



# **Torres Shire Council Submission**

## **2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Issues Paper July 2021**



# TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL

*To lead, provide & facilitate a sustainable,  
safe and culturally vibrant community*

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19 October 2021

## **2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat**

**Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications**

**GPO Box 594**

**CANBERRA ACT 2601**

Dear Committee Chair – The Hon. Luke Hartsuyker

### **TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL'S SUBMISSION TO THE 2021 REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS**

#### **REVIEW ISSUES PAPER**

Torres Shire Council (Council) is pleased to respond to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Issues Paper, July 2021 and specifically to address questions posed by the Committee.

The **Shire of Torres** is a local government area located in Far North Queensland, covering large sections of the Torres Strait Islands and the northern tip of Cape York Peninsula north of 11°S latitude. The peoples of the Shire are First Nations peoples.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Council notes that the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) is established every three years under Part 9B of the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* to conduct a review into telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia: the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review (the Review) The committee was appointed on 1 June 2021 and is comprised of the Hon Luke Hartsuyker (Chair), Ms. Kristy Sparrow, Professor Hugh Bradlow, Mr. Michael Cosgrave and Ms. Sue Middleton.

Council notes that as part of the Review, the Committee will consider the following:

- The impact of Government policies and programs to improve regional connectivity and digital inclusion;

- insights from COVID-19 on the changing digital needs of regional, rural and remote areas;
- service reliability issues, which impact regional communities and options for mitigating them (a particular concern of Torres Shire Council);
- the role of emerging technologies in delivering telecommunications services in regional Australia;
- ways of encouraging further investment in regional telecommunications;
- the role of telecommunications in supporting broader regional development goals;
- ways to improve co-ordination between government and industry in telecommunications investment; and
- consumer awareness and education regarding telecommunications options in regional areas.

Council has consistently and persistently noted in its submission and 10-Point Plan<sup>1</sup> the following:

*At present there is a bandwidth limitation on the backhaul network that is preventing and/or delaying the provisioning of new services in the region and this is impacting Council (and several other organisations) from upgrading and/or installing new business grade services. Council is unable to upgrade services to address issues with current services; and is unable to take advantage of SIP telephony until upgrade completed, which results in higher call costs and risks around disconnection of copper services scheduled to take effect soon. Council efficiencies are impacted through the inability to function sufficiently enough to maintain cloud-based systems; and Council projects such as public wi-fi at the airport cannot be commenced until such time as bandwidth is made available. Torres Shire Council calls on the Federal Government to take decisive action over Telstra's failure to comply with the Commonwealth's CSG Standard 2011 in the provision of telecommunications to the Torres Shire (and region). Further, Council calls on the Federal Government to fast-track Digital 2020 to our Shire and region.*

*Torres Shire Council stresses that failure in the delivery of efficient and effective telecommunications in our region, especially through Telstra, serves to undermine both our business efficiency and our connection to the world ..... Telstra ..... has not complied with the universal guarantee enshrined in the Telecommunications (Customer Service Guarantee) Standard 2011 ("the CSG*

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<sup>1</sup> Torres Shire Council Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia, March 2019, Torres Shire Council Federal 10-Point Plan, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021

Standard"), as amended and issued by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), as follows:

### **1. Limited Bandwidth Availability**

*At present there is a bandwidth limitation on the backhaul network that is preventing and/or delaying the provisioning of new services in the region and this is impacting Council (and several other organisations) from upgrading and/or installing new business grade services. Telstra has..... identified that there is bandwidth available; however, the current technical design is limiting utilisation for the full capacity. Telstra are currently investigating the option to install aggregators in the Freshwater (Cairns) and Thursday Island Exchanges..... in order to take advantage of the bandwidth that is currently unavailable for use. ....Council awaits the promised significant upgrades that have been included in the Digital 2020.*

*The impact on Council regarding limited bandwidth is as follows:*

- a. Council is unable to upgrade services to address issues with current services; and*
- b. Council is unable to take advantage of SIP telephony until upgrade completed, which results in higher call costs and risks around disconnection of copper services scheduled to take effect soon; and*
- c. Council efficiencies are impacted through the inability to function sufficiently enough to maintain cloud-based systems; and*
- d. Council projects such as public wi-fi at the airport cannot be commenced until such time as bandwidth is made available.*

