PORTFOLIO REPORTS - STATE COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

Sally Brindal – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

Telecommunication technology is developing at an exponential rate. While this has resulted in a number of enhancements and improvements for rural and remote communications, the portfolio remains a focus for State Council to guarantee communications services are maintained and continue to be enhanced to ensure our rural and remote students and their families are always provided with adequate communications services commensurate to their needs.

TELSTRA

3G CLOSURE

3G is now gone, but for some Australians, reliable 4G coverage has not arrived. It would be an understatement to say the shutdown of the 3G network on 28 October 2024 has provided an equivalent or better 4G experience. Members have reported, and continue to report, a lack of 4G coverage where there previously was 3G coverage and call dropouts in existing 4G areas. These concerns are continually raised with Telstra at a federal level and with the Minister for Communications. Unfortunately, no solutions appear to be forthcoming with Telstra continuing to claim consumers are reporting an equivalent or better experience!!

Telstra have launched their 3G Helpline to further support customers who need more help with the transition. Telstra will work with customers 1:1 to troubleshoot their issues. For some, this may be quite straight forward with device setting updates, upgrading to a blue tick device or installing a go repeater. For others, it may require escalating it to their colleagues to better understand what the network experience is in that specific location so they can provide advice: https://www.telstra.com.au/exchange/telstra-3g-network-shutdown--accessing-support-and-transitioning.

Key information:

- Customers can call 1800 990 853 between 8am to 7pm Monday to Friday AEDT.
- Different device types and the diversity of Australia's landscape mean that each customer's experience is unique, which is why they want to work directly with each customer to help troubleshoot.
- The helpline is staffed by a team of agents with deep knowledge on the transition to help troubleshoot why mobile experience may have changed.
- Telstra/3G closure is their main hub with guidance for customers to self-serve some of the basic troubleshooting: https://www.telstra.com.au/support/mobiles-devices/3g-closure

Telstra have not put a timeframe on how long the helpline will operate for. They will continue to review the volume and types of calls and make their decision on longevity as things progress.

Telstra offer the following steps you can take to get the best out of 4G and 5G coverage.

1. Always update your phone's software. Check your software is updated and network settings are correct, then set your network to automatic. **TIP**: To make sure you have the latest software update, power cycle your phone by turning it off for a few minutes and then turning it back on. This forces the phone to refresh its network settings and will bring up the latest software update available.

2. In a regional, rural or remote area? For optimal coverage, Telstra recommend a Bluetick device. You can also consider getting coverage extension devices for home or on the road.
3. Ensure your Telstra Go Repeater or Cel-Fi Go is set up for 4G. Make sure it is configured correctly to boost 4G signal.
4. Check your location on Telstra coverage maps. Telstra 4G coverage is equivalent to sites previously covered by 3G on our maps but remember that these maps are a guide only.

Remember, fewer bars of coverage on your new phone does not mean less service – there are no 4G standards for signal bars.

RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT REFERENCES COMMITTEE (RRAT)

The Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee chaired by Senator Matt Canavan has handed down a long-awaited report into the shutdown of 3G networks. It made three relatively simple recommendations after several months of consultation.

The Committee recommended that:

- The Australian Government has established a program to assist consumers who have lost mobile coverage following the 3G shutdown. This program should be co-funded by both industry and government and be for the purpose of purchasing connectivity equipment for use by residents in rural and remote areas. For example, subsidies could be provided to purchase:
  - Boosters for buildings and vehicles
  - Starlink or other low-earth orbit satellite equipment, including access to mobile phones by Starlink services; and
  - Replacements for equipment rendered obsolete by the 3G shutdown.
- The Australian Government and the telecommunications industry accelerate the introduction of mobile phone services via the Starlink network; and
- The Australian Government increased the scope of the National Audit of Mobile Coverage to include off-road areas (including on private land such as farming and grazing properties). This could be achieved by enabling technology for people to 'pin' the location where service is available. Data gathered should be cross-referenced with that of the mobile network operators and published in an easy access-to-access format.

STARLINK

Some customers may be transitioned to the new Telstra Starlink voice service with no installation or hardware cost and on the same monthly plan. You do not need to bundle with the data package.

Currently, there is very little information on how the system will work where multiple phone lines exist within the house. The service also comes with a 4G modem as backup should there be an issue with the satellite, but you need 4G coverage for that to be of use!

The Telstra Starlink bundle (voice/data) is $125/mth plus cost of hardware but limited to 100Mbps download and 5Mbps upload. Existing Starlink customers can transition to the Telstra product.

Previously, Next G Wireless Link (NGWL) customers received support through a dedicated helpline. Unfortunately, there is currently no such support for NGWL customers transitioned to Starlink.

GOT YOUR OWN STARLINK KIT?

