



**Dale Last MP**  
**Member for Burdekin**

**Burdekin Electorate Office**

Shop 30 Centrepoint Arcade

AYR QLD 4807

Tel: 07 4767 0500

Freecall: 1800 817 594

Email: [burdekin@parliament.qld.gov.au](mailto:burdekin@parliament.qld.gov.au)

Shadow Minister for Police and Corrective Services, Shadow Minister for Fire and Emergency Services  
Shadow Minister for Rural and Regional Affairs

Hon Luke Hartsuyker  
Chair  
2021 Regional Telecommunications Review  
Email: [secretariat@rtirc.gov.au](mailto:secretariat@rtirc.gov.au)

Dear Minister Hartsuyker,

As the State Member for Burdekin and Shadow Minister for Rural and Regional Affairs I am writing with regards to the telecommunications in regional, rural and remote Queensland, and more specifically within my electorate.

The state electorate of the Burdekin is the fifth largest in Queensland and covers more than 78,000 square kilometres. It is also one of the state's most economically diverse electorates stretching along the coast to include towns such as Bowen and Ayr where agriculture, small business and tourism are economic drivers and to the west where resources largely steer the future of their surrounding small towns such as Dysart, Moranbah and Clermont.

In this day and age it is safe to say that telecommunications and our ability to quickly receive information, access our finances or connect with others, plays a vital role in our everyday life no matter where you live. However, when it comes to living in rural and regional areas such as those in the Burdekin Electorate, having the ability to send a text, dial a number or search the internet has only become increasingly vital as more services become online-only. This has become more difficult for many constituents in my electorate.

Being able to pick up a phone and dial emergency services can be the difference between life and death and being able to search the internet has determined whether you can access your money, or keep up to date with the daily news. For many living in the city I would expect this would be relatively easy. However with a transient workforce operating nearby, many centres in the Burdekin electorate struggle to stay informed on online news, send a text or Face-Time a loved one living hundreds of kilometres away.

On behalf of my constituents, and residents of rural and regional Queensland, I ask that your review take into consideration the information and recommendations outlined within the following pages.

Yours Sincerely

Dale Last, MP  
Member for Burdekin

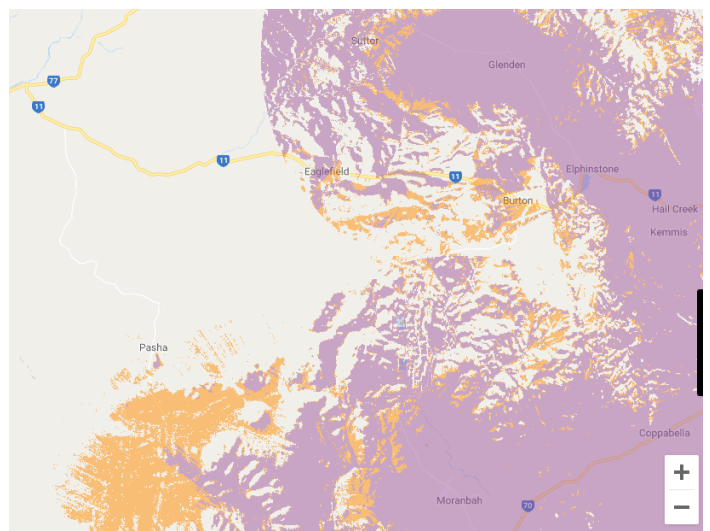


## The current situation

As the fifth largest electorate in Queensland, the Burdekin electorate is largely defined as regional, remote and very remote by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

As stated in the issues paper, while the lifestyle of many regional areas, such as those in my electorate are considered attractive, the ability to easily connect to mobile or broadband networks has underpinned the liveability of these areas. Across the Burdekin Electorate there is an average of more than 100km between town centres and many of these towns are connected by narrow, rural roads which are shared between resource companies, travellers, residents and agricultural transport operators. While many of these areas receive some coverage by a telecommunications company, parts of these roads and particularly the Peak Downs Highway, are black spot areas which is deeply concerning in times of an emergency or road accident.

