



Close.... But No Connection

A Regional Perspective on the NBN

Submission to Joint Standing Committee NBN

Inquiry into the business case for the

NBN and the experiences of small

businesses

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Joint Standing Committee Inquiry into the business case for the NBN and the experiences of small businesses

Strathbogie Shire Submission – a regional perspective on the NBN

Executive Summary

The Council of Strathbogie Shire and its citizens, in the Goulburn region of Victoria, are looking forward to readily available, reliable, superfast broadband service, right now they feel dissatisfied, disadvantaged, and disconnected by the National Broadband Network (NBN). That is not to say they do not like broadband connectivity, they do, and they want it, and need it.

Supply of digital connectivity is a critical foundation infrastructure in our community.

Recent statements made in the Parliament upon the introduction of new Telecommunications Bills were encouraging, the Minister for Communications, the Hon Paul Fletcher said:

“ the Regional Broadband Scheme will establish a transparent and equitable funding mechanism to make sure NBN Co's satellite and fixed wireless services can continue to provide superfast broadband to regional Australia.”

That is what we want in the regions... Superfast Broadband.

Covid 19 and working from home (WFH) have confirmed the value of connectivity. If the region is not supplied with an equitable NBN offer, then it will be further disadvantaged in the WFH space. The Australian Digital Divide Index (ADDI) places our region 13.7 index points behind Canberra and 11 behind Melbourne. A digital divide between country and cities exists.

The Council of Strathbogie Shire seeks support for the region, we cannot afford to be digitally disadvantaged or impeded in social and economic development.

NBN experiences of Strathbogie businesses are poor, many short comings in service, and speed, are recorded. 61% of surveyed businesses experienced daily dropouts in connection. 90% reported slow speeds.

We fear that with increasing pace of digital development, regions like Strathbogie Shire will be left behind, we are already trying to catch up, but the NBN and mobile phone coverage is letting us down. Small businesses are disadvantaged and uncompetitive in comparison to businesses in other places better served by the NBN. Some businesses cannot remain in the regions and leave in search of greater connectivity.

We recommend to the Joint Committee, insights, and evidence, found in several key research papers: the Goulburn Regional Partnership Digital Plan, and Evidence, and the ADDI Report 2019. Our own survey of businesses in Strathbogie Shire is also attached.

The NBN job is not yet done.

Poor connectivity in the regions, in this digital age, is a policy fail that must be turned around by an intense period of focus and renewed collaboration between all levels of Government.

Not to put too fine a point on it, people in the regions have reason to believe that they are not getting the full benefit of the NBN, and to feel short-changed.

Close... But no connection

There is a certain irony that Strathbogie Shire Council, in an inner regional area, is making this submission to emphasise that digital connectivity, critical to modern communications, is not up to par, so close to metropolitan Melbourne.

At our southern boundary Strathbogie Shire is 123 kilometres from the Melbourne CBD. Strathbogie Shire covers a large 3303 Sq. kilometres and has a population of 10,272 people. Euroa (3279), Nagambie (1880), Avenel (1054), and Violet Town (872), are our regional towns.

We have vibrant communities and businesses supported by agriculture, (sheep, grains, beef, and dairy cattle), viticulture, winemaking, horse breeding and training, tourism & hospitality, and the wonderful natural assets of Australia Felix. However, digital connectivity can be problematic for businesses, sole traders, our residents, and visitors.

Connectivity by fixed line, fixed wireless, satellite, or mobile phone technology is vital to our communities. Yet, fast broadband connectivity is a quixotic quest in many Strathbogie Shire locations.

To be connected, we are always hopeful, we know it is possible, the NBN is here, but connectivity can be difficult to manage, and the results ultimately frustrating.

Black spots abound, too many to report, and mobile 4G coverage away from main roads has often gone missing or it is a poor quality.

The National Broadband Network is important

Arguably, the National Broadband Network (NBN), and mobile phone coverage, is even more important now in regions like Strathbogie Shire than in any metropolis. Connectivity allows personal and business communications otherwise not possible. Video calls for example, meeting applications, ZOOM, and Telehealth are powerful communication tools for people challenged by distances, living and working outside a major city.

The purpose of the NBN

In its 2018-2021 Corporate plan, NBN Co declared its purpose to be:

“nbn’s purpose is to connect Australia and bridge the digital divide. nbn exists to provide local network access to fast broadband to every home and business in Australia. The nbn local access network connects with Retail Service Providers’ (RSPs) domestic transmission networks and international networks to deliver fast broadband. nbn has a commitment to deliver access to peak wholesale download data rates of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps) to all premises, and at least 50Mbps peak wholesale download data rates to 90 per cent of the fixed line network”

That is what we want in our region, fast broadband, (also known as superfast broadband) in every home and business.

Covid 19 restrictions forced people to stay at home.

Many business owners and staff have worked from home, due to Covid-19, so connectivity is more important in 2020 than last year. There is an increasing reliance on the NBN and digital connectivity as a foundation infrastructure of our regional communities. NBN infrastructure, and 4G, therefore, must be accessible, reliable, and working better than ever.

Working from home (WFH)

Recently NBN Co surveyed over 1000 customers working from home because of the Covid 19 pandemic. The survey found that access to fast broadband made 81 per cent of those surveyed feel more secure in their jobs during the COVID-19 crisis. Good result, fast broadband is important. 83 per cent of respondents said they could not have completed their jobs without it. More good news for NBN Co.

Commenting on their survey Brad Whitcomb, Chief Customer Officer – Residential at NBN CO said:

“The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digitisation of our lives and highlighted the very reason the nbn™ network was built,” And further:

“The way Australians use the internet to work, learn new skills and connect with their family, friends and colleagues has been transformed, and we expect that many of these new behaviours are here to stay.”

These NBN Co survey results, and positive commentary, highlight the importance of making sure that businesses and residents in places like Strathbogie Shire are delivered connectivity at an equivalent standard to other locations (in metropolitan centres) enjoying faster and better digital connectivity.

It should be ensured by appropriate investment, service delivery and targeted assistance, that NBN access and good performance in Strathbogie Shire is just as available here as it is to people living in Brunswick where Fibre To The Node or Fibre To The Premises can provide best level fast connections.

Many farmers, sole traders and business owners in Strathbogie Shire are always working from home, distant from fibre networks, they also deserve a good connection, on a par with Brunswick.

The results of the NBN Co WFH survey cuts both ways, good news for NBN Co and retailers, more connections during a pandemic, however, it also demands that connectivity for regional customers improves now when NBN is more important than last year and

...the very reason the NBN network was built.

Australians rate broadband as “fairly or very poor”.

In an International survey of infrastructure undertaken by ISPOS last year, Australians rated our broadband connection and mobile phone networks lowly. More than half of the Australians surveyed (51 per cent) rated the nation’s digital infrastructure “fairly or very poor”.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported: **“that Australia has been ranked third lowest of 28 countries when it comes to satisfaction with digital infrastructure including broadband and mobile phone networks, an international poll shows.”** and “Just 41 per cent rated the quality of Australia's digital infrastructure “fairly or very good” which was way below the global average of 55 per cent.”

