

**Regional Telecommunications Review – Dubbo Regional Council Comments to DRNSW**

**September 2021**

How has the use of digital and telecommunications services changed in regional NSW since 2018, in particular during the COVID pandemic?

- Increased digital connectivity to more rural areas of the Dubbo Region (small villages), due to Mobile Blackspot Program rollout.
- More reliance on digital and mobile communication and less on fixed landline, due to the capability and uptake of remote working, adapting to Covid restrictions including Covid-safe app, QR check-in requirements and other requirements.
- Greater dependency on digital technology as more services shift to digital platforms:
  - Electronic funds transfers (rather than in-bank manual transactions)
  - Cashless sales for goods and services, for instance both in-store and online shopping, rather than the use of cash.
- Increase in online shopping and online food/beverage purchase and delivery, all enhanced with the reliability, speed and availability of digital technology.
- Increase in use of telehealth services, which to a degree has been required for western NSW for some time due to remoteness of communities and getting medical professionals/specialists to physically get to those communities, however Covid restrictions have increased the importance of telehealth technology.
- Emergence, enhancement and increasing popularity of online education services:
  - Primary and secondary schooling across incorporating online learning (such as zoom), which has been hastened by Covid), use of computers and smart technology within classrooms, the increase in STEM offerings based around new technologies,
  - Distance learning for tertiary education, with many courses completely remote learning and with flexible timeframes.
- Tourism sector – online booking services for accommodation (pre-book as accommodation platforms have gained popularity, tourism attractions online ticket sales, sign in/registration at facilities etc.
- Increasing availability and take up of digital technology within the agriculture sector to improve on-farm efficiencies.
- Improved mapping services, especially of regional/remote areas.



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- Covid safe QR code check in requirements everywhere – requires mobile/smart phone and mobile internet access.
  - Communities are increasingly aligning to the smart cities movement and using technology to make communities more liveable with better amenity (replacement of outdated manual services).
    - Council too is aiming to become a smart Council to better serve its community.
  - Generally, people want to make better informed decisions and digital technology helps with decision making – having resources to hand to in a single mobile device.

### How do service reliability issues impact on regional NSW communities and businesses?

#### What priority actions should be taken to increase network reliability in regional areas?

- There have been numerous instances in the Dubbo Region where Telstra’s communications system has failed which has impacted many sectors, from the retail sector with EFTPOS systems crashing, to mobile phone connections being affected and loss of data etc.
- Emergency services – coverage and reliability are essential for key emergency services when required to respond to disasters in the Dubbo Region and across western NSW. Dubbo Airport is a hub for emergency services for the western region so communication coverage and reliability are key requirements.
- Priorities should be ensuring continued reliability and coverage:
  - Reliability – state and federal governments need to continue to work with mobile and digital service providers to ensure the ongoing improvement of mobile technology across the Dubbo Region and regional NSW to ensure reliability of everyday services that use digital and mobile technology.
  - Coverage – Assurance is required in regards to timing and coverage in transitioning/decommissioning older networks to newer networks (3G to 4G) to ensure there serviceability of regional communities.
  - Coverage – state and federal governments to work with mobile and digital service providers to offset the high costs of improving and expanding mobile coverage, which due to vast distances from existing mobile infrastructure is becoming a lesser priority for telcos to do this for regional, rural and remote communities due to the cost vs benefits. A possible mechanism for this is through the continuation of the Mobile Blackspot Program.

### What key investments are needed to meet regional digital connectivity needs in the future?

#### What are the constraints to digital connectivity in our region?

- Continuation of the Mobile black Spots program, or other, to ensure coverage.
- Further investment in telehealth.
- Investment into equipping primary and secondary schools to provide online learning/remote learning

- Fibre to the premise / high speed and reliable internet to business and residential, both hardwired and mobile infrastructure.
- More investment in satellites that provide mobile and digital connectivity for regional, rural and remote communities but at a cheaper price.
- Investment in data centres (server hosting and data processing facilities) in regional cities to remove reliance on metro based data centres. Data hubs help improve internet speed (reduce the lag time in digital data transfers), provide enhanced local data security solutions, amongst other benefits such as data processing and analytics.
- Affordability – there needs to be continued consideration and funding to help ensure rural, regional and remote communities can afford the higher costs associated with access to digital and mobile telecommunications. There is no doubt that it costs more to access technology in regional areas compared to metro areas so there needs to be investment in making telecommunications more affordable in these communities/areas.

