Founding Members
The Australian Government
The Sidney Myer Fund

Patron in Chief
His Excellency General the Honourable
David Hurley AC DSC (Retd)
Governor-General of the Commonwealth
of Australia

Patrons
Mr Baillieu Myer AC
Hon. John Anderson AO
The Rt Hon Ian Sinclair AC
Mr Bill Kelty AC

Chairman
Mr Tim Fairfax AC

2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat

Department of Infrastructure, Transport,

Regional Development and Communications

GPO Box 594

CANBERRA ACT 2601

30 September 2021

Dear Committee members of the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review

Submission – 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.

The Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal - FRRR - (phonetically: F-triple-R) - is the only national foundation specifically focused on ensuring the social and economic strength of remote, rural and regional communities. Since FRRR's establishment in 2000, FRRR has delivered over $115 million to more than 11,000 projects.

Established by a partnership of the Australian Government, Sidney Myer Fund, and philanthropic organisations, FRRR's unique model connects common purposes and investment with locally prioritised needs, to assist communities to be vital and resilient.

It is FRRR's firm belief that access to reliable telecommunications in remote, rural and regional Australia is fundamental for communities to thrive. Reliable telecommunications are vital for individuals to connect with each other socially, to communicate during emergency situations, contribute to local and regional economies, and engage with services in an increasingly online world.

As an organization that operates from a regional base and through our daily interactions with remote, rural, and regional community groups across Australia we are aware that lack of accessibility and reliability in telecommunication options is common, and that it is not always explicit but remains an underlying context that informs the need of many of our grants, from funding for projects that increase social connection to a range of community resilience projects.

This response specifically addresses the following questions from the Issues Paper:

4. How do service reliability issues impact on regional communities and businesses?
5. How might such impacts be addressed to ensure greater reliability?
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?

Should you wish to discuss any element of this submission or would like any further information please contact us directly at 03 5430 2399 or info@frrr.org.au

Natalie Egleton
Chief Executive Officer
Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal
Dja Dja Wurrung Country   PO Box 41, Bendigo VIC 3552   Ph: 03 5430 2399

4. How do service reliability issues impact on regional communities and businesses?

FRRR receives approximately 2000 requests for funding each year from not-for-profit community groups across remote, rural, and regional Australia.

A lack of reliable internet and phone services is an underlying thread in applications that FRRR receives.

Applications illustrate that remote, rural and regional communities have established workarounds to combat unreliable internet and phone service, and are often seeking assistance to implement community-led solutions to address the limited services that are available to them.

The impact of unreliable services often varies depending on the community. For example, in a community where there is limited home internet connection often a central facility is used as the primary way for people to 'get online' and access vital services, but for other places the primary impact may be in limiting the potential for expanding the local tourism industry, or in attracting residents who are able to 'work from home' away from a metropolitan centre.

In relation to service reliability or coverage issues, common threads we see in applications include:
- Reliability increases isolation in small communities and hampers the ability for communities and people to stay connected with each other;
- central hub/gathering places that have reliable telecommunication services are incredibly important and it is vital to have good connections at these locations, particularly during natural disasters; and
- for volunteers and volunteer-led organisations, reliable services can save time and effort for their members – improving the volunteering experience and reducing fatigue.

A great example of all three of these points is a grant that was made to the Black Head Surf Life Saving Club Inc in November 2019. Their facility functions as the community hall, and was not connected to wired phone or internet services, with poor reception in the local area. This hampered their core lifesaving services, simple tasks such as enrolment of members and purchasing of equipment, and the ability for the club to be used as a community facility. FRRR funds were used to help connect wiring to the club for telephone and internet access. The impact of these improvements for their organization, volunteers, and the community can be seen in their own words upon completion of the project:

"The funding allowed us to make the internet available to many people who would not normally use it...

We have a number of families who have had funerals performed within the club. The internet access meant this was simple...

