



The Hon Luke Hartsuyker
C/O 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and
Communications
GPO Box 594
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Hartsuyker,

On behalf of the Barwon electorate, I would like to present my submission in response to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review.

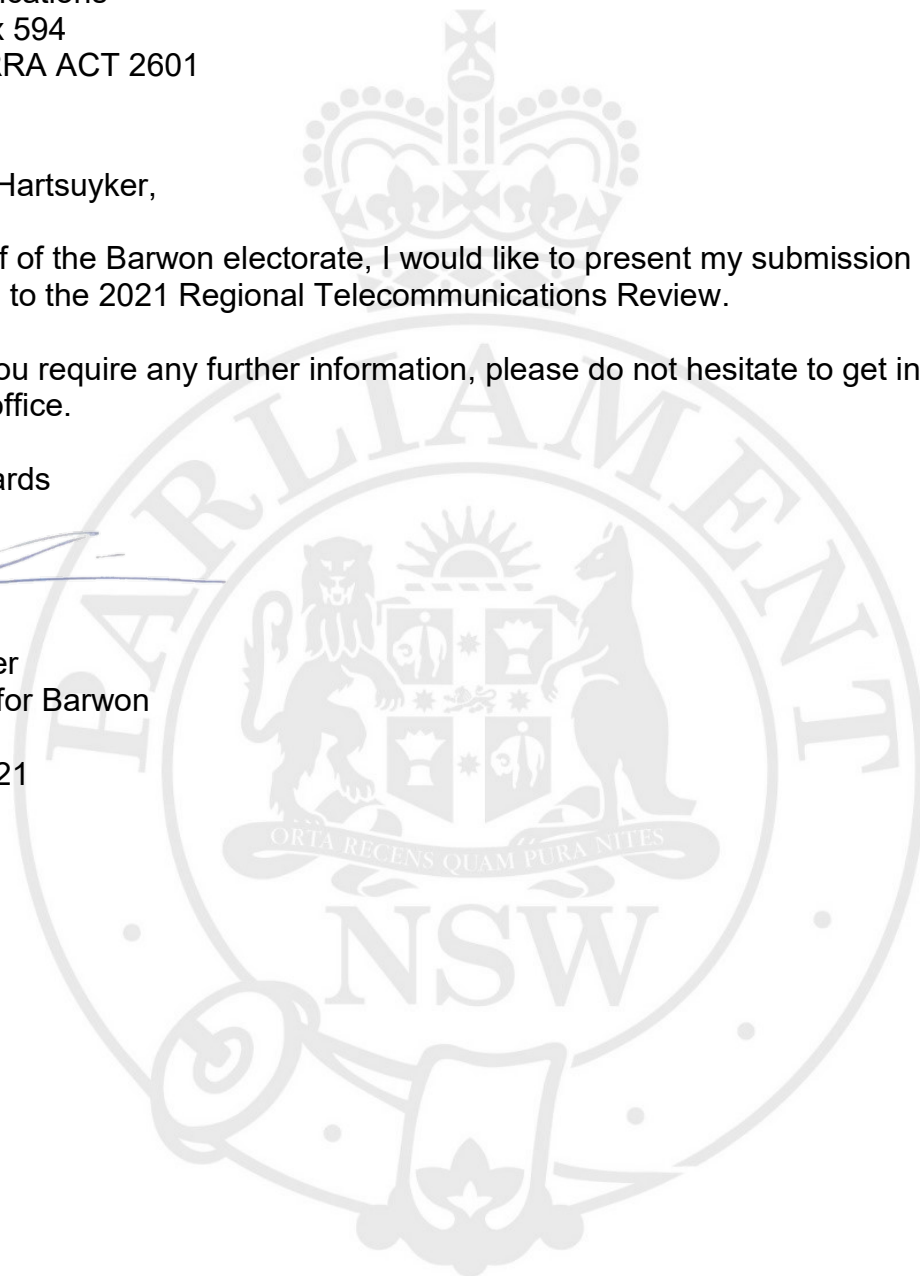
Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to get in contact with my office.

Kind regards



Roy Butler
Member for Barwon

30/09/2021





Regional Telecommunications Review 2021

Submission from Mr. Roy Butler MP, Member for Barwon
29 September 2021

The electorate of Barwon is unique in NSW, it spans some 356,000 square kilometres and is the state's largest electorate, covering 44.5% of the land mass. It stretches from Walgett, Narrabri and Coonabarabran in the east to Broken Hill and the South Australian border, from the Queensland border south to Ivanhoe, Condobolin and Lake Cargelligo.