### **2. Unreliable ADSL Infrastructure**

*For some years now, Council's internet connectivity has been provided via 3 ADSL services to the main administration offices and additional services exist to service the remote offices. The reliability of these services is gradually declining..... For instance, performance degradation can be noticed during peak usage times (i.e., 3pm onwards). As ADSL is a contended service, this kind of impact is not unusual; however, limitations around upgrading force Council to continue using such services until such point as where point 1 is addressed.*

More recently, following a major outage in November 2018, Council has been experiencing regular disconnections from the Telstra network with no resolution to date.<sup>2</sup> All effort has been taken at this point to rule out any Council-owned infrastructure and investigations are continuing with Telstra. In some cases, services are disconnecting up to 10 or more times per day. The impact on Council is significant.

### **3. Mobile Broadband Performance**

The mobile network regularly appears to be congested and this limits the ability to rely on NextG as a failover mechanism for the fixed line services.

Remote workers struggle to maintain connection to the system. This seems especially so late at night where often the service is unusable.

Our communities are internet-savvy, but because of the failures in the delivery of telecommunications in our region, a smaller number of households have internet access compared to the rest of Queensland. Internet access in the Torres Shire is as follows:

- 56.9% of households with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons had internet access; and
- 75.8% of non-Indigenous households had internet access

This compares to the Queensland use rate where:

- 73.5% of households with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons had internet access; and
- 84.2% of non-Indigenous households had internet access.

Therefore, the use rate of households with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons in the Torres Shire is 16.6% less than Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander households in the rest of Queensland and almost half that discrepancy (-8.4%) for non-Indigenous households”.

### **Executive Summary of Issues (and suggested solutions)<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> These difficulties continue to occur in 2021

<sup>3</sup> Please note details outlined in the 2021 TCICA Region Telecommunications and Digital Connectivity, Final Report

## Infrastructure and Assets:

- Unreliability of internet and mobile services – slow speeds, dropouts, short range of towers, blackouts – change the range of towers, intergrade regional planning supported by Regional Technical Panels of all relevant stakeholders – at Commonwealth level refer recommendation for Joint Standing Committee.
- Weather impacts on satellite internet reliability, as the region is prone to heavy rain and cyclones – explore new technologies that remove the need to be satellite- dependent.
- Some infrastructure is old – modernise infrastructure.
- Optic fibre where it exists is not always connected to premises – connect to premises.
- Multiple ad-hoc connectivity options (different systems of set up) with limited inter-operability – address interoperability.
- 2-speed internet service delivery (e.g. connections that some agencies can access versus the rest of the community) – internet service delivery be addressed so that consistency of accessibility is achieved.
- Last mile issues of connectivity (i.e. getting existing connections to reach properties) – connections reach properties.
- Limited mobile coverage, particularly on the outskirts and out of town – operationalise a strategy to expand coverage within the Shire and Region beyond town-centric coverage.
- People are doubling up on devices and services due to reliability issues (for redundancy) to keep businesses operational and maintain core services (increased cost of being connected) – reduce cost to businesses and organisations by reducing cost of connection through efficient data delivery.
- Infrastructure (mobile and some broadband) exposed and damage to infrastructure takes a long time to repair, especially during disasters – infrastructure be weather proofed to reduce exposure, delays and cost.
- Interdependency between mobile, internet and power connectivity, means all three can fail at once – plan provision of all 3 services so that there is not simultaneous fail (see other suggestions in submission).
- Reliance on generators for energy links digital connectivity with outages of power and energy reliability – energy companies expand their service to remove reliance on generators, including the use of new technologies and energy innovations.
- Lack of clarity about infrastructure planning, investment and roll out for the region by telecommunication providers – provide clarity (see other recommendations in the submission addressing transparency and accountability).

