Submission to the
Regional
Telecommunications
Independent Review 2015

ABSTRACT
Mansfield Shire Council has prepared this submission in support of residents, ratepayers and visitors who expect to be able to enjoy a reasonable quality of life, safety in times of risk and to conduct their business on a competitive basis.
Background

Mansfield Shire Council is situated in a rural setting in North East Victoria, 180 kilometres from Melbourne metro. The Census (2011) indicates a permanent population of 8,031. The population continues to grow by just over 1%. However, the municipality is somewhat unique in that 49% of the rateable properties are owned by ‘non-resident’ ratepayers. This causes significant surges in population when the ‘non-resident’ ratepayers, or ‘part-time locals’ stay in their properties – usually weekends and holiday periods.

In addition, tourism is the key economic driver in Mansfield Shire. Some 60% of the gross industry output of $372.215m is attributed to tourism and visitors account for 50% of all local retail trade.

However, inadequate and geographically inconsistent mobile phone coverage with numerous black spots, extensive grey spots and shadow spots exists right across the municipality. In times of peak usage and visitation, the demand often outstrips the capacity in the areas that do have coverage. Businesses are impacted by lack of reception and the safety of residents and visitors is severely compromised.

Since 2010, Mansfield Shire Council in partnership with our community has been actively advocating for improvements to digital telecommunications in our Shire. To that end, we have formed the Mansfield Telecommunications Advocacy Group (MTAG) comprising community members with telecommunications backgrounds or interests along with key Council staff.

The first task for the MTAG was to map our telecommunications profile, issues and deficiencies and clearly state the improvements required to achieve a state of digital equity in our area. The resulting ‘Securing Our Digital Future’ document is attached to this submission and addresses many of the questions posed by the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee.

As a solution to the lack of mobile coverage and mobile network operator business interest, Council has been advocating strongly for co-location of mobile phone and NBN infrastructure to save significant costs and visually limit digital telecommunications infrastructure in our alpine gateway landscape.

It must be noted that just this week, residents in outlying communities were advised that they were now able to connect to the nbn which will result in enormous improvements for our many residents and businesses who have
been relying on slow satellite and wireless internet and even slower dial-up services.

Submission

Q1. Do people in regional Australia believe their reliance on telecommunications differs from those in urban areas? How does it differ and can you provide examples?

People in regional and rural Australia believe their reliance on telecommunications is much greater than those in rural areas. The social, safety and economic equity reasons for this are discussed in detail on page 7 in the attached ‘Securing Our Digital Future’ document.

Q2. For those users already connected to an nbn network service, has the service met your expectations?

Mansfield Shire Council is just being connected to the nbn this month (June 2015). The nbn will allow the majority of our residents and 50% of our businesses to have access to fast internet for the first time and it will open up many opportunities for small business, e-business and telecommuters. This is discussed at length in the attached Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Opportunities for People to Use Telecommuting and E-Business to Work Remotely in Rural and Regional Victoria.

Q4. Irrespective of the adequacy of your local access, are there issues with backhaul or long distance carriage that impacts on your use of telecommunications services?

Mansfield Shire is a key state and national tourism destination. In addition, almost 50% of the rateable properties are owned by people whose primary residence is outside of the Shire. As a result the Shire experiences substantial peaks in visitation which significantly impact the capacity of the mobile networks, resulting in major backhaul issues. Please see the ‘Securing Our Digital Future’ document for further discussion on this impact.

Q5. For users living in areas without mobile coverage, what priorities, other than specific locations, do you consider should be recognised in future efforts to improve coverage?

For the high proportion of users who live and work in the many areas in Mansfield Shire without mobile coverage, providing social and economic
equity to all communities, especially now that digital communication plays such a critical social, economic and emergency role in the everyday lives of rural and remote communities, is of the highest priority. The development of a Universal Service Obligation, in regard to mobile phone coverage must become of the highest priority for Government to ensure everyone in Australia, no matter their location, has access to mobile phone coverage.

Q9. What communications barriers have you experienced in expanding or operating your business or providing services, such as health or education? Have you been able to overcome these barriers and if so, how?