While town centres in the electorate are and have been for some time, largely decentralised and incredibly reliant on telecommunications, the pandemic and the shift of more services to online-only has meant there is a heavier reliance on already existing infrastructure. This is particularly evident during peak times of use (7-11pm according to Telstra) where residents as well as resource sector workers temporarily residing in the area, have reported incredibly slow internet speeds while on the mobile network. For the purpose of this submission I have used Telstra coverage maps as Telstra is largely accepted as the telecommunications provider with the most amount of coverage in the Burdekin Electorate with Vodafone providing no coverage in western areas of the electorate and Optus providing some coverage. The use of Telstra's coverage maps should be taken into consideration when reviewing this submission as a person who relies on Vodafone or Optus telecommunications will in most cases, have poorer reception than someone relying on Telstra. This has also meant that many of my constituents are only able to purchase Telstra products and services as they provide the most coverage in their area, therefore somewhat rendering telecommunication company competition in those areas ineffective.



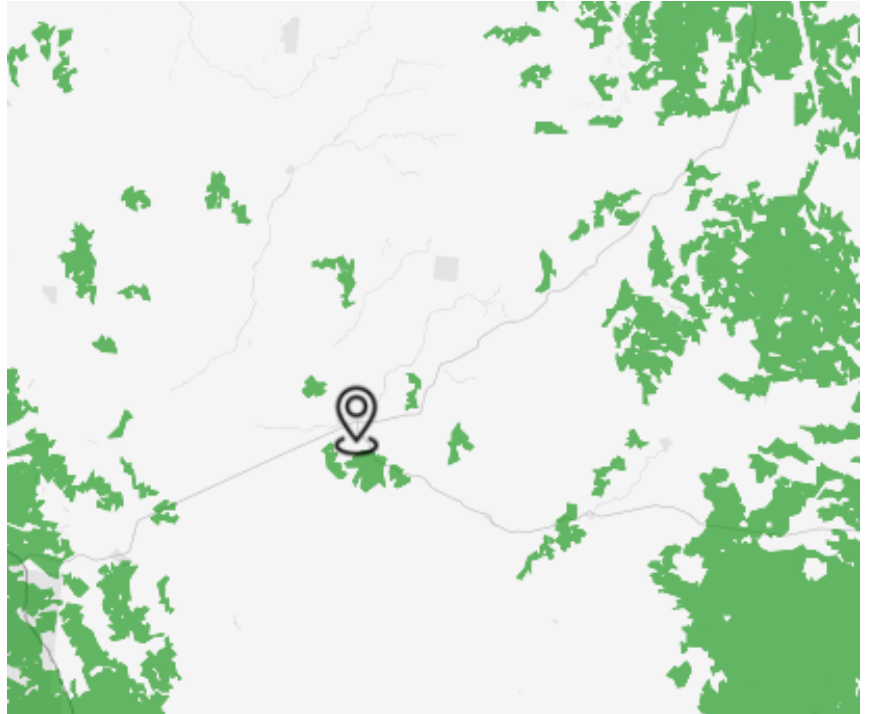
**Coverage maps from Vodafone (left) and Optus (right) of roughly the same area in the Burdekin Electorate**