The thing I am most proud of is that all the club business that needs to link in with State Centre, ...even the simple patrol, can be done seamlessly. It doesn't matter if the teaching sessions is upstairs, downstairs or 1/2 the way up the beach, the instructor can log on in real time and save hours of work."

Reliability issues create additional barriers for remote, rural and regional communities

FRRR's daily interactions with community groups across Australia illustrate that coverage and reliability create a myriad of additional barriers for remote, rural and regional communities when compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

> "The site from which our organisation operates has neither mobile phone reception or internet access except via satellite, and this is very slow and inefficient."
> -Survey respondent, rural Qld.

FRRR sees this first-hand when seeking to contact applicants and grantees, with respondents scheduling meetings so that they can travel to a location with appropriate coverage for a phone call, and when applicants advise of difficulties accessing our online application forms. These community groups experience slow loading times, connection timeouts, and connectivity problems which frustrates their experience of seeking support for their initiatives and causes unnecessary additional time and energy to be expended on administrative tasks, often by volunteers who are already stretched.

Interim results from FRRR's Heartbeat of rural Australia study[1] shows that **a quarter of responding community groups find their internet connection somewhat or extremely unreliable. A further 4% have no access to the internet.**

While these issues become time consuming for our staff to help resolve, more importantly these people and groups are experiencing these same issues whenever they try to engage with online environments which are becoming increasingly expected processes across our technologically connected society. In these ways, many across remote, rural and regional Australia are placed at a disadvantage when compared to their technologically connected metropolitan counterparts.

Telecommunications and natural disasters

FRRR has a long history of supporting disaster preparedness and assisting affected communities to recover. We have facilitated support to communities preparing for disaster events and recovering from the 2021 NSW floods, 2019/20 bushfires, 2019 North Queensland floods, Cyclones Debbie (2017), Oswald (2013), Yasi (2011), and Larry (2006) and subsequent flooding, the 2013 Blue Mountains bushfires, the Victoria Black Saturday bushfires of 2009, and the ongoing drought in parts of every state in Australia. The importance of telecommunications and broadcasting capability during these events is often mentioned as part of the need for support for local projects.

> "Because power, phone and mobile coverage was down during the 2019-20 bushfire event there was a frightening level of danger and isolation for individuals and families during these terrifying times. Therefore, of great importance to the community was to have an emergency communication system."
> -Applicant seeking radio equipment for a local fire service

---

[1] The Heartbeat of Rural Australia study is a survey for community groups and not-for-profits in remote, rural, and regional Australia and in part aims to understand the impacts of recent events included COVID 19. The survey is live and so the statistics quoted here are interim figures based on the 548 current responses. If the committee would like to see the final results of the study in November, FRRR would be happy to provide.

> "Without the tower, the valley would lack vital communications, such as mobile telephone, mobile data (there is no NBN) TV comm's and CB radio. The tower was hit by lightning in recent years and was severely damaged. The valley was out of communications until our President provided a temporary solution."
>
> -Applicant seeking funds to restore and upgrade a community owned transmission tower damaged by storms

> "Each major storm or fire event, power and phone services are cut, often for many days. We do not have mobile phone coverage in the locality… The provision of office capability and reliable communications would complement this important community function."
>
> -Applicant seeking funding for a back-up generator and mobile boosting equipment for a local fire station

Communities rely heavily on telecommunications for their ability to communicate during disasters. Ensuring that these services remain stable both during and after disasters is incredibly important, as is the importance of ensuring that solutions are tailored to the local needs.

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

FRRR's focus on supporting remote, rural, and regional communities has given us an appreciation for the breadth of contexts and experiences of communities across Australia. We believe that place, locational context, is central to achieving equitable access to opportunities and that local communities know best what they need.

FRRR are not experts in telecommunications technology but we appreciate that taking a tailored and community-specific approach is not an easy task when working on a service at a national scale. Notwithstanding this, FRRR believes that a philosophy of and willingness to engage on the local level, to take into account local voices, and letting communities lead the change in their area will see far greater results than taking a one-size-fits-all approach.

