2021 Regional Telecommunications Review

Submission from Regional Cities Victoria to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

2021

ABOUT REGIONAL CITIES VICTORIA

Regional Cities Victoria (RCV) is a regional leadership group dedicated to building a sustainable Victoria by providing strategic advice, coordination and advocacy to state and federal governments. RCV supports policies which enable Victoria's regional centres to grow and develop by attracting further investment and encouraging the presence of a skilled workforce.

Comprising the Mayors and CEOs of the 10 largest cities in regional Victoria – Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Horsham, Latrobe, Mildura, Shepparton, Wangaratta, Warrnambool and Wodonga - RCV is focused on achieving real change in regional Victoria through policy development and implementation.

RCV is widely recognised as a pre-eminent advocacy organisation for regional Victoria. It is a trusted policy partner for government, working with key ministers and various arms of government including Local Government Victoria; Regional Development Victoria and the Victorian Planning Authority; as well as other bodies such as Rural Councils Victoria and the Municipal Association of Victoria.

As regional hubs, RCV cities support surrounding towns and districts through the provision of education, health, financial, transport and social services, as well as retail, sport and recreation, cultural and tourism amenities and activities.

RCV's vision is for regional prosperity and enhanced liveability through sustainable growth. To realise this, we need to develop and advocate for policies that invest equitably and sustainably in regional cities to support a growing Victoria.

There is a need for strong digital infrastructure to ensure our communities remain deeply connected and our businesses can thrive with the digital economy.

SUBMISSION

Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic
According to the June 2021 quarter Regional Movers Index, there was an 11% rise in the number of people moving from capital cities to regional areas compared with the June 2020 quarter. 27.8% of people who vacated metropolitan Melbourne, settled into regional Victoria.

The shift towards online work was taking place before the pandemic, with 69% of organisations adopting cloud-based work platforms. However, analysis by Microsoft and AlphaBeta showed that nearly 9 in 10 Australian firms adopted new technologies during COVID-19, supporting 3.2 million workers.

Research conducted by the Regional Australia Institute found that the number of Australians working from home in a regional setting doubled during the past 12 months.

The COVID-19 pandemic has cemented the importance of digital connectivity to the economic success of all communities, particularly those regional areas experiencing major growth.

For businesses, the pandemic has provided a significant and immediate challenge to those without an online presence as their revenues collapse or they are unable to trade at all.

Lack of connectivity has also had a social impact on regional communities where people have not been able to stay connected to loved-ones and the isolation has affected their mental health, particularly during Victoria's lockdowns.

Local impact
Under existing demand loads digital infrastructure in Victoria's regions is inadequate and not ready to meet the growing demand.

A large business and major employer based in regional Victoria often chooses to transmit information via the phone network, rather than rely on the stability of the internet connection.

Other regional businesses who unfortunately find themselves in blackspots have been known to rent an office space in an area with good connectivity and use a range of technologies to access information at their primary office, leveraging the speeds at their second site.

The long-term economic outlook for regional Victoria is linked to access to digital platforms. Whether it be digital training, telehealth services or IoT technology in the agriculture sector, regional and rural communities are increasingly reliant on reliable internet connections to be able to participate in the economy.

Regional Cities Victoria welcomes the investment in regional and rural digital infrastructure from all levels of government.

The Federal Government's Mobile Blackspot Program has generated a total investment of more than $875 million, to deliver more than 1,270 new mobile base stations across Australia. But the grant process is competitive.

As more aspects of our daily lives move online and incorporate digital technologies, the access and uptake of these technologies is not equitable. This is an issue that is present across all aspects of society, but it is particularly pronounced in rural and regional areas when compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, one regional school highlighted that while they were able to provide a significant number of students with equipment (laptops), their ability to use their equipment for learning was hindered as they did not have access to the internet.

Digital inclusion is a critical part of ensuring we have liveable, equitable and sustainable communities in the future.

Recommendations
We hope to see the continuation of programs that support business-grade broadband connectivity projects for regional towns. However, some areas in Victoria are too sparsely populated to benefit from these policies.

Regional Cities Victoria urges policymakers to consider regional digital infrastructure as necessary to the provision of an essential utility. As in other areas where privately deployed technologies are relied upon to provide a public utility, such as energy production, setting clear targets about the desired digital connectivity outcomes would help to facilitate private sector investment and investigation of solutions to coverage issues.

Digital connectivity, particularly in areas prone to natural disasters such as fire and floods, should be given priority funding.

At a minimum, Regional Cities Victoria are calling for $50 million in government support to enable regional digital infrastructure investments that are not commercially viable. And we are seeking investment to ensure free Wi-Fi is available in all regional cities and on all regional trains.

Contact
Thank you for receiving this submission. Should you have any queries, or require further information, please contact the Regional Cities Victoria Secretariat on 03 9654 4799 or via email: rcv@cprcomm.com.au