

Submission to Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

By Susanne Koen on behalf of Resilient Communities Adelaide Hills
(<http://resilientcommunitiesadelaidehills.org/>)

My submission to the Regional Telecommunications 2018 issues paper concerns community safety. I note that you provide questions to guide the writing of submissions, although you say that respondents are not bounded by these topics. What disappoints me is that the questions are all to do with utilisation, access and economics with no mention of community safety. And yet the risk to vulnerable communities is increased when landlines are replaced with nbn technology and telecommunications become reliant on a power source.

Background

I write on behalf of a number of Adelaide Hills Communities. The rollout of the nbn across the Adelaide Hills is not yet complete. Some communities already have fibre to the node. Many of us will need to wait at least another 12 months for fixed wireless. And yet, with regard to community safety, we will be better off than our neighbours, as we will, when connected, still be able to keep our landlines.

The Adelaide Hills is an area with frequent power outages, which has in the past resulted in loss of communications, on one occasion for up to 5 days. Since these communities are highly at risk from bushfires, storms and flooding, their vulnerability is considerably increased if communications fail. Since communications are vital to not only alert emergency services to an incident, but also to warn residents of any impending danger, it is imperative that emergency communications are prioritised for the safety of individuals and communities.

Extreme weather event December 2016

Shortly before midnight on 27th December 2016, fierce storms raged around the Adelaide hills and parts of the mid-North for a number of hours. Winds of up to 120km/hour brought down trees into homes and onto power lines, whilst torrential rain caused flooding in a number of catchment areas, leaving 155,000 households without power for extended periods, some for up to five days. Many households have no mains water or sewerage.

As a consequence, essential services—power, water, sewerage, and telecommunications—were also lost for up to five days. This had major consequences on day to day life, particularly for elderly and vulnerable people. By far the biggest concern was the failure of communications. At that time, few of our communities were connected to the nbn, but were reliant on landlines and mobile phones. However, mobile phone towers worked for 4–6 hours before battery backup ran out. ‘SOS’ calls remained available, presumably because not all towers exhausted battery backup simultaneously and emergency calls could be made by ‘roaming’ across other carriers. Nevertheless, all towers failed within 24 hours, leaving the community with no mobile coverage and, significantly, no access to Triple 000 or other emergency lines.

Unprecedented in the history of these communities, and just as Triple 000 was lost, the Telstra exchanges also ran out of battery power. Consequently the community was unable to communicate with the outside world: if there had been a car accident, a medical emergency or a bushfire, there would have been no means to report it—neither could we report infrastructure damage to SA Power Networks.

The nbn and rural communities

Although we live only 20 minutes from the Adelaide CBD, our services are far more limited than our neighbours living in urban communities. We have no mains water nor sewerage, both of which we must supply ourselves. This is manageable for some who can purchase and maintain a generator. For others, through the group I established—Resilient Communities Adelaide Hills—we can take care of our neighbours by opening up community facilities. What we can't do is ensure communications.

Even with a generator to the home, with no power to the node or the mobile base station, we will be without communication. Nbn Co advises customers to ensure their mobiles are charged in the event of a power cut. In other words, it abdicates responsibility to mobile telcos. What became evident in December 2016 was how rapidly mobile coverage failed.

In other words, if no intervention is taken, the rollout of the nbn, coupled with a limited battery backup at mobile base stations, means communities could lose communications after only four hours and remain without communications for many days.

Joint Standing Committee on the nbn

Last year I made a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on behalf of Resilient Communities Adelaide Hills. Not only did I submit a written report, but I was also asked to speak to the Committee at a public hearing in Adelaide last June. Unfortunately, no mention was made in their September 2018 report of the safety concerns that I raised.

Potential solutions

Our local Federal Member, the Honourable Rebekha Sharkie, has delivered a private members bill in parliament for longer battery backup—24 hours—at mobile base stations in vulnerable communities. This legislation has not yet passed. And yet, given the intensity of climate change and the examples of fires and storms overseas and their potential to replicate here, the need for reliable communications in a disaster is absolutely imperative.

Conclusion

This is an issue faced not only by our communities in the Adelaide Hills: I have seen concerns raised by fire authorities in other states and jurisdictions, equally disturbed by the threat to their own communities in an emergency should power be lost and communications consequently disrupted. I therefore urge you to consider this aspect and expand your brief to include community safety.