

**Environment and Communications Legislation Committee**

**Tuesday 26 October 2021**

**Opening statement from the Secretary of the Department of  
Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and  
Communications**

Good morning.

Throughout the past year, the dedicated staff in my Department have continued to work to deliver essential ongoing functions, COVID-19 response measures and business-as-usual activities – connecting Australians, enriching our communities and empowering our regions.

I would like to outline some of the key achievements of our Department over the past year.

In the last financial year, my Department, in collaboration with our 28 portfolio entities, has delivered more than \$19 billion of investments across our portfolio to support our objectives in the major infrastructure, transport, communications and arts sectors. We have delivered more than 130 programs.

The National Broadband Network has been critical to the ability of millions of Australians to work from home during repeated COVID lockdowns and has ensured millions of Australians have continued to be employed. Broadband internet and telephone services were also relied on by many Australians to connect to schools and access telehealth services during the disruptions of COVID-19.

The Minister for Communications declared on 11 December 2020 that the NBN should be treated as built and fully operational. The Department updated settings for the \$19.5 billion Commonwealth Loan Agreement with NBN Co. Limited to agree a refinancing framework within which NBN Co can approach debt markets efficiently and raise private debts. As a result, NBN Co. has repaid \$11.38 billion on its loan agreement with the Commonwealth. The Department also supported the Minister to issue a new Statement of Expectations to NBN Co on 26 August 2021.

The Department delivered thirty communications and media programs over the past financial year. These included \$230 million for Standard Telephone Services and \$40 million for payphones under the Universal Service Obligation, as well as funding for the National Relay Service to ensure these lifeline services are available to people across Australia.

The Mobile Blackspot Program continued to improve mobile coverage and competition across Australia, including through generating private sector investment. 938 new base stations were on air at 30 June 2021.

The Regional Connectivity Program committed \$117 million in Commonwealth funding for place-based high-speed broadband and mobile projects across Australia, providing regional communities with significant upgrades to voice and data services.

We commenced the \$37.1 million Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) program. STAND will be delivered over two years to fund more temporary telecommunications facilities, a Mobile Network Hardening Program and additional NBN Sky Muster satellites.

We worked closely with stakeholders including Telstra (as operator of the Emergency Call Service), emergency service organisations and carriers to introduce Advanced Mobile Location to the Triple Zero Emergency Call Service. AML enables mobile phones to send GPS location coordinates when a call to Triple Zero is made.

We also delivered the Public Interest News Gathering program, providing \$68.3 million to 108 regional publishers and broadcasters to support their public interest news journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Department supported the development and commencement of the new Online Safety Act 2021, which expands the remit of the eSafety Commissioner to cover adult cyber abuse and introduces significant tools that can be used to make digital platforms and other technology businesses improve online safety for their users. By supporting a safer online environment, we assist Australians to confidently engage online and enjoy the benefits of the digital economy.

A significant media reform process was initiated with the release of a green paper in December 2020. This process started a conversation that will help re-shape and reform Australia's media landscape to enable all Australians to continue to access a wide range of services providing quality news and entertainment content.

The Department also supported the passage and commencement of legislative reforms to streamline and modernize the spectrum management framework, and supported ministerial decisions to facilitate critical 5G spectrum allocations. We also administered the Australian 5G Innovation Initiative, to provide grants to support businesses to test productivity-enhancing applications of 5G.

Over the past year, my Department coordinated delivery of the \$1 billion Relief and Recovery Fund supporting regions, communities and industry sectors that have been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus crisis. Through this fund, my Department has delivered additional payments to support Indigenous Visual Arts Centres, crisis relief for regional arts and crisis relief for Artists, Crew and Music Workers.

Creative industries and the creative economy have been amongst the sectors hardest hit by COVID. In response, the Government has provided targeted support for the arts and creative sectors.

In 2020-21, my Department facilitated over \$345 million of additional Australian Government support for the arts, entertainment and screen sectors.

We delivered the Restart Investment to Sustain and Expand Fund (RISE) fund, committing \$100 million to 242 projects. We also delivered \$29.8 million under the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support Program, which helps fund the operations of around 80 Indigenous-owned art centres, and a number of art fairs, regional hubs and industry service organisations that are at the heart of Australia's world-famous Indigenous visual art movement.

The Location Incentive Program will provide approx. \$100mn of support for 13 productions, attracting international screen productions to locate to Australia. Together, these productions are expected to generate around \$766 million of expenditure in Australia.

We also administered \$21.5 million under the Indigenous Languages and the Arts program to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

peoples to express, preserve and maintain their culture and \$16.2 million of funding under the Sustainability for Arts Organisations program. The Sustainability Fund provided 'last resort' funding assistance to significant Australian Government funded arts organisations at imminent risk. These organisations are key employers of Australian artists and art workers and the leading presenters of high-quality work to audiences across Australia.

This goes some way to demonstrate the breadth, depth and complexity of the work of this Department, which I am immensely proud to lead.

These achievements have been delivered despite lockdowns affecting much of the country and the disruptions of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic and its wide reaching impacts have stretched public policy making and delivery all over the world. I am proud of the ongoing commitment and professionalism of my people, ensuring – throughout this period of disruption – the Department has supported Australia.

I would like to thank the people that are my department – most of whom I have not seen in person since early August – as well as our portfolio agencies for their extraordinary efforts. A strong and well-functioning public service has been a key part of Australia's effective response to the crisis. I have been impressed by the commitment and willingness of our staff to step up and serve the people, businesses and communities of Australia during this challenging time.

I'd also like to thank all those we've partnered with throughout COVID – including our portfolio agencies and GBEs – for their cooperation and professionalism as we've worked together to deliver for the Australian people.

Thanks.