SUBMISSION TO THE REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW 2021

PREPARED BY

Women's Health Goulburn North East

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We are intersectional in our approach and are proud to stand beside generations of great women whose work has brought us closer to equality for all.

We acknowledge the wisdom, living culture and connection of the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and acknowledge the profound disruption of colonisation and the Stolen Generations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We believe in shared and just cultural transformation that embraces diversity, and these acknowledgements are part of the ethical principles that guide our work and conduct.

Reimagining the economy means radical transformation is necessary. Our submission is grounded in the belief that economic activities should centre care: for ourselves, for each other and for Country. We commit to centring our work and lives around a culture of care for people and land, the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, true listening to and heeding of Indigenous voices, the valuing of First Nations wisdom around how we can connect ourselves with humility, love and compassion to each other and the Earth that nurtures us.

This always was, and always will be Aboriginal land.

WHO WE ARE

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) is a proudly feminist organisation supporting the creation of equal, just and resilient communities in rural and regional Victoria. We believe in shared and just cultural transformation and locate our work within an ecosystem of broad global alliances working across social movements. Gender and climate justice sits at the heart of our work, and the urgency of addressing what have become existential crises is what propels us to extend our visioning beyond reformative tweaks to inadequate existing systems, towards unapologetically bold and truly transformative change.

Our submission draws on the work of women's movements across the globe. Although we are grappling with the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic within our communities, we continue to work in solidarity to co-create a vision for the future in which the digital economy exists not merely to generate incomes and enable the accrual of personal wealth, but to ensure the care of people and the planet and collective liberation, through preventative health and wellbeing, restorative justice and First Nations self-determination.

women's health
goulburn north east
challenging inequity, embracing diversity

SUMMARY STATEMENT

Women's Health Goulburn North East welcomes this opportunity to provide feedback to the Australian Government's Regional Telecommunications Review 2021. We are supportive of the commitment to improving digital equity and inclusion. We see commonalities between our vision and the role of the review panel in setting a long-term forward agenda to maximise equitable outcomes for regional and rural communities. We look forward to working together to achieve these goals across our region and it is in this spirit of collaboration that we make this submission.

As an overarching thought, we hope that in finalising and implementing ongoing telecommunications policy reforms, the Review will pay close attention to how its policies, plans and projects in this area might be as inclusive, accessible and culturally safe as possible, providing opportunities for all people, but especially women, Indigenous community members, LGBTIQA+ people and people living with disability, to help shape what a digitally inclusive, equitable and safe future actually looks like. This is of particular importance in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted and deepened existing inequalities in Australia, including digital inequality and exclusion.

CONTEXT FOR OUR SUBMISSION

Digital inclusion is a critical challenge in Australia because digital disadvantage intersects with other forms of social and economic exclusion, including gender inequality.

According to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), which measures levels of digital inclusion across the Australian population, women score lower than men across all age categories. The Index, which monitors levels of digital inclusion across three key domains – access, affordability, and digital ability – highlights the gendered nature of the digital divide, underscoring the critical importance of equitable policy solutions.

Women have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with higher unemployment rates, poorer mental health outcomes, less access to vital supports like JobKeeper, and increased caring responsibilities and unpaid domestic labour. In addition, the rapid transformation of Australia's digital economy in response to the pandemic exacerbates the digital divide, with women at greater risk of exclusion from vital online services.

However, the impacts of COVID-19 have also enabled our communities to recognise services and industries that are truly 'essential' to liveability. These foundational services – healthcare, food production, education, housing, transportation – are the industries whose breakdown has the gravest impact upon rural and regional people's resilience and their ability to live and connect, particularly during times of disaster. This is because these sectors are directly connected to the social determinants of health – the living and working conditions that form people's social environment.

At Women's Health Goulburn North East, we're keenly aware of the intersections between digital inclusion, gender inequality, social wellbeing and community resilience in the face of disaster. We present this submission in the spirit of establishing strong, resilient localised digital economies built upon the principles of care, equality and wellbeing.

With the COVID-19 pandemic prompting a rapid transformation of Australia's digital economy and increasing the digital divide, we believe a rights-based, social justice approach to telecommunications policy is the only way to secure digital inclusion for all Australians. **Of the <u>well-researched and documented barriers to digital inclusion</u>, we encourage the Review to prioritise the following:**

01. ACCESS

Equitable access to a fast and reliable internet connection is essential for digital inclusion. However, research indicates that inequalities exist in internet access according to age, income and educational attainment, further exacerbating existing social inequality across Australia.

