

Connecting Victoria

Creating more jobs, boosting local businesses
and connecting more Victorians to loved ones

ENGAGEMENT REPORT



Acknowledgement of Country

The Connecting Victoria program team and the Victorian Government proudly acknowledge Victoria's Aboriginal peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands on which we live and work. We pay our respects to them and their Elders past, present and future, and honour their unique relationship to Country.

Unless indicated otherwise, this work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au. It is a condition of this Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Licence that you must give credit to the original author who is the State of Victoria.

You might find this publication useful but Victorian Government and its employees do not guarantee that this publication is without flaw of any kind or is wholly appropriate for your particular purposes. The Victorian Government disclaims all liability for any error, loss or other consequence which may arise from you relying on any information in this publication.

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government,
1 Treasury Place, Melbourne

ISBN 978-1-76090-505-7 (pdf/online/MS word)

This document is available as a PDF and in an accessible Word format on the Engage Victoria website (engage.vic.gov.au/connecting-victoria). If you have any issues with this document, please email Connecting Victoria at connectingvictoria@ecodev.vic.gov.au or call the Victorian Government Contact Centre on 1300 366 356. If you are deaf, or hearing or speech impaired, you can contact the National Relay Service on 1800 555 660 or visit relayservice.com.au.

Contents

Executive summary	2
Key findings	2
Next steps	3
About Connecting Victoria	4
How we engaged	5
What you told us	6
1: Economic growth	6
2: Working and learning from home	8
3: Safety	9
4: Social inclusion	10
5: Telehealth	11
6: Service quality	12
7: Fairness	13
What we learned through Engage Victoria	14
Who responded?	14
What you told us	15
Themes	17
What we learned through place-based consultation	18
Who did we engage with?	18
What you told us	18
Themes	21
Where enhanced connectivity can help now	22
Where enhanced connectivity can help in future	23
What we will do next	24

Executive summary

The Victorian Government is fast-tracking better mobile coverage and broadband across the state through the \$550 million Connecting Victoria program. Connecting Victoria will enable more businesses to take advantage of digital opportunities with more reliable, better value broadband and mobile connectivity in more places.

The Connecting Victoria project was announced in November 2020 as part of the Government's 2020/21 Budget, which set out an unprecedented investment to boost Victoria's economic recovery. Connecting Victoria will create opportunities and new jobs, strengthening Victoria's economy by better connecting more Victorians, communities and thousands of businesses across the state.

All Victorian businesses and residents stand to gain from participating in the digital economy, and thousands will benefit from more reliable and faster broadband connectivity delivered through this program.

From July to September 2021, the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR) reached out to people across Victoria to get their valuable insights about their 'lived experience' of mobile and broadband connectivity. This will help us to identify locations for upgrades and new infrastructure through the Connecting Victoria program in regional Victoria and outer suburban Melbourne.

Key findings

We received more than 11,000 responses from Victorians through a survey on Engage Victoria, conducted 13 roundtable discussions across the state, and gathered more than 110 formal submissions through direct consultation with local government and other government organisations.

We identified several common connectivity issue themes through the consultation process, including: how a lack of connectivity is hindering economic growth; the need to better support remote working, learning and health services; and the vital importance of maintaining connectivity in emergencies. People we spoke to said they value fairness in the distribution of funding and services, and that it would be helpful if Government addressed the barriers some people face in accessing the digital world.

This report is a summary of the views of people we engaged with and does not represent the view of the Victorian Government.

Next steps

We will integrate the lived experience insights received through our consultation into a decision-making process to identify possible locations for funding. We will seek to partner with telecommunications providers to help deliver improved infrastructure in as many places as possible, as quickly as possible. We announced the first 12 locations funded through the program for broadband upgrades in August 2021, and will continue to announce locations throughout 2022.

We will continue to engage with community and businesses throughout the program.

For more information and to keep up to date, visit the [Connecting Victoria website](#).



About Connecting Victoria

It's never been more important to be connected – for family, community, work, learning and safety

The \$550 million Connecting Victoria program is fast-tracking better mobile coverage and broadband access across the state.

The program is focused on getting more Victorians access to business-grade broadband and upgrading mobile coverage, improving 4G mobile coverage, enabling more places to connect to 5G, and improving access to safety information during bushfires and other emergencies.

The Victorian Government will encourage the Commonwealth Government and telecommunications providers to co-invest in the delivery of the new infrastructure.

Connecting Victoria's first funded projects were announced in August 2021. They will see up to 10,000 Victorian businesses in Hamilton, Portland, Wonthaggi-Inverloch, Warragul, Colac, Benalla, Dromana, Pakenham North, Pakenham South, Lara and Cranbourne South get access to faster and more reliable fibre internet through Enterprise Ethernet services.

The Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions has partnered with NBN Co to fast-track these first locations because we know the businesses based there will benefit from faster and more reliable connectivity that will uplift the economy in these local communities.

More Connecting Victoria projects will be funded across the state throughout 2022.

Visit vic.gov.au/connectingvictoria for more information.



How we engaged

We engaged with people across the state to understand the issues they have with mobile and broadband connectivity

We spoke to people from councils, regional partnership areas and communities to better understand Victoria's connectivity needs.

We did this by:

- ▶ providing an overview of the program on the [Connecting Victoria website](#)
- ▶ asking Victorians to complete our survey on the [Engage Victoria website](#), which was open to everyone to share their mobile and broadband challenges
- ▶ hosting roundtable discussions to share our objectives and hear first-hand about the connectivity challenges communities are experiencing
- ▶ working with councils in regional Victoria and outer suburban Melbourne to gather data on places that have connectivity challenges or could benefit from enhanced connectivity, and to assess future connectivity needs
- ▶ directly engaging with government organisations such as Bushfire Recovery Victoria, Emergency Management Victoria and Regional Development Victoria.