Our own Strathbogie Shire Survey of businesses

To prepare this submission and gauge the real world NBN experiences of business, Strathbogie Shire surveyed our business owners. The results of our survey may be best described as unsatisfactory, and those dissatisfied respondents as unhappy and frustrated.

68% of businesses experienced poor internet coverage which had a negative effect on their business.

Many respondents described poor services, poor connections, slow speeds, and drop-outs. Waiting, disruption of processes, and time lost are major frustrations.

The comments elicited by the survey are numerous and reflect the strength of feeling in the business community who now must rely on digital connectivity and worry about the efficacy of doing so.

Strathbogie Shire Survey figures:

- **Type of service** - 34% use NBN Fixed Wireless, 29% NBN Landline, 18% NBN Satellite, 13% 4G Mobile & Wireless and 6% ADSL/Cable.
- **Slow speed** - 90% of businesses surveyed experienced slow speed and drop-outs.
- **Drop-outs** - 62% of businesses surveyed experienced Daily dropouts, 24% Weekly dropouts and 14% Monthly dropouts.
- **Slow Uploads**- 77% of businesses surveyed experienced slow upload speeds.
- **Video conferencing** -77% of businesses surveyed used video conferencing during Covid-19.
- **Video dropouts** - 61% of businesses surveyed experienced video conferencing dropouts, slow speed, and time delays during Covid-19.
- **Pricing** - 56% of businesses surveyed said that pricing was not a deciding factor when choosing their internet plan, compared to 44% of business who said price was a deciding factor.

Experiences of small and medium business in relation to the utilisation, accessibility, customer service and affordability of the NBN

Reliance on NBN Fixed Wireless, and NBN satellite in Strathbogie is limiting, some businesses have been forced to seek 4G connections to improve performance and reliability. The ubiquity of internet driven systems demands that small business must seek out stable and useful connections.

Working from the survey results, and comments, the NBN is not meeting the expectations of business and the community is therefore not benefitting from the full service that the NBN should be providing and which is spoken of in NBN Strategic Plans and Ministerial announcements.

In their own words...

Typical of the comments from business owners, in their own words, were the following:

Negative internet experiences

- *“we have spent considerable amounts of money, have tried NBN satellite, broadband and 18mths ago had 4g internet and boosters installed. we are once again looking at upgrading internet equipment to try and achieve an improved internet service with our accounting and horse management software programs being cloud based we **often struggle to even access these imperative business systems**”*
- *“**We have not been able to update and include new technology on our website** and other communications as it is taking too long to do updates etc. I was driving to Melbourne frequently (pre-restrictions) and updating at the office in Melbourne as it was too difficult to do.”*
- *“I have not been able to update my website regularly and it takes forever to connect to vital websites. I struggle to upload images for our sales and will have to go in to town to do this. **It's not good enough.**”*
- *“**We have had to abandon the NBN for our administrative office personnel and move to the far more expensive 4G connection** - the speeds we obtain through this are at least >100mbps, and more reliable for the bandwidth requirements of the business. We provide emergency services through our aerial firefighting capability and connectivity is key to our ability to enact this critical community service.”*

Video Conferencing:

- *"Delayed and some days has dropped out, **inconsistent and therefore unreliable when running multiple businesses**. Has financial and strategic impact short and long term."*
- *"The meeting will freeze and I will have to logout and log in again and I normally miss out on a vital part of the meeting! **I can't use my camera either as the internet isn't good enough.**"*
- *"There is a definite lag between the lips moving and the voice you hear. Also video conferencing is very "jerky". And don't bother running video and sharing your screen in a zoom meeting the lag between you clicking on something and your client seeing what you are clicking on is **frustrating!**"*
- *"Connection lags and then we drop out completely. **NBN is unreliable at best**. Have been unable to join Zoom meetings."*

Working from home during Covid -19

- *"Staff working from home have has various success. Some employees experience multiple dropouts in an hour on remote connections to the office server making **working from home extremely difficult.**"*
- *"**We need more data, NBN satellite is limiting**, children cannot home school from home and we cannot run our businesses effectively or on demand which is what is required with online businesses and global companies."*

Impact of Covid-19

- *"I pay for unlimited service and have begged Telstra for support or an NBN connection to no avail. Customers continually complain about the internet service, this is also bad for my mental health, I am trying to deal with a situation I can't help, very distressing. **Have had to purchase a dongle to be able to work during the Coronavirus.**"*

Digital Divide

- *"I would like to have access to unlimited NBN at a reasonable cost, as people can do in larger cities."*
- *"Sufficient bandwidth and speed are more relevant to than is the price, but the price of services must always be evaluated. It is anti-competitive that metro based competitors have a bigger range of services and generally at lower prices than regionally based businesses."*

Price

- *"It's expensive particularly compared to other countries. We need internet to run our business yet we need it to be fast and consistent."*
- *"**I would be comfortable with the pricing if the speed and reliability was consistent**. Unfortunately it sometimes isn't and it seems that we are expected to accept this as normal."*

- *“I work from home (as do most people at the moment) so I need to have the fastest possible plan that I can afford. We need to be able to have multiple people using the internet for school, work or streaming/gaming at the same time.”*
- *“I was prepared to pay more out of desperation but was told they could not guarantee it would be a better service.”*

Other surveys in regional Victoria, like the Bendigo survey with over 3000 respondents, have also recorded dissatisfaction with NBN and mobile phone services. Strathbogie Shire residents are not alone in their commentary and experience of disappointingly low levels of NBN satisfaction.

Detailed Strathbogie Shire survey results and all comments are included as an attachment to this submission.

Goulburn Region Digital Plan identifies NBN shortfalls

Strathbogie Shire has been cooperating in a study of digital connectivity in our region. A Goulburn Regional Digital Plan has been developed in collaboration with Regional Partnerships Goulburn. A report and supporting evidence document have been recently released. Some of the key findings are:

Enabling Infrastructure

- Fixed broadband service within the region **currently do not meet the expectations** or demand of communities and industry with substandard Fibre-to-the-Node (FTTN) connections limiting connectivity and use of fixed wireless and satellite technologies in smaller localities further compromising connectivity.... (Amen to that)
- Mobile connectivity is variable across the region with good service coverage around regional centres but **poor network coverage** in outlying areas – including key visitor and emergency management areas of the region.
- Networks available for Internet of Things (IOT) **connectivity are not currently provided on a scale that meets the current and project future demand** amongst industry. Use of these technologies offer significant opportunities for business to increase their productivity and efficiency.
- **There is a deficiency in public Wi-Fi services** relative to demand for affordable digital connectivity amongst visitors and the most vulnerable in communities.

