



Submission to Regional Telecommunications Review 2021

All Australians must have access to fast and reliable telecommunications services

“No matter where they live or work”

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Strathbogie Shire is regional Victoria with a population of 10,992 people. Two hours drive up the Hume Freeway north of Melbourne.



Introduction

At Strathbogie Shire we appreciate the forum provided by the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021 to submit, express opinions from our region, explain the lived experiences here, and become involved in the review process. Thank you for the opportunities.

Strathbogie Shire Council has resolved that digital connectivity is an important fundamental infrastructure requisite in need of attention, further development, investment, and advocacy for improvement.

It was a pleasure to read the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021 Issues Paper. The paper addressed the regional issues and raised many of our questions and concerns. In this submission we will follow the sequence of regional telecommunications topics raised in the Issues Paper.

We Could not Agree more with paragraph 3 on page 5, where it says:

“Connectivity is also a big part of encouraging people to live, work and invest in regional areas. The regions offer attractive lifestyle amenity for many people and regional Australia is experiencing renewed interest from business and government. Taking advantage of this opportunity for regional growth requires residents and businesses to be able to access the same level of telecommunications services available in urban areas”

That is what we want...

Access to the same level of telecommunications services available in urban areas!

In their 2020 Annual Report... NBNCO agree:

*“But more importantly, rolling out this network to more than 11.7 million homes and businesses has been critical for maintaining business productivity, employment and social cohesion during the COVID-19 pandemic and a boon for customer choice and competition within the broader telecommunications industry. **It has fundamentally changed the way Australians live and work by offering fast, secure and reliable broadband services no matter where they live or work.** And it has helped lay the foundations for the thriving digital economy we need to remain productive, prosperous and connected through the impacts of COVID-19”*

Fast, secure and reliable Broadband services no matter where they live or work!

Statements, expectations, guarantees... and the lived experience

Lived experiences in our region do not meet the nice words in corporate plans, or the Statements of Expectations and Universal Service Guarantees.

Announcing the new Statutory Infrastructure Provider (SIP) arrangements in July 2020, Minister Paul Fletcher agreed that all Australians can access high-speed broadband, he said:

“These historic laws mean that all Australians can access high-speed broadband, no matter where they live or work,”

“Under the new SIP laws, NBN Co will have a statutory obligation to provide broadband services that are able to achieve peak download and upload speeds of at least 25/5 Megabits per second.”

“NBN Co must also provide at least 90 per cent of premises on its fixed-line network with peak broadband speeds of 50/10 Megabits per second.”

The 25 down and 5 up is often not realised by Satellite or Fixed Wireless connections in our region. Telecommunications service delivery is not up to par because:

- Congestion, slow speeds, and dropouts commonly diminish quality of service
- The alternative of using a 4G mobile signal also has reliability issues.
- There is an over reliance on Satellite and Fixed Wireless connectivity in Strathbogie Shire which does not nearly meet the expectations expressed by the Minister.
- Mobile phone signals are often patchy when away from the Hume Highway.

Strathbogie Shire, in making this submission, is actively in pursuit of improvements to the telecommunications services available in our region.

We will be proactive and seek that the commitments and guarantees in speeches, statements, corporate plans are met with performance in Strathbogie Shire.

Telecommunications in all forms must be available to all Australians in the regions.

No matter where they live or work!

Lived experiences are disappointing

Accepting these foundation statements and guarantees above as a base for measurement of telecommunications services in our region, we can only be disappointed by the current supply of services and the mixed results experienced by consumers in Strathbogie Shire.

Despite all the development costs, paid for by taxpayers over many years, and all the contributions of consumers and Governments, telecommunications services in our region do not meet with the expectations of those who have paid and continue to pay.

In 2020 Regional Development Victoria reported significant short falls in supply of telecommunications services in the Goulburn region (including Strathbogie Shire).

In the Goulburn Regional Digital Plan, the Committee Chairman reported that:

The Partnership has heard from Goulburn's communities and industries about the challenges that they face in the areas of digital connectivity, technologies and skills. These challenges are reflected in the evidence highlighted in this Plan which shows that the Goulburn region experiences significantly lower levels of digital access than other regional areas of Victoria and in particular Metropolitan Melbourne – creating a digital divide between communities and businesses.