02. AFFORDABILITY

Affordable, high-quality broadband communications is a key component of Australia's telecommunications policy. However, by international standards, Australia has a high 'internet cost' which is likely to be amplified by the COVID-19 economic slowdown.

03. DIGITAL LITERACY

According to the Inclusive Internet Index, Australia scores 11th for Readiness, after Austria and Japan. Readiness data examines the capacity to access the internet, including skills, cultural acceptance and supporting policy. Improving this score is central to digital literacy and inclusion.

We would also like to encourage the Review to consider Helen Haines MP's <u>Regional Development Issue Paper</u>, which includes commitments to build new mobile phone towers to close out black spots in regional communities and ensure universal access to affordable and quality NBN.

CHANGING DEMAND

Question 2: What changes in demand, barriers or challenges need to be addressed when it comes to telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia?

As technology has advanced, many Australians have embraced new telecommunication services and integrated the full functionality of these emerging technologies into their lives. However, equitable access to and engagement with the digital economy remains out of reach for many people. Digital inclusion refers to the activities and services necessary to ensure that all people and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use telecommunication services. From a social justice perspective, digital inclusion must include targeted strategies to 'reduce and eliminate historical, institutional and structural barriers' to technology use and access.

However, intersecting social and economic factors continue to prevent meaningful digital inclusion across Australia. In particular, women, older Australians, low-income families, people with disabilities, Indigenous Australians, and culturally and linguistically diverse migrants continue to face a range of barriers and challenges that prevent digital inclusion. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index's (ADII) 2020 report, Measuring Australia's Digital Divide, highlights a range of intersecting barriers to online participation and outlines the lasting effects of digital exclusion on underserved communities.

According to the ADII, there's a substantial digital divide between Australians living in rural and urban areas. In 2020, capital cities recorded a digital inclusion score 7.6 points higher than in rural areas (65.0 vs 57.4). Additionally, the latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show there are still more than 2.5 million Australians who are not online. Government policy to date has focused on making telecommunications widely accessible across Australia's vast landmass and dispersed population. Still, failure to consider equity of access across economic, social, and spatial lines means many people are left behind.

SERVICE RELIABILITY

Question 4: How do service reliability issues impact on regional communities and businesses? How do outages, including in natural disasters, impact on communities and businesses?

Australians have a 1 in 6 estimated lifetime exposure to natural disasters, with climate change influencing weather patterns and accelerating extreme weather events (Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience, 2021). In particular, bushfire weather conditions are projected to increase in frequency and severity in the coming years, with Australia's eastern states expected to experience more prolonged and more severe fire seasons Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience, 2021). Victoria is one of the three most fire-prone areas in the world.

The 2009 Black Saturday fires are often called 'the worst natural disaster in Australian history' and resulted in the greatest loss of life from a bushfire since settlement, with 173 deaths. A further 414 people were injured, and 2029 houses were destroyed. Conducted over two years following the Black Saturday fires, qualitative research from Gender and Disaster Australia highlights the critical role of telecommunications in regional communities both during and after a disaster. According to Gender and Disaster Australia's *The Way He Tells It* research report, mobile phones were essential for communication when landlines were impacted or the power was out with many women using mobile devices to warn of impending threats, pass on safety advice, and check on each others' wellbeing. However, the lack of reliable mobile phone services in regional and rural communities left many people without a vital communication channel.

"One of my main concerns was to try and contact our son... we had to drive until we got the signal on the mobile because that was the only communication"

- Kate
The Way He Tells It research participant

"You can't get onto 000 or anyone, and we lost our towers so we lost our phone. Over the next few hours, we could get texts through but that was about it"

- Sally
The Way He Tells It research participant

In addition to critical communication channels for local residents, service reliability issues and non-integrated radio systems put first responders at increased risk. Metropolitan Police and emergency service vehicles operating on digital radio communications could not communicate with the analog systems used by regional and rural services. Despite sustained efforts to improve regional telecommunications reliability in the decade since the Black Saturday fires, regional telecommunications were again impacted during the devastating 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires.

Women's Health Goulburn North East attending a series of network meetings and community feedback forums in the 12 months following the fires, further highlighting telecommunications challenges for communities and first responders on the ground in regional and rural communities. In particular, with the fire moving between New South Wales and Victoria, emergency management services expressed frustration at the lack of coordinated and reliable telecommunications for cross-border operations.

