



8 July 2024

2024 Regional Telecommunications Review

WESTERN DOWNS REGIONAL
COUNCIL SUBMISSION

8 July 2024

Assistant Secretary
Regional Connectivity Branch
Department of Infrastructure,
Transport, Regional Development,
Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 594
Canberra ACT 2601

Sent via email: rtirc@infrastructure.gov.au

Dear Sir or Madam,

RE: 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review

Western Downs Region Council (Council) is a local government Council in Queensland, Australia. The Council manages an area of 37,937 square kilometres (14,648 sq mi) with a population to around 35,000. Council is at the forefront of the changing world and works to support our growing region, with our Corporate Plan underpinned by progress, people, place, and performance.

We sincerely thank the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee for seeking submissions regarding the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review, which is of strong interest to our Council and our residents.

Please find enclosed a copy of the Council's submission regarding the review.

For any further information or questions, please contact either myself via email jodie.taylor@wdrc.qld.gov.au or mobile 0407 961 496 or Nicole Franklin, A/Economic Development Manager via email Nicole.Franklin@wdrc.qld.gov.au or 07 4628 5349.

Yours Sincerely,

Jodie Taylor
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

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About the Western Downs Regional Council

The Western Downs is located on the Darling Downs, approximately 207 kilometres north-west of Brisbane and 83 kilometres north-west of Toowoomba. The region encompasses the centres of Dalby, Chinchilla, Jandowae, Miles, Tara, and Wandoan, covering nearly 38,000 square kilometres. Combining country lifestyle with modern living, excellent retail offerings and conveniences, the area is home to a population of around 35,000 people and has a large working age population of 60.9% aged 15-64 years.

Built on agriculture and thriving in the intensive agriculture, energy and manufacturing industries, Western Downs Regional Council is focused on making our region a great place to live, work, visit and invest and to ensure our future generations have the opportunity to do what they love whilst enjoying a regional lifestyle and continue the strong economic growth of the region.

Council manage Australia's second largest road network of over 10,000 km with highways leading into the region include the Bunya, Leichhardt, Warrego & Moonie highways, an extensive water, gas, and sewage network, and one of Australia's largest cattle saleyards. Located in the heart of the resource rich Surat Basin, the Western Downs has a diversified energy portfolio with five pillars of energy generation: Coal, Gas, Hydrogen, Wind and Solar cementing our reputation as the Energy Capital of Queensland. This contributes to the region's strong economic growth, investment, and consistently high employment with a GRP of \$5.91 Billion.

Council's five-year [Economic Development Strategy](#) (2023 to 2028) addresses critical issues and clearly articulates a strategic pathway for the Western Downs to diversify and grow its economy, building on the region's competitive advantage and further attracting business and investment in value-adding opportunities and emerging markets. The Economic Development Strategy focuses on five key pillars:

- Jobs & Skills - The Western Downs workforce is growing, optimised and fit for the future.
- Liveability & Infrastructure - The Western Downs is equipped with modern infrastructure and quality essential services across the region to enable liveability and wellbeing, whilst sustaining population growth.
- Population - The Western Downs demonstrates population growth to meet workforce demands.
- Productivity & Innovation - The Western Downs is a recognised leader in agribusiness, energy and manufacturing, and local productivity continues to increase.
- Sustainability & Resilience - The Western Downs is future-proofed for a changing climate and transitioning economies, and circular economy principles are stimulated.

This strategy aligns closely with the Council's [Corporate Plan](#) and supports one of Queensland's most progressive [Planning Schemes](#) which is committed to attracting and enabling development and ensure the Western Downs is a diverse region at the forefront of the changing world.

Executive Summary

Western Downs Regional Council's submission to the Australian Government 2024 Telecommunications Review focuses on addressing the significant connectivity challenges faced in the region. Despite the region's substantial contributions to Queensland's economy, with \$7 billion of renewables in the project pipeline and a \$1 billion agricultural industry, it continues to experience gaps in internet and mobile coverage. These gaps impact the region's economic productivity, emergency response capabilities, and overall quality of life for residents.

Key highlights from the submission include:

- **Investment in Infrastructure and Addressing Coverage Gaps:** Investment in infrastructure to enhance telecommunication capacity and reliability in regional, rural, and remote Australia. This includes expanding coverage areas, upgrading existing networks, and deploying advanced technologies like satellite and Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellites to support higher data traffic and connectivity demands.
- **Innovative Solutions for Infrastructure Resilience:** Recommendations for legislative requirements on network resilience not only on risk management, especially during natural disasters, and exploring modern satellite services like LEOSats.
- **Private Sector and Collaborative Investments:** Insights into how private sector investments, particularly in the agricultural sector, highlight the need for collaborative and cost-effective programs.
- **Universal Service and Consumer Safeguards:** The importance of strengthen customer service guarantees and ensuring affordable, transparent pricing structures.
- **Connectivity Literacy and Access:** Emphasis on government support for improving connectivity literacy through independent, tailored programs, and leveraging public institutions like libraries.
- **Digital Inclusion for First Nations Communities:** Advocacy for community-led digital solutions with strong engagement and culturally appropriate consultation.
- **Combatting Misleading Information:** The need for independent information sources to help regional consumers and businesses make informed connectivity choices.
- **Skilled Workforce for Telecommunications:** Proposals for government funding to support training programs and partnerships with Local Government Authorities to ensure a skilled workforce for telecommunications infrastructure.

Recommendations

Western Downs Regional Council recommends the Committee:

1. Enhance Infrastructure Expansion and Resilience:

- Investment in Infrastructure to enhance telecommunication capacity and reliability in regional, rural, and remote Australia.
- Invest in modern satellite services like LEOsats to provide more reliable and higher-speed connectivity options for regional and remote areas.
- Implement legislative requirements for network operators to maintain resilient networks and mitigate connectivity loss during disasters.

2. Addressing Coverage Gaps:

- Investment in infrastructure expansion, such as the deployment of additional mobile towers and infrastructure along regional and remote roads.
- Leveraging innovative technologies like satellite and Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellites could extend coverage to areas where traditional infrastructure deployment is challenging.

3. Government-Funded Connectivity Programs:

- Implement government-funded programs to enhance connectivity literacy and ensure equitable access to telecommunications services, particularly in underserved regional areas.
- Provide grants and support for independent advisors to help communities choose the best connectivity solutions tailored to their needs. For example, subsidizing the cost of LEOsats for qualified residents to reduce congestions.

4. Maintain and Strengthen Consumer Safeguards:

- Retain and strengthen customer service guarantees within the universal service framework to ensure reliable connectivity, especially during emergencies and natural disasters.
- Introduce regulations to maintain affordable pricing and protect consumers from price gouging.

5. Support Collaborative Private Sector Investments:

- Encourage private sector investments through collaborative and cost-effective programs that leverage the strengths of local businesses and industries.
- Provide incentives for partnerships between private sector entities and local governments to enhance connectivity solutions.

6. Community-Led Digital Inclusion Initiatives:

- Foster digital inclusion through community-led solutions, particularly for First Nations communities, by ensuring strong community engagement and culturally appropriate consultation processes.

7. Transparent and Independent Information:

- Establish independent platforms for providing reliable and unbiased information about telecommunications services to combat misleading claims and assist consumers in making informed decisions.

