



Rebekha Sharkie MP

Federal Member for Mayo



MOBILE BLACK SPOT PROGRAM ROUND 5A PUBLIC SUBMISSION

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The Federal electorate of Mayo covers 9,135 km² of regional South Australia, taking in the Mount Lofty Ranges, the Fleurieu Peninsula and Kangaroo Island.

Mayo has more than 130 nominated sites under the Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP) and yet this electorate has only secured eight sites since the program began in 2015, before I was elected to office. Only half of them are currently operational.

Inequity in site allocations

For many rounds the Commonwealth blamed the lack of financial commitment from the former South Australian Labor Government for the low number of allocated sites in South Australia. In 2018 the South Australian Liberal Government elected in 2018 committed \$10 million to mobile black spots and yet Mayo received only one site out of 17 allocated to this State under Round 5. I am advised by carriers that a number of sites besides Kuitpo were put forward for consideration under Round 5, but without success.

In comparison, over the five rounds of the MBSP, 25 base stations have been allocated to the Liberal Party held electorate of Barker and 49 base stations allocated in the Liberal Party held Electorate of Grey.

Notwithstanding that future rounds of the MBSP might have taken into account the feedback from the 2016 Australian National Audit Office report on funding criteria shortfalls in Round 1, where 81.7 per cent of funding was directed towards base stations in Government-held electorates and nearly 20 per cent of towers provided no new or extended coverage, it is still apparent that the processes for selecting MBSP sites are completely inadequate to address the numerous black spots in Mayo.

Third party co-contributions

I have concerns about the implementation of a key design principle of MBSP Round 5A calling for support for third party co-contributions.

The South Australian Government committed \$3 million in co-contributions to Round 5 of the MBSP. However, on 24 May 2019 the State Government announced an Expression of Interest process for the South Australian contribution fund.

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This process required a "minimum community contribution of \$50,000". The deadline for submissions was 7 June 2019.

At the time I expressed my concerns to the State Government regarding the short timeframe for submitting expressions of interest and the capacity of many communities within my electorate to meet that \$50,000 co-contribution. It was never clear how the State Government expected communities to organise and fundraise \$50,000 within a fortnight, or whether they specifically expected local government or private enterprise to provide the funds on their behalf. I continue to maintain that it is a matter of equity that one community should not be denied access to a mobile blackspot solution because they could not afford to raise \$50,000 or lack the good fortune to have the backing of private enterprise.

Local Government and organisations such as Regional Development Australia (RDA) are arguably the organisations with the greatest capacity to provide community co-contribution. However, I am advised that until recently any Local Government contribution to base station construction in South Australia has largely been in-kind support with land provision, rate relief and the fast-tracking applications. Direct funding for base stations would require Councils to include the infrastructure in their business plans and their annual budget submissions for community consultation which was not plausible within the timeframe of a fortnight and would also lead to increased costs to ratepayers.

I note that the Discussion Paper maintains co-contributions will not be mandatory but I would like to stress that financial capacity at a community level should not override community need when prioritising Round 5A applications.

Priority for co-location sites, technology flexibility & complementary services

I support the design principle of giving priority to solutions offering services from at least two mobile network providers and the need for more flexibility for bespoke solutions in different communities.

I sought feedback from carriers following the announcement of Round 5, including Optus, the carrier building Mayo's only Round 5 site at Kuitpo. I was advised in a meeting with the South Australian and Territory General Manager that the absence of incentives for co-location under the MBSP had led to adverse outcomes for Mayo and poor service delivery in some MBSP sites under previous rounds.

Feedback from Telstra suggested that this carrier was seeking to migrate from 3G services and only put forward a limited number of submissions for sites in Mayo because of the existing MBSP criteria. Vodafone advised that they were concentrating on other market objectives and did not engage with the MBSP this round.

I agree that Round 5A should be designed to encourage and support new innovative methods of mobile service delivery for rural and remote areas. Further, I support proposals that offer complementary services. Cherry Gardens in the Adelaide Hills is not a nominated blackspot site and was ineligible for MBSP funding even though the community has limited access to mobile and broadband services due to localised issues with steep terrain.

Centre Alliance was successful in securing \$200,000 for a \$350,000 Regional Digital Connectivity Infrastructure project to set up 4G equipment on the existing NBN tower in the locality. The State Government committed funding and the remaining amount is being raised via a competitive tender process with telecommunication companies.