Digital Uptake

- Across the region, **issues around reliability of services and connectivity constraints** as a result of the outlined Enabling Infrastructure issues are reducing the motivation of business and communities to explore and invest in digital technologies and services.

Digital Capability

- There are significant **issues around the affordability** of digital connectivity within the Goulburn Region with Goulburn residents paying more for access to digital services as a proportion of their household income than the rural Victorian and metropolitan Melbourne average.

Visitor locations supply shortfall

- All **visitor locations have issues with fixed access broadband services**. Half of the visitor spots analysed appear to have adequate mobile coverage based on public coverage data, but national parks, rivers and trails are under-served.

- Note that there are reservations, based on local mobile access experience, about the good coverage indicated by public coverage maps.

Primary production supply shortfalls

- **Fixed access broadband** services for businesses involved in **primary production** needs to be addressed. In its current state, **the digital infrastructure is unable to meet the region's needs, with all locations found to have a major supply shortfall in fixed access broadband satellite services for business users.**

The Goulburn Regional Digital Plan and supporting evidence document include a significant set of research relevant to Strathbogie Shire which we have referenced here. We recommend these reports to the Joint Standing Committee as useful material worthy of consideration, and to be given due weight, when analysing the current state of digital connectivity experience in the region.

Looking at the available NBN services now and into the future, 3 to 5 years, it appears that as demand increases the infrastructure will probably not keep up with the pace. Some communities will be left behind... that is not the purpose of the NBN. The aim is to provide fast broadband and to bridge the digital divide.

The local evidence is in...

Not to put too fine a point on it, people in the regions have reason to believe that they are not getting the full benefit of the NBN, and to feel short-changed.

The Digital Divide

There is a continuing gap between cities and regions... a digital divide not yet bridged. The NBN is a technology that should reduce distances and differences between city and country, it appears not yet, and even with the arrival of new services like 5G mobile, the gap may not be closed.

Figures and analysis published by the Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019 (ADII) show that in the Northern Region of Victoria, including Strathbogie, has the lowest ADII rating in Victoria.

- **Northern Victoria scores - 53.9**
- **All other rural Victoria scores - 56.3**
- **Melbourne Metro scores - 64.9**
- **Melbourne Central scores - 66.8**
- **Canberra (all of ACT) scores - 67.6**

Strathbogie Shire in Northern Victoria is 11 points behind Metro Melbourne.

The gap between city and country has closed over recent ADII surveys however, there is concern that with continuing growth in the use of digital means to do everything in our lives, places like Strathbogie Shire, currently sub-optimal will fall further behind. See Page 38 ADII Report for 2019.

Canberra (and all of ACT) is 13.7 index points ahead of Strathbogie Shire.

What is the impact of the Digital Divide?

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index is instructive:

- Geography plays a critical role!
- Some Australians are particularly digitally excluded!
- Collaboration across all levels of government is needed!

“Digital inclusion is about bridging this digital divide. It is based on the premise that all Australians should be able to make full use of digital technologies: to manage their health and wellbeing, access education and services, organise their finances, and connect with friends, family, and the world beyond”

The goal of digital inclusion is to enable everyone to access and use digital technologies effectively. It goes beyond simply owning a computer or having access to a smartphone. Social and economic participation lies at the heart of digital inclusion: using online and mobile technologies to improve skills, enhance quality of life, educate, and promote wellbeing, civic engagement and sustainable development across the whole of society.

There are also larger national goals at stake. Digital inclusion is a necessary condition for the social, economic, and environmental transformations set out, for example, in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Innovation leading to improved outcomes in health and education, sustainable cities, labour markets, and the justice system are likely to rely on high levels of participation, skills, and engagement with digital technologies”.

We could not have said it better, the ADII group involving RMIT University, Swinburne University, the Centre for Social Impact, Telstra, and Roy Morgan Research... they have nailed it.

We ask that careful consideration and weight is given by the Committee to the full ADII report, “Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide 2019”: which we recommend to the committee.

People and communities cannot be left behind, the necessary work in cooperation with State and Local governments must be done to engage all, or the original objectives of the NBN will not be met.

It would be particularly galling to allow metropolitan communities to benefit from the full NBN experience and knowingly leave behind regional communities.

Looking forward to Superfast Broadband

Introducing two Telecommunications Bills (Telecommunications Legislation Amendment (Competition and Consumer) Bill 2019, Telecommunications (Regional Broadband Scheme) Charge Bill 2019) into Parliament last year the Minister for Communications, The Hon Paul Fletcher said:

“the Regional Broadband Scheme will establish a transparent and equitable funding mechanism to make sure NBN Co’s satellite and fixed wireless services can continue to provide superfast broadband to regional Australia.”

Further Minister Fletcher said:

“The bill makes important changes to the regulatory framework to strengthen the provision of superfast broadband infrastructure across Australia. The changes put the customer experience at the forefront by ensuring consumers can benefit from greater wholesale and retail competition, access superfast broadband under the statutory infrastructure provider obligation and are supported by sustainable funding arrangements for essential broadband services in regional, rural and remote Australia.”

We support this statement whole heartedly and welcome the inherent commitment. Now we are looking forward to seeing the benefits of the legislation which passed and was assented to on May 20, 2020.

Speaking in support of these Bills, Member for Indi, Dr Helen Haines MP said:

“Access to the internet is becoming as essential to daily life as access to electricity or water. It’s now the government’s main channel for interacting with citizens. This includes Centrelink reporting, the ATO and myGov. Yet this access is meaningless if it’s unaffordable, particularly for low-income families. Coverage must be universal not just on paper but in the reality of people’s lives.

I welcome the second part of these bills. That’s the introduction of the statutory infrastructure provider obligations on NBN Co and other carriers. These obligations will ensure that all Australian premises are able to

access superfast broadband services of 25 megabits per second or better. If it's not reasonable to connect premises via fixed line, the provider must provide a fixed-wireless or satellite technology solution. On fixed-wireless services, voice services for consumers must be supported.

*All people in Australia currently have guaranteed access to a telephone voice service through the Universal Service Obligation. **This change helps build on that and provides consumers with certainty that all people in Australia, no matter where they live, have access to high-speed NBN.** This news will be very welcome to constituents of mine who access the NBN via satellite or fixed wireless, but I must say that these services still fall far below what they need,"*

These are welcome comments, and express what this submission is all about, we need the promised superfast broadband in the regions... **looking forward to it.**

The NBN job is not yet done

Despite the June 30, 2020 end date for NBN rollout, the job is not yet done until gaps and missing links in services are improved to an acceptable operating standard in the regions... and there will always be room for further improvements.

What we ask, is that the NBN Co will bring the service up to a standard that does not discriminate against the likelihood of a successful fast broadband connection in all communities, and which therefore contributes to the success of communities and businesses in all places and does not lead to some being left behind.

We recognise and acknowledge that Parliamentarians from regional Australia have spent considerable time and effort tackling NBN issues.