8. Skilled Workforce Development:

- Increase funding for training and development programs to ensure a skilled workforce capable of supporting and maintaining telecommunications infrastructure in regional and remote areas.
- Collaborate with Local Government Authorities to develop tailored programs that address the specific needs of their communities.

9. Improvement and Alignment of Government Programs:

- Reduce or remove co-contribution requirements for grant programs to make them more accessible to regional and remote councils with lesser financial resources.
- Ensure government investment programs align with local government planning and funding processes through strong engagement and collaboration, allowing for tailored solutions that meet local needs.

By implementing these recommendations, Western Downs Regional Council aims to bridge the digital divide, enhance connectivity, and support the region's economic and social development.

Submission

Resilient and stable mobile and data connection is vital to support regional Australia's growth and transition into the digital economy. Substandard mobile and digital connectivity across communities with low-density populations remains a significant issue for the Western Downs and much of regional Australia. Unfortunately, telecommunications providers will only increase coverage when demand reaches a level to be financially attractive.

The Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan identifies the Western Downs region as a pivotal location in the Southern Renewable Energy Zone, driving the first phase of development and the State's energy transformation. Connectivity is the crucial layer of infrastructure that supports the Western Downs economy and community, enabling population retention, business development and attraction, telehealth, remote working and education, and social inclusion.

Rural residents and businesses across the Western Downs face issues when it comes to mobile and internet access, reliability, and speed. Many regional areas do not have the population to make it attractive for telecommunications providers to install new infrastructure, however, many of these areas have multi-million-dollar industries such as intensive agriculture, energy, and manufacturing. Regional resilience can be improved through an expanded NBN rollout, additional mobile towers, subsidies for residential and business microcells, and telco roaming.

Without suitable access to cost-effective telecommunications, towns are not able to retain and attract populations, further enhancing the disadvantage. For regions like the Western Downs, low populated areas are home to substantial intensive agricultural operations and feedlots, the resources sector, and energy and renewable projects - all of which are major contributors to the Queensland economy.

Further to this, in 2023, the Western Downs experienced two catastrophic bushfire disasters, one of which was the largest bushfire event in Queensland's history. Ours is a region prone to major flooding, bushfires and extreme weather events and unaddressed connectivity shortfalls prohibit residents in our region from receiving lifesaving emergency communications and warnings.

Significant investment in expanded digital connectivity and telecommunications infrastructure is required to support regional Australia's growth and ensure Western Downs businesses and producers can compete locally, nationally, and internationally.

Increased investment in expanded connectivity should be the key consideration as part of the Regional Telecommunications Review. Whilst Council has responded to the queries in the order they are included in the paper, note that this order does not reflect the order of significance to Council.

1. What initiatives or tools could be implemented by the telecommunications industry or government to improve connectivity literacy, and make it easier for regional consumers and businesses to understand their connectivity options and help them to choose affordable services that meet their needs?

Western Downs Regional Council acknowledges the importance of improving connectivity literacy among regional consumers and businesses to ensure they can make informed decisions about their connectivity options. To achieve this goal, Council believes that tailored government support is essential, focusing on gaining an in-depth understanding of telecommunication and connectivity gaps and providing tailored business and community support.

Rather than relying solely on telecommunications industry initiatives, Council advocates for government-funded programs that prioritise unbiased information dissemination and community empowerment. It is crucial that these initiatives are provided by independent providers who are not driven by sales outcomes, ensuring that consumers and businesses receive objective and accurate guidance.

One effective approach could be to allocate funding for collaborative projects between government bodies and community institutions such as libraries. Libraries serve as trusted community hubs and already play a vital role in providing access to information and resources. By partnering with libraries, government initiatives can reach a wider audience and provide accessible support to individuals and businesses seeking to improve their connectivity literacy.

Western Downs Regional Council proposes the collaborative projects could involve:

- **Workshops and Training Programs:** Funding could support the development and delivery of workshops and training programs conducted by independent digital connectivity and telecommunications experts, potentially partnering with libraries. These sessions could cover topics such as understanding different types of connectivity options, assessing individual connectivity needs, and navigating affordable service plans.
- **Educational Materials and Information Resources:** Government funding could also be used to create educational materials and resources tailored to the specific needs of regional communities. These resources could include informational pamphlets, online guides, and video tutorials explaining connectivity concepts and guiding users through the process of selecting suitable services.
- **Community Engagement Events:** Libraries could host community engagement events focused on connectivity literacy, inviting local residents and businesses to participate in discussions, Q&A sessions, and networking opportunities. Council welcomes the federal government to conduct these events would provide valuable opportunities for individuals to learn from experts, share experiences, and collaborate on solutions to connectivity challenges.
- **Digital Literacy Programs:** In addition to connectivity-focused initiatives, government funding could support digital literacy programs aimed at enhancing overall digital skills and confidence among regional residents and businesses. These programs could

cover topics such as internet safety, online communication, and using digital tools for business purposes.

By investing in tailored government support initiatives delivered through trusted community institutions like libraries, we can empower regional consumers and businesses with the knowledge and resources they need to make informed decisions about their connectivity options. This approach not only fosters connectivity literacy but also strengthens community resilience and economic opportunities in regional areas.

2. What further initiatives can be implemented to support First Nations communities in developing and leading their own digital inclusion solutions while ensuring cultural appropriateness?

Western Downs Regional Council recognises the importance of prioritising initiatives that support First Nations communities in developing and leading their own digital inclusion solutions while ensuring cultural appropriateness. To achieve this goal, Council emphasises the need for strong community engagement and consultation with First Nations groups to identify current gaps, their needs, and co-design solutions in the Western Downs Region.

- **Community-Led Consultation responsive to cultural appropriateness:** Government initiatives should prioritise community-led consultation processes that actively engage First Nations communities in identifying their unique connectivity challenges, aspirations, and priorities. This involves establishing meaningful partnerships with local Indigenous organisations, Elders, and community leaders to facilitate open dialogues and participatory decision-making processes. Any digital inclusion solutions developed for First Nations communities must be culturally appropriate and respectful of Indigenous values, traditions, and knowledge systems. This requires involving Indigenous stakeholders in the design and implementation of initiatives, ensuring that they have agency in shaping solutions that align with their cultural contexts and priorities.
- **Capacity building with tailored solutions within the First Nations communities:** Government funding should support capacity-building initiatives that empower First Nations communities to take ownership of their digital inclusion efforts. This could include providing training, resources, and mentorship opportunities to Indigenous individuals and organisations, enabling them to develop the skills and expertise needed to lead and sustain digital inclusion projects. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, initiatives should be tailored to meet the specific needs and preferences of each First Nations community in the Western Downs Region. This requires conducting comprehensive assessments of existing infrastructure, connectivity barriers, and digital literacy levels within Indigenous communities, allowing for the co-design of solutions that address their unique circumstances.
- **Partnerships and Collaboration for long term success:** Collaboration between government agencies, non-profit organisations, academic institutions, and the private sector is essential for delivering holistic and sustainable digital inclusion solutions. By fostering partnerships with diverse stakeholders, including Indigenous-led organisations and businesses, initiatives can leverage collective expertise and resources to maximise impact and ensure long-term success. Government funding

should be allocated strategically to support multi-year initiatives that prioritise continuity and sustainability, allowing for the iterative development and refinement of solutions based on community feedback and evolving needs.

