



Australian Government

Department of Communications and the Arts

# Digital Technology Hub — consultation paper

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## Contents

<b>Context</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Objectives of the Digital Tech Hub</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Providing independent and factual information .....	5
Question 1 .....	5
Promoting awareness of the Digital Tech Hub .....	5
Question 2 .....	5
Assisting to resolve users’ telecommunications issues .....	6
Question 3 .....	6
Question 4 .....	6
Question 5 .....	6
Maximising benefits of connectivity for regional businesses.....	6
Question 6 .....	7
Local Digital Planning.....	7
Question 7 .....	7
Communications Awareness for Disaster and Emergency Situations .....	7
Question 8 .....	7
<b>Sustainability</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Question 9 .....	7



## Context

The telecommunications market is changing and the technologies within it have become much more complex. Essential services in education, health, government and business are increasingly moving toward a digital-first model. People expect to have access to the internet, while also needing the skills to use digital technologies and to engage online, both socially as well as for the delivery of services.

In 2018, the Regional Telecommunications Review (the Review) was undertaken by an independent committee to examine the state of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia. The committee undertook 22 public consultations across regional Australia and received over 380 submissions from individuals and organisations. A key message from public consultations was that people in regional communities would benefit from increased support to make the most of different communications technologies and to troubleshoot issues.

In response to this feedback, the Review recommended a centralised platform aimed at helping regional, rural and remote Australians to navigate digital technologies. It recommended that Government commit to improving digital literacy in regional, rural and remote Australia by:

- developing an online ‘hub’ to provide independent and factual information to help support people to build up skills to solve telecommunications issues.

The Government’s response to the Review, announced on 20 March 2019, included a significant investment in regional communications through the \$220 million Stronger Regional Digital Connectivity Package. This package includes funding for two additional rounds of the Mobile Black Spot Program and a new Regional Connectivity Program, which includes:

- a competitive grants program to address local telecommunications priorities in regional areas
- a Digital Tech Hub to improve digital literacy
- measures to develop the Universal Service Guarantee (USG), including trials of alternate technologies to provide voice services in more remote areas, and expert advice on ways to deliver the USG in the future.

This consultation paper is on the Digital Tech Hub.

## Objectives of the Digital Tech Hub

The objective of the Digital Tech Hub is to:

- provide regional, rural and remote Australians information on digital technologies and support them to address telecommunications issues.

The Digital Tech Hub will help regional, rural and remote residential consumers and small and medium businesses to get connected and stay connected. To help all consumers make the most of digital technologies and services, the Digital Tech Hub will cater for a range of user groups, with differing requirements, including: getting and staying connected, developing digital business applications and conducting digital planning.



## Providing independent and factual information

The Digital Tech Hub will be operated by a contracted third-party provider on behalf of the Department. It will not prioritise any particular product or service, but will support people in making their own informed choices. The Digital Tech Hub will support regional, rural and remote consumers by:

- developing and hosting a website with factual information, answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs), an interactive component, and links to resources on other websites, such as:
  - Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia (BIRRR)
  - the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN)
  - the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission (ACCC)
  - the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA)
  - Retail Service Providers (RSPs) and industry groups
  - Infrastructure providers (including but not limited to NBN Co, Telstra, Optus and Vodafone)
- maintaining a social media presence to provide information, engage with consumers and promote the Digital Tech Hub
- developing and distributing resources, including through stakeholder networks to reach consumers.

The information on the Digital Tech Hub will help consumers understand different types of connections, plans and technologies available in their area—including phone, mobile and broadband. It will provide advice on what to look for when choosing a provider, how to escalate faults and general consumer rights. It will also help with troubleshooting common issues.

The Digital Tech Hub will also provide information on how regional businesses can realise the benefits of digital technologies, and information to assist local communities and councils to engage in digital planning processes.

The Digital Tech Hub will make use of existing content where possible rather than generate new content, and will adapt and update existing material where needed.

### Question 1

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

## Promoting awareness of the Digital Tech Hub

The Digital Tech Hub will target residential and business consumers and will focus promotional activities on regional, rural and remote areas. Promotion will aim to make sure consumers know the Digital Tech Hub can help them get connected and stay connected, and can help them understand the technologies available in their area.

Options for promotion include distribution through existing networks including the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC), the Regional Development Australia (RDA) network, and regional partnerships and local government organisations.

### Question 2

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



## Assisting to resolve users' telecommunications issues

The Digital Tech Hub will help resolve users' telecommunications issues by referring them to appropriate third party information and contacts, and performing basic troubleshooting. This will occur through:

- a website with information guides, FAQs, links to third-party materials and an online chat function
- a social media page with an interactive component (e.g. instant messaging)
- a phone support line, with an option to leave a message and receive call-back as well as take live calls during specified hours.

In selecting a provider for the Digital Tech Hub, the Department will encourage innovative, cost-effective approaches to troubleshooting consumer issues and/or disseminating information (for example, the use of podcasts or online tutorials on common problems).

It will perform an advice and referral role rather than act as a third-party mediator between consumers and industry. For example, Digital Tech Hub staff would not contact an RSP on behalf of a consumer, but would provide consumers with information to facilitate contact with an RSP. It may also refer consumers to alternate pathways of redress such as industry escalation processes and the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman.

Key RSPs will be asked to consider providing in-kind support, such as training for staff and information on customer service escalation processes. It is expected that the Digital Tech Hub will also facilitate contact between consumers and RSP customer service processes.

### Question 3

What social media presence is most relevant to regional consumers?

### Question 4

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

### Question 5

For retail service providers: what kind of in-kind support can you provide for the Digital Tech Hub?

## Maximising benefits of connectivity for regional businesses

Innovative digital applications exist today that could have immediate positive impacts to regional business sectors if they are taken up.

In agriculture, technologies like Internet of Things applications, automation and the collection and use of whole-of-farm data can inform decision making, increase production capacity and reduce input costs.

In tourism, better connectivity can enhance the visitor experience, allow better targeting of marketing and enable businesses to react faster to opportunities and challenges.



The Digital Tech Hub will aim to provide resources on these kinds of applications for regional business sectors and to raise awareness of how current and emerging technologies can be adopted.

#### Question 6

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

### Local Digital Planning

Many local councils (or groups of councils) are considering developing digital plans for their communities. The Digital Tech Hub could provide resources and links to information that can assist local communities and councils to engage in digital planning processes, assisting them in taking a greater role in leading the process.

#### Question 7

What information would be most useful in assisting communities to undertake local digital planning?

### Communications Awareness for Disaster and Emergency Situations

Communication is essential in preparing for and responding to disaster and emergency situations. Some disasters can also put pressure on or damage communications networks. Clear and consistent information on how to prepare for and best use communications during disasters and emergencies will help to promote awareness and assist communities.

The Digital Tech Hub could provide resources and information that would be able to better prepare communities to employ resilient communication strategies, including managing the expectations of communication capabilities during disaster and emergency situations and identifying what temporary equipment is available.

#### Question 8

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

### Sustainability

Funding is available for the Digital Tech Hub for two years. Options will be explored for the longer term sustainability of the Digital Tech Hub beyond the two-year funding period.

#### 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?

