404-19

Regional Connectivity Submission
regionalconnectivity@communications.gov.au

9 September 2019

Wimmera Development Association Regional Connectivity Submission on behalf of the Wimmera Southern Mallee Region

Overview

The State Government Regional Partnerships program have developed Digital Plans across regional Victoria. These plans must be incorporated in future improvements to service delivery and regional priorities to ensure delivery efficiencies and avoid duplication. In rural and remote areas, it cannot be underestimated how unreliable digital connectivity is. Many service offerings have been made available to rural areas, most with limited success. Future programs for digital infrastructure must support efficiency gains for the agricultural and mining sectors as well as supporting improved educational and social outcomes for the region's youth. Regional and rural businesses have many options of technology available to use and require the connectivity to support these platforms to increase efficiencies. A greater focus is required for farming communities and businesses outside of rural and remote townships.

Question 1
Are there additional key elements that should be incorporated into the design of the Regional Connectivity Program?

Technical and customer support

This program requires an educational component to build on regional capacity in the service and support sector. In many instances where businesses have invested in new technologies there is little or no technical support available within the region and city based support services have limited understanding of the restrictions of regional connectivity and the implications for new technology adoption. As a requirement of the program, there is a 10 year timeframe for delivery of the project. Customer service and IT support also needs to be included in the successful projects to support the ongoing accessibility and delivery of the service for the duration of the project.

Regional Digital Plans / Shared Learning

In regional/rural & remote areas, many organisations have collaborated on digital submissions and small-scale connectivity projects in the past. While place-based projects can deliver some results, a regionally coordinated approach involving collaboration among local and state government agencies, regional economic development agencies and community and business groups is likely to deliver greater impact in a more cost-effective manner. In

Victoria, the State Government Regional Partnerships program has developed Digital Plans (see attached) across the state.

Farm Businesses and Families

A broader focus needs to be given to Farm Businesses as part of this program. Currently the program highlights townships with lower levels of service, but the agricultural sector is not highlighted as a major beneficiary. With agriculture being a key economic driver of the Wimmera Southern Mallee more support needs to be given to improving the connectivity of farm businesses and families to deliver increased efficiencies in the sector and reduce educational and social inequality. The education needs of the younger generation will also benefit from increased connectivity, with many students living on farms unable to study from home using online tools due to lack of services. As a region, the Wimmera Southern Mallee has educational outcomes of a lesser standard than a large portion of the state of Victoria.

Question 2
Should other parties, for example local government authorities, business organisations or industry groups, be allowed to lead a bid for Regional Connectivity Program funding?
Other parties should be able to apply for program funding including consortia of other parties, however, all applications should be required to have a business case/feasibility study to support the application, e.g. a regional water corporation in Victoria has implemented an internal network for system management and they are currently working with the agricultural community to look at ways their network can add value to these businesses and local community.

In the Wimmera Southern Mallee, it is recognised that projects such as these are better delivered across the region, using shared knowledge to build on regional capacity rather than a number of disconnected small-scale projects. A number of our regional organisations already support shared service delivery through numerous programs and departments. For example, the Wimmera Southern Mallee councils have recently partnered with the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority to implement the same GIS mapping platform to assist with public/tourism location information and town planning, minimising costs and increasing efficiencies to all users. Previously councils across the regions were using different programs costing significantly more and delivered inconsistent data and less efficient use of time. Undertaking shared services also assists with having a number of people with shared knowledge to support the system across the region.

Question 3
Are there other organisations beside local, state and territory governments that could be considered 'trusted sources of information' for the purposes of identifying local telecommunications priorities?
In Victoria, the Regional Partnership program has developed Digital Plans for the regions. These plans have been developed with State Government, Local Governments, Local Development Organisations and Industry using evidence-based research and a large number of networks.

Question 4
Are there ways that the Department can facilitate linkages between potential infrastructure providers and local communities?

62 Darlot St
Horsham Vic 3400
03 5381 6500
info@wda.org.au
www.wda.org.au

The Department should play a role in quality control and audit to ensure that service providers meet quality standards e.g. are accredited/licenced to take part in the program. End users would then be confident in their decision making that they were involved in a reputable program with solid backing.

Controls are required to be certain that assessments of applications are undertaken in a fair and equitable way, with weighting and increased priority given to projects that maximise benefits for regions and not for political gain e.g. marginal seats.

Local communities should also undertake an audit of existing and upcoming digital connectivity projects to understand exactly what projects are in the pipeline to deliver these services.

Question 5
Are there any comments that you wish to make in relation to co-contributions?

In Victoria, due to the recent work undertaken by Regional Partnerships with Digital Plans, there may be an appetite for co-contributions with State Government if these projects enable the delivery of regional priorities.

