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Contact: Donna Ausling

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2018 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Email: secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW SUBMISSION

I refer to the Regional Telecommunications Review 2018 established pursuant to Part 9B of the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999*. The purpose of this submission is to provide Council's feedback to the Review Committee in line with the key focus areas detailed within the commensurate Issues Paper.

As context, the Liverpool Plains Local Government Area (LGA) is located in the northwest of NSW approximately 45 minutes from the Regional City of Tamworth. The population of the Liverpool Plains is approximately 8,000 persons and is considered to be an ageing population. The local economy is strongly based on Agriculture and the Liverpool Plains is internationally renowned for its productive and fertile soils, being known as Australia's 'food bowl'.

The two (2) primary settlements within the Liverpool Plains LGA are Quirindi and Werris Creek. The LGA covers a total land area of approximately 5,086 km².

1. What are the main barriers to people in regional communities increasing their use of digital technologies and possible solutions for overcoming these barriers?

Barriers include:

- Lack of appropriate technical information and appropriate guidance and support with respect to installation, access, troubleshooting within the current telecommunications system.
- Extreme cost disparities between regional/rural and metropolitan areas. In regional and rural areas it is incredibly expensive to access telecommunications.
- Lack of reliability of telecommunications services. There are frequent and sustained outages. The Werris Creek mobile service interruption is a recent example – this outage extended for over three (3) months. Ongoing outages have created significant community safety concerns.
- Mobile coverage is extremely sporadic within our Region and there are a number of blackspots affecting our smaller population settlements. These include, but are not limited to the communities of Spring Ridge, Pine Ridge, Caroonna, Currabubula, Bundella and Blackville.
- The community has widely expressed its difficulty with navigating a very complex system of information over several service providers as part of their individual decision-making processes. Access to such information also often relies on sporadic and unreliable internet access for supporting guidelines, collateral/document storage and dissemination channels.

LIVERPOOL PLAINS SHIRE COUNCIL

60 Station Street PO Box 152 QUIRINDI NSW 2343 TEL 02 6746 1755 FAX 02 6746 3255
EMAIL lpssc@lpssc.nsw.gov.au WEBSITE www.lpssc.nsw.gov.au ABN 97 810 717 370

- The ageing population of our LGA makes access a challenge, generally. Older community members are often fearful of making an incorrect 'choice' which in turn can lead to an inability or unwillingness to take up new technology, or, adopting technology that might better suit their needs. There is often little support by way of training or education in respect of such services. This contributes to increased social isolation and community risk, generally.
- Reporting faults through the Telstra 1300 number is considered to be exceptionally difficult and convoluted. The complexity of the system in reporting faults and outages often results in customers 'giving up' part way through the process.
- The Telecommunications vernacular is littered with complex acronyms and techno-oriented language. Key concepts of 'fibre to the node', 'VPN' and 'ISDN', for example, are not well understood by the community.

Solutions/Opportunities:

- Improve access to information by affected communities based on a well thought-out and articulated Communications Plan. For example, for communities with ageing populations conduct pop up shops at central locations with appropriately trained personnel available that can navigate the system and the various 'tiers of influence' with the view of providing independent guidance and advice to members of the community and businesses. Region-specific Project Officers co-funded by Telcos and State and Federal Government could also be considered.
- Improve training access to rural and regional areas to the community and local government staff. Local government (Councils) are at the coal-face and are considered to be an important but often neglected stakeholder in the process that can assist in the rectification of local issues. Notwithstanding this statement, Councils are not the sole panacea to community engagement and issues resolution with respect to the prevailing challenges detailed in this submission. Any solution should not result in cost shifting to Councils being undertaken.
- Improve information sharing across the various stakeholder organisations and better engage with affected communities.
- Telecommunications providers need to obtain a better understanding of site-specific infrastructure limitations in their project planning and site investigation phases.
- Increased use of social media and ICTs in community resilience-building activities and harnessing of social capital for community-based projects.
- Financial subsidies need to be urgently considered to improve equity of access within rural and regional communities such as the Liverpool Plains Shire.