> "We are heavily reliant on digital technology in our industry. This is the area that is most difficult to receive any funding for and it is also the most expensive. For small clubs, this is a major hurdle to success!"
>
> -Survey respondent, Vic regional town

In addition to seeking to improve coverage and reliability across remote, rural and regional Australia, FRRR would encourage the use of additional funds to activate community-led responses that assist in mitigating the impacts of reduced reliability and coverage. Such funding would engage affected communities in envisaging solutions for the interim and long term. For example, funding for increased telecommunications infrastructure to be installed in central access points (e.g. neighbourhood houses and community halls) whilst the wider network is improved.

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?

As was experienced across Australian society, FRRR has witnessed and experienced large disruptions due to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant number of FRRR grants sought to fund in-person activities or events that have been impacted or even postponed, and depending on the area even infrastructure projects were impacted. Cancellations and postponements have been common, with 21% of projects starting in the 2019/2020FY requiring extensions to their grant term.

Despite the challenges, a number of community groups have also pivoted to adopt new technology or methods to ensure that they could continue their activities, even if that meant shifting online with mixed results.

> "During COVID lock down we began using Zoom from personal computers… For the first time, all members were able to take part in meetings and training irrespective of their location, as long as they had internet access.
>
> *<after restrictions eased>* We have attempted to maintain the Zoom capability with members who are unable to attend face-to-face… However the best mobile signal we can achieve, using the hotspot function of a mobile phone placed high on a window sill, is insufficient to maintain continuous connection or to share online training resources."
>
> -Recent grant applicant

Interim results from the Heartbeat of Rural Australia study show that 65% of respondent community groups have shifted more toward digital methods of communication in the last 18 months and just under half continue to rely a lot or extensively on traditional communication methods (telephone, face-to-face or paper). Despite this, 51% of respondents have not, and do not intend to invest in digital technologies in the near future as a response to recent disasters. Whilst digital telecommunication connectivity will increasingly be an important function to ensure equity across remote, rural and regional communities, we must also be mindful of not leaving behind those who are not adopting this technology as rapidly, and the balance that is required between improving literacy with new technologies along with increased access.

Co-existence of low coverage and reliability with low technological literacy

COVID-19 has also increased the speed at which many services are being offered through digital or virtual means, which has increasingly important implications for many in areas of low coverage or reliability, and where levels of low technological literacy further compound the situation.

> "Internet bandwidth is very limited and internet is unreliable in our area. Digital literacy is low in our community and willingness to improve is also limited, particularly for older indigenous people. Increasing reliance on online training, workshops and video conferencing generally as a replacement for one-on-one service delivery is very difficult for us to work with as we do not have the option to 'go online' with our services."
>
> -Survey respondent, remote WA

> "Many of our older members are not comfortable with digital technology. All but 1 member has access to emails but some cannot reply to emails. All members have a mobile phone. Less than half members use Facebook. Training in the use of Facebook and computer programs e.g. word, excel, publisher would be beneficial to our organisation going forward."
> – Survey respondent, NSW regional town

As we continue to move to online / virtual processes that each require technological literacy, we must also invest in level of technological literacy training and support available for remote, rural and regional community members. However, in areas of low coverage and/or service reliability, efforts to improve technological literacy will be hampered and expected outcomes must be tempered.

Conclusion

This submission has highlighted FRRR's experience in working with remote, rural, and regional communities across Australia, and some of the impacts that a lack of reliable internet and phone connection can have on communities. These communities are missing out on a vital aspect of modern life, one that is driving innovation globally and that helps to save lives in times of emergencies. It is of the utmost import that those outside metropolitan areas are not left behind, and that they are able to make the most of the opportunity that new telecommunications can afford.

We thank the committee again for the opportunity to make a submission. If you would like to discuss any of the points raised here, please contact us directly at 03 5430 2399 or info@frrr.org.au