

Introduction

The Northern Territory Government (NTG) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the guidelines for round 3 of the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP).

These comments are provided by the Office of Digital Government in the Department of Corporate and Digital Development.

The *Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia*, announced in the 2022–23 Federal Budget, is acknowledged as an essential program which will improve telecommunications services in remote areas of Australia. The RCP is a vital part of this plan and has already provided benefit to remote Territorians from previous rounds of the program.

Comments on the Guidelines

i. Under Section 2.1 it is stated

\$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

\$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.

The NTG welcomes the funding allocation under this program to make a difference in connectivity across regional Australia, and the specific allocation to improve connectivity to First Nations communities.

ii. Under Section 2.2.1 it is stated

The services to be delivered, as a results of the proposed projects, must be a demonstrable improvement over the existing telecommunications solutions in the relevant area.

NTG supports the prioritisation of improved service delivery and encourages the prioritisation of projects that will deliver new and improved connectivity to significantly underserved and disadvantaged communities – particularly very remote First Nations communities.

iii. Under Section 2.2.4 it is stated

Applicants seeking dedicated First Nations funding will need to demonstrate that its proposed solution will benefit a First Nations community.

The NTG supports the requirement to demonstrate benefits to First Nations communities and support from the local community.

Based on experience from previous RCP funding rounds, there has been limited time to complete full feasibility studies to scope out detailed proposal to improve telecommunications in very remote Aboriginal communities, which would provide a more accurate estimate of costs.

Work continues to engage with communities and telecommunications providers to develop realistic proposals which are cost effective, culturally appropriate and align with the aspirations of local

communities. With rapidly changing technology and continual development in this space, the NTG would encourage sufficient flexibility be built into the submission process to allow for variations to respond to potential changes in the details of a project.

Projects to deliver benefits to First Nations communities could also outline the benefits that these would provide in line with national Closing the Gap targets.

- iv. Under Section 5.1 it is stated, that solutions must:

Not overbuild a like-for-like services unless you can demonstrate a clear need for improvement and the project would deliver a demonstrable and substantive improvement in service quality, coverage, reliability or speed.

NTG encourages efficient and shared use of existing infrastructure to maximise the outcomes delivered for remote and regional Australians.

- v. Under Section 6.1.1 it is stated projects can demonstrate economic benefits through

Facilitating greater competition in telecommunication retail services

While NTG recognises the vital importance of introducing competition in remote telecommunications, it would encourage the RCP funding to continue to prioritised the need to deliver substantially improved connectivity to remote communities who either have no connectivity or are significantly underserved under existing arrangements

- vi. Under Section 6.1.3 it is stated

The maturity of the proposed solution and technology being adopted; including case studies of where the same or a similar solution has been implemented

The NTG recognises the importance of funding mature solutions that will reliably meet the needs of customers, and encourages this to be balanced with support for innovative and flexible proposals that will provide connectivity solutions to some of Australia's most remote and hard-to-reach communities.

- vii. Section 6.2 outlines that Mobile Black Spot Solutions will prioritise funding of multi-network operator infrastructure.

The NTG in-principle supports implementation of multi-network operator infrastructure, noting that limited mobile coverage, backhaul capability and competition in the NT makes it difficult for it to attract successful projects under this funding program.

Department Contact

The NT Government is committed to working closely with the Australian Government to maximise investment in telecommunications infrastructure in the NT and to reduce the gap in digital connectivity between the NT and other jurisdictions to enable all Territorians to access modern digital connectivity. The latest round of RCP will assist with this commitment and is very much appreciated.

Contact details are:

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