By prioritising strong community engagement and consultation with First Nations groups, governments can ensure that digital inclusion initiatives are truly responsive to the needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities in the Western Downs Region. This approach not only fosters greater connectivity and participation but also upholds principles of cultural appropriateness, self-determination, and Indigenous leadership in the digital age.

3. How can government and industry address any misleading and inaccurate information surrounding telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote areas, to ensure consumers and businesses have access to reliable and unbiased information when making decisions about their connectivity options?

Addressing misleading and inaccurate information surrounding telecommunications services in regional, rural, and remote areas requires a multi-faceted approach that prioritises transparency, education, and independent information dissemination. Building upon the principles of community empowerment and tailored support outlined in our previous question, the Western Downs Regional Council recommends the following strategies to ensure consumers and businesses have access to reliable and unbiased information when making decisions about their connectivity options:

- **Independent Information Platforms:** Government and industry should collaborate to establish independent information platforms dedicated to providing accurate, up-to-date information about telecommunications services in regional, rural, and remote areas. These platforms should be easily accessible to all stakeholders and offer comprehensive resources, including the use of independent data but not only coverage maps, service provider comparisons, and user reviews, to help consumers and businesses make informed decisions.
- **Community Education Campaign in partnership with Libraries and Community Centres:** Government-funded community education campaigns should be developed to raise awareness about common misconceptions and pitfalls related to telecommunications services. These campaigns could include workshops, webinars, and informational materials tailored to the specific needs and literacy levels of regional, rural, and remote communities, empowering them to navigate the complexities of connectivity options effectively. Government and industry should collaborate with libraries, community centres, and other public institutions to disseminate reliable information about telecommunications services. By leveraging existing community infrastructure, stakeholders can reach a broader audience and ensure that all residents, including those with limited internet access, have access to unbiased information and support services.
- **Transparency Requirements for Providers with Independent Audits and Reviews:** Government regulations should mandate transparency requirements for telecommunications service providers, including accurate reporting of coverage areas, service quality metrics, and pricing structures. By enforcing transparency standards, regulators can hold providers accountable for their claims and ensure that consumers

have access to reliable information when evaluating their connectivity options. Regular independent audits and reviews of telecommunications services should be conducted to assess service quality, coverage accuracy, and compliance with regulatory standards. These audits should be carried out by impartial third-party organisations or government agencies and publicly accessible to promote transparency and accountability within the industry.

By implementing these strategies, government and industry can address misleading and inaccurate information surrounding telecommunications services in regional, rural, and remote areas, empowering consumers and businesses with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their connectivity options. Through a combination of transparency, education, and independent oversight, stakeholders can work together to build trust and confidence in the telecommunications sector and ensure equitable access to reliable and unbiased information for all.

4. Deploying and maintaining telecommunications infrastructure in remote areas requires a skilled workforce. What initiatives can be implemented to ensure there is a skilled workforce in regional and remote Australia capable of supporting the construction, maintenance and operation of futureproof telecommunications infrastructure?

Deploying and maintaining telecommunications infrastructure in remote areas requires a skilled and specialised workforce capable of supporting the construction, maintenance, and operation of future-proof telecommunications networks. Recognising the critical role of skilled workers in advancing connectivity in regional and remote Australia, it is imperative to implement targeted initiatives and funding mechanisms to address workforce challenges. The Western Downs Regional Council recommends the following strategies to ensure the availability of a skilled workforce in regional and remote Australia:

- **Flexible Funding Models:** Governments should adopt flexible funding models that prioritise connectivity outcomes over strict business case criteria in remote and underserved areas. Given the vast geographical areas and low population density characteristic of remote regions, traditional market-based approaches may not be sufficient to drive investment in telecommunications infrastructure. Instead, governments should allocate funding based on the social and economic benefits of improved connectivity, working collaboratively with industry stakeholders and local communities to identify priority areas for investment. Governments should also consider subsidising the cost of Morden Low Earth Orbit satellites (LEOSats) for qualified residents. For example, anyone in a township, that has access to NBN Services (Fixed Wi-Fi, Fixed line) is not able to claim subsidised fees for LEOSats. This would reduce congestion on LEOSats.
- **Collaboration with Local Government Authorities (LGAs) on tailored Training and Skilling Programs:** Governments should collaborate closely with Local Government Authorities (LGAs) to design and implement tailored workforce development programs that address local needs and priorities. LGAs are well-positioned to identify specific skills gaps within their communities and develop targeted training initiatives in partnership with industry stakeholders and educational institutions. By leveraging the expertise and resources of LGAs, governments can

ensure that workforce development efforts are responsive to the unique challenges and opportunities present in regional and remote areas. Government funding should be allocated to establish and expand training programs specifically tailored to the needs of the telecommunications industry in regional and remote areas and each respective LGAs. These programs should focus on equipping individuals with the necessary technical skills, such as network design, installation, and maintenance, as well as soft skills like project management and safety protocols. By investing in training initiatives, governments can cultivate a pipeline of skilled workers to support the construction and operation of telecommunications infrastructure in the respective LGAs.

By implementing these initiatives and funding mechanisms, governments can ensure the availability of a skilled workforce capable of supporting the construction, maintenance, and operation of future-proof telecommunications infrastructure in regional and remote Australia. Through tailored training programs and collaboration with LGAs, stakeholders can address workforce challenges and advance connectivity objectives in underserved areas.

5. Could the NBN fixed wireless network or other alternative networks be used to provide reliable and affordable voice services in remote areas? Are there any consumer safeguards or guarantees that need to remain or be changed under reformed universal service arrangements?

Western Downs Regional Council strongly advocates for a reliable and affordable service provision covering the region. While a transition from satellite to fixed wireless is considered positive in relation to connectivity and speed, challenges are identified with the reliability of the NBN fixed wireless network due to its nature and susceptibility to line of sight and weather-related disruptions. It is advised to retain existing consumer safeguards like the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) to ensure transparency, maintain service levels, and provide compensation for consumers, especially in areas with limited connectivity options. Stricter rules on interim services are necessary to ensure continuous connection during emergencies, specifying timeframes for connections or repairs and compensation available. Enhancing price protection and transparency is crucial to prevent price inflation or gouging, establishing a universal price structure for fairness and affordability. Retaining accessibility, including public payphones, is vital to ensure connectivity for those unable to afford fixed services or residing in areas with limited coverage.

- **Utilisation of Fixed Wireless Networks:** Whilst Council considers the transition from satellite to fixed wireless services positive, there are challenges utilising fixed wireless networks for voice services in remote areas due to their reduced speeds and susceptibility to weather-related outages. This type of connection is considered to have largely reduced speeds than other options and is also highly susceptible to weather conditions, leading to frequent outages.
- **Retention of Customer Service Guarantee (CSG):** CSG should be retained within the framework to ensure transparency and maintain service levels until full coverage is achieved with mobile network, especially in remote or rural areas. This safeguard remains essential for ensuring a high level of transparency in areas where consumers may have limited connectivity options. Council also suggested to have CSG to roll into mobile and data networks in terms of price, coverage, data transfer, and service.