2. *How are people in regional communities currently using their broadband service and how might they increase the benefits of using this technology?*

- Community members within our LGA are primarily utilising their Broadband services for a range of purposes including information searches, market research, and commonly weather data during the extreme drought conditions that are being currently experienced.
- Benefit of access to improved services (and access generally) are considered multi-faceted across quadruple bottom line considerations throughout the whole community.

- 3. What data-intensive activities are occurring in regional, rural and remote Australia? What digital technologies are needed for these?**
- As detailed above, our Region is a large and significant agricultural producer. Given the limitations on data access and telecommunications coverage our Producers are inhibited from accessing and implementing new technology particularly within the Agribusiness sphere. These barriers ultimately result in a stymying of economic development and social growth opportunities.
- 4. How can regional businesses better utilise digital technologies to maximize economic benefits?**
- The availability of improved download speeds, reliability and a reduction in cost would increase application and uptake exponentially.
- 5. What can be done to improve access to and uptake of telecommunications services in remote indigenous communities?**
- Council has no Indigenous communities which are considered to fit the 'remote' category.
- 6. *Are there practical examples of how communications services can improve the well-being of people in remote Indigenous communities?***
- As above.
- 7. *What skills do people need to get the most from their digital technologies and where can they learn these skills?***
- A range of practical applications need to be made available, particularly for the ageing members of our community and local businesses that are currently transitioning to, or proposing to transition to new digital technologies.
 - There are a range of service providers that can potentially provide training and upskilling solutions. This includes, but is not limited to:
 - TAFE NSW
 - Local Chambers of Commerce
 - Community Colleges
 - Local libraries
 - Existing service organisations (eg Lions, Rotary Clubs and CWA, for example)

8. Have you had ongoing issues affecting your satellite or fixed wireless broadband service? If so, how have you overcome these issues?

- Issues are ongoing across our community. Frequent outages exist and many issues remain unresolved, for example within Werris Creek (also not connected to the NBN).

9. If you are in an areas with access to the Sky Muster satellite service and you have not taken it up, why not?

- Sky Muster is not a suitable solution for Council's business needs. An upgrade exercise is currently underway to enable Council to access recently installed NBN services within the township of Quirindi, however, this has been delayed due to current infrastructure limitations. As a consequence, a date of completion of this work is currently undetermined.

10. What economic or social indicator could be used to guide investment to further improve mobile coverage?

- A combined approach is considered appropriate using indicators such as:
 - SEIFA index (social risk and disadvantage)
 - Fisher Index per ABARES (measurement of Agricultural productivity).

11. Is information readily available regarding how to use devices to improve mobile reception in areas with poor coverage? Eg information about external antenna equipment?

- As indicated above, it is not considered that this information is readily available to rural and regional communities.

12. What emerging digital services will be of most benefit to regional businesses and what are the data needs of these services?

- E-commerce activities to access lucrative Asian markets.
- Digital/mobile diagnostics.
- Trial data within the Agricultural sector.
- Mapping – drone usage.
- Ability to improve testing, market research and productivity within the Agricultural sector.

13. What broadband services are people using other than those available through the NBN?

- Council historically arranged for private fibre to be installed between two of its premises as part of its Business Continuity Plan. This has proved to be an effective, but expensive, solution.
- Many members of our community need and rely upon wireless broadband (4G) where the NBN is not available.

14. How can more competition be encouraged in the provision of broadband services in regional Australia?

- Establish a Universal Service Fund (USF), managed by the Commonwealth Department of Communications, to help fund non-commercial but socially important telecommunications infrastructure. The USF could be funded from contributions via an improved levy scheme that would look to reduce the distortionary impositions of the current arrangements.
- Consider broader opportunities for co-funding of infrastructure.
- Consistent with NBN's current remit, formally designate NBN as the *Universal Infrastructure Provider*, opening up further retail opportunities.
- Consider broadening the remit of the Universal Service Fund to deliver a broader range of telecommunications solutions for regional communities and other consumers, such as public open access WiFi. Consideration should also be given to providing funds for small scale community-led communication projects to enable broadband services to all Australians.

If you wish to discuss the contents of this submission further please contact Council's Director of Environmental and Economic Development Services Ms Donna Ausling by phoning this office on 6746 1755, or by emailing lpesc@lpesc.nsw.gov.au.

Yours faithfully



R S (Ron) van Katwyk
GENERAL MANAGER