How Victorians responded



3
month
engagement



298
people attended
our roundtables



over
11,000
Engage Victoria
survey responses



13
roundtable
discussions



over
110
submissions
from councils



57
local government
areas engaged

What you told us

Seven key themes emerged from our community consultation



1: Economic growth

Businesses that don't have high-speed internet told us they are missing out on economic growth opportunities. They said that poor connectivity infrastructure is limiting their operations, preventing them from performing even basic tasks such as responding to emails, handling electronic transactions, or calling employees and clients.

Residents told us that bad connectivity and ongoing outages make it difficult to perform remote work, study online and socialise through the internet. This is making residents feel dissatisfied and stressed. They also said that poor connectivity is a big deterrent for regional migration.

Participants said that, looking ahead, places in Victoria will need improved mobile and broadband connectivity for new residential areas, flourishing tourism, regional business expansion and job creation, to adopt new technology in industries like mining, agriculture and manufacturing, and to meet the growing appetite for online content and events.

Better connectivity would also promote the set-up of 'digital hubs', which could be places where businesses and community organisations share spaces, services and resources to encourage collaboration and innovation.

People we engaged with explained why connectivity is important for the following areas of Victoria's economy:

The visitor economy

Tourism is a key focus for many locations. Participants told us that some communications infrastructure cannot support the demand during peak tourism seasons, which affects businesses and leads to poor experiences for visitors. Closed international borders and other COVID-19-related restrictions have boosted intrastate travel, which has increased the load on infrastructure.

Participants said that some areas will need better internet and mobile coverage to support existing demand as well as live streaming, for example, arts, music, and sporting events, to engage a wider audience.

Nine of the 13

roundtable discussions highlighted **tourism** as a connectivity priority





Agricultural technology

Lack of connectivity was highlighted as a big factor that is slowing down digital advancement in agriculture, including use of the Internet of Things (IoT) and robotics or automation. Participants said high-tech agriculture needs 5G and enhanced connectivity to support on-farm operations, supply chain management, and to collect data about things like soil quality and water use in real time.

Business opportunities

Participants reported that limited mobile and broadband connectivity is negatively affecting businesses in some areas. Business owners are reluctant to invest in equipment to improve production and increase competitiveness if there is a chance it won't work due to connectivity issues.

Growth areas

We were told that many places are experiencing rapid development and growth, and infrastructure has not been able to cope, leading to slow connectivity and ongoing outages. To make the most of this growth, participants said that connectivity infrastructure needs to be upgraded. They also said that the planning process for new developments including housing estates and digital hubs needs to identify appropriate sites for new mobile towers early and ensure high-speed broadband connectivity is provided.



2: Working and learning from home

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to big changes in the way we live, accelerating the shift to remote working and learning. Victorians who responded through the consultation process said that this has placed a lot of pressure on connectivity infrastructure. Mobile and broadband speeds have suffered, with bottlenecks and outages, making it difficult for households where people are working or learning from home.

People we engaged with told us what they are experiencing when working or studying from home:

Working

In areas with poor connectivity, remote workers reported consistent challenges that they said are making them less productive and unable to communicate quickly and effectively with colleagues, customers and clients. They told us that some residents are moving to areas with better connectivity, which may lead to a social and economic divide between people that can afford to live in well-connected areas and those that cannot.

Learning

Some parents and teachers in Victoria experience challenges trying to access or provide remote learning because of the lack of reliable internet access. They raised concerns that in some cases this is creating inequity, as some students have better access to virtual classes or more regular contact with their teachers than others.

24%

of Engage Victoria responses mentioned **connectivity challenges** with remote work and education





3: Safety

Victorians that responded felt that connectivity was critical during natural disasters like bushfires and storms, power outages, and emergencies involving health and safety. They said that unreliable connectivity makes it difficult to prepare for emergencies and manage risks. During emergencies, better mobile and broadband coverage is needed so that community members can receive emergency messages and ask for help in real time.

16%

of Engage Victoria responses mentioned the need for **better connectivity in emergencies**



We were told that connectivity is also needed to maintain and restore other services in affected areas. For example, service providers use online tools and systems when planning works and communicating with workers and the community.

Safety concerns were also raised in relation to poor connectivity on highways and in other remote locations. People we engaged with said that patchy mobile coverage can lead to occupational health and safety issues for people who work alone, or commuters and farmers who are unable to access help when needed.



4: Social inclusion

Respondents told us the COVID-19 pandemic has made Australians even more dependent on digital technology – in our economy, everyday lives and jobs. They said this reliance will increase as more interactions move online, for example, paying bills, completing forms and using QR codes. However, some members of the community cannot carry out these activities because they do not have access to high-speed and reliable mobile or broadband services.

For some, being unable to connect to family and friends, especially during lockdowns, has been especially difficult.

People raised concerns that some Victorians are unfamiliar with using digital technologies, such as the elderly, rural or disadvantaged groups, and do not have the skills to fully benefit from better connectivity. They suggested that training and 'IT helpdesk' programs could be rolled out alongside the improved infrastructure to ensure inclusion of all residents and businesses.

Affordability is also a concern. Some areas only have access to connectivity from a single service provider. This could mean customers in those areas are paying higher prices for their internet and mobile services, while sometimes still experiencing inferior and unreliable connectivity.

