



Adelaide Hills Council response to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review

The Adelaide Hills Council wishes to make the following submission to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review.

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?

The Adelaide Hills Council region contains areas that have weak or limited access to Mobile phone and Digital access. This is often due to a combination of factors including topography limiting some forms of communication service provision, distance between communities and individual homes and businesses making the cost of providing telecommunication infrastructure exorbitant, and planning regulations that can hinder the installation of infrastructure.

Technology is requiring people to have access to increasingly higher speed broadband which is often not available to regional communities. This impacts resident's quality of life and businesses future viability.

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

The business case to install digital and mobile phone coverage in some of these communities will rarely add up. Therefore there needs to be subsidised provision of these services in regional communities. Adelaide Hills is a Peri-Urban community with a number of areas that due to topography make it difficult to provide high speed internet access and mobile phone coverage. With the impact of Climate Change making extreme weather events like fire and floods more common people living in these communications poor areas need to have access to quality communication services for safety.

The Adelaide Hills council region has many home based businesses with a large proportion which appears to be increasing involved in the professional services industry. All home base businesses but particularly those in the professional services industry require high speed internet. The demand for this will continue to increase in regional and Peri-Urban areas as technology driven economic and social changes enabling workplace flexibility.

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

The shifting of responsibility and cost onto Local Government for the provision of Communications infrastructure remains problematic. Programs like the co-investment fund that require local communities to contribute to the cost of installing high quality communications infrastructure that is available in urban areas are inequitable. It is suggested that State and Australian Government collaborate more proactively to identify and address shortcomings in communications coverage in regional and rural areas.

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

Communication outages continue to impact residents and businesses in the Adelaide Hills. Overall it is not a regular issue but in some locations outages and slow download times reduce the ability of businesses to operate and present a health and safety hazard for some residents in case of emergency. The Black Summer 2019 Bushfires highlighted some of these issues with mobile coverage out at risk with power outages putting mobile towers on 3 hour energy power. NBN's emergency program providing vans to provide localised communications coverage is an important stop gap.

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

Having services like NBNs Local Emergency management support remain critical in times of emergency. It is also useful to have a range of options that can quickly be switched between (satellite and fibre) to better ensure continuity of service in times of emergency.

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?

There has been a significant increase in the number of people working from home across the Adelaide Hills during Covid-19. This is a trend that we expect will continue to some degree as we already had high numbers of residents working from home. This makes the division between residential property and business/commercial property increasingly blurred. Government Programs that support businesses to engage with digital infrastructure will need to recognise this increasing merging of residential and commercial activity.

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

There needs to be strong alignment between State planning systems and the provision of telecommunications infrastructure. In South Australia recent planning reforms promote integrated planning as a key guiding strategic policy and this has translated to improved visibility for telecommunication facilities within the statutory development code. However, this is largely contingent on an amenable zone setting applying to a particular site, which is not often available - particularly in remote/scenic locations.

This creates a tension in the application process whereby a proposal particularly for large scale infrastructure is usually met with a degree of community opposition. There may be opportunity for State planning authorities to collaborate with telecommunication providers to identify key locations for future infrastructure demand and make provision for this through an appropriate infrastructure zoning regime.

Regional Development Australia (RDA) organisations are important players in this space and they need to be able to apply for funding to investigate telecommunication service provision weaknesses as well as host programs that address these gaps. Local Government is often looked to provide an auspice role in the implementation of infrastructure solutions and this is a function that would sit better with an RDA.

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

Regular and formal communication mechanisms between the three levels of Government, RDAs, and telecommunications providers would facilitate provision of timely information and between communities and government. This could take the form of a local Commination's network managed

by the RDA with the remit of providing two way communication and facilitating community lead approaches to infrastructure and service provision solutions.

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?

The role of NBN regional engagement staff is critical in supporting communities to identify and choose connectivity options that work for them. These roles should be broadened to cover all areas of telecommunications service rather than just digital.

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?

Regional Customers need to have information on how their communications services are performing including updates on download speed and outages in communications. The information that is provided needs to be more timely and accurate for local conditions. The performance of communication service provider companies also would enable customers to make more informed decisions.