



21 February 2020

Regional Deployment Branch
Department of Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 594
CANBERRA ACT 2601

To whom it may concern,

RE: Digital Technology Hub Consultation

The NSW Farmers' Association ('the Association') welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Digital Technology Hub ('Digital Tech Hub').

The Association is Australia's largest State Farming Organisation, representing the interests of over 6,000 farmers in NSW. The Association seeks equitable access to reliable, affordable, quality telecommunications for regional users. Farming families need trusted and stable access for business and education services, and social connectivity.

Access to improved telecommunications services in rural, regional and remote Australia is imperative to facilitate economic growth across the agricultural industry through innovation in production, improved market access and enhanced consumer connectivity.

Improved digital literacy is also critical to enable consumers to utilise appropriate telecommunications services, and to effectively solve technology issues. Access to plain English information and resources through the Digital Tech Hub will assist in building digital literacy skills and increasing utilisation of technologies to maximise economic benefits.

The Association strongly supports the establishment of a user responsive Digital Tech Hub to bring telecommunications information and assistance together in a centralised platform. This dedicated digital literacy enhancement service and information hub should educate, inform and up-skill regional and rural consumers on telecommunications services, products and resources to increase their on-farm personal and business productivity.

The Association considers that the Digital Tech Hub should be located in a regional centre with both a voice and online presence. It should be staffed by personnel with technology, product and service expertise, who understand the geography and challenges facing regional and rural Australians. It is critical that the successful tender has an understanding of regional issues informed by a regional presence.

To ensure the provision of valuable and valued advice and resources through the Digital Tech Hub, it must:

1. Receive adequate funding to support the proposed model, including a human interaction element to aid problem solving. This must include a telephone support service.
2. Include support that is not technology based to assist in achieving technology resolutions. If a consumer does not have access to technology to utilise the Hub, they should be able to access it through an alternative method.
3. Include clearly set standards about responsiveness and timeliness to action resolutions.
4. Ensure protocols to escalate issues with telecommunications providers on behalf of consumers.

NSW Farmers' Association

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

The Association supports the concept of an independent Digital Tech Hub to provide practical, relevant resources to rural, regional and remote consumers. These resources should be easy to use and provide information to suit the personal and professional needs of rural Australians.

The Association proposes that the Digital Tech Hub should:

1. Provide factual information on infrastructure and product availability to 'humanise' the great technology options (devices and equipment) that are available for mobile coverage and internet connectivity,
2. Help consumers to ask the most informed questions when purchasing telecommunications devices and negotiating the retail packages on offer,
3. Raise awareness of the options for 'on-farm' technology enabled business solutions,
4. Improve visibility of the consumer's rights and responsibilities when a fault arises in a service (broadband, mobile, landline) and provide measures on how and with whom to resolve, referring to complaint and regulatory agencies (Australian Communications Media Authority, Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman) if required,
5. Provide an online accredited price comparison scheme for broadband, voice and data plans,
6. Articulate where Mobile Network Operators have invested in mobile coverage across Australia,
7. Build awareness of all technology providers, in particular the 130+ small independent technology providers,
8. Any other relevant connectivity and coverage issues and questions.

It is critical that the Digital Tech Hub provides current, accurate, plain English information to assist rural, regional and remote consumers in understanding different types of connections, plans and technologies available in their area, along with practical support to address technology barriers. For example, the Hub could assist consumers in understanding company-specific jargon used by service providers by providing accessible, standardised, simplified information.

Fact sheets and answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are critical to include. Links to current, relevant resources on other reputable websites would assist in providing access to a broad range of information and services, for example specific information on providers or consumer rights resources.

Similarly, information on troubleshooting, and advice on choosing a provider, escalating faults and general consumer rights must be updated frequently to ensure accuracy and to facilitate real solutions. Information such as consumer rights when subject to frequent and/or long service outages and how to effectively escalate issues and complaints should be included. The ability for the Hub to undertake warm referrals or follow up with providers on behalf of a consumer would be welcomed. In some cases, consumers attempt to pursue issues with the Ombudsman but encounter delays and difficulties as they are less familiar with smaller telecommunications providers.

Provision of current and accurate information about providers in a consumer's exact location is essential. This would encourage competition amongst providers and provide consumers with a choice.

When visiting the Hub, the consumer could be prompted to complete a short, simple survey to record the primary reason they are visiting the site, where they are located and if they have tried to solve the problem before. This could provide intelligence on the telecommunications issues most regularly faced by rural, regional and remote Australians, and what it is they are seeking from the Hub. This information could then be used to increase service and reliability in areas frequently reporting issues.

To adequately provide assistance and troubleshooting options, in addition to fact sheets and FAQs, an interactive option is vital.

The Digital Tech Hub must be supported by telephone assistance. This is crucial, as when a broadband service is not working or a consumer is not connected to such a service, the option to use the online

platform will be unavailable. Consumers cannot access the Hub without internet, and this may be the very issue they are seeking to fix.