There are system wide impediments to delivery of superfast internet and mobile signals across the Strathbogie Shire.

- 66% of NBN connections in Strathbogie Shire are supplied by the slower and less reliable satellite or fixed wireless services. See Strathbogie Shire mapping attached.
- Satellite 27%, Fixed Wireless 39%, Fibre to the Node 27.7%, Fibre to the Curb 5%,
- Only 1.3% is supplied as Fibre to the Premises (FTTP)
- The towns of Violet Town and Avenel are not supplied by fibre connections.
- Mobile signals are poor or intermittent outside towns, some localities and properties are not served by a mobile service signal.
- Sections of crucial roads are not serviced by good reliable mobile signals.
- Some residents must drive away from their homes to find a useful mobile phone signal.

If we lived in Brunswick, where all connections are Fibre to the premises capable of 1000MBPS down, we would have the potential to connect at speeds which are 40 times faster than the restricted 25MBPs available by satellite in Strathbogie Shire.

Telecommunications services in the regions should be reliable and available at the same level as in urban areas.

In their own words...

Our 2020 Strathbogie Shire Survey of lived broadband experience showed that local business owners are frustrated by telecommunications services in our region.

Here is a typical comment on the experience of using broad band for video conferencing in Strathbogie Shire...

“Our only option is Skymuster which despite all the promises can only offer at best 25MB, and mostly it doesn’t even get to that. Nagambie township and surrounds gets between 45-50 MB, so we are mostly under half of that, with no promise of better speeds in the future. This combined with poor or no mobile service (despite the fact that we paid to have a Telstra booster installed at the house, which works intermittently and only within metres of the unit inside the house) makes ordinary business interactions, especially once out on the farm, and at the yards and sheds very difficult.”

Clearly this customer is not benefitting of the speeds and telecommunications services to which the Minister and NBNCO aspire.

And another one:

“Due to the limitation of 25mbps, and with multiple people in the office using the same bandwidth due to social distancing requirements with COVID-19, we get dropouts and loss of internet, which is a concern when holding calls with external parties/clients/potential customers where more than one person is required on the video conference. As a result, most of us move to mobile hotspots when doing internet critical tasks to ensure connectivity.”

To the point:

“Speeds can vary depending on the day, time & weather. Our NBN based phones are AWFUL, we have regular dropouts that make us look incompetent!”

More direct:

“Don’t bother as it is too slow.”

A copy of the Survey results is included with this submission.

Supply of telecommunications services in Strathbogie Shire should be developed to be equal to those supplied in the Metropolis of Melbourne, or Sydney, and regional centres like Shepparton, Bendigo, and Wagga Wagga where mobile phone and broadband services are generally reliable and readily available.

Strathbogie Shire is in the “Goldilocks Zone”

Strathbogie Shire is within the golden circle of two hours travel north of Melbourne via the Hume Highway or by train.

The Strathbogie Shire towns of Nagambie, Euroa, Avenel, Violet Town, Strathbogie, Longwood, and adjacent districts are productive in agriculture, attractive to tourists, and popular with tree changers and retirees seeking a country lifestyle.

There is significant residential development planned for Strathbogie Shire based on the natural attractions of the region. Residential development in Nagambie, Avenel and Euroa is growing and the region is experiencing demand for homes and development.

Demographer Bernard Salt has described locations within 150kms of a metro CBD as being, ***“in a Goldilocks Zone that delivers just the right balance between an affordable and laidback lifestyle and weekly or fortnightly visit access to the city.”***

Strathbogie Shire is in the “ Goldilocks Zone.”

Bernard Salt also predicts that 1.5 Million workers will want to work from home in hybrid arrangement in the Post Covid era (up from 506,000 in the 2016 census).

Migration to the country is growing and working from home (WFH) is more than a fad, as Bernard Salt says about Covid -19...

“It has hastened the digitisation of business... and it has revolutionised the way we work”

Zoom with a View

Access to fast and reliable telecommunications is critical to meet the technical requirements of working from home (WFH).

Living in Strathbogie Shire brings space, peace and quiet, but with the arrival of modern communication it does not mean remoteness, or isolation, because, as Bernard Salt has observed, the internet covers great distances quickly and as the circumstances caused by Covid-19 have demonstrated, that many Australians now work from home (WFH) using a reliable connection.

