

**Southern and Hills Local Government Association**

# **Digital Connectivity Policy Paper**

August 2027



## 1. Purpose of this Policy Paper

This policy paper has been prepared to highlight the importance of digital connectivity to the Southern and Hills region and support our advocacy for improved telecommunications outcomes.

The paper provides an overview of the current policy and funding landscape, outlines the key digital connectivity challenges affecting each SHLGA council, and presents a clear regional policy statement seeking the following outcomes for the Southern and Hills region:

- telecommunications is essential infrastructure that supports regional development, community wellbeing, and public safety
- improved digital inclusion and affordability to enable the community to maintain relationships, participate in community life and access services and support remotely.
- improved mobile coverage and network performance across communities, transport corridors and visitor destinations
- resilient communications infrastructure capable of supporting emergency preparedness, response and recovery
- improved digital connectivity for businesses, primary producers and regional industries
- stronger coordination between Commonwealth, State and industry investment in regional telecommunications infrastructure.
- recognition of the Southern and Hills region as a priority location for future digital connectivity investment.

## 2. Why Digital Connectivity Matters

Digital connectivity has become one of the fundamental enablers of economic development, community wellbeing and public safety. Reliable mobile and broadband services are no longer simply telecommunications services, they are essential infrastructure supporting the way communities live, businesses operate and governments deliver services.

For the Southern and Hills region, digital connectivity is becoming increasingly important because of the region's unique combination of rapid population growth, dispersed communities, significant visitor economy, diverse regional industries and exposure to natural hazards. These characteristics create growing demand for telecommunications infrastructure that is reliable, resilient and capable of supporting future growth.

Unlike traditional infrastructure such as roads, water and electricity; telecommunications infrastructure is largely planned and delivered through commercial investment by network providers, supplemented by targeted government funding programs. As a result, investment does not always align with the locations where it can deliver the greatest regional economic and community benefit. This creates an important role for regional advocacy to ensure that investment decisions recognise the needs of growing regional communities.

### ***Supporting Population Growth***

The Southern and Hills region contains one of South Australia's fastest growing areas in Mount Barker, while many communities across the region also continue to experience, or are projected to experience, sustained residential growth. Population growth is increasing

demand for digital infrastructure in the same way it increases demand for transport, water and community facilities.

As more people choose to live and work in the region, reliable digital connectivity is becoming an increasingly important factor supporting housing, business investment and access to services. Planning for future growth therefore requires telecommunications infrastructure to be considered alongside other essential infrastructure that enables communities to develop sustainably.

### ***Supporting Regional Productivity***

The regional economy is increasingly dependent on reliable digital connectivity. Tourism operators, primary producers, manufacturers, professional services, health providers and small businesses all rely on mobile and broadband networks to communicate with customers, process transactions, manage supply chains and adopt new technologies.

Agriculture is becoming increasingly technology-enabled through precision farming, remote monitoring and automated systems, while businesses across all sectors are making greater use of cloud-based services and digital platforms. Reliable connectivity is therefore an important contributor to regional productivity, innovation and economic competitiveness.

### ***Supporting Social Connection and Community Wellbeing***

Reliable digital connectivity is also increasingly important to social connection and community wellbeing. Digital technologies provide an important means for people to maintain relationships with family and friends, participate in community life and access services and support, particularly where distance, mobility or limited transport options can make face-to-face connection more difficult.

This is particularly relevant across the Southern and Hills region, which includes ageing coastal communities, dispersed rural populations and people living in smaller or more isolated townships. For older residents and people living alone, access to reliable mobile and broadband services can help maintain social networks, support independent living and reduce the risk of social isolation and loneliness. Connectivity also enables access to telehealth, online community activities, government services and other supports that increasingly form part of everyday life.

Poor or unreliable connectivity can compound geographic and social isolation. As more services and social interactions move online, communities without reliable and affordable access risk being further disadvantaged. Improving digital connectivity should therefore be recognised not only as an infrastructure and economic development priority, but as an important contributor to stronger, more inclusive and connected communities.

