



Submission to the 2021 Telecommunications Review

On behalf of Edward River Council and its community, thank you for allowing us to participate in the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review.

Introduction

Centred around the rural town of Deniliquin and the Edward River in the southern Riverina in New South Wales, Edward River Council, home of the Deni Ute Muster, is home to over 9,000 residents. About an hour's drive north of the Victorian Border, and over eight hours drive from Sydney, the Edward River is a major anabranch of the Murray River and enjoys significant tourism and visitation centred around its magnificent weather and beautiful natural assets. Deniliquin is less than 300km north of Melbourne, but it seems like our residents and visitors are in a third-world country when it comes to telecommunications infrastructure.

The town of Deniliquin has only adequate mobile and broadband service and, as soon a traveller leaves the urban limits, mobile coverage is inadequate and unreliable, and broadband is expensive and limited.

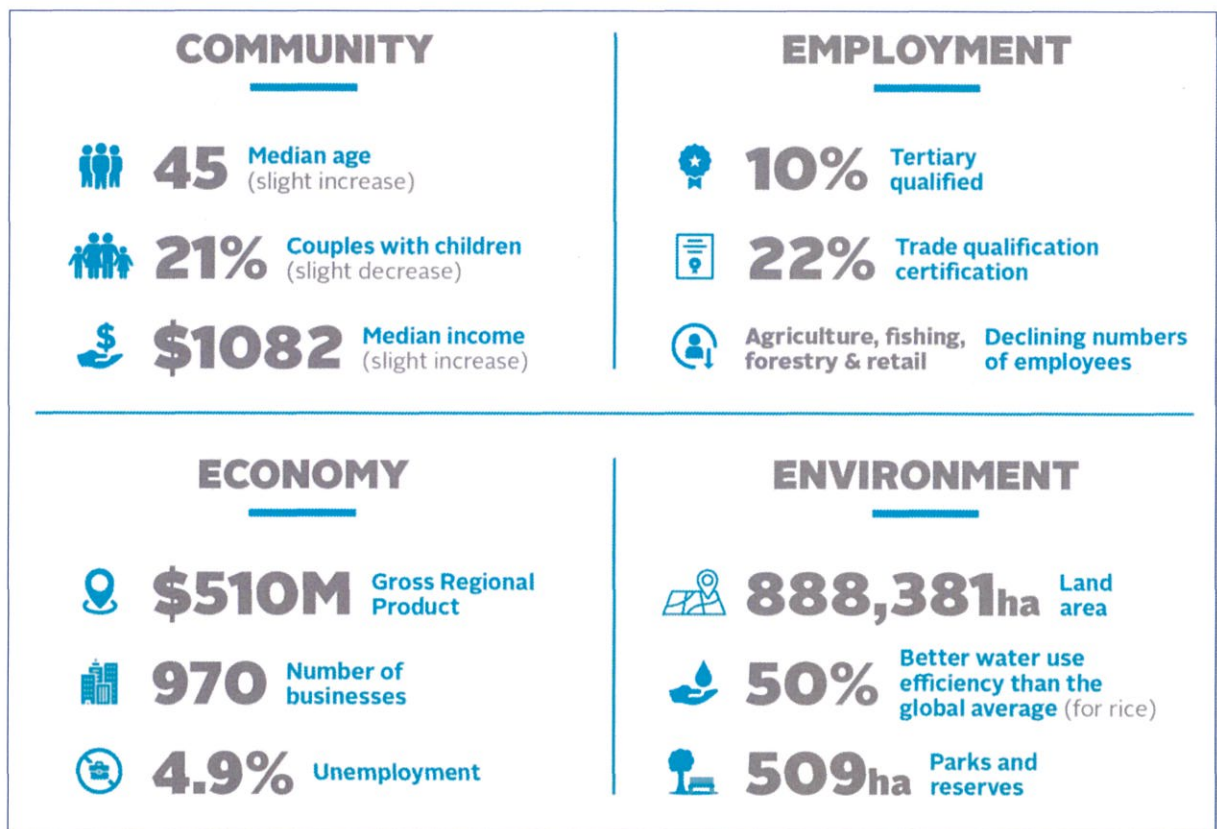


Figure 1: Edward River Council Snapshot

Agriculture and industry

The Edward River region's agriculture sector produces more than \$250 million worth of regional exports annually and is a major centre for rice, cotton, sheep and cattle, and other cropping commodities.

