



**Australian Government**

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**Department of Broadband,  
Communications and the Digital Economy**

**Digital Regions Initiative**

**Round one guidelines**

***August 2009***

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# 1. Digital Regions Initiative

## 1.1 Introduction

The four year \$60 million Digital Regions Initiative comprises \$46 million announced as part of the Australian Government's initial response to the Regional Telecommunications Review and additional funding of \$14 million as part of the Government's Rural and Regional Broadband Network Initiative announced in the May 2009 Budget.

The Digital Regions Initiative will co-fund digital enablement applications to improve services in the key sectors of health, education and/or emergency services in regional, rural and remote<sup>1</sup> communities across Australia in partnership with state, territory and local governments.

For Australians living in regional, rural and remote locations, improving service delivery through the use of innovative digital enablement technology will:

- leverage the potential of the Australian Government's significant investment in the National Broadband Network
- further stimulate Australia's digital economy
- create employment opportunities in local communities
- develop skills and help to retain professionals in local communities.

The Digital Regions Initiative will support projects which will deliver innovative and sustainable services such as those that will:

- boost innovation in healthcare by enabling services such as remote consultation, diagnosis and treatment in areas where there are specialist skills shortages
- extend digital education services to enable more regional, rural and remote communities to access improved educational opportunities
- increase the use of digital technologies to improve emergency and disaster response both within and across state and territory borders.

## 2. Aim

The aim of the Digital Regions Initiative is to co-fund innovative digital enablement projects supporting improved health, education, and emergency services in regional, rural and remote communities.

## 3. Principles

The Digital Regions Initiative will co-fund digital applications projects that meet the aim by:

- being positioned to leverage the opportunities that will be created by the National Broadband Network

- targeting gaps in essential services delivered to regional, rural and remote communities
- expanding successful digital enablement initiatives of state, territory or local government, including those funded by the *Clever Networks program* into other regions, cross jurisdictionally or nationally
- using proven and tested concepts and models of improved and innovative service delivery including those developed by *Clever Networks* projects, in new regions, cross jurisdictionally or nationally
- supporting innovative approaches to service delivery using digital technologies that are based on best practice developments from nationally recognised Information and Communications Technology (ICT) research and development activities
- aligning with national policy approaches in the delivery of health, education and/or emergency services with a particular emphasis on benefiting regional, rural and remote communities.

## 4. Eligibility

Lead applicants for funding under the Digital Regions Initiative Round one must be eligible state, territory or local government entities as follows:

- state and territory government departments and agencies
- state and territory owned business enterprises
- local government
- local government business enterprises
- business enterprises or other entities jointly owned by state and territory governments and local governments, e.g. new entities or entities owned by and representing a group of state, territory or local government entities, or
- local government and municipal associations.

Where more than one government entity is seeking funding for a project proposal, a lead entity must be nominated as the applicant seeking funding on behalf of all other entities (or project partners) that will contribute to the proposed project.

Only proposals that are from the above entities lodged on time or considered by the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy under the relevant factors outlined in Section 8 of these guidelines will be deemed as eligible.

**Note:** *Project partners may also include not-for-profit and private sector organisations. However, the lead entity submitting a project proposal under the Digital Regions Initiative funding must be one of the entities listed above. If successful, the lead entity will receive Digital Regions Initiative funding and will have the responsibility of implementing the project and meeting the obligations. Please note that the Australian Government will only make payments to government authorities.*

## 5. Funding

The Digital Regions Initiative will make available up to \$53.4 million over two funding rounds. The first competitive funding round will include a call for expressions of interest to be lodged by 14 September 2009. The intent of the expression of interest process is to provide potential applicants with the opportunity to collaborate with other projects, either within their jurisdiction or to strengthen their application through cross-jurisdictional linkages. These will be published on the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy website ([www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions](http://www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions)). Full project proposals are to be lodged by 14 October 2009.