## In times of Emergency

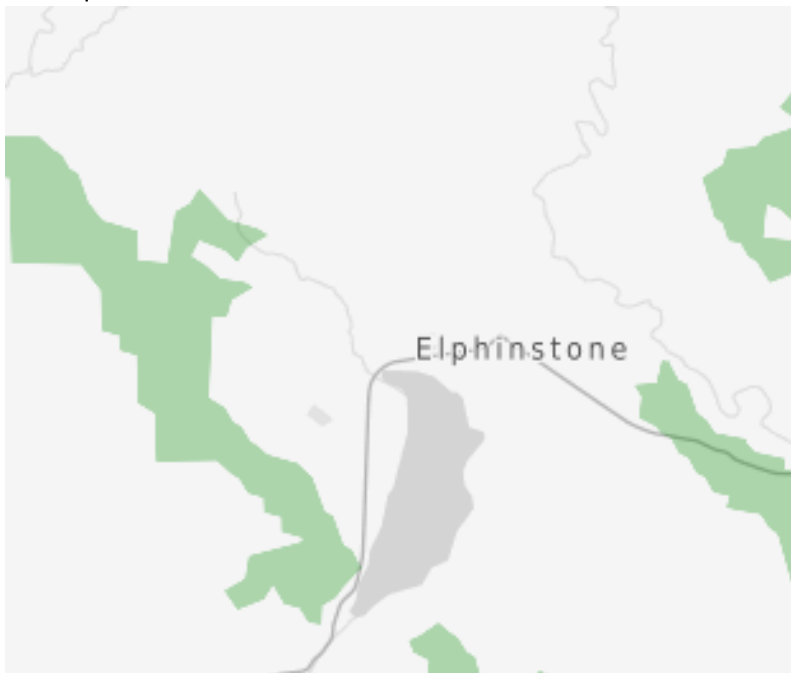
Sadly, this year we have already seen a horrific number of road crashes in the state, with RACQ placing the Burdekin as one of the worst electorates for road fatalities this year so far.

During the Easter period we saw exactly how accessing telecommunications while on these roads is critical when witnesses to a single vehicle traffic crash involving a mother and her four children struggled to contact emergency services due to poor phone reception in the Mount Coolon area.



As you can see in the Telstra 4G coverage map (pictured above), there is patchy, if any, reception in the area where the accident happened.

Thankfully the witness was able to eventually contact emergency services and avoid disastrous consequences however without being able to reach help quickly, this instance could have had horrific consequences.



Unfortunately the Mt Coolon area is not the only stretch of road to suffer significant blackspots in telecommunications coverage with areas along the Bruce Highway, between Townsville and Bowen, suffering intermittent coverage.

Of particular note is areas of travel between Glenden and Nebo, via Elphinstone (pictured left) which, according to Telstra's 4G coverage maps, does not receive mobile coverage at all.



Roads from Moranbah to Clermont (pictured right) are also a concern where, as you can see by the coverage map, road users struggle to receive patchy, if any reception.

As mentioned above, many of these towns are linked by rural roads, most of which are unsealed and often incredibly dangerous.

### The resources sector

The Burdekin electorate is economically diverse with towns such as Collinsville, Moranbah, Dysart, Clermont and Middlemount relying on the resources industry and the six mining companies that operate nearby.

According to economy data, the mining industry sector in Isaac Regional Council area alone (which includes towns like Dysart, Moranbah and Clermont) contributes to 84.54 per cent of the total economic output of that region with the industry sector offering 13,080 jobs in the area.

While the Isaac region is home to roughly 20,900 people, there are an additional 10,580 resource sector workers housed in temporary accommodation in the area who also rely on telecommunications infrastructure.

In the Mount Coolon area, where the above-mentioned road accident occurred, two towers, the Mount Coolon and Pasha towers were being overwhelmed by increased telecommunications traffic associated with large work camps, used to house workers linked to the Bravus (formerly Adani) mining development.

On this basis I would submit that there either needs to be more regular reviews of telecommunications infrastructure to ensure they not only take into account the needs of residents in the area, but industries and businesses that initiate operations in the near future. There also needs to be clear guidelines around who is responsible for the upgrades (if needed) to telecommunications infrastructure in that area. These guidelines could be similar to those discussions had with developers around roads and rail maintenance imposed by council and state government during the approvals process.

During difficult times within the Mount Coolon area, constituents were logging faults with Telstra and I undertook representations and had conversations with Telstra representatives and Bravus however at the time there was no sign of a timely resolution to the issue. Implementing these guidelines during the approval process, I believe, would have alleviated this issue.

When it came to the COVID-19 pandemic, the resources and construction sectors were among the industries that kept the economy going. However, for those workers on the ground, lockdown and separation from families took a heavier toll on mental health.

