

MOBILE PHONE AND INTERNET ACCESS ISSUES IN LODDON SHIRE AND RURAL AREAS OF GREATER BENDIGO

'Stories from the Bush' *A snapshot of experiences*



For many years, rural residents in Loddon and the Greater Bendigo Shires have raised issues about the lack of access to reliable mobile phone and internet services. During COVID-19, when the only way to participate in many aspects of everyday life was through digital access, Bendigo Loddon Primary Care Partnership's (BLPCP's) partner organisations highlighted the increased burden this placed on rural residents. BLPCP interviewed some self-nominated rural households between May 14 and June 11, 2020, to find out how these issues impacted their access to education, work, telehealth, and social support. These are their stories.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

"These kids are meant to be doing their VCE. It's not fair that they don't have the same access to learning as other kids."

One mother from Calivil located in Loddon Shire, about 60km north-east of Bendigo, spoke of her frustration in watching her 3 children in high school and university, trying to participate in videoconferences with teachers and lecturers only to have the line drop out.

"First they'd try turning the video off so at least they could hear if not see what was going on. Then that would drop out too. Seeing their reactions has been really tough."

Another mum located between Boort and Quambatook talked about her children having to try to download work between 1am and 7am to access night data through the satellite connection when there was less demand on the connection. When that failed, they sometimes drove into her office in Boort to try to download schoolwork. In the end, the school provided a device which could be used as a hotspot but access through that was also unreliable.



"My telehealth clients were in their cars at the other end of a paddock on a hill to try to get reception."

"I can't send texts without wandering around the paddock."

"If my mobile phone rings inside, I have to run outside to answer it."

"I keep my mobile phone up on a ladder inside to get reception and I climb it quickly when it rings."

I was concerned when they were encouraging people to work from home because I knew I wouldn't be able to work from there. It takes ages to open an email for example. They said they'd see what the situation was and determine if it was safe for me to work from the office. Thank goodness I can. I don't know what I'd have done.

WORKING FROM HOME

Those who tried to work from home during the period, expressed great frustration about trying to connect with clients and colleagues. One resident described phoning clients from the front lawn to enable reception, and the issues that raised in terms of discussing confidential information. "Zoom" connections dropped out.

This inability to connect and utilise the internet from home forced one resident into her office in Boort which is connected to the NBN to enable engagement with clients. However, with the increased demand on the network, the connection with clients from the office was also inadequate.

"Usually it works pretty well but over this period it was terrible."

Those who work in the farming industry where "working from home" is the norm, spoke of the impact the lack of internet and mobile phone services has on their business in an ongoing way.

Unreliable mobile reception was discussed as a safety issue in the context of farming.

"We rely on the mobile phone. The only other way to communicate across the farm is through the CB, but you have to be actually in the ute and in the room with it so it's no good for communication if you're outside the ute or there's no one in the house."

"They could be on the property and end up going somewhere other than where they first intended. If they had a mobile, they could let you know. You need better access for emergencies."

The lack of reliable digital access also limited the technology that could be used to assist with more efficient farming practices. One farmer spoke of wanting to install water monitors for irrigation channels that could be hooked up to the mobile phone so there would be a notification about when to change the watering bays. However, that was not possible and in practice means water is wasted.

ACCESS TO TELEHEALTH

One resident expressed concerns about the quality of telehealth appointments she was arranging for her husband with his oncologist. They had set up videoconferences with Bendigo Health but the line was unreliable and dropped out so that the flow of the conversation was lost. They had a mobile number just in case but that dropped out as well sometimes. She was also waiting for Telstra to come and look at her landline which had just started dropping out.

Another resident worked as a psychologist and discussed the issues experienced with telehealth over the period.

"For 6 weeks we tried telehealth. Video often dropped out then you'd have to try switching to a phone call or switching to phone hotpots. Rural clients were all having similar issues their end. People were in cars at the other end of the paddock to get reception. Some chose to wait until they could get a face to face session again. So many sessions dropped out."

Another resident did a telehealth phone hookup. The mobile didn't work so they switched to a landline so couldn't use video.

