

Thursday, 31st March 2022**Regional Consumers Benefit from 2022-23 Federal Budget, But Immediate Action on Affordability Needed.**

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) has welcomed measures to improve connectivity for people living in regional Australia in the 2022-23 Federal Budget, however stressed the need for urgent government action on broadband affordability.

The Coalition Government has announced \$811.8 million in funding for the Connecting Regional Australia Initiative to expand mobile coverage and improve connectivity, resilience and affordability in regional, rural and peri-urban Australia.

While the essentiality of communications services has been demonstrated by natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic, the affordability of communications services continues to be an issue, especially for Australians on lower incomes.

ACCAN has welcomed the allocation of \$30 million in the Connecting Regional Australia Initiative to address affordability. However, the peak body for communications services urges the Coalition to immediately commit to practical measures to address the issue of affordability.

“The government’s response to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review promises to explore practicalities regarding zero-rating data charges for government websites and consider grants that would help make phone and internet services more affordable for struggling Australians,” said ACCAN CEO Andrew Williams.

“While these sentiments are positive, what we need is concrete action to address affordability. We urge the government to work with NBN Co, as a matter of priority, to introduce a concessional broadband product in recognition of the essential nature of being online in modern Australia.”

Commenting on additional communications funding in the 2022-23 Federal Budget, ACCAN expressed support for the previously announced investment of \$480 million to upgrade NBN fixed wireless services and enhance Sky Muster services. This investment will see up to one million premises in regional, rural, and remote Australia and in peri-urban areas gain access to higher speeds on NBN fixed wireless services or greater data limits on Sky Muster services.

“We know that households on NBN fixed wireless and NBN Sky Muster have often had less than ideal connectivity. We’ve heard countless stories from consumers who are frustrated about slow download speeds on congested fixed wireless towers or insufficient data allowances on Sky Muster services,” said Mr Williams.

“We’re hopeful that the increased investment in the NBN will mean a lessening of the digital divide between the reliability and performance of those in the regions and those in major cities.”

The connectivity literacy of people in the regions will also be boosted by the \$5 million in funding announced to expand and continue the Regional Tech Hub to provide consumer support. ACCAN has long been a strong supporter of the Regional Tech Hub and its important work in providing digital capacity building and troubleshooting services.

“One of the most basic needs for people in the regions is to understand the options that they have to get connected and stay connected. The Regional Tech Hub has been central to ensuring that people have access to independent phone and internet advice that is tailored to their individual needs.”