Mansfield Shire has a predominance of small businesses (1100+) operating from rural towns, remote settlements and home offices. Businesses based in Mansfield township (CBD and surrounds), equate to 50% of the 1,164 businesses across the municipality, thus over 50% of business operators experience mobile and broadband service below acceptable business standards with a direct impact on efficiency, competitiveness, costs and growth.¹

Telecommuting and E-Business are critical for the economic and social future of municipalities such as Mansfield. People will continue to make lifestyle choices regarding where they live and recreate but that choice will be increasingly defined by where they can remotely work and do business.²

Digital communication now plays such a critical social, economic and emergency role in the everyday lives of rural and remote communities. Substandard telecommunications can sentence a region to the social and economic backblocks.³

For Mansfield Shire to continue to thrive and attract lifestyle property treechangers, workers, entrepreneurs and business; digital equity is required throughout the municipality with comparative equity at state and national levels.⁴

Q10. What communication functions (e.g. speed, mobility, reliability, data, etc) would best suit your needs, noting the limitations of each technology (e.g. mobile, wireless, satellite, fibre)?

“Put simply, Mansfield Shire is seeking an effective telecommunications environment that will permit our residents and ratepayers to enjoy a reasonable quality of life, safety in times of risk and to conduct their businesses on a competitive basis” Russell Bate, Mayor, Mansfield Shire Council.⁵

By this Cr Bate means that simply having access to reliable mobile networks would transform life for many Mansfield residents and businesses.
Further to this, improving access in the many ‘grey’ areas is a high priority. Many residents and businesses are able to access a network outside of buildings, but not inside. Stories abound of ‘hanging off verandahs’ or ‘walking up driveways in the rain’ to be able to make a call. Digital telecommunications equity would provide the ability to access mobile networks inside regional and rural buildings.

Pages 7 and 8 of the ‘Securing Our Digital Future’ document discusses further the impacts of limited access to mobile networks from a live, work, invest perspective.

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4 Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Opportunities for People to Use Telecommuting and E-Business to Work Remotely in Rural and Regional Victoria
5 ‘Securing Our Digital Future, Mansfield Shire Council 2013

**Attachments**

‘Securing Our Digital Future’, Mansfield Shire Council 2013

**Telecommuting and E-Business in Mansfield Shire** Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Opportunities for People to Use Telecommuting and E-Business to Work Remotely in Rural and Regional Victoria
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Put simply, Mansfield Shire is seeking an effective telecommunications environment that will permit our residents and ratepayers to enjoy a reasonable quality of life, safety in times of risk and to conduct their businesses on a competitive basis.”

Russell Bate, Mayor, Mansfield Shire Council

Mansfield Shire Council and community are working together to advocate for equitable telecommunication services – this relates to meeting current deficiencies and allowing for future needs.

This paper presents the social and economic challenges experienced by Shire residents and businesses as a direct result of inadequate digital services.

Disparity exists because demand and supply dynamics currently dictate service levels and Council believes there is a direct role for Government to play in providing social and economic equity to all communities, especially now that digital communication plays such a critical social, economic and emergency role in the everyday lives of rural and remote communities.

There are two key considerations related to digital equity for Mansfield Shire:

1. The necessity for interim measures to bridge the digital divide and ensure some measure of equity in mobile telephone coverage, broadband speed and stability between now and 2015 (pre-NBN)

2. The necessity for NBN availability to every Mansfield Shire resident and business and that the service’s performance and cost is comparable to Melbourne and regional centres.

Our advocacy will focus on securing:

• An acceptance by Government and telecommunication providers that Mansfield Shire’s telecommunications are inadequate and in need of an immediate improvement
• A clear pathway mapped out to the resolution of coverage and reliability issues
• A commitment by Government that Mansfield Shire residents and businesses will receive future digital services at comparable performance levels to Melbourne and regional centres

“Put simply, Mansfield Shire is seeking an effective telecommunications environment that will permit our residents and ratepayers to enjoy a reasonable quality of life, safety in times of risk and to conduct their businesses on a competitive basis.”

Russell Bate, Mayor, Mansfield Shire Council
Mansfield Shire Council and community are working together to address the immediate and future digital service needs of our community. This paper presents the social and economic challenges experienced by shire residents as a direct result of inadequate digital services across our municipality. Its purpose is not to present an analysis of digital infrastructure and technology, but to promote digital equity throughout the shire and comparative equity at state and national level by:

- Providing an overview of the current coverage and connectivity situation in Mansfield Shire
- Listing essential outcomes to secure the digital future of Mansfield Shire and its community
- Explaining mobile telephone coverage and broadband connectivity service issues
- Sharing real stories of social and economic impact, faced by the Mansfield community

Mansfield Shire is a regional municipality with a population of 8,000 (2012). If the current 2% population growth (ABS) continues, the projected population increase by 2021 equates to a population of 9,257. The shire is an established and flourishing tourism destination with an annual visitor population of 1.2M, creating substantial mobile and broadband capacity issues in peak visitation periods, when population increases to 30,000. A significant non-resident population (holiday properties) increases the network and service loading, further exacerbating existing capacity issues.