- Lack of clarity about regional backhaul availability – clarity provide to the region - especially by Telstra.
- Reliance on mobile phones to do business is not satisfactory due to data limits, coverage and affordability – diversify infrastructure.
- Lack of capacity of local communities to raise investment or co-contribute for infrastructure developments – factor into Commonwealth funding schemes.
- Need to co-ordinate infrastructure delivery in the region – one example is to ensure road infrastructure design and build is done with telecommunications.
- The shift service delivery to on-line (e.g. My Gov) with e-government and limited on site services (banks, ATMs), remote work and COVID-19 measures have created anxiety about access and being left behind (refer details later in the submission regarding COVID19). The Commonwealth have regard to the impact of digital transfer from phone and paper-based systems and their impact on the region by providing additional supports via their government agencies in the region.
- Regional vulnerability to climate and weather requires greater investment to protect and maintain telecommunication infrastructure – invest.

**Affordability:**

- Data on mobile packages limited and inadequate for need. Plans are capped which limits accessibility in relation to needs (slow downloads and uploads). In some cases, some members of the community have paid for data they are unable to use due to congestion and people give up on usage – Commonwealth require all 3 telcos with a business footprint in the region to develop a pricing package that is appraise to the region’s needs that is transparent and easily understood – expand available data without price hikes.
- Few choices of retail services providers (especially for mobiles) to provide competition – expand providers to ensure competition – Telstra’s role as a preferred provider will require attention.
- Lack of affordability of plans for individuals, services and businesses as many advise they cannot afford *SkyMuster Plus*, or the business grade plans – see recommendation for competition and data provided in remote areas elsewhere in the submission.
- Outer islands of the Torres Strait are being charged international mobile roaming rates – ensure they are only charged domestic rates.
- Limited options of mobile/broadband bundles due to small number of providers – expand the number of providers and design different service plans to meet the demand patterns of remote consumers so that they have more choice of plans, different data and cost structures suited to remote locations and low-income families; and

- Consumers cannot afford laptops, mobile phones and business owners and services require affordable as existing enterprise-grade devices, platforms, software, and connections are seen as too expensive for micro and small businesses – supply and price be addressed through competition; and businesses are supported in the acquisition of assets as part of taxation and other business advice provided through the Commonwealth.

**Technical support:**

- Long service times for connectivity installation and maintenance – establish benchmarks that are appropriate to the region to bring down the long service times currently being experienced.
- Limited place-based technical capability of users to help trouble shoot – compounded by restrictions on technical literacy due to lack of access to laptops, tablets etc. and only experience is via a mobile phone – increase technical capability – regional libraires. TAFE and schools providing community access and programs (e.g. expand the seniors IT program funded through libraries to include other groups).
- Decreasing on-the-ground technical expertise in businesses, service agencies and government, with many agencies contracting consultants to support them remotely (as does Council) – State Government agencies do have help desks and IT specialists to assist but this is all done remotely – No doubt this is a feature of remote and rural regions throughout Australia and hence the committee may recommend strategies to address technical literacy on-the-ground.
- Poor customer service and misinformation given by some providers – a one stop shop for consumer protection is required given that standards and laws pertaining to this matter traverse both the Commonwealth and the State.
- Onus is placed on consumer to address technical issues and troubleshoot and not on providers – reverse the onus.
- Attraction of telecommunication staff to the region is difficult and expensive and results in delays to service - Ergon ensures technical staff are on the ground in the Shire and the region and the telcos should provide the same resourcing.
- Slow service response times and waiting times mean that the Consumer Service Guarantee (CSG) is not often met but communities were not aware of this fact nor the skills to make complaints – all consumers should be aware of, and understand, the CSG. The CSG should be explained in ‘creole’ languages and the Kala Lagau Ya and Meriam Mer dialects, as English is a second or third language for many in the Shire and the region. Information about making a complaint should be equally available and explained in in ‘creole’ languages and the Kala Lagau Ya and Meriam Mer dialects.



### **Digital Literacy and Awareness:**

- Lack of consumer knowledge and advice on getting/staying connected, trouble shooting, service complaints – see above.
- Confusion about telecommunications – providers, packages, internet-mobile differences, options for connectivity – see above.
- Lack of digital skills and increased digital divide and generation gap – refer reference to senior program above and section on digital divide in the submission. There are other differences including geographic, employment categories, individuals and organisations and this negatively impacts on business opportunities, education and accessing social services.

