



## THE HON MARK COULTON MP

Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government  
Federal Member for Parkes

Ref: MC20-006893

Cr Linda Scott  
President  
Australian Local Government Association  
8 Geils Court  
DEAKIN ACT 2600

18 MAR 2021

Dear Cr Scott

I am writing in response to a letter of 21 August 2020 from the then President, Mayor David O'Loughlin, bringing to my attention motions from councils. I apologise for my delay in responding.

I note the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Development, the Hon Michael McCormack MP has responded separately about motions relating to his transport and infrastructure portfolio.

It is disappointing that the COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of the National General Assembly. It would have been a key opportunity for stakeholders from every jurisdiction to share their ideas for improving the local government sector and to discuss the lessons they have learned in the past year. However, I'm glad we were able to catch up in person at the Roads Congress in Wagga Wagga. It was a great opportunity for a frank exchange of priorities.

I am pleased to report in the last financial year \$3.7 billion was provided to local governments. Most of this was untied so councils could allocate funding to their own priorities, including \$2.5 billion through the Financial Assistance Grant Program and over \$1.2 billion in program funding for local infrastructure, drought and bushfire relief. These payments to local governments exceeded 1 per cent of the Commonwealth tax take available.

Thank you for the time taken to bring to my attention the motions submitted by councils that fall within my portfolio responsibilities.

I trust my responses will be of interest to your members.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Coultou', written in a cursive style.

**Mark Coultou MP**

## Responses to 2020 National General Assembly of Local Government Motions

### Motion 1

*Councils call on the State and Commonwealth Governments to provide effective support to Councils dealing with high visitation impacts on iconic Australian destinations by exploring additional funding support and/or revenue raising initiatives that can be used to help meet the costs of servicing visitation and improving the sustainability of these areas.*

### Response

The Australian Government is committed to working with state, territory, and local governments to explore potential financing options to support the costs of servicing visitation and improving the sustainability of iconic Australian destinations. I would be particularly interested in seeing case studies from councils that maintain infrastructure to support the amenity of these assets where it is not feasible or where it would be inequitable to set fees or charges for the use of that infrastructure to cover the costs of its maintenance.

The 2020-21 Budget confirms the Australian Government's steadfast commitment to supporting and working with the local government sector, delivering a record investment in and via the sector. Councils will receive a further \$1.24 billion in untied funding this year via the Financial Assistance Grant program, on top of the \$1.32 billion pre-payment paid in May 2020. This funding is untied in the hands of local governments, which means it could be allocated to council's local priorities.

The Australian Government also established a new \$500 million Local Roads and Community Infrastructure Program that will enable local councils to deliver on priority projects, with a focus on priority upgrades and maintenance of local roads and community infrastructure. In the 2020-21 Budget, the Commonwealth committed an additional \$1 billion to this program.

The Government is providing an additional \$200 million for Round 5 of the Building Better Regions Fund, including \$100 million for tourism related infrastructure projects, and a further \$22.7 million for another round of the Stronger Communities Programme. These programs provide funding for a range of locally-driven projects that aim to strengthen our regions, their economies and the vibrant communities which characterise them.

Where local governments are the custodians of iconic Australian destinations, they can use funding from these programs to meet costs associated with servicing the visitors and improving the sustainability of these attractions.

This funding builds upon previous rounds of the successful BBRF program which has seen \$841.6 million support the Government's commitment to create jobs, drive economic growth and build stronger regional communities.

I also note on 9 November 2020, the Hon Sussan Ley MP, Minister for the Environment, announced the third round of the Australian Heritage Funding Grants Program that will place a particular focus on conserving national heritage places, many of which have faced significant visitor downturn and temporary closure during the COVID-19 pandemic. Heritage site owners, managers and support organisations are invited to apply for grants of between \$25,000 and \$400,000 as Australians focus more and more on domestic tourism opportunities.

I am pleased to advise that both local and state governments are eligible to apply for this funding and I strongly encourage your members to test their eligibility for this timely support. More information is available at [www.business.gov.au/grants-and-programs/australian-heritage-grants](http://www.business.gov.au/grants-and-programs/australian-heritage-grants).