If you have already got a Starlink Kit, you may be able to use it with your new Telstra Satellite Internet plan. You will just need to:

- Cancel your service and transfer your Starlink Kit within your Starlink account, and
- Provide Telstra with your Starlink Terminal ID or Kit Serial Number during the ordering process.

How do I transfer my Starlink Kit to Telstra?

To transfer your Starlink Kit to Telstra:

1. Cancel your existing Starlink service through the Starlink customer portal on the Starlink website. Find the "Cancel Service" option under the "Manage" section on the homepage.
2. Unlock your Starlink Kit from your account by selecting "Transfer" after cancellation. This option is also under "Manage." Note that your service will stop immediately upon transfer, regardless of the remaining time in your billing cycle.
3. Provide Telstra with your Starlink Terminal ID or Kit Serial Number during the ordering process.

Need to Know:

- For more details visit Starlink Support and search 'transfer to a reseller'
- Please be aware that transferring is not available on the Starlink website until 120 days after you purchase your Starlink Kit or 90 days after you activated your kit, whichever milestone you hit first. Reach out to Starlink Customer Support for further assistance.

Where do I find my Starlink Terminal ID or Kit Serial Number?

- **Starlink Terminal ID** can be found in your Starlink app when your kit is powered on. It appears in this format: 00000000-00000000-00000000. Enter it without the 'ut' at the start.
- **Starlink Kit Serial Number** is printed on the shipping label of your kit. For a standard kit, it is formatted as KIT00000000, and for a High-Performance kit, it is KITP00041112.

Check the table below to make sure your Starlink Kit is compatible with Telstra's satellite services.

Starlink Kit	Key Features	Compatible with Telstra Satellite Home Internet	Starlink Ethernet Adapter needed
Standard Actuated Starlink Kit	Terminal with built-in motor for self-orientation. Previously Standard (Rectangular) Starlink Kit.	Yes	Yes
Standard Starlink Kit	Terminal without built-in motor for self-orientation and kickstand mount.	Yes	No
High Performance Starlink Kit	Terminal designed for higher performance with built-in motor for self-orientation.	Yes	No
Flat High Performance Starlink Kit	Terminal designed for higher performance, without built-in motor for self-orientation.	Yes	No

Important

If you're bringing your own Standard Actuated Starlink Kit, you will need the Starlink Ethernet Adapter. The Starlink Ethernet Adapter is a must-have for linking your Telstra Smart Modem 3 to the Starlink router, granting access to your Satellite Home Internet for users of the Standard Actuated Starlink Kit. If the ethernet adapter is not included in your kit, you can purchase the Starlink Ethernet Adapter from our Accessories store.

Starlink has an additional product, Starlink Mini. The dish is a smaller form version of the standard Starlink hardware and will be approximately the size of a MacBook. Speeds through the Starlink Mini will be capped at 100Mbps but will retain low latency advantages of the standard product. Starlink owner Elon Musk signalled on X that the upfront cost of the new dish and ongoing monthly prices will be approximately half that of the standard. However, this did not hold true with the hardware a similar price and unlimited plans more expensive than the current residential plan.

TELSTRA BELONG NETWORK

Telstra Belong is now promoting the School Student Broadband Initiative. Telstra Belong offers low coast mobile and nbn plans backed by Telstra, similar to Boost Mobile and others. Be sure to check terms and conditions as to what exactly the plans offer.

LANDLINES

There is currently no mandate for the removal of landlines, so the existing Universal Service Obligations (USO) and Customer Service Guarantees (CSG) are still very much active. Telstra are obliged to provide, maintain and repair landlines.

Some customers are being offered a NGWL service instead of repairing the landline, but this service requires power.