Zoom, and all the benefits associated with the rapid development of telecommunications are available only when the digital connection is good and reliable.

The upside of working from home has been described by the Productivity Commission in their recent report “Working from Home” Research Paper September 2021.

The Productivity commission say:

“Working from home can improve employment opportunities Avoiding the commute reduces the ‘cost’ of working, and this is expected to induce an increase in labour supply. This may include more work opportunities for people who face barriers to labour force participation. This includes carers, parents of young children, some people with disabilities, as well as people

living in remote or regional areas where there are often fewer job opportunities in close physical proximity. Working from home policies can also promote a more gender-balanced workforce.”

The Productivity Commission recommend that:

“Policy should support the transition to working from home.”

“The shift to working from home caused by the pandemic is a large and material change in the way many people work. Even if half of the people who could work remotely do so an average of two days per week, overall hours worked from home would increase from a pre-pandemic level of just under 2% of all work hours to just under 7%. This is a large change that has happened very quickly but should be kept in perspective. The central workplace will remain the dominant model for the foreseeable future. But the increase in working from home is potentially of great benefit to a substantial portion of the Australian workforce.”

Investments in the infrastructure must continue in Strathbogie Shire to keep pace with this change and the expectations of Governments and consumers. The prospect of commuting to work via the internet and connection and a mobile phone is entirely reliant on the quality and reliability of telecommunications.

Strathbogie Shire in Northern Victoria is currently lagging well behind in the Australian Digital Inclusion Index. (ADII)

The Northern Victoria index score for digital inclusion in 2020 was 56, which was 13.5 index points below inner Melbourne and 8.4 index points below the Victorian average. The comprehensive ADII report is instructive and illustrates how regional areas are lagging.

The ADII report recommends:

“Better outcomes will depend on collaboration across sectors and all levels of government. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of digital inclusion for social resilience and economic security.

Digital inclusion should take a central role in national policy making and planning, with a greater degree of coordination across sectors and the different levels of government. With the NBN now substantially completed, and the economic and social effects of the pandemic becoming clearer, Digital Ability and Affordability are critical areas for attention. Collaboration across business, the not-for-profit sector, and government will be needed to improve outcomes for vulnerable communities.”

What we need is recognition that the digital divide exists and the inequity of it can be corrected by planning and decisions to invest in the right places in regional Australia.

Strathbogie Shire is one of those right places.

Regional Telecommunications Review 2021 issues paper

Key Issues

Changing Demand

The demand for telecommunications services in Strathbogie Shire is increasing just as it is in many places in the country and in cities. Regional development is being promoted by Governments as a positive policy in need of support. There is therefore a need and desire for us all to keep pace with digital connectivity developments.

Demand is also driven by users seeking faster, better, and more reliable services to meet their requirements and to match expectations.

The comparison to services available in Metropolitan locations is inevitable also drives demand.

Regional development is important.

Strathbogie Shire Council supports the benefits of regional development, population increase in our region, increased employment opportunities, and economic and social development.

The Strathbogie Shire Council has resolved that digital connectivity is an important development issue and a fundamental infrastructure.

Improving digital connections is a Council objective and identified as a priority for the whole Shire.

Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on the NBN

In 2020 Strathbogie Shire Council submitted to the Joint Standing Committee on the NBN:

[Inquiry into the business case for the NBN and the experiences of small businesses](#)

In our submission we concluded that the suppliers of telecommunications services (wholesalers and retailers) need to collaborate with local government on their plans for development in our Shire.

Since we submitted last year, little has changed, services have not noticeably improved.

The Parliamentary Committee has yet to report and the outcome is not known. When available, the outcome should be used to also inform the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021.

Support for regional development and the 'Move to More' campaign

What we do know is that Commonwealth and Victorian governments support regional development and are actively seeking to encourage people to move to regions, creating demand for telecommunications services in the regions.

There is a 'Move to More' campaign promoted by the Regional Institute of Australia (RIA).

The RAI is funded and supported by Governments and by NBNCO.

Therefore, NBNCO, and others, should readily recognise that regional telecommunications in Strathbogie Shire must be supported with planned and publicised investment decisions, if the region is to attract migration and future economic development.