Due to the growing role of technology in the agriculture sector and its impact on farming operations, the ability to connect to mobile networks and reliable broadband is essential. Reliable telecommunications infrastructure and mobile services will improve efficiency and effectiveness of farming operations, ensuring our agriculture sector remains well-positioned to continue contributing to the NSW economy.

To support the continued growth of agriculture, it is critical that mobile coverage and broadband across the Edward River local government area is improved.

Without investment in this critical infrastructure, it is likely that the NSW agriculture sector could become inefficient and uncompetitive against other states and countries which enjoy access to improved mobile networks.

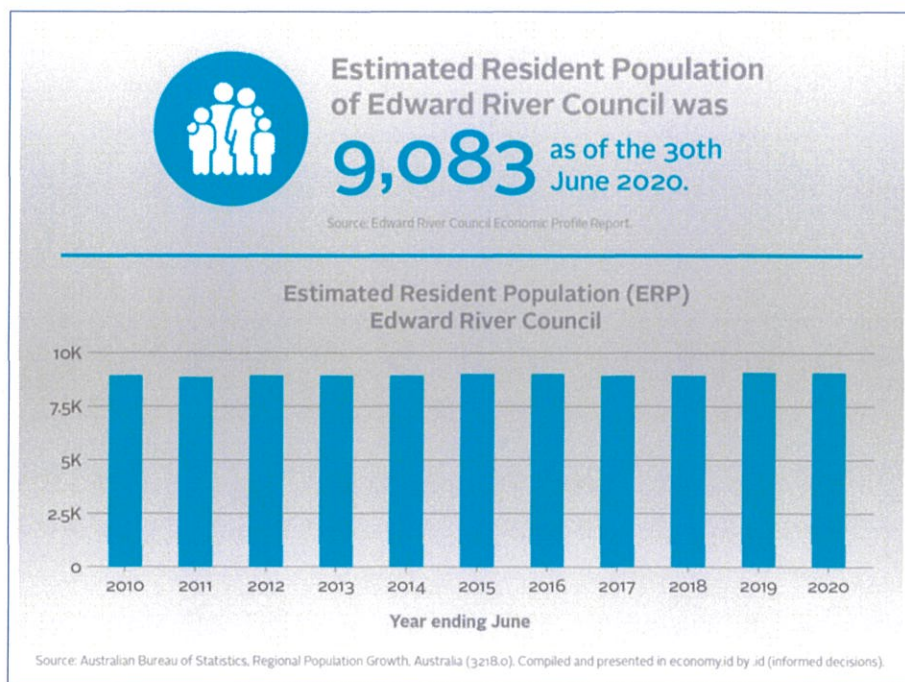


Figure 2: Edward River Council Snapshot

Improved telecommunications infrastructure will allow mobile blackspots to be addressed, enhancing efficiency, and increasing the competitiveness of the NSW agriculture sector. It will also improve business communication and the safety of our residents.

Community Feedback

Council has recently undertaken a major community consultation effort to feed into the next Community Strategic Plan, following the Council election in December 2021. Telecommunications was a major theme of frustration for the community as represented in the figure below.

Of the community members surveyed over a six-week period, 46% expressed that telecommunications infrastructure was among the top three areas for Council advocacy over the next 10 years: alongside healthcare, support for agribusiness, and education. Many community members expressed concern about internet access, reliability and speeds in the region and see that the Council should be strongly advocating for improvement on behalf of the community. Telecommunications is a strong influencer in improving these other areas of advocacy, so in many respects, our community is telling us that telecommunications are its highest priority for improvement. Amongst other benefits, this would enable more people to be able to work from home across the region and encourage people to remain living in the area.

