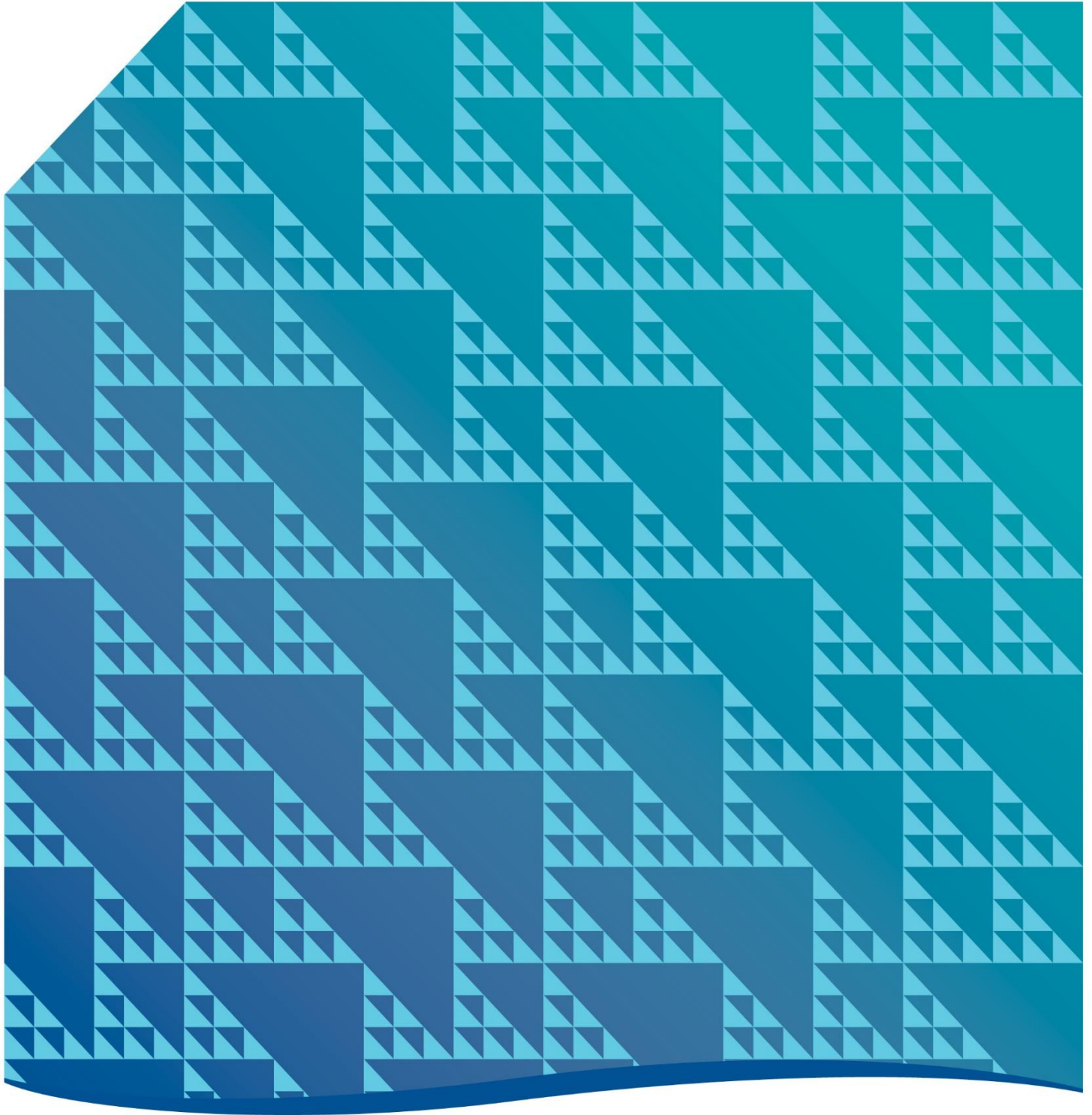


# Regional Telecommunications Review 2021 – Tasmanian Government submission





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# Executive summary

Full and unfettered participation in the digital world is an assumed part of contemporary Australian life as most people continue to spend more time - and do more - online. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has both confirmed and highlighted the long-running divide in Australian digital connectivity; those living in regional and remote areas do not always enjoy the same quality, or access to, digital services as that enjoyed in most metropolitan locations.