Our population is distributed throughout towns, small settlements, remote settlements and remote individual dwellings. Shire topography is diverse; alpine national parks, steep hills and valleys, rolling country, plains, lakes and rivers.

The topography and distribution of population (sparse and remote) presents particular coverage and servicing issues. Mansfield is certainly not unique in its comparatively small population size or the geographic spread of the resident population, however there are factors particular to Mansfield that make inadequate digital services particularly concerning now and into the future.

The remote location of settlements and visitor destinations are significant risk factors in a bushfire prone shire, where mobile coverage is inadequate.

Mansfield’s vibrant tourism industry injects $134M into the economy. The risk of ongoing lack of digital parity with competitor destinations is already a concern and has the rapidly increasing potential to damage a cornerstone of the Mansfield economy. Put simply Mansfield could rapidly find itself ‘left behind’.

Building a sustainable future for Mansfield extends well beyond the two key industries of farming and tourism. Future economic development in the shire requires diversity and new industry less fickle to natural crises and potentially more future-proofed. Mansfield Shire is in other ways well-positioned to be a destination for digital and digital reliant industries, but without suitable digital infrastructure investors will simply ‘go elsewhere’, where metro-comparable broadband speeds, capacity and reliability (whether fixed line or mobile) are accessible.
Improving mobile broadband coverage and supplying adequate fixed line services in topographically challenging areas, to small and remote customer populations, remains economically unattractive to the telecommunications providers.

There are two key considerations related to digital equity for Mansfield communities:

1. The necessity for interim measures to bridge the digital divide and ensure some measure of ‘metro-comparable’ equity in mobile telephone coverage and broadband speed and stability between 2013 and 2015 [pre-NBN]

2. The necessity for guaranteed NBN delivery of equity to the Mansfield municipality (metro-comparable service) and equity to the remote rural communities and isolated residents within the municipality.

Existing fixed line [copper telephone lines] do not extend ADSL broadband service to many rural communities, or the service provides unacceptably diminished speeds due to distance from the exchange, node or tower. Wireless solutions [3G mobile networks/satellite] are overloaded and deliver unstable ‘patchy’ service. Issues of congestion, latency and lack of stability/drop outs are acute in rural and remote areas of the municipality.

At this time Telstra is the key provider of digital connectivity in the municipality. The majority of permanent residents use Telstra as their retail provider. Non-resident or part-time residents, many of whom are metropolitan based, utilise other carriers to a greater degree. Coverage from Optus and other providers is substantially less than that provided by Telstra.

Whilst some users in Mansfield township receive broadband speeds of up to 16Mbit/s, predominantly via Telstra’s ADSL1 or ADSL2+, the distance from the local exchange impacts considerably on the availability and quality of these services. Only 4 kilometres from the town centre broadband speed is highly variable with considerably less stability and areas with a significant reduction in service speed.

Broadband as a term refers to a higher-speed connection, but the speed threshold has varied over time. The widely employed 1.5Mbit/s measure for ‘broadband’ is considered obsolete. 4G mobile networks deliver broadband speed between 2Mbit/s - 40Mbit/s in serviced [predominantly metropolitan] areas. 10Mbit/s – 12Mbit/s would be considered a standard business requirement for metropolitan organisations and increasingly for popular ‘bandwidth hungry’ applications utilised in the home.

NBN promises broadband capacity of speeds up to 1Gbit/s to 93% of Australian premises [optic fibre] and peak speeds of 12Mbit/s [via fixed wireless and satellite] to the remaining 7% of Australian premises.

Remote and rural communities and individuals frequently access maximum broadband speeds of 1Mbit/s at the optimum time of day, dropping markedly at peak times. This is reported across ADSL and mobile connections. The reality of connectivity in Mansfield Shire varies from the stated coverage of key providers.
Providers acknowledge coverage mapping is an inexact science and factors such as distance from the base station, local terrain, user numbers, hardware and software configuration and download source/upload destination impact on coverage and service.

Nevertheless, existing provider mapping of mobile service and broadband service indicates a vastly different picture to that which is experienced on a daily basis by communities within Mansfield Shire.

The prevalence of grey and shadow areas in mobile telephone coverage is unmapped. Measures taken to extend coverage have not addressed the issue in any substantial sense.

The provision of acceptable broadband services (both speed and stability), regardless of fixed or mobile infrastructure, remains well below metro-parity and indeed below standard business or private broadband expectations. The escalating importance of the digital economy is matched only by the importance of equitable provision of services facilitating sustainable, robust regional communities.

 Council and community are resolved to address these inequitable service gaps and present this document as a basis for advocacy with Government and providers to improve their charted responsibilities.

