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Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

Dear Committee Members,

Re: 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review

Anglicare Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review (the Review). Across the Anglicare Australia Network, financial counsellors and frontline staff see the challenges facing Australians who are digitally excluded every single day. It is almost impossible to go an entire day without needing to do some kind of task or activity that requires access to the internet or a device in some form, especially for Australians on low-incomes or who are reliant on government services for support. Despite increasing recognition that digital access is an essential service, regulatory settings for service providers do not treat it as such and this is creating a digital divide which hits regional communities the hardest.

The Terms of Reference for the 2024 Review task the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) to consider and provide advice on telecommunication needs in regional Australia, and the barriers to addressing needs and improving outcomes. One of the biggest challenges for digital connectivity in regional areas is a lack of reliable service, especially for mobile data. Connections are often weak, slow and inconsistent. As an increasing number of everyday activities move online – like banking, education, and even booking or attending a doctor's appointment – the absence of reliable telecommunication services in regional and rural Australia is fostering continued inequity.

In considering barriers to address telecommunication needs the Issues Paper explores the impact of government and private investment in regional infrastructure. Whilst universal service arrangements have played an important role in ensuring access to basic phone and internet services, service needs have drastically changed, and these arrangements are no longer sufficient. Current regulatory and legislative frameworks for telecommunications fail to recognise the necessity of reliable mobile and internet services for day-to-day life.

Anglicare Australia acknowledges that investment in regional areas can be stifled by higher costs for equipment installation and maintenance. However these services are only becoming increasingly essential for everyday life, and the impact of insufficient access is costing Australians more. There is

an overwhelming reliance on private companies to provide basic services, but there is no requirement or incentive for these companies to consider equity or accessibility for consumers. Nor are there requirements on them to offer affordable products and hardship programs to Australians struggling to pay their bills. Access has been a secondary consideration to returning the best outcome for wealthy shareholders, and this approach is not delivering the best service to Australians who need it.

Financial counsellors in the Anglicare Australia Network have reported that many clients in regional and rural areas lack reliable internet connections, and often have to travel long distances to access stable connection. Many clients are forced to rely on public wi-fi or to take time out of their day to use services at public libraries, which is not an easy feat in a regional town. The Government must be setting the example for other businesses and services as more service operations shift online, by ensuring that it is working to achieve the best access to these services.

The people in regional and rural communities that are impacted by digital exclusion are often also battling financial insecurity. Analysis of income support data published by the Department of Social Services shows that people in regional and rural Australia are disproportionately represented in receiving income support payments. Just over one in four Australians live in regional or rural communities.[i] Yet, 42 percent of those on the JobSeeker payment, 43 percent of Age Pension recipients and 47 percent of people receiving the Parenting Payment live in regional or rural Australia.[ii] This disproportionately high number compared to urban populations highlights just how important it is for access to reliable mobile data and other telecommunication service to be universal.

Financial counsellors in the Anglicare Australia Network have reported that lack of reliable service puts their clients at risk of meeting deadlines or key notifications from Centrelink and other government services, that leads to them being cut off or penalised. Without genuine investment in improving telecommunications services, Australians on income support who live in regional and rural Australia will be punished simply because they happen to live in regional and rural Australia.

The impacts of unreliable service in regional and remote Australia are even more stark for First Nations communities. The Digital Inclusion Index measured the gap between First Nations and non-First Nations Australians in remote and very remote communities and found a substantial gap between in access. That gap was significantly less pronounced with First Nations Australians living in the major cities.[iii] Supplementary research conducted by RMIT University found that 43 percent of First Nations communities and homelands have no mobile service to speak of.[iv]

The Government should use this Review to reform telecommunications regulation for providers operating in regional and remote areas, to ensure communities in these areas have equitable access to reliable internet and mobile data services. Network gaps, slow connections and limited-service availability are not problems any Australians should be dealing with in this digital age.

This must begin with ensuring that telecommunication providers are regulated like the essential service providers that they are. Doing so would ensure a proper and genuine framework for companies to operate within and could then include enforceable minimum service standards for regional and rural communities.

Australians living in regional and rural communities should not be disadvantaged or penalised with poor access to mobile and internet service simply because they live outside a major metropolitan city. This is not simply a matter of good data service; it is a matter of equity and fairness.

Anglicare Australia would welcome the opportunity to expand on our submission, or further discuss our input. Please do not hesitate to be in touch if you would like to discuss any of these issues in greater detail.

Yours sincerely

Kasy Chambers
Executive Director

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[i] Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing (2024) Rural and remote health
[ii] Department of Social Services (2023) December 2023 Statistics
[iii] J Thomas, et al (2023) Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023
[iv] D Featherstone, et al (2023) Mapping the Digital Gap