8 August, 2018

The Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee
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To whom it may concern

RE: Australian Government Regional Telecommunications Review

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to this review as follow up to my participation in the consultation held in Townsville last month. I also wish to note that we have appreciated the advice that we can make this submission three days after the due date.

The Regional Development Australia Townsville and North West Queensland (RDA) Committee acutely understands the current challenges of telecommunications in regional Australia.

CONTEXT IN WHICH WE ARE MAKING OUR COMMENTS

RDA works across the 15 local government areas in north and north-west Queensland, an area that covers nearly 26% of Queensland. To put our comments in context, I provide the following facts about our region based on statistics from the Queensland Government Statistician's Office April 2018 Regional profile.

- In June 2016 the population was approximately 266,000; the long term forecast is for our regional population to increase to 374,029 by 2036.
- 72% of the population is located in Townsville, Northern Australia's largest city.
- 9.8% of the population identifies as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.
- The region has 81.9 homeless persons per 10,000 vs 45.6 per 10,000 in Queensland.
- Unemployment stands at 8.8% (11,422 persons) in the December 2017 quarter.
- The majority of the unemployed are in the region's two largest cities: 7,840 of these people are in Townsville; 846 are in Mount Isa.
- Palm Island, Burke, Doomadgee and Carpentaria have the highest unemployment rates ranging from 41.6% to 35.4%.
- Industries in which the region has a high employment specialisation ratio are agriculture/ forestry/fishing, mining, utilities, public administration and education/ training.
- The region is a strong minerals, beef cattle, sugar and horticultural producer with significant volumes of these products going to export markets, often directly from the Port of Townsville to nearby Asian markets.

HOW ARE REGIONAL AUSTRALIANS USING TELECOMMUNICATIONS SERVICES?

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

   - There is a lack of reliable access to internet and mobile telephone services. While there have been improvements as the NBN and Skymuster have rolled out in terms of reliability and speed of downloads and uploads, there are still significant interruptions to services and black spots without reception. The questions are whether all the current solutions being implemented are the right ones and whether a time will come when telecommunications infrastructure is reliable, sufficient in speed and data and affordable in rural areas. There is great concern that these outcomes are not guaranteed.

   - It has been suggested that some rural town customers on ADSL would be best suited to stay on ADSL until Skymuster can offer something better. There has been confusion in some areas that one must go onto the Skymuster even if you are in a town with ADSL. While this is not true, it is possibly promoted by some Retail Service Providers trying to gain new customers.

   - There are data caps that are way below the normal houseful in an urban area, minimising the time that regional residents can be online and using digital technologies. There need to be increases in data caps. For example, a household with a primary school student at a local school will have access to a 50GB education portal. However, this is not available to boarding school or university students who return home on holidays but have assignments and study to do. Rural properties and their residents need to be able to access data for running businesses, education, telehealth, connectivity and well-being of all employees and family members.

   - As a result of the reliability, speed and data cap issues, livestreaming into webinars on how to better use the technology is often difficult.

   - There is limited access to other training opportunities. Targeted funding for rural and remote technology training and sustained roll-out of digital technologies in rural and regional communities would greatly assist in overcoming these shortfalls.

   - Socio-economic disadvantage is a major impediment to the uptake of digital technologies. Our region has a high Indigenous population with higher than average unemployment, and lower than average health and education outcomes. The region is also suffering high unemployment and particularly youth unemployment. Access to the digital environment is mostly through smart phones with disadvantaged people not owning computers or being able to afford the data plans.

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

   - Like urban areas, internet is used for a wide range of personal and business applications. Increased bandwidth and affordability of service would assist in increasing the benefits of this technology in line with urban counterparts.
   - Increasingly the personal usage of internet is through smartphones.

- Subject to having suitable and reliable access to broadband services, the roll out of training opportunities and where possible on the ground programs of support would help businesses and individuals develop their use of the technology. The old "we don't know what we don't know" rings true. A locally based coach or mentor could make a significant difference. While this is labour intensive, significant change in the way we do things does require more intensive effort.
- By demonstrating and coaching on the way technology can be used, and the fear factor removed, businesses and individuals will be able to make greater use of online technologies.

BUSINESS EDUCATION AND HEALTH

3. <u>What data-intensive activities are occurring in regional, rural and remote Australia? What digital technologies are needed for these?</u>

- Telehealth services are being rolled out but require fast connections with audio and visual technologies. The quality of broadband access is still not sufficient to fully implement the opportunities that telehealth present. I have heard of one example where a student did his online studies very late in the evenings so that his sibling could use the internet during the day for telehealth purposes. With much of our region being classified remote or very remote, with a trip to hospital and specialists being hundreds or kilometers away, access to high speed broadband and telehealth services should now be considered a right and not a luxury.

- Education, particularly via distance learning requires significant access to data. Broadband access and fast upload and download speeds are essential in order to facilitate this service. Current options such as live video streaming are often completely unviable due to bandwidth demands and lag time associated with satellite services. As mentioned above, there is a need for greater data limits for students who return to properties in their holidays as well as adults who wish to participate in further education.