PREPAREDNESS ACTIVITIES

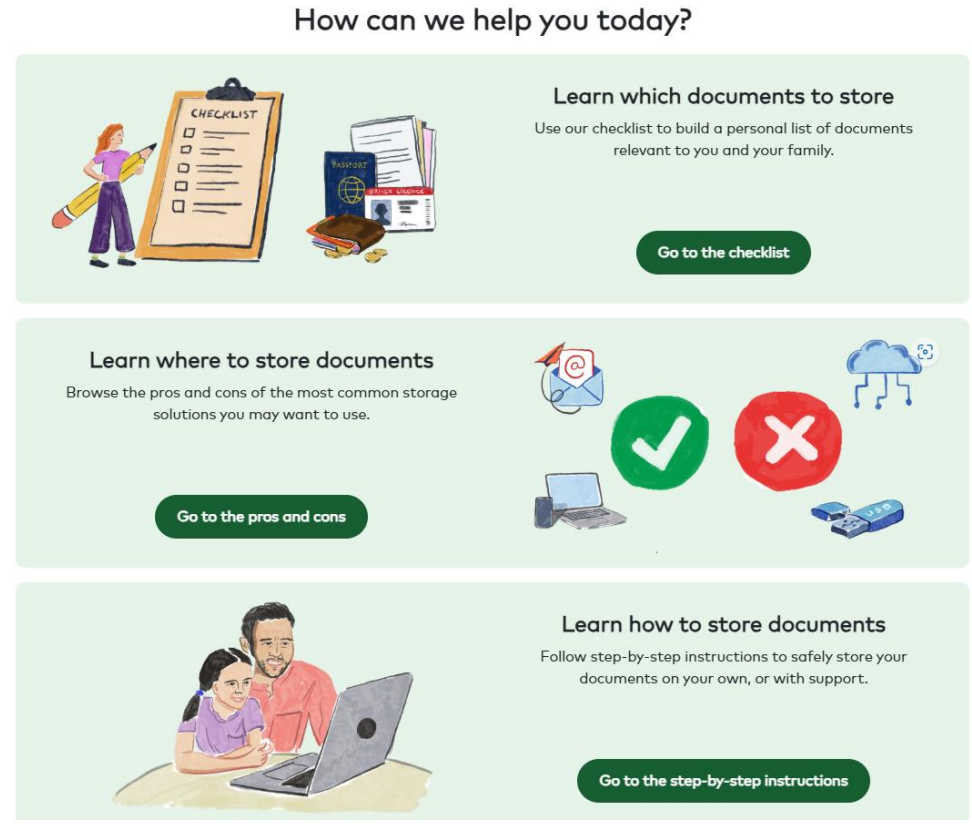
Telstra's preparedness activities and the initiatives available to help communities respond and recover when the worst happens include:

- **Extra data**: Postpaid mobile customers that are impacted in disaster-affected areas will automatically receive 100GB of extra data. Prepaid customers are eligible for 70GB of extra data that can be activated by SMS.
- **Upgraded payphones**: Telstra have updated almost 800 of the 1,000 payphones they are committed to delivering in disaster-prone areas by mid-2025. These upgrades provide free Telstra Wi-Fi, USB charging for devices, and backup power.
- **Telstra Response Team**: Telstra's team of technicians will be on the ground to restore connectivity and provide emergency services as soon as it is safe to do so when disaster strikes. At the same time, trained disaster assistance agents are available 24/7 to take calls and provide bill relief and other support. You can reach them on 1800 888 888.
- **Prepping temporary connectivity**: From their mobile Cell-On-Wheels (COWS), to deploying many more portable satellite kits to Telstra's teams in the field, they are getting equipment ready to help provide temporary Wi-Fi connectivity at priority locations if required when infrastructure is impacted.
- **Network inspections and maintenance**: Telstra are clearing vegetation and maintaining fire breaks at nearly 8,000 sites around the country. They have conducted hundreds of site inspections in cyclone risk areas and tested backup power supplies, including checking or replacing thousands of batteries.

ARE YOU E-PREPARED FOR A NATURAL DISASTER?

Summer in Australia brings natural disasters and emergency situations. Telstra has partnered with Justice Connected to develop a free online training tool that provides a simple guide to identifying your personal documents and how to store them safely.

Learn how to e-prepare for a natural disaster.



MOBILE BLACKSPOT

The government launched Round 8 of the Mobile Black Spot Program on 17 December 2024. Local councillors and State and Federal MPs can now nominate areas for funding through an online Project Noticeboard.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS CONSUMER PROTECTIONS

The Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC) has called for the direct regulation of telecommunications providers as essential services with appropriate protections. Commenting on the adequacy of the draft Telecommunications Consumer Protections (TCP) Code, CALC CEO Stephanie Tonkin said, *"it [the draft TCP Code] is riddled with vague promises and assertions, unenforceable guidance notes, and lacks the necessary firm commitments needed from telcos to assist customers in vulnerable circumstances".*

The Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) has found that Australians living outside of metropolitan hubs are experiencing significant issues with their telcos. In its recent submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review (RTR), the TIO noted that it has received over 50,000 complaints from regional, rural and remote customers about faults, poor service quality, poor mobile coverage and outages since July

2021. Problems such as these can be particularly dangerous for consumers living in areas at greater risk of natural disasters. You can read more on the TIO website.

WA REGIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL

Following Telstra's review of the existing Regional Advisory Council (RAC) model in H1 FY24 Telstra made the decision to disband the state-based RAC's and evolve the RAC model into a national group – the Telstra Regional Council (TRC); the WA RAC, NSW RAC and QLD RAC are going to be combined to form a national RAC.

The TRC's purpose is to *provide strategic advice and guidance to Telstra on opportunities and challenges affecting regional and remote Australians. Members contribute regional, remote perspectives, and offer recommendations to help inform Telstra's decisions.*

Telstra collaborated with the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF) to support the recruitment process.

ARLF received 87 Expressions of Interest (EOIs) through the recruitment process and then undertook an independent review to create a shortlist of 26 candidates, from which Telstra have invited 14 members to join the TRC. No organisations were invited to join. The inaugural TRC meeting will be held in Sydney from 18–20 September.

