



Briefing Papers

Communications Portfolio

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation working on behalf of our members for equity of access to appropriate education for children living outside of metropolitan areas.

ICPA (Aust) has nearly fifty years' experience advocating for educational issues on behalf of families living in rural and remote Australia. Our organisation is well positioned to contribute to the discussion on rural communications from a user's point of view. The majority of families ICPA (Aust) represents fall into the category of the approximate seven per cent of premises in Australia that will be serviced by either fixed wireless or satellite internet connections.

Families living in rural and remote locations frequently use their homes as the base for their businesses with the home often doubling as the classroom for distance education students as well. For our members, access to adequate, affordable and reliable internet and telephone services is vital for the delivery of education, accessing government services and for enabling enterprises to conduct their business.

ICPA (Aust) has strong and clear views on the communication requirements for the non-urban population, which have come about due to the inequities experienced over the last decade or so in comparison to available metropolitan services.

SUMMARY

- Adequate internet connectivity needs to be provided, maintained, improved and expanded for all students educated in regional, rural and remote locations, whether by distance education, in a small rural school or at a tertiary level.**
 - Internet services for regional, rural and remote students continue to be enhanced, improved and expanded such as the recent development of Sky Muster Plus. Due to the nature of education in geographically isolated locations, rural and remote student's need for connectivity is great and their education is often reliant on these services.
 - Data allowances in rural and remote locations should meet the needs of all aspects of education, including special needs (e.g. speech therapy), music and other extra-curricular services which are more easily accessed by urban student counterparts.
 - The continued unmetering of educational and health sites that need to be accessed for educational purposes and required by the curriculum.
 - The provision of an affordable and reliable transportable satellite internet (Sky Muster or similar) service solution for geographically isolated distance education students who do not have a permanent address or location.



2. **Telephony Services need to be provided and maintained in regional, rural and remote areas.**
 - Continued provision and maintenance of landlines in rural and remote areas is essential, especially where mobile coverage is not available and until such time as viable alternatives are made available to all areas.
 - Areas containing a rural school be prioritised in expansion of Mobile Black Spot Program coinciding with continued support and funding of the Mobile Black Spot Program.
 - Universal Service Obligation and Universal Service Guarantee conditions should be met, penalties enforced and include data and voice services.
3. **Fault reporting and repairs need to be prioritised (both internet and phone) for rural and remote students as their schooling is dependent on these services being available.**
4. **It is essential that families living in rural, regional and remote Australia have access to communications services commensurate to their needs and comparable to those provided in urban areas.**
 - Rural and remote families must have access to two sources of communications (i.e. voice and data must be separate services).
 - Fault reporting and repairs need to be prioritised (both internet and phone) for rural and remote students as their schooling is dependent on these services being available.
 - The Regional Tech Hub needs to be maintained and supported to assist rural and remote families with the communications issues, questions and services.
5. **The Distance Education school materials for geographically isolated students need to be classified as essential mail to ensure their delivery is prioritised during mail disruptions, such as natural disasters.**

ISSUE 1 - Adequate Internet Connectivity for all Students Educated in Regional, Rural and Remote Locations

ICPA (Aust) is aware that delivering services to the rural and remote population similar to what is available in metropolitan areas, is far more expensive and time consuming to deploy. Therefore, it is essential that the capacity of the nbn Sky Muster and Sky Muster Plus services are sufficient for both current and future demand. The roll out of nbn Sky Muster services have been welcomed but not without problems. Service provider call centres and volunteer groups have been overwhelmed at times with requests for assistance with problems that they often have no control over. A dedicated rural and remote communications information hub with trained staff that understand rural and remote needs will assist immensely with these issues. The establishment of the Regional Tech Hub in December 2020 was widely welcomed and this service should be maintained and well supported. Other forms of assistance such as nbn Local and the Telstra Regional Advisory Network, have also been a step in the right direction, however these services can be difficult to access for the average customer without an organisation or contact relaying the information. Volunteer groups such as Better Internet for Regional, Rural and Remote Australia (BIRRR) have provided a tremendous advisory and support service, however, they cannot continue to deal with the number of cases they are presented with, nor should they be required to.