## **Motion 17**

*Councils call on the Australian Government to commit to the recommendations of the “2018 Regional Telecommunications Review” as published by the Regional Telecommunications Review committee.*

## **Response**

The Australian Government announced its response to the recommendations of the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review in March 2019.<sup>1</sup>

As part of this response, the Government is investing \$220 million in regional communications through the Stronger Regional Digital Connectivity Package. The Package includes:

- \$160 million for additional rounds of the highly successful Mobile Black Spot Program;
- \$53 million for a new Regional Connectivity Program which will provide grants to address local telecommunications priorities in regional areas;
- a Regional Tech Hub to help regional Australians to get connected and stay connected; and
- measures to develop the Universal Service Guarantee (USG), including trials of alternative technologies to provide voice services in more remote areas, and expert advice on ways to deliver the USG in the future.

The application process for the latest round of Mobile Black Spot Program, Round 5A, opened on 18 November 2020 with applications from mobile network operators and infrastructure providers due by 5 March 2021. The process for Round 6 is expected to commence after the Round 5A competitive assessment process is complete.

Given the significant level of interest shown in the Regional Connectivity Program, the Government allocated an additional \$30 million to the program as part of the 2020-21 Budget. This means there is now up to \$83 million in grant funding available under the program. The application period for the Regional Connectivity Program closed on 17 November 2020, with the outcomes anticipated to be finalised in March 2021.

The National Farmers’ Federation, which was successful through a competitive tender process, developed and operate is operating the Regional Tech Hub. The Hub includes a website, social media and a staffed phone support line that operates five days a week. The Regional Tech Hub was launched in December 2020.

The Alternative Voice Service Trials will be used to identify and test better ways to deliver voice services in regional and remote areas. The Government has awarded grants to six organisations to conduct these trials, which will take place across regional Australia over the next 12-15 months.

The creation of the National Broadband Network (NBN) regional business unit also delivers a key recommendation from the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review, which was to establish a dedicated unit focused on delivering NBN benefits for regional Australians.

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.communications.gov.au/publications/australian-government-response-2018-regional-telecommunications-independent-committee-report-2018](http://www.communications.gov.au/publications/australian-government-response-2018-regional-telecommunications-independent-committee-report-2018)

### **Motion 83**

*That Councils call on the Federal and State Governments to encourage all levels of government to work collaboratively to establish new models and incentive plans/packages to attract and retain a sustainable health workforce for regional, rural and remote areas.*

### **Response**

The Australian Government is taking action to attract and retain a sustainable health workforce for regional, rural and remote areas, including new models of care. In the 2018-19 Budget, the Australian Government announced the \$550 million Stronger Rural Health Strategy, a carefully calibrated suite of measures to address each stage of medical workforce supply: teaching; training; and retention.

In the 2019-20 Budget, the Government committed \$62.2 million to develop a National Rural Generalist Pathway. The Pathway will attract, train and support doctors who provide primary and emergency care, and other services such as mental health care in regional, rural and remote communities.

The Government is also working with a range of organisations including Local Health Districts (LHDs), Rural Workforce Agencies (RWAs) and Primary Health Networks (PHNs) to support the development of proposals to trial innovative models of care. Current work is focusing on identifying the requirements for implementation such as suitable sites; legislative barriers; patient needs, and workforce gaps to be addressed by the new models; and existing and additional funding requirements.

### **Motion 110**

*Councils call on the Federal Government, and in particular the Minister for Local Government, for an increase in the Financial Assistance Grants to support local governments to deliver a range of services including roads maintenance.*

### **Response**

Local Government is a valued partner of the Australian Government and the 2020-21 Budget confirms our steadfast commitment to supporting and working with the sector, delivering a record investment with every council in Australia.

Under the Financial Assistance Grant Program, the Commonwealth pre-paid \$1.32 billion in May 2020, and will pay the remaining \$1.24 billion throughout 2020-21. The Financial Assistance Grant Program is the main mechanism of support provided by the Government to local governments. Since 1974-75, \$58 billion in untied funding has been provided to local governments. In 2020-21 local governments will receive the highest allocation of Financial Assistance Grants funding - an increase by \$50 million over the 2019-20 allocation.

