

11.7 IMPROVING MOBILE COVERAGE IN WEDDIN SHIRE COUNCIL**File Number:****Author:** Director Corporate Services**Authoriser:** General Manager**Attachments:** 1. Document from Department of Regional NSW_06 December 2022 re Improving mobile coverage in Weddin Shire Council**CSP Objective:** Innovation in service delivery (healthy, safe and educated community)**Precis:** To provide Council information on how to improve mobile coverage in Weddin Shire Council**Budget:** Nil**RECOMMENDATION**

That Council:

1. Agree in principle to the Department of Regional NSW (DRNSW) Regional Digital Connectivity (RDC) team undertake procurement on behalf of Council to identify mobile carrier/s to deliver a network sharing solution.
2. Delegate the General Manager to execute the agreement between Weddin Shire Council and the DRNSW RDC team.
3. Note, if Council endorses DRNSW RDC team to undertake procurement activity, Council will be consulted and is under no obligation to proceed with a proposed solution.

PURPOSE

To seek Council's endorsement to proceed with DRNSW RDC team to improve mobile coverage in Weddin Shire, noting that this report now replaces the previous tabled report.

BACKGROUND

In late 2019 Weddin Shire Council was awarded \$1,000,000 under the Regional Growth Funds Drought Stimulus Package. This funding was announced in unusual circumstances. While Council has been advocating strongly since 2017 on matters relating to digital connectivity, Council never submitted a funding application to the Drought Stimulus Package specifically proposing how funding would be used to address digital connectivity. The funding announcement was unprompted. The State Government elected to form a Project Control Group with members from various State Government departments and Weddin Shire Council. The Project Control Group engaged a consultant to develop a strategy with projects and actions on how the funding could be spent, originally around Agtech and mobile coverage. The strategy was funded from the \$1,000,000, as such only \$850,000 remains.

During the strategy's preparation there were significant advancements in digital connectivity as the availability of Low Earth Orbiting satellites shifted from an emerging technology into a transformative reality in the space of a few months with the availability of Starlink in southern NSW from mid 2021. Concurrently Telstra and Optus redefined their business goals in Australia to focus on 5G in the highly profitable high population density areas of the

state and set about reframing expectations about service delivery in low population density regional and remote areas, highlighting the existence of market failure.

The strategy did not pivot in response to these transformative shifts in the regional connectivity landscape. As a result, the strategy was deemed to not meet the tenacious expectations of Weddin Shire Council to deliver meaningful change to the Shire's agricultural communities in the 0-4-year timeline. The strategy's short-term focus on improving 'community access' via 'hubs', and developing 'trail sites' in Grenfell, the only town in the Weddin Shire that already had excellent fixed internet and mobile coverage, was not considered sufficiently transformative. In addition, the strategies projects had significant ongoing resource implications to Council. As yet the remaining funding has not been released to Council and this proposal does not involve releasing funds to Weddin, they will instead administer the project on our behalf. As such Regional NSW have approached Council (Attachment A) to identify a better procurement solution for the unexpended fund.

ISSUES AND COMMENTS

The Regional NSW Digital Connectivity team has approached Council on an opportunity to identify mobile carrier/s to deliver a network sharing solution in the Weddin Local Government Area and provide better coverage and roaming opportunities for residents. This activity can be incorporated into some existing procurement activities the Department has planned for the regional digital connectivity program early next year.

Council had received late correspondence from the Department of Regional NSW and was holding a meeting on the afternoon of 8 December 2022. In order to give Council, the best opportunity to understand the project, a holding report was provided to Council with preliminary information. This report now replaces the previous report.

The DRNSW RDC team have undertaken a number of similar projects and bring a high level of expertise that Council does not currently have. This will include negotiating with the telecommunication carriers to co-locate and/or having mobile sharing coverage abilities, meaning that the customer can hop onto any service available in the area.

POLICY/LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct policy or legal implications arising from this report, noting that Department of Regional NSW have stated we can share this information.

FINANCIAL/RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

There will be no direct financial implications to Council, however noting that there may be a commitment of the still unreleased Weddin Shire grant funds from the Drought Stimulus Package to contribute towards this project. The funding attributed to the Starlink will still proceed as normal. We note that during the Council Mobile Hubs, there was a strong interest from our villages in the use of Starlink.

INTERNAL/EXTERNAL CONSULTATION

Council Officers met with the Department of Regional NSW, the Regional Digital Connectivity team to discuss the proposal on 8 December 2022.

CONCLUSION

Residents in the Weddin Shire Council area have faced many issues relating to mobile coverage and reliability of fixed internet services. The Department of Regional NSW has approved Council regarding improving mobile coverage and looking at ways to share networks across the region.

Although there has been a shift from the original Agtech focus, to improve mobile coverage, and the proposal provides a different alignment and approach to the Council's original intentions, the state government is committed to delivering this approach. This approach will still deliver benefits which align with councils integrated planning and will deliver meaningful improvements to residents of Weddin Shire.

Council should proceed with this approach to:

1. Deliver benefits to the community
2. Finalise a long outstanding grant and
3. Improve and build up our relationship with Regional NSW.