ICPA (Aust) supports nbn Sky Muster initiatives to assist with education needs (i.e. the Sky Muster Education Service, Sky Muster Plus and Sky Muster Plus Premium). The Education Service or 'Ed Ports' have



and continue to provide dedicated services for some geographically isolated distance education students and members have requested that these services be made available to other students. However, ICPA (Aust) acknowledges that for connections that are required for education purposes, a Sky Muster Plus service is a comparable solution for students unable to access the Education Service such as tertiary, boarding or small rural school students, as, with Sky Muster Plus the unmetered content provides greater download capabilities at a better price point than the Education Port. Information about Sky Muster Plus and what it offers should be more widely promoted to help rural and remote families decide if it may be a better option for their students. For rural and remote students who require internet access for education, their service must remain affordable and accessible, therefore ICPA (Aust) supports the continuation of subsidised Sky Muster installs to ensure geographically isolated students are able to access an internet service. Where a family is eligible for a Sky Muster service, they are automatically also eligible for a Sky Muster Plus plan, however these Plans are not available with all Retail Service Providers (RSPs).

ICPA (Aust) also seeks the provision of an affordable and reliable transportable Sky Muster service solution for families who do not have a permanent address or location for distance education schooling, i.e. in stock camps, fencing camps, droving, etc. Some geographically isolated distance education students face further isolation as they are unable to participate in online lessons due to unavailability of Sky Muster when a family does not have a permanent address or dwelling to affix it to. With distance education now largely delivered in an online platform, access to the curriculum and resources, along with maintaining contact with teachers and peers, is essential for distance education students so that they can keep abreast of lessons and have consistency in their lessons. The students impacted are few, however these are students whose educational opportunities are already impeded by being some of the most isolated students in Australia and to be further disadvantaged from accessing their schooling due to the inaccessibility of internet exacerbates this. A transportable means of delivering internet is needed for these types of families to ensure that their students can join in online lessons, interact with classmates, and keep up with schoolwork. The emerging Low Earth Orbit satellite (LEOsat) technology is providing transient families with alternative choices for internet connectivity however, unlike the Sky Muster hardware costs, currently there are no subsidies to assist families with costs associated with the use of LEOsat technology.

In addition, ICPA (Aust) encourages all governments and service providers, to investigate the utilisation of existing communications infrastructure and resources, (particularly in rural and remote areas) to provide alternatives to satellite internet delivery. This would allow more customers to access fixed wireless internet services and other alternative, viable internet solutions in rural and remote areas and reduce the number of people dependent on satellite internet, further reducing the risk of future satellite congestion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- That adequate internet connectivity needs to be provided, maintained, improved and expanded for all students educated in regional, rural and remote locations, whether by distance education, in a small rural school or at a tertiary level.
- That an affordable and reliable transportable Sky Muster or alternative satellite technology service solution is made available for geographically isolated distance education students who do not have a permanent address or location.
- That resourcing and installation of Sky Muster satellite internet continue to be subsidised to ensure that rural and remote families who may have no other option for internet available to them can access a service.



ISSUE 2 - Telephony Services in Regional, Rural and Remote Areas

Efforts should continue to increase the **mobile phone service coverage** in rural and remote areas to fill the void of telephony services. ICPA (Aust) requests that all mobile black spot areas containing a rural school be considered as a priority under future Mobile Black Spot Program rounds or similar future funding programs.

The Productivity Commission's Report on the Universal Service Obligation caused great concern among ICPA members that landlines, which geographically isolated families depend on for voice services, will cease to exist and Sky Muster customers moved to VoIP services as their only means of telephony. ICPA (Aust) reiterates that families living outside of city centres, due to the nature of where they live, require two separate forms of communications (i.e. phone/voice and internet/data as separate services and not relying on the same mode of delivery) so that if one fails, the other is still available. VoIP through Sky Muster at present is far from a reliable service and even nbn itself recommends that customers "Consider keeping your copper service active in nbn™ Fixed Wireless and Sky Muster™ satellite areas if you rely on landline phone services in emergency situations". Satellite services can be affected by weather events and power outages.