Three key issues emerged in the consultations:

- There were **no protocols in place** for first responders on the ground to communicate with their counterparts in other States.
- Each state used **different radio frequencies** to communicate within their teams, so none of the teams on opposite borders could listen to each other's communications.
- There were **significant communications blackspots** in Victoria that were both there originally and were also created by towers being destroyed. The CFA was unable to communicate their positions or other information with units just up the road from each other.

Question 5: How might such impacts be addressed to ensure greater reliability?

We support the Emergency Management Operational Communications Program to develop a single, integrated communications system, and we urge the Federal Government to maintain sustained funding for this vital transition. However, we advocate for timelines to be brought forward to address the immediate risk to regional communities as the 2021-2022 fire season approaches. In addition, long term public funding for open access mobile network expansion in rural and regional Australia would ensure equitable connectivity for regional and rural communities.

Additionally, we call for immediate investment in alternative telecommunications solutions for regional and rural communities at risk of disaster. According to research, the distribution of smart renewable energy micro-grid systems can mitigate the impacts of service disruptions and facilitate rapid service restoration, aiding community disaster resilience and providing alternative opportunities for regional economic development. Additionally, the installation of emergency-use public phones and mobile lending services has been trialed by the NTT Group in Japan. This approach could provide viable additional telecommunications support in regional Australian communities impacted by disasters and could be rolled out alongside Telstra's campaign to make payphone calls free around Australia.

COVID-19

Question 6: How did the use of digital services change for regional consumers and businesses during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? What insights for future service delivery does this provide?

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the rapid digital transformation of essential government, economic, social, and cultural services in response to public health orders and extended lockdowns. The digitisation of Australia's service economy – including for work, health, education and access to government services – has sped up digital adoption by several years. Digital transformation has long been a policy objective of the Australian government. Still, the speed at which this has occurred is exacerbating the digital divide and creates uneven outcomes for communities across the country.

As with all things, there is a distinct gendered element to digital exclusion in Australia. Across the country, women are less digitally included than men, reflective of the global trend. Young Australian women were hardest hit by COVID-19 related job losses, representing one-third of all job losses in women's employment. Additionally, <u>low levels of digital literacy present a significant barrier for women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background</u>s access to jobs, healthcare and essential government services. For all Australian women, the link between online safety and digital inclusion is critical. The Australian eSafey Commission reports that <u>70% of people reporting image-based online abuse are women</u>.

With digital exclusion intersecting with a range of other social and economic factors, it is critical to approach future telecommunications policy through a social justice lens. Put simply, a social justice approach to telecommunications includes ensuring all people have equitable access to and can benefit from the digital economy. The Good Foundation Australia has published a brilliant, comprehensive report titled <u>Digital Nation Australia</u>, which we strongly endorse.

Although more research is required to fully understand the full impact of COVID-19 on the digital divide, it is clear that affordable digital access and digital skills are critical to fully participate in Australian life. As the OECD highlights, bridging the digital divide and prioritising equitable digital transformation is required to ensure all people benefit equally from the digital economy and are resilient for the post-COVID-19 future. Furthermore, the goal of delivering equitable digital transformation aligns with Australia's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Question 9: What role could innovation, including new models, alternative investors or new ways of doing business play to encourage investment in regional telecommunications infrastructure?

In a 2018 submission to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee, the Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia made a number of innovative recommendations for new models of telecommunications equity and alternative investment options. Women's Health Goulburn North East endorses this well-researched, community-led submission and encourages the 2021 review team to revisit these recommendations. In particular, we support the following three key recommendations highlighted on the following page.

01. REGIONAL TECH HUB

Develop and fund an independent Regional Tech Hub to support, advise and provide relevant information to regional consummers. This initiatve would be funded by levy funding from existing telecommunications providers and be structured on a similar basis to the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network.

02. DIGITAL LITERACY PROGRAM

Roll out a funded digital literacy program in regional areas, focusing on supporting consumers to get online and stay connected. This program should work towards bridging the digital divide in regional Australia and promote a safe, equitable and inclusive digital economy.

03. CENTRE FOR DIGITAL INNOVATION

Develop a Centre for Digital Innovation that can research and educate on digital tools and advancements in regional Australia. This program should work towards bridging the digital divide in regional Australia and promote a safe, equitable and inclusive digital economy.

For further information, please contact:

Policy and Advocacy Officer, WHGNE
whealth@whealth.com.au
03 5722 3009

women's
health
goulburn north east

challenging inequity, embracing diversity