Following a *2015 Inquiry into fly-in-fly-out and other long distance commuting work practices in regional Queensland*, the report found that a combination of lifestyle factors involved in fly-in-fly-out





(FIFO) work that can lead to mental health problems. A number of these factors took into account the ability for FIFO workers to be able to easily connect with family and friends, the quality of those connections and maintaining regular and meaningful connections while they are away at work.

Mine workers who were restricted to the mining camp beyond their rostered period of time due to lock downs were left isolated and were subject to these factors as well as others, as they juggled missing out on family events they would have otherwise been home for and keeping communications open with their family and friends.

I have been advised that the unreliable telecommunications in those mining areas, exacerbated this sense of miner's isolation from families and loved ones. Peak times of use meant that levels of phone reception were unreliable or at slow speeds while other temporary accommodation camps do not have strong telecommunications connections at all.

## Shifting to online-only

Before the COVID-19 pandemic we were already seeing a slow transition of more services to online platforms.

Perhaps the most significant in the Burdekin Electorate is in the banking sector where in 2018 I conducted a survey which revealed respondents needed to travel an average of 206kms to access any bank branch.

As banks began closing their local branches constituents were encouraged to use online services or the applicable "app".

While it may have seemed feasible from an inner-city desk for people to log-on to access their banking services, the reality is that for property owners and residents living in mobile blackspots, this is simply not possible unless they are on a device connected to the NBN satellite or fixed wireless network.

In 2020, the announcement by News Corp to transition more than 100 mastheads to a digital only platform meant people living in towns in my electorate were instead encouraged to seek their news from online means with some areas of the Burdekin Electorate such as Clermont, Moranbah and Middlemount now no longer having News Corp papers delivered at all. It meant that at a time when people were needing to be most informed in an up-to-date and thorough manner, some were unable to do so.

Prior to the pandemic, there were already a number of students completing schooling with school of distance education, however I have anecdotal evidence that a number of children who transitioned to online learning during lockdown periods were unable to connect to online services due to poor connectivity at their home.

While the increase of digital and online services becomes a norm for people across the world, I believe the pandemic has fast tracked the requirements of online services however in some areas, the infrastructure needed has not kept pace.



## Funding telecommunications upgrades in the bush

In correspondence with the office of the Federal Communications Minister around the issues with the Mount Coolon and Pasha towers, I was advised that while the Mobile Black Spot Program funding was available for application, the decision for a mobile network operator to apply to the funding incentive remained an entirely commercial decision.

A department-centralised register of locations which are the subject of complaints concerning poor of non-existent mobile is of benefit to ensure black spots such as Mt Coolon are recognised and highlighted for potential funding.

However, I feel there needs to be further opportunity for those sites to be identified and for further public input into which sites are added to the list.

With regards to Mt Coolon and Pasha towers, advice given to my office was largely around encouraging constituents to contact their telco provider. On an individual basis this may suffice, however when there is a number of concerns with telecommunications in one area, there needs to be mechanisms to allow for these areas to be more easily identified for priority funding.

While there are several areas in the Burdekin Electorate that have benefitted from the Mobile Blackspot Funding it is evident that there are other areas that may not have been identified previously that could be considered for funding.

## Conclusion

The Burdekin Electorate is vast and largely regional and remote where businesses, residents, transient workers and farmers rely heavily on the telecommunications networks in their area.

This reliance on our communications network has only increased, particularly as more services have moved on online and the acceleration of online-only services caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However regular reviews on the demand of infrastructure need to be considered particularly in towns that are largely mono-industrial or have a transient workforce which are not often taken into consideration when assessing the need for telecommunications.

The transient workforce that operates particularly within the Isaac Regional Council and Whitsunday Regional Council areas, has meant that demand on telecommunications services has rapidly increased and infrastructure has been unable to keep up in times of peak demand. Unfortunately without clear guidelines as to who is responsible for ensuring vital services such as telecommunications are able to keep pace with demand, these upgrades take lengthy times to even be put forth for consideration.

The reality is those people residing and working in the bush, know how important telecommunications are not just to everyday life such as education and keeping in touch with friends but also in times of emergency. These considerations need to be taken into account when assessing the demand for telecommunications services in regional and rural areas.