75%
of councils we asked
highlighted locations where
poor connectivity
affects social inclusion





5: Telehealth

Victorians told us that attending health appointments in person is challenging for many people who live in regional, rural and remote areas. Access to telehealth and other online services such as mental health and child health therapy sessions helps to overcome this, but Victorians told us that current connectivity speeds and bandwidth don't always support this.



People told us that services such as bush nurses are significantly affected in locations with no coverage, as they need to contact doctors for approval to dispense medication.



6: Service quality

People we consulted with said that broadband and mobile connectivity services in many places across the state are still not good enough. While some infrastructure has been upgraded, residents are still waiting months to be connected. They reported that connectivity issues happen with all service providers. We heard that long outages are common, and some areas are using old technology with no defined plans for improvement.

The consultation process identified that residents and businesses expect:

- ▶ real solutions to the problems they are experiencing and are wary of policy that over-promises and under-delivers
- ▶ a robust fibre-to-the-premises national broadband network that is reliable during peak use
- ▶ innovative connectivity options that are as good as or better than services in other countries and Australian states.

People asked that the Connecting Victoria program consider a range of new and innovative solutions. For example, they suggested that mobile towers could be used by more than one service provider and roaming could be introduced to improve connectivity in regional Victoria. Another idea raised was subsidies to individuals like farmers or other landowners who help to boost mobile signals.





7: Fairness

The people we engaged with placed great value on fairness and inclusion for funding distribution across Victoria to improve overall connectivity, support regional digital plans and boost economic activity.



They valued transparency of funding sources for the project and their ability to influence the selection of locations through the consultation process.

What we learned through Engage Victoria

The survey hosted on Engage Victoria was designed to help us understand the challenges Victorians are experiencing with mobile and broadband connectivity.

Who responded?

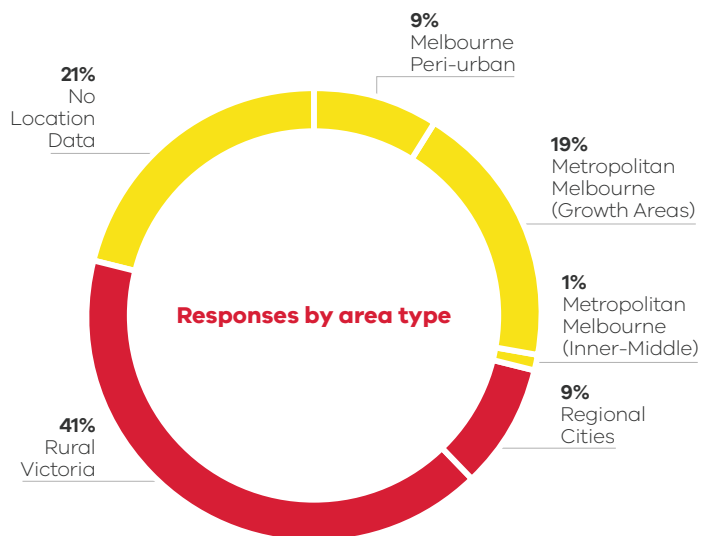


11,000

responses were received from **community members** across Victoria

50%

of responses were from **rural Victoria** and **regional cities**



What you told us

People that responded to our consultation on Engage Victoria said they are experiencing challenges with both mobile and broadband connectivity.

44% Mobile and broadband

A resident in **Woodend** said:

"I can't get mobile reception at my house. The antenna on my roof connecting to a mobile tower is my only connection with the outside world. I run internet and WiFi from this, including all mobile calls. It's expensive and when it goes down, I have no communication with the outside world. I am in a high bushfire risk area and find this very scary."

43% Mobile

A farmer in **Strathmerton** said:

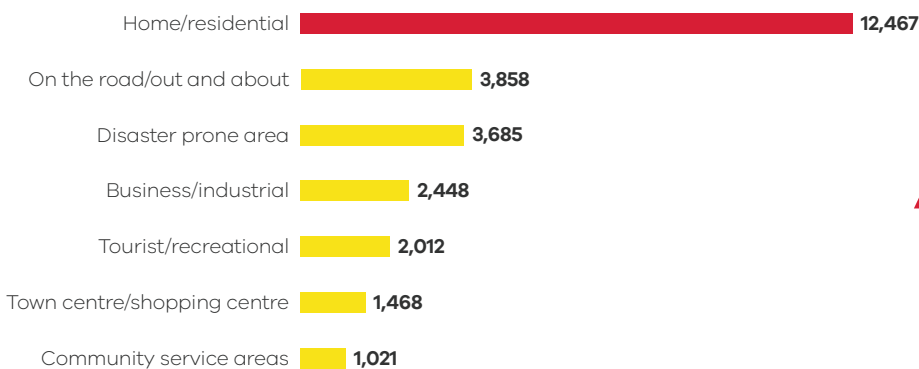
"There is minimal mobile service on my farm. I cannot call emergency services when needed. I once had [an agitated stranger] walk onto my property, and I needed urgent help as I was there alone. I was able to get text messages out, thank goodness, and a friend got police and ambulance to me. I worry that when I am working on the farm, if I had an accident, I would not be able to contact anyone."

13% Broadband

A resident in **Cardigan Village** said:

"The internet access here is very slow, much slower than what is stated by the provider. It is very difficult to use more than one device that requires internet at a time from our home connection and it runs so slow. Simple actions on the internet become very frustrating."