### ***Supporting Tourism and Visitor Experiences***

The Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu Peninsula and Kangaroo Island are among South Australia's premier tourism destinations, attracting millions of visitors each year. Visitors increasingly expect reliable mobile connectivity for navigation, accommodation bookings, digital payments, emergency information and sharing their experiences online.

Many tourism destinations also experience significant seasonal increases in population, placing additional pressure on telecommunications networks during holiday periods and major events. This highlights the importance of considering not only network coverage, but also network capacity and performance in areas with high visitor demand.

### ***Supporting Community Safety and Resilience***

The Southern and Hills region includes extensive bushfire-prone landscapes. Reliable telecommunications are critical before, during and after emergency events, supporting community warnings, operational coordination, public information and recovery activities.

As climate-related risks increase, the resilience of telecommunications infrastructure has become an increasingly important consideration. Investment in backup power, network redundancy and resilient infrastructure helps ensure communities remain connected when communications are needed most.

### ***A Strategic Regional Issue***

Collectively, these factors demonstrate that digital connectivity is no longer simply a telecommunications issue. It is an enabling form of regional infrastructure that supports housing growth, economic development, tourism, emergency management and community wellbeing.

For SHLGA, digital connectivity presents an opportunity to bring together the shared priorities of constituent councils, build a stronger regional evidence base and advocate for investment that reflects the region's strategic importance and future growth. The following sections outline the current Commonwealth policy and funding framework, identify opportunities relevant to the Southern and Hills region, and consider the potential role SHLGA could play in advocating for improved digital connectivity.

### **3. Digital Connectivity Challenges Across the Southern and Hills Region**

The nature of digital connectivity challenges varies considerably across the region. While some communities continue to experience traditional mobile coverage gaps, other areas are increasingly affected by network capacity constraints associated with population growth, seasonal tourism demand or the need for greater network resilience during emergencies.

The following summary highlights the principal issues that have been identified publicly by councils, governments and telecommunications providers and provides an overview of the diverse challenges experienced across the region.

#### ***Adelaide Hills Council***

The Adelaide Hills presents one of the region's most technically complex telecommunications environments. Steep topography, heavily vegetated landscapes and dispersed settlement patterns create highly localised variations in mobile coverage, with reliable service often changing over short distances. Publicly identified black spot locations have included Cudlee Creek, Lobethal, Lenswood, Mount Torrens, Gumeracha, Norton Summit, Ashton, Cherryville, Basket Range and parts of the Onkaparinga Valley. The region's high bushfire risk has also highlighted the importance of resilient telecommunications infrastructure following several significant mobile outages affecting the Mount Barker and Adelaide Hills area during periods of elevated fire danger.

#### ***Mount Barker District Council***

Mount Barker's primary challenge is ensuring telecommunications infrastructure keeps pace with one of South Australia's fastest growing communities. Rapid residential development throughout Mount Barker, Littlehampton and Nairne is increasing demand for mobile and broadband capacity, while some surrounding rural localities continue to experience inconsistent mobile coverage. As the district continues to grow, digital connectivity is becoming an increasingly important component of enabling infrastructure alongside transport, water and community services.

#### ***Alexandrina Council***

Alexandrina experiences a combination of rural coverage challenges and seasonal demand associated with tourism. Publicly identified connectivity issues have included parts of the Finnis district, Ashbourne, rural localities surrounding Strathalbyn and sections of the Fleurieu transport network. Peak holiday periods also increase demand on telecommunications infrastructure serving Goolwa, Middleton and Hindmarsh Island, where visitor numbers significantly exceed the permanent resident population. Reliable connectivity is also becoming increasingly important for precision agriculture and other technology-enabled primary industries.

#### ***City of Victor Harbor***

Victor Harbor experiences comparatively good coverage in the city centre but faces persistence black spots in surrounding areas and increasing challenges associated with network capacity during peak tourism periods. Seasonal visitor numbers place additional pressure on mobile networks servicing the city centre, coastal attractions and major events. Reliable telecommunications are increasingly important for tourism businesses, digital payments, navigation and visitor safety. An ageing resident population is creating greater reliance on digital health and government services, which also creates a range of digital access, literacy, and inclusion challenges.