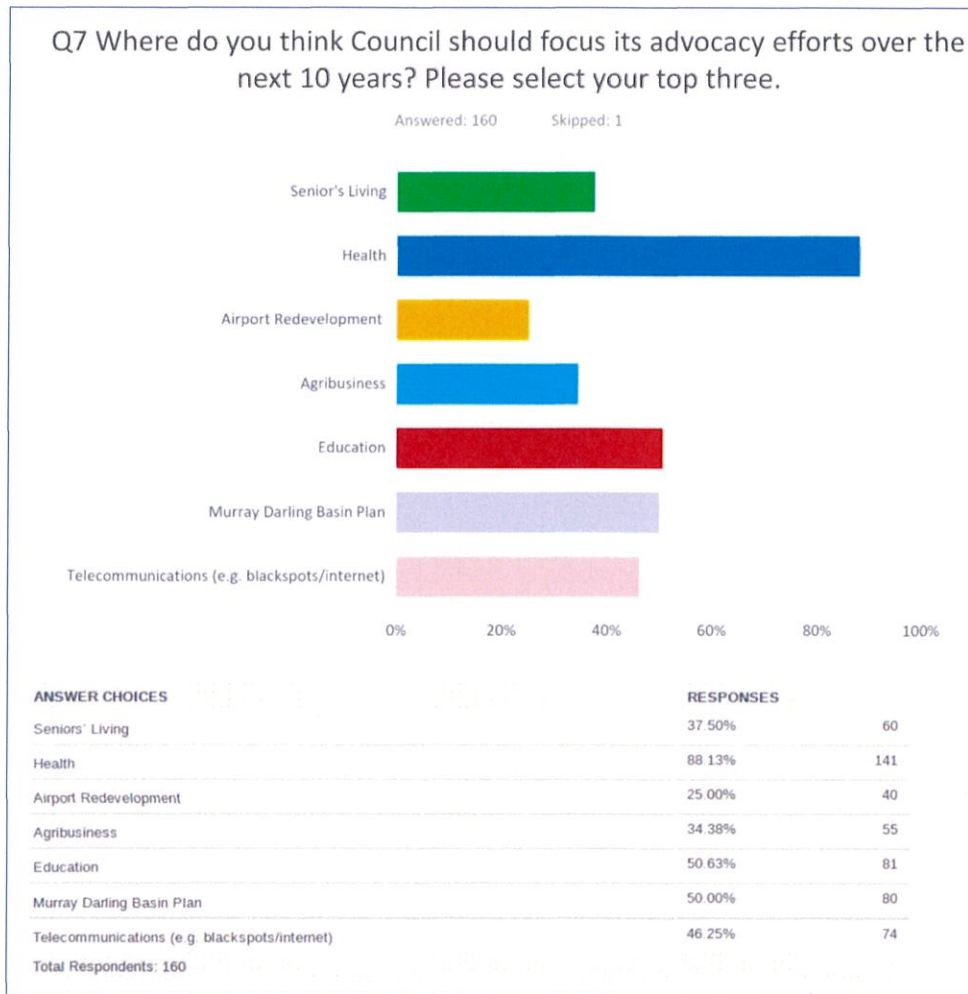


Figure 3: Advocacy priorities identified in community consultation

This has been a source of frustration for some time as Edward River Council’s current advocacy strategy identified three years ago that advocating for further investment from state and federal governments to address mobile blackspots across regional NSW is one of the five priorities in the plan. The feedback from the community indicates that this continues to be a concern and needs further action. There was frustration amongst some community members because there seems to have been no improvement despite lobbying and frequent communication regarding concerns with governments.

