



## **Submission in response to the Regional Connectivity Program Discussion Paper**

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The Regional Development Advisory Committee (RDAC) operates as an independent advisory body to the Minister for Regional and Rural Development on matters relevant to the Government's regional policy agenda. RDAC's current membership comprises the nine Chairs of the Regional Partnerships and its role is to identify and advise on regional policy matters across social, economic and environmental domains, with its priority being a focus on state-wide and systemic issues.

The Victorian Government supported the establishment of the nine Regional Partnerships to provide a platform for all regional communities to have a voice on the issues that are important to them. Each Regional Partnership includes a diverse membership drawn from local communities, businesses and across government, ensuring each region's unique voice and priorities are represented and advocated for.

Based on community consultation, improved digital connectivity has been identified across all Regional Partnerships as a key economic and social development priority.

Despite substantial policy and program investments from the Commonwealth and State, the regional digital divide persists, which significantly disadvantages regional businesses and communities in accessing the economic and social development opportunities offered by digital technologies.

In this context, RDAC, on behalf of the Regional Partnerships, commends the Commonwealth on its \$60 million investment into the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) which is a promising step from the Commonwealth to pilot its own place-based approach to digital infrastructure investments.

Effective delivery of place-based initiatives like the RCP relies on strong data and active, well-informed local stakeholders who can identify and direct investment to local issues and priorities.

RDAC requests that the Commonwealth recognise Regional Partnerships as key stakeholders in supporting RCP delivery in Victoria, acknowledging the substantial place-based evidence

that they have gathered in developing the nine Regional Partnership Digital Plans and the active digital connectivity stakeholder groups that have been fostered in their development.

The Digital Plans have been developed in close collaboration with regional stakeholders to better understand the existence of place-based digital infrastructure gaps and issues in each region. The Digital Plans highlight the ongoing community concerns regarding the regional digital divide in Victoria. Analysis of digital supply and demand in Digital Plans has been conducted on a place and sector basis looking at various digital connectivity types in the context of significant places, primary production areas, tourist locations and transport corridors. Key issues identified include:

- The need for high-capacity, reliable business-grade NBN services. Despite significant investment by the Commonwealth in the NBN network, there will remain many regional premises and businesses unable to access the standard of service they need to support their activities and which will need to be upgraded in the coming years.
- Issues with mobile coverage, particularly moving outside town centres into more remote locations and being able to access sufficient coverage to support the functionality businesses and citizens expect and need to access regularly, including voice telephony, web-browsing, streaming, data applications and downloads.
- Public WiFi networks to provide alternative connectivity to support disadvantaged residents, tourists and students and offer higher-quality connectivity than may be available in premises outside of town centres.
- The need for broad coverage of Low-Power Wide Area Networks (LP-WAN) to support Internet of Things (IoT) devices and adoption across primary production areas and other regional industries.
- Variation in digital inclusion across regional locations and common community concerns regarding digital literacy and digital skills to support effective engagement with digital economy opportunities.

The RCP program can target novel solutions to localised digital connectivity priorities. The emphasis of the RCP discussion paper is rightly placed on digital infrastructure, but the program would also benefit from being flexible enough to support related digital priorities of local communities alongside infrastructure improvements, such as digital skills and capability development, for example in the form of digital hubs.

The RCP should also be established with enough flexibility for other parties, such as local governments and state agencies to be able to lead applications to the program in addition to applications from service providers.

The Regional Partnership Digital Plans are nearing completion. Along with the informed, active regional stakeholder communities fostered in their development, the Digital Plans and Regional Partnerships are critical assets to support RCP implementation and we would

welcome the opportunity to work with the Commonwealth to ensure the RCP is a success in meeting the priority needs of our local communities.

In making this submission on behalf of all Regional Partnerships, RDAC notes that individual Partnerships may also make their own submissions highlighting specific regional and local issues identified through the development of their Digital Plans.



**Chair**  
**Regional Development Advisory Committee**