This is a very disappointing outcome as the previous state-based Regional Advisory Council provided rural and remote representation Australia wide. ICPA (WA) are still involved with a number of organisations associated with the telecommunications industry, ensuring the issues of rural and remote members are clearly heard.

UNIVERSAL SERVICES OBLIGATIONS (USO)

In significant news for Australians in regional areas, the government has announced an expansion of the Universal Service Obligation (USO) - a policy designed to ensure all Australians have access to essential telco services – to a Universal Outdoor Mobile Obligation (UOMO) by 2027. Traditionally, the USO focused on landlines, but in today's world, mobile and internet access are just as crucial.

Under the proposed Universal Outdoor Mobile Obligation (UOMO), which the government will legislate if re-elected at the forthcoming election, Australian mobile operators will be required to significantly expand mobile coverage, providing outdoor mobile coverage nearly everywhere in Australia via LEOSats Direct-to-Device technology, which will particularly impact regional and remote areas.

While this initiative recognises next generation technology, the government clearly stated that the importance of continued investment in existing terrestrial networks to underpin continued certainty is not being ignored, especially in our regional, rural and remote regions where it is needed to guarantee continued productivity and safety.

NBN

Legislation has been introduced to parliament that will make it harder to sell-off the NBN. From a consumer perspective, this is a welcome move. Australian taxpayers have outlaid around $60 billion to build the NBN, and this change will ensure the public interest remains front and centre as we all reap the benefits of fast and reliable broadband. Debate on the Bill is set to continue.

FIXED WIRELESS UPGRADE

nbn has successfully completed its Fixed Wireless (FW) Upgrade Program, a major milestone in their commitment to improving regional and rural connectivity. This nationwide program has enhanced the capacity, performance, and coverage of their fixed wireless network, delivering faster speeds and greater reliability to homes and businesses across Australia.

Key benefits for those in regional and remote Australia include:

- **Faster speeds:** Around 800,000 homes and businesses can now enjoy faster speeds, including during busy periods.
- **New high-speed plans**: Two new high-speed tier plans are now available via participating retail service providers, offering peak wholesale nbn network download speeds of up to five times faster than what was previously available:
  - **Fixed Wireless Home Fast** is intended to be available to approximately 90 per cent of the expanded Fixed Wireless footprint. Fixed Wireless Home Fast has wholesale peak information rate speeds of 200-250/8-20Mbps. Check the nbn website to see what is currently available at your address: www.nbnco.com.au/check
  - **Fixed Wireless Superfast** is intended to be available to approximately 80 per cent of the expanded Fixed Wireless footprint. Fixed Wireless Superfast has wholesale peak information rate speeds of 400/10-40Mbps. Check the nbn website to see what is currently available at your address: www.nbnco.com.au/check
- **Expanded access:** More than 120,000 homes and businesses previously within the nbn Sky Muster satellite service footprint now have access to nbn Fixed Wireless for the first time.
- **Enhanced performance:** Improved network performance for uncapped data plans under nbn Sky Muster Plus.

This program complements nbn's other upgrade programs, such as the recently announced investment to upgrade around 622,000 premises remaining on Fibre to the Node technology, which is expected to benefit more than 300,000 homes and businesses in regional Australia.

Enhancements to nbn satellite services have been made possible due to the upgrades to the nbn FW network, which includes migrating around 120,000 premises from the nbn satellite footprint to access nbn Fixed Wireless for the first time. This is part of a nationwide upgrade program to deliver better broadband for homes and businesses across regional and remote Australia.

The new entry and mid-tier plans are now available through retailers at lower wholesale prices than the existing Sky Muster Plus Premium plan, which was introduced in June 2024.

The three plans now available are:

- **Sky Muster Plus Premium – high tier option:** Replaces the current nbn Sky Muster Plus Premium plan and offers uncapped data use with maximum wholesale speeds of 100/5Mbps at least once every 24-hour period and an anticipated typical busy period wholesale download speed of 48Mbps.
- **Sky Muster Plus Premium – mid tier option:** A new plan that offers uncapped data use with maximum wholesale speeds of 50/5Mbps at least once every 24-hour period and an anticipated typical busy period wholesale download speed of 31Mbps.
- **Sky Muster Plus Premium – entry tier option**: A new plan that offers uncapped data use with maximum wholesale speeds of 25/5Mbps at least once every 24-hour period and an anticipated typical busy period wholesale download speed of 16Mbps.

In addition to the new plans, nbn is also introducing other new features for Sky Muster Plus and Premium users such as the option to purchase dedicated static IP (internet protocol) addresses for users who wish to do things like remotely access their network from outside their property.

