



28 February 2020

Regional Deployment Branch
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications
GPO Box 594
Canberra ACT 2601

Via email: regionalconnectivity@communications.gov.au

To whom it may concern,

Re. Digital Technology Hub — consultation paper

The Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications' (the department) *Digital Technology Hub — consultation paper*.

The RRRCC is an alliance of 21 volunteer and advocacy organisations with a shared interest in improving telecommunications in the bush. The Coalition was formed in 2016 to raise awareness of the important role of connectivity for regional, rural and remote Australians and to advocate for continued improvements. The RRRCC's advocacy efforts are focused on five high-level goals, under which we have articulated a number of specific asks. The RRRCC's five goals are:

1. Guaranteed access to voice and data services.
2. Equitable voice and data services that meet minimum standards and reliability.
3. Continued program to expand mobile coverage.
4. Digital capacity building for regional, rural and remote Australia.
5. Affordable communications services for regional, rural and remote Australia.

The Digital Tech Hub is an important initiative that will help to deliver on Goal 4: *Digital capacity building for regional, rural and remote Australia*, and the RRRCC welcomed the government's 2019-20 Budget commitment to establish the Hub. The RRRCC believes that Australian society and the economy stand to gain from having regional, rural and remote areas digitally connected, and that to realise these benefits consumers and businesses need independent, trustworthy technical support to get connected and stay connected. A well-designed and appropriately

resourced Digital Tech Hub is an important mechanism by which government can help realise the benefits of a digitally connected regional Australia.

The RRRCC was closely engaged in the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review, which called for government to commit to improving digital literacy in regional, rural and remote Australia and ultimately led to the Digital Tech Hub program being established. To deliver on the RRRCC's Goal 4, we have called for the government to work closely with the RRRCC on the Design of the Digital Tech Hub and to commit to supporting the hub beyond the current two-year funding period.

The RRRCC thanks the department for its willingness to engage with our member organisations on the design of the Digital Tech Hub. To deliver maximum benefit, it is essential that initiatives such as the hub are informed by those who genuinely understand the needs of regional, rural and remote consumers, including those represented by RRRCC members.

The RRRCC has consulted on the design of the hub and in this submission we provide a number of general comments as well as responses to the specific questions posed in the consultation paper. **Attached** to this submission is a copy of a document the RRRCC provided to the department in June 2019, following the government's 2019 Budget announcement that it would fund a \$60 million Regional Connectivity Program (including a Digital Tech Hub). The RRRCC encourages the department to adopt the seven design elements described in the attached document (*A new Digital Tech Hub – RRRCC priorities*), summarised as:

- Direct access to advice and assistance through multiple communication channels that are easily accessible and user-friendly.
- Staff must have extensive knowledge of regional telecommunications technologies.
- The advice provided by the hub must be technology and provider agnostic.
- The services must be provided both reactively and proactively.
- The services must draw on past experience and involve the collection of data to inform future services.
- An initial focus should be on how to get connected / how to stay connected / how to use a connection.
- Consideration should be given to provision of face-to-face tech help and training (pending the availability of resources).

The Digital Tech Hub should be based in regional Australia

The RRRCC recommends that as a regionally focused service, the hub should be based in regional Australia. Most telecommunications tech help is located in the major cities (or offshore) and therefore staffed by people who are unlikely to have a lived understanding of the telecommunications issues faced by regional consumers. As the purpose of the hub is to provide support to and upskill regional consumers, it makes sense that the hub be embedded in regional Australia, with a

regionally based workforce that genuinely understands – and regularly uses – regional telecommunications services.

A review mechanism should be established

The RRRCC believes it will be important to establish a formal review mechanism as part of the contract arrangements for delivery of the Digital Tech Hub, as well as an opportunity to provide ongoing feedback. Any review mechanism should allow for relevant stakeholders – including RRRCC member organisations – to provide feedback on the operations of the hub and propose improvements or modifications.

Providing independent and factual information

Consumers rely on independent and factual information to inform connectivity decisions that will have a dramatic and long-term effect on their households and businesses. While organisations such as the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network currently provide high quality independent information for the general consumer, there remains a gap in the market for further independent, unbiased information and specialist tech support for regional consumers. The hub will be best placed to successfully deliver this much needed service if it remains independent, makes use of existing data and methods (particularly the data resources and extensive experience of Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia (BIRRR), and most importantly, is facilitated by technical experts in regional connectivity issues.

Question 1: What sources of information should be incorporated into the design of the Digital Tech Hub?

There is an extensive amount of information available online on the different types of connections, plans and technologies available to regional consumers. This can be extremely difficult for the average person to navigate. It will be important for the hub to collate and consolidate this information and be resourced to produce tools and fact sheets that support consumers to understand and make decisions about the services they use. For example, fact sheets on how to choose a provider or creating a ‘needs assessment and product selection tool’ to help consumers navigate the telecommunications offerings available to them.

