Mobile Blackspot Program – Round 5A

District Council of Streaky Bay Responses

Question 1

Are there any comments on the coverage areas proposed to be targeted?

Round 5A Priority A should consider not only natural disaster-prone areas in the form of bushfire but additionally drought. Included in the response to priority B, a critical response and opportunity to drought, can be business diversification and this can only be possible with appropriate and affordable connectivity.

The emergency zones and assembly areas and letters of support required are endorsed.

Round 5A Priority B should consider priority coverage areas of locations where only satellite coverage is available to encourage competition with satellite providers. The cost of satellite plans in comparison to wireless is significantly higher. This would significantly support the agricultural sectors, both with their current agri-business operations and into the diversification of agriculture into areas such as agri-tourism where, particularly accommodation is reliant on on-line reservations. These areas are generally areas of low population densities.

Page 36 of the SA 20 Year infrastructure plan supports this in that digital agriculture, contingent on reliable and high speed connectivity, could increase the gross value of Australian agricultural production by $20.3 billion – a 25% increase on 2014/15 levels.

This is further supported by the recent COVID19 pandemic where there was a required rapid transformation to digital (for health, education and differing models of work) that was not isolated to one particular demographic nor region, but on a national scale across all sectors. This transformation was made difficult and remote communities were unprepared due to the lack of capability possible within their existing infrastructure.

Page 31 of the SA 20 Year infrastructure plan suggests digital connectivity will be central to our State's growth aspirations.

Council strongly supports that funding will be reserved and encourages higher levels of funding to solutions that deliver services to low population areas.

Council strongly supports the same approach as Round 1 and 2 as proposed so that remote and very remote areas are targeted.

Round 5A Priority C major regional and remote transport corridors; this should not be limited to major freight corridors.

Council strongly supports the proposal to utilise the Roads of Strategic Importance (ROSI) Initiative (eligible areas), as a key concern for Council and the district is the nominated Port Augusta (South Australia) to Perth (Western Australia) corridor. Targeted upgrades (as per the project benefits) will increase access for higher efficiency heavy vehicles, leading to an overall increase in the efficiency of the corridor in line with the ROSI objectives. Key industries that will benefit from an upgrade to this corridor include, grain, fuel and livestock. Additionally social and economic benefits will be derived from improved safety for residents traversing to Adelaide and visitors to the region from across the nation.

The noted social and economic benefits are further supported in the key design point of continuous and/or consistent coverage encouraging a “cluster” type project development.

Round 5A could consider the inclusion of priority coverage to digitally activate and encourage coverage of key tourism attractions and tourism routes. This would be aligned with the current focus on tourism recovery, domestic tourism travel and particularly the anticipated increase in the caravan and camping sector into remote locations. Page 36 of the SA 20 Year infrastructure plan supports mobile communications as playing a key role in the regional tourism experience.

Question 2

Are there any comments on the types of proposals that would be eligible for funding, including the required coverage outcomes

Macrocells, like traditional cell towers, are the largest cell type and they provide the greatest range of coverage in a mobile phone network.

Since they provide the most cell coverage, Macrocells typically take up the most space compared to other cell types, which restricts their ability to be implemented in a wide variety of locations.

Because of their space requirements, Macrocells are typically found in places such as rural communities and alongside long stretches of highway, where land availability doesn’t come at a premium.

The macro cell base stations would support large industry, the agricultural sector and the transport corridors.

The funding round should consider alternative/additional solutions in much smaller items such as Totem Wifi hotspots. These hotspots would enable smaller stakeholders such as Councils to fund and activate multiple locations in preference to one key location.

It is supported that Round 5A encourage and support new innovative methods of mobile service delivery.

Corridor coverage key design point touches on the fact that for certain regions a one size fits all approach may not be desirable, nor meet the required benefits of certain regions and this is where clustered, innovative approaches using various delivery methods could be warranted.

Question 3

Is the RAN model an effective sharing model for Australia?

The proposal for Round 5A is to prioritise funded solutions that provide a service from at least two Mobile Network Operators (MNO) and includes the co-location of MNO’s.

The RAN model could provide effective sharing and cost savings opportunities in the right locations. Council endorses that sharing models should be explored and negotiated before funding is provided.

Council has concerns regarding the suggestion that funded solutions should prioritise service from at least two MNO’s. In remote and regional areas, where a second MNO may not be considered (due to low population or an existing MNO in the region) viable for secondary MNO take up. For example, a region such as the Eyre Peninsula, which is predominantly serviced by one MNO, may be disadvantaged as the limited population base may not be attractive to a

second MNO, especially if they do not also receive the same connectivity options in adjoining locations/areas.

Support for proposals offering complementary services deployed with a mobile service could alternatively be prioritised in preference to the proposed two MNO's co-located for remote and rural locations.

