



Australian Government

**Australian Government response to the House of
Representatives Standing Committee on
Communications and the Arts' report**

Connecting the country: Mission critical

March 2025

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Overview

The Australian Government welcomes the report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts on its inquiry into co-investment in multi-carrier regional mobile infrastructure.

The Government is committed to improving communications outcomes for communities in regional, remote and very remote Australia, and in First Nations communities. Our *Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia* (the Better Connectivity Plan) is providing more than \$1.1 billion to rural and regional Australia to improve communications, including through mobile and broadband connectivity and resilience.

A key goal of the Better Connectivity Plan is to improve multi-carrier coverage on major roads and highways, and in underserved communities, in regional, rural and remote Australia. Communications markets in regional and remote Australia, including road networks, are thin and investment in new or expanded coverage often results in small numbers of new customers. The Government recognises that new thinking may be required, and is providing \$50 million in funding to the State and Territory Governments to test innovative, novel or complex solutions to improve coverage on regional roads and highways, with a strong focus on achieving multi-carrier coverage.

Our flagship regional communications programs – the Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP) and Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) – are increasing connectivity in the regions. These programs continue to evolve, and reflect changing need, market conditions and community priorities. The most recent rounds of the MBSP and the Peri-Urban Mobile Program (PUMP) have sought to encourage multi-carrier coverage through both incentives and assessment criteria, with Round 8 of the MBSP offering higher co-funding rates for solutions which provide outcomes from all three Mobile Network Operators.

By funding data collection through the National Audit of Mobile Coverage, the Government is building the evidence base for policies and initiatives which support improvements in, or enhancements to, regional communications.

We also continue to strengthen initiatives to support digital inclusion and connectivity in First Nations communities. The Government is delivering free community Wi-Fi in remote communities, establishing a First Nations Digital Support Hub and network of digital mentors to provide culturally competent support, and improving the national collection of data on First Nations digital inclusion. Recent rounds of programs, such as the RCP Round 3 and MBSP Round 7, targeted improved connectivity in First Nations communities, while Round 2 of the Mobile Network Hardening Program offered increased support for resilience upgrades in remote Australia and First Nations communities.

The Government values ongoing and productive engagement with State and Territory Governments, particularly through the Regional Connectivity Ministers' Roundtable, and with the telecommunications sector, local communities, and other key stakeholders to deliver effective policy and programs.

The 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review (the Review), which occurs every 3 years, provided an opportunity to examine the existing and future telecommunication needs in regional, rural and remote communities across Australia. Recommendations from the Review will inform telecommunications policies and programs into the future.

The Review was grounded in robust engagement with communities, the telecommunications industry, all tiers of government, and other stakeholders. The Review acknowledged progress in

improving regional connectivity in Australia and noted remaining gaps in mobile and Wi-Fi coverage, affordability and resilience.

The Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, tabled the Review Report, *Connecting communities, reaching every region*, in the Senate on 13 December 2024, and House of Representatives on 4 February 2025. The Australian Government is preparing its response.

The Government will continue to innovate, and to refine and target our policies and programs to deliver improved connectivity for rural, regional and remote Australia, and First Nations communities.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government's response to *Connecting the country: Mission critical* is set out in detail below.

Recommendation 1:

2.50 The Committee recommends the Australian Government review the implications of the current framework for the allocation, management, and use of spectrum for the provision of regional telecommunications services, giving consideration to issues such as non-use and area-wide licensing. The review should identify policy or regulatory changes to support increased coverage and competition in regional, remote and First Nations Australian communities.

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Australian Government has a number of mechanisms in place to support the allocation, management and use of spectrum for regional telecommunications services. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) is responsible for the management of the radiofrequency spectrum and is guided by the *Radiocommunications Act 1992* (the Act). The object of the Act is "to promote the long-term public interest derived from the use of the spectrum by providing for the management of the spectrum in a manner that:

- facilitates the efficient planning, allocation and use of the spectrum; and
- facilitates the use of the spectrum for commercial purposes and defence purposes, national security purposes and other non-commercial purposes (including public safety and community purposes); and
- supports the communications policy objectives of the Commonwealth Government."

Consistent with the object of the Act, the ACMA's management of spectrum is intended to support the Government's communication's policy objectives. The Government's 2024 Ministerial Statement of Expectations to the ACMA specifies the Government's policy priorities, and includes:

- supporting government policies related to regional, rural and remote Australia including by having regard to relevant ministerial policy statements in the planning and allocation of spectrum to support innovation and competition in these areas; and
- that the ACMA have regard and contribute to, where possible, the Government's policy priorities with respect to First Nations Australians and meeting the Closing the Gap targets.

The Government has provided further policy guidance to the ACMA through Ministerial Policy Statements (MPS) under section 28B of the Act. The ACMA is required to have regard to any relevant MPS under section 28C of the Act. The Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, has issued an MPS for the ACMA's process to consider spectrum licences due to expire between 2028 and 2032, and has specifically identified 'connectivity and investment in regional and remote areas to deliver improved services to end users' as a Government communications policy objective that the ACMA will need to carefully balance among other policy objectives for this important process.

Additional to the MPS for the expiring spectrum licences (ESL) process, an MPS for the 3.4-4.0 GHz band includes support for digital connectivity and investment in regional Australia as a Government communications policy objective. This MPS has guided the ACMA in its allocation of important mid-band spectrum through 2023-24, including in regional and remote areas.

