acronyms and techno-oriented language. Key concepts of 'fibre to the node', 'VPN', and 'ISDN', for example, are not well understood by the community, particularly older and CALD persons.

- Opportunities exist to improve access to information by telecommunications-challenged communities via a well thought out and clearly articulated local Communications Plan. Such a Plan could augment to the local Community Strategic Plan (CSP) and detail a range of actions required to support the affected community and local business. For example, communities with ageing populations could facilitate service provision through the existing Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) with appropriately trained personnel to assist with setting up and basic training in the use of modern telecommunications devices. Businesses could also be provided with local support to navigate the various 'tiers of influence' with the view of providing independent guidance and advice. Region-specific Projects Officers co-funded by Telcos and State and Federal Government could also be considered in areas of greatest need.

- There are a range of service providers that can potentially provide training and upskilling solutions if provided with appropriate collateral and support material. These include, but are not limited to:

  - TAFE NSW

  - Local Chambers of Commerce

  - Community Colleges

- ➤ Local libraries

- ➤ Visitor Information Centres

- ➤ Existing service organisations (e.g. Lions, Rotary Clubs and CWA).

- The recent adverse weather events impacting our Shire, with extreme drought, flooding and most recently a mouse plague, has highlighted the importance of telecommunications technologies in both developing and maintaining community resilience. The majority of support information is now available online with many rural-based local businesses and agricultural operators experiencing challenges in accessing information during an already extremely stressful and debilitating time. Ongoing support and development in this space is therefore needed by the telecommunications industry and government along with recognition and acknowledgement of these prevailing challenges. It is likely that these adverse events will become more frequent with climate change, accordingly, greater industry participation and government intervention within the resilience space is needed.

6. Support Opportunities – item (e)

The following support opportunities have been identified:

- Our Region is a nationally significant agricultural producer. Given the ongoing limitations on data access and telecommunications coverage, our Producers are inhibited from accessing and implementing new technology, particularly within the Agribusiness sphere. These barriers ultimately result in a stymying of economic development and social growth opportunities. The availability of improved download speeds, reliability and reduction in cost would increase application and uptake exponentially. Support for the establishment of regionally-based data centres and further investment in 'hard' telecommunications infrastructure is therefore sought.

- Improved coordination activities as detailed in a preceding section such as the preparation of local Communications Plans.

I trust that the above submission provides the necessary assistance for the RTIRCs decision making. Should you require any additional information in this regard you are invited to contact Council's Manager of Strategic Planning,

Yours faithfully

Stewart Todd
General Manager