As a small state characterised by a highly decentralised population, numerous regional, remote and very remote communities, and challenging terrain, Tasmania is not only a microcosm of regional Australia but is an instructive case-study of the difficulties of providing equitable telecommunications infrastructure in areas of marginal viability. In Tasmania, as elsewhere, these conditions have resulted in single-carrier market dominance, the persistence of blackspots or patchy and unreliable services, and vulnerability in the event of natural disasters. Notwithstanding this, it must be acknowledged that significant infrastructure investments over recent years are beginning to alter this landscape.

Recent Australian Government telecommunications programs have undoubtedly made a sizeable contribution to the resolution of connectivity issues in regional areas. However, it is unsurprising that, in attempting to address the very complex connectivity challenges facing regional Australia, government programs at all levels have sometimes delivered imperfect outcomes that tend to favour carrier priorities in resource-constrained communities, and they do not always achieve the objective of increased competition in regional areas. Many of the most digitally disadvantaged communities are located within jurisdictions that have limited capacity to provide financial contributions to support applications, advocate for program inclusion, or even identify and prioritise funding needs. These communities are sometimes further disappointed when funding is awarded to a carrier that does not service much of the community – and this disappointment can be compounded if their own carrier declines to accept the offer of colocation.

The consequences of inadequate and inequitable telecommunications connectivity have also been highlighted over the past 18 months. The 2020 Australian Digital Inclusion Index identified that the digital divide follows clear economic, social and geographic fault lines; Australians with low levels of income, education, and employment - and those living in some regional areas - continue to experience significant levels of digital disadvantage.

# Adequacy – changing demand: Mobile, Broadband, Fixed Voice

## I. Services required to meet current and future needs

***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?***

In modern Australia, participation in the digital world is an assumed part of daily life and most people are spending more time, and doing more, online. High quality broadband access is increasingly being seen as an essential service like electricity and water, which can enable anyone to easily and reliably connect to services provided by all areas and levels of government, employment, the business sector, entertainment and social connectivity. More and more, this means connecting via fibre based or next generation mobile broadband services that provide greater bandwidth and higher download speeds.

In the last decade the Australian Government has implemented a range of policies and programs to:

- Embed digital skills and capabilities in the education curriculum;
- Lift the digital capabilities of SMEs;
- Support a dynamic and emerging tech sector;
- Drive Industry 4.0 transformation;
- Support business engagement in the digital economy; and
- Continue the expansion of the telecommunications network via partnering with service providers as well as state and local governments.

However, the 2020 Australian Digital Inclusion Index<sup>1</sup> identified that the digital divide follows clear economic, social and geographic fault lines: Australians with low levels of income, education, employment and those living in some regional areas continue to be digitally disadvantaged due to:

- Limited or no access to the internet (eg rely on mobile-only internet connectivity or do not have a home or personal connection);
- Affordability issues (cost of connection and devices); and
- Lack of confidence and knowledge (lack of ability).

As the impact of the pandemic spread from capital cities and major urban centres to the regions, many Australians consumed record levels of bandwidth due to working from home, home schooling and tertiary study, telehealth, online shopping, use of entertainment streaming services, social engagement and synchronous video communications.

However, the past 18 months have highlighted that those living in regional areas relying on mobile connections, fibre to the node, fixed wireless or satellite connections do not enjoy the same quality of access to digital services as those available in most metropolitan locations. In Tasmania's regional areas this inequity is a significant issue for employers who struggle to attract and retain staff and their families. This, in turn, not only impacts the productivity and profitability of industry, but also negatively impacts the prosperity of regional communities and the economic feasibility of various government services.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TLS\\_ADII\\_Report-2020\\_WebU.pdf](https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf)

