



Director  
Regional Connectivity Program  
Department of Infrastructure, Transport,  
Regional Development and Communications  
GPO Box 594  
Canberra, ACT 2601

11 March 2020

### **Re: Regional Connectivity Program Grant Opportunity Guidelines**

The Central Land Council, based in Alice Springs, considers it important for Traditional Owners and communities to provide feedback on the Regional Connectivity Program Grant Opportunity draft guidelines to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (“the Department”).

The CLC is a Commonwealth independent statutory body established under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (‘ALRA’) and is also the Native Title Representative Body (NTRB) under the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth). It is led by a Council of 90 Aboriginal people elected from communities in the southern half of the Northern Territory, which covers almost 777,000 square kilometres and has an Aboriginal population of more than 24,000. The majority of CLC constituents live in highly remote and dispersed communities where economic development is needed urgently.

Telecommunications issues are of great concern to the constituents of the CLC. Many areas of the CLC region do not have reliable mobile phone services. Internet connectivity is also a critical need that is not being met by the Australian Government. Internet is not only required for personal use, but also for connectivity of EFTPOS machines in shops, which is essential to those on income management imposed by the Australian Government where Centrelink income support payments are quarantined on the Basics Card. Over summer, there were instances in the CLC region where the mobile outages meant that people were unable to use their Basics Card in the community store for days (for example, there was a three day outage at Papunya). This meant that they could not buy food and had to travel hundreds of kilometres to Alice Springs in order to access their money. Internet access is also required for access to

information and services in remote communities, such as health and education. Better internet will also contribute to more opportunities for jobs and business development over time.

The CLC believes that improvement in telecommunications infrastructure envisaged in the Regional Connectivity Program should be delivered by NBN Co or another government owned vehicle to regional and remote locations, meeting a standard similar to urban locations. We agree that the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review recommended additional investment in regional and remote locations, but not through a complex grant program that requires co-contributions. To receive services that match the standard of urban locations, those in remote locations, particularly Aboriginal communities, are being asked to submit complex grant applications, engage with the relevant State or Territory Governments and seek co-contributions including from telecommunications companies. All of this without the guidelines providing any confidence that the effort will result in the outcome and importantly without providing any support. This is unfair and we think that the guidelines do not respond to the needs of remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia.

We doubt there are any organisations in Central Australia, at this stage, that will have the capacity to develop competitive applications for consideration which have all the requirements listed in the draft guidelines, despite the grave importance for improved reliability of broadband and mobile services in our remote communities. As it is, the guidelines favour organisations and regions which have considerably more resources at their disposal to respond to a grant application process.

With respect to the guidelines, we urge the Department to prioritise investment in projects that have social or safety outcomes, such as those in remote Aboriginal communities. The CLC also suggests that financial co-contributions should not be required for Aboriginal community-driven projects, or at the very least, that the contribution should be below 50%, in order to make this a more feasible way to deliver services in remote Aboriginal communities.

In addition to providing mobile and internet services, it is important that investments are made to ensure the relevant infrastructure is adequately maintained and able to function all year around. Some communities have experienced outages as a result of the solar-charged batteries that support mobile coverage stations failing during periods of cloud cover. The Regional Connectivity Program should provide funding for this also.

It is vital that the final guidelines include arrangements to provide support in preparing applications and particularly for remote communities. The Department could consider, for example, putting in place regional and remote co-ordinators to facilitate grant applications as well as provide support from a help desk. As it is, we fear that the draft guidelines are unfair for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and will result in a poor outcome. The Department could contract an Aboriginal business to facilitate understanding and support to Aboriginal organisations in remote Australia to prepare a competitive application.

We would like the opportunity to discuss this submission further including how the guidelines can be reframed to meet the needs of remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia and beyond. Please contact Georgie Sutton on [georgie.sutton@clc.org.au](mailto:georgie.sutton@clc.org.au) to make arrangements for a teleconference as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joe Martin-Jard', written in a cursive style.

Joe Martin-Jard  
**Chief Executive Officer**