The ACMA is increasingly using a mix of licence types and allocation methods in its major spectrum allocations, with appropriate spectrum being made available to support coverage and competition in regional and remote areas, where digital exclusion amongst First Nations Australians is often more pronounced. The ACMA's approach to area-wide apparatus licences (AWLs) and their allocation, for example, provides for flexible use of the spectrum similar to spectrum licences, options to tailor licences to more targeted coverage areas and bandwidths, shorter licence terms, and lower upfront costs, which improve opportunities for smaller operators who may want to offer tailored services to regional Australia. AWLs have been part of several recent major spectrum allocations, including the 26 GHz and 28 GHz allocations in 2020-21 and allocations across the 3.4-4.0 GHz band in 2023-24.

Use of spectrum holdings by licensees will be an important consideration in the ACMA's approach to managing a large number of spectrum licences expiring between 2028 and 2032. The future of this spectrum will have a long-term impact on telecommunications in Australia, including allocating spectrum that can be used by licensees to provide services in regional and remote areas.

On 19 December 2023, the ACMA released its framework and response to submissions from Stage 1 of the ESL process. In March 2024, as part of Stage 2 of the ESL process, the ACMA requested information from incumbent licensees about how they are using their spectrum. In a 'reply to comment' period in June 2024, the ACMA sought feedback and responses to the initial information received. In Stage 2, the ACMA also requested information from incumbent licensees and prospective alternative licensees of the spectrum covered by ESLs about how their future use of the spectrum is intended to support a range of public-interest outcomes, including regional, rural and remote connectivity, investment and competition, innovation and efficiency. The ACMA will consider this information as it moves forward with the ESL process.

Spectrum is an essential component to any wireless communications system, including mobile networks. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's Regional Mobile Infrastructure Inquiry Report, released in October 2023, found that Australia's three major Mobile Network Operators currently have sufficient spectrum to supply mobile network services in rural, regional and remote Australia. However, while access to spectrum may not be a barrier for major carriers, the cost of deploying infrastructure, and other related issues, to deliver communications services may affect its use.

To strengthen access to telecommunications services, the Government's 2024-25 Budget is delivering free community Wi-Fi services in remote First Nations communities that have no or limited connectivity. This will enhance the connectivity in areas that require additional support due to their geographical isolation.

Recommendation 2:

2.137 The Committee recommends the Australian Government review current licensing arrangements to consider the merits of including licence conditions on mobile network owners and other spectrum licensees of terms and conditions that mandate open access and active sharing solutions in defined circumstances and or geographic locations.

The Government **agrees in principle** to this recommendation.

The spectrum regulatory framework is designed to facilitate management of spectrum to ensure its most efficient use. Spectrum licences are one of the types of radiocommunications licences that can be issued under the *Radiocommunications Act 1992* (the Act), and these particular licences are typically issued to mobile network owners to authorise their wireless broadband networks. In contrast to prescriptive frameworks, the Australian framework is typically service and technology agnostic, which means that new technologies and services can be deployed by licensees and users without regulatory intervention.

There are few regulatory barriers to spectrum licensees developing arrangements to share or trade their spectrum with third parties. For example, the Act allows spectrum licensees to trade their spectrum licences either in part or in full, and to reach agreements with third parties on access to spectrum covered by their spectrum licences. Such trades and authorisations are subject to Australia's merger control settings.

On 29 April 2024, Optus and TPG Telecom announced a regional Multi-Operator Core Network (MOCN) agreement, which would allow TPG Telecom to access Optus' regional radio access network and would allow Optus to licence some of TPG's spectrum for use in the MOCN. On 5 September 2024, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) announced it would not oppose the proposed MOCN agreement.

On 10 April 2024, the Treasurer, the Hon Jim Chalmers MP, announced reforms to Australia's merger control system. The purpose of the reforms is to more efficiently and effectively target mergers that are anti-competitive, while allowing mergers that are pro-competitive to proceed faster. Under the reforms, there will be a new mandatory notification system for mergers above certain thresholds and the ACCC will be the decision-maker on approvals. The legislation to implement the reforms, namely the Treasury Laws Amendment (Mergers and Acquisitions Reform) Act 2024, was passed by the Parliament on 28 November 2024. The new merger control system will come into effect on 1 January 2026, with businesses able to make voluntary notifications under the new system from 1 July 2025.

Further, the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, wrote to the Chair of the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) in December 2023 noting that the ACMA's management of the expiring spectrum licences (ESL) process offered an opportunity to comprehensively consider different licensing arrangements. The Minister asked that the ACMA develop a considered view on the use of alternative licensing conditions in the Australian context including, but not limited to, roll-out obligations and their effectiveness in achieving broader coverage, and use-it-or-lose-it and use-it-or-share-it provisions and their effectiveness in achieving more efficient spectrum use.

In March 2024, as a part of Stage 2 of its ESL work, the ACMA released a paper that included an overview of these alternative licensing conditions and their potential implementation through the ESL process and under the spectrum licensing framework as licence conditions. The ACMA sought stakeholder views on a range of issues, including the effectiveness and impact of these licensing conditions. The ACMA also noted a number of alternative mechanisms that, either independently or

in connection with ESLs, could potentially achieve the objectives identified by the Minister. The ACMA has considered feedback on these issues and wrote to the Minister in late 2024 with its advice on alternative licence conditions in the context of ESLs. The Minister is considering the ACMA's views and is expected to respond to the ACMA in due course.

The Government also uses grant programs to achieve open access and active sharing solutions, including the suite of regional mobile infrastructure programs. The Mobile Black Spot Program and pilot programs of the Regional Roads Australia Mobile Program are, for example, using grant funding, and eligibility and merit criteria to encourage active sharing.

The *Competition and Consumer Act 2010* gives the ACCC powers to declare services, which are used to mandate access to services between competitors. The ACCC has periodically considered whether mandating domestic roaming would be in the long-term interests of end users, taking into account changing market circumstances. It last considered this matter in 2017 and found that mandated roaming could lead to lower mobile infrastructure investment and potentially lead to higher costs, particularly for people in regional areas.