Then Member for Indi, Cathy McGowan AO MP, speaking in Parliament on 10 May 2018 said:

*"My electoral officers constantly regale me with stories, saying, 'Guess what else has happened?' I know it's not new, but really, we need to put energy into what we do about this. The strong message from my community is that the NBN is not delivering as promised. **Their concerns and dissatisfaction with the rollout illustrate a lack of equity between metro and regional communities, particularly in relation to slow speeds.** When people in my community try to address this, there is a lack of clarity of responsibilities between NBN Co and retail service providers. Ultimately, they turn to the office of their member of parliament for help."*

The advocacy effort that Cathy McGowan made to improve the NBN outcomes for regional Australians was persistent and remarkable. Her speech of 10 May 2018 remains relevant today. Her message as an independent MP, in an electorate covering in part the Strathbogie Shire, was clear and supported by many others.

The question is, was the message heard and has it been acted upon?

Emergency communications

Safety and critical communications are enhanced by good internet and mobile phone coverage in circumstances where weather, fire and critical incidents strike to create danger. A sub-standard connection inhibits community understanding of warnings and news. Some providers of vital services or volunteers have been held back by slow or unreliable connections.

Black spots in mobile coverage coincident with poor NBN connections create communication black outs in some critical locations where visitors and tourists gather. 5G services are not here yet, it is not clear how 5G will impact and improve digital connectivity in the region. Will 5G be an NBN competitor too? What will happen to 3G services which in places is the only mobile service available?

What will happen when other competition arrives? There are currently in development and deployment, systems which use a multitude of broadband satellites to cover the globe. Will these new systems outrun and overtake the mixed method NBN?

Visitor Economy

Strathbogie Shire is visited by 366,000 people per annum, having a day out, a few days away, or a holiday. The visitor spend in the region is important, events, markets, festivals, and sporting gatherings also attract tourists.

NBN connections are especially important to tourism and hospitality businesses.

The Victorian Government has identified the importance of digital service to the visitor economy in its "Better tourism infrastructure 2025 outcomes plan". They said:

"In a more competitive market, visitors are demanding better experiences. This includes high quality amenities and mobile phone and internet coverage." And further:

"a \$52.5 million package has been announced to fix mobile blackspots in regional Victoria, including along regional rail lines. The Government will continue to look for opportunities to further increase regional mobile coverage."

This is a good start to assist the visitor economy, however, some tourist locations in Strathbogie Shire are not even covered by reliable mobile phone coverage.

The power of tourism businesses having the ability to up tech should not be underestimated. Just to be competitive, tourism and hospitality businesses must be connected, and accessible, digital connectivity is vitally important.

Collaboration across all levels of Government is needed

The Strathbogie Shire recommends that a focussed and concerted effort be made to ensure that NBN delivery in this region is brought up to standard, to meet community expectations of Governments, and satisfy demand.

Right now, businesses and the community are falling behind in the digital race and they know it.

There is a level of dissatisfaction in the community which also undermines the NBN. The views of business owners are well expressed in the Strathbogie Shire survey. The comments come from the horses' mouth, people in business who have struggled with the NBN, and offered little assistance.

One of the clear take away messages of this submission is the level of dissatisfaction and confusion out in the market for NBN services. More needs to be done to help people through connectivity, technical, and information issues. Getting answers from NBN co or Retail Service Providers can be a long journey further adding to frustration.

Communication with customers should be a higher priority for NBN than it appears not to be.

The digital divide is being addressed by policies; however, practicalities are working against meeting policy expectations. More needs to be done in regions to communicate with business owners. How about getting out into the country, listening, and acting to help people understand how to get the best out of the NBN.

A collaboration of Local, State and Commonwealth Governments using the Goulburn Regional Digital Plan as a guide in our region is recommended.

Local Parliamentary representatives have repeatedly and persistently voiced their genuine concerns and opinions in debates and Committees. These efforts are appreciated, the NBN co needs to listen to them and act. Equity of access for regional businesses is very important, to deny equity is to place them at risk.

Business owners should not need to spend time making complaints, waiting for the connection to speed up, or for issues to be addressed by the Parliament. Rather make the NBN work in the ways which the Minister has described, and to which the NBN co aspire in their corporate plan... make it happen.

Working from home and schooling from home has recently increased demand and changed how people use the internet, but for others, much of their work has always been done at home. Tradies, farmers, contractors, sole traders need to be connected to obtain the benefits of new digitised systems.

The NBN shortfalls identified in the Goulburn Digital Plan are based on a careful analysis in their evidence document. This work should be used to immediately commence to collaborate on the upgrade of systems and upskilling of users in the Goulburn region.

A new strategy is required, as the roll out is being completed but...

the NBN job is not yet done

Poor connectivity in the regions, in this digital age, is a policy fail that must be turned around by an intense period of focus and renewed cooperation between all levels of Government.

Not to put too fine a point on it, people in the regions have reason to believe that they are not getting the full benefit of the NBN, and to feel short-changed.

The Council of Strathbogie Shire appreciates the work being performed by the Joint Standing Committee members in the delivery of this inquiry. The NBN is a critical foundation infrastructure. We trust that our submission will be useful to your inquiry. We are committed to seeking out the best possible NBN and mobile connection outcomes for Strathbogie Shire communities.

Julie Salomon

Chief Executive Officer

Strathbogie Shire

Attachments:

- **Goulburn Region Digital Plan PDF**
- **Goulburn Region Digital Plan Evidence Document PDF**
- **Australian Digital Divide Index Report “Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide” 2019 PDF**
- **Strathbogie Shire Survey of businesses – August 2020**
- **Two Connectivity case studies**
- **Endnotes, Quotes, References**

Two connectivity case studies

Two connectivity case studies nearby to Nagambie

Digital connectivity is an issue even at places where tourism and commerce thrive, for example, the Mitchelton Hotel, an international standard tourist destination, and the neighbouring Swettenham Stud both near Nagambie.

Strathbogie Shire is also home to over 70 equine businesses, breeding properties and training centres, the horse racing industry is here, and international investors have arrived. The quality of the country and proximity to Melbourne is attractive however less than optimal digital connectivity can hold them back. Case study 2 describes the difficulties of operating a horse breeding facility with unreliable connectivity.

Case Study 1 – Mitchelton Winery & Hotel.

Started with vineyards planted in 1969 and then the building of the landmark 55 metre tower and cellar door in 1975, the Mitchelton site is a well-established tourist destination on the banks of the Goulburn River completed by the opening of a luxury boutique hotel and Day Spa in 2018.

It is major tourist destination in the area and attracts not only travellers but also local and international business and equine industry investors.

Mobile phone connectivity is a daily problem as coverage on site is intermittent, resulting in many visitors unable to make a phone call or send and receive email whilst in the area. The ability to offer high quality service to tourists is hampered by the negative experience of little or no mobile phone coverage. Improved mobile and internet services are vital to service existing businesses and continue to drive tourism and investment in the area.