- We require an acceptance by government and providers that Mansfield is under-served and in need of improvement.
- We require a clear path to the resolution of the coverage and reliability issues identified.
- We require a commitment by government and providers to ensure that Mansfield does not become a digital backwater
- We require effective digital connectivity coverage for 95% of addresses within the Mansfield Shire (wired or wireless).
- We require digital infrastructure that provides usable bandwidth at peak load times.
- We require a roadmap for achievement of effective digital coverage.
- We require clear notice as to when NBN services will be made available in our shire
- We require clear information as to whether services based on fixed wireless or satellite will ever have a speed higher than 12 Mb/s
- We require clarity on the social criteria for NBN selection of fixed wireless sites
- Where no other solution can be found the Shire requires funding to install specific telecommunications infrastructure (new towers, base stations etc.)
CONNECTIVITY ISSUES

The two key issues to address in order to secure our digital future are:

1. Inadequate and geographically inconsistent mobile phone coverage with numerous black spots, extensive grey spots and shadow spots across the municipality

2. Inadequate broadband service (unstable service and inadequate data speed) and inconsistent standards across the municipality

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EQUITY

Mansfield Shire has a comparatively small population and as a consequence the user numbers have been insufficient to drive supply of equitable service from service providers. As supply continues to be driven by demand, rather than social and economic equity, this situation is likely to remain. The consequence is social inequity, a digital divide of ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’; when comparing one municipality to another, one town to another and one person to another.

SAFETY

Safety is compromised when essential information cannot be accessed at the time it is required. Where mobile telephone service and fixed line coverage is unstable or non-existent then calls to ambulances or doctors are unsuccessful. This is particularly important to rural and remote residents, where connectivity is least reliable.

Visitors to the municipality have a higher ‘small provider’ usage (not Telstra) with a correspondingly high lack of mobile service. As a tourism destination Mansfield cannot fulfil its duty of care to visitors as essential safety information cannot be reliably communicated. Neither are visitors reliably able to access public safety messaging such as CFA information and emergency services SMS warnings. The Emergency Management Coordinator has great concerns that people will believe they will receive an SMS warning in an emergency when they do not actually have service.

Popular camping areas have no mobile service. In peak periods, when visitation is at a high level, network congestion prevents access to online safety information. Visitors expect to be able to receive SMS emergency warnings, but in most of the rural areas this is not possible. Additionally lack of coverage inhibits both residents and visitors from timely reporting of incidents such as fires or accidents with may result in critical delays in emergency response.

BUSINESS

Mansfield Shire has a predominance of small business operating from rural towns, remote settlements and home offices. Businesses based in Mansfield township (CBD and surrounds), equate to 50% of the 1,164 businesses across the municipality, thus over 50% of business operators experience mobile and broadband service below acceptable business standards with a direct impact on efficiency, competitiveness, costs and growth.

Businesses operating in black/grey/shadow digital service areas are frequently unable to carry out basic business practises such as conducting online sales, mobile telephone calls, virtual meetings, research or utilise national or international suppliers, source
new markets or even contact clients. With the existing inequitable digital servicing there is a lack of economic equity. Businesses are unable to compete when they sit on the wrong side of the digital divide.

COMMUNICATION

With the network latency experienced across the municipality business operation is seriously impacted. Standard real-time business communications such as Skype or video conferencing are impossible. The impact of this is compounded for rural and remote business where digital communication is vital. Social communication is a key aspect of life. Existing communication devices are rapidly becoming less relevant as other digital communication pathways are increasingly used for social connection.

TOURISM

The tourism sector is a significant contributor to the Mansfield economy. The impact of patchy mobile telephone service is both a direct loss of bookings and indirect loss of business from perceived deficiency of professionalism.

With more than 90% of all travellers researching travel options online and the exponential increase in online bookings, adequate broadband service is absolutely essential for tourism businesses who must maintain a current, reliable and highly functional web presence and receive the contacts made via that web presence, in order to remain competitive. The broader impact is that the tourism destination of Mansfield (Shire) fails to remain competitive in the domestic and international tourism marketplace due to inequitable digital service. Good mobile and broadband access is crucial for a robust tourism destination; visitors expect mobile reception. Lack of reception can cause visitors to choose other destinations providing better coverage.

SOCIAL

Remote and rural communities require greater access to digital communication for health, safety, education and social interaction, than their metropolitan counterparts.

Unstable or inadequate mobile and broadband service creates a level of social injustice, with communities and individuals unable to benefit from the same degree of information or the same level of current information.

Working from home is not an option for many rural residents. Low broadband speeds and lack of access to real-time communications prohibits effective teleworking. With a large ‘tree-change’ population in the municipality expectations of teleworking are as high as the disappointment experienced when mobile and broadband services prove inadequate for the practice.