The Government is also considering the effectiveness of facilities and tower access regulations under the *Telecommunications Act 1997*, following the ACCC's findings, in its 2023 *Regional Mobile Infrastructure Inquiry Report*, that the regimes may no longer be fit-for-purpose. Following a public consultation process (held between February and April 2024), the Government is considering whether any changes are required to ensure the legislation effectively promotes access to towers and associated infrastructure, including how the legislation applies to mobile network infrastructure providers.

The Government is also working with industry to achieve Temporary Disaster Roaming as an industry-led solution (Recommendation 23).

Recommendation 3:

2.137 The Committee recommends the Australian Government review the policy intent, objectives, and guidelines of the Mobile Black Spot Program to ensure it remains fit for purpose. The review should be completed within 12 months.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government has conducted an external evaluation of the Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP) to measure and assess the effectiveness of the Program in delivering its policy intent and objectives, and to inform future policy and program design. The evaluation and the report is under consideration.

The Government also reviews, and updates as appropriate, the Grant Opportunity Guidelines (the Guidelines) for each round to ensure the MBSP continues to achieve its objectives. This includes considering changes in the market, opportunities for improvements, continued need for funding and whether the criteria continue to align with objectives and outcomes. The Government consults with stakeholders on potential changes to the MBSP, including proposed Guidelines.

The design of the MBSP and Guidelines are also adjusted to achieve particular policy outcomes and objectives, such as a focus on Public Interest Premises (Rounds 4 and 5), natural disaster prone areas and Major Designated Transport Routes (Round 5A) and remote, very remote and First Nations communities (Round 7). Round 8 of the MBSP opened in December 2024, with a focus on regional and remote areas of Australia that are prone to natural disasters, and provides higher co-funding rates for solutions which provide outcomes from all three Mobile Network Operators.

The Report of the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review also proposed an evaluation of the MBSP (and other government programs) to ensure they remain effective and fit-for-purpose. The Government is currently preparing its response to the Review Report.

Recommendation 4:

3.165 The Committee recommends the Australian Government establish a working group involving mobile network operators, infrastructure providers, regulatory bodies, and relevant government agencies to address technical, regulatory, and policy barriers to the adoption and deployment of multi-carrier mobile network infrastructure across regional and remote Australia, and to provide input on future funding and co-investment programs that allow for innovation and focus on outcomes.

The Government **agrees in principle** to this recommendation.

The Australian Government is delivering the intent of this recommendation through a number of mechanisms.

The Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, meets frequently with the telecommunications industry (including Mobile Network Operators and Mobile Network Infrastructure Providers) to discuss both industry-wide issues and matters of relevance to a particular area or company.

The Minister for Communications hosts a State and Territory Regional Connectivity Ministers' Roundtable to discuss commonalities, developments in the market, potential for investment, and policy and program design. The August 2023 meeting discussed barriers and options to improve multi-carrier coverage in regional and remote Australia, including pilot programs of the Government's Regional Roads Australia Mobile Program. The Government is providing \$50 million to State and Territory Governments for the pilot programs to trial new or innovative approaches to increase mobile coverage on highways and major roads in regional and remote Australia, with a strong focus on delivering multi-carrier outcomes. Design of the pilot programs will inform the design and delivery of a national program, and are funded from the *Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia*.

The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts consults regularly with the communications industry, officials in State and Territory Governments and Commonwealth agencies (including the Australian Communications and Media Authority) on matters impacting the sector, particularly the delivery of services to regional and remote Australia.

The Department co-leads the Mobile Telecommunications Working Group (with the New South Wales Department of Planning and Environment), which was established by the State and Territory Planning Ministers in July 2023. The Working Group is providing advice on options for a coherent national framework to prioritise and accelerate planning and approvals for larger communications infrastructure, such as poles and towers, to improve mobile connectivity for new developments and growth areas. The Final Report from the Working Group was published in July 2024, and sets out a set of national principles to improve mobile connectivity, particularly in new developments and growth areas.

The Department engaged with a wide range of industry and government stakeholders to inform the design and delivery of the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation (TDRI) Program, which supports piloting and deployment of innovative solutions to strengthen telecommunications resilience. Stakeholders were provided an opportunity to comment on and contribute to the TDRI Program's draft Program Guidelines through a public consultation process between 11 May 2023 and 9 June 2023. The Department engaged with relevant Commonwealth agencies, such as the National Emergency Management Agency and the Australian Communications and Media Authority, and State and Territory Government agencies on the design of the TDRI Program.

The Department is assessing the potential impacts on the design and delivery of the Government's programs resulting from the regional Multi-Operator Core Network agreement between Optus and TPG, including the funding models and approaches to deliver multi-carrier outcomes.

Recommendation 5:

3.168 The Committee recommends the Australian Government establish a trial program to fund mobile carrier infrastructure in specific regional and remote geographical areas with a mandate for open access through active or passive sharing to any funded infrastructure.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government has allocated funding through the Regional Roads Australia Mobile Program for pilot programs and a national program to improve mobile telecommunications on regional and remote roads. The Government is providing \$50 million to State and Territory Governments to trial new or innovative approaches to increase mobile coverage on highways and major roads in regional and remote Australia. These pilot programs are, at a minimum, strongly preferencing multi-carrier outcomes, and include passive and active sharing. Design of the pilot programs is informing the design and delivery of a national program, and are funded from the *Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia*.