Continued provision and maintenance of adequate and reliable telephony services in regional, rural and remote areas is critical. As geographically isolated students rely so heavily on landline telephone services for their schooling, it is essential that these services are available to them and in good working order. In past years, delays in having a landline established in distance education schoolrooms was very problematic for some families. Until such time as viable alternatives are made available in these areas, landlines need to be maintained and upgraded as required. ICPA (Aust) and our members have welcomed the assurance from the Commonwealth Government that landlines in rural and remote areas will remain in service until such time as another form of voice service that meets the needs of those living in geographic isolation is widely available.

RECOMMENDATION

That the USG remain on landline telephony services for those living outside of mobile coverage areas and that these landline services continue to be maintained and upgraded as necessary until such time as a dependable, affordable and reliable alternative is available.

ISSUE 3 - Prioritisation of Fault Reporting and Repairs (Internet and Phone) for Rural and Remote Students

It is critical that telephone service repair times are kept to a minimum to ensure students' learning can continue. ICPA (Aust) requests a priority installation and repair service be in place for families educating their children via distance education due to geographic isolation. Fault reporting and repairs need to be prioritised (both internet and phone) for rural and remote students as their schooling is dependent on these services being available. ICPA (Aust) eagerly awaited the announcement of an independent Regional Tech Hub. With the Regional Tech Hub commencing in December 2020, ICPA (Aust) recommends that the hub receives on going funding and support, including meeting clearly established goals and targets, to ensure regional Australians can get connected to services that meet their needs, learn how to stay connected and use their connections. The Hub should assist with the landline and data needs of rural and



remote users. NBN LOCAL and The Telstra Regional Advisory Network are great incentives and should be operating at a level that can ease some of the pressure raised by groups such as the Regional Tech Hub, Better Internet for Rural Regional and Remote Australia and the Isolated Children's Parents' Association.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- That phone or internet services required for rural and remote students to undertake their education experiencing outages and faults be attended to as a matter of urgency.
- Ongoing funding and support for the Regional Tech Hub to ensure regional Australians can get connected, stay connected to services that meet their needs.

ISSUE 4 – Two Sources of Communication for Families Living in Rural, Regional and Remote Australia (i.e. Voice and Data)

The need for two services is imperative in rural, regional and remote locations due to the vast distances and isolation our members face. A further barrier to digital technology use in regional, rural and remote areas is the concern that in order to access these services, the equipment required needs electricity to work. Both mobile and internet services require power (especially if using fixed Smart Antennae or Cel-Fi equipment) and if there is a power outage, which are frequent in rural and remote areas, the service cannot be relied upon and many properties that are on self-generated power do not run their generators 24 hours a day. Families in the bush need communication services from different sources as when a service is not working, it can be a long distance to assistance. ICPA (Aust) advocates for rural and remote families to have a minimum of two communications services (voice and data) that are independent of each other. When communications services are down, it affects education and business for these families as well as being a safety issue.

A whole of government solution is needed to ensure that adequate, reliable and affordable communication services are available to those living in regional, rural and remote areas. This goes to the very heart of keeping our rural communities and schools alive. Connectivity is the silver bullet which will serve to provide the type of essential services such as education in rural and remote locations which families expect and deserve. It is essential that services are reliable and consistent as well as adequate in terms of speed, quality, capability and cost to ensure telecommunication services and digital technology in regional, rural and remote areas are comparable with those in urban areas. Connectivity needs to be a priority for State, Territory and Federal Governments so that we can ensure the gap between urban and rural communities, and especially the education of students in these communities, does not continue to widen.

RECOMMENDATION

That families living in rural, regional and remote Australia have two independent sources of communications available to them.



ISSUE 5 - Postage of Distance Education School Materials

When mail is disrupted due to natural disasters, such as a flood, distance education resources necessary for the continuation of lessons in the geographically isolated home schoolroom are delayed, often for months at a time. Distance Education materials should be classified as essential mail and as such prioritised by Australia Post to ensure education can continue with as little disruption as possible.

RECOMMENDATION

That Distance Education school materials for geographically isolated students be classified as essential mail.