Introduction

Greater Hume Council is a rural Council located mid-way between the regional cities of Albury-Wodonga and Wagga Wagga. The ERP for Greater Hume as at 30 June 2020 was 10,841 residents (ABS cat 3218.0)

The Council area consists of 5 towns and 6 villages and surrounding rural areas that have varying mobile phone service and a mix of NBN technologies as listed below:

Burrumbuttock – Satellite (soon to be fixed wireless)

Brocklesby - Satellite

Culcairn – Fibre to the node

Gerogery/Gerogery West – Mix of fixed wireless and Satellite

Henty – Fibre to the node

Holbrook – Fibre to the node

Jindera (fastest growing town in the Shire) – Fixed wireless

Morven - Satellite

Walbundrie - Satellite

Walla Walla – Fixed wireless

Woomargama – Satellite

Rural areas – Predominately Satellite

Greater Hume Shire Council like many other rural and regional areas is experiencing unprecedented population growth and this combined with more people requiring access to mobile and NBN services for work and school it is exposing the shortcoming of our telecommunications network.

QUESTIONS

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?**

     Rural communities need access to mobile phone capacity, NBN connectivity with adequate speeds, reliability and price. In many instances this is just not available.

     As can be evidenced above large areas of Greater Hume are reliant on Satellite which is a spectacularly inferior service and very expensive in comparison with either fibre or fixed wireless. For example a 300gb Satellite Plan with a 25/5 speed will cost in the vicinity of $200 per month which when compared with fibre a similar cost will provide the consumer with unlimited data and 250/100 speeds. Fixed wireless will provide download speeds of up to 95mbs with unlimited data for around $100 per month.

     Further when working from home most users are utilising VPN networks and along with streaming is metred data which can very quickly exhaust Satellite Plan allowances.

Whilst it is acknowledged that a second Sky Muster satellite has been launched, the satellite service is grossly in adequate for business and since the COVID pandemic has engulfed Australia grossly inadequate for people working from home and home schooling.

Whilst the 2018 Regional Telecommunication Review stated that NBN Co. is now confident that the Sky Muster Satellite Service is working to international best practice benchmarks (page 24) it is extraordinarily inadequate to support business and lifestyle applications.

It is a similar situation for fixed wireless that does not seem to expand with demand as evidenced in our fastest growing town, Jindera which has an annual growth rate of 4% and a town population of more than 1,500 and a district population nearing 2,700. The population estimates have been based on 2016 census figures adjusted for new home builds. Furthermore it is difficult to negotiate for towns like Jindera to be upgraded to fibre to the premises due to the structure of NBN Co where it needs to be a commercially viable for NBN Co.

Council has commenced work on a proposal to upgrade the Jindera Township to fibre to the premises however with a build cost of up to $10M and a contribution from NBN Co in the vicinity of $2M. It is then the responsibility of Council and/or the community to identify and secure funding through Australian and NSW State Government regional connectivity funding programs. This is very discriminatory to rural Australia.

There is a significant divide between the broadband service available in metropolitan cities and rural areas. The Government has made a commitment to **all** of Australia that it will receive broadband coverage and that same coverage should be enjoyed by all regardless of cost.

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

As mentioned above as a result of the pandemic people need to be able to work and undertake schooling from home. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided the greatest opportunity for growth in regional and rural Australia particularly with a growing number of people choosing to work from home. High speed internet services and reliable mobile phone coverage is essential to support the migratory shift in population.

The importance of access to high speed internet is also essential to provide access to tertiary education who have tended to move to on line platforms during the pandemic. It is very likely with the reduction of international students and reduced funding from the Australian Government, tertiary education providers are funding on line delivery a more cost effective option.

With a push to relocate people to regional and rural areas good telecommunications is essential for work, leisure and health (e.g. streaming services unrealistic on NBN satellite, life-saving personal alarms require access to the mobile phone network)

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

Privatisation of Telstra and the commercialisation of NBN Co has resulted in perverse outcomes for rural Australia with mobile phone towers being built where populations can provide a return on investment. This remain an issue today where Greater Hume has key forest haulage transport routes and high risk plantation forestry but small population numbers. Whilst Council has made countless submissions to Mobile Black Spot Expressions of Interest upgrades have been slow and at times inadequate to service the transport routes or the local community.

An area is only a mobile black spot is it is not serviced by any provider meaning that Optus or Vodafone may have a tower which is not useful when the large majority of rural Australians have a Telstra mobile phone due to existing coverage. There needs to be government policy/regulation developed to encourage sharing of infrastructure, both hard and soft.

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

A significant area of the Greater Hume Council area was impacted by the 2019/2020 Black Summer Bushfires. The area impacted by the bushfires has very poor landline services which were impacted by telephone exchange building being damaged by fire. Mobile phone towers also became unserviceable as a result of the bush fires and dense smoke significantly impacted on NBN Satellite services.

This left many people without any form of communications during the most horrendous bush fires. Consideration and needs to be given and funding established to provide alternate short term solutions in these instances to ensure the protection of life of residents, fire fighting volunteers and contractors assisting in the fire fighting effort.

Earlier this year the NBN tower at Jindera was being upgraded which was warmly received by residents and business operators however the upgrade works extended over a period of two or three weeks impacting significantly on business applications and other services such as EFTPOS. This was a planned outage that went far longer than originally advised which is totally unacceptable in the 21st century.

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

As mentioned above the duplication of infrastructure has led to perverse outcomes because the cost of new towers in rural areas. There is a need to encourage infrastructure sharing to increase coverage and reduce costs.