Why is connectivity a problem?

- There are daily problems with mobile phone connectivity, coverage onsite at Mitchelton Hotel is poor and drops in and out depending where you are.
- Customers travel to local wineries, horse studs etc and cannot get a signal, make, and receive calls, or emails. Travellers are vital to the area.
- Want it to be a place where people can enjoy the tourism benefits.
- Horse stud neighbours and key investors are moving into the area, millions into major breeding operations. Hotel guests are visitors to the horse studs. If Nagambie and Strathbogie Shire aspire to build capacity in the region to be an internationally recognised equine epicentre, then horse studs and owners worldwide need to be able to connect.
- International visitors are taken aback when there is no mobile coverage for them it is a negative experience.

Case Study - 2 Swettenham Stud

Equine industries have found Strathbogie Shire to be well located for their purposes and have established horse breeding and training properties.

Investment in the racing industry continues with the likes of Swettenham Stud, Lindsay Park, and Yulong. A reputation is growing therefore the need for high quality connectivity is a necessity, not a nice to have, but a necessity to connect business here to overseas interests.

International renowned horse breeders Swettenham Stud are leaders in the thoroughbred industry, based in Nagambie. Investing substantially into their stud and celebrating the success of local horses such as Black Caviar, has seen a significant rise in international investment in the local area.

Online bloodstock auctions are the core of operating in the international arena, and internet delays can impact the auction result as many offers are lodged in the last 5minute period. Not knowing in 'real time' if your bid has been successful is an operational issue for the industry, of whom many are not just horse farms but multinational companies. Continued investment by international bloodstock breeders in the Nagambie, Strathbogie and Euroa areas will require accessible fast internet services to be able to compete now and into the future. It is critical.

Why connectivity is a problem:

- Swettenham Lodge is large estate where welfare of horses is very important. Internet based systems are used in breeding and welfare, staff and vets will be accessing information over the internet and delays/lag time is an issue, to be most effective the download information needs to be there and then on superfast broadband.
- Online auctions involve overseas bidding for horses online, the timeline is important to make an offer in the last minutes of the auction process. Sometimes the bidder is unsure if they pressed the button to bid, or if pressed twice then charged double.
- There is a widely held expectation that the NBN service will be fluent, and internet is vital to smooth operations of the stud.
- Other breeders moving into area, international investors from China, have discovered the region and need a good link to Mongolia. The Bloodstock hub area of Nagambie, Strathbogie, and Euroa is growing it in importance and connection to overseas.
- Investors are often multinational groups and the availability of the NBN, and Mobile cover is important to their investment decisions.

Endnotes, Quotes and References

Close...But no connection

<https://app.remplan.com.au/strathbogie/community/population/age?state=PRgPiE!jxx2i0APYTXyqvjfkZjDBfnTjtra5FytPt4t0yuot6FKA2SEV7>

The National Broadband Network is important

The Purpose of the NBN

<https://www.nbnco.com.au/content/dam/nbnco2/2018/documents/corporate-reports/corporate-plan-2018-2021.pdf>

Working from home

NBN co have surveyed people working from home

<https://www.nbnco.com.au/blog/the-nbn-project/right-at-home-working-flexibility-the-new-normal-following-covid-19>

Live local, work global: In the era of remote work, Australia could become a destination for the world's best talent

https://www.smartcompany.com.au/people-human-resources/australia-destination-global-remote-workers/?utm_campaign=SC&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&utm_content=smart_co_daily&utm_term=2020-08-25

Australians rate broadband as “fairly or very poor”.

ISPOS survey of global infrastructure

Just 41 per cent rated the quality of Australia's digital infrastructure “fairly or very good” which was way below the global average of 55 per cent.

More than half of the Australians surveyed (51 per cent) rated the nation's digital infrastructure “fairly or very poor”.

The Global Infrastructure Index survey conducted by the polling firm Ipsos asked respondents how they rated the nation's digital infrastructure including high speed broadband, full fibre networks (FTTP), and latest generation mobile phone networks.

Only Germany (30 per cent) and Italy (40 per cent) had a smaller share than Australia rating the quality their digital infrastructure “fairly or very good”.

<https://www.ipsos.com/en/global-infrastructure-index-public-satisfaction-and-priorities-2019>

<https://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/global-survey-shows-australia-ranks-poorly-for-broadband-satisfaction-20191224-p53mpw.html>

Our own Strathbogie Shire Survey of businesses

A copy is attached with this submission

Other surveys

<https://www.bendigoadvertiser.com.au/story/5282503/mp-receives-3250-responses-to-bendigo-nbn-survey/>

Goulburn Region Digital Plan identifies NBN shortfalls

A copy of the Plan and supporting evidence is attached with this submission

The digital divide

A vibrant digital economy and the significance of digital inclusion and confidence.

https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook46p/RegionalTelecommunications

Measuring Australia's Digital Divide Report

A copy is attached with this submission

<https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/>

AUSTRALIAN DIGITAL INCLUSION INDEX - What is digital inclusion?

As the internet has become the default medium for everyday exchanges, information-sharing, and access to essential services, being connected is now a necessity, rather than a luxury. However, some groups and individuals still face real barriers to participation. In recent years the overall digital divide has narrowed, but where gaps exist, it has also deepened. Latest ABS data shows that over two and a half million Australians are not online. These Australians are at risk of missing out on the advantages and assistance that digital technologies can offer.

Digital inclusion is whether a person can access, afford and have the digital ability to connect and use online technologies effectively]

Digital inclusion is about bridging this digital divide. It is based on the premise that all Australians should be able to make full use of digital technologies: to manage their health and wellbeing, access education and services, organise their finances, and connect with friends, family, and the world beyond.

The goal of digital inclusion is to enable everyone to access and use digital technologies effectively. It goes beyond simply owning a computer or having access to a smartphone. **Social and economic participation lies at the heart of digital inclusion: using online and mobile technologies to improve skills, enhance quality of life, educate, and promote wellbeing, civic engagement and sustainable development across the whole of society.**

There are also larger national goals at stake. Digital inclusion is a necessary condition for the social, economic, and environmental transformations set out, for example, in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Innovation leading to improved outcomes in health and education, sustainable cities, labour markets, and the justice system are likely to rely on high levels of participation, skills, and engagement with digital technologies.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) has been created to measure the level of digital inclusion across the Australian population, and to monitor this level over time. Using data collected by Roy Morgan, the ADII has been developed through a collaborative partnership between RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra.

A growing body of Australian and international research has outlined the various barriers to digital inclusion, the benefits of digital technologies, and the role of digital engagement in social inclusion.

Single studies have also measured how different social groups access and use the internet. However, the inaugural ADII report published in 2016 was the first substantive effort to combine these findings into a detailed measure of digital inclusion across Australia.