The gap between stated (mapped) telecommunication company coverage and actual coverage has the potential to preclude eligible users [those experiencing stipulated sub-standard services] from accessing service improvement schemes (such as ISS).
CONNECTIVITY IMPACT | MOBILE COVERAGE: OPTUS DUAL BAND

Optus Dual Band Coverage

Mapping for illustrative purposes only.
Coverage data sourced from carrier websites December 2012
Population data sourced from ABS 2011 Census
(C) Mansfield Shire Council and others
Optus is my current service provider. My wife has to go outside day and night to make or receive calls on her mobile phone. I have the same issue with my mobile phone.

**Howes Creek Road**

We get two bars of mobile signal at one point in the house and also at one point outside on our front deck, but this varies from not bad to frustrating in that the signal often drops out or just goes unintelligible. The safety issue of this patchy signal worries us, not least with regard to bushfires.

**Goughs Bay**

The deal with Telstra regarding our mobile phones should be a good one, but since we do not get good signal at home we rarely make much of a dent in our free calls. In addition the poor signal means that we can forget about using our internet allowance on our mobile contracts too as this is dire at best.

**I'm disabled and I'm alone for the most part during the day. About six months ago I was moving some equipment in our garage and lost my balance and fell becoming trapped between a mower and a wall. Finally after about 2.5 hours I was able to drag myself along the floor and stand again. I did on that occasion have my mobile with me but with no signal unable to call for assistance.**

**Old Tonga Road**

I’m also concerned each fire season as I have heard Council/CFA/SES will be using SMS messages to advise residence of Extreme/Code Red conditions or fires in the area. Once again without mobile reception and Council not being able to provide suitable evacuation options lives may be in jeopardy.

**Howes Creek**

I am really trying to make this “TreeChange” business model work and generally it’s going well with the one exception being mobile connectivity.

**Alpine Ridge**

My Telstra service there is average to say the least, I can have 3 bars of service, move 1 foot to the left and no service at all . . . the service directly opposite on the other side of Lake Eildon is perfect.

It would be great to have a signal you can rely on for conducting business on while up here from Melbourne, however at the moment it is just too in reliable.

**Howes Creek**

I have a flat on Mount Buller . . . to make a call I need to go upstairs against a window, I still have drop outs or no service. I have spoken to TELSTRA several times and they tell me I have good coverage? There are many black spots in the village.

**Mount Buller**

I run a business in Melbourne and when we come to Mansfield I would like to keep running the business. On a good day if we want to make a mobile call or connect to wireless email I have to leave the house go for a stroll to the wood shed and make the connection... sometime requires me to stand on a chair or hold the phone or note book computer up as high as I can to get a signal. By the way today is a good day and I am sending this email from behind the wood shed.

**Campagnolo Road**

We are residents of Ford Drive and although close to the Pap’s towers are in the shadow of the Paps and do not get mobile and internet coverage. We are with Telstra and have complained with little effect.

**Ford Drive**
Telestra Mobile Broadband Coverage

Approximate coverage. Coverage speed and performance is dependent on where you are, the device you are using and can be improved by adding an external antenna.

(© Maranoa Shire Council and others)
CONNECTIVITY IMPACT | BROADBAND COVERAGE: NBN AND ADSL

Estimated ADSL and Future NBN Coverage

Mapping for illustrative purposes only. Coverage data sourced from carrier websites. Data population data sourced from ABS 2011 Census. (C) Maranoa Shire Council and others.
Since moving to the area... I have experienced nothing but bad and at most times non-existent mobile phone and internet connection, I have had 4 new modems, and 2 antennas sent to me in an attempt to fix the problem to no avail.

Howes Creek Road

My wife was considering further studies (relating to her profession) which required the use of the internet; she is unable to do so and has become very frustrated due to the unavailability of the internet most days. The service provided in Mansfield is antiquated, inadequate and counter-productive to business and to the wellbeing of families living in the area.

Howes Creek Road

We are way too far from the local exchange for ADSL so instead for three years have been using mobile broadband by means of a router which is hard-wired to a Yagi aerial on the roof. This too is patchy but when we first started using it, although far from great was usable. However the signal we receive has steadily gotten worse (we’re guessing that in part this is due to the proliferation of smartphone devices which of course can also connect to the internet), but which, during the busy tourist periods, is utterly atrocious.

Goughs Bay

I have a film/video production company and also build & host websites... I have... tried many different external antennas and positions to improve my signal strength but still battle to get just one bar of signal on my $300 BigPond modem.

