Southern Downs
REGIONAL COUNCIL

26 July 2018

Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

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Submission

Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

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

   The main barriers people in the Southern Downs Region currently have with digital technology is the lack of infrastructure and poor planning in some parts. Council believes that's when the opportunity arises extra conduit should be laid when completing major projects. By having this existing infrastructure already in place it promotes future development to those areas.

   Other barriers affecting regional communities are socio-economic status and affordability of products offered by telecommunication companies. A majority of companies will only accept online employment applications, which makes submission difficult should their home or area have poor coverage.

   The Southern Downs Council, like all other local government authorities, seeks to offer free WiFi to the community and visitors to the region, but acknowledges that there is a substantial cost to the community to accommodate this service. As part of the services delivered by local government, Southern Downs Regional Council remains unclear if this is part of Council's primary service delivery. In the past Southern Downs Regional Council has been quoted figures of in excess of $200,000 to establish free WiFi networks in Warwick and Stanthorpe, with additional ongoing fees.

   The importance of free WiFi cannot be underestimated. For example there is an expectation from backpackers that work in and around Stanthorpe that there will be free internet services. Access to WiFi promotes local businesses, as well as marketing the region to an international audience.

   Southern Downs Regional Council would submit that there should be Federal Government funding above and beyond Blackspot Funding that supports free WIFI in the central business districts of towns and villages.

   With half of Warwick currently connected via fibre-to-the-node, there is still a high demand for cable to be laid in the industrial estate, which accommodate some of the Region's biggest companies.

   The NBN should consider businesses when laying fibre cable, so as to ensure equal opportunities for both businesses and consumers to access broadband services. There is currently a mixture of technologies planned for the Warwick Industrial Estate.

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

   People and businesses in regional communities are limited to their take up of online services based on the availability of broadband services. Many homebased and small businesses are limited in their potential to run additional software such as MYOB, video conferencing programs and Cloud services as there is limited bandwidth available.

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The main industry of the Southern Downs Region is farming and agriculture. Some of these farming companies who have limited broadband coverage suffer from not being able to benefit from the latest farm management and accounting systems available, such as Agrimaster, Mistro or Phoenix which are tailored for the agricultural industry.

Households in regional areas are often unable to enjoy luxuries such as Netflix, Stan, Live Streaming and YouTube, because of poor coverage and limited data available from their service providers.

The Southern Downs Regional Council uses SCADA systems at a number of the water and wastewater plants including the Killarney Water Treatment Plant. The SCADA software is crucial to help maintain efficiency, process data for better decisions, and communicate system issues to engineers and plant operators to help alleviate downtime. Currently SCADA sends alerts via the 3G/4G network, however with extremely poor or next to zero coverage in the Killarney area, there is a history of lengthy delays when receiving these messages, raising concerns of reliability for ground staff.

When staff members receive these alerts from SCADA, they are able to remotely access the system to check issues. However, with inadequate coverage this process is often slow and ineffective, forcing staff to travel to the plant, sometimes in the early hours of the morning to rectify issues. There is then a concern for staff welfare as the plant is located in a rural area, where staff mobile phones generally receive no coverage.

3. **How can regional businesses better utilise digital technologies to maximise economic benefits?**

The Australia Government offers people in telehealth eligible areas access to specialist video consultations under Medicare. This service is to provide patients, who are unable to travel into major cities easier access to doctors and specialists. However, without adequate digital technology and infrastructure this service is not possible for these small rural townships.

4. **What skills do people need to get the most from their digital technologies, and where can they learn these skills?**

A majority of digital technology skills are acquired through school based programs and TAFE. The Southern Downs Regional Council library offers 'Tech Savvy Senior Classes', which is a program operated in partnership with the Queensland Government and Telstra. This program is aimed at enabling older people, particularly those in remote areas to develop the skills and confidence to use technology for socialising, accessing important services or conducting personal business.

5. **Have you had ongoing issues affecting your satellite broadband service? If so, how have you overcome these issues?**

Council currently use satellite broadband services at a number of the remote treatment plants and experience no major issues with this service.

6. **What economic or social indicators could be used to guide investment to further improve mobile coverage?**

It's unfortunate that the main indicator to establish whether further investment to improve mobile coverage is often emergency response time, serious injury or death. An example of this would be Gap Creek Motorbike Park at Maryvale, located 25 minutes from Warwick. The park is a 650 acre property offering camping, 3 motocross tracks and a mix of enduro and trail rides to visitors. The park attracts hundreds of riders every weekend and with very low to zero mobile coverage available, there is a history of extensive delays for emergency services, as riders needs to travel back to office to alert staff members.

The Southern Downs Regional Council has renowned black spots long the New England Highway between the two major townships Warwick and Stanthorpe, which cause numerous problems for emergency services, which are faced with delayed response times when reaching patients.

In 2016 the Southern Downs region received three new mobile base stations at Goomburra, The Summit and Yangan, through the Mobile Black Spot funding program. The telecommunications towers provide faster data and better mobile coverage for businesses, residents and tourists travelling through the region.

Initially Council prioritised 15 locations in the region for funding in its submission to the Mobile Black Spot Program, which indicates the need for further investment to improve mobile infrastructure in the region.

