

Provide equitable communication network

An equitable communication network for the region is essential if FNQ is to have sustainable growth and development.

The size of FNQ means we are reliant on our communication networks whether this is mobile, broadband, fixed Wi-Fi or satellite. To be competitive in current marketplaces (national and international) and drive increased productivity and access to greater economic opportunities through a global marketplace our communication network is essential. FNQ has vast untapped potential for the development of an array of 'Agri Business', tropical expertise and tourism products which can be exported from the region. An equitable communication network will also support efficient and effective employment, government service delivery, education, health, workplace health and safety and social wellbeing.

In terms of fixed broadband quality, quality level A (where at least 80% of the premises have access to high quality fibre to the premise (FTTP) services), this currently applies to only 34,000 premises in northern Australia. This represents 5% of premises in North Queensland. In terms of quality level D and E (the lowest), 90% of premises in North Queensland fall into this category⁸. Australia's internet services are currently supported by an ageing copper network which requires considerable maintenance and provides for inferior service to that provided in much of the rest of the world. The NBN was expected to significantly reduce download times for content with high bandwidth

requirements and will offer speeds much faster than is currently possible. There is also considerable concern that, while satellite services will deliver broadband to many areas that currently don't have it, and that it should improve speeds significantly, the network will remain far inferior to that covered by the fibre footprint.

This has been exacerbated by COVID-19, which accelerated the move towards online service provision for health, education and other government support services. Residents in areas with poor or no connectivity or limited access to computers are even more disadvantaged due to expectation they can access services remotely/digitally.

Infrastructure Australia's Infrastructure Plan⁹ identifies that in terms of mobile coverage, services in regional Australia are not as accessible as in our capital cities. Without better mobile services, regional Australia will not fully benefit from new technologies and the associated business opportunities and better service delivery. For example, mobiles (and other technology) enable remote control of agricultural tasks including monitoring soil moisture, supplying water to drinking troughs for cattle and opening and closing gates.

Mobile coverage also means a quicker response to car accidents and greatly

assists in fighting bushfires, floods and other natural disasters. Mobile access is important for regional tourism because visitors expect to have mobile services wherever they go.

More people are choosing to forego fixed voice services and rely on mobile services alone.

The cost of backhaul is directly related to the capacity required to supply mobile services and the distance of the backhaul link. The cost of this capital is enough to discourage providers from building their own network, thereby denying services to some regions or limiting consumer choice. The NBN is investing in backhaul infrastructure as part of delivering broadband infrastructure in the region. This infrastructure could also be used by mobile network providers, to expand their coverage in more regional areas.

As Infrastructure Australia aptly puts it, technological improvements and innovation can transform industries and open up opportunities for regional business. Providing equitable communication networks will create innovations that will help overcome geographic challenges particularly relevant to FNQ. This will also greatly assist in closing the gap on access to health, education, training and employment opportunities for many socially disadvantaged groups, including people in indigenous communities and people with disabilities.

⁸ Infrastructure Australia, (2015), Northern Australia Audit - Infrastructure for a Developing North Report. Canberra: Australian Government

⁹ Infrastructure Australia, (February 2016), Australian Infrastructure Plan - Priorities and reforms for our nation's future Report. Canberra: Australian Government.