### **Safety, Emergency and Border Security:**

- Interruptions to communications during accidents and health emergencies – refer this matter addressed in the submission, including the findings of a recent coronial enquiry
- Limited access to information and alerts during disaster management and weather events – see submission.
- Difficulty reporting safety issues across isolated roads and between islands in the Torres Strait – see submission.
- Difficulty reporting domestic and family violence and criminal activity – refer submission.
- Difficulty reporting border security concerns – refer submission; and
- Difficulty implementing COVID-19 measures – refer above and submission.

The following addresses a number of the questions posed in the issues paper:

#### **Q1. 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?**

Council and our communities have the same business, economic, educational, social and service delivery requirements as elsewhere in Australia. In our Shire and region, the quality and reliability of services fail, not only during storm events and cyclones, but absent these events. Community members and Council can report that there is unreliability of internet and mobile services with slow speeds, inadequate network capacity, dropouts, black spots and lack of geographical coverage.

#### Case One:

A member of our community reported that she was preparing for an examination as part of her doctoral program. She was experiencing problems with internet performance and connectivity.: freezing, buffering or dropping out altogether. This posed a serious problem, as the examination was time-limited, and a penalty would be applied if the questions were not answered within the time set.

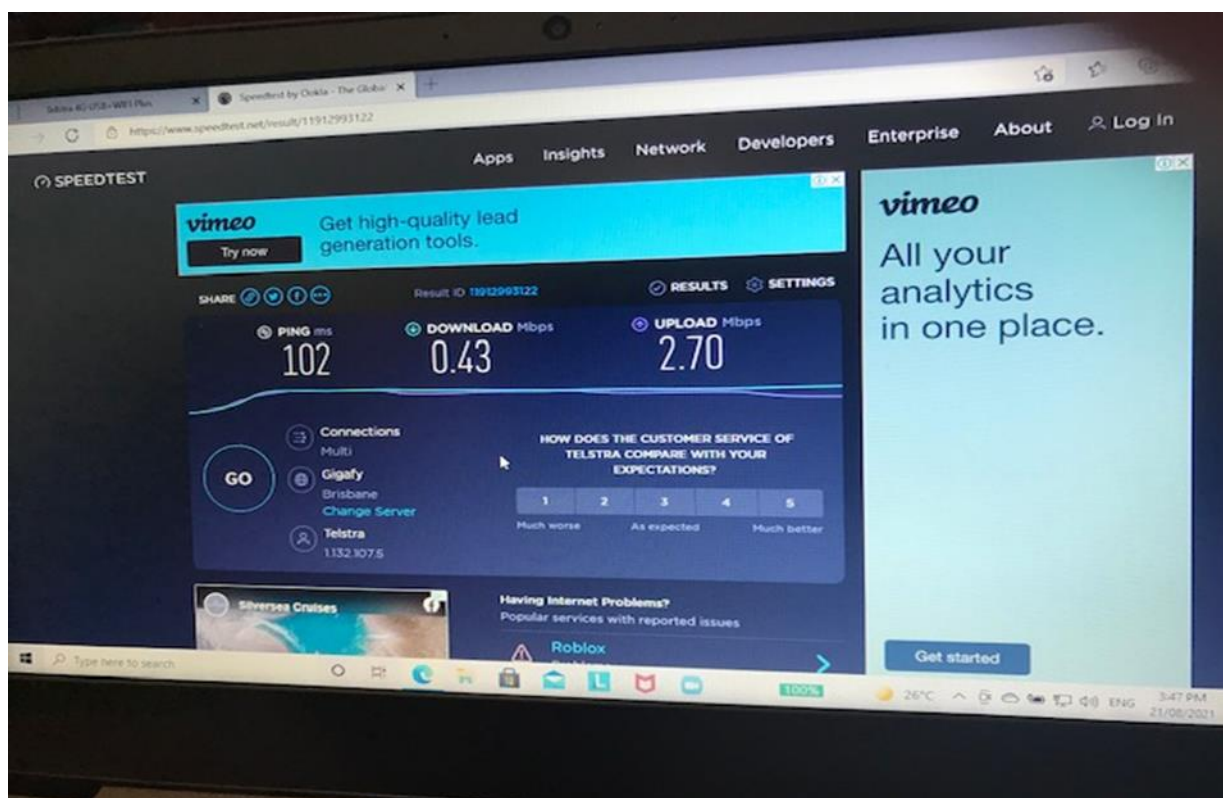
The examination was for a duration of a three hours, requiring reliable telecommunications for that period. She contacted the University and they used software to determine the download speed (see Figure 1 below). The required Mbps speed to undertake the exam was 2 Mbps (and at worst 1 Mbps). The speed on this day was 0.43 Mbps and on the previous day 0.75 Mbps. The download speed differs depending on what day of the week and what time of the day the internet is accessed. In all circumstances, the speed was too slow to support her meeting the aforementioned University requirements and the University advised that this lack of reliable telecommunications may make it difficult for her to complete her doctorate.