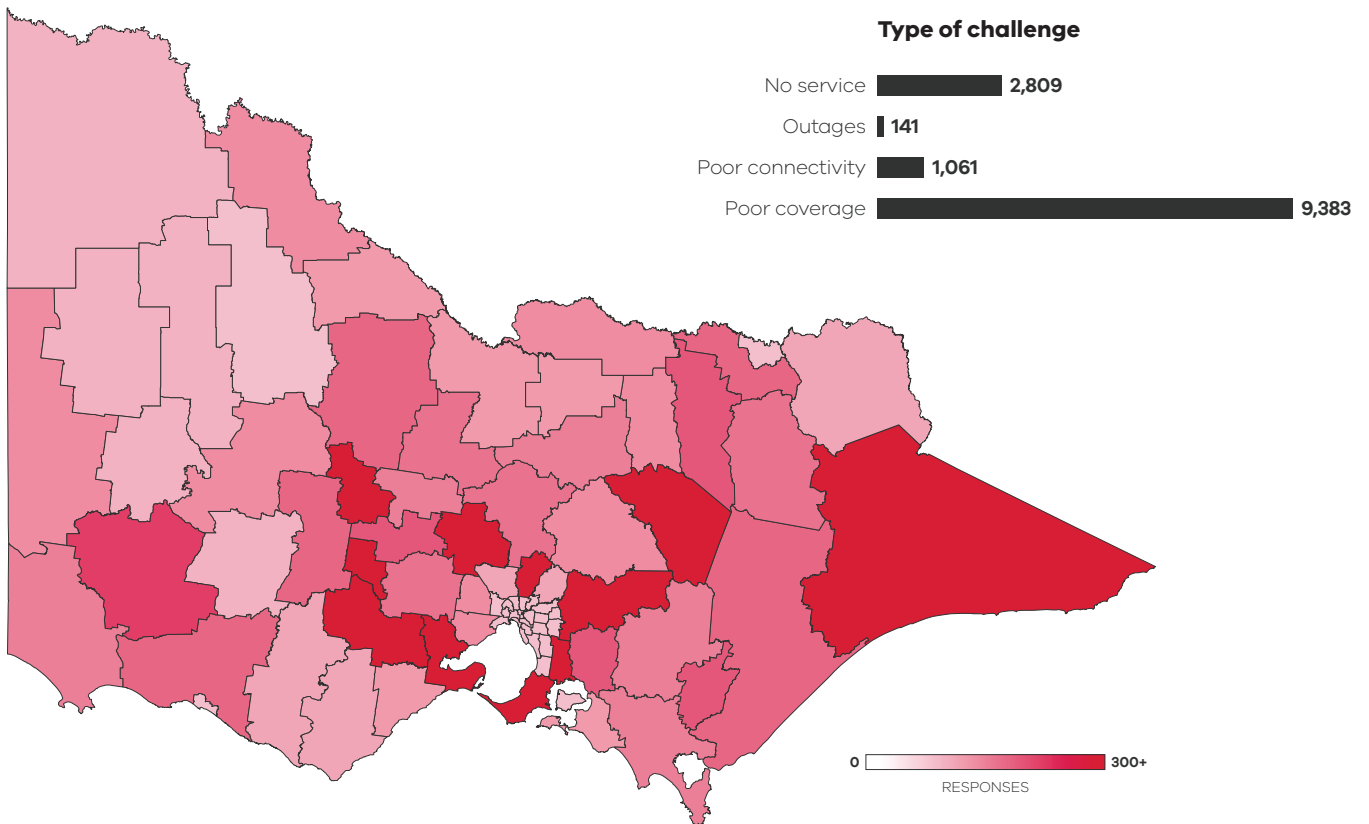
Responses by type of place



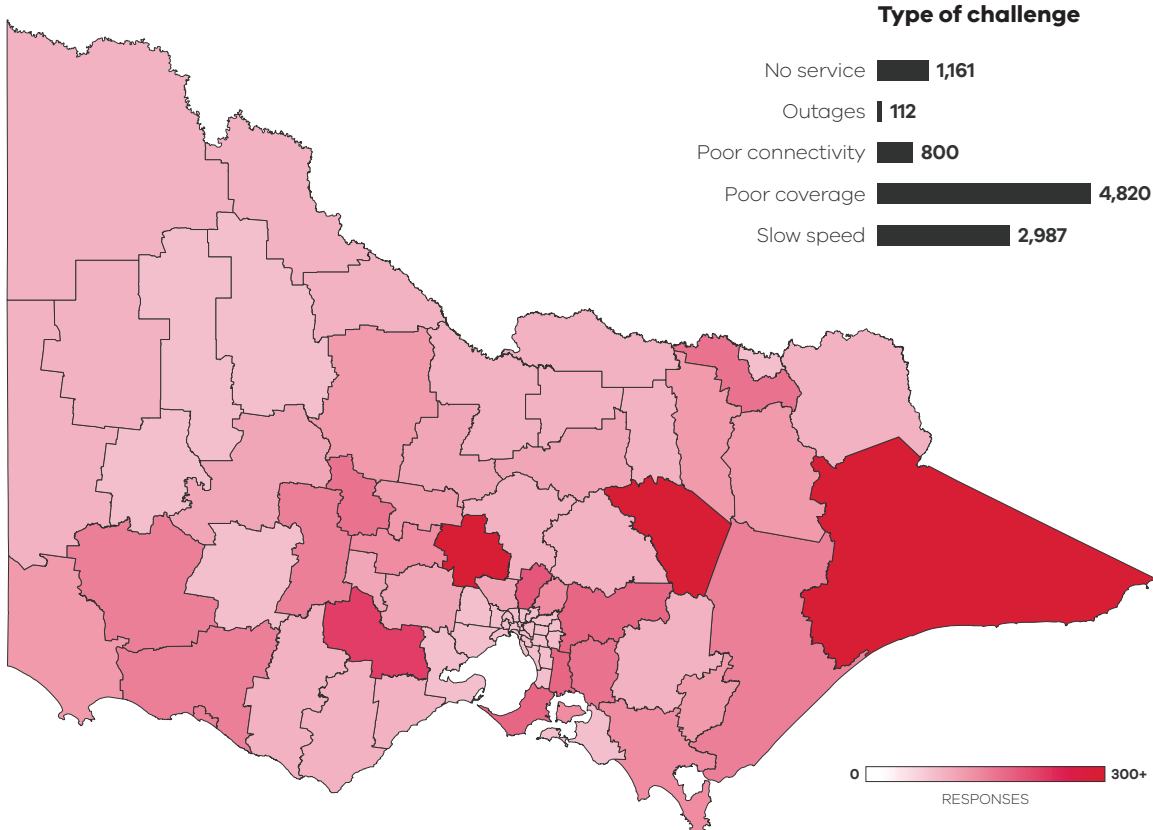
67%
of location types that had a
connectivity challenge
were residences