Alpine Ridge

For some of my Melbourne, interstate or international clients I need to upload video files to servers such as YouTube. Because of the slow connection speed I have developed a method whereby I power my modem from the cigarette lighter of my car. Some days I need to drive to the top of the hill 2-3 times to complete my business.

Alpine Ridge

I am a Mt Buller resident who also lives in Mansfield township. I have been trying to work off a wireless internet connection which caused no end of difficulties both in Mansfield and Mt Buller, constantly dropping out. I have since connected ADSL at 2 properties to try and combat the problems.

Mansfield

The mobile phone and Internet connection is close to nil. We have to leave mobiles and iPad in a specific corner of a window only. I’m a remedial massage therapist and my wife a book keeper, and we want to operate our business from home and both are dependant of Internet and mobile. Gough’s Bay as you know is in a high- risk area for bush fire and in case of fire we won’t be able to receive any alert on the mobile.

Goughs Bay

We live in Sawmill settlement, and network coverage is poor at best. We have the BigPond elite gateway modem, and a 22dbi yagi antenna on the roof. We have no fixed line internet access, so wireless is the only option.

Sawmill Settlement
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**SPEED TESTS**
Securing Our Digital Future

TELECOMMUNICATIONS ADVOCACY GROUP

Chair Cr Russell Bate
Cr Marg Attley
Robert Graves
Daryl Hunt
Noel Willaton
Trevor Poussard
Sarah Stegley
Ian Geer
David Roff
Ed Adamson
Ian Fraser
Roger Coates

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Telecommuting and E-Business in Mansfield Shire
Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Opportunities for People to Use Telecommuting and E-Business to Work Remotely in Rural and Regional Victoria

Mansfield Shire Council

ABSTRACT

Mansfield Shire Council has prepared this submission in support of residents and ratepayers who require effective telecommunications to work and conduct business.
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Natural landscape – digital scene

Mansfield Shire Council’s submission to the ‘Inquiry into the Opportunities for People to Use Telecommuting and E-Business to Work Remotely in Rural and Regional Victoria’ is unapologetically focused on the major current impediment to telecommuting and e-business being the lack of equitable telecommunication services throughout the shire and lack of comparative equity with major regional centres and metropolitan cities.

Conducting business on-line has become the new pen and paper for employees or business owners regardless of where they are physically. Globally, nationally or regionally it matters nought, in today’s 24/7 paradigm, where you hang your hat - as long as you have the tools to ‘get the job done’.

While outsourcing employees via state of the art telecommunications to regional satellite or home offices may have significant benefits from a peak hour, stressed metropolitan road and transport system – the real benefit for our region is in the work opportunities and choices afforded to locals, treechangers and part time residents as employees or self employed business owners.

Many residents rely on telecommunications and e-business to spend days working in Mansfield Shire and travelling to the city to conduct the face to face imperatives – enabling them to reside in the shire of their choice and yet remain competitive. These residents may be employees or business owners.

Mansfield Shire, as a significant lifestyle property economy, boasts a surprising number and variety of successful businesses across the construction and manufacturing sectors – some owners concede their businesses may be ‘better off’ elsewhere – closer to major hubs – but the owners don’t want to relinquish the lifestyle advantages of living in Mansfield Shire. For them, the importance of their telecommunications is critical.

Mansfield has been healthily growing with older couples and young families for many years above the state average, yet the spectre of population decline is never far from a regional municipality’s risk list.
Connecting the dots

Future proofing the Mansfield Shire economy is about looking after our strengths in tourism and agriculture and broadening our economic base compatible with our landscape and social values. To thrive we need young, skilled people.

The ability of Mansfield Shire to retain and attract Gen X & Ys will be heavily dependent on understanding what ‘ticks their boxes’ in a work environment sense. It’s not rocket science to know that high on the agenda and a ‘not-negotiable’ is access to fast and reliable internet for both work and social connectivity.

The importance of securing our digital future has seen the formation of a Mansfield Telecommunications Advocacy Group.