The Government is also using existing programs to encourage active and passive sharing:

- Rounds 1 to 5A of the Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP) included funding and policy incentives to require funded Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) to offer co-location opportunities, at incremental cost, to other MNOs during the pre-design stage of sites. This allowed costs to be shared and efficiencies achieved. Funding was also awarded for a number of trial sites under Rounds 5 and 5A to support forms of active sharing, including roaming.
- Round 7 of the MBSP encouraged MNOs and other interested parties to work together during the application period to develop multi-MNO solutions, including active sharing solutions. This Round awarded funding for 25 new OneWiFi neutral host base stations to support multi-carrier outcomes.
- Round 8 of the MBSP is offering higher co-funding rates for solutions which provide outcomes from all three Mobile Network Operators, with up to seventy-five per cent co-funding available for passive sharing outcomes and up to one hundred per cent co-funding available for active sharing outcomes. Round 8 also uses a two-stage process, described below for the Peri-Urban Mobile Program (PUMP).
- The PUMP tested approaches to encourage multi-carrier outcomes. The Program's design settings include a two-stage application process which facilitated discussions between registered applicants on potential co-location opportunities. Round 2 also included an additional 25 percent funding contribution to lead applicants for solutions that provide or enable multi-carrier outcomes and consideration through dedicated assessment criterion and the value with relevant money assessment. Nine of the funded projects under Round 2 will deliver multi-carrier outcomes, with the remaining 38 projects required to offer co-location to interested mobile carriers, where technically feasible, to support potential multi-carrier outcomes at these sites in the future.

Further refinement to existing programs is expected, taking into account outcomes of previous rounds, market conditions and available funding and advice from the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review (RTR).

The Report from the 2024 RTR supports a continued focus on active infrastructure sharing for remote black spot areas, including access to neutral hosts, emergency roaming during natural disasters and domestic roaming. The Review Committee expressed optimism that "once deployed,

the Optus and TPG regional mobile network and spectrum sharing arrangement along with Direct-to-Handset services could lead to significant and positive changes to mobile service competition and availability for regional, rural and remote Australia.” The Government is currently preparing its response to the Review Report.

Recommendation 6:

3.170 The Committee recommends the Australian Government work with the New South Wales Government to develop more extensive trials of active infrastructure sharing solutions in regional New South Wales, including along road corridors and in remote Indigenous communities.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government is providing \$50 million from the Regional Roads Australia Mobile Program to State and Territory Governments to pilot new and innovative approaches to deliver multi-carrier coverage on regional and remote roads. The principles underpinning these pilot programs were discussed extensively with jurisdictions, including the New South Wales Government. The pilot programs are, at a minimum, strongly preferencing multi-carrier outcomes, and include passive and active sharing.

Commonwealth funding for a number of these pilot programs has now been announced, including \$10 million announced for the New South Wales pilot on 15 November 2024. The New South Wales Government is contributing up to \$38 million to the pilot as well.

Round 8 of the Mobile Black Spot Program is also offering higher co-funding rates for solutions which provide outcomes from all three Mobile Network Operators, with up to seventy-five per cent co-funding available for passive sharing outcomes and up to one hundred per cent co-funding available for active sharing outcomes.

Recommendation 7:

3.172 The Committee recommends the Australian Government consider allocating dedicated funding through programs such as the Mobile Black Spot Program and the Regional Connectivity Program for co-investment in trial sites to demonstrate the feasibility of technical and commercial models for multi-carrier mobile network sharing.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government is providing grant funding to encourage multi-carrier outcomes through its regional communications programs.

- Rounds 1 to 5A of the Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP) included funding and policy incentives to require funded Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) to offer co-location opportunities, at incremental cost, to other MNOs during the pre-design stage of sites. This allowed costs to be shared and efficiencies achieved. Funding was also awarded for a number of trial sites under Rounds 5 and 5A to support forms of active sharing, including roaming.
- Round 7 of the MBSP encouraged MNOs and other interested parties to work together during the application period to develop multi-MNO solutions, including active sharing solutions. This Round awarded funding for 25 new OneWiFi neutral host base stations to support multi-carrier outcomes.
- Round 8 of the MBSP is offering higher co-funding rates for solutions which provide outcomes from all three Mobile Network Operators, with up to seventy-five per cent co-funding available for passive sharing outcomes and up to one hundred per cent co-funding available for active sharing outcomes. Round 8 also uses a two-stage process, described below for the Peri-Urban Mobile Program (PUMP).
- The PUMP tested approaches to encourage multi-carrier outcomes. The Program's design settings include a two-stage application process which facilitated discussions between registered applicants on potential co-location opportunities. Round 2 also included an additional 25 percent funding contribution to lead applicants for solutions that provide or enable multi-carrier outcomes and consideration through dedicated assessment criterion and the value with relevant money assessment. Nine of the funded projects under Round 2 will deliver multi-carrier outcomes, with the remaining 38 projects required to offer co-location to interested mobile carriers, where technically feasible, to support potential multi-carrier outcomes at these sites in the future.
- Round 3 of the Regional Connectivity Program required MNO applicants delivering new mobile coverage outcomes to offer the option of co-location to other MNOs.

The Government is also providing \$50 million to State and Territory Governments to trial new or innovative approaches to increase mobile coverage on highways and major roads in regional and remote Australia, with a strong focus on delivering multi-carrier outcomes. Funding is being provided from the Regional Roads Australia Mobile Program.

Further refinement to existing programs is expected, taking into account outcomes of previous rounds, market conditions and available funding and advice from the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review (RTR).

Recommendation 8:

3.174 The Committee recommends the Australian Government establish a trial program to fund infrastructure to support multi-carrier mobile network sharing models at locations on major roads in regional and remote areas with limited or no contiguous network coverage.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government is providing \$50 million from the Regional Roads Australia Mobile Program (RRAMP) for pilot programs to improve mobile coverage on regional roads and highways, with a strong preference for multi-carrier coverage. The principles underpinning the pilot programs require pilot programs to focus on roads of strategic importance, key freight routes, and national land transport networks. Pilot programs are also improving coverage on roads with no or limited coverage, or extended blackspots, addressing service gaps and delivering reliable coverage, including at rest stops.