The current “Telstra coverage map” indicates quite patchy 4G coverage, Deniliquin-only 5G coverage and marginally better 3G coverage across our region. The reality on the ground is remarkably different. The average mobile consumer cannot rely on maintaining a phone call via hands free in a vehicle if they were to leave the town limits. A resident and business owner of Deniliquin provided the following direction comments for example, *“Even within the urban area of Deniliquin telecommunications is often poor. On most occasions I am lucky to have one bar identifying connectivity, when (my clients are needing to make phone calls), depending on who their provider is, they frequently have to walk out onto the road to have any reception, frequently none at all.”*



Figure 4: 5G Telstra Coverage Map - Deniliquin and Surrounds

Source: (Telstra.com.au, 2021)



Figure 5: 4G Telstra Coverage Map - Deniliquin and Surrounds

Source: (Telstra.com.au, 2021)

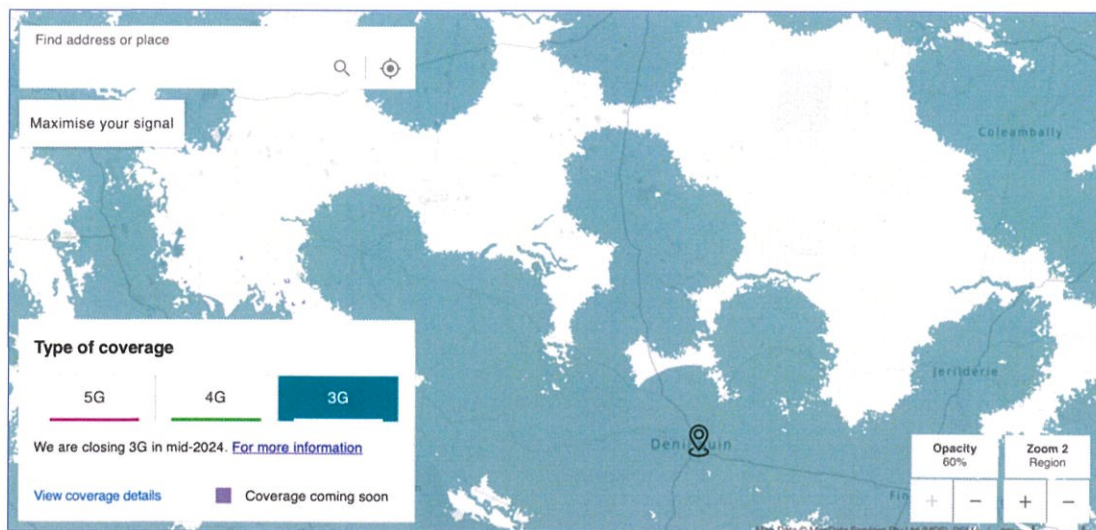


Figure 6: 3G Telstra Coverage Map - Deniliquin and Surrounds

Source: (Telstra.com.au, 2021)

Several farmers have provided examples of the limitations of mobile coverage, one being: *“Although mobile phone coverage has improved in areas it’s pathetic in most areas of the council areas. It seems like a second-rate system and the mobile towers put up throughout our area give very limited coverage.*

“We have all had to buy mobile boosters for our vehicles and machinery at around \$1300 each vehicle, costing my family tens of thousands of dollars which we shouldn’t have to buy as we should be getting comparable coverage to city people. I do not understand at all what the NBN offers us except pointing us to satellite service which I am informed is variable at best.”

Telstra’s advice to our concerns for mobile communications is to purchase mobile phone boosters. This response is unhelpful and inadequate.

The Regional Telecommunications 2021 issues paper states: *“To support its 5G network rollout, Telstra has announced that it will decommission its 3G network in 2024. Telstra has indicated that it will expand its 4G network to a similar footprint as the current 3G network, but specific detail around the timeframe and extent of this transition are not yet widely available.”*

Edward River has serious concerns about this intention by Telstra. Many people in our regional areas will be significantly impacted if the 3G network was to be decommissioned before the 4G network was expanded to a greater footprint than was afforded with the 3G coverage.

