

# **COMMUNICATIONS REPORT 2021**

**Kristen Coggan**

ICPA (Aust) has continued to work closely with the Federal Government, telecommunications companies and other like-minded stakeholders to seek the maintenance and development of adequate, affordable and reliable communications services for families in regional, rural and remote areas, particularly for educational outcomes.

Throughout the past year we have continued our membership in the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC), attending regular RRRCC meetings and associated stakeholder forums. We have taken these opportunities to impart the experiences and concerns of ICPA (Aust) members across many communications issues. ICPA (Aust) is also a member of the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) and have a representative on the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) Consumer Panel where we further raise awareness of communication challenges for rural and remote students and their families.

Federal Council's work in the Communications portfolio has continued extensively this past year.

## **Internet**

ICPA (Aust) maintains regular contact with NBN Co and Telstra to ensure that the data and other communications needs of geographically isolated students are at the forefront of their minds and that initiatives introduced such as the introduction of Sky Muster Plus are maintained and continue to be enhanced. Sky Muster Plus has been an exciting development whereby many educational sites are now unmetered content on these satellite plans and ICPA (Aust) are in the fortunate position to be able to liaise with nbn to continue the ongoing conversation regarding the unmetreing of any sites that are needed for educational purposes. Federal Council will continue to ensure members are informed of the best choices for them in terms of accessing adequate and high-quality internet services for their children's education purposes. We are also working with Telstra and State Councils to establish increased unmetered data for educational requirements of geographically isolated students when mobile services are used.

In delegation meetings with the Minister for Communications, Urban infrastructure, Cities and the Arts, the Hon Paul Fletcher MP and Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government, the Hon Mark Coulton MP, Federal Council highlighted that for many geographically isolated families, online learning is ongoing and the requirement for adequate and high-quality internet services in regional, rural and remote locations are essential to guarantee access to equitable education. We have sought assurance that the Government will ensure that the communications initiatives continue to be enhanced, improved and expanded for these geographically isolated students.

## **Alternative internet services and technology**

Members highlighted at the 2020 Federal Conference that the limited alternatives for internet connectivity and services in rural, regional and remote Australia continue to impede equitable access to educational opportunities for students in these areas. To that end, members sought to encourage the Commonwealth Government to work proactively and cooperatively with companies attempting to bring diverse universal broadband internet to Australia, including alternative satellite-based internet services and technologies. Federal Council contacted the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) as well as both Minister Fletcher and Minister Coulton, citing the importance of options and choice when accessing internet services, with the potential of alternative technology providing more affordable, practical and accessible solutions for geographically isolated families.

ICPA (Aust) understands there are already alternative solutions becoming available in Australia and that the

Federal Government supports and encourages the development of these new technologies to provide increased choice for members. We will continue to watch this space and keep members informed of any developments in this regard.

ICPA (Aust) has been in meetings directly with alternative supplier Starlink and look forward to the prospect of what this could mean for our members. Currently, Starlink are beta testing their product and service in Australia and have roughly 400 connections located in Southern Australia. Starlink are very keen to service more of Australia as they keep launching more satellites and build more ground stations. More information is available here - <https://birraus.com/starlink-in-australia/>

### **Portable internet supply for transient GI students**

An ongoing concern for members is the lack of access to internet services for transient geographically isolated students who study via distance education, which is often reliant on connectivity to access the curriculum and other aspects of schooling. ICPA (Aust) has continued to raise this issue in a variety of forums and we can reassure members that there is activity in regards to progressing a practical solution for these families. Federal Council would welcome any case studies from families who face this conundrum so we are able to ensure your needs are recognised. We are pleased there have been some progress in this space, with trials being undertaken and solutions being investigated, however we will continue to highlight that families will require financial and possibly other support to access these solutions.

### **Telephone**

ICPA (Aust) is acutely aware that access to adequate telephony continues to be high on the agenda for members.

ICPA (Aust) corresponded and met virtually with Telstra on a number of occasions requesting that Telstra provide a customer end technology roadmap for the transition from existing mobile phone configurations to country 5G due in 2024. We have been assured by Telstra that they are working earnestly in this space and we will certainly keep members informed of developments as they arise.

Federal Council have also sought from the Federal Government, in correspondence with the Minister for Communications, Urban Infrastructure, Cities and the Arts, the Hon Paul Fletcher MP and Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government, the Hon Mark Coulton MP, consideration of financial assistance or a rebate for rural and remote customers who use mobile broadband for education to upgrade the equipment they may be currently using to access these services (including antennas, boosters that may be rendered obsolete) to ensure ongoing coverage and service in locations whereby alternative telecommunications may otherwise be unavailable. While our requests have been met with some understanding and empathy, we cannot say anything has developed in this space.

### **Alternative Voice Trials**

The \$2 million Alternative Voice Services trials program (or AVST) aims to identify new ways to deliver voice services, including by new providers, assess their effectiveness, and raise awareness of alternative solutions to provide better services and functionality.

Six AVST grants have now been awarded to Concerotel, NBN Co, Optus, Pivotel, Telstra and Zetifi to deliver up to 885 trial services in different rural and remote locations across Australia. ICPA (Aust) are disappointed that many of the “alternatives” are satellite based as we would like to see our families with access to at least two alternative sources of communications. In saying this, we have been assured that nothing will change with regards to current phone service types unless the solutions are equal to or better than existing services.

