# ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

## 2022 COMMUNICATIONS PORTFOLIO CONFERENCE REPORT

**Wendy Hick**

Communications continues to be a lively portfolio, with the connectivity needs of our members remaining a priority for ICPA (Aust), from internet access to telephony service. Communications is a portfolio where developments and changes can occur almost daily.

ICPA (Aust) works closely with key communications stakeholders to ensure we have opportunity to raise topics and issues on behalf of our members. We maintain our involvement with the Rural, Regional and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC), Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) Consumer Panel and Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) Consumer Consultative Forum, where we are able to raise and seek to address the communications challenges faced by our members. ICPA (Aust) also participates in regular meetings with NBN Co and Telstra to discuss issues and topics from across the country.

## Internet Access
The necessity for adequate internet access for geographically isolated families continues to be reflected in motions presented by Branches. Following our 2021 Federal Conference, Federal Council wrote to then Minister for Decentralisation, Regional Education and Regional Communications Senator the Hon Bridget McKenzie and other key Ministers, MPs and Senators, requesting assurance that internet services for the purpose of education are maintained and expanded. In this correspondence Federal Council cited the need for current internet services in rural and remote Australia to not only be maintained, but for further enhancements to be made, to ensure geographically isolated students and their families have access to adequate internet services as reliance on online resources expands across all levels of education. With the recent change of Government, ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate on this with newly appointed Minister for Communications, the Hon Michelle Rowland MP.

## nbn® Sky Muster™ Satellite Services
Many of our members rely on Sky Muster satellite services in order to access internet in their geographically isolated locations and we continue to raise a variety of issues associated with Sky Muster internet, both ongoing and time-sensitive, with relevant parties, including the Federal Government and nbn directly.

In our correspondence following conference to the former Minister for Regional Communications we requested reassurance that the installation of the Sky Muster service and its hardware would continue at no cost to rural and remote student households to ensure affordable access to education for rural and remote students. Federal Council was assured that this would continue and will seek further reassurance following the change of Government.

In recent years, the Sky Muster network has seen enhancements in the form of the Sky Muster Plus product, which provides an extensive unmetered data capacity. For current users of Sky Muster services, we can confirm that all users are eligible to migrate to a Sky Muster Plus plan, including families using an educational port on the Sky Muster network. ICPA (Aust) encourages all members who have a standard Sky Muster plan, whether on an educational port or otherwise, to investigate their options for a Plus plan with a Sky Muster

Plus Retail Service Provider (RSP) as education sites as well as all web meeting tools such as Zoom are unmetered on Sky Muster Plus. Members should be aware that not all RSPs have Sky Muster Plus plans, however customers are able to change providers to a RSP that does offer these plans in a few simple steps. All Sky Muster providers can be found here https://nbn.com.au/skymuster-providers.



**Sky Muster™ Plus changes as of 1 July 2022**
As of 1 July, Sky Muster Plus services were further enhanced with a plan upgrade which allows for completely uncapped data usage from Midnight to 4pm. This new upgrade includes Virtual Private Network (VPN) as well as video streaming during these hours which will assist students who require this for their education lessons. Under the new plan, only VPN and video streaming count towards customers' data allowance. These changes came into effect automatically on 1 July for all Sky Muster Plus accounts and are only available on Sky Muster Plus (regular Sky Muster service does not offer this unmetering, and not all RSPs offer Sky Muster Plus plans, so members are encouraged to check their plan with their internet provider). See link above.

nbn® have recently released several tools to help families navigate the ever-growing online world.

- the Online Skills Check & Resources (OSCAR) has been created to help measure online skills and find resources to help families with their digital journey. OSCAR takes users through four essential competencies: online knowledge, device usage, sharing data and e-safety and online communication. Through the answers provided in the online skill check, users online skills are measured and information to relevant resources which may assist are provided. ICPA (Aust) sent out a link to OSCAR with our unique ICPA QR code in the March edition of the Branch Bulletin for members to access this tool or you can scan it here to access the tool and accompanying resources.