The effectiveness of mobile communication can be influenced by network capacity, topography, climate and the number of concurrent users. Tower locations and service upgrade timelines are largely dependent on the carrier's internal business case justifications. Regional and lower socioeconomic users tend to delay upgrading their mobile phones, which can lead to a sub-optimal user experience as service digitisation often does not include compatibility with older models. This disadvantage will be compounded by the carriers move to decommission the 3G service by June 2024.<sup>2</sup>

The Tasmanian experience has confirmed that as more services connect to the NBN towers, Fixed Wireless is not a workable solution in most locations due to increasing congestion that degrades the service. At over 30 Department of Education sites connected via NBN wireless, the connections deliver speeds of just 6Mbps down and 2 to 3 Mbps up during normal usage. This is dramatically less than sites connected via FTTN<sup>3</sup> based services and significantly below what is possible on FTTP<sup>4</sup> based services. Such low speeds negatively impact on primary and high school students (K-12), TAFE and University being able to actively engage in high quality online learning - in many cases students have to resort to manual learning materials instead.

Conversion of FTTN and Fixed Wireless infrastructure to FTTP is an additional challenge as neither have local fibre infrastructure and FTTP requires different distribution infrastructure to FTTN, so the incremental costs to upgrade may be significant in many instances.

With respect to industry, many applications are demanding more ubiquity, more mobility, higher speeds and lower response time. 5G technologies have the potential to meet these demands but this will require significant investment. Patchy investments in regional areas will exacerbate the existing digital divide and curtail productivity gains. There is potential for Government to partner with MNOs to trial the application of 5G under Australia's varying regional conditions.

## 2. Changes in demand, barriers or challenges

### ***What changes in demand, barriers or challenges need to be addressed when it comes to telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia?***

Tasmania has a regional economy, a decentralised population and challenging terrain (topography, high levels of vegetation). These factors decrease the viability of the telecommunications infrastructure needed to deliver services in Tasmania at a level that is comparable to those available in urban Australia.

Tasmania's ability to respond to infrastructure funding programs is limited by:

- the scale of its local government – Tasmanian has 29 councils and even the largest of these (Hobart City Council) would be considered relatively small in comparison to other capital cities.
- the difficulty these councils face in attracting and retaining skilled staff.
- smaller councils' responsibility to maintain an ageing service infrastructure network (ie pits and pipes) which is funded by a low rate (income) base.
- the limited resources these councils have to undertake preliminary gap and solution analysis, or to prepare applications for funding.
- These regions are often the areas where the need is greatest.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.telstra.com.au/business-enterprise/news-research/networks/announcements/3g-service-closure> - neither VHA nor Optus have published shut off dates yet.

<sup>3</sup> Fibre to the Node

<sup>4</sup> Fibre to the Premises

In Tasmania, the telecommunications market continues to be dominated by Telstra, and this dominance has traditionally been driven by Telstra's superior state-wide coverage, particularly in more remote areas. This dominance persists, although Optus has made significant infrastructure investments over recent years. Funding programs need to grapple with the competing objectives of providing the mobile coverage most demanded by Tasmanians (Telstra coverage), supporting competitive neutrality, and supporting increased competition.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a population shift to regional areas, as reflected by increased residential property sales. This decentralisation will lead to increased demand for high-quality connectivity and more competition in these areas.

### 3. Effect of Government policies and programs

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

Australian Government telecommunications programs have undoubtedly made a sizeable contribution to the resolution of connectivity issues in regional areas. However, the following issues are noted:

- Most Australian Government digital infrastructure funding programs require that the carrier is the applicant. This often results in applications being submitted for locations that meet the carrier's business case requirements rather than for locations that are the highest priorities for the jurisdiction.
- While programs are increasingly looking for new ways to address connectivity issues in commercially challenging situations, the willingness of carriers to support applications in these areas is often dependent upon third-party contributions from local and state governments. Unfortunately, many of the most digitally disadvantaged communities are located within jurisdictions that have limited capacity to provide financial contributions, advocate for program inclusion, or even identify and prioritise funding needs.
- Understandably, government funding is awarded to carriers on a merit-based process. However, such decisions can see funding provided to a carrier to construct and operate a mobile phone tower in an area that is principally serviced by that carrier's competitor. Although co-location is encouraged by Australian Government programs, it is understood that this only occurs in approximately 28 per cent of new builds. Consequently, residents often report significant dissatisfaction in the outcome of the program as they have not directly benefitted from the new coverage delivered. This is particularly true in Tasmania - where there is a high reliance on Telstra services – and on major transportation routes, where users cannot reasonably switch SIM cards to obtain continuous service. This issue again raises the question of whether there is greater capacity at the national program level to provide incentives to other carriers to co-locate on funded towers.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that those living in regional areas do not enjoy the same quality of, or access to, digital services as those available in our metropolitan locations. Recognising this inequity, in July 2020, the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC) released an Interim Report<sup>5</sup>, which noted that 'COVID-19 has amplified the need to have digital access recognised as an essential service for all Tasmanians.' The Report concluded that 'the State Government, with the support of the Australian Government, should address digital inclusion and equity across Tasmanian communities, including by addressing critical regional mobile and internet black spots' (Recommendation 54).

On 16 March 2021, the Council released its PESRAC Final Report<sup>5</sup> which made several additional, and more specific, recommendations including:

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pesrac.tas.gov.au/reports>



**Recommendation 10:** The [10 year Infrastructure] pipeline should be extended to include information on digital infrastructure investment plans, including from telecommunications providers, to address digital inclusion strategies.

**Recommendation 33:** The State Government should take an active role, working with the Australian Government, telecommunication carriers and other providers, to improve Tasmania's digital infrastructure, as a priority, including by:

- a) undertaking a review of digital infrastructure coverage gaps and priorities for future investment (which would inform the quantum of funding required);
- b) commissioning research to determine the economic and social gains from greater deployment of digital infrastructure;
- c) actively pursuing greater collaboration and co-investment arrangements with the Australian Government, telecommunications industry carriers and other providers; and
- d) allocating funding for digital infrastructure projects to strengthen connectivity, particularly in our regions.

The Tasmanian Government accepted and endorsed all recommendations, making a clear commitment to improving the state's digital infrastructure.

## Service Reliability

### 4. Impact of service reliability issues

***How do service reliability issues impact on regional communities and businesses? How do outages, including in natural disasters, impact on communities and businesses?***

Tasmania is serviced by three fibre cables across Bass Strait, but only one service provider offers dedicated, carrier-grade, redundant capacity. The disconnection of one these cables – Basslink – from December 2015 to June 2016, underscored the vulnerability of service delivery to the state. A new 1500-megawatt capacity undersea and underground electricity connection between Victoria and Tasmania (Marinus Link), has been proposed and has now entered the design and approvals phase. Importantly, optical fibre cables will also be installed in each of the 750 MW components of Marinus Link. This will double the optical fibre telecommunications cable routes across Bass Strait and support greater telecommunications capacity, competition, and security between Tasmania and mainland Australia.

While Marinus Link is being supported by funding from the Federal Government, which in December 2020 increased its investment to \$150 million to fund design and approval work and said it will take a majority stake in a special purpose vehicle to oversee the project, a final investment decision is not targeted until late 2023 for it to come online in 2028-29.

As with most of regional Australia, the state has large areas where service reliability issues create challenges for communities and businesses alike. For example, in the context of the mobile phone network issues include:

- No coverage i.e. true black spots
- Poor coverage i.e. low signal strength
- Patchy coverage i.e. the service footprint is not continuous and service varies between households or across properties

- Public coverage maps do not reflect the lack of service, for example facilities are located in a blackspot hollow between two towers – in some Tasmania schools this creates a high risk environment for students who need mobile connectivity to monitor personal medical issues at all times
- Coverage is provided by a non-dominant carrier
- Bandwidth congestion occurs due to the seasonal influx of users
- Signal strength is insufficient to provide hand-held coverage inside premises

Consequently, the capacity of users to adopt digital technologies – such as sensor technologies and apps, communicate with cloud-based apps or access relevant support and services – is limited.

NBN services have lower Service Level Agreement thresholds and extended outages are often undertaken during the day which impacts service supply into schools. Special requests are required to ensure NBN alters the timing of these outages so they are undertaken in school holidays rather than during term time.