Further support for the local government sector was delivered in May 2020 through the \$500 million Local Roads and Community Infrastructure Program that enabled local councils to deliver on priority projects, with a focus on priority upgrades and maintenance of local roads and community assets. The LRCI program received a significant boost in the 2020-21 Budget with an additional \$1 billion allocation. The program will support thousands of direct and indirect jobs and will drive shovel-ready local priorities, supporting locals jobs, local business and local procurement.

As part of the Local and State Government Road Safety Package, the Australian Government has committed an additional \$100 million per year to the Roads to Recovery program from 2019-20, bringing the total commitment to the program from 2013-14 to 2023-24 to \$6.2 billion, and an ongoing record commitment of \$500 million for each year following to fund local road maintenance and upgrades.

Road crashes are a major cost to Australians every year. Black Spot projects target those road locations where crashes are occurring. The Black Spot Program reduces the risk of crashes by funding measures such as traffic signals and roundabouts at dangerous locations.

The Australian Government is investing an additional \$50 million a year to the Black Spot Program from 2019–20 through the Local and State Government Road Safety Package, bringing the total funding to \$1.1 billion from 2013-2014 to 2023-24, with an ongoing commitment of \$110 million for each year following.

### **Motion 123**

*Councils call on the Federal Government to establish National Data Standards to enable more efficient and effective reporting of local government data and to ensure that comparisons can be made on the same data assumptions across all states and councils.*

### **Response**

The Australian Government recognises the importance of National Data Standards and its significance. In the 2020-21 Budget, the Australian Government has invested \$13.7 million over four years commencing in 2020-21 for the Better Data Use to Support Delivery for Regional Australians program. This program will provide government and community decision-makers with better economic, social and demographical data on regional Australia.

### **Motion 130**

*Councils call on the Australian Government to dedicate funds to increase drug and alcohol treatment and rehabilitation options in rural and regional areas, as a matter of priority.*

### **Response**

#### Drug and Alcohol Program:

The Australian Government is taking action to reduce drug and alcohol-related harm. The Australian Government has committed more than \$800 million over four years (from 1 July 2018) to reduce the impact of drug and alcohol misuse on individuals, families and communities through the overarching Drug and Alcohol Program. Of this investment, \$660 million is provided for treatment services and national leadership.

In addition, as part of the 2019–20 Whole-of-Government Drug Strategy Budget Measure, the Australian Government invested \$9.5 million over two years (from 2019–20) to ‘Increase access to drug and alcohol treatment services in regional, rural and remote areas’.

### Local Drug Action Team Program:

The Australian Government is providing nearly \$10 million to the Local Drug Action Team (LDAT) Program over 2020–21 to 2021–22, taking total Government investment in the LDAT

Program to more than \$29 million since 2016–17. This is a direct investment into local communities, supporting locally-led action to target local community needs.

There are currently 239 active LDATs across Australia delivering primary prevention and health promotion programs, with the aim of building protective factors and reducing risk factors for drug and alcohol harms in communities. LDATs develop Community Action Plans targeted to the needs of the local community in partnership with local community organisations such as schools, local police, local government agencies and non-government organisations.

The next LDAT recruitment round will be undertaken in early 2021, bringing another 40 LDATs into the Program and building on the progress being made in community primary prevention by existing LDATs.

### **Motion 132**

*Councils call on the Australian Government to hold a referendum to amend the Constitution to recognise local government as an important, legitimate and essential element in Australia's system of government.*

### **Response**

The Australian Government acknowledges the interest from some segments in the community for a referendum on the recognition of local government in the Australian Constitution.

As you are aware, local government is a creature of state constitutions. Referenda on the inclusion of local government in the Constitution took place in 1974 and 1988, however both attempts were unsuccessful.

Renewed discussion about including local government in the Australian Constitution is welcomed. However, as previous attempts showed, success will rely on positive engagement and careful planning before any question is put to the Australian people.