The 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review found continued investment in new mobile coverage along major roads and highways is essential for safety. It noted positive feedback from stakeholders on the Regional Roads Australia Mobile Program, which is providing grant funding to improve multi-carrier mobile coverage on highways and major roads in regional and remote Australia. The Government is currently preparing its response to the Review Report.

Recommendation 9:

4.131 The Committee recommends the Australian Government conducts and publishes the results of a government-led region-by-region mobile coverage audit, with analysis of coverage gaps across regional, rural and remote Australia. The audit would benchmark metrics on connection, data capacity and latency and should commence before the next Regional Telecommunications Independent Review commences under Part 9B of the Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999 (Cth); and biennially thereafter.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government is providing funding for a National Audit of Mobile Coverage through the *Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia*. The Audit will help to identify black spots and target future investment, and will assist in assessing the accuracy of carrier coverage maps annually from 2024 to 2027.

The Audit commenced on 8 May 2024 and will involve a pilot Audit followed by a main Audit. The main Audit will see drive testing of about 180,000 kilometres of main rural and regional roads every year for three years, along with static auditing in up to 77 locations. This data will be supplemented by additional crowd-sourced data collected from around 150,000 users Australia-wide. The Government has published initial results from the Audit, and will publish further data during the course of the project. The Government will also share data with State and Territory Government agencies and industry regulators.

Recommendation 10:

4.132 The Committee recommends the Australian Government lead development of a Regional Australia Mobile Telecommunications Strategy to consider the trends and demands of regional growth and identify regions and growth corridors where synergies can occur in the planning and construction of transport routes, energy, water and telecommunications connections.

The strategy should be developed and agreed in consultation with state and territory governments and the Australian Local Government Association.

The results of mobile coverage audits and key data on regional growth, industry, employment and tourism drivers would inform the Strategy.

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Australian Government has a cohesive strategy to deliver communications services to regional and remote Australia.

This strategy is multi-faceted and includes universal service modernisation and responding to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review. It also recognises that the deployment of new telecommunications equipment and infrastructure is a commercial decision by the relevant carrier. While the Government does not have a role in these decisions, it is supporting investment in regional areas where commercial incentives are insufficient, including through the *Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia*.

The Government engages regularly and extensively with stakeholders, including the telecommunications industry, State and Territory Governments, local government, regulatory agencies, and industry associations to discuss issues and challenges, market developments and changes, and emerging technologies. These discussions also explore synergies, opportunities for co-investment and mechanisms to address barriers.

The Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, meets with her State and Territory counterparts through the Regional Connectivity Ministers' Roundtable. Feedback from these discussions informs policy development, program design and regulatory changes.

The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts co-leads the Mobile Telecommunications Working Group, which was established in July 2023 to provide advice on options for a coherent national framework for prioritising and accelerating planning and approvals for larger communications infrastructure, such as poles and towers, to improve mobile connectivity in new developments and growth areas.

The Working Group's advice was endorsed by Planning Ministers and published in July 2024, and sets out a number of principles and underpinning actions that would, if implemented, streamline the deployment of larger telecommunications infrastructure in a similar way as other essential utilities. The Working Group recognised the increasing community expectation that telecommunications services are as essential in our daily lives as other utilities. The cost and operational benefits in making sure the deployment of essential utilities such as roads, energy, water and telecommunications services are aligned in new developments and growth areas are expected to extend to regional areas.

The Department also engages with State and Territory Governments on deployment matters via the Regional Connectivity Ministers' Roundtable, as well as the Mobile Telecommunications Working Group.

The Department provides secretariat support for the Powers and Immunities Reference Group (the Reference Group), which comprises a diverse range of landowner and carrier peak body stakeholders that meets from time to time. The Australian Local Government Association is a longstanding member of the Reference Group.

The 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review considered changes and adjustments that may be needed to Government policies and programs to ensure they continue to be effective, remain fit-for-purpose, are maximising the social and economic potential of regional Australia, and deliver improved telecommunications outcomes. The Government is currently preparing its response to the Review Report.

Recommendation 11:

4.133 The Committee recommends the Australian Government work with state and territory governments and relevant stakeholders to develop agreed guidelines for considering telecommunications infrastructure needs in early planning phases of road and rail construction and energy infrastructure rollouts.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government is progressing this recommendation through a number of mechanisms.

The Government is working with stakeholders across utility sectors, industry and government to ensure telecommunications infrastructure is considered in the early stages of planning and construction to achieve efficiencies associated with a 'dig once' approach.

The Energy and Climate Ministerial Council noted, at its meeting on 1 March 2024, the interrelationship between telecommunications and energy as two of the most critical infrastructure sectors. It agreed that the Minister for Communications provide an update on measures the Commonwealth is taking to support telecommunication companies to improve their network resilience, particularly in relation to regional mobile sites operating without power for longer, and the responsibilities of telecommunication companies to maintain and restore services during and after climate challenges.

The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts co-leads the Mobile Telecommunications Working Group (with the New South Wales Department of Planning and Environment), which was established by the State and Territory Planning Ministers in July 2023 to provide advice on options for a coherent national framework for prioritising and accelerating planning and approvals for larger communications infrastructure, such as poles and towers, to improve mobile connectivity in new developments and growth areas.

Austroroads is also leading work on a draft National Code of Practice to manage utilities, including telecommunications, in road reserves. The National Code of Practice aims to improve consistency, compliance and minimise impacts of third-parties operating in road reserves.

