

Environment and Communications Legislation Committee

Wednesday 26 May 2021

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

Good morning.

I would like to update the Committee on key developments in this portfolio since last estimates.

At that time, I outlined the substantial assistance from the Government to support the arts sector through COVID19 and investments in telecommunications to improve digital connectivity across Australia, particularly in our regions.

We continue to work with Ministers, APS colleagues, key industries and state, territory and local governments to deliver essential ongoing functions and COVID-response measures as Australia continues to recover from the impacts of COVID-19.

Creative industries have been amongst the sectors hardest hit by COVID.

Venues, festivals, screen production and international touring all completely ceased in March last year to meet necessary health restrictions to keep the Australian community safe.

Since then, the Office for the Arts has played a significant role in delivering critical support to the sector and helping it to reopen.

There is still much more work to do until we see the creative economy and the arts return to pre-COVID levels.

Although the arts and creative sectors have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, parts of these sectors are reactivating with the Government's targeted support. The Minister has also announced an additional \$300 million for the sector in the Budget.

Under the first 3 batches of the RISE Fund, 242 arts projects are being supported across all Australian states and territories and in regional and remote Australia with \$100 million in funding, reaching an audience of millions in more than 2,000 locations, and generating jobs.

The Australian screen production industry is also thriving, with the Government's Location Incentive attracting 23 large budget international productions to film in Australia, which will inject over \$1.74 billion into the economy.

The Government's \$50 million Temporary Interruption Fund has also enabled 51 Australian film and television projects to secure financing and start filming.

The department also continues to support the delivery of telecommunications services throughout Australia.

In April 2021, the Government announced the outcomes of the Regional Connectivity Program, which provides funding for 81 'place-based' telecommunications infrastructure projects across regional, rural and remote Australia.

Successful Round 1 projects include the \$9.8 million King Island project, to be delivered by Telstra, which will improve the island's telecommunications network by upgrading the microwave transmission link between Victoria and King Island, increasing the transmission capacity to the Island by more than six-fold, as well as deploying several new 4G sites and upgrading the existing mobile network.

Another example is the Commonwealth contribution of \$435,500 for Wi-Sky NSW to extend its fixed wireless network across regional NSW. The network provides high-speed residential and enterprise broadband services to communities across a wide area, enabling the adoption of digital farm technologies for agricultural and pastoral businesses, as well as the uptake of online video conferencing for the delivery of telehealth services, reducing the need for unnecessary travel.

We continue to work with NBN as it embarks on its program of refinancing the Commonwealth loan and investing in the network. Since the last hearings, NBN has successfully raised USD\$2 billion in the US bond market.

E-safety remains a high priority for the Department and we will be working on the Government's \$5.2 million investment in an National Online Safety Awareness campaign. The campaign will raise awareness of the new Online Safety legislation, if passed by Parliament, and the new and strengthened schemes that will be available through the eSafety Commissioner. This will inform and educate Australians to the help available to them and support victims of online abuse and harm.

In the media sector we continue to work with the sector as it responds to the Government's media reform green paper. In addition the Department is working with the Community Broadcasting Foundation to extend the long-standing arrangements for providing this important grant funding, including the additional \$8 million over two years, that supports the 450 community broadcasters to operate and deliver their important services to communities.

Over the past year, in spite of the challenging circumstances, the department has continued to deliver its essential ongoing business in program, policy and regulatory functions. I would like to put on record my thanks to all the people in my department for their extraordinary hard work and dedication. 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.