



Submission to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

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?

Services need to be effective, functional and reliable. Currently customers are being told they need to spend significant sums to install boosters etc in order to get minimal coverage at their residence (office) but as soon as they move out of this space there is often no coverage. Banks and some other services drop out when the service is slow or scratchy. Either provide a service or don't charge full rate when it is not available over the whole area or time. (I frequently have to re ring my brother who drops out regularly or has to go outside and stand in a particular place to have a conversation. He was told it would cost \$100,000 to restore the landline and mobile is atrocious).

So in answer to your above question, people who are required to hold a mobile service only need to be able to use that service reliably without having to stand on the nearest hill on a cold, windy and rainy night.

Where I am, it needs to be functional, regardless of how many people are trying to use the service – I get 1 bar mostly and if there are a lot of users phone works but wireless broadband is too slow. ADSL is not available and satellite seems to be variable according to those that use that.

- 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 the community in general is moving out of landlines to mobile these services need to be equivalent for all users. CBD users don't have a problem generally but as soon as you get to a hilly area or less populated space services drop off dramatically. There needs to be compensation for people who don't have the same level of service. Most country people are not paid a premium to live rural but living there costs a lot more for a lower standard of service.

Landline services should be available for customers where mobile service is substandard and not at such an exorbitant cost that it is out of reach.

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

A free for all, user pays system with no requirement for the standard and actual, effective availability of service has resulted in a substandard system for anybody who is not in a built up area. The notion that 99% of the population has access is a nonsense. Scratchy, dropping out, 'only on the hill facing west', substandard service should not count as reasonable access. Privatising the system without functional outcomes for all people in all areas has created a two tier system. Providers are smugly quoting meaningless statistics that have stretched the truth. Maybe 99% of city dwellers have a usable mobile service.

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

Sometimes you just can't do any business activities because the service is simply not adequate. Outages (like power outages resulting in the tower/exchange going down and not restorable for days because it has to be resurrected slowly) put communities at risk and businesses out of action. In this 'connected' world when the connection fails, business shuts (electronic payments don't happen, cash not preferred and frequently not held...). People with health issues simply cannot rely on mobile services in rural and peri urban areas. Disasters result in a blackout and back to the physical drive to check on people.

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

Towers need to have back up generators that will start up automatically and last at least 24 hours and/or have a system in place for refuelling that can be done locally without having to refer back to Melbourne.

If customers must rely on mobile services, then there must be adequate towers to provide the service to a satisfactory standard. Standing on the nearest hill in the wind and rain, having to redial due to drop outs etc is not acceptable. If you insist on substandard service by towers then at least provider of the service should pay for the boosters etc at the rural residence – not the customer.

- 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?

It appears bandwidth was increased during Covid and this meant working from home worked for me but now dependent on doing stuff when high use of streaming (or whatever) is not happening by other users.

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

Cannot comment on availability in Indigenous communities but suspect it is just as bad as anywhere else. Costs for everyone simply get increased whenever the provider chooses and you wear it, even when they change your plan and no longer provide the cheaper options. Pretty bad really that you just get lumped into a more expensive plan that provides what you don't want but there are no other options.

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

Provide effective services rather than the cheapest option for the provider (eg if landlines are the most effective, then require them to be available at an affordable cost to the customer). If mobile, they need to have sufficient band width for high use periods. Maybe have 'fly in' options for events like shows etc so communications is not crashing out all the time.

- 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?

It will always be expensive for providers who's primary objective is to turn a profit to provide services in rural, peri urban and remote areas. This is why it was a better system to have a non-commercial service provider where cheaper areas subsidised the cost in more expensive areas. Using satellite providers may work when things are going well but there will ultimately be issues with bandwidth and satellites going down. Future proof the system.

- 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?

Unless and until rural, peri urban and regional areas are subsidised or compensated for the additional cost of provision of service they will always have a substandard service. You don't get paid more to live in the bush but it costs more. How many people have died/will die because reliability of service is not equivalent for everyone. Maybe if phones could automatically switch to satellite when towers were not available things might improve.

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

Rapid rollout in rural areas! What a joke.... Basically it costs money and needs to be managed by people who are working efficiently and not constantly looking at a return on investment for shareholders. 30 years ago

when we had local techos and linesmen they would know the area and infrastructure well and it was better maintained. When it all got privatised and these people lost their jobs it all degraded significantly. Having call centres that know where you are would also help. So often they clearly have no idea where you are located and can only ask standard questions, they are difficult to understand and cannot help with anything that is not scripted.

Get some of the people in charge to take 5 year old technology out on a trip to some of these areas. It seems that people in ivory towers simply will never 'get it'.

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

Collaboration always helps. Maybe use publicly owned land for infrastructure would speed up the process and reduce conflict. In my experience, rural people are always looking at ways of finding solutions. City slickers operating in offices are always looking to turn a \$. Change the mindset of the service provider to 'service' not profit.

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

Government investment needs to focus on enabling service provision in sparsely populated areas and difficult terrain so that services are effectively available to everyone. If mobile is not available to a satisfactory standard then reconnect the landlines.

- 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?

You would need to provide face to face assistance at the property so you can experience the difficulty and also not expect all customers to upgrade their technology at considerable cost every 5 minutes. A lot of people simply want their telephone service to actually work, not all the bells and whistles they are not going to use. They are also subjected to the usual scam callers so are unlikely to trust someone calling from Telstra! I get them all the time – how come with all this state of the art technology you cannot overcome these.

- 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?

Sometimes you will need to use old fashioned snail mail to get to some of these customers and for them to believe what you are telling them. You also need to put in the hard yards and meet face to face. Now that the service in a lot of these areas has crashed to such a parlous state it will take a lot of effort to rebuild it. Word of mouth and experiences will succeed.

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

Providing rural, peri urban and remote customers with a service that is as effective and reliable as the CBD should be the aim. Compensation should be provided for those to whom you do not provide an effective and reliable service (like all the people who have to go outside, up the hill, down to the gate etc or for whom the internet is so slow and intermittent you cannot reliably use it). You will need to actually go to the premises of these people and see the problem.

There needs to be greater collaboration across services – if your exchange needs power, you and the power provider need to agree on how that is maintained, not simply each keep pointing to the other. The community has been losing on this for too long and paying the penalty. Look at the Wooroloo fire.

Risk management needs to be transparent. Who you are prepared to see without an adequate service (so they are at higher risk of not having an adequate service in an emergency, like life support etc) needs to be published. People have already died no doubt because they were without a service due to a poor supply/maintenance issues. Lives have already been put at risk because there was no service (bushfires, no power, no phone) or inadequate bandwidth to cope with demand. Don't just fluff over this – we are not stupid.

Adequate maintenance of existing infrastructure needs to be, and seen to be, carried out. Particularly for landlines that are more reliable than mobile services when they are appropriately maintained.

Why are these things important? Because we are sick of being ignored, delayed, told it is too hard, watching and experiencing poor service due to inadequate maintenance (my landline has regularly been chewed by kangaroos over the last 5 – 10 years where it has been left on top of the ground). Our lives were put at risk during the recent Wooroloo fire due to communications simply not being there. When will people outside the CBD be given due regard for services they paying the same amount for?