The Digital Regions Initiative seeks to co-fund comprehensive proposals which facilitate service delivery in the key sectors of health, education and/or emergency services through innovative digital enablement technologies. Collaborative projects between local, state entities and cross-jurisdictional entities are encouraged to maximise the effective use of those technologies. Proposals must also be positioned to work with, and take advantage of, the fast broadband that will be delivered through the Australian Government's National Broadband Network. Further information on the National Broadband Network can be found on the Department's website ([www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions](http://www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions)).

The indicative range of Australian Government funding that may be provided for a particular project under the Digital Regions Initiative Round one is \$2–7 million (GST exclusive). Applicants proposing projects that are cross-jurisdictional or have a national focus may seek a higher level of funding. Projects of a smaller scale may seek a level of funding below the indicative range, however, such projects will need to clearly demonstrate a significant positive impact for Australians living in regional, rural or remote areas through the delivery of services in one or more key sectors of health, education and emergency services.

Funding will only be provided to innovative, high-quality projects that are closely aligned to the aim and principles outlined in these guidelines. Applicants are expected to provide a clear strategy to ensure ongoing financial viability of their project. Funding will not be provided to support the continuation of activities of existing projects.

Digital enablement project funding will be provided to enable service delivery. It is not intended that funding be used for establishing large scale broadband links but essential supporting infrastructure that is required for service delivery will be considered for funding.

Projects may include the following types of activities:

- digital technology applications
- costs associated with the introduction of digital applications, including change management
- enhancement to capabilities of existing network infrastructure

- network engineering and improvements that ensure an efficient and effective network
- associated capital equipment (servers, network hubs and connectivity elements).

Applicants should note that funding for all successful proposals will be provided through a National Partnership agreement on the Digital Regions Initiative and associated implementation plans. Projects approved for funding will be the subject of an implementation plan established under the National Partnership agreement. Such plans will be agreed by relevant parties.

The Digital Regions Initiative will run until 30 June 2013. Projects funded under the Initiative must be completed before 31 December 2012 to allow time for final project reporting and a final evaluation of the Initiative.

**Note:** *The Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy reserves the right to amend these guidelines for Round 2 funding.*

### **5.1 Australian Government contribution to funding**

The Australian Government will contribute up to 50 per cent of the estimated cost of project activities. Applicants are encouraged to use the Australian Government funding to leverage funds from other project partners.

Matching funding is required for all Digital Regions Initiative projects. Where an applicant is seeking funding on behalf of more than one agency or jurisdiction, all parties must contribute resources to the project. Total contributions from sources other than the Australian Government must at least match the Digital Regions Initiative Round one funding. Contributions from parties from any activity primarily funded by the Australian Government cannot be used as matching funding.

Activities that are primarily funded by the Australian Government are not precluded from being part of a project. However, contributions from any such activity would be disregarded for the purpose of assessing whether the application complies with the matching requirement for contributions from other sources.

Cash contributions will be considered more favourably in the assessment process. Other contributions must be valued at a specified current market rate. Other contributions may include property, equipment, services, personnel time, project management and professional advice. Any specified contributions must be needed to fulfill the project's goals and objectives and must be applicable within the timeframe of the project.

For the purposes of assessing matching funding, the Australian Government will use a nominal value for staff that devote 100 per cent of their time to the Digital Regions Initiative project (covering salary, on-costs and overheads, per annum) as follows:

- |   |           |
|---|-----------|
| • program leader/senior manager                         | \$170 000 |
| • project/team leader/manager                           | \$108 300 |
| • other (support staff, e.g. technical, administrative) | \$ 67 500 |

Large capital items must be valued proportionally to the usage by the Digital Regions Initiative project and based on depreciation of the capital item and the running costs over the life of the project.

Valuations of existing intellectual property will be not considered as a contribution to funding.

## **6. Expression of interest process**

Potential applicants may lodge an expression of interest. Expressions of interest must be lodged via the online facility on the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy's website at [www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions](http://www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions) by 5:00pm Australian Eastern Standard Time on 14 September 2009.