In our increasingly digitised world, it is vital that all Australians are able to share the advantages of being connected. By presenting an in-depth and ongoing overview, identifying gaps and barriers, and highlighting the social impact of digital engagement, the ADII aims to inform policy, community programs, and business efforts to boost digital inclusion in Australia.

Geography Plays a critical role

The ADII reveals substantial differences between Australians living in rural and urban areas. In 2019, digital inclusion is 8.1 points higher in capital cities (63.8) than in country areas (55.7). Nationally, the general trend has been a narrowing of the Capital–Country Gap since 2015, (from 9.6 points in 2015 to 8.1 points in 2019). However, there has been substantial fluctuation in the Capital–Country Gap across the states and territories since 2014. Over the past 12 months, the gap has narrowed in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria (VIC), South Australia (SA) and Queensland (QLD), but widened in Tasmania (TAS) and Western Australia (WA).

Some Australians are particularly digitally excluded

The ADII points to several socio-demographic groups that are Australia’s most digitally excluded in 2019, with scores 10.0 or more points below the national average (61.9). These groups in ascending order include: people in Q5 low-income households (43.3), mobile-only users (43.7) people aged 65+ (48.0), and people who did not complete secondary school (49.4).

Collaboration across all levels of government is needed

If the benefits of digital technology are to be shared by all Australians, digital inclusion should form an integral part of the state and national economic policy making and strategic planning. With the NBN nearing completion, Digital Ability and Affordability remain critical areas for attention. Collaboration across all three levels of government (which are rapidly moving their services online) is needed to improve the digital skills of excluded communities and people 50+ in the workforce. Consideration should also be given to digital inclusion as a key commitment in the Closing the Gap agenda, with a program of research to measure and monitor digital inclusion in remote Indigenous communities.

ADII 2019 https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2019_Final_web_.pdf

Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, 2019, Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019, RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra.

Looking forward to Superfast Broadband

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2Fd70fa2ae-1caf-4548-a026-9f8c47bf03ee%2F0046%22>

Legislative improvements – recently legislated are welcome

Minister Fletcher introducing these changes in his second reading speech said:

“The competition and consumer bill contains three key measures.

Firstly, the bill will make carrier separation rules for superfast residential networks more effective and more flexible, giving carriers greater scope to invest in superfast networks and compete.

The changes to carrier separation rules will allow carriers, other than NBN Co, to operate fixed-line superfast networks with both wholesale and retail businesses, rather than to be wholesale only as is currently required.

Secondly, new statutory infrastructure provider (or SIP) obligations on NBN Co, and other carriers playing a comparable role, will support the ongoing delivery of superfast broadband services.

The statutory infrastructure provider obligations will place an explicit statutory requirement on NBN Co, or other carriers playing a comparable role, to connect premises and supply wholesale superfast broadband services on reasonable request from a retail provider. The baseline speed to be supplied is 25 megabits per second download and five megabits per second upload.

NBN Co will need to take all reasonable steps to ensure that 90 per cent of premises connected to its fixed-line networks can receive broadband speeds of 50 megabits per second download and 10 megabits per second upload. NBN Co's fixed-line networks should be able to connect at least 92 per cent of premises across Australia.

Thirdly, the Regional Broadband Scheme will establish a transparent and equitable funding mechanism to make sure NBN Co's satellite and fixed wireless services can continue to provide superfast broadband to regional Australia.”

Further Minister Fletcher said”

The bill makes important changes to the regulatory framework to strengthen the provision of superfast broadband infrastructure across Australia. The changes put the customer experience at the forefront by ensuring consumers can benefit from greater wholesale and retail competition, access superfast broadband under the statutory infrastructure provider obligation and are supported by sustainable funding arrangements for essential broadband services in regional, rural and remote Australia.

Helen Haines MP Parliamentary debate 13 02 2020 Hansard p1189

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=CHAMBER;id=chamber%2Fhansard%2F7d484b66-ffc9-4ae3-8b86-80e38515d510%2F0062;query=Id%3A%22chamber%22>

Access to the internet is becoming as essential to daily life as access to electricity or water. It's now the government's main channel for interacting with citizens. This includes Centrelink reporting, the ATO and myGov. Yet this access is meaningless if it's unaffordable, particularly for low-income families. Coverage has to be universal not just on paper but in the reality of people's lives.

*I welcome the second part of these bills. That's the introduction of the statutory infrastructure provider obligations on NBN Co and other carriers. These obligations will ensure that all Australian premises are able to access superfast broadband services of 25 megabits per second or better. **If it's not reasonable to connect premises via fixed line, the provider must provide a fixed-wireless or satellite technology solution. On fixed-wireless services, voice services for consumers must be supported.***

All people in Australia currently have guaranteed access to a telephone voice service through the Universal Service Obligation. This change helps build on that and provides consumers with certainty that all people in Australia, no matter where they live, have access to high-speed NBN. This news will

be very welcome to constituents of mine who access the NBN via satellite or fixed wireless, but I must say that these services still fall far below what they need, and I'd like to share just a couple of their stories.

A constituent who lives in Indi wrote to me expressing his frustration with the service he receives by satellite, the only NBN service available for his property. He and his partner are both undertaking university study by distance, online, to further their careers. They both actively volunteer with community groups and committees. But the current monthly data caps placed on NBN satellite customers mean they routinely run out of data. This places them at a huge disadvantage with regard to their ongoing education and involvement with the community groups that they serve. They've tried getting a bigger package, but they can't purchase any additional data, due to the NBN Fair Use Policy. As he told my office:

I'll cut to the chase, I truly feel like a second class citizen, I am disadvantaged simply due to my location, as I stated those in very close proximity to us have access to far better technology at a fraction of the cost. Whilst we are left short every month, I feel for those in more remote areas who rely on this technology for their children's education.

Experiences of small and medium business in relation to the utilisation, accessibility, customer service and affordability of the NBN

<https://theconversation.com/broadband-internet-can-help-rural-communities-connect-if-they-use-it-72941r>

<https://academic.oup.com/ajae/article-abstract/99/1/285/2452343>

<https://business.airband.co.uk/the-importance-of-fast-internet-for-rural-businesses/#:~:text=A%20high%20speed%20internet%20connection,that%20of%20their%20geographic%20base.>

<https://www1.nbnco.com.au/blog/business/rural-women-achieving-goals-with-connectivity>

https://www.tio.com.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/TIO%20Systemic%20Report%20Impacts%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20phone%20and%20internet%20complaints_July%202020.pdf

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/11/world/australia/australia-slow-internet-broadband.html>

ACCC are monitoring ...This Measuring Broadband Australia data clearly shows that too many consumers with FTTN connections are not receiving the speeds they are paying for.

