

Modern internet services in Gunnedah NSW and surrounding areas are unavailable to all users. ADSL broadband services are only available to those located within a centralised radius of the current exchange while those on the fringe of town are unable to access any ADSL services due to degradation of available services on outdated infrastructure.

Mobile broadband is the most popular alternative although it is far from being equitable in terms of quality of service and economics. There is a substantial demand on the existing mobile network with internet users having access terminated in favour of mobile telephone calls; thus, frequent dropouts in internet access are common. Moreover, users of the mobile broadband network often pay substantially more for substantially less in terms of data access. Based on surveys provided by some users in this area (Gunnedah ADSL Upgrade Community Action Group), mobile broadband customers must pay upwards of 150-180% more per month for data capacities of less than 10% compared to ADSL customers living closer to the exchange. On a cost-per-unit basis (\$/GB), this is far from equitable and highly unacceptable.

Further to comments on the mobile broadband network, many users in outlying areas, including new subdivisions on the fringe of town, do not have stable or reliable access to mobile reception. Even though users can get a signal on mobile devices, it is weak and subject to dropping out. Proposals to force customers onto VOIP-based telephone networks will inhibit users from accessing a reliable telephone network as unreliable mobile reception and internet access will completely prevent telephone access. The mobile network needs to be enhanced through the addition of towers and/or associated infrastructure to improve access to rural users currently impacted by topographical disturbances and interruptions to existing network access.

Several promises have been made to provide a micronode in one distribution area (GUNN48/GUNN801) that contains the greatest proportion of affected customers; however, the proposed work has been continuing for over twelve months and was last visibly worked on approximately six months ago. It seems clear that service providers will only invest in infrastructure in areas where the return on investment (ROI) is greater than the desire to provide customer satisfaction.

NBN network construction was originally scheduled for 2015 but this was cancelled at the last change of government. It has been only recently that Gunnedah has been added to the NBN construction plan now due for completion by 2018. It is not clear how or why Gunnedah has been pushed back so far in the rollout of NBN while smaller surrounding towns have been connected.

As a consequence of the general issues described above, there are many users in the Gunnedah district that are unable to access reliable telephone, mobile and internet services. Proposed changes to the Telecommunications Universal Services Obligation (TUSO) should consider all of these issues and more to ensure that reasonable and equitable services for rural and remote customers are provided, just as they are to our urban counterparts.

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