Barwon has some unique features, there are 13 Local Government Areas, and the Unincorporated Area in the North West – 93,000 square kilometres where there is no Local Government, just volunteer Village Committees to represent the interests of the community. Across the electorate there are 91 schools, 27 hospitals and multipurpose services, 43 Police Stations and 10 Fire Stations. In addition there are hundreds of community organisations including Rotary Clubs, Country Women's Association Branches, sporting clubs, and volunteer groups.

Barwon is unique in its geographic make up likewise the people of Barwon are unique. They are self-reliant, pragmatic and welcoming. They do not ask for much and get on with what is important for them and their community.

Whilst telecommunications is largely a Federal Government issue, I came to be working on the issue of blackspots after I was contacted by a number of constituents who were wholly fed up. They are fed up with being told their blackspot will be addressed 'in the next round' or to invest in a mobile phone booster.

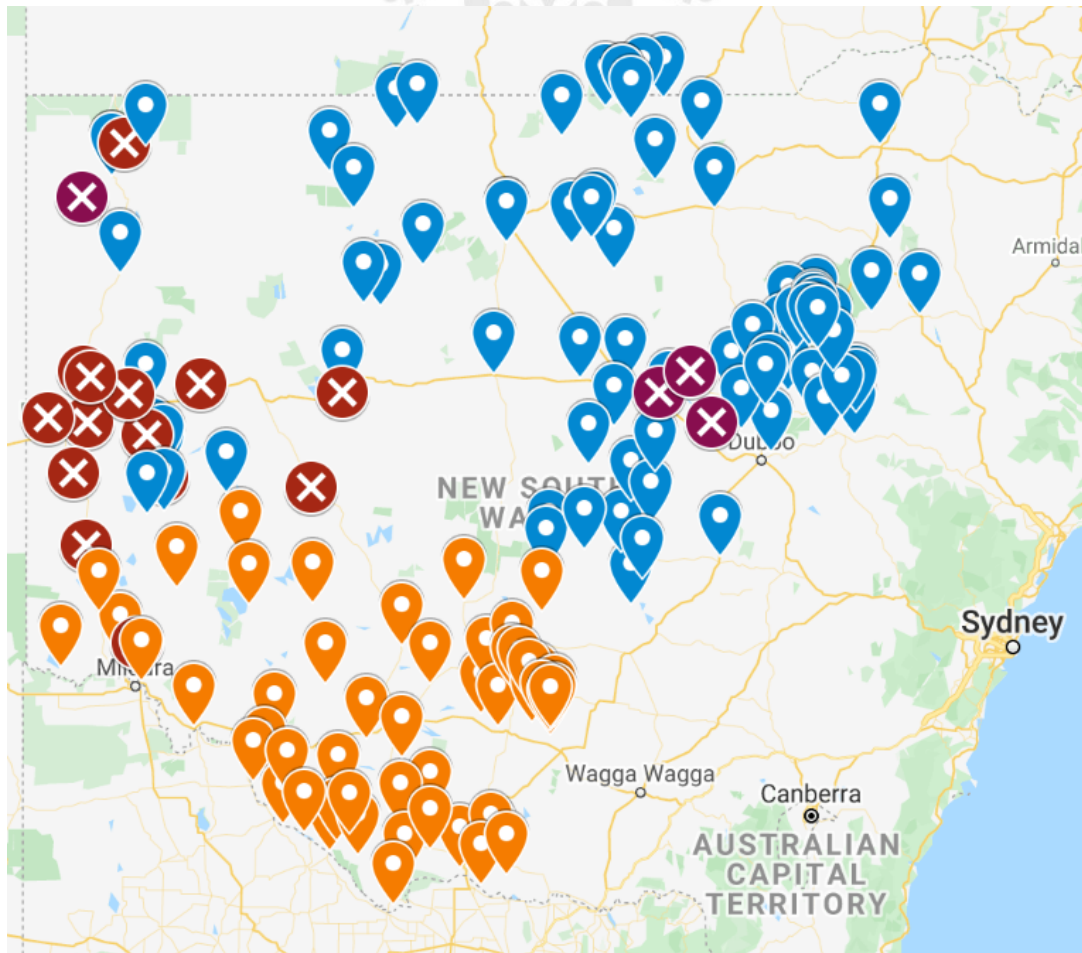
When I asked the people of Barwon to come forward with their stories involving issues with lack of connectivity in the bush their response was staggering. Many constituents provided us with concerning scenarios regarding delayed responses when contacting emergency services first responders for traffic accidents, people with injuries after motor vehicle accidents walking to an area where they had signal to contact emergency services for assistance, tourists in the area with no coverage using providers other than Telstra, health staff on call needing to carry a UHF radio, small businesses who cannot operate for days when the relevant mobile tower is down and being able to pump fuel using EFTPOS payment systems is a necessity in the outback. Primary producers in rural and remote NSW are reliant on dependable network connectivity to manage all the aspects of their





business. Access to the weather conditions and regular contact with their trade partners both nationally and internationally is essential.