How can investment in telecommunications infrastructure be used to support government programs and policies designed to encourage economic development in regional NSW?

Investment in telecommunication infrastructure will support:

- The attraction of skilled workers to regional centres/communities (migrants and those wanting to relocate away from metro centres for financial and lifestyle benefits but have not been convinced that essential services and infrastructure currently exists in regional areas).
- The attraction of new businesses and industries to regional centres, knowing there is high speed and reliable mobile and digital connectivity.
- The attraction of families to regional areas to reinvigorate smaller/decreasing communities.
- Increase economic growth and productivity of Australia (especially through exports) with regional industries contributing approx. one-third of GDP and two-thirds of export earnings.
- Ultimately investment in telecommunications infrastructure provides assurance to families, workers and businesses wanting to move to regional NSW/Australia, that the technology is available.

To what extent will new and emerging technologies change telecommunication service delivery in the Dubbo Region over the next 5-10 years? Key barriers to new and emerging technologies.

- Smart cities – Internet of Things (sensors, tags, automation of machinery etc).

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- Real-time access to information and data to improve decision making, maximising resources, enhancing productivity, for instance in the agricultural sector or in the mining sector.
  - 5G, higher dependency on future technologies and the technology that they enable.
  - Emerging technologies may significantly change the role of CBDs, especially retail and service shop fronts with new ways and more widespread of online shopping/transactions, especially operating within Covid restrictions but post Covid where there may be little benefit to going back to old ways of service delivery (and the realised cost savings).
  - Key barriers:
    - Cost. The price to consumers and the price to business is outrageous in comparison even to some of our Regional comparative cities.
    - regulatory settings – no clear direction from government (competing/conflicting priorities across all levels of government);
    - Affordability and coverage of emerging technologies for communities further away from metro centres;
    - Public buy-in to new/emerging technology (5G scepticism, loss of jobs from automation, loss of community or social togetherness etc).

Is the public information currently available about telecommunications services sufficient to allow regional customers to make informed decisions? Any improvements required?

- There needs to be an ongoing commitment to transparency and open data to allow customers to make informed decisions about telecommunication services. Maybe a narrowing or streamlining of information into 'one-stop shops / websites' that allow customers to review and compare the various service providers.
- Clearer and simpler terminology of language and products required (standardisation). For instance, broadband or mobile packages, there are too many differing packages/products, speed categories/limits etc that it is confusing for customers to make informed decisions.
- Hold service providers to account – broadband speed is a big one – what they promote but then what is not achievable.

What steps should be taken to improve accessibility and affordability of telecommunication services to Indigenous communities in the Dubbo Region/neighbouring LGAs?

- Assist service providers with the continued roll out and/or update of aging technology to ensure telecommunications continue to be available in regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities (as service providers may not see value in rolling out infrastructure to these communities and have a focus on new technology, such roll out of 5G in metro and larger regional centres rather than focussing on the transition of 3G to 4G across remote communities).
- Greater connectivity at a lower price will enable indigenous business greater opportunity and greater connectivity between communities across not only the Dubbo LGA, but the area's to the West of Dubbo that have significant indigenous communities that are interconnected. This would grow social service and economic opportunity.
- Opportunities for free services for regional communities, free wifi in community gathering places, village/town centres etc.
- More affordable devices and connectivity of devices. There are areas of the Dubbo community that need more affordable connectivity devices to enable the household budget to stretch to encompass all the needs of the household.