SCHOOL STUDENT BROADBAND INITIATIVE (SSBI)

Applications for a free National Broadband Network (nbn) service through the SSBI have been extended until December 2025, or until the 30,000 connections limit is reached with free internet until June 2028! The announcement was made mid-Jan 2025 as part of the 'Government Back to School'. Members can self-nominate through the National Referral Centre. There are two criteria.

How to qualify for the School Student Broadband Initiative.

To qualify families and carers must:

- Have a school age student at home (full or part-time), enrolled in an Australian school up to Year 12 (including Prep in Qld/Vic/Tas, Kindergarten in NSW, Reception in SA, Transition in NT/ACT and Pre-Primary in WA).
- Not have an active nbn network internet service at your current residential address now or in the past 14 days (having a mobile internet service does not affect eligibility).
- Live in a premise that can access the nbn network through a standard connection.
- Families and carers can directly contact the National Referral Centre to check if they qualify or be referred by a participating nominating organisation.

To date more than 23,000 families are now receiving free internet connections via the School Student Broadband Initiative.

LOW EARTH ORBIT SATELLITE (LEOSat)

The government has announced a significant trial of fixed voice and Low Earth Orbit Satellite (LEOSat) connectivity. This is a notable step forward for consumers, particularly in regional areas. With direct to handset connectivity anticipated to provide mobile phones with voice and text capabilities in the future, these trials may inform future universal service policies. As part of the trials, the reliability and quality of voice calls will be tracked and impacts of weather conditions on services will be tested.

Approximately 250,000 Australians use the service, a significant slice of global users.

As first reported by CommsDay, Starlink has placed some Australian customers on waiting lists, citing limited capacity in certain areas of the country. Users in zones around Perth and Brisbane will have to wait for new capacity to come online before ordering and receiving their satellite dishes. Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) has confirmed this through attempts on the Starlink website to order the dishes to addresses in affected areas. PCMag reports that this is also occurring in parts of the US – a sign of the fast-growing popularity of the service.

Starlink has recently revealed a new product, Starlink Mini, which it plans to launch in coming months. The dish is a smaller-form version of the standard Starlink hardware and will be approximately the size of a MacBook. Speeds through the Starlink Mini will be capped at 100Mbps but will retain low latency advantages of the standard product. Starlink owner Elon Musk signalled on X that the upfront cost of the new dish and ongoing monthly prices will be approximately half that of the standard. If this holds true, Australian consumers could expect to pay $250-300 for a Mini dish, and around $70 per month for a speed capped service.

REGIONAL TECH HUB

Established in 2020, the Regional Tech Hub (RTH) is a centralised resource providing regional, rural, and remote residents with the critical support needed to navigate the complex world of connectivity and technology options. The RTH is a federally funded government initiative offering **independent** and **free**

information about digital technologies, services available, equipment solutions, setup and installation to regional, rural and remote Australians to get connected, stay connected and improve their connection.

The RTH aims to address the gap in digital inclusion between regional and metropolitan communities, by simplifying the noise, confusion, and frustration around phone and internet connectivity. If you answer yes, to any of the following questions, then the Regional Tech Hub can help you:

- Do you need to *get connected*?
- Are you wanting to *stay connected*?
- Would you like to *improve your connection*?
- Would you like to be able to *better use your connection*?

People living in rural, regional and remote Australia are encouraged to reach out to the Regional Tech Hub for independent support to address these four questions.

The RTH team are all based regionally across Australia and offers support via its website, a phone support line 1300 081 029 and social media pages Facebook and Twitter. Call them during the times below to speak to someone directly about your phone and internet options. Alternatively, complete the following options through their website:

- Book a time to speak with them through the 'Book an appointment' tab
- Ask for a free, customised Connectivity Report on your options
- Ask to progress an issue with your service provider using their Escalation Form
- Hotline/Live Chat Operating Hours (AEST/AEDT): Mon: 12pm – 5pm Tue: 12pm – 5pm Wed: 9am – 2pm Thu: 9am – 2pm Fri: 9am – 2pm.

Since December 2020, the Regional Tech Hub (RTH) has received close to 100,000 requests for help, including more than 70,000 website enquiries and helping close to 10,000 people with their mobile and internet connectivity options.

Of the queries received, maximising coverage through the nbn Sky Muster Satellite service was the most common advice sought, followed by requests for information on mobile broadband, mobile phone, nbn fixed wireless and nbn fixed line. Many queries are from people living with an unreliable service that is too expensive or does not meet data needs. In most cases, there are options available, of which the RTH can raise awareness of and ultimately help more people to find the best solution suited to their needs.

The RTH have launched a podcast - Tech Hub Talk. It is now available on all major podcast platforms!

Tech Hub Talk offers practical, easy-listening conversations hosted by Joshua Groch, featuring guest speakers discussing regional connectivity. The first season opens with a conversation about the 3G shutdown; why it was necessary and what you can do if you were caught off guard or are experiencing problems. Other episodes offer insights from various perspectives, including a bush connectivity advocate, a primary producer, and Telstra representatives and real-life stories of resilience, including handling natural disasters in remote areas and emergency preparedness.