The expression of interest process is designed to provide potential applicants with an opportunity to identify collaboration or partnership opportunities with similar proposed projects. Expressions of interest will not be assessed by the Department except as described in the next paragraph, and no potential applicants will be excluded as a result of their participation in the expression of interest process.

Expressions of interest that are consistent with the aim and principles of the program will be progressively published on the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy's website. Applicants should review them to explore opportunities to further strengthen their application through cross-jurisdictional partnering for maximum service delivery impact or to collaborate with similar projects to avoid duplication within their jurisdiction.

Applicants can indicate in their expression of interest if they are willing to consider additional project partners.

Applicants are encouraged to continue to develop their full project proposal as soon as they have lodged an expression of interest.

The lead entity of the project proposal is then required to submit a full project proposal addressing all selection criteria and consistent with the requirements of these guidelines by 14 October 2009.

An expression of interest will not commit a potential applicant to lodge a full project proposal.

Further assistance with lodging an expression of interest is available from [www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions](http://www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions) or by telephone on 02 6271 1450.

## **7. Application process**

### **7.1 Lodgement of proposals**

Full project proposals must be lodged via the online facility on the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy's website at [www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions](http://www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions). The facility will be available by no later than 31 August 2009 until 5:00pm Australian Eastern Daylight Time on 14 October 2009 (the closing time). The Department reserves the right to change the closing time and if the Department does change the closing time, it will notify the change on its website.

Applicants who have not submitted an expression of interest will not be excluded from the full project proposal submission process.

Full project proposals must be consistent with the requirements of these guidelines and address all the selection criteria.

Further assistance with lodging a full project proposal is available from [www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions](http://www.dbcde.gov.au/digitalregions) or by telephone on 02 6271 1450.

### **7.2 Information to be included in project proposals**

Applicants must ensure that all mandatory and supporting information as set out in the selection criteria is provided. This includes a full project summary, applicant and project partner information, budget details and letters of commitment.

Applicants must ensure that all selection criteria are fully addressed when submitting their project proposal.

In responding to the selection criteria, applicants should have regard to the Digital Regions Initiative's aim and program principles. Only projects that meet the Digital Regions Initiative's selection criteria, aim and principles will be considered for funding.

### **7.3 Ownership of proposals and confidentiality**

The intellectual property rights contained in a proposal do not pass to the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy simply by virtue of the submission of that proposal. However, by submitting a proposal, the applicant agrees that the original proposal becomes the property of the Department at the time of submission. The applicant also agrees that the Department may make further copies of, and use, the proposal for the purpose of conducting the Digital Regions Initiative funding process, audit requirements, complying with governmental and parliamentary reporting requirements and responding to requests for information by a House or a Committee of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. All relevant copies of the original proposal also become the property of the Department.

Applicants should provide details in respect of any information in their proposal that they would require the Department to treat as confidential. The Department undertakes to keep

confidential that information. This obligation of confidentiality does not apply if the confidential information:

- a) is disclosed by the Department to its advisers or employees in order to evaluate proposals
- b) is disclosed by the Department to the responsible Minister
- c) is disclosed by the Department, in response to a request by a House or a Committee of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia
- d) is authorised or required by law to be disclosed, or
- e) is in the public domain otherwise than due to a breach of the Department's obligation of confidentiality.

#### **7.4. Late lodgement**

Project proposals received after the closing time will be excluded from the assessment process, except if the late proposal is received after the closing time due to:

- (a) mishandling by the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, and/or
- (b) circumstances beyond the control of the applicant.

Any decision by the Department on whether or not to admit a late proposal to the assessment process shall be final.

Applicants will not be able to introduce new information after the lodgement of their full project proposal. However, the Department may, but is not obliged to, approach applicants to seek clarification of certain elements of their application.

#### **7.5 No contractual obligation**

Nothing in these guidelines will be construed to create any binding contract between the Department and any applicant.

### **8. Selection criteria**

Applicants for Digital Regions Initiative Round one funding should address their project proposals against the selection criteria listed below.

