To whom it may concern,

I am a layperson, who lives just 10 km outside our regional centre (Stawell) in the Wimmera region with my aged parents. We are too far from the exchange to get landline broadband, and rely on mobile internet using an external aerial for reception. We are not NBN eligible my parents are pensioners and do not have the wherewithal nor technically savvy to invest in the satellite option. Telecommunication services are vastly inferior to that available in town and which is much less than Melbourne.

My main issues are that the telcos use foreign call centres who have no clue about regional Australia and the issues encountered the assumption we have the same problems as metropolitan areas. When I expressed concerns about my parents and myself living in a bushfire prone area and reporting a problem with lack of reception they couldn't understand our anxiety. Call centres need to be based here or rural specialists trained.

Trying to resolve issues with service is frustrating, The Telco storefronts are sales divisions mainly for apparatus and mobile phones, and when you need to speak face to face with someone to review your service such as billing or trying to move to a better and less obsolete service plan they don't do this on site, there is only the phone call option once more a foreign call centre. That goes into full sales mode trying to sell you a more expensive and over complicated or services not wanted. The shopfronts also cannot deal with service and maintenance issues.

We are supposed to have good indoor service according to Telstra and Optus, were are only 11km from the service towers at Stawell, however signal strength is already reduced to 2 bars on iphone vs 4 in town 10km away. Service flips between 4G and 3G Broadband highly variable 2 Mbs to 15 Mbs depending on time of day also depending where we are on the home block. Indoors virtually no signal, sufficient maybe to get a call sometimes but it cuts out once answered. My parents have to go outside to make and receive calls. Telstra's solution, an indoor repeater at personal cost is very expensive for pensioners

Our landline service quality  is poor, my father is hard of hearing and the line quality is poor, to the extent he cannot use the landline even I have difficulty hearing callers on the phone as the volume is so low. I don't know how many different phones they have gone through to address the problem at great cost to themselves.

I will address other  as responses to the questions you proposed in the issues paper.

1. **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**?

   Much better cabling, and mobile tower infrastructure of course full fibre to the premises, to ensure the optimum services such as bandwidth and providers so equivalent services to that in the city and major regional centres can be accessed. More mobile towers in the regions is an issue not only to ensure redundancy in emergencies, we are in a major fire risk zone, but

flood risk is high as well.

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

Much more capacity in the networks to handle tourism requirements, my area is a favoured tourist destination where the population in the area swells two fold or frequently more. This causes strains on mobile service access and with severe degradation on mobile access and data services. We are only 11km or so from the nearest tower and during holiday season it becomes apparent the network is under stress. This is particularly worrying when bush fire season coincides with tourist season in summer.

Fault reporting is especially problematic as you deal with a call centre overseas who have absolutely no idea that you might be a rural customer and little insight as to what that means. Often they have very little technical expertise. You go through their standardised problem check menu a few derisory remote tests and then, "We don't see a fault on your line or can't detect a service fault with the signal" You cannot speak directly to someone in the technical area, the only time I managed to speak was when I referred my problem to my local MP and the ombudsman. Then I was able to properly describe the symptomology of the issue I was reporting to someone who understood what I was talking about.

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

To be frank we are the poor cousin in service provision and infrastructure, the view here there is very little done by the government to address our concerns. Poor service provision even when only 10km or so outside our regional centre needs to be taken seriously. Stronger mandates for quality service provision is required, benchmarked to the best available in the large metropolitan centres, anything less than 90% equivalence should not be tolerated. The telcos do not do in the field checks of their services such as signal strength etc, they rely too heavily on remote sensing.

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

Service reliability is a major issue, each summer we are worried about reliability, in the Grampians and nearby towns such as Pomonal people are worried whether alerts etc will be received. In many, including my parents this is a great cause of anxiety each bushfire season. This is not just emergency SMS messages but access to the internet for the Vicemergency app which can be set for regional alerts.

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

A simple solution is greater mobile tower density in the regions. Proper rollout of fibre to the premises must be undertaken since reliability and service quality rapidly deteriorates by distance when relying on traditional cabling. Outside the major centres 5G service will never happen due to the limited range of the carrier signal unless tower density is addressed. I don not believe "pop up" mobile towers nor power supply hardening are sufficient. The problem is infrastructure redundancy and capacity in the event of an emergency.

6. **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 was much greater demand because of home learning, increased video streaming available bandwidth was degraded and connection contention issues experienced. It seems there was insufficient capacity in the systems/infrastructure to handle the extra demand caused by working from home and remote learning. Many had to buy mini modems and the like. The service issues highlighted very strongly that there was little capacity to even handle future growth in a fast changing telecoms environment.

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

Government subsidies and grants, those on farms and in remote areas should not be paying infrastructure and delivery costs just because the house may be set back from the main road, or there is some distance from the main line. The provision of modems and modem replacement as part of a telecoms contract should be integral. We have issue with what the "predicted" indoor signal strength "Good" vs almost non existent in reality. The solution from Telstra is to buy an indoor repeater station connected to an external aerial which is over $2,000 investment, my parents are pensioners and cannot afford this solution.

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

This is outside my competence to comment other than assessment of any infrastructure and development programs must take telecommunication services into account with the aim of improving and expanding existing services at every opportunity. It is not good enough for remote and regional communities to be constantly asking for additional services when in the city, these appear to be laid on as a matter of course as sweeteners to retain customers in a

far less captive market.

9. **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?**

Innovation and new models should always be first in the regions, our needs are more direct and city infrastructure delivers so much more as standard. These new technologies initially are marginal to the experience of city dwellers but can make a vast difference to the life and experience of regional consumers. Additionally, it will have the effect of levelling up the regions to the cities with far greater economic outcomes for our businesses who can compete on a level playing field when it comes to ecommerce. The main barrier appears to be the large areas involved and lack of will to invest in the regions as they are viewed as too hard or expensive to deliver services and seen as unprofitable. In  my view this is wrong as there is so much unmet demand for our businesses who find it difficult to connect with sophisticated markets and high quality telecommunications will also make the distance barrier non-existent or invisible to their customers.

10. **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?**

I don't  have competence to answer this

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

Subsidies and direct grants with strict performance and  delivery targets

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

Regional communities need to be asked for direct representation or input whenever telecommunication issues arise. In most instances these communities have to come with a

begging bowl to government or telco providers. It seems solutions are imposed on our communities that are convenient and low cost to the providers.

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

Democratic oversight with full involvement of the communities of concern. Town hall meetings etc to ask what our expectations are.

14. **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?**

Better information from all levels of government and easier access for complaints. Public forums that enable customer rating of services on government portals.

15. **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?**

Independent, government sponsored in-field testing of the telco service claims, regular assessment and responding to consumer reports. Star ratings for each provider, as to the accuracy of their claims, granular enough at the local level. Constantly updated on an easily accessible free website. An indication if service improves or deteriorates since last reporting cycle.

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

Customer service, there is no face to face interaction anymore call centres do not understand regional needs. The shopfronts are to drive sales and have nothing to do with

service delivery. Trying to get to talk someone in the technical to talk about service quality issues is very hard.