I like not sitting in a waiting room. I like not travelling to appointments but I wish the connection was better.

Telehealth for regional and rural areas is being pushed and it's great to have as an option but the digital access issues made it a lot harder.

SOCIAL CONNECTION SAFETY AND SUPPORT

Social connection and support through a time of crisis is important, with mobile and internet connection being the main form of communication. One of the residents and her husband contracted coronavirus during this period. With inadequate mobile reception and unreliable internet access, the only communication method was through the landline. She talked of the isolation they felt at this time.

“There were 4 DAYS when neither of us could get out of bed. We couldn’t access anything. We felt totally cut off.”

She spoke of her fears for the lack of access to mobile and internet services as society moves to become more dependent on them.

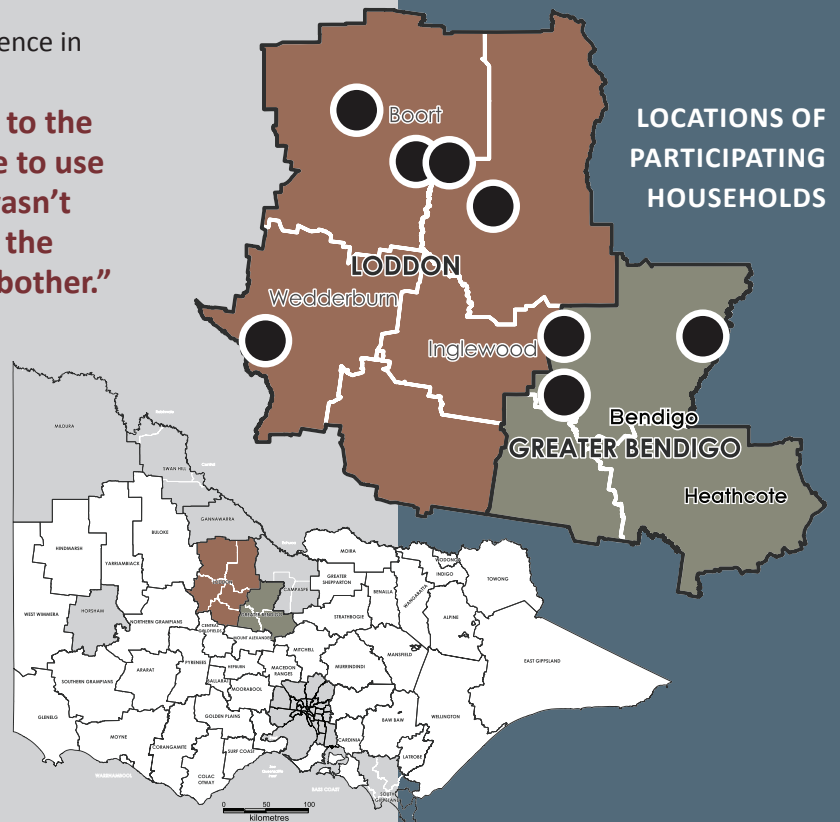
“People are going to be so isolated. If you live on a property, people begin to accept it as normal. Landlines are used less and less. We rely so much on digital stuff but it stuffs you up.”

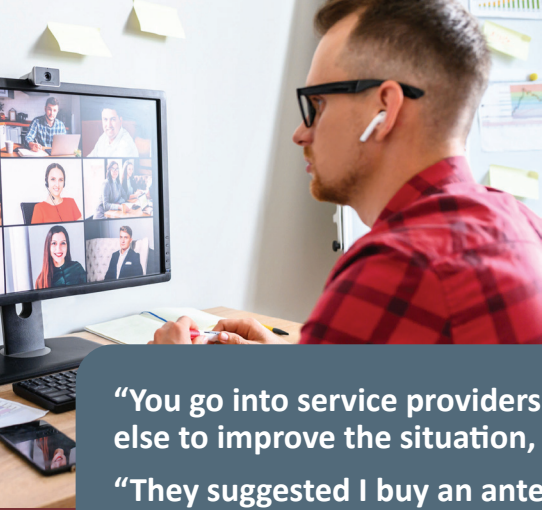
Another explained that she didn’t have a landline at the moment as they stayed in temporary accommodation on their property while their house was being built.