Note: multiple locations were specified in a single response

Engage Victoria responses showing mobile connectivity challenges by local government area (LGA)



Engage Victoria responses showing broadband connectivity challenges by LGA



Themes

Three themes emerged from people's responses to our survey on Engage Victoria. They said the accelerated shift to remote working and learning has placed pressure on connectivity infrastructure. Connectivity is critical during natural disasters, especially bushfires and storms, power outages and health emergencies. Also, the lack of high-speed internet affects a community's ability to benefit from economic growth opportunities.

24% Remote work and learning

A resident in Riddells Creek said:

"Working from home is near impossible and kids online learning is a nightmare. We have three kids trying to home-school and with internet that continues to drop out they miss so much information and interaction. In terms of recreational streaming, we can't download pictures on Facebook let alone stream a movie."

16% Safety

A resident in Thomson said:

"My dad was dying on the side of the road and there was no cell reception to call Triple Zero, so his friend had to ride away closer to Erica to call. The operator wanted to know continuing details about Dad's condition, so my dad's friend had to keep riding back and forth from Dad's dying body to check on him and then ride back away to get cell reception to tell the Triple Zero operator how he was. This needs to be fixed so nobody else goes through this."

10% Economic growth

A business owner in North Wangaratta said:

"Business growth is restricted as the network is at capacity and does not provide high enough upload and download for a digital economy. Installation of optic fibre is needed to supply business and industry and ensure economic growth."



What we learned through place-based consultation

In roundtables and other place-based consultations, community leaders, advocates and councils told us which locations they thought could benefit from investment in connectivity.

Who did we engage with?

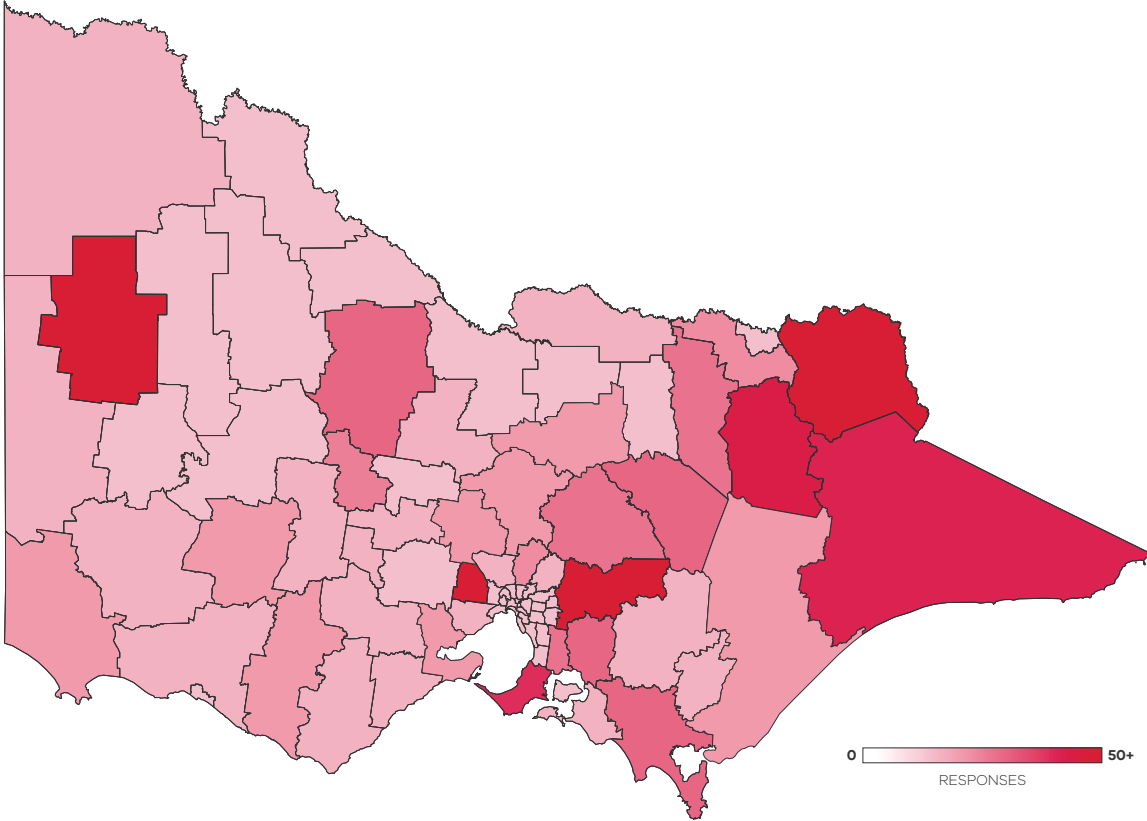
We hosted 13 roundtable discussions to share our objectives and hear first-hand about the connectivity challenges communities are experiencing. Almost 300 community members, leaders and advocates attended these sessions. We also worked with councils in regional Victoria and outer suburban Melbourne to gather data on places that have connectivity challenges or could benefit from enhanced connectivity, and to assess future connectivity needs.