The campaign: <https://www.movetomore.com.au/> promotes liveability in the regions. Since so many people have been forced by the circumstances of Covid-19 to work from home, digital connectivity in all forms has become a fundamental infrastructure requirement and demand has increased.

Work, Education, telehealth, social inclusion, personal wellbeing, and liveability are supported... when good connections are available.

People consider digital connectivity an important infrastructure that must be available to support their decision to move to the country.

Victoria's Draft 30-year Infrastructure Strategy supports regional connectivity

A draft released by Infrastructure Victoria in December 2020 has a focus on bridging the digital divide and includes:

- *To improve resilience of regional telecommunications infrastructure and to continue to address regional Victoria's digital connectivity gaps. (Recommendation 80)*
and
- *Continue to address regional Victoria's digital connectivity gaps in the next five years, continue delivering regional digital connectivity improvements, and review the need for further government investment following the roll-out of the Digital Future Now initiative. (Recommendation 86)*

Within the Draft 30 Year strategy and regional priorities for Goulburn there is a clear recognition that continuous improvement of digital connectivity is a necessity.

Infrastructure Australia has identified regional telecommunications as a priority issue over the next 1 to 5 years.

Infrastructure Australia has reported that potential options to address the initiative include:

- increasing shared use of the existing transmission network
- upgrading existing regional networks to allow faster digital connections
- investing in new transmission networks.

Regions, distance, topography, and no excuses

There can be no excuses for not investing in regional telecommunications and leaving behind a region like Strathbogie Shire in the supply of broadband, mobile phone services and access to the internet.

We do not accept...

- **“You’re up the bush, too far away”**
“The trees get in the way”
“Move further up the hill”
- Topography should not be an excuse
- **Close enough... is not good enough**
- We do not accept constant dropouts or failures
- **We do not accept: “Yer’ get that up the country”**

We do not underestimate the demand that our community has for all things internet and the social and economic power of superfast broadband access.

What we seek is the commitment of Governments, NBNCO and Telcos to ensure that the best possible services are made available in Strathbogie Shire and...

Please show us the plans for future regional development and investment.

Mobile

Many locations in Strathbogie Shire suffer from poor or no mobile phone signal.

Mapping provided by telecommunications retailers is not always accurate on the ground. When away from towns, towers, boosters, or highways signals drop out or deteriorate to the point of being useless. Our small villages often suffer from inferior mobile services. This is not the experience of people in Brunswick village in the metropolis of Melbourne.

Expectations are that mobile phone services will improve in Strathbogie Shire.

Mobile phones are used extensively to stay connected via internet provided social media. Text messages, emails, Facebook, voice calls, etcetera are all possible on a range of handheld smart devices.

Where NBN broadband is of poor quality and (not up to the 25Mbps down and 5Mbps up commitment) then a mobile signal becomes the carrier and much more important to the customer.

All types of digital connectivity are now bundled together.

How we connect is not as important as being readily and reliably connected.

Mobile signals are often easier to use. The smart device is handheld, take it outside, on the driveway, to the shed, or walk to the top of the hill.

We hear of many places where a mobile signal at the home or on the farm is unavailable unless standing still on a spot.

We also hear of the homes and properties where there is no useful mobile signal, or only at the house with amplification provided by the addition of an expensive CELFI antenna.

Where signals are poor, and NBN is also at the low end of performance, some residents and business owners have been obliged to purchase a YAGI or CELFI booster antenna. The cost, over a thousand dollars, rubs salt into the wound of disadvantage caused by poor service in the region. The additional cost is a penalty and runs counter to the supply of a universally available reliable service.

It is recommended that where 4G signals are poor a subsidy should be made available to allow customers to access a booster antenna at low cost.

4G is far from universally available in Strathbogie Shire. 3G is often the only signal available.

It is recommended that 3G services be maintained beyond the planned 2024 switch over. 4G & 5G have yet to provide full cover. Locations where 4G drops out may be covered by 3G. Great care should be taken with the removal of 3G mobile services.

Responsible authorities and Government must be convinced that mobile services will not be diminished by removal of 3G signals.

