

Mobile Coverage Programme Discussion Paper

Submission Cover Sheet

Submission Information

This cover sheet should be attached to submissions made to the Department of Communications in relation to the Mobile Coverage Programme Discussion Paper.

Contact Details

Name of respondent:	Mr Don Ramsland
Name of organisation:	Walgett Shire Council
Phone:	
Email:	
Website (if applicable):	
Date:	27 February 2014

Confidentiality and privacy

All submissions and comments, or parts thereof, will be treated as non-confidential information unless specifically requested, and acceptable reasons should accompany each request. Email disclaimers will not be considered sufficient confidentiality requests.

Respondents lodging a submission should be aware that submissions (excluding any information agreed to be treated as confidential information) will be made publicly available, including on the Department of Communications' website. Submissions and comments will be subject to freedom of information provisions. Despite a submission being identified as confidential or sensitive, submissions may be disclosed where authorised or required by law, or for the purpose of parliamentary processes.

Do you want all or parts of the submission to be treated as confidential? Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes, identify below which parts of the submission are to be treated as confidential (and provide a reason):

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If the submission contains personal information of any third party individual, indicate on this Submission Cover Sheet if that third party individual has not consented to the publication of his or her personal information:

Submission Instructions

Submissions are to be made by **5:00pm (AEST) Friday 28 February 2014**.

Where possible, submissions should be lodged electronically, preferably in Microsoft Word or other text-based formats via the email address mobilecoverage@communications.gov.au

Alternatively, submissions can be sent to the postal address below (to arrive by the due date):

The Manager
Mobile Coverage Programme
Department of Communications
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2615

All submissions lodged will be acknowledged by the Department of Communications by email (or by letter if no email is provided). Respondents lodging a submission who do not receive acknowledgement of their submission should contact the Department. Submissions which are not acknowledged by the Department as being received may not be considered. Respondents should be aware that emails greater than 10Mb may not be successfully delivered.



Reference: DR:RW:

Your Reference:

Contact:

27 February 2014

The Manager
Mobile Coverage Program
Department of Communications
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2615

Dear Sir,

RE: Submission to the Mobile Coverage Program Discussion Paper

Walgett Shire Council has ongoing concerns regarding the lack of effective mobile phone reception across the whole of the Walgett Shire and welcomes the opportunity to comment on your discussion paper. Walgett Shire is situated in far west NSW and serves an area of approximately 22,000 sq kms. Large areas of the Shire receive little or no mobile phone coverage. Three major state highways traverse the Shire – the Castlereagh Highway (182.72km), the Gwydir Highway (77.6km) and the Kamilaroi Highway (166.2km). This network in particular experiences little or no coverage for most of its length which gives rise to obvious risks to the travelling public.

Walgett Shire is home to a highly mobile population that is mainly engaged in farming and grazing undertakings or associated supporting service industries. Walgett Shire is also experiencing major growth in the tourism industry because of its location on the major highways referred to above. Distance between towns is in the average of 80/100 km. both local residents and travellers often attempt to make use of the time spent travelling by phoning business contacts, family and friends. The introduction of computers, tablets and iPhones in recent years is only adding to the pressure being placed on the existing, substandard broadband system.

Council makes the following suggestions with regards possible ways to improve mobile phone coverage within the shire.

Current Limitations

ASDL2 capacity issues

Whilst there is mobile phone coverage in the towns of Walgett, Lightning Ridge and Collarenebri, there does not appear to be any additional ASDL2 capacity at the local exchanges. Ideally improved infrastructure would provide for a 4G wireless system (4G) to allow for improved broadband and mobile phone reception. This would enable both council and commercial operations the opportunity to handle much greater data downloads.

Under Utilised Towers

The 4G network stops at Dubbo, 283 kms south east of Walgett.

Telstra is the only real provider of mobile phone services within the shire and upgrading to 4G would allow much faster downloads, particularly in areas where the existing signal is weak.

Council's concern in relation to the proposed \$80m Mobile Network Expansion Project, is that as there is only one carrier in our area there would be little benefit in tendering out the provision of towers. It seems any other carrier would be unlikely to bid in this area where they do not have an existing network.