- The nbn® Sky Muster Satellite Services Connectivity Guide is an interactive trouble shooting tool which can be downloaded to a device or computer so that it can be accessed if customers are offline. This troubleshooting guide helps users work through their service, troubleshoot and optimise performance. The Guide can be found and downloaded here:
  https://www.nbnco.com.au/content/dam/nbn/documents/support/satellite/nbn-sky-muster-troubleshooting-guide.pdf
- Recently nbn have also released their Fixed Wireless Connectivity Guide which can be found here
  https://www.nbnco.com.au/content/dam/nbn/documents/support/fixed-wireless/Fixed%20Wireless%20Connectivity%20Guide.pdf

Federal Council continues to add useful resources such as this to our ICPA (Aust) website so that members can find them easily. https://icpa.com.au/au/useful-websites-news-and-resources-communications

## Alternative Internet Services

While Sky Muster has provided welcome internet access not previously seen in rural and remote Australia, ICPA (Aust) advocates that all geographically isolated students need access to adequate communication services to meet their education needs. In a response from the Minister in December 2021, it was acknowledged that internet access *"via the National Broadband Network (NBN) Sky Muster satellite service is critical to the education of many geographically isolated students",* and additionally that *"the government remains committed to ensuring that students, regardless of where they live, have access to high quality education and experience the same education opportunities as other students".* ICPA (Aust) is encouraged by the recommendation in the recent Regional Telecommunications Independent Review that the Government Fund Innovation trials to explore the value and reliability of new technology solutions able to address broadband and mobile coverage across regional, rural and remote Australia and that more and improved internet solutions may emerge in the future.

## Transient Families

The need for an affordable internet product for transient families working in remote locations of Australia has been a high priority for Federal Council as the need for an internet connection to access schooling continues to increase. ICPA (Aust) welcomed the recent nbn Mobility Trial and NBN Co's commitment to testing portable flyaway connection kits with distance education students and families who work in remote areas of Queensland and the Northern Territory late last year. The outcomes of these trials were as expected – the families, and most importantly their children, were ecstatic with the opportunity to be able to access internet and therefore their schooling while on the move.

ICPA (Aust) believes priority must be given to the provision of internet to these children as a matter of urgency in order to ensure their education is not hindered because of their family's circumstances. Unfortunately, the costs of these kits are prohibitive and we therefore corresponded again with Minister McKenzie and other relevant Ministers and Shadow Ministers in February, requesting provisions for possible subsidies or other assistance to be made available similar to fixed (home) Sky Muster installations, to ensure transient internet connection kits are affordable and accessible for the small number of students for whom they are required. Federal Council will continue this advocacy with the new Government.

## Mobile Coverage/Service

ICPA (Aust) also included in our correspondence to Minister McKenzie issues raised in regard to the need for both expanded mobile coverage in rural and remote areas, particularly in the vicinity of schools along with the need to ensure current mobile services have sufficient backup power to provide consistent and uninterrupted delivery. In a response received in December these concerns were noted and reference was made to funding available to expand mobile services through the next round of the Mobile Black Spot Program and Round 2 of the Regional Connectivity Program. We do know that previous Mobile Black Spot programs have concentrated on expanding coverage in the vicinity of small rural schools and we expect this to continue. Members are encouraged to investigate opportunities for funding applications for locations of concern. The recent Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee, included in their 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Report released on February 14, 2022, recommendations to "*Encourage shared network access and innovative funding for mobile in regional areas"* and to *"Increase Government investment in regional connectivity".* At this stage we are uncertain of the new Government's commitment to the Mobile Blackspot Program, however we will continue to raise the need for continual improvements to be made for mobile services in rural and remote areas, not just in regards to coverage but also capacity of mobile networks.

The issue of back-up power reliability and capacity on mobile towers has been raised in a number of forums by Federal Council. Consistent, uninterrupted service is important to families living in geographically isolated areas for the delivery of children's education programs as well as safety and health concerns. ICPA (Aust) has been working collectively on communications issues and recently Federal and all State Councils attended a communications meeting with representatives from Telstra to discuss the issues members raised at the 2021 conference. At this meeting, information was provided regarding Telstra's mobile sites being actively upgraded

with battery and battery replacements as well as mobile transmission equipment also being upgraded to improve resilience in regional, rural and remote areas. There is currently some suggestion that this advocacy on backup power should also include the various power supply companies as they are ultimately in charge of overall power sources. Federal Council will continue its discussions on back-up power and work towards better outcomes in areas dependent on these services.

ICPA (Aust) advocates strongly for this investment to be concentrated in areas with maximum advantage for educational access in any future funding opportunities.

### 3G Shut Down

ICPA (Aust) has continued to seek assurance from Telstra and the Federal Government that rural and remote areas will not be left lagging as the Telstra 3G is gradually shut down leading up to June 2024. Telstra has committed to provide 4G coverage equivalent to their 3G coverage by the time of 3G closure and ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate both to Telstra and the Federal Government that until it is certain that this commitment met, the 3G shut down should not proceed. A number of new plans are currently being investigated to assist with enhancing current mobile capacity and ensure as many rural and remote locations are able to access adequate mobile coverage.