Over 2,900 data points

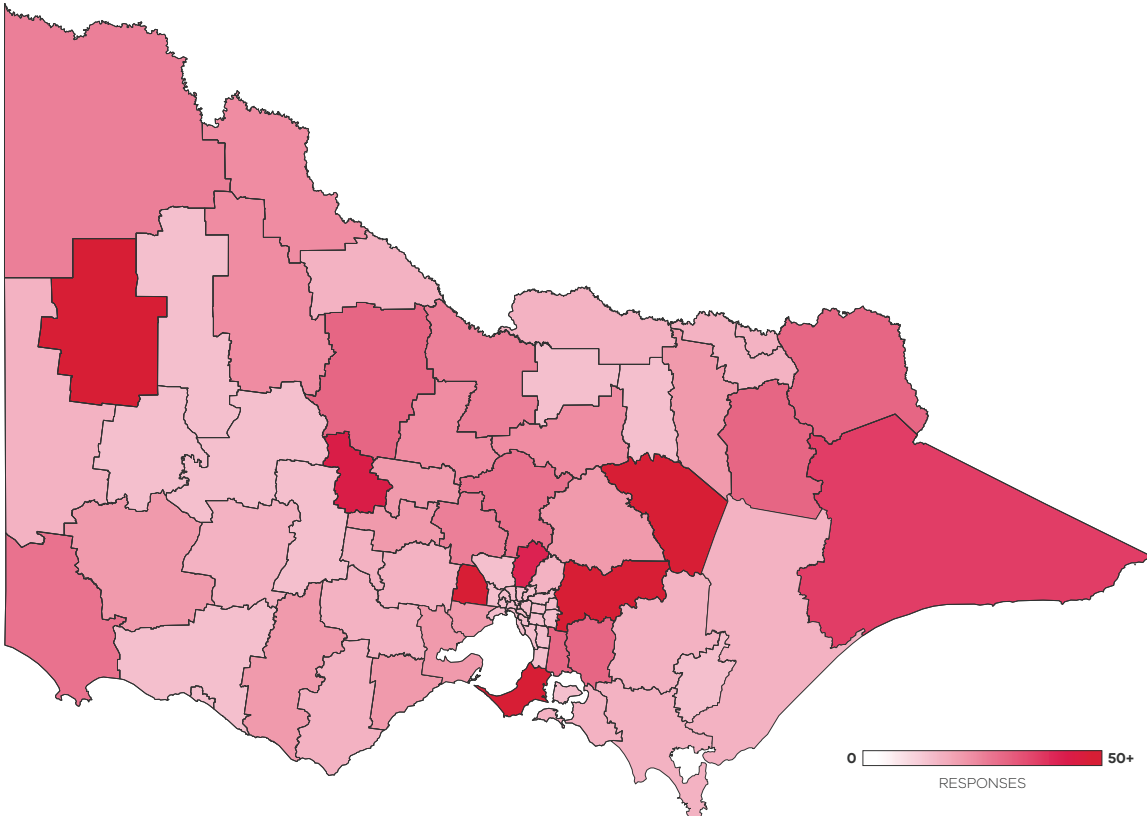
were gathered by us from the **roundtables** and place-based **consultation program**.

What you told us

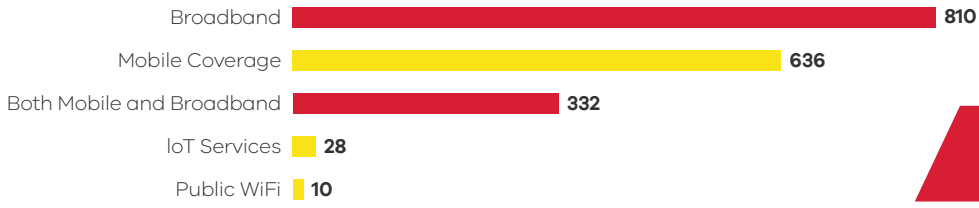
Place-based engagement responses showing mobile connectivity challenges by LGA



Place-based engagement responses showing broadband connectivity challenges by LGA