### Case Two

A businessperson in the Shire was participating in a meeting that was being conducted in Parliament House in another State. The meeting was via Microsoft *Teams*. The businessperson reported to Council that the sound and picture continued to either freeze or drop out. The opportunity to influence those in attendance at the meeting was lost. This and similar experiences resulted in loss of important business.

So the first requirement is that the Commonwealth ensures that the Torres Strait region is afforded safe and reliable telecommunications in order that its communities may undertake educational, business and other activities.

Figure 1



In addition, there are safety concerns with the lack of reliable digital connectivity, especially in the context of COVID-19, but also in terms of family violence and policing, border security and biosecurity; brought into high relief in times of isolation. The problems experienced in the region also have terrible human costs, as noted by the coroner recently in the *Pana Boy* boating tragedy, where five people (including young children) lost their lives. The coroner determined that **poor mobile phone connectivity** in the region, along with the absence of an outer island ferry service and a cultural shift in marine safety were the three main contributing factors to the tragedy, requiring urgent attention<sup>4</sup>.

The problems experienced in our Shire and region have other economic costs, including opportunity costs, as well as lost strategic literacy through the absence of intergovernmental linkage associated with remote digital service delivery.

The other area to address is the service quality and social infrastructure gaps due to limited or mismatched telecommunications services/plan to meet remote, regional and rural consumer needs and the affordability of plans (particularly where there are redundancies and lack of access to local technical support). To address these difficulties one important step is to encourage competition so that *Telstra* is not effectively afforded monopoly status in the Torres Strait. *Optus* (for example) regularly has no coverage in the Torres Strait.

## **Q.2 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?**

As noted by Torres Cape Indigenous Council Alliance Inc (TCICA):

*The communities in the Torres and Cape region have aspirations for economic and social and cultural development and wellbeing. (The TCICA Report) concludes that a lack of regional-scale planning leaves individuals, families and communities to resolve complex digital planning and service development issues. At the local scale, digital connectivity enables people to earn a living, run a business, have social contact, access services and participate in civic life. Evidence highlights the critical roles that digital connectivity plays, particularly in information exchange., decision making, building social capital, civic participation and connection for long term recovery. A whole of region approach to resolving these issues can empower local communities, businesses, families and individuals to secure better access and to improve the benefit they derive from these emerging new opportunities. Digital participation can be strongly empowering, helping*

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<sup>4</sup> As cited in Strait Talkin'/Cape York Weekly, "Coroner's Concerns", page 1 and "Leaders reflect on tragic incident", page 2

*people to overcome their sense of helplessness, giving them a sense of control and agency for individuals, communities and businesses, and helping them fulfil and social aspirations and develop resilience in the long term.*<sup>5</sup>

Thus the first requirement needed in the Shire and the Torres Strait is a whole-of-region approach with regional-scale planning of digital connectivity and telecommunications. Key to this is high-speed digital connectivity, effective planning for access and localised digital capabilities (Marshall, Babacan and Dale 2021). In a Northern Australia Communication Analysis (Marshall et al., 2020) undertaken for the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Developing Northern Australia identified the key issues as follows:

- Infrastructure gaps: The levels of service available in the north of Australia and those enjoyed in the major metropolitan areas differ significantly. The economics of communications provision in remote area militates against extension provision of terrestrial backbone links, whether by microwave radio or optical fibre, and mobile phone coverage. While satellite internet can deliver acceptable service, it is recognised that the quality and reliability of services deteriorates under a range of conditions (Infrastructure Australia, 2015)<sup>6</sup>
- Service quality and social infrastructure gaps: Limited or mismatched telecommunications services/plans to meet the needs of rural and remote customers, inadequate network capacity, reliability and technical services and limited localised support for digital knowledge sharing and skills development.<sup>7</sup>

These infrastructure, service and skills gaps in digital connectivity and communication technologies have been found to result in the digital divide (Thomas et al., 2019). The term “digital divide” refers to the disparity between individuals (as well as households, businesses, sectors) in different geographic areas and socio-economic levels of access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) as well as their use of the internet for a wide variety of activities (OECD, 2020). Digital exclusion is interlinked with other forms of inequality; can compound existing disadvantage; and can create new forms of societal stratification and impact on life chances (Babacan et al., 2020)

Council has drawn attention to the fact that at present there is a bandwidth limitation on the backhaul network that is preventing and/or delaying the provisioning of new services in the region and this is impacting Council (and several other organisations) from upgrading and/or installing new business

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<sup>5</sup> Babacan Hurriyet, McHugh Jennifer, Marshall Amber, Gopalkrishnan Narayan and Dale Allan, TCICA Region Telecommunications and Digital Connectivity, Final Report, 2021, Torres Cape Indigenous Council Alliance Inc., QUT Digital Media Research Centre, James Cook University, the Cairns Institute, p2

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p 4

<sup>7</sup> Op cit, pp-4-5

grade services. The Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP) does not fund projects to improve backhaul capacity but rather funds the base stations to improve mobile coverage.

Council recommends that this funding approach be further examined, noting our concerns. Council does note, however that the inaugural 2021 funding round of the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) has included improvements to mobile coverage and backhaul and increased the NBN fixed line/wireless services in the regions.

It is critical that funding is evidenced-based. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) is one such source of evidence. Currently there are no ADII scores available for all of the Cape and Torres Strait region.

A previous study commissioned by the Far North Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils (FNQROC) reported no signal at all could be found along many of the roads on the Cape and both 3G and 4G services were not available.

### **Q.3 What changes in demand, barriers or challenges need to be addressed when it comes to telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia?**

Demand, barriers and challenges in our region very much focus on human capacity development and efficient business continuity. The Federal Government has established a Regional Tech Hub in 2020. This initiative is very much supported. Nevertheless, its limited number of staff cannot assist all of regional Australia and the Hub's knowledge across Cape York and Torres Strait communities is limited. Expanding the personnel employed in the Hub and their knowledge of our region; or alternatively, creating a Hub in the Cape and Torres Strait and employing local personnel who understand the needs and challenges of the communities in our region will address current deficiencies.

The Torres Strait is Australia's most northern frontier and borders Papua New Guinea. Torres Shire, and notably Thursday Island, is the main commercial service delivery and business hub for the region and is accessible via daily flights to Horn Island and ferry to Thursday Island as well as by barge to Thursday Island.

The issues identified in the TCICA report and confirmed by Council include:

- Difficulties engaging with government online processes in individual or work situations (examples included individuals trying to use Centrelink portals on their mobile phones and going to Council to seek technical support as there is no other point of call. Difficulty of agencies to do government reporting, trying to upload or download data, connectivity dropping out during uploading and size of documents creating challenges);

- Outages periods can be for anything up to 5 days leading to the inability to pay fees and charges on Council EFTPOS or to obtain cash from an ATM or make transactions at the various businesses in the Shire;
- In addition to outages, school and health centre staff experience slow speed and dropouts during peak times or at home;
- Poor internet hinders remote learning;
- Problems with download and upload speeds lead to significant loss of productivity;
- The aforementioned problems impact on training and development cost – bringing trainers to the Shire is expensive and could be mitigated if there was reliable and efficient telecommunications; and
- Police and other agencies report that they often experience dropouts across the region and rely on satellite phones – often with poor reception – a serious safety risk for police, corrections (probation and parole), child safety and other services.