“Put simply, Mansfield Shire is seeking an effective telecommunications environment that will permit our residents and ratepayers to enjoy a reasonable quality of life, safety in times of risk and to conduct their businesses on a competitive basis” Russell Bate, Mayor, Mansfield Shire Council.¹

¹ Securing our Digital Future, Mansfield Shire Council, 2013 – attached as source reference
Definitions

Telecommuting
Telecommuting and telework are synonyms for the use of telecommunication to work outside the traditional office or workplace, usually at home or in a mobile situation. Factors that will continue to affect the future of telecommuting include the availability of bandwidth and fast internet connections in a given country; social methodologies for balancing work control and work freedom; the perceived values and economies in telecommuting; and the opportunities and need for working collaboratively across large distances, including globally.2

Telecommuting is a work arrangement in which the employee works outside the office, often working from home or at a location close to home (including coffee shops, libraries, and various other locations). Rather than travelling to the office, the employer “travels” via telecommunication links, keeping in touch with coworkers and employers via telephone and email.3

E-business

Although the terms e-commerce and e-business are often used interchangeably, there are differences. E-commerce is the buying and selling of goods and services on the internet or other computer network. Any brick and mortar store can become an e-commerce business by adding a virtual storefront with an online catalog. In most cases, e-business refers exclusively to internet businesses, but it may also refer to any business that uses internet technology to improve productivity and profitability.4

The terms ‘e-commerce’ and ‘e-business’ are often used interchangeably but what do these words really mean? e-commerce refers to online transactions - buying and selling of goods and/or services over the Internet. e-business covers online transactions, but also extends to all internet based interactions with business partners, suppliers and customers. These online interactions are aimed at improving or transforming business processes and efficiency.5

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2 searchmobilecomputing.techtarget.com
3 jobsearch.about.com Alison Doyle
4 Kristie Lorette, Demand Media, smallbusiness.chron.com
5 austrade.gov.au
Mansfield Shire – a snapshot of our local economy

Mansfield Shire is a vibrant and growing, rural lifestyle shire. Tourism, farming and lifestyle living are the backbone to a healthy local economy, supported by significant retail and service sectors.

Situated in North East Victoria, Mansfield Shire is in close proximity to the primary local market of Melbourne (around 2 hours) and major regional centres such as Shepparton, Wangaratta and Benalla.

The Shire acts as a hub for nature based tourism, being the gateway to Lake Eildon, Mt Buller/Mt Stirling and Alpine National Park. The region’s rural amenity is an intrinsic part of the Shire’s economic success. Tourism, livestock farming, holiday home investment and now professional service sector workers are attracted or leverage off the landscape and natural features of the region.

There are 1,164 businesses in Mansfield Shire with the accommodation and food services sector the largest by employment followed by retail trade and education and construction the largest by industry output at $55.569m. Over 50% of our retail trade is attributed to our visitors and the gross industry output for the Shire is $372.215m.

While we are ageing as per the statewide regional trend, the number of couples with children is growing as are the numbers with non-school qualifications. An increasing median household income indicates that Mansfield is becoming increasingly affluent, possibly with the attraction of new lifestyle residents.6

The growth of knowledge industries and professional services will also assist in sustaining Mansfield Shire’s economy and highlight some areas where future economic development may be focused, in particular how to leverage from and maximise the knowledge and skills capacity of professional services workers, working from home in the Shire.

Snapshot

- 1000 + businesses
- Industry output $372,215 million
- Unemployment rate well below the state average
- 50% of businesses located in Mansfield township
- 50% in other towns, villages and rural-based enterprises
- Employment base of around 3,700
- Over 1.14 million visitors (bulk overnight visitors)
- 52% retail trade attributed to tourism
- Mansfield residents are becoming more affluent, better educated and both older couples and young families are being attracted to the shire.7

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6 Mansfield Shire Economic Profile 2011 – Census Update
7 Mansfield Shire Economic Profile, February 2013
Benefits for rural and regional Victoria in working remotely

In Mansfield Shire, working remotely for some means working from home or away from the local central office when it suits - but for many it is the solution to juggling the lifestyle choice of the family or individual to live in Mansfield Shire while still keeping the career or business competitive. Stories abound of the work from local office (home) and travel (minimally) for the face-to-face.

Lifestyle choices for many override career. Business owners and workers choose to live in Mansfield even though it may not be the ‘best’ location for remuneration of effort.

Potential ‘treechangers’ at the Regional Living Expo genuinely enquire about the level of education and health services and work opportunity in the country. But they absolutely expect that telecommunications will be available on a par with what they have in the metropolitan area.

Health and education services are increasingly reliant upon telecommunications to provide specialist advice and curriculum flexibility while young workers expect a fast digital connectivity for work and social reasons as a ‘given’.

The retail sector – one of our major employers – is struggling with the trend to online shopping and competition from the discount chains. Buy local campaigns and main street vitalization go some way toward keeping dollars local. Innovative retail businesses are increasingly playing front of house retail and back of house internet engine room. While the nexus between business and e-business blurs – the constant is the need for quality telecommunications.

Digital communication now plays such a critical social, economic and emergency role in the everyday lives of rural and remote communities. Sub standard telecommunications can sentence a region to the social and economic backblocks.

