Telecommunications Review Submission: Shire of Chittering

The Shire of Chittering is a Western Australian Wheatbelt shire that adjoins the northern boundary of the Perth Metropolitan area. The Population of the shire has been increasing over the past twenty years due to the urban sprawl. Due to recent transport improvements, this growth has accelerated as the Perth CBD is now as little as 45 minutes away from the shire.

This growth has changed the makeup of the shire. The southern area of the shire is Peri-Urban, predominately Rural Residential areas, comprising young families either working in the Metropolitan Area or Fly-In Fly-Out to more remote mine sites. The north of the shire remains a traditionally broad acre farming community. There are also three town sites in the shire, with two sites having a commercial district and surrounding population.

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?

   Regional Australian's require access to both internet and reliable mobile telephone coverage. Although both services can fill holes from lack of other services (eg: VOIP and mobile internet browsing), the provision of both services allows for a more seamless experience, allows for the use of a range of technologies and creates redundancy for when technology fails.

   Currently there are many things that can't be done, often due to the lack of one service. Areas that have no internet connection, due to the lack of delivery of NBN so far, can't cope with having one person working from home, let alone two adults and a couple of children during a COVID lockdown. Broadacre farms may have access to satellite internet at the farmhouse, but a lack of mobile coverage prevents them from utilising available technologies while working on the farm away from the farmhouse.

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

   The main barrier is that the provision of telecommunication services in regional areas is not viewed as commercially viable. This needs to change through either the increase in demand allowing telecommunications companies to charge more, greater government or other funding to assist the business case for the provision of technology or utilising other technologies to provide services.

   The lack of demand is difficult as it is hard to show demand when a service is not readily available. The past has shown that the use of telecommunications and has continued to expand to fit the available service. Web pages, apps, music and video streaming, video conferencing and telehealth have all been developed once the necessary services are available. As the services are not available in regional areas, technologies that need a better service are not developed as they cannot be utilised.

3. 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 Blackspot Funding and Digital Farm Grants have had a positive effect on regional telecommunications. This has allowed an increase in the provision of

services by the large telecommunications companies and just as importantly, the trial of new technologies and offerings that may provide better solutions in the long term.

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

On a day-to-day basis, reliability issues impact the ability it conduct a business fully. Businesses will not invest in new technologies for their business and employees will not choose to work from home if it cannot be reliably done every day. Reliability issues therefore impact the trust in the service and that lack of trust prevents a commitment to utilising the highest potential of the service, instead people will settle for utilising the average ability of the service.

 In emergencies the problem isn't the lack of trust, but that if a person is trusting a service and it fails, they can be severely compromised in their response to an emergency, whether that be a volunteer firefighter missing getting called out to a fire or a resident not leaving their house in time as they missed the information necessary to make that decision.

There are further impacts both in responding to the emergency and recovery from the emergency. Without a communications network available, a coordinated response cannot happen and vital information may not be able to be disseminated. This holds true for recovery as residents may not get information from authorities or even communicate with friends and family to know their situations.

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

Reliability can be increased through redundancy. Providing a greater service than may be currently required to avoid towns running out of ADSL ports or customers on the fringe of a mobile phone tower losing reliability as more people access the tower from a different direction. Having backup networks such as coverage through both internet infrastructure and mobile coverage. Better backup systems for other factors such as the loss of electricity, something that reduces reliability and is more common in regional areas.

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?

What really should be looked at is how the use of digital changed for everyone, not just regional consumers and businesses, over COVID. Unfortunately, while the world changed to working from home, video conferencing and accessing many more digital rather than face to face services, in regional areas this change could only happen as much the available services allowed. While people locked out of the Metropolitan Area could have worked from home, often the lack of available internet services prevented this as there was not sufficient speed and bandwidth available.

COVID showed that people are able to adapt and embrace new technologies, but the technology must be available to them for people to be able to use them.

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

Nil Response.

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

   Telecommunications should be viewed as a basic necessity for regional development such as roads, electricity and water. The choice of where to invest should be made with consideration to planning schemes and other basic infrastructure development to ensure that all of the necessary services are provided into one area.

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?

   The main barrier remains the small market which reduces the desirability of private companies to invest in infrastructure. If innovation can create cheaper infrastructure or cover larger areas for the same price, then it will help to overcome this barrier.

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?

    Nil Response.

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

    Nil Response.

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

    Communications between the three levels of government are vital. There are a number of programs that support improving infrastructure however they have different guidelines, are run at different times and they don't necessarily tie in with local government budget cycles. Better communication would allow for better planning which would hopefully then lead to better outcomes than the current piecemeal approach. Projects such as the STAND Emergency project have shown they good results can be achieved when different departments and organisations do work together.

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

    Aside from the different levels working together, it is more important to ensure that the programs that have provided funding and led to improvements in telecommunications services are continued.

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?

    Nil Response.

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?

Nil Response

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

Nil Response