Further comments from community members during Council’s consultation efforts are shown below:

- Community comments**
- *“Very poor internet at North Deniliquin. People have very little service and working from home is near impossible.” – online survey*
 - *“Council needs to improve GIS data.” – online survey*
 - *“Upgrade the telecommunications access. We don’t seem to have good public access to the Internet.” – Outdoor Council Staff meeting attendee*
 - *“Telecommunications internet advocacy should be a Council priority.” - online survey respondent*
 - *“I think the internet infrastructure here needs improvement. I think this could keep more people here while still being able to work – we don’t always have the employment here but if they could work from home with decent internet all the way out, not just in Deni but all the way out, that’s something we lack, particularly giving people the opportunity to work from around here.” – Council staff meeting*
 - *“We want better communication out here we have dreadful phone service – we had a petition, and nothing happened.” – Pretty Pine community meeting attendee*
 - *“They’re real limitations for us. So, there’s so much more we could do on farm with technology if we had connectivity.” – community meeting participant*

Figure 7: Community Comments on Telecommunications

Health and Education

As outlined prior, telecommunications are either an enabler or an impediment to improvement in many other areas of concern for the Edward River. The figure below shows draft community goals for the next 10 years for the Edward River Community:

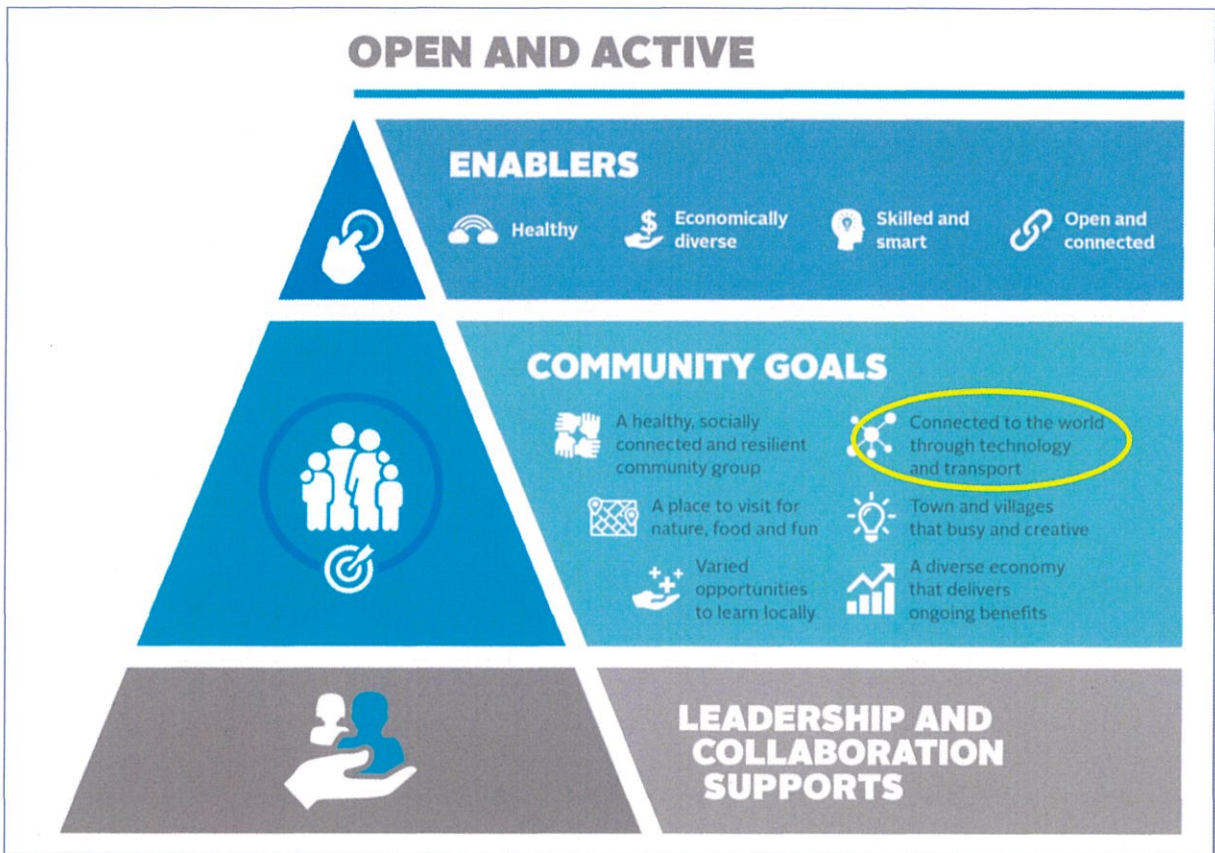


Figure 8: Draft Edward River enablers to support community goals

Healthcare and education specifically are enablers for community growth and prosperity yet have been sources for increasing concern within our community for the last decade.

Recently, there has been well-reported debate within our community following the Inquiry into Health Outcomes and Access to Health and Hospital Services in Rural, Regional, and Remote New South Wales. The inadequacy of health services for our community has been acknowledged by the NSW Health Minister, Hon. Brad Hazzard, MP, by providing funding for a Deniliquin region Clinical Services Plan to determine the improvements to be made. If telecommunications services remain comparably poorer than services within our major towns and cities, it will limit access to technology, such as telehealth.

Emergency services is also inhibited by limitations in telecommunications services. Radio is relied upon heavily by emergency services workers when in remote areas, however the ability to provide an emergency call while on a rural road is a die-roll and could mean the life-or-death of rural constituents in the event of a road or farm accident.