In May 2022, Optus shut down their 2100MHz spectrum band 3G service, with 3G no longer available to Optus customers on that band.  Telstra has given customers notice of the June 2024 changeover date and time to plan for the change to 4G and most technology sold within recent years has been 4G capable.  It is important to remember that technology changes over time and all equipment needs to have a replacement plan, similar to computers, printers and other devices. The average recommended life span of technology equipment is between three to five years and replacement or upgrade should be considered and planned for as that time approaches for any communications equipment as devices become incompatible with new technology and services.

### Telstra Broadband Upgrades for Education Projects

Telstra has paired with state governments and state education departments with projects to bring about better digital inclusion through upgrades to internet services in schools.  The projects will benefit 1258 state schools across Queensland, joining an upgrade for more than 2000 schools in NSW, a boost for more than 1600 public schools in Victoria, an upgrade for more than 500 schools across SA, an upgrade to more than 750 public schools in WA, and upgrades to some regional schools in Tasmania. Education departments in each state should have lists of the schools receiving upgrades, what those upgrades entail and expected date of completion.

### The Blue Tick

Recently we have become more aware that not all devices perform well with mobile services in rural and remote settings.  In 2007, Telstra put forward the 'Blue Tick' program where mobile devices were thoroughly tested and if given the 'Telstra's Blue Tick' it signifies that a mobile device delivers superior voice coverage in rural and regional areas on the Telstra Mobile Network. The Blue Tick program is still in place and we encourage members to consider looking for devices that have the blue tick for use in rural and regional areas that have mobile coverage.  If members are experiencing reduced mobile coverage in certain areas compared to previous times, it can sometimes be a change in the device they are now using, and blue tick devices have been tested to identify their performance in rural and regional areas.

### Telephone

In rural and remote areas, telephone connections remain a significant and essential part of the communications services relied on by residents and understandably members continue to request for services to be maintained to adequate standards. Through correspondence to Minister McKenzie and other relevant Ministers and Shadow Ministers as well as recent submissions to the Regional Telecommunications

Independent Review and the Carrier License Conditions - Better Reporting on Telstra Delivery of Voice Services consultation, ICPA (Aust) has raised key concerns of our members including:

- The need for customer service and telephone assistance lines to more effectively assist rural and remote students and their families.
- The need for priority, subsidised phone line installations and repairs in rural and remote areas when the purpose is education delivery.
- The need to ensure rural and remote students have consistent access to continuous and reliable telephone communications through regular maintenance of existing telephone infrastructure and the provision of a temporary satellite phone or other service to any rural or remote family where a phone fault is not rectified within three working days.

We have also sought reassurance that for those members who live in nbn satellite and fixed wireless mapped areas, who have non-nbn landlines such as, high-capacity radio concentrator (HCRC), Next G Wireless Link (NGWL) networks and copper lines, the retention and ongoing maintenance of these current services is maintained and prioritised until equal or better alternatives can be identified and installed. Several ICPA members were involved in the Alternate Voice Services Trials which concluded on the 30th June 2022, the report is available on the Department's website. We thank our members who gave valuable feedback on these trials. We continue to advocate that all residents living in geographically isolated areas should have access to two independent communications services and not be solely reliant on one communication source while stressing that a move from existing HCRC or copper line services to Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) services reliant on satellite is not a satisfactory replacement of legacy voice services at this time, where rural and remote residents currently only have satellite internet access.

The Minister's response to our letter raising these topics in December provided reassurance that the Government was committed to upholding the current Universal Service Obligation (USO) commitments, which should ensure that existing services are adequately maintained until such time as viable alternatives are identified. We are also optimistic that the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee recommendations to "*continue but reform existing universal services for the future*" will ensure this commitment is adhered to. Federal Council will highlight the importance of this with new Minister for Communications Hon Michelle Rowland MP and seek a commitment from the new Government to uphold this guarantee.

**Telstra Call Centres returning to Australia**
In early 2020, Telstra announced that their call centres would be moving back to mainland Australia and assurance was made at the 2021 Federal Conference that Telstra was working towards having all consumer and small business calls answered in Australia. At the start of July 2022, Telstra announced that all consumer and small business calls are now being answered within Australia https://exchange.telstra.com.au/say-gday-call-centres-back-in-australia/. ICPA (Aust) is optimistic this will improve members' experiences when making contact regarding their Telstra services and will monitor the outcome of this move.