In responding to these selection criteria, applicants should have regard to the Digital Regions Initiative's aim and principles and address all parts of each selection criterion. The selection criteria are weighted equally.

#### ***Selection criterion 1: Project outcomes and benefits***

Applicants must provide a clear description of the key sector(s) (health, education and/or emergency services) being targeted and how their project outcomes will improve the delivery of services in that key sector(s).

The description of the project's intended benefits should include the potential social and economic benefits for service end-users in regional, rural and/or remote Australia. Any discussion of benefits resulting from its implementation should include the likely impact of the services for other organisations and/or the wider community. Applicants should provide evidence that the benefits arising from the project represent value for money when considered against the total project cost and the proposed Digital Regions Initiative contribution.

Responses should detail how the project will work with and take advantage of the fast broadband that will be delivered through the Australian Government's National Broadband Network. In addition, they should address how the project will leverage other national, state, territory or local government priorities including digital enablement initiatives.

Applicants must clearly identify whether the project expands and/or replicates successful *Clever Networks*, state, territory and local government projects or models of innovative service delivery into other regions, cross-jurisdictionally or nationally.

### ***Selection criterion 2: Innovative and complementary services***

Applicants need to clearly describe how the project will address national, state, territory and/or local government priorities in relation to health, education and/or emergency services delivery issues in regional, rural and remote Australia for the key sector(s) being targeted:

- Projects with an eHealth-related component must clearly show alignment with the *National eHealth Strategy* (<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/National+Ehealth+Strategy>). Responses should clearly show that projects are capable of being implemented in compliance with National eHealth policies, business requirements, systems architectures and standards (or updates thereof) endorsed by national e-health governance bodies, or issued by the National eHealth Transition Authority (NEHTA) or the Australian Government as required.
- Projects targeting the education sector which specifically include schools, should contribute to national educational objectives as set out in the Digital Education Revolution (DER) *Strategic Plan and Implementation Roadmap* (<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Pages/default.aspx>). The DER aims to contribute to sustainable and meaningful change to teaching and learning in Australian schools that will prepare students for further education, training and to live and work in a digital world. Responses should indicate how the project will contribute to these objectives.
- Projects that focus on or include the emergency services sector should complement Australian Government emergency service initiatives.

Applicants need to outline how the project's digital service delivery model is innovative, including how it is distinguishable from other applications and services already commercially available.

### ***Selection criterion 3: Demand***

Applicants need to clearly establish the level of demand for their project including how demand will be sustainable or increase over time.

This will include the approximate number of service end-users to benefit from the project and level of support for the initiative from communities, users and relevant agencies.

In outlining the level of demand, applicants will need to identify the region(s) in which the project services will be delivered (including key population centres). Applicants should also identify why such services are currently not being provided, and are unlikely to be provided, in the targeted communities in the near future without Digital Regions Initiative funding.

### ***Selection criterion 4: Technical characteristics***

Applicants need to clearly explain key technical characteristics of their proposal, in particular, the digital enablement technology to be used and how it will meet user expectations and requirements. No single technology will be favoured in the assessment of project proposals.

As well as a maintenance strategy, issues which need to be covered by the proposal include: project scalability, adherence to relevant standards, access conditions and protocols, the level of interoperability with other networks, functionality, security, upgrade and redundancy.

### ***Selection criterion 5: Financial planning and sustainability***

Applicants are required to include a financial plan which outlines the financial strategy, viability and sustainability of the project, including the level and nature of funding from sources other than the Australian Government. Cash contributions will be considered more favourably.

Budget and expenditure details are required to be entered into the Budget and Expenditure template as part of the online application process.

This template will capture information pertaining to the proposed project cash flow, expenditure and income and will clearly identify contributions being made by the applicant and/or other project partners.

Applicants will also need to include signed letters of commitment as evidence of contributions being made from parties other than the applicants. Facility to upload these documents will be available as part of the online application process.

