

RESPONSE TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW 2021

29 September 2021

To: The Committee for the 2021 Regional Communications Review

Dear Committee Members

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission into the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review, for regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.

Chamber of Commerce NT is the largest employer-based member organisation in the Northern Territory. Many of our business members live in remote and regional areas of the Territory, from Yulara to Tennant Creek to Nhulunbuy, and we have encouraged them to contribute to your review so that their issues and concerns are raised as part of this process.

We note in your Issues Paper you clearly state “Connectivity is a big part of encouraging people to live, work and invest in regional areas”. We totally agree – so much so that Telecommunications is Pillar 6 in our new NT regional liveability campaign “Living It Up in the Regions” – with the other 5 pillars being access to workers, access to housing, access to childcare & schooling, reducing the impact of crime and anti-social behaviour on business and COVID-19: safeguarding Territory business.

Having strong and vibrant communities throughout the NT means strengthening all of these pillars, so that overall, the community continues to function well and contribute to economic and social prosperity as well as enjoy social cohesion and community connectedness.

- Effective and strong telecommunications feeds into better liveability in the regions.
- Better liveability helps keep people in their homes, jobs and businesses, and functioning as part of their regional or remote community.
- This in turn helps create an environment more conducive for people to stay, work and live in, and more people in a town or area helps ensure better likelihood of businesses and services remaining open
- And it all helps regional and remote Northern Territory in our overall development and contribution to both the Territory and national economies.

We respond as follows to selected sections of your Issues Paper.

Section 1 - Adequacy:

1.1 Changing Demand:

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?

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

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

- **Consistent, uninterrupted and strong internet service** in regional towns, and remote outposts – stations, roadhouses, businesses and Aboriginal communities. Examples of why this is **essential** are;
 - **Business Services – E Commerce:** Businesses in regional towns as well as remote such as stations, roadhouses, wayside inns, transport-related and outback stores are dependent on strong and consistent internet reception to operate. **If the eftpos machine goes down in a roadhouse, how will fuel, food and accommodation be paid for?** Fewer people are carrying cash anymore, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting cashless society we live in now has been hurried along because of it.
 - **Access to workers for remote locations:** With international borders closed, it is extremely difficult for regional and remote towns or outposts to attract workers, many of whom are usually international. Those that do come (especially from cities or as international backpackers on visas) need an incentive to stay – a business providing strong and consistent internet that allows for streaming is essential (for entertainment purposes), as is use of WhatsApp and Messenger for conversations with family and friends or to attend to personal administration. Often remote workers are living in one roomed accommodation in isolated places - without this service life 'after hours' provides little incentive to stay. Continual short-term workers create stress on a business' operational capacity and hence its sustainability.
- **Remote mobile coverage** – Regular solar-powered coverage spots (to alleviate black spots) along main freight, passenger transport and tourism routes in the NT are required, so that drivers can connect with emergency services (such as on the Stuart Highway in SA, up to the NT border). It's a question of safety due to breakdowns and other issues found on remote transport corridors, and supports the safety and wellbeing of users, which in turn promotes further usage of these routes, with users more confident in the knowledge there is mobile access not too far away. And with this;
 - **Frequent signposts** along the transport route so that drivers know how far away the next mobile reception area is
 - **Better security** to safeguard the equipment from vandalism and theft
 - **Sharing of towers:** Determine a way for mobile network operators such as Telstra and Optus to share telecommunication towers, so that all people with differing phone companies have reception from the one tower, rather than one or the other. People do not generally have more than one phone plan or sim card for their phone.
- **Tower malfunctions:** If the only telecommunications tower in town regularly malfunctions, all businesses and residences are affected. Repeated concern has been raised about this amongst residents in, for example, Alice Springs and Tennant Creek – mobile coverage and internet are affected.
 - Need to ensure **higher levels of redundancy** in telecommunications towers (so that if a component in the tower fails, it won't affect service). If equipment malfunctions in a metropolitan area it can be fixed within 2-4 hours, however in a remote location it can take 2-4 weeks to fix because of the need to locate a technician, availability and travel times of technician – and to then provide remote diagnostics, ordering and freight times for delivery of parts, and finally the availability of the technician to travel again and fix the malfunction. Most telecommunications companies also store parts in capital cities, not regional or remote areas.
 - **Data Capacity:** Towers may only provide enough coverage for mobile phone usage, and not data capacity – the telecommunications tower needs data availability, and this is achieved through better backhaul to their network, whether through satellite or other means

- **Changing Demand for Data:** There is a strong and worldwide trend for additional data available on devices. Current services do not meet demand or provide unlimited data. The only way to provide data in remote parts of the NT is by Skymuster which has severe data limits. If you share your Skymuster service with employees or guests (eg stations, remote caravan parks) there is huge financial risk here that you will exceed your monthly data quota and have to pay excess fees. However at the same time, businesses that can't promote that they have unlimited wifi, lose customers who need it for both leisure and work travel).
- **Effect of Australian Government policies and programs in remote and regional NT:** Since the last regional review in 2018 there has been little change except the individual installation of Skymuster by some homes and businesses at their expense. There is no 5G phone network whatsoever in the NT, and very little 4G coverage out of the major towns. NBN is providing a better service for the 5 largest population centres of Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs at this time, however not all home addresses were covered in the rollout (eg south of Heavitree Gap in Alice Springs, or south of the MacDonnell Ranges – and no rollout map to show that installation in these areas will be met).