Across NSW in 2016, there were over 3,200 reported regional blackspot locations affecting businesses, services and assistance during natural disasters. Using information provided by constituents I have mapped blackspot information across the electorate, the list is by no means exhaustive with many people giving up hope they will even have their blackspot issues resolved. What I have learnt from this data confirms that connectivity across Barwon is far from acceptable.



Map of Blackspots reported to my office

Since its inception in 2014, the Federal Government has committed \$380 million over six rounds to the Mobile Black Spot Program, with over one thousand base stations funded¹. However, very few of these base stations have benefitted our constituents in the South West and Far West, with only an estimated 174 new or upgraded mobile base stations to be delivered in Regional NSW in 2019. My offices have reports of some of



¹ Coultan, Mark. Letter to Roy Butler MP. 11 December 2020. [Attached]
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these base stations not being fit for purpose, even after an upgrade. I will go into further detail on this point later on in my submission.

In early 2019, NSW State Government committed to investing \$400 million in the Regional Digital Connectivity Program. The focus areas under this program are: mobile connectivity; internet and data connectivity; and on-farm connectivity. This investment through the \$ 4.2 billion Snowy Hydro Legacy Fund was to transform regional telecommunications infrastructure. The Barwon electorate has received 6 new towers covering 3,000 square kilometres or just 0.8% of Barwon.

Unreliable and non-existent mobile coverage impacts negatively on almost every aspect of people's lives in the bush: business and academic success or failure, the tourist economy we are so desperately trying to bring into our small towns, connectivity for the agricultural industry that will drive modernisation and provide for compliance, and day-to-day transactions with government.

Time and time again the facts show that rural and remote NSW is left behind when it comes to telecommunications upgrades (among other things). By focusing only on busier economic areas and regional cities with higher populations to drive telecommunications provider profits, our rural and remote communities are denied the opportunities they deserve to prosper.

The Barwon Experience

"Hello? Hello? Can you hear me? Hang on, I'm just in a dip. I'm just going up a hill. Can you get me?" Beep, beep, beep—call failed. "Yeah, hang on a minute. Hang on. Just going to where I can pick up a bit more service. You there, mate?" Call failed. That may sound comical, but imagine you have just had a car accident. You have broken bones. You are bashed up. You are pretty sure your mate is not going to make it. To get phone reception you have to run five kilometres in the dark for help. You are able to get one or two bars, enough to make a call. In a nearby community the first responders are notified. They kit up, ready to head out. Before they set off they have to make doubly sure that they know where they are going because as soon as they leave the town limits they have no ability to communicate back to base—nothing. They cannot check Google Maps. They cannot call anyone.

One person in my electorate does not have to imagine this situation because it happened to them. Tragically, that person's friend did not make it. This was last year. Out west our phone reception is worse than it is in some Third World countries. When a bloke driving a bullock cart on a dirt road in rural India can cruise by me on the phone and people in the middle of towns in my electorate cannot get service, you know there has been a monumental stuff-up in Australia.





The following excerpt from *A Digital Divide in Rural and Regional Australia?* published in August 2001 still stands 20 years later as an accurate summary of the concerns held by people right across my electorate today.

Information technology has been heralded as the medium which will lead to the 'death of distance', whereby, individual citizens and businesses, irrespective of where they are located, will be able to participate effectively in the new knowledge-based economy and society. In other words, the tyranny of distance, felt so acutely by many of those living in rural and remote Australia, has the potential to be undermined if not extinguished by the Internet.

However, the removal of government service offices from country areas, the closure of banks, the introduction of national competition policy and the part-privatisation of Telstra, have ignited some concerns amongst those in rural and regional Australia about being left behind in the new globalised and Internet-connected world. With this has come an anxiety that uneven distribution in access to the Internet may further separate the country from the city².