Recommendation 12:

4.134 The Committee recommends the Australian Government reform the powers and immunities in Commonwealth legislation, such as the Telecommunications Act 1997 (Cth) to enable mobile infrastructure to be deployed in regional, rural and peri-urban areas more swiftly.

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Australian Government is initially focusing on policy and regulatory changes that can support mobile telecommunications deployment, and will then consider implementation of legislative reforms in support of the work of the Mobile Telecommunications Working Group.

The Government changed the Telecommunications in New Developments policy in February 2024. The changes expand the scope of the policy by explicitly requiring developers to actively consider the provision of mobile connectivity in new developments. Under the changed policy, developers are obliged to engage with Mobile Network Operators and Mobile Network Infrastructure Providers as early as possible on mobile connectivity and coverage solutions for new developments with more than 50 residential lots. This policy change was a first step by the Government in signalling its commitment to improving mobile coverage in new developments.

Public consultation on potential amendments to the *Low-Impact Facilities Determination 2018* was undertaken in late 2024. The proposed amendments are designed to further streamline the deployment of mobile infrastructure in regional and rural areas and are being considered by the Government.

The Government is considering the deployment of mobile infrastructure in urban and peri-urban areas through the work of the Mobile Telecommunications Working Group.

Larger telecommunications infrastructure, such as towers and poles, cannot currently be deployed by a carrier using the powers and immunities framework, and must be installed in accordance with local, State or Territory planning laws. Some jurisdictions have streamlined planning arrangements enabling towers and poles to be deployed as exempt or complying developments, which removes the requirement for a development application process.

Implementation of this recommendation would require legislative change to Schedule 3 of the *Telecommunications Act 1997*. Any legislative change would be subject to public consultation to ensure it appropriately balances community and landowner interests with those of the telecommunications sector.

The Government will consider this recommendation in the context of applying the outcomes from the final report of the Mobile Telecommunications Working Group to regional and rural areas.

Recommendation 13:

4.135 The Committee recommends the Australian Government prohibit its agencies from charging additional co-user rental fees above the rent a principal tenant pays to lease Commonwealth crown land for the purpose of providing telecommunications services.

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Australian Government raised the issue of co-user rental fees through the Mobile Telecommunications Working Group, which has considered matters associated with accessing land for telecommunications infrastructure, including the approval process and cost to access Crown land. Working Group participants were encouraged to engage with relevant agencies responsible for these matters in their respective jurisdictions, but noted that each individual State and Territory has the discretion to determine how they set Crown land fees.

The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts will engage with other relevant agencies on matters related to accessing Commonwealth Crown land, including co-user fees for shared sites.

The Department intends to participate in future jurisdictional Crown land reviews as they occur and will refer the issue for inclusion in a future work plan for the Working Group.

Recommendation 14:

4.136 The Committee recommends the Australian Government work with state and territory governments and industry to negotiate smaller minimum lot sizes that can safely host new mobile infrastructure.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government raised the issue of minimum lot sizes through the Mobile Telecommunications Working Group. This issue was raised in the context of the Working Group's discussion on land access. It identified the complexities across jurisdictions in harmonising land access matters and will refer the issue for inclusion in a future work plan.

Further engagement with industry is needed to determine appropriate land dimensions, which could then be referenced in State and Territory planning processes, particularly determining lot size in different settings, that is residential, commercial, regional, rural and remote.

The Report on the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review recommended expediting planning approvals for large telecommunications infrastructure projects, where the Australian Government has contributed funding. The Government is currently preparing its response to the Review Report.

Recommendation 15:

4.137 The Committee recommends the Australian Government facilitate the harmonisation of planning and environmental regulations for new mobile infrastructure across regional, rural and remote Australia.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government has considered streamlining of regulations for the construction of new mobile infrastructure through the Mobile Telecommunications Working Group.

Members of the Working Group have reinforced the challenges that differences in each jurisdiction's planning frameworks have on the efficient deployment of larger telecommunications infrastructure. For example, the local council is the decision maker for development applications in some jurisdictions, while the State or Territory Government planning agency is the decision maker in other jurisdictions.

The Government will continue to work with jurisdictions to implement a coherent national framework to support the deployment of mobile telecommunications infrastructure.

Implementation of this recommendation would require legislative change to Schedule 3 of the *Telecommunications Act 1997*. Any legislative change would be subject to public consultation to ensure it appropriately balances community and landowner interests with those of the telecommunications sector.

There are existing safeguards in Schedule 3 of the Act, the *Telecommunications (Low-Impact Facilities) Determination 2018* and *Telecommunications Code of Practice 2021* to protect areas of environmental significance, including areas recognised through Commonwealth, State and Territory legislation as areas eligible for environment or heritage protection (including areas of cultural importance to First Nations peoples).

Recommendation 16:

4.138 The Committee recommends the Australian Government develop and implement a practical universal service obligation for mobile telecommunications service providers.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government has announced that it will introduce legislation to require mobile network operators to ensure that baseline mobile coverage is reasonably accessible throughout Australia to support access to emergency communication, with the new obligation to form part of a modernised universal services framework. The obligation would take effect when commercial direct to device services, supplied over low earth orbit satellites, have been deployed nationwide. This will deliver benefits for people living in areas with no mobile coverage, and also provide important public safety benefits.

The obligation will ensure voice and simple messaging system services are supplied.

Recommendation 17:

4.139 The Committee recommends the Australian Government facilitate early roundtable meetings between NBN Co and mobile telecommunications industry representatives with Rewiring the Nation program planners to ascertain the potential to co-locate telecommunications infrastructure along renewable electricity transmission routes planned for regional and remote Australia.

The Government **agrees in principle** to this recommendation.

