LGAQ
LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION
OF QUEENSLAND

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2018 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
Department of Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Sent via email to: secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

The LGAQ is the peak body for Queensland's 77 local authorities. Our traditional role is to advance the interests of our member councils. Telecommunications has been a key area of interest for many of our member councils. The LGAQ welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this review.

Before addressing specific questions raised in the discussion paper, which is included in the attachment, an overview of the current strategies being undertaken by councils and the reasons why these actions are occurring need to be recognised.

Years of economic downturn due to severe droughts, compounded by ongoing demographic changes is threatening the economic fabric of many towns. A comparison of census populations on rural and regional councils in Queensland, based on LGAQ council segments, has shown a 3% decrease. Some individual councils have recorded a 10% population decrease between the 2011 and 2016 census.

This population decrease erodes council revenues and creates a flow-on effect in reducing government services such as less teachers, health workers, police and other state government services. A downward cycle is being created. Maintaining the status quo is certain to lead to missed opportunities and perpetuates this cycle.

The LGAQ's Digital Productivity Report reveals that councils recognise that while the digital economy does provide threats, (for example automation threatening low-skill jobs) if it can be mastered, it also provides opportunities for growth. There is a now a greater focus on the local, or in many instances, the need for regional, management of digital and making it a key part of economic development activity.

Councils are being proactive in implementing a range of activities to ensure country towns have the best possible opportunity to grow. This focus on digital, because it is an enabler, is an underpinning strategy for many councils.

The building block for the implementation of any digital activity is connectivity – telecommunication infrastructure. Once connectivity is obtained, the need for awareness and skills are some of the factors required to maximise the opportunity.

The LGAQ has been pro-active in working with councils to improve connectivity and skills. It has supported initiatives that aim to ensure rural and regional communities can move forward.

This has involved raising awareness about existing telecommunication infrastructure at the local network, raising awareness about some of the technology solutions that can improve productivity through efficiency, cost saving or service delivery, making financial support to

regional digital strategies, including proof-of-concepts, and supporting the soft infrastructure – awareness and skills programs.

The LGAQ's 2018 Advocacy Action Plan raised the need for the State Government to allocate funding to assist councils to develop regional digital strategies, skills and awareness programs to master these digital challenges. This request was based on the success of the LGAQ's involvement with the Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) – a regional development organisation which aims to foster, facilitate and promote the sustainable growth in Central Western Queensland.   The RAPAD initiative is a meaningful approach to identify and develop opportunities involving the digital economy.

The telecommunications landscape (infrastructure and policy) is complex, liquid and not well understood. It is our view that not since the de-regulation of the telecommunications industry in the 1990's has there been such a profound range of factors that are combining in ways that is impacting upon telecommunications in Australia and none more so than the changes occurring in the bush.

Legislative changes to the Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation, which threatens voice and payphones in communities, proposed changes to regulations involving Powers and Immunities of carriers building telecommunications infrastructure, the ongoing rollout of the nbn, ongoing evolution of mobile networks, including the 5G spectrum auction and the subsequent roll out of 5G, the impact of digital disruption – the internet of things (IOT) and big data, the realities (augmented, virtual, hybrid), drones, social media autonomous vehicles, awareness of on-line threats and cyber-security, the building of IOT networks such as SigFox and LoRaWan are combining in ways that can only be described as complex.

At the same time, the Commonwealth and the State have allocated millions for programs that are branded around "smart", "innovation", "digital" or "advance". Some of these programs benefit the bush.

For example, the Commonwealth Government's Mobile Blackspot program will result in about 200 new base stations and about 50 micro-cells being built in Queensland is an outstanding outcome. The recent announcement by the Commonwealth Minister for Rural Telecommunications that there will be a fourth round of funding for mobile base stations has been warmly welcomed and publicly acknowledged by the LGAQ.

The nbn roll-out involves a mix of technologies – in rural Queensland local government centres are designated as satellite (SkyMuster) fixed wireless, Fibre to the Curb (FTTC) or Fibre to the Node (FTTN).

There also appears to be a surge of new market entrants as regional councils, frustrated with the existing services, seek options to ensure towns and people living on properties are not "left behind".

Councils are embracing technology not only at the organisation level but at the community level to ensure towns and properties can access and benefit from the digital economy. Connectivity is critical, and councils are making strategic investments to resolve issues, either real or perceived, to demonstrate that they are being proactive.

In some communities the type of nbn technology has changed which reflects the broader strategy of the technology mix of the company but reiterates the challenges in understanding what technology is available in the local area.

New infrastructure by the traditional mobile carriers, Telstra, Optus and Vodafone continues to be rolled out but the technology in base stations also continues to evolve as well...the evolution of 3G to 4G and eventually 5G will result in bigger and smarter network coverage. However, it is recognised that the up-coming 5G spectrum auction is expected to be in the 3.5Ghz range, which could have limited range in terms of footprint. It is expected that an enhanced 4GX in the much lower 700MHz range is possibly the most likely solution.
As part of 5G, carriers will also roll out their Narrow Band Internet of Things network (NBIOT) – a network that complies to global standards to provide the network to move small packets of data associated with sensors.

The challenge for councils is understanding how the plethora of above mentioned changes will ensure their towns and people who live on properties will be genuinely be able to participate in the digital economy. Better awareness and understanding will help councils make better investment decisions as to how they can develop local niche digital strategies. While good and bad seasons will always critically affect core aspects of local rural economies, the need to identify and develop opportunities to ensure the bush can take advantage of the digital economy is paramount to the regional economy.

Attached are the Association's responses to the questions raised in the discussion paper. Should additional information be requested, please contact the LGAQ's Innovation Executive Lou Boyle on 07 3000 2234 or lou_boyle@lgaq.asn.au

Yours sincerely

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