1.2 – Service Reliability:

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

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

- **Public perception** is that 'the tower or the system is broken' because they can not use their phone or get internet coverage or streaming services in the way they expect to, at the time they want to. It may be nothing is broken; however, people's expectations are such that they do not understand that heavy usage at peak times (eg 5-8pm) means congestion – pages won't load, media won't stream and emails take forever.
 - **Stronger education** is required to inform the public and support them in staggering their usage times, especially in regional and remote locations

1.3 – COVID-19:

6. How did the use of digital services change for regional consumers and businesses during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? What insights or future service delivery does this provide?

- **Shift of Business to Cashless Payment:** Although the trend was building, the pandemic exacerbated business shift from payment by cash to payment by eftpos machine or through online services, to minimise the risk of transferring infection from customers to employees to customers. E Commerce is here to stay, and business requires efficient and effective systems supported by solid telecommunications to enable E Commerce to function, and not put business trading at risk.

1.4 – Indigenous Australia:

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

- Chamber NT supports the implementation of the Arnhem Land Fibre Works and the Fibre to the Premise installations underway, such as in Yirrkala, connecting remote communities. Also, nbn putting satellite-based wifi networks into small homeland communities, meaning there is at least some service rather than no service whatsoever.
- We believe these services need to be replicated in other regions of the Northern Territory, so that social connectedness and economic development may be enhanced in remote communities through access to wifi.

Section 2 – Opportunity:

2.1 Regional Development

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

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?*

- **Investment:** It may not necessarily be about investing additional money; it could be about using what infrastructure is available more efficiently. An example may be a group of businesses subscribing to a larger data service together (eg such as nbn) and sharing the infrastructure and cost together, rather than individuals subscribing to their own small, individual and expensive plans.

2.2 Emerging Technologies

10. *To what extent will new technologies enable significant change to the delivery of telecommunications services in regional Australia over the next 10-15 years? Are there any barriers to accessing these new technologies?*

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

- **How to deploy in remote and regional locations:** None of the new technologies mentioned in the Issues paper, such as IoT, Edge computing applications or 5G can be available in remote or regional locations in the NT without significant investment in carrier backhaul capacity (there is no infrastructure in place in NT remote and regional locations to connect 5G cells – it's vast distances to small population centres and one can see the digital divide increasing, as cities become more connected and regional and remote areas become less connected. Even putting in a 4G tower in a remote community (instead of 3G), does not guarantee it will work. Telecommunications companies will know their fibre optic capacity and they won't install a tower or deploy 4G or 5G unless they know it will work. There is no easy answer here, we acknowledge the challenges.

2.3 Maximising Outcomes:

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

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

- **Government support:** The NT is a large geographic area with small population centres – the cost is enormous to rollout effective telecommunications across the Territory. However, business and liveability issues are all key to maintaining and even growing our populations and economy across the board. With E Commerce here to stay, it is both essential and critical that NT business has access to and usage of effective telecommunications services. Chamber NT acknowledges there is no quick or easy fix, however, stresses the importance of continuing to determine how best to support business, and local communities, throughout the Territory. There may be possibility for co-investment, such as between Commonwealth, NT Government and regional councils to align and develop regional telecommunications plans with Telstra, to lay fibre optic cable along existing road corridors to ensure effective functioning of business and to connect more remote communities.
- **Decentralise Investment in the NT:** It's important to ensure the integrity and continuity of telecommunications in the Territory at all times. This means shifting investment from Darwin to

other parts of the Territory, if required. For example - build a Territory DR (Disaster Recovery) site outside of the cyclone area of the Top End. At present the DR site is in Casuarina, on the outskirts of Darwin. A safer option would be Katherine or Alice Springs. If Darwin is hit by a cyclone the entire telecommunications infrastructure of the NT is likely to be impacted.

Section 3 – Awareness:

3.1 Education

14. How can regional consumers be better supported to identify, choose and use the best connectivity options for their circumstances, as well as understand their consumer rights?

3.2 Public Information

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?

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

- **Easily understood information:** Development of simple and easily understood diagrams, tables as well as videos and online documents for use by business, to be delivered through media, social media and communications channels.
- **Business to Business delivery:** Funding for an organisation such as Chamber of Commerce NT to deliver IEC (information – education – communication) strategies and materials to business owners throughout the Northern Territory, so that they understand the options, the benefits and risks, and from that can make an informed choice on their telecommunication approach.

For further Information:

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