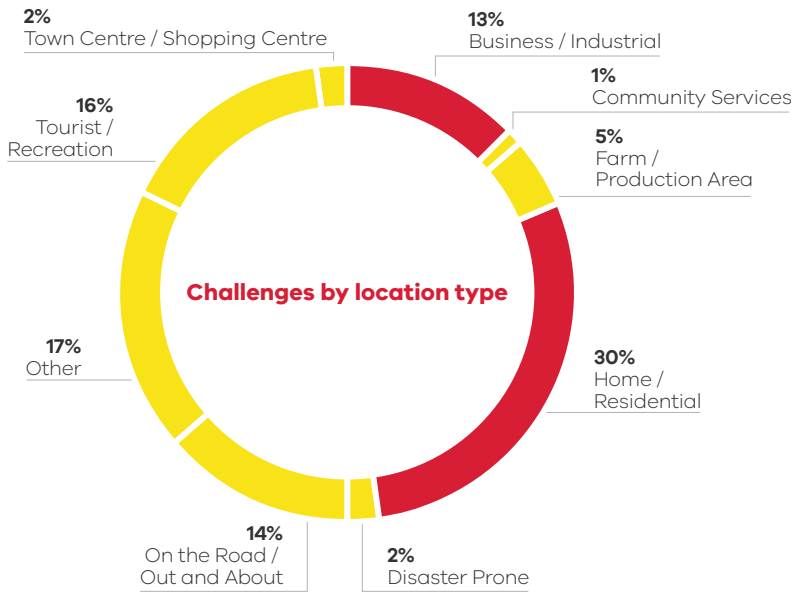


Challenges by technology type



63%

of submissions highlighted **broadband connectivity** as an existing challenge



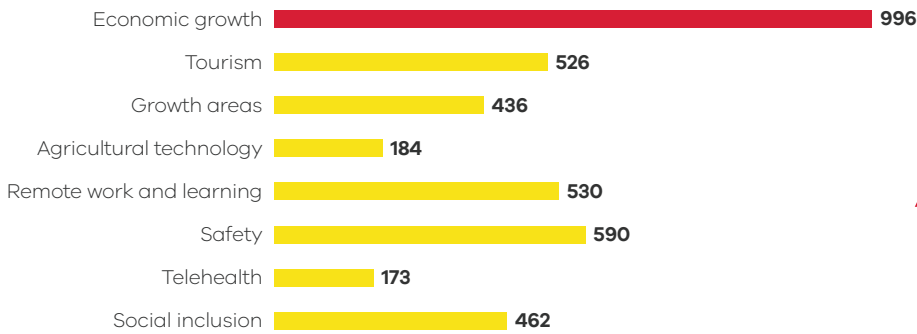
43%

of submissions highlighted **home or work** as an existing connectivity challenge



Themes

Key themes



41%
of submissions said **business, economic and industrial development** are affected by existing connectivity challenges

75% of council responses that mentioned social inclusion said poor connectivity was a contributing factor.

Low digital skills, being unable to keep in touch with family and friends, and impact on learning were some of the key challenges in areas with limited connectivity.

A consultation participant in **Bridgewater on Loddon** said:

“Digital technology and connectivity are what help to bridge the divide. Whether it’s accessing telehealth to specialists in Melbourne, online learning degrees to get employment closer to home etc. it can bring numerous benefits. It means having better quality video calls, faster downloads, and not having to go outside in the cold and rain to make phone calls.”

18% of submissions highlighted affordability as a challenge.

People we spoke to talked about affordability challenges, including in regions with only one service provider, where connectivity was too expensive and of poor quality.

A consultation participant in **Eildon** said:

“Fixed wireless is unreliable compared with Fibre to the Node, and it is also expensive. This means that people do not use the NBN in this area, which prevents them from equitable internet access. It also affects business development as fixed wireless struggles to deal with large data volumes.”



Where enhanced connectivity can help now

People we spoke to believe that enhanced connectivity can bring more jobs, innovation and investment to their area, ensure community safety, bring greater tourism, and boost business productivity and the local economy.

Themes that emerged from their feedback include:

- ▶ **Faster technology needed:** NBN fibre-to-the-premises was the most preferred option for connectivity speed, reliability and reduced broadband backlog. This is critically important for residents who still rely on wireless technologies for their broadband connectivity or who work from home.
- ▶ **Mobile upgrades:** Mobile could be upgraded to 4G and 5G in more areas to ensure residents have better connectivity.
- ▶ **Industry collaboration:** Telecommunication providers could work together (and with state or Commonwealth governments) to ensure everyone has good coverage, regardless of which provider they are with.

48% Mobile

A consultation participant in Tallangatta said:

"5G will provide optimised mobile coverage and data capacity for all of the township's business, residents and tourists, to ensure the ongoing viability of regional townships and provide increased economic, social and community outcomes."

49% Broadband

A consultation participant in Rye said:

"The increase in the summer population decreases the speed of the internet. This significantly affects tourism businesses (hospitality and retail) when it's their busiest time to trade."

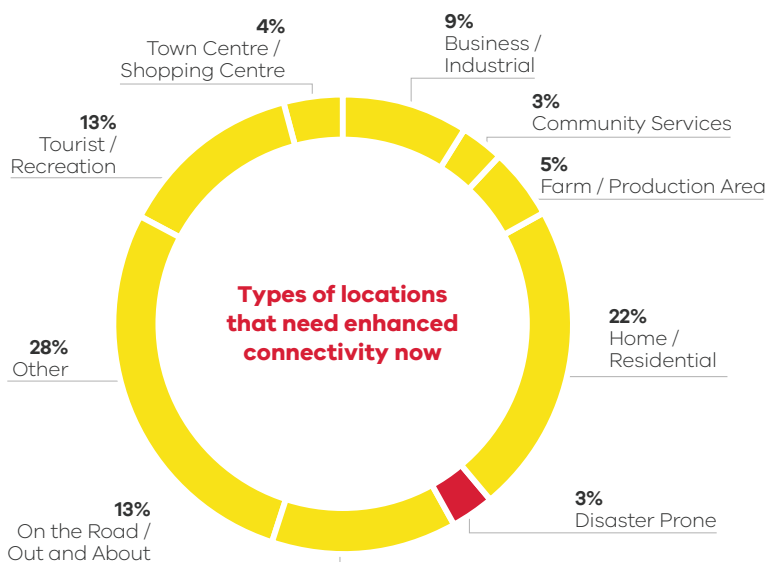
3% IoT, Public WiFi and other ways to connect

A consultation participant in Milawa said:

"An upgrade from fixed wireless to Fibre to the Premises or Fibre to the Node would increase capacity of businesses to embrace the Internet of Things and increase capacity for visitors."