The RRRCC support the information sources listed in the consultation paper and would also support the addition of specialised organisations for specific issues e.g. consulting with the Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association for queries relating to distance education and online school programs.

Promoting awareness of the Digital Tech Hub

Question 2: What other existing networks can be used to promote the Digital Tech Hub?

Consumers who would benefit from accessing the Digital Tech Hub are likely to be experiencing telecommunications issues ranging from inconsistent connectivity to no connection at all. This would mean that only using services such as web-based advertising, emails, social media and other online platforms may not reach those who require the service the most. The RRRCC recommend the use of non-internet-based media such as flyers, local radio promotions, and community meetings.

Utilising existing organisations and networks that are embedded in regional communities will be an important means of informing consumers about the hub. The RRRCC recommends utilising Local Government Authorities to promote and expand the reach of the Digital Tech Hub, for example by distributing information flyers with rates notices or in local government communications such as newsletters and by leveraging local government events. Other relevant networks include the Regional Development Australia bodies and regional schools. The hub could also have a presence at regional events such as major agricultural field days.

RRRCC member organisations are also more than happy to use their networks and communications channels to promote the hub.

Assisting to resolve users' telecommunications issues

RRRCC member BIRRR sought feedback on a number of the consultation paper questions via its Facebook group, which has more than 10,000 members. Over 80 per cent of BIRRR respondents believed it was necessary for the hub to include a combination of email, social media messaging, and an instant messaging service that supports sending pictures and the use of email (this is in addition to the call centre service). It is important that the services provided by the hub can be accessed by anyone and not limited to those who have an account with a certain social media platform. A successful model would be utilising a similar chat service to that provided on the Optus website (with image sending capabilities), a contact email address with the ability to lodge enquiries outside of the hub's staffed office times, and the use of Facebook instant messaging for promotion. It should be made clear to consumers that the first port of call for service issues is an RSP.

It will be important for the department (and the hub provider) to consult with BIRRR regarding the ongoing use of its Facebook forum, which is a highly successful means of sharing information and troubleshooting by engaging with fellow consumers. There is also the opportunity for the Digital Tech Hub website to include a similar open forum where consumers could ask questions of and share information with the broader community.

Question 3: What social media presence is most relevant to regional consumers?

Like their metropolitan counterparts, regional consumers utilise a range of social media platforms. BIRRR has successfully used Facebook's instant messaging, forums and community groups to facilitate information sharing from not only BIRRR volunteers but also other regional consumers who have overcome connectivity issues or who have relevant technical expertise.

While the RRRCC support the use of an instant messaging service, we recommend that social media platforms are primarily used for promotion, not for delivery of the service. This would remove the need for an individual to have an account on a specific platform to be able to access the hub. We recommend an instant messaging/chat function be established within the Digital Tech Hub website, and that the function support the sharing of images and short videos. There are numerous examples of existing services and relevant software packages available.

Question 4: What 3 to 4-hour window would best suit a limited-hours phone service, if implemented?

As outlined in the **attached** document, the RRRCC support an easily accessible and user-friendly service to be delivered through multiple communication channels. A call centre manned by technical experts is a critical part of this service, supported by other communications channels such as email and webchat.

The RRRCC strongly encourages the department to prioritise provision of a phone service, notwithstanding the limitations of the available funding. The preference would be to avoid a limited-hours phone service, or to establish an effective answering service and call-back function. Should available resourcing limit the phone service to a particular window, between midday and 5pm is recommended. Care should be taken to account for different time zones.

Maximising benefits of connectivity for regional businesses

Question 6: What information would be most useful to help small and medium businesses to maximise the benefits of digital connectivity?

Given the limited funding available, the RRRCC recommends that the hub maintain a reasonably tight focus in line with what was recommended by the Regional Telecommunications Review – namely how to get connected and stay connected. The RRRCC is concerned that if the hub expands its services to upskilling businesses – including farm businesses – on how to use innovative digital applications such as internet of things applications, automation and the collection and use of data, the hub's resources may be spread too thinly.

A useful way that the hub could help businesses to maximise the benefits of digital connectivity would be to redirect consumers to the range of existing and emerging services and programs designed to help consumers use their connections. There could be scope to expand the role of the hub in this area should additional funding become available, including through relevant partnership arrangements.

Communications awareness for disaster and emergency situations

Question 8: What information would be most useful in assisting communities to prepare for, and best use digital connectivity during disaster and emergency situations?