Season One Episode Highlights:

- **Episode 1**: *3G Shutdown* – A discussion with Kristy Sparrow from BIRRR on the impacts and what it means for regional users.
- **Episode 2**: Insights from a primary producer on adapting to the change.
- **Episode 3**: Telstra's perspective on the shutdown and future improvements.

- **Episode 4**: A pastoralist's experience with natural disaster recovery in Far North QLD.
- **Episode 5**: Preparing for emergencies and insights from emergency response teams.

Keep an eye on their socials for episode updates!

REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS INDEPENDENT REVIEW COMMITTEE (RTIRC) 2024

The Review occurs every three years and is an opportunity to examine the existing and future telecommunications needs in regional, rural and remote communities across Australia. The Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee has delivered its report to the Australian Government, informed by extensive consultation with people living and working in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia, sharing their views and experiences with connectivity.

The 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review 'Connecting communities, reaching every region' report and recommendations, are available in the following formats:

- Connecting Communities, reaching every region (PDF)
- Connecting Communities, reaching every region (DOCX)
- Extract of the 2024 Recommendations (PDF)

I must confess I have not read the whole **119-page** report! There were however, 14 recommendations that can be summarised as follows:

1. **Upscaling connectivity literacy**
   The Committee recommends a significant increase in the focus and resources for connectivity literacy in regional, rural and remote Australia.

   The Australian Government should:
   - Develop a program to create Connectivity Champions.
   - Develop high-quality connectivity literacy training programs to train Connectivity Champions, communities, businesses and other stakeholders.
   - Refocus the Regional Tech Hub and increase funding to expand its capacity, boost awareness of its services, and improve its performance in providing existing core services.
   - Review the Regional Tech Hub's scope, strategy and governance at the end of its current contract period.

2. **Improving the mobile experience**
   The Committee recommends actions to improve mobile services, including addressing diminishing mobile experience in existing regional, rural and remote coverage areas.

   The Australian Government should:
   - Prioritise funding to improve existing terrestrial mobile network capacity, service quality, and resilience rather than further extending terrestrial coverage.
   - Continue funding new terrestrial mobile coverage for critical areas like roads and leverage strategically located Wi-Fi hotspots where needed.
   - Request the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to conduct a new inquiry into mandatory domestic mobile roaming, considering emerging DTH (direct to handset) satellite technologies and its effect on competition.
   - Mandate, at the earliest opportunity, emergency mobile roaming during disasters and expedite the regulatory and operational framework for its use.

- Increase consumer and business awareness of terrestrial mobile network alternatives like Wi-Fi calling and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services for fixed locations.
- Enhance the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA's) resources to enforce compliance against the sale and use of illegal mobile phone boosters and other unauthorised equipment and installation practices.

3. Expedite universal service modernisation

The Committee recommends the Australian Government expedite modernising the USO and the Statutory Infrastructure Provider (SIP) regime by merging them into a unified service obligation. NBN Co, as the provider of last resort, and other SIP operators would be required to provide voice-capable broadband services with minimum speeds and standards for all premises.

The Committee also notes that continued public ownership of NBN Co will be crucial to ensure that service standards are met under a modernised USO in regional, rural and remote Australia. The contractual Copper Continuity Obligation (CCO) should be phased out where and when proven and effective voice-capable broadband services are available.

The Committee further recommends:

- NBN Co be tasked and funded to implement, in consultation with industry stakeholders, a plan to manage the needs of different cohorts of regional, rural and remote users.
- The modernised USO be technology neutral.
- The modernised USO be flexible, ensuring that minimum speeds, quality and other standards are readily adaptable so they remain relevant to changing needs.
- Premises without terrestrial mobile coverage have access to an affordable secondary redundant broadband service, including optional battery backup, with government contributions as necessary.
- When a modernised USO is introduced, the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) is updated and strengthened to provide appropriate protections for regional, rural, and remote consumers.
- Public phones (payphones) be embedded as a free service for domestic calls. Once current contractual obligations expire, the Australian Government should consider tendering for a provider to operate public phone services.

4. Consumer protection

The Committee:

- Recommends a full review of consumer protections and service standards to consolidate and strengthen protections contained in a multitude of legislative instruments.
- Supports the ongoing TCP Code review with a focus on strengthening enforceable consumer protections, in particular, ensuring commission-based sales incentives do not undermine the fair treatment of vulnerable consumers.

5. Affordability

The Committee recommends:

- The introduction of pre-paid, low-cost broadband plans in remote First Nations communities, as proposed by the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group.
- The Australian Government facilitate extending these options, promoting affordability and access for all regional, rural and remote Australians.