Table 1\p5 – Regional Profile

Northern	LGA	Telstra mobile	Optus mobile	NBN broadband
1	Torres Strait Island Regional Council (TSIRC)	non-uniform 3/4G coverage focused on townships	non-uniform 3G only coverage focused on townships	satellite or legacy ADSL
2	Torres Shire Council	non-uniform 3/4G coverage focused on townships	non-uniform 3G only coverage focused on townships	satellite or legacy ADSL
3	Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council (NPARC)	non-uniform 3/4G coverage focused on townships	non-uniform 3G only coverage focused on townships	satellite or legacy ADSL

**Q.4 How have the Government’s policies and programs affected telecommunications service outcomes in regional, rural and remote Australia? How can these be improved?**

This question has been addressed elsewhere in the submission. The Commonwealth Mobile Black Spot Program and the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) apply in our Shire; however, unlike the TSIRC region, the NPARC region and Cook Shire, the only funding that Council received is associated with the Northern Peninsula airport at Bamaga (Round 4 funding). The projects announced through the RCP support Aurukun, Napranum and Mornington Island. Council seeks equitable and needs-based access to this Commonwealth funding.

**Q.5 How do service reliability issues impact on regional communities and business? How do outages, including in natural disasters, impact on communities and businesses?**

Community members have expressed concerns that *Telstra* is cutting back service provision – especially on the outer islands.

Unambiguously, *Telstra* is opaque in terms of information regarding available data that may be accessed in the region. The three carriers should be transparent about available data in the region. One recommendation emanating out of this review might be that the carriers be required to publish an accurate report of available data and load **in each region** in their annual reports.

There is one bank in the Shire and the region – NAB with a single ATM and it has the 4<sup>th</sup> highest traffic in Australia for NAB. Frequent closures due to dropouts are a feature of telecommunications in our Shire and region. Banking stops when ATMs do not work or when the Branch is closed, resulting in negative personal and business impacts throughout the community (no lending, significant amounts of cash being carried across the Torres Strait that also impacts on tourism operators).

Council is reliant on ADSL and satellite for fail over. Council, organisations, individuals and businesses in the Shire and region are keen to increase available data. One recommendation is that the Commonwealth develop regionally relevant indicators and benchmarks for minimum service quality to meet the Universal Service Guarantee (USG) and that the USG be reviewed in light of this 2021 review to determine whether it meets the needs of regional, remote and rural Australia. Council seeks that the Guarantee is designed to meet community need in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Further examples regarding reliability include:

- Due to the lack of mobile coverage, the radio station is investing in their own connectivity, which is a dial-up box VOIP system.
- The justice system is impacted, particularly the availability of online courts.
- Health services, and notably telehealth are seriously impacted - 120 NDIS clients are in the area with the only support through telehealth. There is no way to obtain/get into therapy sessions. Foregone sessions must still be paid, and 3-4 sessions are often missed due to connectivity challenges.
- Primary health care was forced to close down for a half a day to catch up on paperwork due to having to rely on manual systems. Clinicians cannot get connectivity in the building and need to go outside to use satellite phones.

Another constructive initiative that the Review Committee could consider is that:

- the provision of telecommunications be a whole of government approach; and
- the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) be expanded to include representation across the portfolios; and

- rather than meet every three years, it becomes a joint standing committee of the parliament; and
- Part 9B of the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* is amended to reflect these changes.

This recommendation is considered important because of the rapidity of change in the telecommunications and the need for effective governance of our nation's telecommunications, especially in remote, regional and rural areas.

**Q.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 it provide?**

*Closing the Gap* strategy has at Target 17 that by 2026 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equal levels of digital inclusion. During COVID-19 lockdowns, schools in our Shire and region were unable to shift to online learning. Instead, schools prepared resource packs to be sent home or collected. In a number of the communities (thus defeating the public health purpose of on-line learning during the pandemic). It was reported that the work was not completed and so there was a period where no school-based learning took place. Schools and parents indicated concerns as to how NAPLAN would be delivered online. Further, due to the terrible speed for both downloads and uploads, Council staff who were required to work from home as part of the lock down, struggled with the telecommunications, especially in undertaking work involving large file downloads.