Regional projects showing benefits in efficiencies to the agricultural and mining sector will have increased chance of receiving co-contributions. It is therefore important to include these sectors in discussions for these projects.

Question 6
What type of projects should be considered for funding through the Regional Connectivity Program?

A number of projects are being investigated which include alternative NBN, Community Telco, 4G Repeaters to set up regional infrastructure using overlays of coverage mapping already undertaken. Additionally, the AgTIDE (Agricultural Technology, Innovation, Development & Extension) Project is currently being rolled out in the region. This project will deliver better uptake, education and knowledge to support the agricultural sector as part of a regional data farm assisting farmers to unlock further efficiencies and mitigating impacts of climate change.

On the back of recent oncology and cardiac rehabilitation trials successfully conducted by the Wimmera Health Alliance a proposition is currently being finalised to establish a collaboration between the Royal Children's Hospital, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, the Royal Flying Doctors Service and researchers to deliver Telehealth to Wimmera based GP's to offer specialist paediatric advice and referrals.

Strong business cases and legacy outcomes need to be included in any project applications.

Question 7
Are there any comments that you wish to make in relation the proposal that all Funded Solutions will provide Retail Services for a minimum of 10 years after the Asset has become operational?

IT Support and customer services needs to be included in all projects otherwise services may become redundant before project completion and adoption will be slowed. Capacity building/training is also required to upskill local people to deliver regionally relevant and applicable advice. IT support and customer Services need to be available for the duration of the project.

In the event of a telco providers/suppliers entering into receivership, ownership of infrastructure should revert to project owners or funders to establish some security to those investors.

Question 8

Are there any comments in relation to the proposed Eligible and Ineligible Areas?

Criteria for eligible areas should also be weighted towards locations with little or no service. Across the Wimmera Southern Mallee region, sparse populations over and expansive area create limited opportunities for further investment by the primary two telcos being Telstra and Optus. In many areas, for productivity and safety, farmers and residents choose to have two handsets with a service with both companies.

Example 1: Township of Kaniva

Unlike most Wimmera towns the township of Kaniva currently accesses the NBN via satellite technology, even though the main NBN trunk travels through the township. This situation creates limited and expensive connectivity to the local area.

Example 2: Northern Grampians / Grampians National Park

A large portion of the Grampians National Park currently has limited servicing for residents, tourism operators & visitors and emergency services.

Example 3: Township of Birchip

The township of Birchip is currently serviced by Fixed Wifi NBN. This service is provided from Donald and connects via microwave point to point. Latency in the systems is inadequate for larger business use.

Question 9

Are there any comments that you wish to make in relation to the proposed eligible and ineligible expenditure?

Funding for estimated capital cost may not be enough for smaller rural and remote communities, in these areas, it may be necessary to include financial assistance towards some operational expenditure such as Customer Service, IT Support and education (capacity building) in the region.

Smaller and less supported communities should have access to programs such as this to assist with business and educational support, improving the outcomes for rural/regional areas that are already playing catch up to the rest of the broader community. For these areas, consideration should be given to supporting the development of feasibility studies and business cases.

A pro-forma business case could be developed to assist these projects to work through the financial component of the project. This would also assist the assessment of the projects as they would be using the same methodology in their applications.

Question 10

Are there particular circumstances where it may be appropriate for the Commonwealth to make some contribution to ongoing operating expenses?

(As Q9) Funding for estimated capital cost may not be enough for smaller rural and remote communities, in these areas, it may be necessary to include financial assistance towards some operational expenditure such as Customer Service, IT Support and education (capacity building) in the region.

Question 11

Is there a case for a third category, for highly localised solutions for projects that, for example, are seeking funding of less than $200,000 (GST inclusive)?

A third category is seen as a positive option, and could assist some smaller communities/regions to access this program. A specific funding pool, reserved for highly localised solutions would help to ensure that small rural and remote communities were adequately represented, particularly for those where the cost:benefit may not meet pre-determined thresholds.

Question 12
Are there any other design principles that should be considered?

Consideration should be given to supporting/funding the development of feasibility studies and businesses cases to support applications submitted under a third category (e.g. less than $200,000), especially for rural and remote areas where relevant expertise may be limited. A prepopulated web pro-forma or portal could also be considered.
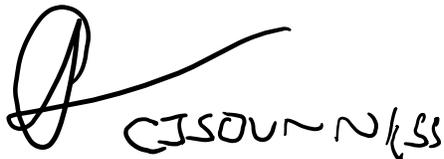

Question 13
Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment criteria?

How are the criteria weighted? Rural and remote areas should be weighted more highly to drive program benefits to areas where it will make the most impact.
The reduction of social deprivation in rural and remote areas should be considered and weighted accordingly.
Education and support capability that builds a legacy from the project should be included as a criteria item.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Sounness
Executive Director

Att: Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnerships Digital Plan Summary Document