Mobile phone and Broadband audits

It is recommended that where a mobile 4G signal is the better option for broadband connection, NBN should supply a technical onsite audit to assist the customer to achieve the best possible connection. It may be that there is an equipment fault, a simple fix or an alternative not known to the customer.

The operation of Broadband and mobile services is not easily understood by customers and assistance is needed. Call centres can only provide information, and onsite analysis in the regions is preferred.

Where a mobile signal is unavailable a similar onsite audit should be applied, also to fully assess options. The ubiquity of handheld devices purchased by Australians demands that the system of signal supply is capable of delivery of the service on the ground in regional locations like Strathbogie Shire.

Black spot funding

Mobile black spot funding is appreciated.

The Regional Connectivity Programme has also been applied to fund mobile 4G improvements and add one 5G site in Strathbogie Shire.

The Mobile Black spot funding programme should be funded to continue and allocate funds to improve mobile signal cover. There are sections of roads, locations, and waterways in Strathbogie Shire where mobile signals are poor or unavailable.

Continuous improvement should be applied to target locations. Examples include: the Mitchellstown area, including Mitchelton Hotel, Tahbilk Winery, and the Goulburn River.

Violet Town also suffers from congestion where mobile phone services appear to be unable to meet demand on Market days and at peak trading times where retailers report failures of EFTPOS systems to connect.

Other roads with mobile phone black spots:

- Euroa-Mansfield Rd - Gooram
- Euroa-Shepparton Rd - Euroa
- Church Rd – Boho South
- Tarcombe Rd – Ruffy
- Buntings Hill Road - Ruffy
- Creighton’s Creek Rd Creighton’s Creek
- Murchison - Violet Town Rd – Violet Town
- Hume Freeway – Violet Town

Strathbogie Shire supports further investigation of shortfalls of signals and black spot removal plans by telecommunications retailers in our region. Local knowledge and cooperation are the key to making best use of opportunities to improve mobile signals locally.

Please tell us about plans to reduce the number of mobile black spots.

Broadband and the NBN

NBN broadband arrived in Strathbogie Shire in 2018, the benefits were evident, and an expectant community engaged well with the opportunity to connect to broadband via the NBN.

However, 66% of NBN address points in Strathbogie Shire were allocated by NBNCO to fixed wireless or satellite connections. These wireless options are sub-optimal when compared to the fibre to the premises (FTTP) connections available to most customers in Melbourne, or Sydney, or Shepparton or Wagga Wagga or in Business Fibre Zones.

Fibre to the Node (FTTN) connections predominate in the towns of Nagambie and Euroa. However, fibre connections do not extend to Avenel, Violet Town, Longwood, Strathbogie, or any of the small villages in Strathbogie Shire.

In 2020 a Strathbogie Shire Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the NBN identified the shortcomings of telecommunications services in the Shire. Our submission was well received, a copy is included with this submission. Since September 2020 little has changed on the ground, the issues remain unresolved, and the submission remains relevant to the debate about regional telecommunications services.

The 2021 NBNCO Corporate plan includes a \$4.5 Billion network investment plan to *“bring forward the next phase of planned network investment to help meet future demand for higher speed broadband services”*. NBNCO also announced that the Enterprise Ethernet product will be available without connection charges in 240 new Business Fibre Zones.

However, there is no evidence published that the telecommunications industry or NBNCO has a coherent plan to improve telecommunications locally in Strathbogie Shire.

And to make the market more interesting in April 2021, a game changing competitor arrived in Strathbogie Shire.

Star-Link is now here in Northern Victoria with beta testing of alternative internet connection option via low orbit satellites. So far, the Star-Link service is very good, at least five times faster than the widely distributed but slow NBN Skymuster.

Will NBNCO and broadband retailers react to this new low orbit satellite competitor?

Access to broadband is a fundamental infrastructure

Digital technology and the digital economy are moving forward fast, there are some huge economic levers driving change and causing the Strathbogie community to ask questions like these:

- How are we placed in Strathbogie Shire to keep up with the speed that the internet is developing?
- Now that the NBN rollout has been declared complete! What are the immediate plans to improve connections in Strathbogie Shire?
- When will there be an upgrade to fibre in Avenel and Violet town?
- When will the residents of Strathbogie Shire see improvements to the performance of NBN connections?

