



Murrumbidgee COUNCIL

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2021 Regional Telecommunications Review
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development & Communication

Email: secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

Dear Sir

Submission Regional Telecommunications Independent Review

Internet

Murrumbidgee Council has fibre to the Darlington Point Office, and yet we constantly get internet speeds which are only 20% of what we should be receiving.

It was never really noticeable when working at the office, however it was very noticeable when COVID 19 had staff working remotely. Until we received complaints from remote workers, the internet speed to the office was never tested.

It appears that in rural Australia reportable speeds and delivered speeds are not equal.

Approximately 5 km outside each of our three townships of Coleambally, Darlington Point and Jerilderie, the only connection available is Sky Muster. Sky Muster is a good option, however it is, in essence, unaffordable, and limited in up and down speeds.

Equitable access to us means a service the same in rural and remote as what is provided in urban Australia, the inequity exists in up and down speed, cost, serviceability and education.

In researching ways to provide higher speeds of internet to our Local Government Area (LGA), we tried to determine who has fibre in the ground, and who is willing to provide.

It is impossible to find out who has fibre in the ground, yet I believe 90% of it will have been installed using public funds, be it Telstra in the early days of Government ownership, NBN, Transgrid and so on.

We made great friends with Transgrid, they were very keen to work with us in providing a solution to increase speeds to our LGA. In the end we had to walk away as the costs were prohibitive. For some reason the costs with internet are disproportionately expensive, when you compare with other jurisdictions around the world. Why is that our base costs are so expensive?

As the Government contributes funds in infrastructure for internet, it should be mandated that other players have the right to utilise the infrastructure at a set fee. Our costs are high, because we are lower in population, so why do we continue to compound the problems? What I mean is, if I could see fibre mapping within Australia, I would see a Telstra fibre, beside an NBN fibre, beside an Optus fibre, beside a TPG fibre, with all heading to the same place. Just this scenario shows that we have paid 4 times the cost and, as taxpayers, consumers and customers, it does ultimately come out of our pocket. Is this not wasteful? Surely it could be mandated that everyone could utilise, for a set fee, the available infrastructure. If not, it should be Government owned. You will say that is what the NBN charter is, unfortunately NBN, like every other telco, has a profit motive, and there is no profit in rural and remote Australia, hence even our NBN is substandard.

Government silos are also killing the internet world and adding to the waste of resources. We are having a conversation with the NSW DPIE about \$200M they have from the sale of the Snowy Hydro, to spend on internet and mobile coverage improvements in the bush. We went into that meeting having just heard that the NSW Education Department had given Telstra \$200M to install fibre to a few schools. Why? Is this not a wasted opportunity for the towns with those schools? The NSW Government paid commercial rates for the installation, the fibre will be owned by Telstra, they (the Education Department) are paying commercial rates for the data, and the fibre is going past other local, State and Federal infrastructure, but they who own the infrastructure have not been informed, so when they seek a connection, if they have the ability, it will be 6 times the price.

Mobile

Unless you have a cell fire booster installed, forget about making a call on your mobile phone 7 km outside of any of our three towns on the Telstra network. That was the position residents and travellers of Murrumbidgee Council faced, until Council provided a 50% contribution to a new facility on a tower we already owned at Bundure on the Kidman Way. So now, when leaving Jerilderie for Darlington Point via the Newell Highway and Kidman Way, there is only a break in service for about 15 km between Jerilderie and the Bundure Tower, and a further 10km break between Bundure Tower and Coleambally, and a 5km break in service between Coleambally and Darlington Point.

Travel from Jerilderie to Narrandera on the Newell Highway, there is approximately 60km of no service area between Jerilderie and Morundah, yet there is a mobile tower at Bundure on the Newell Highway which, unfortunately for Telstra customers, is an Optus facility (I am told).

Rural Australia understands that it's not commercially viable for the telcos to invest in rural and remote Australia, yet the need exists, and we are thankful for State and Federal Governments providing funding such as Mobile Black Spot Program.

However we need to do one of two things.

Firstly, mandate that any Government provided funds directed towards mobile coverage must allow for roaming by all carriers. Not just co-location of each other's equipment (that should be mandated in the cities), but one set of equipment signalling all carriers. I know this statement contradicts the equitable stance, however I am sure rural and remote Australians would be happy to pay premium (say \$10 a month) on top of their current plan to ensure roaming.

Why is it I can take my Telstra phone to the USA and immediately be roaming on ATT or in Canada on Rodgers, but I cannot travel along the Newell Highway, leaving Jerilderie on Telstra, roam onto Optus at Bundure, then back to Telstra past Morundah and Narrandera.

The second option would be for Government to own the infrastructure. As mentioned, rural and remote Australia are not commercially viable to the telcos. In the same way as it's not commercially viable for a health company to build a private hospital in rural and remote Australia.

Government build the towers, Government owns the transition equipment, Government maintains the equipment, and Government receives an annual payment from the telcos. Look at it in the same way as the Commonwealth Bank pays Australia Post to deliver their services in Post Office across Australia, even in rural and remote Australia. ATM X, Armaguard's Automatic Teller Machine, must have some agreement with ANZ to allow ANZ customers to use these ATM's without paying a fee, while non-ANZ customers are charged. There are plenty of models out there. Local Government can assist you here, as we have infrastructure, towers, tall buildings and power dotted all over.

Murrumbidgee Council contributed just under \$400,000 to Telstra as our 50% share of the facility at Bundure (Kidman Way), plus we already owned the tower. We know a little about equipment needed, I would hazard a guess that the total equipment cost would be less than \$100,000, so in essence our contribution is to cover the cost of the next 10 or 20 years the tower will be in service.

What funding contribution under the Mobile Black Spot Program actually goes to towers and equipment, and how much goes to the operational cost and ultimately the profit of the telcos?

Summary

1. Where the Government provides funds under the Mobile Black Spot Program, one condition must be a mandatory roaming to other mobile providers;
2. Where the Government provides funds under the National Broadband Network and/or Regional Connectivity Programme, one condition must be that any fibre installation or other capital must be made available to other providers;

3. Failing the ability to enshrine items 1 and 2 above, that the Federal Government (not via NBN) install, own and operate the backbone infrastructure of fibre, data exchanges, towers and cellular equipment, licencing telcos and providers the use of infrastructure;
4. That the Federal Government set the minimum speeds, 100MBPS up and down;
5. That the price for delivering the minimum speed be regulated;
6. These be mandatory requirements of obtaining and maintaining a telecommunications licence in Australia.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Scarce', written in a cursive style.

John Scarce

GENERAL MANAGER