A consultation participant in Kyneton said:

"Public WiFi in the town of Kyneton would enable local initiatives, enhancing the tourism experience, increasing participation and facilitating economic activity."



3% of submissions highlighted **disaster-prone areas** as a priority for enhanced connectivity

Where enhanced connectivity can help in future

Victorians that took part in our place-based consultation told us that regional areas are experiencing a large influx of people from metro areas who want to settle in regional Victoria and work remotely. Businesses are also looking to expand or establish a presence in regional Victoria – especially places with clusters of capability in agricultural technology, freight, logistics and manufacturing. Participants told us that capitalising on this demand and the associated economic uplift will depend on strong services and infrastructure in these regions.

Regional growth plans include the development of residential dwellings, shopping centres, community centres, digital hubs, education precincts, industrial areas and tourist attractions.

Participants said that they want to see the government step in to develop a connectivity framework and implementation plan. They said NBN fibre-to-the-premises and 5G services should be prioritised to provide a minimum standard of service for all users and ensure regional businesses can compete effectively in national and global markets.

37% Mobile

A consultation participant in Talbot said:

“Mobile coverage is crucial to the development of Talbot as a new residential option. Significant funding should be provided to plan for the growth of this town, which is a link between the CBD of Maryborough and along the Ballarat corridor.”

60% Broadband

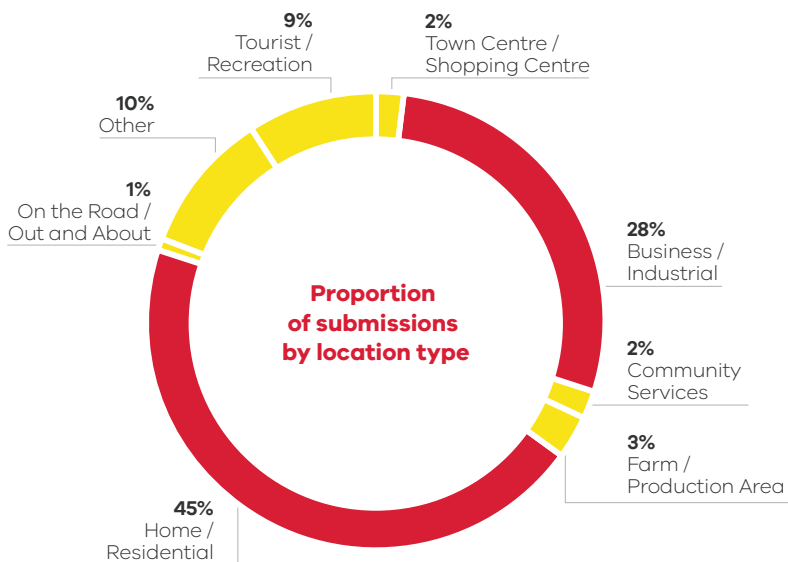
A consultation participant in Harcourt said:

“Harcourt is identified as a growth township and enhanced connectivity will provide great attraction for both residential and business expansion – the current fixed wireless service is not meeting demand or the level of service expected.”

3% Other

A consultation participant in Wangaratta said:

“Broadband services will increase the capacity of the current aeronautical businesses to expand their online services. Connectivity will establish the new industry with global connection and the ability to implement Internet of Things technology to their business.”



73% of submissions highlighted **future business/industry sites** and **new residential areas** as priority for connectivity infrastructure

What we will do next

The information and insights we received throughout our consultation process will give us a better understanding of what Victorians need and the places where it is most needed.

We will integrate what we have learned about where mobile and broadband improvements are most needed and it will be part of the Connecting Victoria program's decision-making process.

There will be three steps in this process:

- 1. Build the evidence base**
- 2. Analyse key factors**
- 3. Funding contribution**

The diagram on the following page has more information.

Build the evidence base



Gathering place-based information

Measures

- Potential economic uplift
- Potential job creation
- Industry composition
- Population and number of premises
- Socioeconomic factors and inclusion
- Locations prone to natural disasters
- Investment requirements



Lived experience

Experience information provided by residents, businesses and organisations in the region, obtained through community engagement



Infrastructure

Existing and planned fibre or mobile infrastructure in the region



Analyse key factors



Places that stand to gain the greatest benefit from improved connectivity



Economic

Opens the region to the digital economy, and enables potential uplift and more jobs



Inclusion

Improves lived experience and digital inclusion in the region



Safety

Improves the region's response to natural disasters



Connectivity gaps

Where existing gaps are not likely to be addressed by the industry outside of the Connecting Victoria program



Funding contribution



Identifying funding partners

The key factors are overlaid with consideration of **funding from potential contributors**, such as the Commonwealth or industry infrastructure providers who have a commercial interest to partner with the Victorian Government to **connect target locations**.



Decision-making

We will seek to partner with industry telecommunications providers and the Commonwealth Government to help deliver new infrastructure in as many places as possible, as quickly as possible.

We will continue to engage with community and businesses throughout the program.

For more information and to keep up-to-date visit the [Connecting Victoria website](#).