- **Stricter Rules on Interim Services:** Stricter rules on how suppliers provide interim or alternative services are necessary to ensure continuous connection, particularly during emergencies or natural disasters. Council believes that the CSG should maintain the service levels for timeframes expected for connections or repairs and what compensation is available, and additionally should be more stringent on how suppliers provide interim or alternative services to ensure connection is maintained.
- **Enhanced Price Protection and Transparency:** Price protection and transparency within the framework need further development to prevent considerable inflation of prices or price gouging by companies.
- **Retention of Accessibility:** Retaining accessibility within the framework, including services such as public payphones, is crucial to ensure connectivity for those who cannot afford fixed services or live in areas with limited coverage. Council believes that services such as public payphone services should be retained within the framework, while usage is declining, there is still an identifiable need to ensure that these services are provided and accessible for those that don't have access to a fixed service or cannot afford a service. In 2024, a digital age, connectivity should no longer be looked upon as a luxury, and more so as a necessity.

6. In modernising universal service arrangements, should access to public phone infrastructure continue and are there particular areas of need? Could technologies beyond traditional payphones be explored to meet this need?

In modernising universal service arrangements, Western Downs Regional Council believes that access to public phone infrastructure should continue, especially in areas where fixed services are limited or unaffordable. This ensures connectivity for individuals who rely on public phones for essential communication, particularly in remote or rural areas where alternative options are scarce. Technologies beyond traditional payphones should be explored to meet this need, including innovative solutions like mobile charging stations or community Wi-Fi hubs, which can provide additional services while maintaining essential communication access. This approach aligns with the goal of ensuring universal access to communication services while adapting to evolving technological trends and consumer needs.

- **Importance of Universal Access:** Universal access to telecommunications infrastructure is paramount. Given the vast geographical areas and low population density in remote regions, telecommunications infrastructure is often limited. Ensuring universal access guarantees that all residents, regardless of their location, have equitable access to essential communication services.
- **Continuation of Public Phone Infrastructure:** Public phone infrastructure, including traditional payphones, should continue to be available in areas of need throughout the Western Downs. While the usage of traditional payphones may be declining, they still serve as a vital communication lifeline, especially for individuals who lack access to other communication means or during emergencies.
- **Exploration of Alternative Technologies:** Exploration of alternative technologies beyond traditional payphones is essential to meet the evolving communication needs

of remote communities. Innovative solutions such as mobile charging stations, community Wi-Fi hotspots, or satellite-based communication hubs could complement traditional payphones and provide additional connectivity options in remote areas.

- **Tailored Response Based on Data of the Local Government Authorities (LGAs):** Tailored responses should be developed based on data regarding the number of phone services versus the number of residents in each Local Government area. Analysis of this data can identify areas with inadequate access, allowing for targeted deployment of telecommunications infrastructure to address connectivity gaps. Work with LGAs to develop tailored programs to improve access to telecommunications infrastructure and foster digital inclusion. Local governments are in a unique position to advocate for the needs of their communities and can work closely with telecommunications providers to implement solutions tailored to the unique challenges of remote areas like the Western Downs.
7. **What should the minimum internet speed guarantee be (currently a peak speed of 25/5 Mbps) to meet modern needs? Should minimum data download/upload allowances be regulated? What other factors are important, like latency, reliability and affordability?**

The Western Downs Regional Council advocates for a minimum internet speed guarantee that reflects modern needs and enables residents and businesses to fully participate in the digital economy.

Minimum Internet Speed Guarantee: While the current peak speed of 25/5 Mbps may have been sufficient in the past, advancements in technology and the increasing demand for bandwidth-intensive applications necessitate a higher minimum speed. To meet modern and future needs, Council suggest that the minimum internet speed guarantees should be at least 50/10 Mbps to accommodate the growing requirements of remote work, online education, telehealth services, and digital entertainment.

- **Regulation of Minimum Data Download/Upload Allowances:** In addition to minimum speed guarantees, regulating minimum data download/upload allowances is essential to ensure equitable access to digital resources. Council recommends that minimum data allowances be established to prevent data caps from disproportionately affecting users in remote areas with limited connectivity options. These allowances should be sufficient to support basic internet usage needs, such as streaming, video conferencing, and downloading/uploading large files.
- **Latency, Reliability and Affordability:** Beyond speed and data allowances, factors like latency, reliability, and affordability are equally crucial in determining the effectiveness of internet services. Low latency is essential for real-time applications like online gaming and video conferencing, while reliability ensures uninterrupted connectivity, especially during emergencies. Additionally, affordability is paramount to ensure that internet services remain accessible to all residents, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Council emphasises the need for comprehensive regulation that considers these factors to guarantee a reliable, high-quality, and affordable internet service for regional and rural communities in the Western Downs.

8. How can we achieve equity with respect to mobile services (voice, data and SMS) in regional, rural and remote communities and on regional and remote roads?

Western Downs Regional Council recognises that achieving equity in mobile services, including voice, data, and SMS, is essential for regional, rural, and remote communities. As outlined in our previous submissions to the Better Delivery of Universal Services - Discussion Paper, coverage remains the primary issue affecting mobile service accessibility in the West Downs areas. Council strongly advocates for initiatives aimed at expanding coverage to underserved regions, including regional and remote communities and regional roads. Improved coverage would enable residents and travellers to access essential mobile services, including emergency communications, regardless of their location.

- **Addressing Coverage Gaps:** To achieve equity in mobile services, it is crucial to address coverage gaps comprehensively. This requires significant investment in infrastructure expansion, such as the deployment of additional mobile towers and infrastructure along regional and remote roads. Additionally, leveraging innovative technologies like satellite and Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellites could extend coverage to areas where traditional infrastructure deployment is challenging.
- **Engaging with Mobile Network Operators:** Collaboration with mobile network operators is vital to address coverage gaps effectively. Council recommends engaging with operators to identify priority areas for coverage expansion and develop mutually beneficial partnerships to accelerate deployment efforts. Furthermore, Council identifies that there is a gap for mobile network operators to not provide services or updates if the customer base is not in the area. As a result, providing incentives or subsidies for network expansion in underserved regions could incentivise operators to invest in infrastructure upgrades.
- **Community Engagement and Consultation:** In line with our previous advocacy efforts, community engagement and consultation are integral to ensuring that mobile services meet the needs of regional, rural, and remote communities. Council encourages ongoing dialogue between government, industry stakeholders, and local communities to identify coverage priorities, assess service quality, and address any emerging challenges. By actively involving communities in the decision-making process, mobile service initiatives can be tailored to local needs, leading to more equitable outcomes.

9. How can we ensure regional, rural and remote areas have access to the networks, equipment and capacity they need for improved household connectivity and to foster innovation and efficiency across regional industries, including for IoT applications?

As mentioned in response to question 8, Western Downs Regional Council firmly advocates for equitable access to connectivity for all residents and supporting our multi-million industries. In today's digital age, reliable and robust connectivity is not a luxury but a necessity for economic growth, social well-being, and emergency communications within our region. Despite being an economic powerhouse with thriving industries like Agriculture, Intensive Agriculture, Energy, and Manufacturing, the Western Downs experiences significant gaps in Internet and Mobile coverage. These gaps hinder access to essential services, hamper

business operations, and pose challenges during emergency situations such as natural disasters and negatively impacting on access to basic and important safety net services including health care and contacting emergency services.

