



Mr Brian Mitchell MP
Chair,
Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts,
Inquiry into co-investment in multi-carrier regional mobile infrastructure

PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Submission from Helen Haines MP on behalf of Indi Telecommunications Advisory Group

Dear Mr Mitchell,

I am pleased to make the following brief submission to the Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts on behalf of the Indi Telecommunications Advisory Group (ITAG). This submission is an opportunity to speak to the Inquiry on behalf of the people living, working and visiting Northeast Victoria and sharing their experiences, current concerns and potential solutions.

In considering the Terms of Reference, I have given particular consideration to point 2 - focusing on community views on single carrier vs multi-carrier outcomes. It is important to note that there have been some barriers to providing a fully informed submission with regards to the information available and the availability of all the LGA representatives to provide specific contributions before the deadline.

Currently, many of the LGAs in my electorate are experiencing extreme flooding and working on cleaning up. Unfortunately, but understandably, they have been distracted with this pressing duty and were not available to provide a specific contribution. Mr Derek Beautyman of Mansfield Shire Council, however, did find some time to provide information and I have included it below – it is reflective of many reports I have received since becoming the Member for Indi. The remainder of the information provided comes from previous and ongoing feedback received in my electorate office from individual constituents, local business owners and visitors to the region.

About the Electorate of Indi

The electorate of Indi covers 29,000 square km and the nine local government areas (LGA) of Alpine Shire Council, Benalla Rural City Council, Indigo Shire Council, Mansfield Shire Council, Murrindindi Shire Council, Strathbogie Shire Council, Towong Shire, Rural City of Wangaratta Shire Council and City of Wodonga. The electorate of Indi includes the Alpine resorts of Falls Creek, Mt Hotham, Dinner Plain, Mt Buller and Lake Mountain. Each LGA is characterised by its own unique and diverse topography, land use, populations and economic activity. Tourism, agriculture, forestry, viticulture, timber production and processing, manufacturing, health and social services and countless small businesses make up the lifeblood of Indi's communities and economy. These varying communities which include regional cities as well as remote mountains and valleys have diverse telecommunication needs and experience an array of telecommunication challenges when undertaking business, emergency management, travel, health care and education.

Dr Helen Haines MP

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Indi Telecommunications Advisory Group (ITAG)

Indi Telecommunications Advisory Group (ITAG) is steered by Independent Federal Member for Indi Dr Helen Haines MP. It is a consultative committee comprising the electorate's local governments, community members and regional stakeholders with the purpose of developing community-led responses to telecommunication challenges experienced in our electorate. Since the establishment of ITAG in 2013 my electorate has secured 51 new mobile towers. What is difficult to establish is how many of these are multicarrier.

The Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, and the Arts website, is cumbersome and difficult to decipher for the layman, and information on tower locations in Indi and whether they are single carrier or multi-carrier appears to be non-existent, or at least, buried in technical details and jargon that it proved difficult to locate simply and quickly. This lack of ready information has influenced and prevented a more comprehensive collection of views on the question of single-carrier vs multi-carrier advantages. Having said that, ITAG does have sufficient information and knowledge regarding the experiences and shortfalls to a single-carrier location, and this has been included in this submission.

Report on community views on single carrier vs multi-carrier outcomes

Congestion, slow speeds and dropouts are common complaints to my office, but so too is the lack of multi-carrier towers which cause angst and frustration to residents and visitors to the region. Considerable stretches of no service where the individual is with a provider that is not serviced in the area impacts negatively on the visitor experience and consequently, on the long-term destination brand credentials of North East Victoria.

This has significant ramifications to the livelihood, sustainability and safety of our population and the high number of visitors to our region every year. Staying connected across vast distances is critical to the social and economic success of modern regional communities, allowing businesses to trade and communities to look after each other, especially in an emergency. The impact of devastating bushfires and other natural disasters is made worse if local telecommunications infrastructure is not equipped to communicate with everybody in a crisis. This is particularly critical when emergency services are attempting to communicate an evacuation order or bushfire alert. For example, transient visitor populations who camp in isolated and difficult to reach locations are particularly vulnerable without mobile service, or no access to a service because their provider is not available.

The Mansfield Shire provided the following comments:

Mansfield Shire has been blessed with a recent announcement of increased digital infrastructure within our Shire. We have a growing number of visitors in all seasons are heartened by the commitments to our community.

Visitation is largely from metropolitan Melbourne and these visitors bring a number of telecommunications account variations.

In my experience as a local real estate agent since 2005, I would venture that 2 in 5 people visiting our area would enquire why their mobile phones would not work here. In some instances it simply led to people to give up and invest in areas that had better reception or at least their service provider.

During follow up calls with potential buyers, we would gain regular feedback on issues like mobile phone reception and internet coverage or availability.

I have now been in Local Government (Mansfield Shire Council) for 3 years and the rate of enquiry is similar in this role of Economic Development Officer. We receive regular enquiry about why telecommunications are so poor or non-existent within sections of the shire.

There are topographical reasons and also a very low number of providers, generally speaking, outside of the metropolitan area, we understand that there are basically two providers in Telstra and Optus who own and operate the infrastructure here.

We believe that the advantages in opening up the use of infrastructure to a wider number of providers are many.

Our understanding is that commercial advantages are included in the multi user model, where sharing of spectrum bandwidth between providers as a component of a commercial arrangement might be included in the sharing of infrastructure.

Recent information surrounding announcements for 5G activation and new mobile towers for the Mansfield Shire (and Mt Buller) revealed that the benefits of activation of 5G on reducing 4G loads would provide benefits in signal strength/ availability throughout the further reaches / remote areas of the Shire – where 5G may not extend. That this coupled with potential sharing of bandwidth/spectrum within a commercial infrastructure arrangement between providers would also provide advantage in making the signal more robust.

The benefit to the community during the transitional periods where 3G is removed, 5G is further activated and 4G becomes the balancer in marginal telecommunications regions, if well managed, should provide a more robust service for users of current bandwidth.

Shared infrastructure should create a broader choice of service providers in regional areas, and better infrastructure maintenance through commercial agreements requiring assurances that ensure consistency of service amongst the end users.

- Derek Beautyman, Economic Development Officer, Mansfield Shire Council

This view and experience is supported in every other LGA in my electorate, with many complaints to my office particularly from Optus and Vodafone customers who are unable to get service even though they report they are located within meters of a tower. Consumers unsurprisingly are not aware that mobile phone base stations may not carry their telecommunication company signal. Visitors throughout the region too have expressed their frustration at not being able to access services, all because they are with the *wrong* provider.

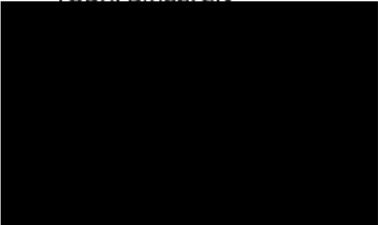
Given these identified issues, I welcome a review of the services available. Regional communities often pay significant premiums to purchase reliable, up to date products, only to be restricted to one or two mediocre options.

Recommendation

It is a unanimous ITAG desire for the Committee to recommend innovative and effective alternative connectivity solutions as soon as possible to complement traditional (and often out-dated) options. This could include a multi-carrier compulsory agreement for regional and rural Australia. Choice is paramount to the customer experience, and anything less adds to the perception that we are receiving a sub-standard and inferior product.

I wish the committee success in their deliberations.

Yours Sincerely


Dr Helen Haines MP
Independent Federal Member for Indi