<https://www.accc.gov.au/media-release/nbn-plan-speeds-pick-up-for-most-consumers>

Michelle Rowland speaking in Parliament on 13.02.2020 said

“Even as recently as yesterday, the ACCC took what can only be described as a direct swing at the performance of fibre to the node, following its latest broadband speed monitoring report. I point out that fibre to the node is actually the most prevalent fixed-line technology in regional Australia. The ACCC stated—and it wasn't subtle; it was very direct:

... many high speed fibre to the node (FTTN) connections still don't come close to performing as promised. The results show that about a quarter of those consumers on FTTN connections, who are paying for high-speed 50 Mbps and 100 Mbps plans, still did not receive anywhere near their full plan speeds, at any time.

Mr Sims, the ACCC chairman, went on to say:

This Measuring Broadband Australia data clearly shows that too many consumers with FTTN connections are not receiving the speeds they are paying for.

So the very valid question that Australian consumers should be asking, including those in rural and regional Australia is: why has this government built a \$51 billion network that is still not delivering the speeds that Australians are paying for?"

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2F7d484b66-ffc9-4ae3-8b86-80e38515d510%2F0059%22;src1=sm1>

The NBN JOB IS NOT DONE YET

Thursday, 10 May 2018 HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES 3657 CHAMBER

Ms McGOWAN (Indi) (11:04): I would like to endorse the comments of my colleague from Eden-Monaro. He absolutely understands the issues that we're facing. I rise to speak about the Telecommunications Legislation Amendment (Competition and Consumer) Bill 2017 and the Telecommunications (Regional Broadband Scheme) Charge Bill 2017. I will be supporting this legislation in the House. If passed, these bills will establish statutory infrastructure provider obligations on NBN Co to support the ongoing delivery of superfast broadband services and will provide sustainable funding for NBN Co's loss-making fixed wireless and satellite services to regional areas through the Regional Broadband Scheme, the RBS. I welcome these changes.

As a member of the Joint Standing Committee on the NBN, I, along with many of my colleagues in the House, heard firsthand of the dissatisfaction with the rollout of the NBN. The dissatisfaction absolutely seems to be highest in regional communities. The purpose of the NBN rollout committee is very clear. Our job is to assess the rollout of the NBN and ensure that this significant infrastructure project for Australia is delivered in a way that delivers the social and economic benefits it promised.

My office, like those of many members in regional areas, is acutely aware of the gap between the promise and the reality of the NBN. The experience of one of my constituents from the King Valley, a wine-producing and agricultural region 300 kilometres north of Melbourne, is a clear indication of this. I would like to read this into Hansard because I think it encapsulates the enormous frustrations that we're experiencing, but before I do I'd like to acknowledge the Minister for Regional Development, Territories and Local Government, who's in the House. It's lovely to have you here, Minister. I know that you understand this more than anybody else. Through our work on the House Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation you've just heard of the opportunities that we've got to face. I really look forward to working with you in your role to see what we can do about making sure all the regions and agriculture in particular have access to the internet that they need.

Here's a case study of a business in my electorate. They had NBN Sky Muster satellite installed in November 2016. The telecommunications office has had a case file on the

complaints since mid-November 2016, with no resolution. NBN contractors have visited the property on six separate occasions to replace satellite dishes, NTD units and cables to the house. Each instance resulted in the technician reporting to NBN Co and Ericsson, the satellite provider, that there was no internet signal. NBN continued to close each case, and each time a technician went to the property a new case was opened.

Their ISP is iiNet. They have had two case managers at the TIO who have expressed their frustration in dealing with NBN Co. The assigned NBN Co case managers claim to have not had the emails sent by the TIO, even though the TIO have copies on file. The ISP seems powerless to pursue the case on behalf of the customer, even though NBN Co insists that the fault complaints have to come from the ISP.

The constituent has 4G with Optus, which they say works well. They want to keep a wireless internet arrangement at home using Optus, but they've been told that they have to be on satellite, which eliminates other options. NBN claims that they can opt to retain their legacy copper services as well as, or instead of, switching to NBN, as there are no plans to switch off the existing copper networks in these areas. That has been a hard-fought battle. But this particular constituent doesn't have fixed copper wire to their property, so it's not much help. They want the government to give the TIO more power to compel NBN to meet requirements. Despite the many fault lodgements to NBN, NBN continues to dismiss the issue.

There's not even the option to switch ISPs, because the fault continues with the satellite. There are only six providers to choose from, and my constituent believes that they've got dubious reputations. He tells me that the Sky Muster satellite ISPs do not include Telstra or Optus. The constituent tells me that he feels his hands are tied and he has been spun around like a yo-yo, with no resolution, as NBN refuses to admit that it cannot provide the capability for an internet service. This has affected the constituent's health and has been detrimental to the spouse's ability to work from home. They've agreed for me to put a ministerial into the system. They want the government to authorise on paper that he be allowed to continue to use his 4G for internet. It's just a comedy of errors—shock, horror! How could this be the case? Sadly, it's not a one-off experience. My electoral officers constantly regale me with stories, saying, 'Guess what else has happened?' I know it's not new, but really we need to put energy into what we do about this. The strong message from my community is that the NBN is not delivering as promised. Their concerns and dissatisfaction with the rollout illustrate a lack of equity between metro and regional communities, particularly in relation to slow speeds. When people in my community try to address this, there is a lack of clarity of responsibilities between NBN Co and retail service providers. Ultimately, they turn to the office of their member of parliament for help.

As part of my role on the NBN rollout committee, we spent 12 months meeting with communities across Australia, talking to businesses and local and state governments and taking submissions. In total the committee took 191 submissions from a range of individuals and organisations, 39 of which were from my electorate of Indi. I thank those constituents for playing an active role in this process, for engaging with me and the committee and for building the evidence base so that the committee can make informed decisions and sound recommendations. I have here the list of the 39 constituents, which I was going to read to the House today, but I think that would use up some of my scarce time, and I have more important things to say. But I want to acknowledge every single one of those constituents for the time and energy they put into putting their concerns in writing. Many of them turned up to the inquiry and actually spoke to their own issues. We do get that you are busy people, and I really do appreciate the energy it takes to work with government, so to every single one of you: thank you. I look forward to continuing to advocate in parliament so that we get a better outcome.

I want to turn my mind now to the recommendations of the committee. There were 23 recommendations, but there are just a few I would really like to highlight, as I think they address the needs of rural and regional communities. I continue to call on the government to direct the NBN to establish a regional and rural reference group to support the rollout of NBN in rural and remote Australia. Minister, this is where you could really help me. When we put this recommendation up, the NBN said they didn't need a rural and remote reference group—that they knew about what was going on. Well, they might know about it, but I tell you what: their communication to the regions is not strong. I do acknowledge that they brought a roadshow bus to north-east Victoria and took it around many of the towns in my electorate, which was certainly a beginning, but there are so many issues that still need to be addressed, and communication back to my electorate and my constituents about how these are being addressed is really needed. So one of the recommendations is that we set up a reference group.

