



Shire of Mt Marshall

— THE SANDALWOOD SHIRE —

IN REPLY PLEASE QUOTE: JN18 – 089 FILE: A6/22
ENQUIRIES TO: Mr John Nuttall

21 May 2018

Janet Barnes
Regional Sales and Service Director
Telstra
Level 4, 80 Stirling Street
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Ms Barnes

TELECOMMUNICATIONS OUTAGES ACROSS THE NORTH EAST WHEATBELT

On behalf of the Council and Community of the Shire of Mt Marshall, and also the wider community across the North East Wheatbelt, I write to raise with you our significant concerns regarding telecommunication outages which have been occurring over a significant period of time.

Although you may already be aware of the issues, it is important that I set them out for you to clarify any misunderstanding which may occur within your business. There are two main problems, which I acknowledge may well be linked:

1. The poor battery life of the back-up batteries provided with your infrastructure.
2. The loss of landline communications during a power outage

I will deal with each issue in turn, demonstrating how our community has been affected, and indicating ways in which Telstra could easily provide a solution.

Battery Back-up

Whenever there is a power failure in the Shire (unfortunately a fairly common issue), the mobile communications rely upon battery back-up. Those batteries last at most for 12 hours on the infrastructure servicing Bencubbin and Beacon. We are aware of other towns locally where that battery life is significantly shorter. Once the battery power has run out, all mobile communications (and it seems landline which I will deal with next) are lost. This is obviously not only inconvenient but also very dangerous. We have a remote, ageing community who in those times are unable to communicate with anyone else.

You can imagine the concern relating to medical emergencies, other emergencies etc. These power outages are often linked to dangerous conditions such as storms.

Once the battery has run out of power the community is required to wait for an engineer to come to the two towns to provide generator facilities to power the infrastructure. Not only is this presumably a financial impost for Telstra, but more importantly for us it can be days before this assistance arrives. It is also not uncommon for an engineer to have driven to Bencubbin to provide a generator, but then not go on to Beacon (which is more isolated) to assist them.

One example of this occurring is over the recent Easter Weekend. An unexpected storm hit the area (from Merredin to Dalwallinu) on Good Friday (30 March) afternoon and evening. Bencubbin and Beacon lost power in the late afternoon. By the early hours of Easter Saturday morning all communications had been lost across the Shire, and surrounding Shires. In fairness a Telstra Engineer attended Bencubbin (we understand from Albany!) on the Saturday afternoon and was able to hook up a generator, and by around 3.30pm communications around the town site were restored. The Shire President was able to speak to that engineer, and enquired about Beacon. He was told that Beacon was not on the engineers list so he would not be going. Telecommunications were therefore not restored to Beacon and surrounds until late on Monday 2 April. During that time therefore the isolated residents had no means of communication at all. It is only by good luck that there was no emergency that could not be reported.

Landlines

It has become apparent that for some reason landline communications are now reliant upon the same power as the mobile technology. That did not used to be the case, and people could previously at least rely upon their landline during times of loss of mobile. An explanation regarding why this is the case would be appreciated.

Given the issues raised above regarding the time taken to restore the communications, it is absolutely unsatisfactory that isolated, and often aged and vulnerable people are left without any means of communication. The Shire has received a large amount of feedback requesting us to raise this issue with Telstra, as there is fear about what could happen during these times.

Along with the community, this loss of landline and mobile also has an impact upon all other services. During the recent storm event mentioned above, the St John Ambulance centre which covers our Shire and surrounding Shires was unable to properly function. They could neither receive calls, nor communicate with their staff. Shire workers were trying to undertake a clear up of hazards (such as felled trees) but again had no means of communication, which put them in a position of danger. Emergency Services were of course in the same position, and this includes the local police who were also without means of communication.

I mentioned earlier that there were some simple (and presumably cost effective in the long run) options to be able to resolve these issues for all of the North East Wheatbelt. These options include:

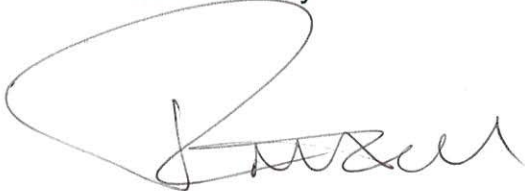
- Provision of batter back-up with substantial running time
- Provision of solar charging, to be able to recharge the batteries
- Provision of generators at every site, with an agreement in place with every Local Government so that their staff can start the generator in times they are required.

I hope that I have been able to demonstrate to you the vulnerable position that our communities are placed in by the current situation, the urgent need for action to be taken by Telstra, and the very real concern of all of our communities until something is done. Unfortunately, despite these issues being raised in several venues, including District Emergency Management Meetings, no action to address the problems has yet been taken.

I would be very happy to arrange for the Shire President and myself to meet with you at your earliest convenience in order that these issues, and the potential solutions to them can be discussed.

Please be aware that at the instruction of Council a copy of this letter is also being sent to the relevant State and Federal Ministers, including the Minister for Communication, the Minister for Emergency Services and the Minister for Police.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Nuttall', with a large, sweeping loop at the beginning.

John Nuttall
Chief Executive Officer