

28 September 2021

Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat  
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and  
Communications  
Via email- [secretariat@rtirc.gov.au](mailto:secretariat@rtirc.gov.au)

## **REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback as a part of the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021. Council would also like to thank the Review Committee for the opportunity to contribute to the Review by participating in the North West Tasmania public consultation session held on 28 July 2021.

The Issues Paper captures the critical role and importance of telecommunications in supporting productivity and well-being in regional, rural and remote areas. Council would like to provide specific feedback on the current challenges in the Waratah Wynyard Municipal area and North West Region of Tasmania.

Tasmania performs poorly on all measures of digital inclusion. Tasmania's Digital Inclusion Index in 2020 was 59.6, making it the least digitally included state in the nation and 3.6 points below the national average of 63. The Digital Inclusion Index in 2020 for the North West region was 51.5, 11.5 points below the national average. This region is the least digitally included in Australia against all metrics and is therefore socially and economically disadvantaged.

A collaborative and targeted approach is required to address this matter. Council encourages a whole-of-government approach in strengthening Tasmania's regional digital infrastructure and recommends that clear whole-of-government Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) be set for the provision of a minimum standard of service to all Australians focusing on the areas of affordability, access, and ability to connect. Council also advocates for government to provide funding to address the KPIs.

The community in North West Tasmania continue to raise concerns with Council regarding mobile network coverage and capacity including:

- depth of coverage;
- coverage availability;
- network capacity, particularly in high tourist visitation during peak periods; and
- continued patchy coverage, including on the major transport corridor, the Bass Highway.

North West Tasmania has a dispersed population covering a 23,000 square kilometre landmass. The dispersed population and topography of the land in this region make the required solutions commercially unviable for service providers without government co-investment.

Some service provision models have suggested that local government co-invest in infrastructure alongside funding from the Regional Connectivity Funding Program, and commercial provider/s. This funding model

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is not an equitable solution. Users of the service will pay for the service at the same rates as other Australians and yet are also asked to contribute directly in the capital investment for access. Rural and remote Councils should not have to fund this type of infrastructure that is readily available in more populous centres. Our Council is concerned that if funding gaps are left to rural and remote Councils to cover, infrastructure will continue to fall further behind the major population centres.

Council would like to see the State and Federal governments play a more significant role in closing the digital divide by bridging the funding gap for this essential service for the community.

The Government's Mobile Blackspot Program, and Regional Connectivity Program make some attempt at addressing digital inequality of regional areas. The funding programs do however have some barriers to effectiveness. The programs require the applicant to have an understanding of the issues and required technical solutions which requires a collaborative body of work between government and service providers. There is no commercial incentive for service providers to initiate this work.

A greater investment is required to understand issues locally and the proposed solution in collaboration with service providers, Local Government and the community. This is most efficiently achieved on a regional basis rather than smaller ad hoc solutions and applications for funding. Local government can assist the State and Federal Government by proactively supplying information for the regional study, advocating for solutions based on knowledge of local communities.

Waratah-Wynyard Council has, in collaboration with a local service provider and Circular Head Council, sought advice on appropriate technical solutions for our municipal areas. Collectively, a range of solutions are required including site augmentations, new macro site investments, and new small cell investments. The total investment required is anticipated across both municipal areas is expected to be in the order of \$8m to \$9m. There is an expectation that both Councils financially contribute to this expenditure.

The solutions referenced above, whilst addressing some geographic areas of concern, still leave large parts of our municipal areas, including many small towns and agricultural industries and businesses, without adequate telecommunications. Financial support, through grants or subsidies for business and residents to access equipment, including boosters, for rural and remote areas with low populations should be considered. Innovative, low cost solutions should be prioritised for small towns and population centres with geographic constraints such as undulating terrain.

In the North West Region of Tasmania, with significant heavy vehicle movement along infrastructure corridors, it is imperative that mobile phone coverage is improved to allow communication on highways and major roads. Safety, as well as efficiency, will be improved as a result.

COVID-19 has delivered a step-change in using online approaches for many aspects of day to day life, including education, working, shopping, accessing health services, and accessing government services. This has amplified the importance of digital access and have it recognised as an essential service. The North West region risks worsening economic conditions and difficulty in achieving population growth if digital standards are not improved.

The Tasmanian Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC) delivered its Final Report in March 2021. The purpose of the report is to provide advice to the Government on long-term recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion was identified as a critical enabler to economic and social recovery for Tasmania.

In summary, given telecommunications critical role and importance in supporting productivity and well-being in regional, rural and remote areas, Council advocates for:

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- The Government to undertake the required research on the technical and practical solutions on a regional basis in collaboration with service providers, local government and the community (rather than accepting inefficient ad hoc applications and solutions);
- Whole-of-government Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) be set for the provision of a minimum standard of service for all Australians focusing on the areas of affordability, access, and ability to connect; and
- For State and Federal government to fully fund infrastructure gaps to address the KPIs.

Council does not have qualified staff to provide submission relating to emerging technologies or specific technical issues, however we trust this submission provides sufficient information to ensure improvements to telecommunications remain a priority area for all tiers of government in the short term. The Digital Inclusion Index indicates the North West of Tasmania should be one of the highest priority areas to address.

Yours sincerely



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