These issues create usage challenges at the best of times – in the event of natural disasters the damage to telecommunications and power infrastructure can exacerbate the emergency response. Tasmania has large areas that are prone to severe flooding, wind and storms and bushfires. During these events, landlines, internet services and mobile services are often impacted, through the destruction of network components, disruptions to supporting network infrastructure or through network congestion both during and after the event. Tasmanian communities often rely on SMS phone ‘trees’ to receive and communicate key messages.

Connectivity issues impact communities’ ability to receive timely public safety notifications, communicate with friends and family, and also access support, assistance, and advice during recovery. This was confirmed in the *2013 Tasmanian Bushfires Inquiry* report<sup>6</sup>, which indicated that the largest impact of the incidents analysed was the loss of mains power and the need to deploy generators to enable telecommunications service continuity because the backup battery capacity was limited. The Tasmanian Government notes the work of the Australian Government through its Network Hardening Program to address these issues.

## 5. Ensuring greater reliability and network resilience

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

Solutions might include:

- Continued investment in network resiliency eg. auxiliary power. However, it should be noted that regions with limited financial resourcing may prioritise highly visible new connectivity over relatively ‘invisible’ investment in disaster mitigation.
- Supporting new second tier entrants to the market by helping to address barriers to entry.
- Supporting local communities to identify needs and solutions.
- Considering supplementary funding programs that assess applications on basis of digital disadvantage and need rather than on cost to the Australian Government.
- Supporting skills development in regional areas so that communities and users can identify, install and service solutions to connectivity issues themselves.

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/\\_\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0015/208131/1.Tasmanian\\_Bushfires\\_Inquiry\\_Report.pdf](http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/0015/208131/1.Tasmanian_Bushfires_Inquiry_Report.pdf)

# COVID-19

## 6. Change in use of digital services during the COVID-19 pandemic

***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?***

COVID-19 instigated a sudden and significant increase in demand for digital services for regional consumers and businesses. Business demand was driven by:

- the need to pivot to online trading to offset lost revenues
- the need to understand public health directives, and
- the need to access government support services.

Businesses in regional areas of Tasmania were particularly hard-hit by the pandemic as they were often heavily reliant on interstate and international tourism. Regional businesses are more reliant on digital access to markets than their metropolitan counterparts as they are based in areas with low, and highly dispersed, populations that often have less capacity for discretionary expenditure.

Regional businesses were further disadvantaged during the pandemic by difficulties in accessing physical technical support.

COVID-19 highlighted the need for ongoing investment in network capacity building to safeguard against future demand shocks. It also highlighted the need to prioritise investments that address inequalities in digital access, particularly in regional areas.

At a state-wide level, infrastructure developments were delayed by a lack of access to specialist crews due to travel restrictions, highlighting the need for local capacity building wherever possible.

In the context of education provision, services via remote learning were impacted by the lack of suitable broadband, or because low socio-families did not have an existing broadband service or devices due to cost. In some cases, families had a single mobile service with a very small data plan for the whole household, which was used to support both parents working remotely and three children all trying to engage in remote learning.

The impact of 'learning at home' during COVID-19 has provided a much clearer picture of student need in terms of digital access and disadvantage, and the level of response required to ensure students were not disadvantaged. During 2020, the Tasmanian Department of Education loaned students over 5 200 windows-based devices, more than 1 200 iPads and over 650 internet dongles with filtered internet access. That is in addition to the more than 23 000 devices (laptops, windows tablets and iPads) that schools already had for use by students in the classroom and away from the school location. As the need to move to home based learning became clear, the Department also actively pre-purchased 1 000 more iPads and 2 000 additional Windows-based devices to enable quick supply to schools.

To ensure ongoing access and equity for all students, schools continue to actively support students with the loan of Department-owned laptops and tablets where the teacher, student or family have identified a need. Schools are also providing filtered internet access to support students and families that have no or unreliable internet access, however such access is only as good as the telecommunications infrastructure in that location.

