

## REVIEW OF STATE PLANNING POLICY 5.2 – TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE

The Department of Planning, on behalf of the Western Australian Planning Commission (WAPC), is undertaking a review of the WAPC's State Planning Policy 5.2 Telecommunications Infrastructure and its associated guidelines. This paper provides information about the purpose and scope of the review and the role of the policy in managing the development of new telecommunications infrastructure.

### WHY IS THE POLICY BEING REVIEWED?

Good telephone coverage – both mobile and fixed-line – is an essential part of modern life. It enables community interaction, supports economic productivity, and allows rapid response in times of emergency.

Since the release of the current State Planning Policy in 2004, demand for mobile telecommunications services has increased beyond expectation and technology has rapidly advanced. A policy update is now needed to reflect changes in technology and industry practices; and to respond to increased demand.

In addition to updating the functional aspects of the policy, a review will also evaluate whether the policy and local practices adequately balance service needs with relevant health, environmental and visual landscape considerations. It will also examine how to improve policy requirements for local government for when they assess telecommunications infrastructure proposals in their localities to give certainty to the industry and reduce the number of costly appeals against refused infrastructure development applications.

### WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES?

A number of issues have been identified and are explained below. However, three key themes are:

1. Community need for adequate mobile data services and coverage as well as the elimination of black spots.
2. Need for greater certainty for industry and local governments in approval processes.
3. The role of planning with respect to community concerns about health issues.

In summary, community concerns about perceived health effects, community pressures on local governments and the lack of specific guidance in the SPP 5.2 on the siting of infrastructure near sensitive land uses has led to inconsistent approaches to the decisions about new telecommunications infrastructure.



### WHAT ARE THE HEALTH ISSUES?

There has been some community concern about the effects of Radiofrequency Electromagnetic Energy (EME) emissions from telecommunications infrastructure. EME is part of everyday life – emitted by the sun and the earth, as well as by mobile phones, television transmissions, radio broadcasting and emergency systems.

Extensive studies have shown that environmental levels of EME are far below the levels that would result in any health impacts.

Setting standards to protect the Australian public is a Commonwealth Government responsibility. Commonwealth regulations set standards with which all mobile phone networks and infrastructure must comply. They are published by the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA) and they are known as the ARPANSA Standard. At public access points, even without buffers, emissions are typically hundreds or even thousands of times below the ARPANSA standard potentially harmful levels.

### IS THERE A NEED FOR BUFFER DISTANCES?

Recommended buffer zones are sometimes used in planning instruments to separate sensitive or incompatible land uses from each other. Separation distances are related to the nature of the problem. Assessing the appropriateness of a buffer separation distance can be based on factors like safety and health, or on amenity issues like noise and odours.

For radio frequency EME, ARPANSA sets clear criteria that must be applied when new telecommunications infrastructure is approved. This means that where a second buffer distance is added, there is a layer of regulatory redundancy and the extra separation is not required under the Commonwealth health and safety standards. In fact, a new tower sited further from a community sensitive area may need to operate at a higher power to cover a larger distance. This may result in higher EME exposures in that sensitive area as well as cause phone handsets to emit stronger signals to connect with a tower which is further away.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

Locating mobile phone towers **CLOSER** to sensitive sites can result in **LOWER** levels of electromagnetic energy.

Mobile phone towers are usually sited where they will best meet coverage requirements. If a site is placed further away from its optimal location, it may need to operate at higher power. Therefore, if a tower is close to sensitive area, such as a school, the emissions at that area may be lower than if it was placed further away.

## REVIEW OF STATE PLANNING POLICY 5.2 – TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE

### WHAT ARE CURRENT ISSUES AFFECTING THE STATE PLANNING POLICY AND THE APPROVAL OF NEW TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE?

A range of issues affecting the installation of telecommunications infrastructure in Western Australia have been identified by stakeholders. They include:

- Black-spots and poor mobile phone coverage in some areas – these are identified as important safety issues by emergency services.
- The application of inconsistent buffer zone distances by some local governments – this creates uncertainty for telecommunications industry participants and can impact on the quality of services in certain areas.
- The varied approach in assessing telecommunications infrastructure development applications across local government – this has contributed to uncertainty among industry participants; and in some cases, resulted in lengthy and costly appeals against refused infrastructure development applications.



- The complex approvals process for telecommunications carriers to install their infrastructure in Western Australia is in contrast to elsewhere in Australia – this impacts on local jobs and investment and subsequently on the State’s economic performance. A simplified and consistent process, and clearer rules and guidance for assessing telecommunications infrastructure development applications would be supported by local government and assist in maintaining community confidence in development decisions.
- Concern over the perceived health risks associated with the siting of telecommunications infrastructure among some members of local communities – these concerns are often at odds with the standards set by ARPANSA and result in communities seeking to override the Commonwealth Standard’s requirements by asking local governments to set larger separation distances than are otherwise required. The planning system operates within an inter-governmental policy framework and regularly incorporates standards and practices from other policy jurisdictions. In

## REVIEW OF STATE PLANNING POLICY 5.2 – TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE

this context, the safety of telecommunications infrastructure is required to comply with health and safety rules set by the Commonwealth Government, which is based on evidence and international research.

- The State Planning Policy's current approach to the aesthetic requirements for new telecommunications infrastructure could be improved.
- Improvements and changes in telecommunications infrastructure technology and to national infrastructure arrangements, such as the National Broadband Network, need to be recognised through the State Planning Policy.