Council believes there are a number of underutilised towers along the existing highway network across the Shire that could be used to greatly expand coverage. If these towers were used to install mobile receptors, it is possible that coverage along the whole highway network would be possible. At present, there is little coverage on the state highway network servicing not only Walgett but also Lightning Ridge and Collarenebri as well.

Increasing coverage across the Walgett Shire would provide added productivity benefits to the property owners and residents in outlying villages including Come By Chance, Grawin, Burren Junction and Rowena. In addition to the obvious safety benefits of an expanded mobile coverage, modern technology would allow a range of situations where equipment that could be monitored remotely could be installed.

Use of technology to improve access and reception levels

The use of up to date technology and improved devices including modern handsets, using patches and high reception aerials etc. could improve the coverage of the existing network, Walgett Shire believes that an information and subsidy system could be developed to promote the use of these devices.

A subsidy scheme would encourage the adoption of new technology and would be a low cost way of improving coverage once an information program increased the knowledge of landholders/residents to the types of things that could be done coverage.

Mobile Black Spots Project

Under this program outlying communities, such as Come By Chance, would be able to put forward locations to be funded for upgrading. Councils including Walgett Shire could submit Expressions of Interest. However, the expectation that Council would commit to a co-contribution is not reasonable as Council's resources are already stretched to breaking point in a bid to provide much needed core services to our community. Our view is that mobile networks are not one of local government's core responsibilities and should be provided by the private sector or higher tiers of government.

The expectation of higher tiers of government that Councils should contribute financially to the provision of mobile phone services is another example of why remote local governments are struggling to remain viable. This is not a local government responsibility and certainly not one that we could afford to be involved with. It should not be dependent on local government to ensure that there are adequate mobile phone services provided across any local government area.

The small populations residing in outlying areas of the Shire precludes these communities being able to provide private funding for any co-contribution but in the interests of non-discrimination this lack of capacity should not be the reason such services are not provided to these areas.

The Assessment Criteria

Council believes that the assessment criteria is biased towards larger population centres, and once again this disadvantages our more remote communities. In determining the value for money to the Commonwealth (criteria 5) – the number of premises covered is a criteria. Many of the potential users in Walgett Shire would be tourists including backpackers – this is not accounted for. The residential premises are few and far between. The value to industry should be taken into account

along with the productivity savings/business benefits from introducing extended coverage but along with the benefits for economic growth these are ignored.

One assessment criteria is *Commitment from more than one MNO*. In remote shires such as Walgett this is unlikely to happen as there is only one MNO currently providing any service. Again this should not result in a disadvantage for our communities.

Also, as mentioned above any requirement in the criteria for accessing co-contributions will disadvantage our communities' chances of having increased mobile phone coverage.

Utilising the NBN network

Again, this is not relevant to the Walgett Shire as there is no NBN infrastructure, leaving the Shire only more disadvantaged.

Recommendations

Having regard to the significant cost of erecting new base stations, Council urges the government to look at alternatives, including using existing towers that are located across the Shire. Co-location of services or using towers that are no longer in use is a cheaper means of providing a service, allowing a greater coverage to be achieved.

In Walgett Shire it is recommended that existing Telstra towers at:

- Berkley Downs, Come By Chance
- Marshmead Land, Walgett

could all be utilised to install new equipment and enable mobile coverage.

In far west NSW it is considered unnecessary to require all new base stations to be able to support at least two MNOs, as it is likely that only one could operate effectively. This requirement only adds additional costs to the projects. It is believed that additional towers should be centrally located to provide the most effective coverage for the entire Shire.

Council strongly believes that smaller communities should be responsible for finding co-contributions in order to be able to have access to mobile phone services.

Council also urges the Federal Government to consider an information and subsidy program, as detailed above, to increase coverage and make better use of the current network. The subsidy system would make it more affordable and the information will assist residents to understand their options and how to increase their ability to access the coverage that already exists.

There are many benefits to be had from improving the mobile network. Council simply wants our local businesses and residents to benefit and have similar access to mobile services as the rest of Australia.

Yours faithfully,



Don Ramsland

General Manager