The Government agrees in principle that the co-location of telecommunications infrastructure with electricity transmission infrastructure should be investigated where feasible. The Rewiring the Nation Office will facilitate discussions between relevant transmission planning and delivery authorities and Government agencies. The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts will engage with the Rewiring the Nation Office to assess the feasibility of this recommendation, both from a broadband and mobile infrastructure perspective.

The National Broadband Network (NBN) is predominantly located close to residential premises, given it is a customer access network. There would be limited opportunity for NBN infrastructure to be located away from where people live. NBN Co has established transit networks connecting, via points of interconnection, to other network infrastructure. Any expansion of the number of NBN points of interconnection would require consideration with the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. NBN Co's transit network, if augmented, may only provide marginal benefit, now that the company has moved from its construction to operational phase.

Recommendation 18:

4.140 The Committee recommends the Australian Government encourage investment in ‘smart’ mobile infrastructure that incorporates renewable and decarbonised energy solutions.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government is using a number of policy and program levers to support investment in energy efficient infrastructure, while recognising that the industry invests in innovation to meet its own commercial objectives.

- Round 2 of the Mobile Network Hardening Program is funding a standalone hybrid power project in Western Australia. The new power system will improve resiliency, benefiting both mining operations and local communities.
- Under the Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters Program the Government co-funded the deployment of 40 hybrid power cubes deployed into NBN Co’s network. These power cubes combine solar power, batteries and diesel generators to support network operations when there are power interruptions, and are located in:
 - ten in each of New South Wales and Victoria;
 - eight in Queensland;
 - five in South Australia;
 - four in Western Australia; and
 - three in Tasmania.

The Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation (TDRI) Program included both an Innovation Round and a Power Resilience Round. The Power Resilience Round funded a range of power solutions to improve disaster resilience and reduce instances of telecommunications power outages. Two of the three focus areas were to provide stand-alone off-grid power solutions, including solutions involving renewable energy, and more energy-efficient telecommunications infrastructure. Projects to be funded by the TDRI Program were announced on 1 May 2024, and include:

- deployment of hybrid back-up standalone power solutions that use combinations of renewable energy, fuel and batteries;
- trialling the use of hydrogen in energy generation for telecommunications; and
- new portable generators to support telecommunications resilience around Australia.

Australia’s telecommunication industry also has a focus on encouraging and enabling suppliers and customers to reduce their emissions. This is important as the majority of the footprint for the industry are indirect emissions, being produced by upstream supply chains or downstream consumer cohorts. The telecommunications industry also continues to play a role in reducing the overall emissions in the Australian economy by enabling change in other sectors.¹

¹ A number of sources support this as a global position. For example, How Tech and telecom and Create a Triple Win in Green, Boston Consulting Group, February 23 (www.bcg.com/publications/2023/role-of-ict-in-sustainable-development-triple-green-win), Mobile Net Zero: State of the Industry on Climate Action, GSMA. Association (www.gsma.com/betterfuture/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Mobile-Net-Zero-State-of-the-Industry-on-Climate-Action-2022.pdf).

Recommendation 19:

4.141 The Committee recommends the Australian Government commission and publish a government-led cost-benefit analysis of increased access to telecommunications infrastructure in under-serviced regional and remote communities to inform future policy and program development and funding decisions.

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Australian Government has a number of initiatives underway to ensure it has access to a clear, detailed and robust body of evidence on access to telecommunications services in regional and remote communities.

The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts uses a range of data and information to ensure an evidence-based approach to policy development and program design, including:

- the Bureau of Communications, Arts and Regional Research, which leads the Department's research and provides economic and data analysis on communications issues;
- analysis of the quantum of applications and nature of projects submitted for funding from communications programs, evidence of need and demand, and analysis of gaps in coverage;
- outcomes of earlier rounds of existing communications programs;
- State and Territory Governments, local governments and the private sector, particularly for qualitative data; and
- the Digital Inclusion Index, which includes information on access, affordability, digital ability and digital exclusion.

The Australian Government has conducted an external evaluation of the Mobile Black Spot Program to measure and assess the effectiveness of the Program in delivering its policy intent and objectives, and to inform future policy and program design. The evaluation has been completed and the report is under consideration.

The 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review recommends a new government website to track funded projects and ensure communities are informed about infrastructure investments, milestones, delivery timeframes, and potential delays and their causes. The Government is currently preparing its response to the Review Report.

Recommendation 20:

5.70 The Committee recommends the Australian Government investigate and, where appropriate, fund targeted, place-based solutions for providing reliable and secure access to telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities, including, but not limited to:

- deployment of wi-fi mesh networks or wi-fi hotspots, and
- use of Low Earth Orbit satellite services.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government places a high priority on providing access to communications services in First Nations communities, and is delivering a range of place-based initiatives in support of this objective. The Government continues to consider further opportunities to support these communities as emerging connectivity solutions develop.

The Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) Round 3 and Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP) Round 7 allocated \$32.5 million (GST exclusive) in funding to improve connectivity in First Nations communities. The significant response to these grant opportunities resulted in additional funding being provided, with grant funding of \$37.4 million (GST exclusive) provided to 25 projects from RCP Round 3 and \$12.4 million (GST exclusive) from the MBSP Round 7 to 19 projects in First Nations communities.

The Mobile Network Hardening Program (MNHP) Round 2 encouraged the delivery of resilience upgrades in remote Australia and First Nations communities through increased funding for projects in these locations. Grant funding of 75 percent of the capital cost of projects in remote, very remote or First Nations communities is being provided. Nineteen projects located at 15 sites in First Nations communities are being funded from the MNHP Round 2.

On 13 February 2024, the Government announced it would provide free community Wi-Fi services to around 20 remote First Nations communities that have no or limited connectivity. This announcement reflects recommendation 1.3 of the initial report of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group (the Advisory Group), which identified community Wi-Fi as a solution where traditional terrestrial connectivity has failed. The Advisory Group has also identified place-based approaches as a key guiding principle for addressing First Nations digital inclusion.

