

7 June 2024

Mr Tas Larnach Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Larnach

Inquiry into the shutdown of the 3G mobile network and telecommunications services accessibility

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) represents the 537 local governments across Australia. Among these councils are a considerable number that are outside of metropolitan areas or urban centres and are faced with the challenges of living further away from key infrastructure, economic opportunities, and in some cases reliable mobile and digital connectivity.

Finding number two of the 2021 Hartsuyker Regional Telecommunications Review found that *“Local councils and other regional stakeholders are increasingly expected to facilitate telecommunications service delivery, but are not appropriately resourced to identify connectivity needs and support the deployment of suitable solutions.”* (Regional Telecommunications Independent Review., 2021). It is with this in mind that we urge the committee to recommend consultation with Local Government Authorities (LGA) to minimise impact as much as possible in the planned 3G network shut down on 30 June 2024.

If efforts to communicate with regional customers have not yet succeeded, then it is likely that when the shutdown happens these customers will look for answers through their local council, and especially when they find that they can't make calls to Mobile Network Operators. Working with councils before the shut off will mean that information and resources will be where they are needed.

Regional communities and local governments are more likely to experience “Mobile Black Spots”, and connectivity challenges, often having had to use historically unreliable internet service providers such as SkyMuster to access the internet. These issues are exacerbated by the reality of having to accept that mobile coverage will not likely ever extend to some regions while the mobile phone carriers are increasingly unwilling to build infrastructure that will not have any sort of reasonable return on investment in the short or medium term.

In these regions 3G signals are the only signals that are connecting them to the mobile network. With limited connectivity, there is often no real need to upgrade a handset, or the limited 3G coverage has simply been accepted as the best that will be available and community members have simply stopped seeking new or upgraded handsets or EFTPOS machines as a form of acceptance of the ongoing situations they are in.

Even in the event of mobile infrastructure upgrades, some community members may simply be unaware that they have increased access to faster and stronger signals.

With the shutdown of the 3G network imminent, regional communities need to be made aware that in many areas the 3G signal will be rolled up into increasing the signal and distance that 4G and 5G will be able to cover, but will render older handsets and machines that are not VoLTE-capable devices obsolete, affecting their ability to access emergency services or even send SMS. We strongly encourage the Commonwealth Government to undertake a targeted education campaign to those communities which will be most vulnerable after the 3G shutdown and who will not have upgraded to newer handsets.

Other communities do not yet have 4G coverage – and as a result should not have the 3G signal cut off until they are able to be offered an alternative through new infrastructure of alternative technology. As the Hartsuyker Review found *“Predictive coverage maps and other public information do not accurately reflect on-the-ground telecommunications experience. There is significant misinformation about the availability of telecommunications services.”* (Regional Telecommunications Independent Review., 2021). Without reliable coverage maps available to give accurate identification of where coverage will be affected, a guarantee is needed from the Mobile Network Operators (MNO) that anyone who currently has coverage on a 3G network will be able to access a mobile signal after the shut down – albeit in 4G or 5G in the same location.

Consumers have made their choices in investment in mobile phones and other products offered by the MNO based on the signals available in their homes, in their farms, in local bush land and on their travel in surrounding areas. Generally, these decisions have been made with the assumption that coverage will only get better with time and not worse. Without the bare minimum of coverage there are potentially life-threatening consequences of rural and remote community members unable to access emergency services, report natural disasters and other events, or even be in contact when in isolated conditions.

Mobile Network Operators should have data on the regions which will be most impacted by the 3G shutdown and where residents have not upgraded their handsets, for the reasons mentioned above. The education campaign should be targeted at these regions.

The 2021 Hartsuyker Review stated *“Participants to the Review have also raised concerns around the closure of the Telstra 3G network by 2024. This includes a perception amongst some consumers that the deployment of 4G or 5G networks to replace the 3G network may lead to reduced coverage outcomes in regional areas...”* (Regional Telecommunications Independent Review., 2021).

Regional and remote local governments can also assist communities during this time of transition through initiatives such as mobile phone recycling schemes. Information on these programs can also be shared with Telstra during this period, or schemes can be sponsored in areas where the switch off is likely to cause the most disruption.

ALGA would urge the committee to recommend that MNOs to work with local governments to identify how many active 3G handsets and devices there are in regions, and how many community members may

Regional Telecommunications Independent Review. (2021). *A step change in demand*. Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved from <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021-rtirc-report-a-step-change-in-demand.pdf>

potentially be impacted by the upcoming shutdown, to inform a targeted Commonwealth education campaign.

If you require further information, please contact Simon Booth on _____ or via email

Sincerely

Linda Scott
President, ALGA

Regional Telecommunications Independent Review. (2021). *A step change in demand*. Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved from <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021-rtirc-report-a-step-change-in-demand.pdf>