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## TASMANIA

2024 Regional Telecommunications Review

July 29th

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Regional Development Australia, Tasmania, is pleased to present this submission for the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review, highlighting the significant achievements and ongoing needs of Tasmania in network connectivity. We have seen significant benefits from improvements to telecommunication services in regional, rural and remote Tasmania, however, there remains a notable digital gap between Australia's urban centres and regional Tasmania.

Yet, continual improvements in network connectivity remain crucial for our community's development and prosperity. Enhanced network connectivity is vital for economic growth, social welfare, safety, and access to emergency services in Tasmania. We have broken down our findings into seven key areas of insight. These are an overview and are not exhaustive of the information provided in this submission.

### Success of the Mobile Black Spot Program

The Mobile Black Spot Program has been a commendable initiative, delivering essential mobile coverage to many previously underserved areas. In Tasmania, the program has already facilitated sizeable improvements in connectivity, (see the *Tasmanian Black Spot Program 2024-25*) enhancing the daily lives of residents and visitors alike. However, as our reliance on digital infrastructure continues to grow, we must build on this success to drive further enhancements in network connectivity. There are still large areas with no network access, with many of those areas being situated on high-traffic transport corridors between our regional centres; areas such as the Midland Highway corridor through central Tasmania have reported multiple black spot areas across varying providers.

### Collaboration and Co-investment for Future Focus

An example of positive impact that we have seen is when partnership and collaboration occurred across all three tiers of government to co-invest and deliver valuable infrastructure to King Island. The King Island Project is supported by a \$9.8 million investment jointly co-funded by Telstra, King Island Council, the Tasmanian Government, and the Federal Government as part of the Regional Connectivity Program to future-proof connectivity across all regional areas.

### Economic Growth and Liveability

## Small to Medium Businesses:

At the end of the 2022-23 financial year, there were 43,415 businesses in Tasmania, of which 41,971 (or 97 percent) are recognised as small businesses (less than 20 employees).<sup>1</sup> This was 637 more small businesses than the previous year. As a continual growth industry, the role that network connectivity can play in that trajectory is substantial.

Enhanced mobile data and reliable internet services are fundamental for the region's economic growth. Small and medium businesses increasingly rely on digital platforms for marketing, operations, and communications, and we will only see this need increase over time. With Tasmania embracing a culture of innovation and fostering technological advancement, Tasmania's ICT sector is booming and sits at the heart of our economy, from small business through to large industry such as mining and manufacturing to service delivery.

## Regional Industry Growth:

Larger and remote industries in Tasmania, such as mining and agriculture, are experiencing a period of growth and are pivotal to the regional economy. Due to their remote and isolated locations, along with the need for instant information to support productivity and logistics, these businesses would greatly benefit from improved connectivity. This is particularly important for proposed workers' accommodation, emphasising the need for family-appropriate housing equipped with dependable connectivity to allow access to healthcare and education for residents.

Advances in the agricultural sector are increasingly reliant on digital device connection, new technologies such as virtual fencing will rely on effective digital connection to enable its use as well as the mandatory electronic identification devices (eID) for sheep and goats being implemented in Tasmania from January 1, 2025.

### Attracting Young Professionals and Families:

Improved infrastructure is vital not only for business growth but also for attracting and retaining young professionals and families. Enhanced connectivity will boost liveability, making Tasmania a desirable destination for both residents and tourists. The professional landscape has adjusted dramatically in a post-COVID world and the number of employed people in Tasmania increased by 38,156 between 2016 and 2021 with recorded 10,195 people working from home.<sup>2</sup>

When we look at the West Coast Council area that has a low level of digital connectivity,<sup>3</sup> we see that only 4.4% of people worked at home whereas in Hobart almost 1 in 10 people reported to have worked from home.

## Education and Community Welfare

### Educational Institutions:

Schools and higher education facilities, such as the Study Hub in Zeehan, King Island and Smithton require robust internet access to offer a wide range of resources and learning opportunities. Connectivity ensures students can engage with contemporary educational tools, access online resources, and participate in remote learning, thereby enhancing educational standards for the state. According to a 2024 study 1 in 5 Tasmanians indicated they are likely to undertake further study in the next 4 years<sup>4</sup> however, cost of living pressure and their digital access is impacting the ability to do so. Students wanting to attain a higher education degree or diploma are hindered by the increased cost of living and the affordability of telecommunication connection.