- Developing an initiative for unmetered access to critical government websites for users on limited data plans.
- Ongoing availability and funding for the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) to ensure all school-aged children have access to broadband internet, along with initiatives to increase awareness of the program in regional, rural and remote Australia.

6. **Develop a national telecommunications data platform**

The Committee recommends the Australian Government establish a national telecommunications data platform. Managed by the ACMA or the ACCC, the national platform should include:

- For consumers: an interactive online tool that allows consumers to easily access detailed information on broadband and mobile service availability in their area, helping them make informed decisions about their connectivity options across Australia.
- For the restricted use of Australian and state and territory governments: information about the location of telecommunications infrastructure assets for the purpose of investment and emergency planning and response.

Telecommunications providers should be required to supply data to governments in standardised formats to enable comparisons between locations and providers. This will enhance transparency in broadband and mobile coverage and help guide infrastructure investments, especially in underserved rural and remote areas.

The Committee further recommends that the Measuring Broadband Australia (MBA) program is continued beyond its current contract enabling the ACCC to monitor service performance.

7. **Regional telecommunications strategy**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a regional, rural and remote connectivity strategy. The strategy should be a vision for regional telecommunications and guide future investment and the regulatory environment for the future.

8. **Modernising government programs**

The Committee recommends that rigorous evaluations of the Australian Governments current rounds of telecommunications investment programs be conducted to ensure public investment is well targeted and delivered effectively. Further, the government should ensure that future rounds of existing and new programs are fit for purpose by:

- Considering technology developments, such as LEO satellites and DTH capabilities.
- Mandating meaningful community engagement throughout each project phase, with special emphasis on First Nations communities both as titleholders and consumers.
- Prioritising competitive retail and infrastructure options where viable.
- Addressing connectivity literacy and affordability.
- Enhancing resilience and capacity.
- Recognising the value of cross-government collaboration and planning.

To increase transparency, the government should create a public website to track milestones for all funded telecommunications projects. This platform would keep regional, rural and remote communities informed about infrastructure rollouts by providing regular updates on timelines, potential delays, and their causes, thereby building trust and awareness of government efforts to improve connectivity.

9. **Support for the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group**
   Recognising the value of the work of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group, the Committee recommends that it be continued as a standing initiative. Consideration should be given to adopting relevant First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group recommendations across regional, rural and remote communities to address the digital divide.

10. **Embedding community Wi-Fi**
    The Committee recommends that the Australian Government:
    - Continue funding contributions for existing Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) facilities.
    - Invest in new community connectivity hubs to provide community Wi-Fi services during emergencies and natural disasters.
    - Expand investment in mesh Wi-Fi networks in remote First Nations Communities, allowing a choice from a tailored menu of connectivity options that best meet local needs and noting that communities without mobile coverage should be prioritised.
    - Invest in and promote free public Wi-Fi initiatives in key locations across regional, rural and remote Australia.

11. **Transition oversight**
    The Committee recommends comprehensive independent monitoring and public reporting during large-scale telecommunications transitions, such as mobile technology switch-offs and the migrations required for modernising the USO. The ACMA could be well-placed to perform this role.

12. **Expedite planning approval**
    The Committee recommends that the Australian Government should exercise its power to expedite planning approvals for large telecommunications infrastructure projects, such as tower installations in regional, rural and remote Australia and in instances where Australian Government funding has contributed to projects.

13. **Powering connectivity**
    The Committee recommends that regulation be introduced to require:
    - Minimum backup power periods for new critical telecommunications infrastructure installations in regional, rural and remote Australia, with existing assets to be captured over time. The backup period would be regularly reviewed to take account of changes in storage and network technology.
    - Energy providers to give high priority to restorations of power for critical telecommunications infrastructure in regional, rural and remote Australia.
    - Energy providers to prioritise energy connections for new telecommunications installations.

14. **Evolution of Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committees**
    The Committee recommends replacing the current appointment of Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committees every three years with a permanent Regional Telecommunications Commissioner or Regional Telecommunications Advisory Panel. Given the rapid pace of technology change, increasing complexity of the market and the need to modernise the USO, continuous oversight is required.

SCAMS

SMS Sender ID Register Legislation Goes Before Parliament

Legislation to establish an SMS Sender ID Register was introduced to Parliament by Minister for Communications, Michelle Rowland and the Sender ID Register Bill has now passed Federal Parliament. The proposed Register aims to reduce the number of scams and help consumers identify legitimate texts from fraudulent ones. It is an important tool to combat SMS scams that consumers frequently experience. The ACMA will now move to establish and operate a Register. All industry participants need to do their part.

The federal governments planned SMS Sender ID Register will be mandatory rather than voluntary. This comes after a government trial of a voluntary register and consistent pressure from ACCAN (Australian Consumer Action Network) and the consumer sector to create a mandatory Register. 89% of respondents to consultation expressed a preference for a mandatory model. The Register will help to drive down the number of scams SMS Australians receive. Australians are frequently bombarded by scam texts – and from international experience (Singapore), a mandatory Register will make a difference.