This bespoke solution will greatly improve mobile reception and mobile broadband services in the community. Other communities should be able to benefit from similar solutions.

Priority for natural disaster prone areas

Mayo experienced enormous losses in the Black Summer Bushfires. From December 2019 to January 2020, bushfires swept through the Adelaide Hills and Kangaroo Island. The bushfires burnt through more than 300,000 hectares, around 185 homes were destroyed and three people lost their lives.

Only one mobile phone tower near Mount Torrens was destroyed. However, the fires were so intense that they burnt the SA Power Network infrastructure servicing numerous mobile towers in the fire grounds. Safety issues and, in limited instances, theft prevented carriers from transporting portable generators to mobile tower sites. The fires also burnt a significant amount of copper landline infrastructure.

In its response to the Royal Commission into the Bushfires, the Adelaide Hills Council noted that mobile phone communications were compromised at times due to loss of service due to extended power cuts and 'blackspots' in coverage in some areas. The council said this was also noted by community members and raised with the council as a point of concern. The Council advised that it considered access to telecommunications in particular to be crucial not only for its own purposes but for broader community benefit. Good reliable mobile telecommunications coverage is particularly important in high bushfire risk areas to everyone, not just emergency services.

Therefore, I support the principle of Round 5A giving greater priority to natural disaster prone areas, particularly high risk bushfire areas.

In the 45th Parliament I introduced a Private Member's Bill requiring telecommunication carriers to provide 24-hour standby power in key mobile base stations operating in high risk bushfire areas. The *Telecommunications Amendment (Guaranteeing Mobile Phone Service in Bushfire Zones) Bill 2017* was not brought to the Federal Parliament for debate but I am advised by carriers that my advocacy on this issue led to future rounds of the MBSP requiring at least 12-hour backup power on base stations.

Round 5A should continue to give priority to sites that provide at least 12-hours of back-up power and more if possible. Consideration should also be given to funding the retro-fitting of existing towers to provide backup power of least 12 hours or more.

Priority should also be given to applications that offer technology solutions that offer greater resilience in the event that bushfire destroys electricity infrastructure. Carriers that build in disaster prone areas should also demonstrate that they have contingency plans and networks to work with emergency services and local authorities to re-establish telecommunications to the wider community as quickly and safely as possible.

Operational and backhaul costs

Under Round 5A, funding recipients should be permitted to capitalise the costs of leased optical fibre and microwave backhaul. I also maintain that future rounds of the MBSP should consider providing funding to upgrade backhaul. Kangaroo Island also has a number of identified mobile black spots but I have been advised this remote region is in urgent need of upgraded backhaul to warrant investment in base stations.

NBN Road Muster fleet & emergency satellite

Lack of telecommunications was a pressing concern raised with me at the first community meetings held after the Cudlee Creek bushfire. I would like to extend my thanks to NBN Local SA for answering a personal call to bring in a vehicle from NBN's Road Muster truck fleet to Lobethal to provide a secure NBN satellite Wi-Fi hotspot for disaster victims.

When permitted to travel to Kangaroo Island after bushfire swept through in early January 2020, NBN Local SA also provided secure NBN satellite Wi-Fi for residents sheltering in Kingscote. During the initial recovery phase NBN also provided emergency satellite services at Gosse, on the Western District Football Grounds building; at the Blaze Aid camp at Kingscote and at the Rockpool Café at Cassini.

The Road Muster truck and the emergency satellite NBN were welcomed by bushfire-affected communities who had no access to mobile or landline communication. Round 5A and future rounds of the MBSP must consider funding this type of rapid-response infrastructure in disaster prone regions so telecommunications can be quickly transported to communities affected by natural disaster.

In conclusion

In summary, funding allocations under Round 5A must be more transparent and equitable; co-contribution must not be mandatory; priority should be given to applications offering services from at least two mobile network providers; there needs to be more flexibility for bespoke solutions; greater priority must be given to high risk bushfire areas; priority should be given to proposals that provide at least 12-hours of back-up power and more if possible; and future rounds of the MBSP should consider providing funding to upgrade backhaul and providing rapid-response telecommunications infrastructure.

Yours sincerely



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