### **Regional Tech Hub**

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the launch of the Regional Tech Hub, a Federal Government initiative to offer free, independent advice to regional Australians on the best internet and mobile phone connection for work, study

and lifestyle needs, in late 2020. The establishment of the Regional Tech Hub comes as a direct result of requests from ICPA (Aust), its members, other stakeholders and organisations, for regional, rural and remote communications assistance to be made available. The Hub is being jointly operated by the National Farmers Federation (NFF) and the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN). ICPA are working closely with the Hub staff and are a part of the Regional Tech Hub Stakeholder Reference Group. Federal Council encourages members to familiarise themselves with the Regional Tech Hub and access their services when required via their website <https://regionaltechhub.org.au>, through the Regional Tech Hub Facebook page, including a new discussion board initiative, Twitter, by email: [helpdesk@regionaltechhub.org.au](mailto:helpdesk@regionaltechhub.org.au) or contact the Hub's hotline on 1300 081 029. The Hub also has some provider contact details and a handy printout you can fill in for easy reference when you need it. <https://regionaltechhub.org.au/stay-connected/provider-contact-sheet/>

ICPA (Aust) has been involved in the development of the education section on the Hub's website and look forward to continuing to work with the Hub staff to ensure the needs of our members are recognised and considered. Federal Council have urged both Minister for Communications, Urban Infrastructure, Cities and the Arts, the Hon Paul Fletcher MP and Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government, the Hon Mark Coulton MP to extend funding for the Hub past the current 12-month commitment.

#### **Distance Education Broadband Working Group (DEBWG)**

ICPA (Aust) has been a member of this Federal Government initiative since it was first established in 2015 and it has been a welcome forum to represent our members in the field of communications for distance education. Federal Council are keen to see this group continue and develop so that we can maintain this direct connection with the Department of Communications in order to advance the needs of our members.

#### **Regional Rural and Remote Coalition (RRRCC)**

ICPA Aust continues to be an active member of the Regional Rural and Remote Coalition (RRRCC). We join together with many like minded stakeholders as a Coalition to highlight our collective concern about the lack of equitable access to reliable and quality telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia. We represent the businesses, communities and families of rural and regional Australia. In the coming months ICPA (Aust) will meet with the RRRCC for delegations in Canberra.

#### **2021 Regional Telecommunications Review**

The Regional Telecommunications Review is an opportunity for people living and working in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia to share their views and experiences using telecommunications services in their area. Every three years the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) is appointed to conduct the review and to hear people's experiences firsthand.

The 2021 Committee was announced by the Honourable Mark Coulton MP on 2 June 2021. The Review will be held from June to December. The five members appointed to the Committee are: the Hon Luke Hartsuyker (Chair), Ms Sue Middleton, Ms Kristy Sparrow, Professor Hugh Bradlow and Mr Michael Cosgrave.

The Review will examine the adequacy of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia, along with particular issues identified in the Terms of Reference <https://www.rtrc.gov.au/terms-reference>.

The Committee must consult publicly and details on consultation will be published shortly. Past Committees have sought views through written submissions in response to an issues paper and through meetings with communities and stakeholders around Australia.

If any of our members have the opportunity to attend a review event, I urge you to attend and tell of your experiences and concerns regarding communications.

As part of the Review, the Committee will deliver a report and may make recommendations to the Australian

Government. The Committee has been asked to deliver its report by 31 December 2021 or earlier.

### **Mobile Black Spot Program**

ICPA (Aust) continues to advocate and discuss the Mobile Black Spot Program with government and stakeholders. The Government has committed \$380 million to the Mobile Black Spot Program to invest in telecommunications infrastructure to improve mobile coverage and competition across Australia.

The Program is supported by co-contributions from state and local governments, mobile network operators (Optus, Telstra, TPG Telecom Ltd (formerly Vodafone) and Field Solutions Group), businesses and local communities.

Under the first five rounds of the Program (Round 1, Round 2, the Priority Locations Round, Round 4 and Round 5), the Government's commitment has generated investment of more than \$836 million, delivering more than 1,200 new base stations across Australia.

Round 6 is about to commence, more information can be found here:

<https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/phone/mobile-services-and-coverage/mobile-black-spot-program>

### **Telstra 3G shutdown**

The Telstra 3G will be gradually shut down in June 2024. Telstra is committed to provide 4G coverage equivalent to their 3G coverage by the time of 3G closure. Telstra will be undertaking detailed checks of coverage outcomes as they upgrade sites to include 4G. 4G is more advanced than 3G so most customers will experience an upgraded service. The 3G spectrum will be repurposed to 5G. This will help expand 5G coverage in regional Australia more extensively. Most customers will migrate naturally, but all will be fully supported through the 3G closure. Next G Wireless Link (NGWL) services will also be migrated to 4G. Reports of 3G coverage reducing are all investigated whenever reported and any reduction in coverage due to site upgrades is quickly resolved. For this to happen customers need to report faults to Telstra.

### **Helpful Contacts**

In recent times it has been very encouraging to see providers and services acknowledging the need for rural, regional and remote customers to have access to specialised help for their communication needs. ICPA (Aust) has collated a list of useful communications contacts for members at <https://icpa.com.au/au/useful-websites-news-and-resources-communications>. While this is not an exhaustive list we hope that it assists many members to gain assistance and support for their communications needs. This is currently being updated on the ICPA website.

As I finalise this report, ICPA (Aust) understand that there have been developments for New South Wales schools. Read more at <https://icpa.com.au/>

ICPA (Aust) has been well supported in our telecommunications issues by the State Councils, our branches and members and we will continue to raise these concerns wherever it is possible to have them addressed.