Conversely, COVID-19 also engendered much greater digital literacy in our Council and permitted the effective rollout of Microsoft *Teams* across the Shire office/business units. The number of connections and the consistent reliability of transmission/picture/sound/speed are still not on par with 21<sup>st</sup> century delivery requirements.

Council has addressed the other questions contained within the issues paper in the Executive Summary. Should the Committee have any questions pertaining to this submission, or wishes to further explore any matters raised, please don't hesitate to contact Council.

Thank you for providing Council with the opportunity to respond to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Issues Paper.

Yours faithfully



Dalassa Yorkston

**Chief Executive Officer**



## ANNEXURE 1 - SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the proposed solutions outlined in the Executive Summary, Council proposes the following:

1. The Commonwealth ensures that the Torres Shire and the Torres Strait region are afforded safe and reliable telecommunications in order that its communities may be socially connected and safe; so that it may effectively govern; and such that it may undertake or provide educational, business and services, including (but not limited to) local government, justice, policing and health.
2. The Committee supports initiatives to encourage competition so that *Telstra* is not effectively afforded monopoly status in the Torres Strait. *Optus* consumers (for example) regularly have no coverage in various parts of the Torres Strait.
3. Establish a whole-of-region approach with regional-scale planning of digital connectivity and telecommunications. Key to this is high-speed digital connectivity, effective planning for access and localised digital capabilities.
4. Council recommends that the Commonwealth's funding approach be further examined but does note that the inaugural 2021 funding round of the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) has included improvements to mobile coverage and backhaul and increased the NBN fixed line/wireless services in the regions, Council seek that it also extend its reach into our Shire.
5. To assist the Australian Government in the allocation of funding for telecommunications, it is critical that it is evidenced-based. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) may assist in understanding the digital divide and concomitant need. Currently there is no ADII scores available for all of the Cape and Torres Strait region. Clearly this gap needs be addressed.
6. Expand the personnel employed in the Regional Tech Hub and expand its knowledge of both the Torres Shire and the Torres Strait region, desirably by creating a Hub in the Cape and Torres Strait that employs local personnel, who understand the needs and challenges of the communities in our region.
7. The Commonwealth Mobile Black Spot Program and the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) apply in our Shire; however, unlike the TSIRC region, the NPARC region and Cook Shire, the only funding Council received is associated with the Northern Peninsula airport at Bamaga (Round 4 funding). The projects announced through the RCP support Aurukun, Napranum and Mornington Island. Council seeks equitable and needs-based access to this Commonwealth funding.
8. Carriers be required to publish an accurate report of available data and load **in each region** in their annual reports.

9. The Universal Service Guarantee (USG) be reviewed in light of the Committee's 2021 review to determine whether it meets the needs of regional, remote and rural Australia. Council questions whether the Guarantee has been met in our region and also seeks that the Guarantee is designed to meet community need in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
10. Another constructive initiative that the Review Committee could recommend given the pace of change in telecommunications and the impact of this change on rural, remote and regional Australia is as follows:
  - the provision of telecommunications be a whole-of-government approach; and
  - the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) be expanded to include representation across the portfolios; and
  - rather than meet every three years, it becomes a joint standing committee of the Parliament; and
  - Part 9B of the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* is amended to reflect these changes.
11. The Consumer Service Guarantee (CSG) be explained/translated in 'creole' language and the Kala Lagau Ya and Meriam Mer dialects, as English is a second or third language for many in the Shire and the Region. Information about how to make a complaint should be equally available and explained in 'creole' language and the Kala Lagau Ya and Meriam Mer dialects.
12. The Universal Service Guarantee (USG) be explained/translated in 'creole' language and the Kala Lagau Ya and Meriam Mer dialects, as English is a second or third language for many in the Shire and the Region. Information about making a complaint should be equally available and explained in 'creole' language and the Kala Lagau Ya and Meriam Mer dialects.
13. The Committee recommends that the current onus placed on consumers by providers/carriers to address technical issues and troubleshoot is reversed.

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