For Mansfield Shire to continue to thrive and attract lifestyle property treechangers, workers, entrepreneurs and business; digital equity is required throughout the municipality with comparative equity at state and national levels.
Securing Our Digital Future

Given the critical importance of securing our digital future to support working remotely as a business or employee; for its social and safety imperatives for residents and visitors, Mansfield Shire Council and community are working together to advocate for equitable telecommunication services – this relates to meeting current deficiencies and allowing for future needs.

To that end, a paper has been developed (attached) that presents the social and economic challenges experienced by shire residents as a direct result of inadequate digital services across our municipality.

Its aim is to promote digital equity throughout the shire and comparative equity at state and federal level by:

- Providing an overview of the current coverage and connectivity situation in Mansfield Shire
- Listing essential outcomes to secure the digital future of Mansfield Shire and its community
- Explaining mobile telephone coverage and broadband connectivity service issues
- Sharing real stories of social and economic impact, faced by the Mansfield community.

Mansfield Shire has a predominance of small business operating from rural towns, remote settlements and home offices. Businesses based in Mansfield township (CBD and surrounds), equate to 50% of the 1,164 businesses across the municipality, thus over 50% of business operators experience mobile and broadband service below acceptable business standards with a direct impact on efficiency, competitiveness, costs and growth.

Businesses operating in black/grey/shadow digital service areas are frequently unable to carry out basic business practises such as conducting online sales, mobile telephone calls, virtual meetings, research or utilise national or international suppliers, source new markets or even contact clients. With the existing inequitable digital servicing there is a lack of economic equity. Businesses are unable to compete when they sit on the wrong side of the digital divide.

With the network latency experienced across the municipality business operation is seriously impacted. Standard real-time business communications such as Skype or video conferencing are impossible. The impact of this is compounded for rural and remote business where digital communication is vital.

Working from home is not an option for many rural residents. Low broadband speeds and lack of access to real-time communications prohibits effective teleworking. With a large ‘tree-change’ population in the municipality expectations of teleworking are as high as the disappointment experienced when mobile and broadband services prove inadequate for the practice.⁸

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⁸ Securing our Digital Future, Mansfield Shire Council, 2013
Real stories

I have a film/video production company and also build & host websites... I have... tried many different external antennas and positions to improve my signal strength but still battle to get just one bar of signal on my $300 BigPond modem.9

Alpine Ridge

For some of my Melbourne, interstate or international clients I need to upload video files to servers such as YouTube. Because of the slow connection speed I have developed a method whereby I power my modem from the cigarette lighter of my car. Some days I need to drive to the top of the hill 2-3 times to complete my business.

Alpine Ridge10

I run a business in Melbourne and when we come to Mansfield I would like to keep running the business. On a good day if we want to make a mobile call or connect to wireless email I have to leave the house go for a stroll to the wood shed and make the connection... sometime requires me to stand on a chair or hold the phone or note book computer up as high as I can to get a signal. By the way today is a good day and I am sending this email from behind the wood shed.

Campagnolo Road11

My main issue is that our internet connections/speed are so bad as soon as you leave the town. Wireless at both the winery and our house is pretty hopeless - there is no way we can send or receive any large files which generally means that working from anywhere but our office in Mansfield is out of the question. This impacts on the productivity of our enterprise as it limits my ability to work on site at the winery/vineyard or when at home, and also means our computers/users at the winery are limited with what they can do. To have to bring data/photos in to our office here on a data stick is not a very efficient use of the internet!

Given that both the winery and our house are in direct line of sight with Telstra towers and within 8km of Mansfield this is a very ordinary state of affairs. Having said that, the ADSL connection we have in Mansfield is pretty good (though not like those in Melbourne) and is adequate for what we need to do at the moment.

Delatite Lane12

9 Securing our Digital Future, Mansfield Shire Council, 2013
10 Securing our Digital Future, Mansfield Shire Council, 2013
11 Securing our Digital Future, Mansfield Shire Council, 2013
12 David Ritchie, Managing Director, Delatite Wines P/L
Recommendations

Telecommuting and E-Business are critical for the economic and social future of municipalities such as Mansfield. People will continue to make lifestyle choices regarding where they live and recreate but that choice will be increasingly defined by where they can remotely work and do business.

The Mansfield Shire Telecommunications Advocacy Group is focused on securing:

1. An acceptance by Government and telecommunication providers that Mansfield Shire’s telecommunications are inadequate and in need of an immediate improvement
2. A clear pathway mapped out to the resolution of coverage and reliability issues
3. A commitment by Government that Mansfield Shire residents and businesses will receive future digital services at comparable performance levels to Melbourne and regional centres.

Attachments