Question 4

What other design options could be considered that provide multi provider outcomes?

Consideration of new technologies such as the "Starlink" program through Elon Musk's SpaceX company (satellite connectivity) may offer increased connectivity of lower costs in rural and remote regions. These options should be considered as longer term solutions to traditional and costly infrastructure.

Question 5

Are there any comments on the funding cap for Round 5A and eligible costs?

Council supports the introduction of a higher funding cap for deploying solutions that require multiple base stations and/or multiple innovative solutions as raised in question 2. It would be difficult to support a project along a road corridor or within a target region with a funding cap of $500,000 (inc GST), particularly if the aim was a clustered application (which should be encouraged).

Similarly, a higher cap might be required to support solutions in remote or very remote areas that have increased coverage distances, construction costs and implementation requirements.

Council supports the proposal to permit funding recipients to capitalise the costs of leased optical fibre and microwave backhaul.

The program should consider applicants such as Local Government and other smaller proprietors looking to apply under joint ventures/partnerships, to permit capitalisation of the cost of ongoing operational and maintenance costs for base stations for a two (2) year period, to provide an incentive and encourage proposals from these regions.

Question 6

Are there any comments that you wish to make in relation to the eligibility to apply for funding?

It may be useful to include the option for those wishing to upgrade current infrastructure. As many areas have only access to 3G capability, it may be useful to include consideration to allow upgrade to 5G capability to ensure the divide in accessibility does not continue to increase between urban and rural / remote areas.

Question 7

Are there any comments that you wish to make regarding ways the program could assist potential state government and third party contributors?

Co-contributions from state, territory, alternative federal government funding, or third party contributions, should be calculated towards the applicant's contribution.

Question 8

Are there any comments regarding the need for a shorter minimum operational period, particularly in remote and very remote areas?

3G solutions could be utilised for a shorter operational period and as a stop gap measure for remote and very remote areas providing connectivity in areas that previously did not have any form of connectivity. A minimum (3-5) period could be utilised with a condition that at the end of that period it is transitioned to a minimum of 4G (if possible) so as to not further disadvantage that area.

A shorter minimum operational period may encourage applicants to put in initial infrastructure and then transition.

Question 9

Are there any comments on the proposed equivalency requirement and 4G reference power levels for handheld and external antenna coverage?

This should be encouraged to ensure an even playing field and to ensure remote and very remote areas are not disadvantaged, nor have install technology that will be quickly outdated.

Question 10

What criteria could be used to identify key sites where independent power systems or redundant backhaul could be funded?

Working with SA Power Networks may assist in identification of those areas that are regularly affected by blackouts or mandatory reductions to power due to issues such as bushfire hazard reduction. Those remote areas with ageing infrastructure are regularly turned off during fire hazard and extreme heat days, with communication capacity being impossible within hours of the electricity supply being turned off. These leaves rural and remote communities in an even more vulnerable position as UHF/VHF becomes the only form of communication possible for extended periods of time (and then only where battery back ups exist).

Question 11

Are there any comments regarding the requirement for at least 12 hours of auxiliary backup power for small cells?

As indicated in recent natural disaster events have shown power outages can lead to prolonged outages of telecommunications networks and may face delays or difficulties deploying generators to base stations.

As rural and remote areas are regularly subject to power outages for more than 12 hours (some lasting several days), it may need to be considered that in remote and very remote locations, backup power arrangements are in place for a minimum of 24 hours.

Question 12

Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment criteria?

New coverage outcomes support the testing of new coverage against existing customer mapping. Consideration should be given for upgrades from 3G to 4G, not just new coverage particularly for rural and remote areas.

Support of a modified formula to consider overlapping coverage is also of a high priority in these areas.

The number of premises to receive new and overlapping handheld coverage weighting should be decreased accordingly if considering the design principles and particularly in regards to Principle 1, priority area 3; promoting solutions in areas where low population densities have discouraged applications in previous rounds.

Further, it would be useful to have access to advice from Local Councils included in the assessment criteria as Local Councils have the increased ability of understanding the needs of each locality within their districts. For example, the District Council of Streaky Bay have been requesting access to microcell tower installation at Mount Hall, Melingie Hill and Snaggly Hill for an extended period of time. Installation at these sites would offer coverage to about 95% of the district, however our requests have been disregarded and small cell tower has been installed at Baird Bay which now services only 5 permanent locals, and those fishing in the area. Whilst the residents and those camping and fishing in the area are very grateful for the installation community concern has been expressed regarding what is seen as a waste of taxpayers money when an extra contribution to install a macro cell at Mount Hall would have provide service capability to a significant area and avoided current blackspots experienced from the Witera Silos through to Streaky Bay township itself.