Similar with Education. The Edward River Snapshot shows that a mere 32% of our workforce is tertiary or trade qualified. Without access to contemporary telecommunications services, this will continue to lead to disadvantage within our community.

Taking Advantage of Major Projects to fill the gaps

There are several major projects underway in and near our region that could benefit the community with a little lateral thinking. The Inland Rail project has specifically been mentioned in the Discussion Paper as benefiting from improving mobile services along its route, thereby benefiting not only the project, but the communities nearby.

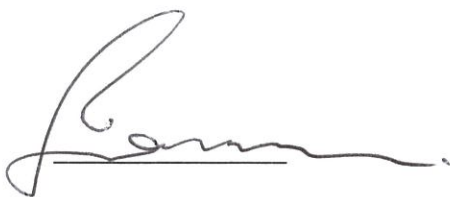
A strategy of investing in enabling telecommunications services alongside major infrastructure projects should be adopted by governments as a matter of course. Why shouldn't the investment in

the [Energy Connect](#) project or new [wind farm](#) and [solar](#) projects, as examples, provide additional benefits such as improved telecommunications services for the communities that are hosting these projects? Often there is need of investment into roads, drainage, and civil infrastructure to cater for heavy construction equipment for the project, and these investments sometimes only marginally provide a benefit to local communities. Moreover, communities often see that the benefits of these projects are for the city folk, rather than the surrounding communities that are hosting them. The governments of Australia should provide additional investment in telecommunications *alongside major projects* to support the investment and provide a direct benefit to the local host communities.

Recommendations

Edward River Council recommends that, the 2021 Telecommunications Review committee:

1. Recognises that contemporary telecommunications services are critical to the safety, growth and prosperity of rural and remote communities and should be reflected in federal and state government policies
2. Recommend amending government policies to provide immediate intervention in the telecommunications market to fill gaps in coverage of both mobile and broadband services in rural areas
3. Recommend that the federal government increases its investment into new technologies, such as satellite broadband, and current technologies such as 4G, to fill critical gaps in communications in rural areas
4. Recommend that the state and federal governments provide a fund for enabling telecommunications infrastructure to support large-scale projects and provide immediate benefits to local communities.



Cr Norm Brennan
Mayor



Mr Philip Stone
General Manager