7 February 2023

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: Regional Connectivity Program Round 3 (including Mobile Black Spot opportunities)—Draft Grant Opportunity Guidelines

Thank you for the opportunity to review the 'Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) Round 3 Grant Opportunity Guidelines' and to submit feedback.

Livingstone Shire is nestled along the beautiful Capricorn Coast and covers approximately 11,776 square kilometres, with a population of almost 40,000 residents which continues to grow rapidly. The Shire is made up of 66 localities with many of these localities experiencing vulnerability during disaster events. The Livingstone Shire Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG) works proactively to reduce risk and increase the resilience of residents and visitors. This letter advocates specifically for the safety of isolated and vulnerable communities and seeks amendments to the guidelines that will allow the opportunity for improved communication technologies, particularly during disaster events.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (the Framework) sets out the foundational work required nationally, across all sectors, to reduce existing disaster risk, minimise new disaster risk, and deliver better climate and disaster risk information. The suggested amendments to the RCP will align with this framework and the responsibility all sectors have in reducing risk.

Australia's 2030 vision for disaster risk reduction, which is broadly aligned with the goals of the Sendai Framework and the Sustainable Development Goals are:

In Australia, we are enabled and supported to actively reduce disaster risk and limit the impacts of disasters on communities and economies. All sectors of society understand and respond to social, environmental, technological and demographic changes which have the potential to prevent, create or exacerbate disaster risks. All sectors of society:

- *make disaster risk-informed decisions,*
- *are accountable for reducing risks within their control,*
- *and invest in reducing disaster risk in order to limit the cost of disasters when they occur.*

The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience outlines that application of a resilience-based approach is not solely the domain of emergency management agencies; rather, it is a shared responsibility between governments, communities, businesses and individuals.

Livingstone Shire's increasing population and tourism growth is exacerbating vulnerabilities of isolated and remote communities during disaster events including more road crash incidents, marine rescues and isolated motorists all of which require reliable communications. In large scale disaster events it is vital to send mass messaging via emergency alerts, particularly to reach tourists and visitors. During peak holiday periods, the population of some our isolated communities (with little or no communications service) can swell from 200 to 2000, intensified by the post COVID 19 increase in domestic tourism. To that end, we promote amendment to the guidelines to allow investment in communication technologies specifically in communities that are vulnerable to isolation and subsequently at risk.

Section 2.2 of the guidelines addresses 'About Round 3'.

In alignment with the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework and the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience which outlines shared responsibilities of business and government, it is suggested that this section is tailored to include vulnerable communities:

> A $100 million Regional Connectivity Solutions stream for place-based solutions that deliver new or upgraded broadband services or upgraded mobile services. It will enable bespoke telecommunications projects to be specifically tailored to the particular economic and/or social requirements of a region, including isolated and vulnerable communities
>
> For Regional Connectivity Solutions, the Round 3 Grant Opportunity will focus on areas:
> - of high economic and/or social value and/or vulnerable communities (small, remote, or isolated with limited or no public safety or first responder capabilities)
> - outside the NBN fixed-line footprint; and
> - where better connectivity and increased data have a clear benefit to a local region.

Section 3.1 of the guidelines states that indicative funding amounts are streamlined for solutions that improve telecommunications infrastructure in First Nations communities

We appreciate the nomination of First Nations communities. To further increase the accessibility and support of vulnerable communities, Livingstone LDMG would like to submit consideration of indicative funding amounts specifically for communities vulnerable to disaster events:

> Round 3 of the Program has up to $150 million (GST exclusive) of funding available, including:
> - $100 million for Regional Connectivity Solutions, including indicative funding of $15 million (GST exclusive) for solutions that improve telecommunications infrastructure in First Nations communities and including indicative funding of $15 million (GST exclusive) for solutions that improve telecommunications infrastructure in isolated communities vulnerable to disaster events; and
> - $50 million for Mobile Black Spot Solutions, including indicative funding of $7.5 million (GST exclusive) for solutions that provide new mobile coverage in First Nations communities and including indicative funding of $7.5 million (GST exclusive) for solutions that improve telecommunications infrastructure in isolated communities vulnerable to disaster events.
>
> All eligible applications under the Regional Connectivity Solutions stream will be grouped into three categories for both the overall Program merit list and the First Nations communities merit list and the isolated communities vulnerable to disaster events, according to the amount of Program funding requested, to ensure that smaller projects are given due consideration during the assessment process.

Section 6.1 of the guidelines addresses the merit criteria, with section 6.1.2 nominating Merit Criterion two (social Benefits).

Within the social benefits section we propose that consideration be given to communities that are vulnerable or isolated from two or more potential natural disasters. Further inclusion to include transient or seasonal populations, such as marine/seafaring communities, or areas with a seasonal workforce, such as fruit pickers or those that migrate inter-state to work from home. For example:

Examples of how your project could demonstrate these social benefits include:

a. facilitating provision of more efficient and effective health or education services, including improved access to health or education resources in the home

b. improving public safety and network resilience in a defined area. This may include the ability to call 000 from more locations, providing alternative technologies with which to do so, or improving the effectiveness, resilience or safety of Public Safety Premises

c. improving retail competition, regional amenity, community connections and inclusion. This may include improving affordability, providing services that help to attract and retain a workforce or enhancing cultural heritage; and/or

d. addressing disadvantage within the community including First Nations. This may include addressing low digital inclusion, providing affordable services to places with entrenched disadvantage, or providing people who are excluded with improved opportunities to access support services.

e. addressing isolated, remote and vulnerable communities, particularly those with one road in and one road out with limited or no public safety first responder capabilities. This may include communities vulnerable to disaster events, communities with transient or tourist populations, and those with marine or seafaring populations that rely on communications technology.

The Livingstone Shire LDMG has firsthand experience in prevention, preparation, response and recovery in isolated and vulnerable communities. With the increasing severity and regularity of disasters in Australia and the need for a coordinated, cooperative national effort to enhance Australia's capacity to withstand and recover from emergencies and disasters we look forward to working with industry and business to build and increase resilience. Thank you for opening the guidelines for review and for considering isolated, vulnerable communities that are exposed and at risk during and after disaster events.

Yours sincerely