National Scam Number

Telstra have a new short national number (7226) for customers to report suspected SMS and MMS scams.

Customers who forward SMS and MMS scams to 7226 (SCAM) will help Telstra better protect millions of Australians from receiving harmful SMS/MMS messages that may attempt to trick them into providing their personal information, credit cards, or downloading malicious apps.

Telstra have a LINK (https://www.telstra.com.au/exchange/almost-half-of-australians-use-a-weak-password--here-s-what-that) available with simple tips and tricks on how to forward text messages, including video tutorials as well as tips on what to look for in a scam SMS and MMS.

Top five scam calls:

- **Amazon impersonation**: Scam calls about an issue with your Amazon account. They claim funds will be taken from your account if you do not act immediately by providing personal information.
- **Banking/finance impersonation:** Scam calls, emails and SMS claiming suspicious activity, unauthorised debits, or that your account has been suspended. They request personal details to verify your identity.
- **NBN impersonation:** Scam callers posing as someone from technical support. They claim there is a fault with your internet to get access to your computer and personal information.
- **Telstra impersonation:** Similar to the NBN scam. Callers pose as Telstra technical support and claim you have issues with your service or internet to access your computer and personal information.
- **eBay impersonation:** Scammers use a recorded message to claim you have made a purchase that requires a charge to your account. This is to get you to provide to personal information.

All five of the top reported scams impersonate trusted and well-known businesses, with scammers often displaying a fake number or sender information on your phone to make the contact look legitimate.

Many businesses clearly state they will not contact you out of the blue or send messages with links seeking financial information or personal details, so always treat these calls with caution.

How To Avoid Scams

- Do not provide your personal information to an unsolicited caller or sender of a message.

- Do not open links in any unsolicited messages you receive.
- If the brand has an app you can use instead of receiving messages, consider whether this will work for you. Messages you receive via the app are much more likely to be legitimate.
- Even if a message slips into a legitimate message stream on your phone, double-check that it is from the brand concerned.
- If in doubt, always contact the business via their publicly available contact details (or the details on your regular bill or transaction record) rather than the details provided by the caller or in a message.

Phishing

Hackers are going to great lengths, including mimicking real people and creating and updating fake social media profiles, to trick victims into clicking phishing links and handing over usernames and passwords.

The alert from the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) - the cybersecurity arm of intelligence service GCHQ - warns that the phishing attacks are targeting individuals and organisations in a range of sectors.

The end goal of the phishing attacks is to dupe the victim into clicking malicious links that direct to fake, but realistic-looking, login pages, where the victim will enter their login credentials, providing the attackers with access to their account, which hackers abuse directly or use to gain access to other victims.

Many of the malicious links are designed to look like commonly used cloud software and collaboration tools, including OneDrive, Google Drive, and other file-sharing platforms. In one case, the attackers even set up a Zoom call with the victim and then sent a malicious URL in the chat bar during the call. They have also created multiple characters in the phishing thread (all controlled by the attackers) to add the appearance of legitimacy.

CHATGPT AND AI

ChatGPT has captured the internet's attention with millions using the technology to write poems, craft short stories, answer questions and even ask for advice - and "meanwhile, cybercriminals are using it to generate malicious threats through its impressive ability to generate human-like text that adapts to different languages and audiences.

According to recent Norton reports, the "Pulse Report" for 2024 highlights a significant rise in sophisticated scams utilizing AI technology, including deepfakes and AI-generated voices, making it harder to identify fraudulent activity, particularly in investment scams, "boss" email scams, and part-time job scams on platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram; essentially, cybercriminals are leveraging advanced AI tools to make scams appear more legitimate.

Key points from the Norton Pulse Report 2024:

- **AI-powered scams:** Expect a surge in scams utilizing AI-generated deepfake videos and voice messages to trick users into providing personal information or money.
- **Business Email Compromise (BEC) evolution:** "Business Communication Compromise (BCC)" scams will become more prevalent, where cybercriminals use AI to mimic a user's boss or colleague in emails.
- **Social media manipulation:** Social media platforms will be flooded with AI-generated scams, making it difficult to distinguish real from fake content.
- **Targeted digital blackmail:** Cybercriminals will leverage personal data to execute more sophisticated and targeted digital blackmail attempts.

What to do to stay safe:

- **Be vigilant about verifying information:** Always check the source of information, especially when dealing with financial transactions or sensitive personal details.
- **Keep software updated:** Regularly update your operating system and security software to protect against the latest threats.
- **Use strong passwords and multi-factor authentication:** Protect your accounts with strong passwords and enable multi-factor authentication where possible.
- **Educate yourself about emerging threats:** Stay informed about the latest scams and cyber threats to be able to identify them.