
Telecommunications Information Sheet

Developed by Wheatbelt Development Commission

BACKGROUND:

In 2010, WDC undertook a process of infrastructure planning with Wheatbelt local governments. This process identified the key developmental issues for the Wheatbelt, one of which was telecommunications.

Following some preliminary work to identify the priority areas WDC Project Officer, Rebecca Kelly is now working with the Department of Commerce, the Federal Department of Broadband, Communication and the Digital Economy, telecommunications providers and LGAs to identify telecommunications gaps and projects to rectify issues. This will result in a number of business cases to encourage and lever further investment in telecommunications infrastructure throughout the Wheatbelt. Initially the focus will be on mobile phone coverage and the upcoming impacts of the introduction of digital television. The WDC is also keen to expand the access to ADSL2+, especially in those areas of the region that could be waiting for many years for potential NBN services.

Digital Television

A number of Wheatbelt communities own and operate retransmission facilities for analog television. It does not appear that funds will be available to build and operate digital retransmission facilities. Current information highlights that there will be subsidies for individual households to purchase and install satellite digital services. However, it is understood that the subsidy is only available for one television per premise. The switch to digital television will therefore present a substantial cost for those with multiple televisions, especially hotels and motels.

Mobile Phones

While mobile phone coverage in this region has improved, there are still areas without coverage. The WDC will encourage a collaborative approach to “filling the gaps”. This will involve partnering between Local Governments and service providers to identify funding shortfalls for these additional towers and developing workable arrangements between State, Federal and Local funding sources, together with input from the service providers, to achieve the desired result of complete regional coverage.

Broadband Services

There is a great deal of variation in access to broadband services across the region, from Regional Centres with ADSL, ADSL2+ and wireless through to only satellite services that are proving to be unsatisfactory.

While it is understood that the NBN rollout is underway in other areas of Australia, it will be many years before it arrives in parts of the Wheatbelt, and services in many of these areas are likely to be wireless or satellite.

CURRENT SITUATION/ISSUES:

It is difficult for the WDC and the regions local governments to plan for the introduction of new telecommunication services, mainly due to a lack of information on current and planned infrastructure. The proposed subsidies for digital television also present a challenge.

GOVERNMENT'S POSITION/COMMITMENT

Regional Mobile Communications Project (RMCP)

In September 2010 the State Government announced \$120million to deliver improved mobile telephone and emergency service coverage to regional Western Australia. \$40million was allocated to the Regional Mobile Communications Project (RMCP) and \$80million to the Community Safety Network Project (CSNP). The Department of Commerce tender for supply of infrastructure under the RMCP was advertised in March 2011. Once a preferred supplier is appointed and the location of towers funded by this program is finalised the WDC will work to secure additional required coverage for the region. This will improve coverage on some of the Wheatbelt's highways.

Optus has recently erected towers in the Shires of Chittering, Victoria Plains and Moora and the WDC understands they are dealing directly with local governments to develop these projects. This needs to be monitored, given that the vast majority of this region is covered by Telstra.

It is important that quality information is made available (especially from Telstra as the company with the majority coverage in this region) on where the mobile gaps are, what plans are in place to "fill the gaps" and what partnership strategies might be acceptable to fast track the introduction of new towers in strategic locations.

Broadband

NBN is an Australian Government initiative under the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy. This wholesale-only, open access high speed broadband network is planned to deliver high-speed broadband across Australia.

NBN, the largest infrastructure project undertaken in Australia will involve the laying of fibre optic cabling to 93 per cent of homes, schools and businesses Australia wide

to provide broadband speeds of up to 100 megabits per second (Mbps), or up to 100 times faster than currently experienced.

However, this 93 percentage is Australia wide. We expect that Western Australia will make up a large portion of the 7% that does not receive fibre to premise. This means that many of our regional areas will be serviced via a combination of next-generation high speed wireless and satellite technologies delivering speeds of approximately 12 Mbps in comparison. The anecdotal history with satellite broadband delivery has not built confidence that this is a solution to bandwidth in the long term. Currently, satellite technologies are impacted significantly by weather conditions, particularly heat and cloud.

It is difficult, at this stage, to determine how this region will be serviced. It is expected that more information will be available as the NBN proponents and Telstra finalise their negotiations, predicted to be later this year.

In the meantime it is important that we gain quality information on the access by communities to ADSL2+. This has been raised as an impediment to business development and access to health and education services in a number of communities. It is suspected that there are a number of Wheatbelt communities that could receive this service simply with switching upgrades. Combined funding may assist the service provider to justify such upgrades.

The Wheatbelt Development Commission argues that the following unique circumstances of our region warrant attention in the planning for NBN service delivery:

- The unique disbursement of our population of 75,000 over 110 communities;
- The nature of this disbursement relying increasingly on technology to deliver essential services such as health and education;
- The industry/business profile of our region being dominated by micro and small business (many of them being home based), and the ability of these businesses to remain globally competitive in a knowledge economy without world class technology.

The Wheatbelt Development Commission and Regional Development Australia – Wheatbelt will work in partnership to develop of Wheatbelt Digital Economy Strategy, however, our work is severely hampered by lack of information in relation to existing infrastructure (both optic fibre locations and transmission/reticulation capacity). An audit of existing infrastructure will create significant efficiencies in the design of an appropriate NBN infrastructure for the Wheatbelt region.

Digital Television

It does not appear that the subsidies for the delivery of digital television take into account the full set of regional needs. It is currently difficult to fully determine

the negative impacts on Local Governments re-transmission sites and organisations, such as motels with multiple TV's. It is important that the cost of TV services in

regional areas does not become another cost impediment to living and doing business in the bush. *Note: A separate Digital Television Fact Sheet developed by the Wheatbelt Development Commission is available for further information on digital television.*

RECOMMENDATION

In order to address the above issues possible solutions are listed below

Disclosure of Information

It is important that quality information is available for groups such as the WDC to assist with infrastructure planning and solution development. All service provider and government information needs to be mapped for the Wheatbelt region. This needs to clearly mark *existing and planned* infrastructure inclusive of:

1. Fibre

- Information is required on what fibre currently exists, and which parts of that fibre can be used for NBN
- As more information becomes available through NBN and Telstra negotiations with regard to fibre rollout, such information needs be made available to planning and regional development organizations such as the WDC.

2. Broadband

- Which exchanges can easily be converted to ADSL and ADSL2+

3. Mobile Phone Coverage

- Location of existing mobile phone towers and coverage
- Identified gaps, referencing and naming specific locations/towns
- Timeline plans for mobile infrastructure upgrades
- Potential partnership based solutions.

4. Digital Television Subsidy

The impact of the introduction of digital television on small local communities with existing re-transmission sites needs to be analysed. Such analysis should include consultation at the local level, maybe through Regional Development Australia – Wheatbelt.

Following this analysis there should be reconsideration of the subsidy packages to minimise the negative impact on regional residents. For example, it may be more viable to amalgamate the funds allocated for each individual private residential household to support a mass distribution method.