# Indigenous Australia

## 7. Improving access and affordability of services in Indigenous communities

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

Access and affordability of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities is directly relevant to the commitment to achieve the outcomes under the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*<sup>7</sup>. The Tasmanian Government would recommend that any investigation of local issues includes initial engagement with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and Aboriginal people.

There is a need for greater coordination between governments at all levels, carriers and other telecommunications players, industry, and community. Often, local jurisdictions lack the human and financial resources to proactively identify gaps, priorities, and preferred solutions, leading to carrier-led responses to government initiatives that either miss real areas of need or deliver solutions that are mis-matched to community expectation and need. Confirmation of which Australian Government telecommunications infrastructure funding programs might deliver the best solutions for regional and remote communities would benefit from independent and impartial technical expertise. Governments may consider avenues for the development of applied technical skills and the attraction and retention of skilled personnel to regional areas.

The outcomes of improved telecommunications services deliver significant results. For example, the Flinders Island Telecommunications Transformation Project was funded under the Australian Government's Building Better Regions program in 2017 to improve communications on Flinders and truwana/Cape Barren Islands. The infrastructure upgrade was finalised in 2020 and included 4GX capability across Flinders and truwana/Cape Barren Islands as well as an 83-kilometre optic fibre cable running north/south on Flinders island. Negotiation of the location for the mobile tower on truwana/Cape Barren Islands was undertaken with the Aboriginal Land Council of Tasmania. The project has provided residents with mobile and data connections that are on par with any urban metropolitan area, enabling them to benefit from a range of previously inaccessible social, health, educational and economic opportunities.

## Opportunity – Regional Development

### 8. Encouraging regional economic development

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

The Tasmanian Government considers that the whole of Tasmania exhibits characteristics of a regional telecommunications market. In recent years investment in competitive wholesale infrastructure in and to the State has occurred, and this has led to investment by retail service providers, particularly in Hobart, to expand the services available.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement>

The NBN is improving the quality of telecommunications services available to many households in the State. However, the implementation of various infrastructure solutions in different regions has created a variety of coverage solutions that deliver varying levels of service.

While governments continue to invest in regional telecommunications infrastructure, there is a need for greater coordination between governments at all levels, the carriers and other telecommunications players, industry, and community. Often, local jurisdictions lack the human and financial resources to proactively identify gaps, priorities, and preferred solutions, leading to carrier-led responses to government initiatives that either miss real areas of need or deliver solutions that are mis-matched with respect to community expectation and need.

## 9. Innovation opportunities and barriers

***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?***

Consideration might be given to programs that fund bespoke bundled technological solutions for individual commercial applications in targeted sectors.

# Emerging Technologies

## 10. New technologies opportunities and potential barriers

***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?***

Low-cost connectivity solutions are increasingly being developed by small players to either compete with, or extend the coverage provided by the major carriers. Innovative technologies such as Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite communications and low-cost narrowband Internet of Things (IoT) technology are also being developed that have the potential to significantly impact important Tasmanian industries, such as agriculture, aquaculture, mining, and forestry. The success and applicability of these developments will depend on access to spectrum and access to fibre backhaul.

Government and private initiatives aim to develop regional infrastructure but there will be a need to ensure that efforts are coordinated to avoid inefficiencies and duplication. Also, the integration of new technologies and applications will continue to rely on the provision of specialist advice to industry to assist it to identify options, install solutions, interpret data, develop, and integrate new practices to drive productivity gains. Regional areas continue to be constrained by their limited access to such specialist advice. Governments may consider avenues for the development of applied technical skills and the attraction and retention of skilled personnel to regional areas.

The increasing dissemination of 5G has the potential to significantly improve accessibility of broadband applications in regional areas but the following questions remain:

- how quickly and broadly this service would be rolled out to regional and remote areas
- whether it will be a feasible solution for providing extensive coverage
- whether 5G services will be consistent and reliable.

## 11. Government support for new telecommunications solutions

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

Tasmania's small population makes it highly challenging to create sufficient scale from local demand to defray the significant capital costs new infrastructure or to provide services at costs that are comparable to metropolitan locations.