We do not underestimate the demand that our community has for all things internet and the social, economic, and inclusive power of fast broadband access.

We are encouraged by the statements made by Minister Fletcher when he said:

“the declaration of completion, a critical step in the planned privatisation of the NBN, shouldn’t be seen as a signal for NBN Co to rest on its laurels.”

“This declaration doesn’t mean that NBN Co will stop developing.”

“I fully expect that the company will operate as a mature entity through continual improvement in the provision of quality services to its broadband retail customers, and ultimately to Australian households and businesses, as well as driving efficiency in its operations,” said Minister Fletcher.

We are encouraged by the NBNCO \$4.5 Billion investment in the network.

Now we are most interested in how the investment will be applied to continuously improving the broadband service for residents and businesses in the Strathbogie Shire.

It is recommended that where a property has no mobile signal available and or poor satellite or fixed wireless the resident should be eligible for an onsite audit of the service to determine if there is a fault in need of repair or a report on how to improve performance of communications at the property.

Fixed Voice

Supply of fixed voice services remain important where other options, mobile and broadband are of poor quality or un-serviceable. Locations where mobile signals are poor can rely heavily on the fixed line and upon maintenance. Unfortunately, we often hear that fixed lines are out of service and remain unrepaired for days and weeks on end. Out in rural areas lines are vulnerable to faults.

Customers often report that faults take far too long to locate and repair.

Residents have commented that fixed voice services via land line are problematic.

In their own words from our survey:

“Our landline was so bad we recently stopped it - no ability to get it repaired so all we got was sales/ scam calls interrupting our day.”

Service Reliability

Taxpayers, (all people are taxpayers), living in Strathbogie Shire contribute taxes, charges, fees, pay telecommunications contract payments, data use payments, Broadband charges, services fees, connection fees, etcetera, as do most Australians living in a variety of city, country, rural, regional and remote locations.

However, the point is that having paid for services, there is a reasonable expectation of good service and reliability, indeed there are Government Service Guarantees in place set as minimum standards.

This site can't be reached. H'mmm, can't reach this page. Aw' Snap

The lived experiences in the country is that Mobile and Broadband telecommunications services do not meet reasonable expectations and getting something done about it by retailers or wholesalers is very difficult. Try calling to complain about a mobile service or Broadband connection.

Complaint resolution must be addressed

Getting through to resolve a complaint with telecommunications suppliers is almost at the point of failure. Almost all consumers have been frustrated by the time and effort it takes to resolve service faults and or complaints about service. Complaints about Broadband services and contacting the NBN wholesaler are particularly difficult to resolve.

It is recommended that telecommunications faults and complaints of poor service should be addressed by a one stop shop which provides a reference number and allocates the issue to the appropriate provider. Too many complaints are bounced back and forth between retailer and wholesaler or company and company. The complaint must land where it will be addressed.

When a consumer has an issue and requests assistance a reference number should be applied to the task of assistance and followed through to completion within an acceptable time frame. Failure to address the complaint reference should cause a penalty to be applied.

It is not acceptable that complaints of supply or service faults go to the Telecommunications Ombudsman for resolution. All avenues of timely rectification or conciliation should be exhausted by the body to whom the complaint is referred first.

Essential Infrastructure

Strathbogie Shire Council has identified digital connectivity in the region as an essential infrastructure which must be advanced just to keep up. Standing still with technology is falling behind.

To address the expectations in the Broadband supply, NBNCO should meet its commitments as described in their 2021 Corporate plan.

“As a Government Business Enterprise (GBE), the principal responsibility of NBN Co is to build and operate the National Broadband Network in accordance with the Commonwealth Government’s Statement of Expectations, 24 August 2016. The Company’s key objective is to ensure that all Australians have access to fast

broadband, at affordable prices, and at least cost to taxpayers. In addition to building and operating a network that is resilient and secure, NBN Co is committed to delivering access to peak wholesale download speeds of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps) to all eligible premises, and at least 50Mbps to 90 per cent of fixed-line premises.”

<https://www.nbnco.com.au/content/dam/nbnco2/2020/documents/media-centre/corporate-plan-2021/nbnco-corporate-plan-2021.pdf>

All looks good in the NBNCo annual report for 2021, but what is the lived experience of broadband access in Strathbogie Shire?