The experience across the Barwon electorate is a rapid removal of services from our communities, with more services delivered online the digital participation divide between rural and remote NSW and the city has only expanded. Our connectivity is patchy and unreliable and yet our government shop front has been removed and replaced with a phone number and directions to 'fill in the form online' – a slap in the face when simply making the call is difficult in my communities, let alone accessing an online form. Services have been centralised to the city or to regional centres, areas with multiple options for getting online. As I said it's a slap in the face to country people to have not just the shop fronts but the connectivity to access the services in any way you wish.

There's also an additional rich irony experienced almost daily among my communities whereby the phone tower goes down or the Sky Muster is on the blink – the only way to report a fault log it online. Recently this year I had a small community lose all phone reception for a number of days – right in the middle of working from home and home schooling during COVID-19 – this outage was unplanned. The town drew straws and one resident drove out of town until they had phone reception to call my office to ask if I could step in and get the telco to fix the issue. More than 3 days later, reception to the town had been restored. For 3 days the community's economic activity was crippled waiting for repairs. There are sadly too many instances of this occurring. It has become evident to my team that until the telco hears that they are calling from a Member of Parliament's office there is minimal interest in immediately responding to these outages.

2 Curtin, Dr Jennifer. *A Digital Divide in Rural and Regional Australia*. Parliamentary Library, Australian Government. 2001.

https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/CIB/cib0102/02CIB01#table5





To put the situation simply – as it has been to me by my constituents many times over – the telcos need a kick up the butt. In addition the government must play a more active role in monitoring the activities of the providers – a role I do not believe is an overstep when the Mobile Blackspot Program continues to supplement their business activities.

Where you live should not be the determinant of whether or not you can access reliable broadband or mobile data. In some parts of regional NSW there are multiple options for individuals and businesses to get online, from the NBN, multiple MNOs, Sky Muster with backup options readily available should your first preference drop off. But this is not the case in vast tracks of the Barwon electorate with individuals and businesses in most cases relying on just one option that is unreliable. The onus falls on the individual to invest significantly in additional infrastructure to enable access to some form of connectivity. In this example below from one of my constituents personal investment does not necessarily guarantee 365 days a year reliability.

“The mobile phone reception at 15981 Barrier Highway is nil without the aerals that the Emmdale Roadhouse has installed at my own expense. The travelling public have no contact unless they come into the Roadhouse as the booster only gives off a very small area of coverage. The signal comes from the Koreo tower which is approximately 40 kilometres away to the east. There is no signal from the McCullochs Range tower which is also approximately 40 kilometres away to the west. The Koreo Tower has been off line or slow for months. We are told that they are doing maintenance on it. It comes good for a few days, then goes slow or showing connectivity but unable to up load data. Then it will go off all together again. This is happening more and more.

I have to travel up to McCullochs Range 40 kilometres away to do my banking or anything that is pressing to be sorted out in this day and age where everyone thinks we have access to internet at the drop of a hat.

When the Royal Flying Doctor has to use the air strip across from the Emmdale Roadhouse the Doctors have to come over to the Roadhouse to use the land line to make their arrangements for their patients.

We have no mobile or internet at Emmdale Roadhouse when this tower [at McCullochs Range] goes out.

The Public have no mobile connection, just after leaving Cobar and then they don't get anything until McCullochs Range tower, approximately 200 kilometres in distance along the Barrier Highway.

Hope something is done before the hot weather starts and people start breaking down in the extreme weather.”

Virginia Beard, Owner/Operator Emmdale Roadhouse





For business operators like Virginia, this situation greatly inhibits her ability to run her business. No connectivity means no EFTPOS, which when you're hundreds of kilometres from the nearest bank is a significant inhibitor to the operation of her business.

Recently Tilpa, a town in Barwon, went without mobile or internet service for 11 days straight. Can you imagine the uproar if Sydney, Armidale, Tamworth or Dubbo were without service for 11 days? For 11 days the telecommunication provider allowed that remote town, which relies on the Royal Flying Doctor Service for medical care in emergencies, to be without service. They could not call. The provider said, "It's not a priority. It will be fixed when we're next in the area." The problem is that the Government is beholden to the telcos. If it were serious about addressing the problem of mobile blackspots, it would fix the power imbalance.

In November 2020 I wrote to the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts regarding unreliable mobile coverage and poor connectivity experienced in the electorate. In December the Member for Parkes responded on behalf of the Minister, there are several statements in that response that must be addressed by this review and remedied.

