

2 March 2020

The Hon Michael McCormack MP
Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Via: Regional Connectivity Program portal

Dear Minister

Far North Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils submission on the Regional Connectivity Program – Draft grant opportunity guidelines.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the Draft grant opportunity guidelines for the Regional Connectivity Program, it is encouraging to see funding focussed on Regional (and rural) Connectivity.

The Far North Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils (FNQROC) was established in the 1980's and represents 13 member councils in far north Queensland. The FNQROC region is the largest and fastest growing region in Northern Australia. It extends over 320,000 square kilometres with a population of approximately 278,000 and a gross regional product (GRP) of \$16.33 billion.

The thirteen councils have collectively focussed on five key areas; Transport networks, Respecting our environment, Water and Electricity equity, Social infrastructure equity and equitable communication.

Our member councils consist of:

Council	Type	Population (ERP2018)	SEIFA Disadvantage Index (2016)
Cairns	Regional	~165,000	980
Hope Vale Aboriginal Shire	Aboriginal	1,081	621
Wujal Wujal Aboriginal Shire	Aboriginal	306	596
Yarrabah Aboriginal Shire	Aboriginal	2,848	518
Cassowary Coast	Rural	29,689	931
Carpentaria	Remote	1,974	858
Cook	Remote	4,445	917

Croydon	Remote	288	884
Douglas	Rural	12,257	981
Etheridge	Remote	804	932
Hinchinbrook	Rural	10,805	960
Mareeba	Rural	22,517	936
Tablelands	Rural	25,541	949

You will notice from the above table that most of our members have low population numbers and some of the lowest SEIFA disadvantage index figures.

The size of our councils (and region), their associated population numbers and SEIFA disadvantage index figures identify that we are least resourced in both skills and personnel to solve many on ground issues which those in urban centres get as a right; communication blackspots (mobile and broadband) are one such issue.

We recognise that we cannot simply go cap in hand each time and need to provide evidence to our gaps in service. We have started this by undertaking an on ground analysis of our mobile communication network. A copy of this report and the spatial data can be found on our website www.fnqroc.qld.gov¹. Our issue is we now have this report; the next step is to prioritise the gaps and develop solutions. For this region, it is currently beyond our resource capability.

It is envisaged that this program is focussed on areas similar to our region, and our comments are based on our experience and need.

Comments on draft guidelines:

General comments

This program appears to focus on infrastructure only. It would be helpful to regional, rural and remote councils if it also allowed studies to be undertaken i.e. mobile blackspot gap analysis, understanding broadband details/shortfalls, development of priorities and recommendations to fix these gaps.

These studies could benefit the Commonwealth Government by having detailed expert analysis on the real size of the issue. For mobile communication, service providers keep this information commercial in confidence and there is no clear mapping of blackspots. This information could start to fill a national database and allow cross-referencing for Mobile Blackspot funding.

For our region, we would be keen to undertake two studies:

1. Prioritise our mobile communication blackspots and identify potential solutions (including costs)
2. An assessment on our broadband capacity including:
 - a. Awareness of satellites
 - b. Accessibility to broadband
 - c. Comparison between satellite, fixed wifi and fibre optic

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https://www.fnqroc.qld.gov.au/files/media/original/004/996/ee8/c8c/190815_FNOROC017_Report_Final_V2.1.pdf



- i. Upload/download speeds
- ii. Costs to the consumer



Financial Co-contribution

Connectivity is vitally important to regional, rural and remote areas however they are the least likely to have the resources to co-contribute. It also hardly seems fair that regional, rural and remote ratepayers (generally low on the SEIFA index) are required to contribute to an essential service others in urban areas have received as of right.

We recognise it is difficult for the Commonwealth to have a firm understanding of the on ground issues across this vast nation and it is difficult to understand and fix the many issues in regional, rural and remote areas as Queensland is different to New South Wales as it is to Victoria. It is hoped the department can consider looking at providing funding for more than infrastructure and that local governments are able to apply for this funding to provide some evidence to their issue/s. As a region, we would contribute financially to the study.

Should you wish to discuss any aspect of our submission please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

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