Without internet access, for example if the consumer is experiencing a broadband outage (as is a common occurrence for rural Australians – often for a few days), it is impossible to use the platform. Most rural Australians struggle with reliability and quality of services, and in some cases, this Hub will be connecting them with broadband for the first time. Beyond access issues, a telephone assistance option is critical to cater for the variety of digital literacy levels of users from those being connected, to those staying connected, to those seeking to maximise benefits of connectivity for their business.

In addition to telephone assistance, a ‘chat’ component is important to include on the platform. This provides a further option to consumers if telephone assistance is unsuitable or unavailable, and provides more instantaneous interactive options – for example, enabling users to share photos to aid the assistance process such as identifying where something should be plugged in. A social media chat option may be beneficial, but a chat feature based on the platform itself would likely provide greater benefit to consumers.

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

The Digital Tech Hub could be promoted through communications of member organisations, for example through member organisations of the RRRCC. Other options include community groups, local councils, libraries, and local shops and businesses.

It will be important to promote the Hub through a variety of channels due to the diversity of digital literacy levels of consumers and the broad target demographic. Hard copy flyers would be an effective way to share information about the Hub in regional areas to supplement digital communications that may be more limited in reaching intended consumers.

In promoting the Hub it is important to understand that many of the target users may not have prior knowledge of a “hub” or “digital platform”, or have the skills to resolve issues through self-directed search engines. In any promotion materials, the large text, bold information (focus) needs to be around “internet connectivity issues”. This is language that the consumer can readily identify with; digital literacy and hub is not.

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

The Association has the strongest presence on Facebook compared to other social media channels and it is reasonably effective for communicating with members. Whilst a social media presence is important, other forms of interaction and communication are crucial to rural Australians. A full range of communication strategies must be utilised to ensure access by all users.

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

NSW Farmers’ members would prefer a phone service to operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If the phone service is to be time limited, the phone service must include a call back option to ensure it is responsive to consumer needs.

A 3 to 4 hour window is too limited as issues can arise at any time of the day or night, and can have significant personal and business implications. Offering such a small window to seek telephone assistance would extend the time taken to address issues, furthering the disparity between metropolitan and rural areas. It is important that phone support be available outside of ‘traditional’ business hours; evening access is critical.

Question 5: *For retail service providers: what kind of in-kind support can you provide for the Digital Tech Hub?*

Not applicable.

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

The ability to discover and utilise digital innovations may assist small and medium regional businesses to improve their business efficiency and profitability. Without the Hub, they may not have access to this information.

Farmers typically share information about innovations between themselves, and prefer innovations that are user friendly. For these reasons, information to inform farm businesses on how to maximise the benefits of digital connectivity may provide value to farmers using the Hub.

A challenge in providing this information is the broad spectrum of what is available. For example, potential benefits of digital connectivity for tourism, agriculture and the internet of things includes a wide variety of applications and emerging technologies. The nature of these innovations would make it difficult for the Hub to provide current, accurate, relevant information and assistance on an ongoing basis.

Basic, introductory information and assistance on agricultural connectivity and the internet of things should be included as a minimum. More complex information and assistance may be better suited to links and referrals from the Hub, to ensure a high quality, accurate service is provided at all times. It may be more beneficial to provide limited but accurate, current and relevant information to maximise benefits of digital connectivity. Links and referrals to other reputable sources and short descriptions of what is available may be more suited to this platform than providing an extensive range of specialised assistance and troubleshooting, noting the limited funding. Quality of information and assistance is more important than quantity.

The most beneficial information will be independent, current and accurate. The Association notes the difficulty of catering for consumers ranging from getting connected to researching how to maximise benefits of their connectivity for their business. It is important that when people access the platform they can easily access the information they are seeking, and are not overwhelmed with information and options for a wide variety of business needs. The Hub must be clear in communication about what it will do and what is beyond its scope.

Question 7: *What information would be most useful in assisting communities to undertake local digital planning?*

It would be beneficial to provide basic, plain English information on what digital planning is and how it might be undertaken. Links and guidance to more in depth information would also assist consumers such as councils and organisations in considering digital planning.

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

Troubleshooting, information fact sheets and FAQs on how to prepare for and use digital connectivity during disaster is an important inclusion. Additionally, links and information on updates of the current situation during disaster and emergency situations would be useful. This information could aid people in their disaster preparations, including planning how best to utilise their telecommunications during the disaster and possible options and alternatives.

If temporary solutions are available, this information could also be communicated to users through the Hub, noting however they might be unable to access the information. Alternative scenarios for communication during 'outages' must be considered.

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 Association is supportive of the Digital Tech Hub operating beyond its two year funding period, but cautions that paid advertising could distract from effective, accurate information and advice. The Association is supportive of an independent Hub to provide reliable, impartial information and advice.

There is currently a lack of clarity around the budget for this Hub, making it difficult to determine if it is fit for purpose. Following the establishment of the Hub with the current funding commitment, the Association

supports moving to a user pays funding option and if the price point is providing value then a user pays model will deliver the sustainability.

The Association appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Digital Technology Hub. Should further information be required please contact Kathy Rankin, Policy Director on 02 9478 1008 or by email at rankink@nswfarmers.org.au.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Garry Grant', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Garry Grant
Chair, Rural Affairs Committee