Applicants should also identify and confirm their ability to ongoing service delivery after Digital Regions Initiative funding ceases to demonstrate the ongoing sustainability of the project.

**Note:** *Applicants must at least match the funding requested from the Digital Regions Initiative as outlined in 5.1 of these guidelines.*

### **Additional information requirements**

Applications should not be made for Australian Government funding for activities that would normally be funded by state and territory governments or would be commercially viable without government support. Applications should not include projects that involve cost-shifting between levels of government or from the private to the public sector.

Applicants must state whether they have received funding or submitted, or intend to submit, a funding request for the project from another Australian Government or state and/or territory government source.

Applicants must provide a statement as to whether the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy or another Australian Government agency has provided funding for this activity in the past.

Applications from entities (or project partners including entities) that did not satisfactorily acquit previous Australian Government funding in accordance with contractual agreements will not be considered. In their project proposal, applicants must advise the Department if there are any past or current projects that have involved concerns by the Australian Government relating to the satisfactory acquittal of Australian Government funding.

The Australian Government does not limit its ability or authority to contact only nominated organisations/individuals and may conduct its own due diligence in respect of the past performance of the funding applicant and project partners.

### ***Selection criterion 6: Management and organisational structures***

Lead applicants must provide details of the organisational structure and management team to undertake their project, particularly the individual expertise and previous achievements of individual members. This should include:

- an organisational diagram showing the relationship between the lead project, other project partners and any other relevant organisations
- a clear outline of the governance arrangements for the implementation of the project
- full corporate ownership details of all members of the project partners
- curriculum vitae (maximum of two pages) and the contact details of two referees for each member of the management team.

Responses must include the percentage of time that the manager or management team will devote to the management of the Digital Regions Initiative project. It must also include details of major projects of a similar nature or recent accomplishments of each member or the team collectively.

Details of major projects should include the following:

- a description of the project and contribution made by the organisation to the project
- an outline of performance under the project contract(s) (including milestones, budget and key performance indicators, as applicable)
- the total (combined) dollar value of the project and the manner in which it was funded
- the contract start and end dates
- at least one referee, which should include the counter-party to the project contract(s), including an explicit authority for the Australian Government to approach these individuals and be provided with full information regarding project performance.

Where the relevant project(s) included funding from any level of government, the following details must also be supplied:

- contract title and number
- contract (or project) name and number and relevant agency (if not the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy)
- contact details for at least one referee, which should include the project manager from the relevant agency, including an explicit authority for the Australian Government to approach these individuals and be provided with full information regarding project performance.

Applicants will also need to tender a robust and achievable project plan addressing implementation issues, deployment timeframes and risk management measures. In particular, applicants should give assurances that the project will be completed on or before 31 December 2012.

**Note:** *Final reports and financial acquittals will be required before 31 March 2013.*

If more than one entity is involved in the carriage of the proposed project, the applicant will need to indicate who they are, what role they will play, and where each partnering entity fits within the project's governance framework, including reporting, decision making and organisational structure/management team.

**Note:** *Facility to upload documents related to this criterion will be available as part of the online application process by 31 August 2009.*

## **9. Assessment process**

### **9.1 Full project proposals**

Successful projects under the Digital Regions Initiative will be selected through a competitive process.

The Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy has established a panel to assess project proposals. The panel will advise the Minister on the outcomes of its assessment of applications and make recommendations to the Minister on which applications are suitable for funding, the level of funding for each successful applicant and any conditions of the offer.

The Minister will determine which projects should be funded, the level of funding for each successful applicant and any conditions of the offer.

Both the Minister and the panel will take into account the requirements of the Digital Regions Initiative including: eligibility, merits of the project proposals against the selection criteria and the aim and principles as set out in these guidelines.

A probity adviser has been engaged to ensure that the assessment process is conducted fairly and in line with the arrangements set out in these guidelines and that any conflicts of interest are managed appropriately.