- Businesses would like to make greater use of video-conferencing for meetings with clients, suppliers, legal and financial advisers, potential employees and live streaming of training opportunities but these are mostly only available to the larger organisations like universities and councils that have access to dedicated data cables and services. An improvement in internet access will save businesses time and money – an advantage that is currently experienced mostly in the urban areas.

- Businesses rely on the internet to operate EFTPOS facilities, do all banking and payment processes, communicate with clients and suppliers, monitor market trends (this is particularly relevant for agricultural producers), buy inputs and sell products.

4. <u>How can regional businesses better utilise digital technologies to maximise economic benefits?</u>

- Training opportunities delivered on the ground, combined with improved access, speed and data limits would make the most impact on building the local digital knowhow and inclusion in the digital economy.

- The costs of operating a business are high and hence the use of digital technologies to create greater efficiency in all aspects of operations (purchasing, sales, marketing, HR, finance etc) would be beneficial in building the sustainability and future growth of regional businesses.

- Access and promotion to markets is expensive from regional areas; hence the use of web-based technologies to promote one's services and goods can significantly expand the reach and size of one's market. With certain goods and services, exports directly to customers is an option.

REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

5. <u>What can be done to improve access to and uptake of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities?</u>

- Government assistance in establishing and fitting out technology hubs in remote Indigenous communities would assist greatly in achieving this goal. Key economic and social barriers would be removed thorough the provision of service and training hubs in these communities. Engagement of the community in terms of developing the access and use of these services is essential in this respect.

- Government assistance to operate the hubs with coaches and mentors.

- Improve the telecommunications infrastructure – mobile and broadband.

6. <u>Are there practical examples of how communications services can improve the well-being of people in remote Indigenous communities?</u>

- Mobile coverage will allow people requiring emergency services better contact and allow these services to arrive at the destination much quicker, by using GPS Navigation.

- Telehealth has the potential to improve health outcomes, especially in cases where patients are reluctant to travel long distances away from family to receive medical care. Locally based, culturally sensitive medical staff can assist with telehealth appointments with specialists.

7. <u>What skills do people need to get the most from their digital technologies, and where can they learn from these skills?</u>

- A broad range of skills is required. This includes a knowledge of the technologies available, training in the use of these technologies, access to these technologies and awareness raising of the applications and benefits of these technologies.

- Telstra "tech savvy seniors" programs to educate the ageing population.

- Programs need to be targeted by users and their needs and skills/ experience levels. To maximize the investment into NBN and the digital future, investment also needs to go into educational type programs and messaging.

GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT – NBN

8. <u>Have you had online issues affecting your satellite or fixed wireless broadband service? If so, how have you overcome these issues?</u>

    - We have heard through the Isolated Childrens' Parents' Association and also through Charters Towers Regional Council of issues over a sustained period including intermittent service, slow connection speeds, frequent drop-outs, expensive service options and technology break-downs.

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

    - No comments to add

MOBILE COVERAGE

10. <u>What economic or social indicators could be used to guide investment to further improve mobile coverage?</u>

    - Number of residents including employees on properties
    - Number of tourists, including at regional events when service demand peaks
    - Number of workers visiting the area regularly
    - Number of businesses registered and active
    - Internet penetration
    - Level of disadvantage may possibly be an indicator of higher than average reliance on smart phones for connectivity as opposed to use of laptops and desk top pcs

MAKING THE MOST OF MOBILE COVERAGE

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

    - There is not a uniformity in the amount of information people have about boosters. Hence there is still room for improvement to promote opportunities to improve reception through external antennas.

    - Some equipment is not suitable for external antennas.

    - There probably needs to be a renewed focus on promoting the old "blue tick" on mobiles that operate better in regional areas.

ALTERNATIVE AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

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

- Remote monitoring of businesses – eg on properties to monitor water and feed supplies for cattle; councils monitoring bridges/ roads that flood

- GPS and sensor related apps that assist in agricultural production – eg planting and application of fertilisers

- Telehealth remote monitoring of health conditions – already in practice but has large potential to expand

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

- Mobiles – through Telstra and Optus as the main suppliers in our region – using their phones for internet or as hot spots for their laptops.

- ADSL is still being used in many cases

- Universities connect to their own network

- Private suppliers of fibre optic networks

14. <u>How can more competition be encouraged to the provision of broadband services in regional Australia?</u>

- There are many views on whether telecommunications infrastructure and services should rightly be in the hands of the government or private sector or both.
- Viability and profitability will drive investment in urban areas.
- Regional areas do rely on governments to incentivise or fund new infrastructure.
- Incentives could be linked to new contracts, for example, an urban expansion opportunity could be linked with the requirement to also expand a rural part of the business.

In regional areas, communities rely on the Australian Government to ensure equity of access and affordability of telecommunications as a basic right. Regional communities need to access online education, training, health services, business and government services and the arts and recreation, arguably more than their urban counterparts due to distances from major service centres. Everyone needs to keep connected.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. I would be delighted to respond to any questions you may have. I can be contacted on ████████████████████ or ceo@rdanwq.org.au.

Yours Sincerely,

Glenys Schuntner

Chief Executive Officer