### ***District Council of Yankalilla***

Connectivity challenges within Yankalilla are influenced by dispersed settlement patterns, coastal tourism and the strategic importance of transport routes linking Adelaide with the Fleurieu Peninsula and Cape Jervis. Publicly identified mobile coverage issues have included Parawa, Delamere, Second Valley and sections of the Main South Road corridor, while seasonal visitor demand increases pressure on networks serving Normanville, Carrickalinga and other coastal communities. The district's bushfire risk further reinforces the importance of resilient communications infrastructure during emergency events.

### ***Kangaroo Island Council***

Kangaroo Island faces the region's most distinctive digital connectivity challenges because of its geographic isolation, dispersed settlements and exposure to major natural hazards. While Commonwealth investment has improved both mobile coverage and network resilience in several locations, publicly identified connectivity issues remain across parts of the Island, particularly in more remote areas and along transport routes. The 2019-20 bushfires demonstrated the critical importance of resilient telecommunications infrastructure, backup power and network redundancy to support emergency response, tourism, freight and community recovery.

### ***Regional Observations***

Although each council experiences different challenges, several common themes emerge across the region. These include the need to improve mobile coverage in some rural locations, increase network capacity in growing communities and major tourism destinations, strengthen telecommunications resilience in bushfire-prone areas, and ensure digital infrastructure keeps pace with population growth and changing community expectations. These shared issues provide a strong basis for a coordinated regional advocacy approach while recognising that investment priorities will differ between communities.

## **4. SHLGA Policy Statement**

### ***A Connected Southern and Hills Region***

The Southern and Hills Local Government Association recognises that reliable digital connectivity has become essential infrastructure that underpins the region's future economic prosperity, community wellbeing and resilience.

The Southern and Hills region is one of South Australia's fastest growing and most diverse regional economies. It is home to significant population growth, internationally recognised tourism destinations, productive agricultural industries, major regional transport corridors and communities that are increasingly dependent on digital technologies in their daily lives.

Reliable telecommunications are now fundamental to how people live, work and do business. They support economic development, enable access to health and education services, strengthen emergency management, improve visitor experiences and enhance the productivity and competitiveness of regional industries.

While responsibility for telecommunications infrastructure rests primarily with the Australian Government and the telecommunications industry, local government has an important role in identifying regional priorities, providing local knowledge and advocating for investment that reflects the varied needs of regional communities.

SHLGA believes that investment in digital connectivity should be recognised as an investment in the long-term prosperity, resilience and liveability of the Southern and Hills region.

### ***Advocacy Principles***

Subject to Board endorsement, SHLGA could advocate for the following principles.

#### **1. Recognise digital connectivity as essential regional infrastructure**

Digital connectivity should be recognised alongside transport, water, energy and community infrastructure as a fundamental enabler of regional growth and development.

Telecommunications infrastructure should be planned proactively to support future communities rather than responding only after service gaps emerge.

#### **2. Support infrastructure that keeps pace with regional growth**

The Southern and Hills region is experiencing significant population growth, changing patterns of work and increasing demand for digital services. Telecommunications infrastructure should evolve in step with these changes to ensure growing communities have access to reliable, high-quality digital connectivity.

#### **3. Improve connectivity across the region**

Investment should continue to improve digital connectivity across the Southern and Hills region by addressing the diverse challenges experienced by member councils, including mobile coverage in rural areas, network capacity in growing communities and major tourism destinations, and reliable connectivity along strategic transport corridors.

#### **4. Build resilient communications networks**

Given the region's exposure to bushfire and other natural hazards, telecommunications infrastructure should be designed and maintained to provide reliable communications before,

during and after emergency events. Improving network resilience should remain a priority for future investment.

#### **5. Ensure regional communities receive a fair share of investment**

SHLGA supports continued Commonwealth and State Government investment in regional digital connectivity and will advocate for funding programs that recognise the Southern and Hills region's strategic importance, rapid growth, visitor economy and diverse regional industries.

#### **6. Strengthen regional collaboration**

SHLGA will work collaboratively with member councils, governments, telecommunications providers, Regional Development Australia Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island, and other regional stakeholders to identify shared priorities, coordinate regional advocacy and support evidence-based investment decisions.