The stages to the assessment process are as follows:

#### **Stage one**

At stage one, the panel will undertake an initial review of project proposals. It will exclude from further consideration those proposals that:

- do not meet eligibility requirements
- do not address the selection criteria in a substantive manner, or
- are otherwise uncompetitive with other applications when assessed against the selection criteria.

#### **Stage two**

At stage two, the panel will conduct a detailed assessment of the applications against the selection criteria taking into account, as considered appropriate, comments and advice from:

- other government agencies
- business and technical advisers
- legal advisers
- the probity adviser
- the National Broadband Development Group<sup>2</sup>
- referee reports.

The panel may interview applicants at this stage and/or request information from applicants in order to clarify certain elements of their project proposal.

## **10. Reporting and evaluation**

The Digital Regions Initiative will be evaluated against the performance indicators identified below. The performance indicators reflect the project selection criteria and will be used to monitor, measure and report on progress, outputs, outcomes and benefits of each project and the Digital Regions Initiative overall. Both qualitative and quantitative measures are included.

Funding recipients are required to participate in program reviews and evaluations. To effectively participate in this, funding recipients will need to establish baseline data against which project and program progress can be measured. Where possible, baseline data should be included in the funding application and subsequently form the basis of project progress reports.

Funding recipients will be required to provide project reports every three months based on activities undertaken in the previous three months and against the baseline data. Such reports are to be provided within 20 business days of the end of the period to which the report relates.

A mid-term review of the-Digital Regions Initiative will be undertaken in 2011. The review will be based on the project reports and will assess project and program progress against the performance indicators. The review will provide early feedback to government on progress towards meeting the Digital Regions Initiative's aim and principles and as a means of meeting accountability and transparency requirements. A final program evaluation will be conducted in the last year of the Digital Regions Initiative.

### **Performance indicators**

#### **Performance indicator 1: The extent to which regional, rural and remote communities are positively impacted by Digital Regions Initiative.**

Examples of measures by sector:

- Number of communities that have benefited from funded projects.
- Name and classification (regional, rural or remote under the Australian Standard Geographic Classification—ASGC) of communities that have benefited from funded projects.
- Number of projects completed.
- Description of benefits and impacts on communities.

## **Performance indicator 2: Improvements in the delivery of health, education and/or emergency services enabled by digital technologies supported by Digital Regions Initiative projects.**

Examples of measures by sector:

- Description of service delivery benefits for the sector.
- Growth (number and description of new services/enhanced access, by technology type and speed) of services delivered by the Digital Regions Initiative.
- Description/impact of improved digital communication applications and service delivery outcomes for client groups (e.g. radiologists, teaching professionals, students, emergency response workers).
- Description of the qualitative effects on regional, rural and remote communities.
- Description of how the digital enablement technology has benefited the sector, including where appropriate, quantification of those benefits (such as cost reductions).

## **Performance indicator 3: Extent to which Australian Government investment is leveraged by Digital Regions Initiative projects.**

Examples of measures by sector:

- The level of investment by project partners as a result of funded projects.
- The level of investment by parties external to the consortia.
- Description of how the project expands or replicates other government projects or models of service delivery.
- The number and type of additional activities/enhanced access to applications that have occurred beyond the scope of funding agreements.
- Description of additional benefits achieved by projects through the opportunities created by the National Broadband Network.
- The level of additional investment that has occurred beyond the scope of funding agreements and as a result of funded projects.
- Description of how the longer term sustainability of the project will be assured.

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of the Digital Regions Initiative, regional, rural and remote areas have the same meaning as the definitions of ‘Inner Regional Australia’, ‘Outer Regional Australia’, ‘Remote Australia’ and ‘Very Remote Australia’ according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Australian Geographical Classification Remoteness Structure (AGCRS).

<sup>2</sup> The National Broadband Development Group is a working group of the Online and Communications Council. The Online and Communications Council operates as the peak ministerial forum across governments to consider and reach agreement on strategic approaches on information and communications issues of national importance. The National Broadband Development Group collaborates on Broadband and Communications matters of joint interest to the governments, including programs impacting on the availability, take-up and usage of broadband in Australia.