The Government is partnering with NBN Co to deliver this program. NBN Co has worked closely with the Advisory Group, and relevant State and Territory Governments, to identify communities to participate in the initiative. In total, 23 communities have signed up to participate in the program and at the end of 2024, 19 communities were benefitting from free services, with remaining communities coming online in 2025.

The 2024-25 Budget provides an additional \$20 million over three years to deliver free community Wi-Fi services to more remote First Nations communities, using a place-based approach focused on different community needs. This program will be delivered through a competitive process, and may include the use of Low Earth Orbit satellites (LEOSats). This will be supported by a First Nations Digital Support Hub and network of digital mentors programs to increase access and use of broadband services and improve digital literacy and online safety among First Nations people, with an additional \$22 million in funding being provided. The 2024-25 Budget also included \$6 million over three years to improve the national collection of data on First Nations digital inclusion.

The Government's LEOSat Working Group, established in 2022, has identified four key regulatory areas to guide future telecommunications reform, including the role satellites can play in addressing

digital inclusion, particularly in relation to First Nations people, consistent with Closing the Gap Target 17.

The Working Group has provided initial advice to the Government and will continue to do so, particularly as LEOSat capability continues to develop. In alignment with this advice, the Government is considering LEOSat capability interactions with the regulatory and spectrum frameworks, emergency call service obligation, and the universal services arrangements.

Recommendation 21:

5.72 The Committee recommends the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to identify new opportunities and new partners for co-investments in mobile and digital infrastructure in very remote communities that have limited or no existing telecommunications services.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government is working closely with State and Territory Governments through the Digital Inclusion Working Group established by Data and Digital Ministers Meetings to consider ways to support national collaboration on digital inclusion.

The Government also engages bilaterally with jurisdictions to ensure improved alignment and cooperation on matters relating to telecommunications in remote communities. Work in relation to this recommendation is ongoing, and has been an area of focus and progress for the Advisory Group. The Advisory Group is also considering how Low Earth Orbit satellites (LEOSats) can be used to close the digital inclusion gap for First Nations people, and has recommended a pilot program to explore the commercial and technical viability of LEOSats as a solution to connectivity challenges in remote areas.

The 2024-25 Budget provided an additional \$20 million over three years to deliver free community Wi-Fi services to more remote First Nations communities, using a place-based approach focused on different community needs. This program will be delivered through a competitive process, and may include the use of emerging technologies such as low earth orbit satellites (LEOSats).

A key area of discussion of the Regional Connectivity Ministers' Roundtable is support for investment in remote communities. It has, for example, discussed the pilot programs to deliver improved coverage on regional and remote roads. The Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, with State and Territory Ministers responsible for communications, is working to identify opportunities for ongoing co-operation and alignment of investment priorities for the Government's regional connectivity commitments.

Recommendation 22:

5.73 The Committee recommends the Australian Government provide additional funding for government-led collection of data relating to mobile and digital connectivity, and digital inclusion more generally, in regional and remote Indigenous Australian communities.

The Government **supports** this recommendation.

The Australian Government committed \$6 million in the 2024-25 Budget to improve data collection on First Nations digital inclusion, by increasing the scope and sample size of the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) for First Nations people. The ADII uses survey data to measure digital inclusion across three dimensions of Access, Affordability and Digital Ability, and enables identification of the critical barriers to inclusion that may relate to accessing networks, the costs of devices or data, and digital skills and literacy.

Provided over three years, the funding will expand the ADII by building on the current data collection, which includes the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's 'Mapping the Digital Gap' project. This funding will support improving the measurement of the digital inclusion gap experienced by First Nations people through the deployment of additional surveys, including face-to-face and phone calls. This project was a key recommendation of the initial report of the Advisory Group (recommendation 2.1) and aligns with the priority actions identified in the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap, released in December 2024.

The Government, through the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, is progressing a National Audit of Mobile Coverage. The Audit commenced on 8 May 2024 and will involve a pilot Audit followed by a main Audit. The main Audit will see drive testing of about 180,000 kilometres of main rural and regional roads every year for three years, along with static auditing in up to 77 locations. These data will be supplemented by additional crowd-sourced data collected from 150,000 users Australia-wide. The Government has published initial results from the Audit, and will publish further data during the course of the project. The Government will also share data with State and Territory Government agencies and industry regulators.

The Government provided funding in the 2023-24 Budget to initiate work to assess the state of broadcasting transmission and reception equipment in remote and regional Australia, looking at gaps and deficiencies in service provision, with a focus on First Nations communities.

Recommendation 23:

6.61 The Committee recommends the Australian Government establish a working group involving state and territory governments, emergency services agencies, and mobile network operators to develop protocols for temporary roaming arrangements in declared disasters and emergencies.

The Government **agrees in principle** to this recommendation.

The Government acknowledges the important role that a temporary disaster roaming (TDR) capability could have for Australia in times of disaster, and notes the work that the telecommunications industry has been undertaking in relation to TDR for some time.

In October 2023, the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, and Senator the Hon Murray Watt, former Minister for Emergency Management, tasked the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts and the National Emergency Management Agency with scoping a TDR capability in collaboration with the mobile network operators and the State and Territory Emergency Service Organisations.

This announcement followed the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's 2023 Regional Mobile Infrastructure Inquiry which found that temporary disaster roaming is technically possible. It also found that questions remain about the technical complexity and further work is needed to design and develop the capability.

A report was provided to Ministers in March 2024, which included an outline of community expectations about connectivity during natural disasters. In April 2024, the Minister for Communications announced that the Government will continue to work with industry to bring about TDR as an industry-led solution.