### Healthcare and Transport Services:

Improved connectivity facilitates better healthcare and transport services. These sectors can grow and adopt advanced technologies, ensuring isolated communities have access to essential services locally without needing extensive travel or reliance on temporary healthcare access. Better connectivity will enable improved access to telehealth that can in turn relieve the pressures of already overloaded service providers in Tasmania's regional areas.

## Renewable Energy Integration

### Support for Renewable Energy Industries:

As the region develops its renewable energy industries, dependable connectivity will support the integration and management of these technologies. Reliable infrastructure is crucial for monitoring and optimising renewable energy systems, which depend increasingly on real-time data and remote management capabilities. As a growing and sustainable industry within the Tasmanian economy it is important that the digital infrastructure can support its growth.

## Safety and Emergency Services

### Emergency Services:

Enhanced network connectivity is critical for the safety and future sustainability of the regional and isolated community. Reliable communication networks are essential for emergency services to respond promptly and effectively, ensuring community safety. With the current connectivity issues facing Tasmanians in both recorded black-spot areas and isolated communities; the emergency access and response time becomes even higher.

## Digital Literacy and Accessibility

### Digital Exclusion:

Broadly defined, digital exclusion is where a section of the population has continuing unequal access and capacity to use digital technologies that are essential to fully participate in society. For a prosperous and connected Tasmania, collaborating and thriving in a technology-enabled world will enable improved digital literacy levels organically.

Accessibility is a fundamental aspect of digital service delivery, as outlined in Criterion 9 of the Digital Transformation Agency's Digital Service Standard. Ensuring that digital services are accessible to all users, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, is essential for fostering an inclusive community. In Tasmania, improved network connectivity must go hand-in-hand with accessible digital services to guarantee that everyone, including individuals with disabilities, elderly residents, and those with limited digital literacy, can effectively engage with online resources and services. This includes implementing user-friendly designs, providing assistive technologies, and ensuring that digital content meets accessibility standards. By prioritising accessibility, we can ensure equitable access to vital information, services, and opportunities, thereby enhancing the overall quality of life and fostering a more inclusive and supportive community.

Understanding the economic and accessibility pressures facing Tasmania's diverse regional placement is crucial. Tasmanians also face the barriers of affordability with 14.6% proportion of Tasmanians recorded as low-income persons (those earning less than \$500 per week).<sup>5</sup>

According to the latest Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) data released in 2023, 9.4% of the Australian population remains highly excluded, registering an index score of 45 or below. This is down from 10.6% in 2021. The most digitally excluded Australians are most likely to be First Nations Australians, those who have a disability, live in public housing, have not completed secondary school or are over 75 years of age.

## Conclusion

Improving network connectivity is a strategic investment that will support Tasmania's economic diversification, enhance the quality of life for its residents, and pave the way for a more sustainable and prosperous future. Enhanced connectivity will drive economic growth for small and medium businesses, support the development of key industries like mining and agriculture, and attract young

professionals and families by improving the liveability of regional areas. It will also bolster educational institutions by providing robust internet access, allowing students to engage with contemporary educational tools and resources.

Additionally, improved connectivity will enhance healthcare services by facilitating better access to telehealth and advanced technologies, ensuring that essential services are available locally.

Furthermore, sufficient telecommunication infrastructure is critical for the safety and sustainability of regional and isolated communities, enabling prompt and effective emergency response. Addressing digital exclusion is equally important, ensuring that all Tasmanians, regardless of their abilities or socio-economic status, can fully participate in society.

We urge the continuation and expansion of successful programs like the Mobile Black Spot Program and emphasise the necessity of continual improvements to meet our region's growing demands. Efforts to reduce the connectivity gap between urban and regional areas within Tasmania need to be made, allowing the community to grow and prosper in an increasingly network-reliant future. By prioritising these areas, we can build a more inclusive, supportive, and prosperous Tasmania.

RDA Tasmania welcomes the opportunity for further engagement:

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