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Committee Secretary
Select Committee on Regional Australia
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

RE: Inquiry into Regional Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this Inquiry.

The Regional Development Australia Loddon Mallee (RDA-LM) Committee provides the following points in relation to the Terms of Reference.

The effectiveness of existing regional service delivery and development programs (a)

- The implementation of urban service delivery models based on critical mass and time efficiencies has limited impact in rural and regional areas. Health status and service utilisation statistics reveal that the current model of primary health service in the Mallee's rural and regional towns is failing. It has the lowest ratio of General Practitioners (GPs) per capita of all the state regional partnership areas in Victoria and the attraction and retention of GPs is a significant issue. A contemporary nurse practitioner model offers an opportunity to fill some of these gaps in the provision of primary health care to underserved communities (including the increasing aged care sector). However, changes to the Medicare Benefits Scheme are required to facilitate this by reducing nurse practitioner costs and enabling them to work to their full scope of practice.
- Taking 'place-based' regional development approaches further, solutions need to be 'matched' to the situation rather than applying a particular model (even if deemed 'rural or regional') to a locality. This should support regional communities' identification and development of their own solutions to problems.
- Greater flexibility in how funding is allocated and providing the security of funding over longer periods is required to allow better coordination of multiple stakeholders. This is particularly important in order to address more complex and interdependent issues such as entrenched disadvantage in the Mallee and educational disengagement and under employment in the Loddon Campaspe.
- Digital connectivity issues remain in regional and rural areas of the Loddon Mallee. Despite improvements in mobile coverage through the Mobile Black Spot Program, digital connectivity remains a significant limitation to businesses, communities and the visitor



An Australian Government Initiative



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economy in the region. As reported in the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review – *Getting it right out there*, North Victoria receives an Australian Digital Inclusion Index of 50.8 and is one of the least digitally included regions.

Promoting the development of regional centres, cities, towns and districts including promoting master planning of regional communities (c)

- The Loddon Mallee region has a history of encouraging strategic regional thinking. In updating the 2015 Loddon Mallee Regional Strategic Plan, RDA Loddon Mallee has joined forces with the two state Regional Partnerships and Local Government to develop Economic Growth Strategies for the Loddon Mallee region. Formally endorsed by all constituent municipalities, these provide a strategic basis, rationale and direction for investment throughout the Loddon Mallee region. They identify areas of focus based on the region's strengths and key opportunities and enable joined up regional advocacy and action. Implementation of these strategies has commenced and the three regional committees are working alongside community, business, not-for-profit and government to bring about positive change for the region.

Promoting private investment in regional centres and regional infrastructure (d)

- The implementation of the regional Economic Growth Strategies includes the development of an Investment Prospectus to showcase projects ready for funding across the region, including private investment. In addition, a separate project is underway to scope large-scale transformational projects aimed at attracting significant private investment. These projects will require considerable work and time to be realised.

Examine the key drivers for unlocking decentralisation opportunities for both the private and public sectors (e)

- RDA-LM provided a submission to the Inquiry into Regional Development and Decentralisation supporting, in-principle, the relocation of Commonwealth Government agencies to rural areas. However, it noted that it should be targeted so that the location is a good fit to enable the successful operation of the agency, with pre-existing complementary infrastructure, organisations, support services and potential for local employees.
- RDA-LM expresses some concern about the application of the term decentralisation as a mechanism to divert growth and population away from urban centres into 'new settlements' within regional Australia. Its preference is to reap the potential from existing infrastructure, building capacity through improvements and capitalising on under-utilised assets rather than establishing new centres. This is an essential part of the current project investigating transformational opportunities in the Loddon Mallee.

**Consider other measures to support the ongoing growth and sustainability of regional Australia
(I)**

- RDA-LM is advocating for unique, fit-for-purpose funding models that will stimulate activity and business expansion:
 - The 'Small Town Big Difference' fund aims to pool resources from community, private sector, State and Commonwealth Governments to be distributed through a number of rounds for projects in small towns in the Mallee. Smaller communities are often at a disadvantage when it comes to competing for grant programs that are focused on economic measurements and outputs. Yet strong evidence exists that small communities are programmatic and resource and extract maximum value from relatively small investments. If successful, the Bendigo Adelaide Bank is interested in rolling this model out to other areas across Australia.
 - A financing model such as a Regional Capital Investment Fund that supports business growth through access to equity could unlock and incentivise access to capital for businesses and allow them to expand into new markets or innovate. Evidence has been collected demonstrating a demand for capital that is not being met.