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?**

Clearly NBN Wireless and Satellite has been demonstrated to be inadequate for working from, home schooling attending tertiary institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the poor level of service being experienced through these services its inadequacy should have been foreseeable and it is a travesty that it was not included in business continuity planning. Even prior to the pandemic during peak periods these services barely met demand and this has been exposed by the pandemic. Given the billions of dollars invested it is very disappointing that Australia still has inferior internet and mobile phone services.

With a strong population shift to rural Australia as a result of the pandemic service levels during peak usage periods will continue to deteriorate unless infrastructure is dramatically and expediently improved.

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

The 2018 Review identified that young people did not want to work in places without mobile coverage because they wanted to stay in touch with family and friends (Page 47). This is equally true for people wishing to operate a business in rural areas. They do not and cannot work in work in rural areas without access to a reliable mobile phone service and internet connection.

Whilst there has been a significant population migration (in relative terms) to rural areas as a result of the pandemic unless reliable communications are available there will be a drift back to the capital and larger regional cities.

Reliable mobile services and reliable and cost effective access to the internet needs to be provided.

There is significant infrastructure that could assist in providing connectivity in the regions that is not utilised or underutilised. As example Transgrid forms the backbone of the National Energy Market– extending throughout NSW and the ACT, with connections to

Queensland and Victoria. This electricity transmission network also carries optic fibre cable which could provide an opportunity to access fibre for some communities but is largely unused except for Transgrid purposes. For example Transgrid own an optic fibre cable that runs through the centre of Jindera however the Jindera community has no access to fibre. Surely these underutilised assets can form part of the connectivity solution in rural areas.

Essential Energy is also looking at providing telecommunications services through its Telbu project but is there any coordination of these opportunities to will result in meaningful improvements in communications in rural Australia

Organisations like Transgrid and Essential Energy provide an opportunity to trial different and innovative service delivery models in rural Australia rather than each organisation aiming to maximise profits at the expense of the consumer.

The Australian Government needs to be proactive in seeking telecommunication providers to provide appropriate mobile and internet services to ensure decision making is not based solely on financial benefit. This may require subsidisation of individual solutions for remote communities/families.

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

Greater Hume Council does not believe that it should be a local government responsibility to co-fund mobile phone and NBN infrastructure (other than in kind contributions e.g. tower site). Local government in rural areas has very limited revenue raising capacity, other than rates and charges and it is not generally expected that capital and large regional cities will contribute to telecommunications so why should cash strapped country councils be expected to contribute. This is clearly a funding responsibility of the Australian Government from national taxation revenue.

An increased commitment to telecommunications infrastructure from the Australian Government will directly lead to increased economic development in the regions.

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?**

Council does not have sufficient expertise to identify new models of delivery other than ensuring a speedy roll out of the 5G network. It is possible that 5G will provide a viable alternative to poor fixed wireless and satellite service. In the case of Greater Hume it is a large geographic area with a relatively small population which is still entitled to 21st century services. Rural Australia should not be disadvantaged by their geographic location.

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?**

As stated above it is likely 5G may provide an opportunity to improve connectivity in rural areas but over what length of time. The biggest barriers to the delivery of telecommunications in regional Australia is reliable and cost. Both of these matters need to be addressed as a matter of urgency otherwise there will be a drift from rural Australia back to capital and larger regional cities.

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

The economics are not going to stack up for privatised and commercialised operators therefore the up-front infrastructure cost requires greater subsidisation. There has been unprecedented government spending by both Australian and State Governments encourage economic stimulus development during the pandemic however most of these initiatives have been on shovel ready projects in favour of longer term national building projects. This is an opportunity missed by Australian and State Governments.

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

As stated previously local government has limited capacity to contribute to improved communications with the exception providing sites for towers or other infrastructure, working with the telecommunications industry to identify gaps in service provision and to garner community support for upgrades.

It is important that Development Applications continue to condition Developers to install pit and pipe at the Developer's expense so that this infrastructure can you utilised by NBN when demand necessitates or improvements in technology improve cost effectiveness.

Retrofitting pit and pipe at a later date when demand materialises will significantly increase cost and impact on project viability. The pit and pipe infrastructure needs to be installed at construction stage just like other utilities otherwise the financial burden will transfer to others.

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

Government investment programs need to target areas where there is identified black spots based on needs such as transport routes, vulnerable communities etc. and not projects that provide the greatest financial advantage to telecommunication carriers. Until this fundamental change is made rural and remote Australia will be consigned to second rate mobile phone and internet services.

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?**

It is promoted that there are many retail providers and that consumers should shop around for the best connectivity options however with some of these providers there seems to be variations to services available.

For example all amaysim mobile and data-only plans are powered by the Optus 4G Plus Network. Currently the Optus 4G Plus network is a data-only network and the 3G network is still used to make and receive calls so you'll drop back to the shortly to be phased out 3G signal whenever you make calls. It would appear that some shaping also occurs with these third party services that also may not provide the same call functionality of the Optus network.

An independent 'plain English' comparison website and or other information sources need to be developed so that consumers can best choose their connectivity options whilst also clearly articulating any shortcomings of the options.

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?**

Refer above

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

Generally most telecommunications carriers provide very poor customer service and this is particularly the case NBN Satellite Providers. Often is consumers are experiences service difficulties, faults etc. technical support can only be provided after hours as the consumer needs to be at the place where the service is being provided. Whilst these Telco's encourage using emails and call backs which is pointless if the consumer is not at home for periods of the day. When making support calls after business hours, say 6pm this can result in wait times of up to two hours due to their small scale and presumed lack of technical support staff.

This is very time consuming and inefficient for the consumer as it would appear the profit motives of the Telco's outweigh their customer service obligations. In this regard there is a failure in the wholesale pricing model that this outcome occurs.