Firstly, the issue of upgrades occurring in areas selected by mobile network operations (MNOs) as being commercially viable to them despite being subsidised by the government under the Mobile Blackspot Program to establish themselves in that area. To quote the response from the Federal Government via the Member for Parkes:

"The Department maintains a central register of locations which have been the subject of a complaint concerning poor or non-existent mobile coverage. Following receipt of your letter and list of locations identified as receiving poor or no mobile coverage, these locations have been added to the register. This register is made available to all bidders for their consideration when applying for funding under each round of the Program.

Ultimately, it is a commercial decision for the MNOs as to whether to invest in mobile infrastructure... However, the Australian Government stands ready to help subsidise investment in areas where the commercial incentives are insufficient to drive the carriers to deliver new and improved services."

The Government throws millions of taxpayer dollars at telcos to build phone towers, but only when they can make a buck. How is that an acceptable situation? We are lucky—and I say that a little bit sarcastically—to have phone towers and equipment in some towns, but it is not making huge dollars for telcos and they neglect their responsibility to maintain the infrastructure.

After I did a call-out to Barwon for them to tell me their issues with mobile connectivity, the Louth Chamber of Commerce forwarded me a rather

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frustrating chain of emails between its president and Telstra. Louth was really fortunate to have second-hand 3G mobile equipment installed a few years back, which gave them a bit of service. They humbly asked Telstra to have a look at whether there could be a 4G upgrade, because the service had been patchy at best. Telstra did a review and said, "We'll give you some new batteries." The issue persisted and locals could not make calls or send text messages. The Louth race day rolled around and members can imagine how quickly the network capacity was maxed out—no calling and no EFTPOS at the pub.

The Louth Chamber of Commerce are a tenacious bunch and went back to Telstra again. They were told their 3G was okay; they just needed to get the NBN so that they could use the internet to call people over Wi-Fi. The email tennis continued and a month later I received an email from Telstra saying, "With 5G rollout proceeding at pace, we have decided it no longer makes sense, from commercial or customer experience perspectives, to maintain the legacy 3G service offering." So what happens to Louth? Will the Federal Government leave it to the telcos to sort out a solution based on what is best for their bottom line?

Ensuring decent digital connectivity is a core business of government, not of the commercial sector. The core business of government is to ensure that we have essential services and this is an essential service.

Connectivity to the outside world is essential in providing confidence for businesses to establish in the country. Blackspot-free communication is needed to unlock the economic potential of regional NSW. Decentralisation is also stifled in the absence of reliable, blackspot-free communications. People are looking to escape the rat race of the city, and in this COVID-19 world where employers are providing remote work opportunities, reliable communications—or lack thereof—can be a decision-maker or decision breaker.

It is a sad reflection on the Federal Government's Mobile Black Spot Program, a program that has been running for a number of years and allocating millions of taxpayer dollars, has resulted in a situation where in 2021 there are people who still cannot access reliable service without privately investing in boosters or climbing to the top of the tank stand.





Attachment 1




THE HON MARK COULTON MP

Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government
Federal Member for Parkes

MC20-013439

Mr Roy Butler MP
Member for Barwon
Parliament of New South Wales
Unit 1 142 Argent Street
BROKEN HILL NSW 2880

Dear Mr Butler


Thank you for your letter dated 13 November 2020, co-signed by Ms Helen Dalton MP, Member for Murray, on behalf of constituents in Barwon and Murray, regarding mobile connectivity in Western and South Western NSW. As you have also written to the Hon Paul Fletcher MP, Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts on this matter, I am also replying on his behalf.

The Australian Government is committed to improving mobile connectivity and other telecommunications services to keep communities in regional NSW connected, especially during emergencies. I have outlined below some of the actions the Government is taking to improve connectivity across Australia and in regional NSW.

The Mobile Black Spot Program

As you have noted in your letter, expanding mobile coverage has clear economic, social and public safety benefits for people living, working and travelling in regional and remote areas of Australia. This is why the Government has committed \$380 million to date to the Mobile Black Spot Program (the Program), to invest in telecommunications infrastructure projects that improve mobile coverage and competition across Australia.

Under the first five rounds of the Program, the Government's commitment has generated a total investment of more than \$836 million, including co-contributions from local, state and territory governments, mobile network operators and community organisations, funding a total of more than 1,200 mobile base stations across Australia. In New South Wales, 290 base stations have been funded under the first five rounds of the Program, of which 225 are now on air. This represents a total investment of over \$168 million for NSW, including \$57.2 million in funding from the Federal Government and \$32.7 million from the NSW Government.