- **Connectivity improvement focus on Western Downs key industries:** Council recognises the importance of connectivity efficiency across key industries like Agriculture, Energy, and Manufacturing. Particularly our \$1 billion-dollar agricultural industry plays a pivotal role in our region's economy. Improved connectivity in agriculture can enable precision farming techniques, real-time monitoring of crops and livestock, and access to market information, leading to increased productivity and profitability. By bridging connectivity gaps, we can unlock additional revenue streams and enhance the resilience of our agricultural sector. Western Downs is leading the first phase of developments in the Southern Renewable Energy Zone. It is imperative to establish and maintain a fit-for-purpose network capable of supporting industry needs and fostering innovation and growth.
- **Development of a Modern Universal Service Framework:** Council recommends the development of a modern universal service framework that ensures broad access to connectivity characterised by reliability, robustness, high quality, and suitability for diverse needs. With the exception of Chinchilla, Dalby and Miles town centres benefiting from fixed line connection, many rural areas rely on slower and less reliable options, exacerbating the digital divide. There is also an identified need for reliable and robust connectivity across the Western Downs as it forms the basis of day-to-day operations for many businesses and industries, where basic tasks such as processing credit card transactions or communicating with suppliers or customers would not be possible without access to a reliable connection. This applies to other regional and remote areas that rely on a suitable internet connection to form the basis of conducting business, supporting education, social interactions and supporting disaster, safety, and recovery initiatives. The Universal Service Framework needs to secure mobile connectivity and increase its capacity within the region, not only for residents but for anyone coming and going from the region as well.
- **Focus on Mobile Connectivity:** Mobile connectivity, not only in the Western Downs, but across Australia has become a daily convenience and way of living for many in this digital age. The flexibility and accessibility for residents, businesses, and visitors mobile service provides ensures that users can be connected anywhere, at any time. The mobile network provides security and support to the thousands of tourists and fly in fly out workforce across the Western Downs and this gives people of the region and similar regions the access to travel where they need for work, education, healthcare, or leisure and still stay connected to the digital world. Council emphasises the need to strengthen regulations on network operators to ensure a resilient network, especially experienced an unprecedented period of frequent high rainfall and multiple flood events across the region in 2021/22 during natural disasters. Additionally, efforts should focus on increasing mobile capacity to support the region's economic activities and tourism sector.
- **Collaboration and Regulation:** Achieving improved connectivity requires collaboration between government, industry stakeholders, and local communities. Council advocates for regulatory measures to ensure network resilience, affordability, and equitable access. By working together and prioritising connectivity investments,

we can unlock the full potential of our region's economy and enhance the quality of life for all residents.

10. The cost of building and maintaining telecommunications infrastructure in rural and remote areas can be a barrier to offering better services. What can be done to improve the fixed broadband options available to regional, rural and remote Australians?

Western Downs Regional Council recommends prioritising the improvement of fixed broadband options in the region, primarily by strengthening mobile networks. Mobile networks have demonstrated the ability to extend coverage to areas where fixed infrastructure is limited or absent in the Western Downs Region, offering portability and connectivity anytime, anywhere. Given the region's susceptibility to natural disasters, maintaining mobile connectivity is critical for ensuring communities remain connected and have access to vital support services during emergencies. Logistical challenges and a lack of government support often hinder the installation of fixed line services across the Western Downs Region.

Whilst fixed wireless services are available to a number of properties outside of the Western Downs's town centres, there are considerable gaps in provision for example around the Chinchilla district. In addition to this, fixed wireless services are susceptible to outages due to weather events are a common occurrence. Mobile services serve as a reliable alternative during weather events, ensuring continuity in connectivity for businesses and residents.

Mobile connections serve as a safety net during emergencies or when regular fixed services undergo maintenance or repairs. Given the reliance of many businesses on fixed services, mobile connectivity ensures productivity is not compromised during such disruptions. By prioritising the enhancement of mobile networks, the region can address connectivity challenges and foster economic resilience and growth.

Apart from advocating on strengthening mobile networks, Western Downs Regional Council suggests the following measures to improve telecommunications in the region:

- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Collaboration between government and private sector entities through public-private partnerships (PPPs) can facilitate the development of cost-effective solutions for improving telecommunication options. Regional partners or related private businesses can obtain suitable certification to partner with providers to improve response times for outages. These partnerships can leverage the expertise and resources of both sectors to deploy infrastructure more efficiently and sustainably.
- **Incentives for Innovation:** Governments can incentivise innovation in telecommunications infrastructure by offering grants, tax breaks, or subsidies to companies that develop and deploy advanced technologies for delivering fixed broadband services in rural and remote areas. Encouraging innovation can lead to more affordable and reliable broadband options for regional communities.
- **Regulatory Reform:** Regulatory reform measures, such as streamlining approval processes and reducing red tape, can help lower the costs associated with building and maintaining telecommunications infrastructure. By creating a more conducive

regulatory environment, governments can stimulate investment in rural and remote areas, thereby improving fixed broadband options for residents and businesses.

11. Have you had experience with new or alternate service providers such as Starlink or WISPs? If not, why not? What additional measures would persuade you to consider new technologies?

Western Downs Regional Council has some experience with new or alternate service providers such as Starlink or Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISPs). A considerable number of farming enterprises in the Western Downs are using Starlink over 4G due to its reliability and speed. Council in general have some deployment of Starlink and are looking at expanding the use at remote locations or where there is limited option and even for redundancy use in operational technology and for CCTV.

Council is aware that most of the community in Tara in the Western Downs is using Starlink as it is the only available connectivity solution for residents who reside outside the township centre area. While Starlink offers a viable option for residents, it is relatively more costly than other providers, posing challenges for individuals and families from low socioeconomic backgrounds who have no option but to rely on Starlink for internet connectivity.

Council recognises the importance of tailored solutions that address the unique challenges and requirements of rural and remote communities. As a result, Western Downs Regional Council is actively engaging a consultant to provide advice on tailored solutions and determine the most suitable products for residents across the region. This demonstrates Council's commitment to finding the best-fit options for residents across the region and ensures that Council remains informed about emerging technologies and can make informed decisions regarding their adoption to improve connectivity for the community.

Additional measures that should be taken into consideration when assessing place-based and tangible solutions are:

- **Cost-Effectiveness:** Offering competitive pricing compared to existing solutions, especially for residents facing financial constraints.
- **Reliability and Performance:** Reliability and performance are crucial factors in evaluating new technologies. Solutions should be prioritised when offering stable and high-speed connectivity, particularly in remote and underserved areas.
- **Community Consultation:** Council values community input and engagement in decision-making processes. Measures that involve consultation with residents and stakeholders to assess their needs and preferences would enhance the consideration of new technologies.

12. What can be done to maximise access to multiple connectivity options in case of outages?

Western Downs Regional Council advocates for maximising access to multiple connectivity options to mitigate the impact of outages. This includes leveraging a combination of fixed-line broadband, mobile networks, GEO satellite internet, and emerging technologies such as LEO satellite and Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISPs). By diversifying connectivity options, communities can maintain access to essential services and communications even during network disruptions or outages.