The first distinction to make is that in Strathbogie Shire 66% of eligible premises are served by either Fixed Wireless or Satellite broadband. 27.7 % are Fibre to the node and 1.3% Fibre to the premises.

Fixed line serviced premises should enjoy a better service, up to 50Mbps to 90% of fixed line services, however in Strathbogie Shire, two thirds of properties are served by the inferior Fixed wireless and satellite.

The towns of Avenel and Violet Town are not offered fibre connections.

It is recommended that fibre connections are installed for Avenel and Violet Town.

In locations away from towns using a mobile 4G signal as an alternative to access the internet is often not possible.

Locations not served by NBN fibre are on an inferior and slower NBN service.

Some customers have been driven away to pay extra for services provided by others, for example Star-Link. This may be to their advantage, however the reason for swapping is often that the original service via Skymuster was not up to speed and frustrating.

Regional customers have been forced to move and pay more.

Once again, the guarantees of service have not been met in the regions.

Covid – 19

With little or no alternative during Covid - 19 many people have battled with their telecommunications connections.

Working from home has become a necessity, schooling from home, telehealth, and many forms of face to face communications are processed over the phone or internet because of Public Health driven restrictions of movement.

Transactions with Government are increasingly driven by digital connection, for example My Gov.

Dramatic changes to work and interactions have developed during Covid -19, all reliant on good reliable telecommunications. Most of the time good results have been achieved however many frustrations have also resulted from poor service, and or, a connection incapable of driving a Zoom call or syncing voice conversations.

The connectivity test that was Covid-19 over 2020 and 2021 has been passed by Broadband access, but only just. Many working from home tasks were not readily supported on a home-based internet connection available in Strathbogie Shire.

Business level fibre connections do not extend to Strathbogie Shire.

Last year, during Covid-19 lockdown conditions, we surveyed business owners with the following results:

- 77% of businesses surveyed used video conferencing during Covid-19.
- **61% of businesses surveyed experienced dropouts, slow speed, and time delays during Covid**
- 62% of businesses surveyed experienced Daily dropouts, 24% Weekly dropouts and 14% Monthly dropouts.
- **68% of businesses surveyed experienced poor internet coverage which had a negative effect on their business.**

Frustration with the supply of telecommunications services is common in Strathbogie Shire.

The results of our survey may be best described as unsatisfactory, and those dissatisfied respondents as unhappy and frustrated.

Many survey respondents described poor services, poor connections, slow speeds, and drop-outs. Waiting, disruption of processes, and time lost are major frustrations.

Indigenous Australia

Strathbogie Shire does not have a particular insight into supply of telecommunications services to indigenous Australians. We observe that the same issues described above in our submission apply to all households, businesses, and communities in Strathbogie Shire inclusive of all.

We would refer the Review Panel to peak bodies representing the indigenous community in Regional Victoria.

Regional Development

Strathbogie Shire is expected to experience further substantial increases in development and population. Estimates of population increase in Strathbogie Shire predict growth from just under 11,000 residents now to over 15,000 in the next 15 years.

As submitted above, residential development in Strathbogie Shire is growing. Support for Regional Development by many Government policies and programmes is appreciated and there is recognition of the benefits of further diversification economically and socially, however, as investment in development occurs both public and private, the supply of telecommunication infrastructure must keep up.

Telecommunications is an essential foundation infrastructure.

The Commonwealth Regional Connectivity Programme (RCP) has recently approved three mobile phone projects in Strathbogie Shire, one 3G upgrade at North Euroa, upgrades to 4G at Avenel and at Avenel South. These Telstra upgrade projects promise improvements.

However, there is no comprehensive published plan for further telecommunications infrastructure developments in Strathbogie Shire.

There have been some other suggestions... NBNCO has established a regional co-investment fund!

NBNCO Regional Co - Investment Fund (RCIF)

NBNCO is engaging with Councils on the prospect of Co-investments for further regional broadband infrastructure.

The structure of the RCIF is breathtaking.

How does the NBNCO Board see this as an equitable ask of Local government when they are being asked to step outside of their traditional role and shoulder the further responsibility of seeking funding for telecommunications and digital connectivity?