It may be possible for Government to revise its selection methodology to favour projects that address areas of relative disadvantage. To do this, there may be a need to move away from criteria that heavily weight square kilometre coverage or number of premises and instead consider ways to quantify the level of community disadvantage or vulnerability to natural disaster. Similarly, for severely disadvantaged regions, consideration could be given to adjusting the value placed on financial co-contributions (cost to the Commonwealth criteria). Consideration might be given to programs that fund bespoke bundled technological solutions for application by specific industry sectors.

NBN is currently engaging with governments to propose cost-sharing initiatives that would see the creation, or extension, of business fibre zones with pricing equivalent to other metropolitan business zones. However, this is dependent upon significant co-investment from other parties, the number of businesses within the proposed zone, location, and the characteristics of the NBN in that region, all of which potentially disadvantage regional areas.

Similarly, the aim of the **NBN Regional Co-Investment Fund**<sup>8</sup> is to deliver improved broadband services to communities where such investment would otherwise be sub-commercial. The Australian Government's **Regional Connectivity Program**<sup>9</sup> aims to expand the economic, social and public safety benefits of improved digital connectivity to regional, rural and remote Australian communities. And the long running **Mobile Black Spot Program**<sup>10</sup> invests in telecommunications infrastructure to improve mobile coverage and competition across Australia. All programs are heavily dependent upon significant co-investment, which disadvantages smaller councils and states with lower revenue bases.

Yet other programs that can be utilised for improving regional telecommunications services do not require any co-investment from applicants: the targeted **Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program**<sup>11</sup> which is intended to specifically support the recovery efforts of communities in eligible Local Government Areas (LGAs) affected by the 2019–20 bushfires. Five regional local government areas in Tasmania are eligible.

With respect to the speed of rollout, Tasmania's challenging terrain, high level of tree cover, and significant heritage overlays, all negatively impact commissioning timeframes.

## Maximising Outcomes

### 12. Better co-ordination

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

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nbnco.com.au/content/dam/nbn/documents/about-nbn/reports/nbn-rcif-guidelines.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/internet/regional-connectivity-program>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/phone/mobile-services-and-coverage/mobile-black-spot-program>

<sup>11</sup> <https://business.gov.au/grants-and-programs/black-summer-bushfire-recovery-grant>

In a perfect world, programs would be coordinated to ensure that State and local governments knew the outcome of one program before applications for other comparable programs opened. This is particularly relevant to small jurisdictions that have limited capacity to contribute to multiple initiatives.

### 13. Program improvements

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

As noted above, there is a need for greater coordination between governments at all levels, carriers and other telecommunications players, industry, and community. Often, local jurisdictions lack the human and financial resources to identify proactively gaps, priorities, and preferred solutions, leading to carrier-led responses to government initiatives that either miss real areas of need or deliver solutions that are mis-matched to community expectation and need.

## Education – Awareness

### 14. Support for regional consumers

***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?***

There are currently several organisations that provide impartial advice and information to assist individuals and businesses located in regional, rural and remote communities make better informed decisions in the assessment of connectivity options, including predictive coverage data and speeds:

- the Regional Tech Hub - <https://regionaltechhub.org.au/>
- the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) - <https://accan.org.au/>

To maintain impartiality, the organisations are not permitted to directly recommend a specific solution, and much of the information can be difficult to understand for those without any technical understanding, low literacy, if they speak languages other than English, or if they belong to some disability groups.

Finding such information online and accessing these services requires reliable access to the internet in the first place, sufficient digital knowledge to know how to search for them and confirm they are credible sources. This lack of broader understanding often translates into a low level of confidence or a lack of willingness to undertake a wider range of digital tasks (e.g. mobile phone operating system upgrades, email management, internet banking, monitoring their data consumption, online identity protection etc). For some citizens, the inability to do basic digital tasks is rapidly curtailing opportunities to participate in day-to-day life and increasing their marginalisation.

The Tasmanian Government's Digital Ready for Daily Life<sup>12</sup> is a state-wide digital inclusion program that aims to raise awareness and understanding of locally based digital support. The program also promotes the face-to-face digital assistance and basic training offered by local services such as libraries and community centres, but for those at the very beginning of their 'digital journey' it can be overwhelming to know where to start - it is very challenging to reach individuals who are not already digitally engaged.