Recent experiences with bushfires across many parts of regional Australia and severe flooding in Queensland have put intense pressure on telecommunications networks, and clearly demonstrated the importance of contingency planning and preparedness. The RRRCC would support using the Digital Tech Hub as a source of practical information for consumers on how to prepare for and respond to disaster and emergency situations. Useful information would include how to identify what sort of connection you have and how it would be affected by fire/flood, how to ensure you're not relying on a single means of communications, and having on hand a battery-powered radio to receive emergency information in the event that mains power or mobile coverage is lost.

The hub could also be utilised as a means of providing information on network status during and after natural disasters or other emergencies.

Sustainability

The RRRCC believe that there will be an ongoing need for the services provided by the Digital Tech Hub, and one of the RRRCC's priority asks is for the government to commit to the service beyond the current two-year funding period. The hub has the potential to be a long-term tool used to improve the digital capability of regional, rural and remote Australians and to evolve as the needs of those consumers change. It is essential that the department takes a long-term approach in designing the hub.

Data collection is important to inform the ongoing design and delivery of services so that they meet on-ground needs. Data collection has been integral to the continual improvement of services BIRRR provides to regional consumers and businesses and to keep track of trends. The hub should as a matter of course collect data on the services it provides to consumers including location, type of connection, service provider, nature of the issue, time to resolve, and more. We strongly encourage the department to consult with BIRRR staff, who are willing to provide access to relevant data and advice on data collection – and delivery of services.

Question 9: What options are there to fund the operation of the Digital Tech Hub beyond its two-year funding period, e.g. paid advertising?

The RRRCC believes that independence will be central to the success of the hub. A cautious approach should be taken to paid advertising, and to any real or perceived influence this might have on the advice or services provided by the hub. The Regional Telecommunications Review recommended that government commit to developing the hub, and the RRRCC sees an ongoing role for government in its delivery, given the broad public benefit that will accrue from the hub’s services.

Service providers stand to benefit from regional consumers getting connected and staying connected, and one option might be to seek an annual contribution from regional carriage service providers and a continuing commitment from government. Funding sources should be transparently reported.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide a submission. Should you require any further information, please contact Adrienne Ryan, General Manager Rural Affairs at the National Farmers’ Federation, on 02 6269 5666 or aryan@nff.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

The Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition



Attachment

Design of a new Digital Tech Hub – RRRCC priorities

(Provided to then Department of Communications and the Arts in June 2019)

As part of its response to the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review Report, the Australian Government has committed to fund a two-year Digital Tech Hub as part of its \$60 million Regional Connectivity Program.

This is an important initiative, and the RRRCC has an opportunity to influence the design of the Digital Tech Hub, to ensure that it is targeted to meet the genuine needs of rural, regional and remote customers and to deliver maximum benefit.

Following initial discussions, the RRRCC has agreed to the following as essential design elements:

- **Direct access to advice and assistance through multiple communication channels** that are easily accessible and user friendly, including:
 - A call centre.
 - Online forums providing real time access to expert advisors and peer-to-peer support networks/chat groups. Users must have the ability to upload and receive photos and other files to support troubleshooting.
 - Online tutorials/videos/podcasts.
 - Website housing relevant resources and links.
- **Staff must have extensive knowledge of regional telecommunications** technologies and an ability to readily understand (and patiently assist with) the vast range of issues likely to be presented – from routine to highly complex and site-specific.
- **Independence.** The advice provided by the hub must be technology and provider agnostic. It should be tailored to meet the needs of the customer (be it personal, business use or other) but should not seek to unduly influence the selection of provider or technology solution.
- **Provide services both reactively and proactively**, i.e. not only responding to requests for assistance, but actively promoting the hub and the services available to expand the reach. This may be by leveraging existing networks and considering new ways to get information to regional users e.g. communicating through local council networks or local radio.
- **Draw on past experience and collect data to inform services.** This includes the services and techniques utilised with success by Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia (BIRRR), and data collected by BIRRR and others on the range of issues (and re-occurring issues) experienced by customers. This will assist the hub to target the training of its staff and allocation of effort.
- **An initial focus should be on how to get connected / how to stay connected / how to use a connection.** Further details are provided in the table overleaf. This should include:
 - Desk Check Facility
 - Ability to help end users escalate their issues
- **Consideration should be given to provision of face to face tech help and training** (depending on the availability of resources).

Digital Tech Hub key areas of focus:

1.How to get connected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Addressing issues - Knowing what is the best type of connection to suit specific needs - Routers and modems - Boosting equipment/antennas for mobile signal - Plans and how to understand them - How to choose a provider
2.How to stay connected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Troubleshooting a connection - How to escalate an issue/fault - Consumer rights about the connection - Keeping up to date with changes in technology
3.How to use connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How to fact sheets / podcasts/ webpages <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o How to stay safe online o How to use off peak data o How to set up a generic email o How to install a VOiP phone o How to power cycle your equipment o what to do if you think you have been hacked. - Business specific information - Health specific information - Agriculture specific information - Education specific information