This activity has previously been the province of the federal government and it seems that there is an attempt to cost and responsibility shift.

The incentive for LGAs to participate is clear, yes, they want investments in local telecommunications infrastructure.

But where will the Council Co-investment funding come from?

There is not a bucket of Council funds available to buy telecommunications infrastructure.

Tell 'em they are dreamin'

Emerging Technologies

Of the emerging technologies, the StarLink low earth orbit satellites (LEOs) is showing a great deal of promise in the Beta phase operating in the Strathbogie Shire area. The low orbit reduces latency and experience so far is that StarLink will be a fast and strong player in the market.

StarLink, and others that may follow, could fill gaps in the supply of good reliable satellite-based internet service. But it comes at additional cost to the consumer and is not part of the taxpayer paid for NBN system which promised universal cover.

Impediments should not be put in place that would restrict LEOs or other developments.

All the possible options should be available for regional Australians.

Maximising outcomes

To maximise the opportunities and outcomes a much-improved rate and clarity of communication and collaboration with local government is required.

Currently ad-hoc arrangements exist and do not meet the communications and collaboration effort required.

It should not be expected that Strathbogie Shire, or similar rural Councils, can take on the responsibility of planning and investing in telecommunications in our area. It is however in our interests and we do endeavour to be a participant as often as we can in forums, debates, reviews, inquiries, and the related research efforts.

There should be a regional telecommunications forum for the Strathbogie Shire to collaborate and cooperate with State and Federal Governments and representatives of the telecommunications industry.

A local forum would be capable of developing a plan for digital connectivity and telecommunications investment in Strathbogie Shire.

Communicating directly with Local Governments consistently and persistently will bring with it a focus on the real issues and fulsome discussion on the regional issues.

Leaving the discussion to higher levels does not access local knowledge directly or engage with the users of the services.

It is recommended that a formal, regular localised communication with Strathbogie Shire and regional survey of needs should be established.

Conclusion

In Strathbogie Shire we expect that the telecommunications network, including NBN, a publicly built foundation infrastructure, will continue to grow, improve, and contribute to greater productivity and wellbeing of our community.

We want to work more closely with telecommunications providers, wholesalers, NBNCO, Retailers, Telstra, Optus, and others who supply into Strathbogie Shire.

We need a plan for the future, and not to play catch up...

Right now, it appears there is no plan to allow for future economic and community development in the regions. Telecommunications capacities need to be improved now to facilitate development of the regions and increases in population as people decentralise from the cities.

There is mounting evidence that decentralisation is taking place now because of the Covid 19 pandemic and we should not wait and play "catch up". It is more cost-effective to make the extra investment now rather than wait as costs rise into the future

Strathbogie Shire cannot be reactive, must be proactive, is not prepared to wait, must see that action is taken now, and plans are in place for the future...we don't accept that the broadband rollout is complete, job done, and will not be developed further.

Strathbogie Shire has recently submitted a list of telecommunications issues to the Connecting Victoria Project, listing locations for priority attention.

We have recommended projects for development that would Improve services, mobile, broadband and place based. They are described briefly in an attachment to this submission.

But the point is that all these matters require a positive attitude to communication, planning and collaboration that includes Strathbogie Shire in plans that will deliver good quality, reliable and up to date telecommunications services to people. **"No matter where they live or work"**.

For further information please contact

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Strathbogie Shire Council

References and quotes:

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Statements, expectations, guarantees... and the lived experience

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Lived Experiences are disappointing

Strathbogie Shire Mapping of NBNCO connections

Goulburn Region Digital Plan – Regional Development Victoria

In their own words...

Strathbogie Shire Survey of businesses results 2021

Submitted to Joint Standing Committee NBNCO September 2021

[Inquiry into the business case for the NBN and the experiences of small businesses](#)

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Zoom with a View

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Attachments to this Submission

1. Strathbogie Shire Submissions – Joint Standing Committee – NBN

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/National_Broadband_Network/smallbusinessandcase/Submissions

2. Strathbogie Shire Survey

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/National_Broadband_Network/smallbusinessandcase/Submissions

3. Strathbogie Shire NBN Connections mapping.

4. Strathbogie Shire Submissions – Connecting Victoria

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