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<sup>12</sup> [www.digitalready.tas.gov.au/dailylife](http://www.digitalready.tas.gov.au/dailylife)



# Public Information

## 15. Available information on connectivity options

***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?***

Please see response to Question 14.

## 16. Other matters for the Committee to consider

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

### **Digital inclusion**

Effective social participation now requires high quality access to the internet for home and business, economic capacity to pay for that connection and any devices required, and the ability to confidently use digital technologies to undertake a range of activities. Many disadvantaged citizens are more likely to continue to use older model mobile phones, more likely to rely on pre-paid mobile access (and have limited or no financial capacity to absorb additional fees or “top up” their access when their monthly allowance runs out) and are highly unlikely to have home internet access.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that digital capability is increasingly required to undertake simple social activities, such as visiting a café, shop or supermarket. ACT Health has developed a ‘check in’ app to manage community transmission tracking and alerts, which is available to any jurisdiction under license and free of charge. The app has been adopted by the Tasmania, Queensland and the Northern Territory governments, with appropriate state branding applied. Unfortunately, the app is only compatible with iOS 11.0+ and Android V5.0+, so cannot be downloaded and used on earlier model mobile phones. ACT Health has confirmed this is not possible to modify the app to function on earlier operating systems and thereby expand the potential user base.

Despite the work of the eSafety Commissioner in raising community digital capability, the pandemic has exacerbated a range of online threats and challenges. Community digital capability building must also be extended to broadening understanding of how to identify trusted sources for online information, and empowering individuals to protect their online identity. For example, in the context of education some parents are very concerned about the potential for cyber bullying and the lack of moderation on social media platforms. However, due to these concerns, some parents will not allow the Tasmanian Department of Education to loan them a device and/or internet dongle for their child to learn at home. This seriously compromises the child’s learning outcomes and their ability to maintain connection with their classmates.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant economic and social impacts on communities and economies across the world, particularly in regional areas such as Tasmania.

The Tasmanian Premier’s Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC) was tasked with providing advice on strategies and initiatives that could support both the state’s short to medium, and longer-term, recovery from the disruptions caused by the pandemic. To do this, the PESRAC undertook extensive, state-wide, consultation, engaging with some 3500 Tasmanians. Their analysis identified areas of priority themes that were common across people, place and sectors.



As noted above, a clear recommendation was to improve digital inclusion. In July 2020, the Council released its Interim Report<sup>13</sup>, which noted that ‘COVID-19 has amplified the need to have digital access recognised as an essential service for all Tasmanians.’ The Report included the following relevant recommendations:

Recommendation 54 - The State Government, with the support of the Australian Government, should address digital inclusion and equity across Tasmanian communities, including by:

- addressing critical regional mobile and internet black spots; and
- making available at little or no cost, devices and other resources needed to enable disadvantaged Tasmanians to engage in education, employment and to seek the assistance they may require from support services, regardless of location.

Recommendation 55: The State Government should expand the roll out of digital literacy initiatives in communities around Tasmania utilising existing networks such as Libraries Tasmania and Service Tasmania.

This Interim Report was followed by the PESRAC Final Report<sup>5</sup> on 16 March 2021 which included a range of additional, and more specific recommendations, including:

Recommendation 34: The State Government should:

- as a priority, improve digital inclusion across Tasmanian communities by:
  - setting clear whole-of-government Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for closing the digital divide within the next 2-5 years in each of the three key dimensions of digital inclusion: access, affordability, and digital ability; and
  - to achieve those KPIs, align actions and provide material funding to drive outcomes under Our Digital Future<sup>14</sup>.
- engage with local communities to address digital inclusion at a local level; and
- leverage its extensive digital footprint through expanding access to its existing facilities which provide digital capability to our communities. These include:
  - schools;
  - libraries;
  - online access centres; and
  - Service Tasmania outlets.

The Government has committed to implementing all recommendations in the reports delivered by the Council.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.pesrac.tas.gov.au/reports>

<sup>14</sup> <https://digital.tas.gov.au/>



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