### **Motion 134**

*Councils call on the Australian Government to utilise its powers under section 51 of the Australian Constitution to ensure that all remote and regional areas of Australia have access to alternative, robust and reliable telecommunications separate to the services provided by Telstra.*

### **Response**

The new Universal Service Guarantee (USG) provides for access to broadband services, as well as telephone and payphone services provided by Telstra under the old Universal Service Obligation (USO). Under the USG, NBN Co is the default wholesale broadband provider for all of Australia, and must also support voice services on its fixed line and fixed wireless networks.

With the volume NBN rollout now complete, consumers and businesses across Australia can now access fixed broadband services from numerous broadband retailers. The USG is backed up by new statutory infrastructure provider laws that took effect on 1 July 2020.

The Government is working with consumers and industry to see if there are better ways to deliver USG services over the long term. Beyond these baseline USG protections, the majority of people in regional, rural and remote Australia have access to alternatives to Telstra and the NBN, in the form of competing commercial mobile, wireless or satellite networks, if they wish to avail themselves of them, noting these are cost-effective and realistic technologies to service less populous areas.

The Government has a range of programs like the Mobile Black Spot Program, the Regional Connectivity Program and the Alternative Voice Services Trials to further encourage the provision of telecommunications services.

### **Motion 146**

*Councils call on the Australian Government to provide funding for local governments to audit and maintain data on their infrastructure asset base.*

### **Response**

The Government's support for councils includes both general funding and project-specific to deliver targeted infrastructure outcomes in many asset groups including roads, bridges, building and facilities, parks and recreation, stormwater, waste and wastewater and airports. The Government recognises the importance of infrastructure asset bases, including appropriate audit and maintenance of such systems. However, while the Government contributes significantly to the funding of local government assets, the associated audit and maintenance of data processes is primarily a matter for state, territory and local governments. Australian Government funding, such as Financial Assistance Grants, can already be used for this purpose.

### **Motion 147**

*Councils call on the Australian Federal Government to pursue the enhancement of NBN services to rural and remote Australia.*

### **Response**

The Australian Government supports ongoing improvements in the NBN services provided to rural and remote Australia.

In October 2019, NBN Co established a new regional business unit, led by a member of NBN Co's senior management team, which encompasses the fixed wireless and satellite networks, as well as other customer facing functions. NBN fixed line services are available to 73 per cent of premises outside major areas in Australia.

The establishment of the regional business unit is an important signal to regional and rural communities that NBN Co will continue to improve its services so that all Australians can maximise the immense social and economic benefits that high-speed broadband can provide.

NBN Co continues to improve the service quality and products available over the network:

- between January 2019 and December 2020, the company completed 2,799 fixed wireless tower upgrades to increase fixed wireless network capacity;
- in April 2020, the company enhanced its Sky Muster Plus satellite offering by reducing the range of applications that are metered. This resulted in the amount of data unmetered on the product increasing from 30 per cent to 70 per cent;

- the Business Satellite Service was launched in October 2019 providing products tailored to the needs of medium to large enterprises; and
- in September 2020, the company announced a number of upgrades to NBN services including:
  - new investments in fixed-line upgrades encompassing upgrading 75 per cent of fixed line premises across Australia so they can access ultrafast broadband of up to 1 Gigabit per second (Gbps) by 2023, as well as \$50 million for a line speed upgrade program available to resolve in-home cabling issues from premises on the FTTN network;
  - the creation of 240 Business Fibre Zones to extend ultrafast connectivity to 90 per cent of all Australian businesses at no up-front cost, as well as \$50 million for the creation of future Business Fibre Zones, in partnership with local government and other organisations;
  - a \$300 million fund, which it will use to co-invest with federal, state and territory governments and local councils to deliver access to higher speed wholesale broadband services over the NBN to households and businesses in regional and remote areas of Australia. It is expected this fund will assist in moving more regional areas from fixed wireless or satellite to a fixed line NBN access technology; and
  - an annual investment of around \$200 million in increasing the capacity of the fixed wireless network.