- **Infrastructure Resilience:** Council emphasises the importance of investing in infrastructure resilience to minimise the likelihood and duration of outages. This includes upgrading and maintaining telecommunications infrastructure to withstand environmental challenges such as severe weather events. Additionally, implementing redundancy measures and backup systems can ensure continuity of service during disruptions.
- **Community Awareness and Preparedness:** Council recognises the significance of community awareness and preparedness in managing outages effectively. Educational initiatives can inform residents and businesses about alternative connectivity options available during outages and provide guidance on accessing and utilising backup systems. Furthermore, conducting regular drills and simulations can help communities practice response strategies and improve readiness for potential disruptions.
- **Collaboration with Providers:** Collaborating with telecommunications providers is essential to maximise access to multiple connectivity options. Council encourages partnerships with providers to enhance network reliability, expand coverage areas, and deploy innovative solutions for backup connectivity. By working together, stakeholders can identify and address gaps in service coverage and develop contingency plans to ensure uninterrupted connectivity for residents and businesses, particularly in rural and remote areas.

13. What can be done to increase capacity and improve the reliability of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia?

As mentioned on the previous answer, Western Downs Regional Council advocates for an 'access for all' approach to connectivity. In this current age, consistent, reliable, robust, and fit for purpose connectivity is a necessity, rather than a luxury and should be available for everyone, no matter their location (regional, rural, urban etc) income or general socioeconomic status. Western Downs Regional Council also advocates for increased investment in telecommunications infrastructure to enhance capacity and improve reliability in regional, rural, and remote Australia.

- **Investment in Infrastructure:** Investment in Infrastructure is crucial to enhance telecommunication capacity and reliability in regional, rural, and remote Australia. This includes expanding coverage areas, reducing single points of power and network connectivity, upgrading existing networks, and deploying advanced technologies to

support higher data traffic and connectivity demands. By modernising infrastructure, communities can benefit from improved reliability and enhanced service quality.

- **Regulatory Support:** Council emphasises the importance of regulatory support to facilitate infrastructure development and deployment. Streamlining regulatory processes, reducing bureaucratic hurdles, and providing incentives for private sector investment can accelerate the rollout of telecommunications projects in underserved areas. Additionally, regulatory frameworks should prioritise consumer interests and encourage competition to drive innovation and improve service reliability.
- **Resilience Planning:** Council recognises the importance of resilience planning to mitigate disruptions and ensure continuity of telecommunications services. This includes implementing measures to safeguard infrastructure against natural disasters, cyber threats, and other emergencies. Council advocates to reduce single point of failure of both power and network connectivity by having towers in strategic locations as a result to reduce the impact of power and network outage. Alternative placed-based technology and infrastructure should be explored in different areas. By integrating resilience considerations into infrastructure planning and design, communities can minimise the impact of disruptions and maintain reliable connectivity during challenging circumstances.
- **Partnerships, Community Engagement to form Place-based solutions:** Collaborative efforts between government, industry stakeholders, and local communities are essential to increase capacity and reliability of telecommunications services. Engaging with local communities is crucial to identify needs, prioritise investments, and enhance the reliability of telecommunications services. Council encourages active participation from residents, businesses, and community organisations in planning processes, decision-making, and infrastructure projects. By soliciting feedback, addressing concerns, and involving stakeholders in implementation efforts, Council can ensure that telecommunications initiatives align with community priorities and effectively meet the needs of the residents.

14. How can the energy and telecommunications sectors work more effectively, especially with respect to redundancy?

Western Downs Regional Council advocates for collaboration between the energy and telecommunications sectors. The Western Downs Region is often referred to as the "Energy Capital of Queensland" due to its significant contribution to the energy sector, particularly through the extraction and production of natural gas and renewable energy sources such as solar and wind. With a strong presence of energy infrastructure and expertise in the region, there is an opportunity for collaboration between the energy and telecommunication sectors to enhance redundancy and resilience. This collaboration can involve co-locating infrastructure, sharing resources, and leveraging technological innovations to improve reliability and adaptability in both sectors. By working together, the energy and telecommunication sectors can create synergies that benefit the community and contribute to the overall resilience of the region's critical infrastructure.

- **Integration of Infrastructure:** Western Downs Regional Council advocates for greater integration between the energy and telecommunications sectors to enhance redundancy and resilience. By co-locating energy and telecommunications infrastructure, such as fibre optic cables along power lines or utilising shared telecommunications towers on energy infrastructure, redundancy can be improved. This integration not only optimises resource utilisation but also facilitates faster response times during outages or emergencies.
- **Joint Planning and Coordination:** Council emphasises the importance of joint planning and coordination between energy and telecommunications providers to identify opportunities for collaboration and redundancy enhancement. By sharing information, conducting joint risk assessments, and coordinating infrastructure development, both sectors can identify synergies and implement cost-effective solutions to improve redundancy and reliability.
- **Technology Innovation:** Leveraging technology innovation is key to enhancing redundancy in both sectors. Western Downs Regional Council encourages the exploration of advanced technologies, such as smart grids and resilient telecommunications networks, to improve reliability and redundancy. By investing in innovative solutions, such as microgrids with integrated telecommunications capabilities or autonomous power and communication systems, both sectors can enhance resilience and adaptability to changing conditions.
- **Regulatory Support:** Council highlights the importance of regulatory support to facilitate collaboration and redundancy improvement efforts between the energy and telecommunications sectors. Regulatory frameworks should incentivise joint infrastructure deployment, streamline approval processes, and provide funding mechanisms to support collaborative projects. By creating a conducive regulatory environment, policymakers can encourage greater cooperation and innovation to enhance redundancy and reliability in both sectors.

15. What innovative solutions can be explored to ensure telecommunications infrastructure remains operational during and after natural disasters? How could partnerships with local communities improve the maintenance, security and availability of infrastructure?

The Western Downs is a region that is highly susceptible to natural disaster with the region regularly facing floods and fires. With the majority of the region being connected to fixed wireless services, the region often faces outages in line with weather events. Mobile services offer portability, and it has become critical from a safety perspective during these times that communities maintain connected while on the move and access to vital support services including emergency and healthcare services.

Despite being an economic powerhouse, the region experiences significant gaps in Internet and Mobile coverage. Fast and reliable mobile and internet (connectivity) services are vital to ensure a strong and diverse economy and to assist in ensuring a quality lifestyle for the community. Connectivity is a critical economic layer of our region's infrastructure and supports businesses to conduct their activities, grow their businesses and remain connected to stakeholders outside the region.

During disaster events getting important information to community members is crucial in maintaining safety of emergency services and community members alike. The two main forms of fast and efficient communication during a disaster event are via Councils social media, where Australian Warning System (AWS) messaging is disseminated, and Emergency Alert (EA) warnings that are sent via the telecommunications networks to mobile phones and landline devices in times of emergency. This messaging provides lifesaving information to community members and instructions on actions required to achieve community safety.

With unreliable or limited telecommunication service in a large portion of high-risk flood and fire areas of the Western Downs region, vital community emergency messaging is not being received by those who often need it most.

During the recent large scale bushfire events of 2023, Queensland Fire & Emergency Service (QFES) were required to request State Government communication resources from Brisbane (cows & calves) to enable communication between firefighters on the ground. This communication is essential in preservation of life of the paid and volunteer firefighters who put their safety on the line to preserve life and property of those affected by the bushfires. Without communication between firefighters, and between firefighters and the Incident Control, a change of conditions or circumstances on the fireground may very quickly result in a very dangerous situation for all persons involved. Reliant on infrastructure from Brisbane to arrive to achieve this communication does not meet community expectation.