“It’s a struggle to keep in touch with the family. I have to do it from Wedderburn on my lunch break or when I go into Maryborough for shopping. I have to plan to make phone calls when I’m in a town, or if at home, ride my bike to an open space and hold my phone up in the air. I can’t do that at night. My sons work during the day. Mum is in a nursing home. It’s hard to keep in touch. Having moved from the city where this was not an issue, I’m surprised at how bad it is. I was oblivious to what goes on in the country. I’m really disappointed that there are so many rural properties that are disconnected. It’s discrimination. We’re at higher risks for emergencies too. There should be more towers going up. I admire people’s patience but the access is terrible.”

Similarly, another resident related her experience in reporting issues with her landline.

“The landline went down. I had to go to the dam bank 200m away from the house to use the mobile to report it. They said it wasn’t urgent as they could divert calls from the landline to the mobile. I said, “Don’t bother.”





EFFORTS RESIDENTS MAKE TO ADDRESS THE ISSUES AND ADDITIONAL COSTS INVOLVED

Many residents expressed ongoing frustration with their interactions with internet and mobile phone service providers in seeking to address the issues they encounter.

“You go into service providers to explain the situation and they want to sell you something else to improve the situation, but nothing works.”

“They suggested I buy an antenna but couldn’t guarantee it would work. It costs over \$1000, then you have to pay for the electrician to put it in.”

“We have a booster antenna for mobile reception which cost over \$1000. It made a difference 6 years ago but it doesn’t seem to be making a difference now. Do we need to get a new booster tower to catch up with technology?”

“Our neighbours’ experience is that you get advice from providers who say the internet will work but in reality it doesn’t. They are all using their mobile hotspots as best they can, so I’m unsure what we’ll do when our house is ready.”

“Our internet provider said that as more people access the satellite, the internet speed slows down. There’s nothing we can do about it.”



WHO IS LISTENING?

The overwhelming feeling from those households who participated in this project, was one of despair. Many had raised these issues with service providers and some had already contacted media and politicians. All were becoming increasingly frustrated that, despite making every effort to improve their access, their situation is not improving. As one resident said,

“We are digital savvy, but just don’t have access to the technology that everyone else does.”

Some expressed fears that their level of disadvantage compared to urban residents would increase exponentially as inclusion in everyday activities becomes more dependant on digital access, such that the current digital divide may become a digital chasm.



A resident who lives in Sebastian, 22km north of Bendigo, had been able to access NBN due to an infrastructure upgrade about 18 months ago. This had greatly improved their internet service which was described as “appalling” prior to this. She explained that when it works, “it’s awesome.” However, when it fails, it’s out for 2 to 3 hours. This had been a rare occurrence, however it is becoming more frequent and she was speculating as to whether this was due to the increased demand on the system particularly during COVID 19. Her landline is also through the internet as at the time she signed up to a plan, the internet line was reliable and the cost of maintaining a separate landline would have cost \$30 per month excluding calls. Once she could access the NBN, her household’s unlimited internet, mobile and home phone bundle saved her over \$100 per month. However now the household was in a situation where, due to ongoing poor mobile reception, and the increasing unreliability of the NBN service, at times they had no way of accessing emergency services.

“We’d like to have a backup to internet. If it goes down, the mobile service is not good enough for emergencies, and in recent experience it goes down a lot.”

Many residents also discussed “rural tick” or “blue tick” phones which indicate that the device has been tested and delivers superior voice coverage in rural and regional areas. However, residents with these phones expressed the view that they made little difference in practice. One resident explained that her husband’s “rural tick” mobile phone did not perform any better than her mobile phone that did not have the tick. Another resident discussed the cost of the rural tick as a factor.

“If we had rural tick phones it would be really expensive. It’s a budget issue. But also farmers around here say they’re not reliable anyway so is it really worth all the extra cost if it doesn’t work anyway?”