Killarney is also a popular tourist destination located just 25 minutes from Warwick. The local community and businesses all suffer from the lack of telecommunication infrastructure in the area. Killarney hosts a number of large events, such as the Rodeo and the Bonfire Night, which attract thousands of visitors and campers to the area.

Killarney also offers various recreational activities such as hiking, 4WD'ing and mountain biking, where there is always the risk of serious injury. With inadequate mobile coverage there are always major concerns when needing to contact emergency services.

7. **Is information readily available regarding how to use devices to improve mobile reception in areas with poor coverage? E.g. information about external antenna equipment?**

Council does not believe that telecommunication companies openly advertise information about external antenna equipment, possibly because they do not want to promote poor coverage in the surrounding areas. However, the information is available if requested.

8. **What emerging technologies will be of most benefit to regional businesses and what are the data needs of these technologies?**

5G is an emerging technology offering new frequency and better penetration to improve coverage issues; however it is unknown what the range will be and cost to users.

9. **What broadband services are people using other than those available through the NBN?**

ADSL and cellular would be the only other options available to the community.

10. **How can more competition be encouraged in the provision of broadband services in regional Australia?**

Currently the only broadband options for some regional communities is Sky Muster, and even though they offer reasonably competitive rates, they do not offer unlimited data, which almost all other providers offer.

Yours faithfully

David Keenan
Chief Executive Officer

SOUTHERN DOWNS REGIONAL COUNCIL
Case Study | Morgan Park Complex

The Morgan Park complex is situated on the south east edge of Warwick, Queensland, only few minutes from the Warwick town centre. Southern Downs Regional Council is the Trustee of Morgan Park which is a major sports and recreation facility. The Complex hosts a range of clubs and events including horse trials (equestrian), polocrosse, dirt bikes, drag racing, circuit racing, model aircraft and high speed driving.

Morgan Park is the home of "horse power" and hosts an event nearly every weekend. Morgan Park has become well known for its international events, including the inaugural Polocrosse World Cup, Horse Trials World Cup Qualifier and state championships in motor racing.

The Warwick District Sporting Car Club boasts a 3.1km sealed circuit track and conducts motor sport events every weekend of the year, attracting crowds of in excess of 15,000 people.

The Warwick District Drag Racing Association has developed a 200m drag strip with a 550m secondary breaking area.

The Warwick and District Dirt Bike Club have built a motocross track with large pit areas and host increasing numbers of participants and spectators for their events.

The Warwick Horse Trials Club manages infrastructure which includes 200 steel yards, 2.5km of water pipe, a club house, a toilet block and a new competition surface. In more recent years, the Club's grounds have played host to regular clinics and competitions and was selected as the venue for the 2013 and 2014 Queensland International Three Day Event. The course continues to improve with fence upgrades and additions and there is a renewed focus to provide consistent and safe footing around the cross country track and in the competition arenas. In October 2016, the Club hosted the Prydes Easifeed International Three Day Event.

Through the Warwick Polocrosse Club, Morgan Park has hosted the most prestigious polocrosse events in Australia and the world including the first ever World Cup in 2003, the subsequent World Cup in 2007 and several National Championships. The facilities offered by the Warwick Polocrosse Club include, seven fully turfed playing fields, one floodlit field for night matches, two grassed practice fields, six toilet blocks/one disabled toilet/four shower blocks, permanent spectator seating for 2,500, club house featuring food and beverage outlets catering for 250 seated/600 stand-up, private corporate entertaining area, private meeting rooms, car parking for more than 1000 cars, 450 covered stalls and 50 day yard, vet facilities with horse enclosure and concrete floor, ambulance/first aid room and electronic scoreboard. The Polocrosse World Cup will be held again at Morgan Park 22- 28 April 2019 and is forecast to attract more than 90,000 visitors to the event.

The level of connectivity at the Morgan Park Complex is very low. At present Council is working with Telstra to determine a solution either through the installation of fibre or a microwave link.

It is disappointing that Telstra has indicated that it potentially needs to rely upon State Government Grants to possibly bring fibre out to the facility or create a system that will deliver a higher level of connectivity.

As indicated both the Warwick Polocrosse Club and the Warwick District Sporting Car Club have major events planned. Connectivity is integral to the success of each of these events and also plays a role in encouraging repeat visitation from local, domestic, interstate and international visitors to the Morgan Park Complex.

Additionally, the Warwick Polocrosse Club has indicated that it is in discussion with Fox Sports in relation to telecasting the event. Telecasting of the event would be a huge coup for the region and would promote the region globally. This is unlikely to occur without improved levels of connectivity.

The Warwick District Sporting Car Club has also indicated that there is the potential for the streaming or telecasting of the Super Bikes and many of the other motorsport events, however the major inhibitor to this occurring is the lack of connectivity.

Putting aside the need for telecommunications infrastructure for promotion and visitors, each of the sports undertaken at the Morgan Park Complex has the potential for serious injury or accidents for those actively involved, as well as those attending the event. Inadequate levels of connectivity increases the risks associated with responding to any emergency or accident that may occur at the Complex. This is a serious and recognized risk that needs to be acted upon by all parties that have an involvement in the Morgan Park Complex.