For community members, it is essential that during these states of natural disasters they have the ability to remain connected, particularly regarding lifesaving services and assistance.

Western Downs Regional Council suggests the following solutions can be explored:

- **Ongoing funding to support Local Government for Disaster Preparation and Management and Telecommunications Initiatives:** Local Government is the first responder to local disasters events. Western Downs Regional Council would like to see more support towards the region to be better prepared for natural disasters and that telecommunications infrastructure is robust enough to withstand such events. For example, Western Downs Regional Council's Disaster Management Group have been investigating having a dedicated vehicle equipped with satellite technology to ensure reliable connectivity during disaster events. This would allow real-time communication and coordination, enhancing disaster response and recovery efforts. Ensures continuous communication capabilities even when terrestrial networks are down, crucial for coordinating emergency services and providing lifesaving information to affected communities. More federal funding is also needed to support initiatives that enhance the resilience and reliability of telecommunications infrastructure. This includes investing in robust, weather-resistant technologies and expanding satellite service capabilities. Strengthens the overall network infrastructure, making it less susceptible to damage from natural disasters and ensuring faster restoration of services.
- **Implementing Legislative Requirements for Network Resilience and Pricing Structures:** Consideration should be given to implementing legislative requirements that mandate service providers to maintain a high level of network resilience and regulate pricing structures to prevent price gouging, especially during disasters. This

could protect consumers from unfair practices and ensures that telecommunications services remain accessible and affordable during emergencies. Whilst this is partially covered of the security of critical infrastructure legislation, this could be expanded beyond risk management.

- **Resilient Network and Power System:** Council advocates for removing single points of failure and utilising redundant configurations, especially during natural disasters. This includes redundancy of physical paths (where feasible), power, and networks. Infrastructures should have the capability to provide backhaul across different townships in the region as a backup. Multiple network paths, such as Fiber, microwave links, or Modern solutions such as Low Earth Orbit satellites (LEOSats), should be used to ensure vital connections for rural and regional areas. This approach supports critical voice communications and enhances emergency and disaster preparedness initiatives for rural communities.
- **Asset Sharing Among Service Providers:** Council encourages service providers to share assets and enabling domestic roaming, especially during disaster event and management, to maintain service levels for end users. Regulatory bodies like the ACCC should allow exceptions under extenuating circumstances to facilitate this. This could ensure continuous service availability during emergencies, preventing service disruptions and enhancing coordination among different providers.

16. What lessons can be learned from private sector investment in regional telecommunications in closing the digital divide in regional and remote areas?

Many businesses, particularly in the agricultural sector such as feedlots in the Western Downs Region, have invested in customised telecommunications systems to support their operations. These investments highlight the critical need for reliable connectivity to enhance productivity and operational efficiency. These Feedlots in the Western Downs have implemented advanced monitoring and management systems that rely on robust internet connections to track livestock health, optimise feeding schedules, and manage resources more efficiently. While the lack of market-driven solutions has forced businesses to privately invest in their telecommunications infrastructure. This underscores a significant gap in the market's ability to provide adequate services in regional and remote areas. Businesses often have to negotiate with multiple service providers, invest in costly infrastructure, and manage their networks independently, which can be resource-intensive and costly.

There is potential to develop more cost-effective solutions through collaborative and tailored programs, involving both public and private sector stakeholders. Such initiatives can pool resources and expertise to create comprehensive and efficient telecommunications networks.

Western Downs Regional advocates for the following in closing the digital divide in regional and remote areas:

- **Successful Models of Public-Private Partnerships:** Learning from successful models of public-private partnerships (PPPs) can provide valuable insights into closing the digital divide. These partnerships can leverage the strengths of both sectors to deliver scalable and sustainable connectivity solutions. Programs where government grants and subsidies are matched with private investments have been successful in

other regions. Implementing similar models in the Western Downs could enhance connectivity while sharing the financial and operational responsibilities.

- **Community-Based Solutions and Shared Infrastructure:** Encouraging community-based solutions and shared infrastructure projects can reduce costs and improve access for all users. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and ensures that solutions are tailored to local needs. Establishing local telecommunication cooperatives or community broadband networks can allow businesses and residents to collectively invest in and benefit from improved telecommunications infrastructure.

The Western Downs Regional Council is open to work with state and federal governments to secure funding for regional connectivity projects, emphasising the economic and social benefits of improved telecommunications for the entire community. Increased policy and funding support from the government can help address the unique challenges faced by regional and remote areas. By partnering with local governments, industry groups, and telecommunications providers, collaborative programs can be designed to address specific regional needs, ensuring that businesses do not have to shoulder the entire burden of infrastructure investment.

17. What has been your experience as a consumer of Australian Government programs aimed at improving regional communications? What improvements would you suggest?

Western Downs Regional Council acknowledges that grant programs designed to improve regional communications often require a collaborative approach with telecommunications providers. This collaborative requirement is intended to ensure that both the funding and the technical expertise necessary for implementing solutions are available. Programs like the Mobile Black Spot Program have brought some benefits to the region, but the requirement to partner with specific providers has sometimes limited the Council's ability to choose the most suitable or innovative solutions for our unique regional needs.

One significant challenge encountered with these programs is the lack of accessible and independent data to support the selection of providers and solutions. This gap makes it difficult for the Council to make informed decisions that best serve the community's needs. Without comprehensive and unbiased data on network performance, coverage areas, and the reliability of different providers, the Council often has to rely on the information provided by the telecommunications companies themselves, which may not always be impartial or complete.

The lack of independent data undermines the ability to independently select the best provider or solution. This dependency can result in suboptimal outcomes, where the chosen solutions may not fully address the specific connectivity challenges faced by our communities. In some instances, the available programs have led to the implementation of technologies or solutions that, while technically feasible, do not offer the most effective or cost-efficient means of enhancing regional communications.

As such, Western Downs Regional Council suggested improvements to Government Programs:

- **Provision of Independent Data:** To improve the efficacy of grant programs, it is essential that the government provides access to independent, transparent, and comprehensive data regarding telecommunications infrastructure and service performance. Establishing a centralised database that includes detailed metrics on network coverage, speed, reliability, and user satisfaction across different providers would empower the Council to make more informed decisions.
- **Flexibility in Provider Selection:** Grant programs should offer greater flexibility in the selection of providers, allowing councils to independently assess and choose the most suitable partners based on the specific needs of their regions. Removing or reducing the mandatory partnership requirements with specific providers could enable councils to explore innovative and bespoke solutions, potentially involving smaller or emerging technology companies that offer more tailored services.
- **Enhanced Support for Regional-Specific Solutions:** Programs should be designed to better accommodate the unique challenges and opportunities present in regional and remote areas. This includes recognising the diverse geographical, economic, and social landscapes that affect connectivity needs. Providing additional funding and support for pilot projects and innovative solutions that specifically address the issues faced by regions like the Western Downs could lead to more effective and sustainable improvements in regional communications.
- **Increased Community and Stakeholder Engagement:** Enhancing engagement with local communities and stakeholders in the planning and implementation of these programs can ensure that the solutions developed are well-aligned with the actual needs and preferences of residents. Initiatives such as community consultations, feedback mechanisms, and participatory planning processes can help tailor the programs to better serve the community and foster a sense of ownership and collaboration.