The application process for the next round of the Program, Round 5A opened on 18 November 2020 with applications from the mobile network operators (MNOs) and infrastructure providers due by 10 February 2021. Further information is available on the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications website at www.communications.gov.au/mbbsp.

The Department maintains a central register of locations which have been the subject of a complaint concerning poor or non-existent mobile coverage. Following receipt of your letter and list of

Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600
Telephone (02) 6277 7495





locations identified as receiving poor or no mobile coverage, these locations have been added to the register. This register is made available to all bidders for their consideration when applying for funding under each round of the Program. It is also used by the Government to inform future policy decisions.

I have also written to all local councils in the Federal Electorate of Parkes to encourage them to identify their priority locations for improved mobile coverage, and to make direct representations to the MNOs and the NSW Government in support of applications for funding for these locations. Past experience has shown that when local communities and councils engage with the MNOs, it increases the likelihood that a mobile base station application will be put forward for funding under the Program. State funding contributions can also support an MNO base station application.

As the State Members for Barwon and Murray, you may also wish to engage with the councils and local communities in your electorates in support of this process.

Ultimately, it is a commercial decision for the MNOs as to whether to invest in mobile infrastructure in the area. However, the Australian Government stands ready to help subsidise investment in areas where the commercial incentives are insufficient to drive the carriers to deliver new and improved services.

Regional Connectivity

With the rollout of the NBN largely complete in regional Australia, there is an opportunity to further enhance connectivity in some areas with bespoke, place-based solutions. The Government has committed to improving digital connectivity in these areas through the new Regional Connectivity Program. The RCP is an important part of the Government's investment in regional telecommunications and is providing up to \$83 million in grants to deliver new or upgraded digital connectivity to regional, rural and remote Australians.

The RCP targets investment in telecommunications infrastructure projects which respond to local priorities and maximise economic opportunities and social benefits for regional, rural and remote Australian communities and businesses. Funded projects will complement the NBN and the Government's highly successful Mobile Black Spot Program by delivering new and improved access to broadband and mobile connectivity in areas of high economic and social value outside of the NBN fixed-line footprint.

Applications for RCP funding closed on 17 November 2020. The Government is now assessing all eligible applications on a competitive basis in accordance with the RCP Guidelines, with successful grantees expected to be announced in early 2021. Further information on the RCP is available at www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/internet/regional-connectivity-program.

Regional Tech Hub

On 8 December 2020, I together with the National Farmers' Federation (NFF), launched the Regional Tech Hub to help people in regional and rural Australia get connected and stay connected more easily. The NFF, in partnership with the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, manages and operates the Regional Tech Hub. The Hub includes a website, online helpdesk, phone support line and social media access through Facebook and Twitter.

The Regional Tech Hub provides independent and factual information to regional consumers about their digital choices. It also provides regional Australians with a range of practical resources, from how to troubleshoot mobile phone and internet issues, right up to how to escalate faults with a connected service, and helping users to understand their consumer rights.





People living, working and travelling in regional Australia who need practical advice on their telecommunications options and issues can visit the Regional Tech Hub website at regionalttechhub.org.au or contact the Hub's hotline on 1300 081 029.

Emergency communications

The Government takes issues related to emergency communications very seriously. In May this year, Minister Fletcher and I announced a \$37.1 million package to prevent, mitigate and manage telecommunications outages during natural disasters. As a key component of this package, the Mobile Network Hardening Program is strengthening back-up power supplies to keep mobile infrastructure operating for longer during power outages.

Stage 1 of the MNHP is providing \$13.2 million in Government funding to Telstra, Optus and TPG Telecom to extend the battery back-up at 467 mobile base stations funded under Rounds 1 and 2 of the Mobile Black Spot Program, to provide at least 12 hours of back-up power. All macro base stations funded under subsequent rounds of Program are being provisioned with at least 12 hours of back-up power.

Stage 2 of the MNHP will include a new competitive grants program that will fund upgrades to telecommunications infrastructure at priority regional and remote locations. Upgrades under Stage 2 could include further additional back-up power upgrades, increased resilience in the backhaul transmission network or other measures that harden the mobile network.

These measures will increase network resilience and preparedness so communities can better deal with future emergencies and natural disasters, including communities in drought-affected areas. Further information on the package is available at www.communications.gov.au/phone/improving-resilience-australias-telco-networks.

Thank you for bringing your constituents' concerns to my attention. I trust this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely

Mark Coulton MP

cc. The Hon Paul Fletcher MP, Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts
Ms Helen Dalton, MP, Member for Murray, Parliament of NSW

11 DEC 2020

