

2021 Regional Telecommunications Review

Fraser Coast Regional Council Submission

Telecommunications and connectivity has always been an issue of extreme importance to regional, rural and remote Australia. This is certainly the case for the communities within the Fraser Coast Local Government Area (LGA) and has arguably become even more significance since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The work undertaken by the Committee is extremely important and of great impact to those living and working in regional, rural, and remote areas of Australia. The *Regional Telecommunications Review 2021 – Issues Paper* has encapsulated many of the key issues facing these communities and is reflective of the challenges and trends which we are also experiencing in the Fraser Coast region.

The residents of our region primarily live in the cities of Hervey Bay and Maryborough, but there are also 13 small communities in outlying coastal and hinterland areas in the Fraser Coast. Located three hours drive from Brisbane, the Fraser Coast LGA covers areas classified as both Inner and Outer Regional Australia.

The Fraser Coast region is home to around 108,183 residents, spread across an area of over 7,100km². Connectivity is especially important for those members of our community who may be less mobile, with a 17.4% of residents in the Fraser Coast aged over 70, telecommunications are especially important for the 9.7% of the local population requiring assistance for a profound or severe disability. Significant socio-economic disadvantage exists within the Fraser Coast, and these members of our community risk being further disadvantaged if technology and telecommunications do not progress at a rate similar to major urban areas.

Councillors receive many comments from residents regarding telecommunications and mobile coverage across the region and working to see these issues addressed is a significant priority for our Council. In particular, I would like to highlight the issue of mobile connectivity in the World Heritage Area of K'gari. Residents have indicated that the island suffered ineffective coverage during bushfires in 2020, and have shared concerns that major upgrades are required to ensure that functional coverage is available in any future emergencies.

On behalf of the Fraser Coast Regional Council, I welcome the opportunity to share some of the experiences of our community in using telecommunication services in the Fraser Coast Local Government Area and wish to offer the following additional comments.

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

Ensuring that suitable infrastructure is in place to allow for telecommunications services to be delivered to as many people as possible.

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

Programs such as the Mobile Black Spot Program have made a positive contribution towards improving mobile coverage across the region. It is important for programs of these nature to continue in order to reduce the number of mobile blackspots in regional areas, especially as regional populations continue to grow.

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

Mobile coverage and service reliability can have significant impacts on regional communities. The Fraser Coast is famous for its pristine natural beauty, which attracts both local residents and visitors seeking out remote and wild experiences. Unfortunately, this means that our region is no stranger to emergencies and natural disasters, and it is therefore of extreme importance to ensure that both locals and visitors alike have reliable access to information and communications.

Our region recently experienced the importance of telecommunications during a natural disaster in late 2020, when a bushfire burned more than half of the world heritage listed K'Gari, threatening townships and culturally significant sites. The K'Gari Bushfire Review Report, prepared by the Queensland Office of the Inspector-General Emergency Management, noted the following:

- The community raised concerns around phone reception (including satellite phones) being intermitted across the Island, raising concerns for residents and visitor's capacity to report incidents.
- In a small number of locations on the island there is limited 3G coverage near townships. However, most of the island experiences large mobile phone and internet black spots.
- Stakeholders also advised IGEM of radio communication limitations on the island. QPWS advised the Government Wireless Network (GWN) service area provides coverage to south east Queensland, however this does not extend to K'gari. Radio capability and interoperability is an important part of inter-agency communication during fire response activities. This should continue to be factored into response planning by all agencies.
- Limited phone and internet connectivity hinder day-to-day management and firefighting efforts
- There is currently no means for QPWS to ascertain the daily number of visitors to K'gari – solutions such as the Check in Qld App, or automatic number plate

recognition technology could be used but poor mobile phone and internet connectivity would need to be considered further.

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?

Global trends around the increased use of digital services has provided new opportunities for both consumers and businesses within our region to access new products and markets in other geographical locations. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Fraser Coast Region has seen an increase in online spending by residents and businesses, with figures for the month of June 2021 showing a 17.95% increase in online spending compared to the same period in 2020 (*Data source: Spendmapp by Geografia 2021*).

Council's Economic Development team has been made aware of instances in where local businesses have experienced issues undertaking online meetings with current and potential export customers due to insufficient mobile and internet connectivity in some parts of the region. This was particularly the case for businesses that had not previously exported, or have been looking to develop new export customers.

Furthermore, in a survey of local businesses undertaken by Council in June 2021 connectivity was highlighted as the third biggest challenge being faced by business in the Fraser Coast region (following staff recruitment and retention, and supply chain). Heading into the future it will be important that business and industrial areas have suitable connectivity to allow them to remain competitive and to participate in global markets.

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

There are numerous examples of both private and public organisations relocating their headquarters from capital cities to regional Australia. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged many ideas of the modern workplace, as employees all over the country have had to undertake their work away from the office. This has presented a significant opportunity for organisations to consider relocating to regional Australia, and may warrant further investigation into the potential of investment in telecommunications infrastructure to support remote working in place of investment in brick and mortar assets.

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?

In its 2019-20 Annual Report, the Wide Bay Health Hospital Service reported a 112 percent year-on-year increase in admitted Telehealth occasions of service. Future advancements in technology to facilitate increased and expanded telehealth and

remote health services in the Fraser Coast region would provide tremendous benefits to the members of our community. Whilst it remains to be seen what telecommunications technology will be required to support the expansion of these services, it is critical that regional areas are prioritised in its development and roll-out.

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

Fraser Coast Regional Council would welcome the opportunity to engage with other State and Commonwealth Government agencies, and telecommunications industry representatives to discuss potential efforts to improve telecommunications in the Fraser Coast region.

We recognise that the issue of regional telecommunications is complicated and multifaceted and will require collaborative efforts across all levels of Government and the community to find and implement effective and sustainable solutions. In order to provide the Committee with a better understanding of some of the connectivity issues in the Fraser Coast region, I have attached a mobile network testing report which was recently commissioned by Council. Should you require further information regarding telecommunications and connectivity in the Fraser Coast, I invite you to contact Mr Scott Templeman – Executive Manager Tourism, Economic Development and Partnerships at scott.templeman@frasercoast.qld.gov.au or on (07) 4190 5770.

Telecommunications and connectivity are matters of great significance to our local communities and we welcome any further opportunities to provide additional information or participate in initiatives that will help to build better communities in the Fraser Coast region.
Best Regards,

Ken Diehm

CEO

Fraser Coast Regional Council

Attachment 1: *Hervey Bay & Maryborough Mobile Network Testing Report*

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