The Western Downs Regional Council's experience with Australian Government programs aimed at improving regional communications highlights the need for more accessible and independent data to support informed decision-making. By addressing these gaps and providing greater flexibility in provider selection, alongside increased support for region-specific solutions and community engagement, government programs can more effectively enhance connectivity and meet the unique needs of regional, rural, and remote areas.

18. What changes to Australian Government investment programs are required to ensure they are successful, efficient and effective in delivering improved, reliable and equitable telecommunications for regional, rural and remote consumers?

As touched on briefly responded to in the last question, many current investment programs require local councils to provide a financial co-contribution. While this might work well in more highly populated areas, it poses a significant challenge for remote councils with limited financial resources. Remote councils often face higher connectivity gaps and greater needs for improved telecommunications. However, these councils typically have lower financial incomes due to smaller populations and lower rates revenue. This makes it difficult to meet co-contribution requirements, despite the critical need for improved connectivity.

Current programs often necessitate partnerships with specific telecommunications providers. While partnerships can bring technical expertise, they can also limit the council's ability to choose the most appropriate or innovative solutions. This limitation can lead to suboptimal outcomes where the selected solutions do not fully address the unique connectivity challenges of remote areas.

Remote communities have unique challenges and needs that differ from urban and suburban areas. Standardised programs may not adequately address the specific connectivity issues faced by remote areas.

Western Downs Region Council would like to suggest the following changes to Australian Government investment programs:

- **Removal or Reduction of Co-Contribution Requirements & Increased Funding and Support for Remote Areas:** Council would appreciate the government to consider removing or significantly reducing the co-contribution requirement for remote councils. This adjustment would ensure that areas with the greatest need and least financial capability can still access the funding necessary to improve their telecommunications infrastructure. The government should also consider allocating increased funding specifically for remote and rural areas, recognising the higher costs and greater need for connectivity solutions. Additional support mechanisms, such as technical assistance and streamlined application processes, would also enhance the effectiveness of these programs.
- **Flexibility in Partnership Requirements:** The government should provide greater flexibility in partnership requirements, allowing councils to independently select providers and solutions that best meet their specific needs. This could include smaller or emerging technology companies that offer more tailored services.
- **Tailored Programs for Remote Communities:** The government should develop tailored programs that take into account the unique geographical, economic, and social conditions of remote communities. This could include specialised funding streams, pilot projects, and innovative solutions designed to overcome the specific barriers faced by these regions.

These changes would ensure that investment programs are accessible to the areas with the greatest need and least financial capability, ultimately bridging the digital divide and fostering greater connectivity across all regions.

19. How could Australian Government programs better align with state, territory and local government planning and funding processes in delivering telecommunications services and infrastructure?

Western Downs Regional Council acknowledges effective telecommunications infrastructure requires a collaborative approach between different levels of government. While there is often a disconnect between Australian Government programs and the planning and funding processes of state, territory, and local governments. Local and regional planning documents outline specific priorities and projects that reflect community needs and Local governments

have a good understanding of the unique challenges and needs of their communities and often a one-size-fits-all approaches fail to address specific local requirements, leading to inefficient use of resources and suboptimal outcomes. Misalignment between federal programs and local plans can also result in missed opportunities and wasted resources.

Western Downs Regional Council suggests the following:

- **Strong Engagement and Collaboration to form Tailored Solutions Based on Local Needs:** The Australian Government should establish robust mechanisms for ongoing engagement and collaboration with state, territory, and local governments. This includes regular consultations, joint planning sessions, and the formation of intergovernmental working groups to ensure alignment and coordination of efforts. Federal programs should be designed to align closely with state and local planning documents, such as regional development plans and infrastructure strategies. This ensures that funded projects are relevant and support broader community goals. Programs should be flexible and adaptable, allowing for tailored solutions that are designed based on the input and knowledge of local governments. This can be achieved by incorporating local insights into the program design and funding allocation processes. Federal programs should also be designed to align closely with state and local planning documents, such as regional economic development plans and infrastructure plans and strategies. This ensures that funded projects are relevant and can support broader community telecommunications improvement goals.
- **Enhanced Data Sharing and Transparency with Joint Monitoring and Evaluation:** Implementing robust data-sharing agreements and platforms can enhance transparency and allow for better-informed decisions. This includes sharing information on existing infrastructure, planned projects, and community needs. Establishing joint monitoring and evaluation frameworks can ensure that all levels of government are aligned in assessing program outcomes and identifying areas for improvement. Collaborative evaluation processes can provide a comprehensive understanding of program impacts and inform future policy decisions.
- **Streamlined Application and Reporting Processes:** Simplifying and streamlining application and reporting processes can enhance efficiency and accessibility. Providing clear guidelines, support, and resources for local governments can facilitate smoother participation and implementation.

20. What other matters should the Committee consider in its review and why are they important?

The Western Downs Regional Council would like to see transparency in pricing from service providers. Consumers should understand what they are paying and what this entitles them to. Council would also like to see the affordability of these plans being considered to ensure they remain consistent with what users can afford. Infrastructure upgrades are typically not financially viable due to significant connectivity gaps in regional areas and the low-density population rates. Infrastructure and services require to be subsidised to ensure comparative costs to the level and quality of service provided.

While Council agrees with the subsidised options for low-income earners, elderly or healthcare card carriers, we feel that further consideration needs to be given to ensure that the cost is not prohibitive for any user. It is suggested that a tiered scale be investigated, where price is based on usage. Whilst there are significant gaps in usage and availability at current, it is suggested that a baseline be developed once full service is established. This method, alongside the already offered subsidises would ensure that services are accessible at a price that the end user can afford. Council also supports the development of a benchmark in pricing across available services and comparing the cost to international standard and policies to ensure price transparency and accessibility.

Council wishes for the modern Universal Service framework to consider the current rising cost of living that is felt right across Australia, but specifically in regional and rural communities such as the Western Downs Region. It is important for Council to understand how the framework will support all communities during financial hardship and it is recommended that regulation be developed to ensure that price rises are not above and beyond that of the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

While the cost of the connection is an important consideration, Council believes that affordability extends beyond to include device costs, and digital literacy. We believe the Framework should investigate and integrate the investment in programs that provide affordable devices and educate users on cost-effective usage. Digital literacy is an important consideration within low socio-economic and First Nations communities and programs that ensure education is affordable and accessible will continue to ensure these communities are able to access vital services and remain connected to the digital world.

Overall, Council feels there needs to be regular consultation with the end user and industry to ensure that the user experience and affordability are maintained at appropriate levels.
number

Conclusion

Western Downs Regional Council extends its appreciation for the opportunity to respond to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review.

Council would like to be considered for any other further sustainable funding arrangement as this would be highly beneficial for the region mobile phone services and connectivity for our residents. Council would also like the opportunity to provide further insight if required.

Contact Details

Please do not hesitate to contact Nicole Franklin, A/Economic Development Manager via email via email Nicole.Franklin@wdrc.qld.gov.au should you wish to discuss any aspect of this submission.

Appendix

1. Western Downs Council, Economic Development Strategy 2023 – 2028, [economic-development-strategy-document-ver-22.02.23.pdf \(wdrc.qld.gov.au\)](#)
2. Western Downs Regional Council, Corporate Plan 2021 – 2026, [Plans & Publications Western Downs Regional Council \(wdrc.qld.gov.au\)](#)