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21 July 2016

Mr Paul Lindwall
Presiding Commissioner
Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Lindwall

Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation Inquiry Submission

Central Highlands Regional Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission Issues Paper on the Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation.

Telecommunications is a key concern for residents and visitors to this region with respect to access, reliability, affordability and equality of these services, and has a significant impact on local business, industry, tourism and key government services such as health and education.

Council considers telecommunications to be a basic necessity, and inadequate services are therefore a significant issue, particularly for those living, working and travelling in regional and remote Australia. On this basis, Council considers a Universal Service Obligation to be critical in ensuring that all residents and visitors to our region have access to these essential services.

It is noted technology improvements provide an opportunity to review the minimum standards detailed in the Universal Service Obligation. Council considers this to be appropriate with respect to acknowledging and including a minimum standard for mobile and broadband services, however any change must also recognize the need to maintain quality voice services, particularly in regional and remote areas. These services remain necessary due to inconsistencies in quality, availability and reliability of mobile, broadband and satellite based services.

Council acknowledges and supports the views of the Remote Area Planning and Development (RAPAD) board in this regard, and considers that VoIP type technology/services are not a realistic option for a voice Universal Service, particularly if the access technology proposed is satellite technology.

Council also notes the need for ongoing investment in telecommunications infrastructure, particularly with respect to mobile coverage (e.g. Mobile Black Spot Programme). Round 1 of this programme provided \$100 million to fund 499 new or upgraded base stations across

Australia, with this funding supplemented by Telstra (\$165 million), Vodafone (\$20 million), five (5) state governments (i.e. NSW (\$24 million), Victoria (\$21 million), Queensland (\$10 million), Western Australia (\$32 million) and Tasmania (\$0.35 million)) and \$1.7 million in contributions from local governments, businesses and community organisations. A further \$60 million of funding has been committed by the Federal government for Round 2. Despite the funding committed, there are over 10,000 sites nominated as mobile black spots in Australia, and therefore further funding is required to address this significant infrastructure problem.

Finally, Council notes the importance of publicly accessible fixed line services (e.g. payphones) in regional and remote communities. These services provide a level of redundancy for residents or visitors unable to access private fixed line or mobile services, whilst also providing for emergency communications, for example during network outages. Council considers this service should be continued and recognized within the Universal Service Obligation.

Should you require any further information with respect to this submission please feel free to contact Council's Manager Community and Customer Service, Mr Luke Lankowski

Yours faithfully

Scott Mason
Chief Executive Officer

21/7/16