The committee has seen really clearly there needs to be greater consultation with rural and regional end users in the development of NBN user policy and NBN rollout plans. To the advisers in parliament today and to the people listening, I plead: this is really important and not an optional extra. Just saying that the telcos understand rural and regional Australia is not good enough, because we don't have evidence of that and we think it needs to be done much better. This recommendation was accepted by the majority report of the committee. It went to the government, who came back with, 'No, we're not going to do it,' for no good reason. So I reiterate that in my speech today.

*I understand that, if you could set up such a reference group, the group would include consumer advocacy groups and departmental representation from the communications and regional development areas. It would be a really important step in improving the end user experience and increasing transparency. It's easily done, with huge output. I can't see why we wouldn't agree to it. **When business decisions fundamentally change, the NBN experience for the end user in regional and rural communities should be referred to the reference group for consideration and analysis as to whether the decision will result in NBN not meeting its responsibilities outlined in the statement of expectations. When changes happen with NBN, you really need to consult with your regional users and say: 'How is this going to impact on you? Is this actually going to work, yes or no? What's a communication plan we could put in place to actually make it work better?'***

We also called for a clearly identified complaint-handling process which would include complaint resolution processes and time frames and complaint acceleration processes, internal and external, and would meet Australian government accessibility guidelines. It should not be hard to do that. We've been hearing about the problems with the TIO. They say, 'It's not us.' Why couldn't we set up something very specifically to meet the needs for rural and regional Australia? You've heard today that we've got special and quite different needs to the city people. If we could have a process where our needs were met directly and quickly, I could say that you would be a friend of every single regional member of parliament, because it would take the huge workload off our officers and it would be really appreciated by constituents. I know we have a helpline, but it's not targeted specifically to rural and regional, and we don't get a sense that our particular issues are being addressed in the right way. We have seen that there are significant inadequacies in resolving customer complaints—notably, a lack of direct access to the NBN and a gap in the knowledge of available avenues for complaints and dispute resolution. Whilst these issues cost wholesale and retail providers, there is a need for a single agency to provide this information to ensure the uniformity and consistency of messages and advice. If the minister and advisers would like to meet with staff in my department, I would be really happy to sit down with them and talk about the complaints that we get and how this recommendation could be worked to resolve some of the issues in a

speedy way.

Before I get to the end of my talk, I would like to address my comments to agriculture and rural and regional development. In doing so, I want to acknowledge the enormous difference that the NBN has actually made to my community. My speech so far has mostly been about the problems, but, truthfully, it is a most wonderful, essential service that is going to be such a game changer for communities like mine. Where it's working—and working well—it has made a huge difference, so it's fantastic to have. I refer to an experience that the minister and I

had as part of the inquiry into regional development. We went to Launceston, in Tasmania, and also to Geraldton, in Western Australia. We heard from both of these cities, which are

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gigabit cities; they've got infinite internet. The envy that it evoked in the rest of us, because we don't have that and we put up with such substandard—it was like dirt road problems.

These two cities can advance because they've got the capacity to do it. It unleashed, I think, in all the people on our committee, an understanding of the opportunities from this technology for rural and regional Australia—and our frustration that we have to come to parliament and argue to get the changes made, as opposed to being on the front foot and being able to bring all our resources to work with the Department of Communications and the Arts, NBN Co and the TIO to actually sort out and solve the problems—because of all the benefit.

I know that the cities will benefit, but, in seeing what Launceston and Geraldton were able to do and the enormous optimism that those cities have because they've got such good internet, I could imagine that in my communities. We have so much potential to produce more. Fifty per cent of the water in the Murray-Darling Basin falls in my electorate. We could do so much. We could triple our agricultural production. We could triple our manufacturing. We're on a main transport route. We could do so much with 21st century agriculture if we could get hold of this technology. I've had the opportunity to go to Armidale, to the University of New England, to see what their smart farms are doing for agriculture. It is so exciting to see the research, but at the moment we can't bring that to our electorate. I can't bring that to my farming, manufacturing and stock and station agents, because we don't have the capacity. I'm here in parliament asking for basic services rather than being able to say, 'Let's work together to do what we can.' I'll be supporting this legislation. It is a good beginning, but we've got a long way to go. I offer the support of myself, my offices and my community to see if we can get over the hump and deliver what we know the potential of this technology is.

https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/67aa916e-a0c1-4a4b-a23b-98660dd7d5e3/toc_pdf/House%20of%20Representatives_2018_05_10_6091_Official.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansardr%2F7d484b66-ffc9-4ae3-8b86-80e38515d510%2F0059%22>

Visitor Economy

Better tourism infrastructure 2025 outcome

“Significant improvements in tourism infrastructure at key attractions is delivering a better visitor experience.

Why action is required Strategic public investment is required for Victoria to maintain its competitive

advantage. Investment by governments in high quality sports, arts and cultural, nature-based and local infrastructure helps to attract visitors and spur private sector investment. World class major sports and arts and cultural infrastructure is a major part of why people visit Victoria.

In a more competitive market, visitors are demanding better experiences. This includes high quality amenities and mobile phone and internet coverage. More can be done to improve access to our natural assets through better outdoor recreation infrastructure. A third of the state is public land and appropriate infrastructure developments can improve people’s access to these assets and deliver jobs for local communities.

How we’ll get there . As noted previously, the Government is investing substantially in regional Victoria, with a \$101 million Regional Tourism Infrastructure Fund and investments in regional sport complexes, arts facilities and indigenous heritage. In addition, a \$52.5 million package has been announced to fix mobile blackspots in regional Victoria, including along regional rail lines. The Government will continue to look for opportunities to further increase regional mobile coverage.”

https://economicdevelopment.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1340979/Visitor_Economy_Strategy.pdf

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22publications%2Ftailedpapers%2F506e83cf-97e3-4984-b32a-1ae5e1113f1d%22>

ABS Census data _ Strathbogie Shire

Dwellings — internet connection

[dwelling structure](#) | [household composition](#) | [mortgage & rent](#) | [number of motor vehicles](#) | [internet connection](#)

Dwelling internet connection	Strathbogie (\$)	%	Victoria	%	Australia	%
Internet not accessed from dwelling	945	22.6	287,506	13.6	1,172,415	14.1
Internet accessed from dwelling	3,079	73.7	1,768,050	83.7	6,892,165	83.2
Not stated	151	3.6	57,157	2.7	221,494	2.7

In Strathbogie (S) (Local Government Areas), 73.7% of households had at least one person access the internet from the dwelling. This could have been through a desktop/laptop computer, mobile or smart phone, tablet, music or video player, gaming console, smart TV or any other device.

[View the data quality statement for Dwellings internet connection \(NEFD\)](#)

What will happen when other competition arrives? There are currently in development and deployment, systems which use a multitude of broadband satellites to cover the globe. Will these systems outrun and overtake the Mixed method NBN?

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/04/australia-regulator-opens-door-for-spacex-starlink-internet-service.html>

Will 5G be a NBN competitor?

<https://www.reviews.org.au/internet/5g-australia/>

<https://www.reviews.org.au/internet/best-nbn-alternatives/>

DVR030920