**Telstra RAN**
The Telstra Regional Advisory Network (or RAN) is a program that helps Telstra's regional customers (Consumer, Small Business & Enterprise) get connected wherever they are in regional, rural or remote Australia. The RAN program has been designed to help Telstra customers who are having connectivity issues in their home, business premises or on the road. It provides holistic service solutions using Telstra experts from regional Australia, as well as the Telstra Network & IT team and field technicians, to provide Telstra customers with a range of services from a simple fix to fully integrated and bespoke network solutions to ensure they are able to make the most of their connection using the Telstra regional footprint. More info here https://exchange.telstra.com.au/helping-our-regional-and-rural-customers/ and also at Telstra's

Regional Services and Coverage web page https://www.telstra.com.au/coverage-networks/telstra-regional-australia

**Other Relevant Communications Topics**

The Regional Telecommunications Independent Review which ICPA (Aust) robustly participated in, was conducted last year and the Committee tabled its report *2021 Telecommunications Review – A step change in demand* on 14 February 2022. Due to COVID travel restrictions the committee conducted online consultations, holding 26 public consults and receiving over 650 submissions. A number of consultations were successfully conducted over Sky Muster services including the consultation several of our Federal Councillors participated in, as well as the Review's Deputy chair and ICPA member Kristy Sparrow participating in the review via her Sky Muster connection. The full report is available here.

The review committee made twelve recommendations:

1. Adopt a longer-term strategic approach to regional digital infrastructure and skills
2. Increase Government investment in regional connectivity
3. Implement a regional telecommunications resilience fund
4. Trial emerging connectivity technologies
5. Build connectivity literacy and digital capability among regional users
6. Enhance NBN Co's regional fixed wireless and Sky Muster services
7. Implement and enforce new performance and reliability standards for wholesale and retail services
8. Continue with reforming existing universal services for the future
9. Improve information available to consumers about mobile services including coverage and performance
10. Encourage shared network access and innovative funding for mobile service in regional areas
11. Focus on the digital needs of Indigenous communities
12. Improve affordability of telecommunications for vulnerable groups in regional areas

With a new Federal Government now in place, ICPA (Aust) is hopeful that their commitment to acknowledging and enacting the recommendations of the Review Committee are comprehensive. The government is working towards their Better Connectivity for Rural and Regional Australia Plan, which they say will deliver improved broadband and mobile coverage in regional Australia.

Recently the first major milestone of the plan was implemented with $480 million provided to NBN Co to upgrade the NBN fixed wireless network. After the upgrades are rolled out, nbn Fixed wireless customers will be able to access increased download speeds of up to 100 Megabits per second (Mbps), with up to 85 per cent able to access 250 Mbps. The upgrade will also deliver an increase to typical wholesale busy hour speeds of at least 50 Mbps. This will benefit an estimated 755,000 premises.

Fixed wireless coverage will be expanded to cover a further 120,000 currently mapped for satellite premises, which have allowed NBN Co to increase Sky Muster data allowances and plus plan offerings product, with further enhancements to follow after the upgrades are complete.

This is the first of a number of commitments made by the new government in the lead up to the federal election under the Better Connectivity for Rural and Regional Australia Plan which also includes:

- Boosting NBN speeds on NBN Fixed wireless
- Increasing NBN satellite data allowances unmetering Sky Muster Plus usage between midnight and 4 pm.
- Expanding fibre access in the regions – investing to expand full-fibre access to a further 660,000 homes and businesses in the regions currently relying on copper wire.
- Conducting a national audit of mobile coverage – an independent audit of mobile coverage to better identify black spots and guide investment priorities.

- Boosting mobile coverage on roads – $400 million to provide multi-carrier mobile coverage on roads with coverage black spots, and in regional communities.
- Solving local connectivity problems – $200 million towards place-based regional telecommunications projects, such as mobile or targeted fibre, to meet community needs.
- Boosting on farm connectivity – $30 million program to enable more farmers to extend connectivity in their fields and take advantage of connected machinery and sensor technology.
- Access to speeds of 100 megabits per second or more by late 2025 for 80 per cent of the 3.7 million homes and businesses in regional and remote Australia.
  https://www.alp.org.au/policies/better-connectivity-for-rural-and-regional-australia-plan

Federal Council will continue to monitor the implementation of these commitments and any developments in this regard and ensure these are communicated to members.


**Regional Tech Hub**
ICPA (Aust) would like to remind members that the Regional Tech Hub is a free Federal Government initiative which offers independent advice to regional, rural and remote Australians on the best communications connections (phone and internet) for their needs. The Regional Tech Hub was established after requests from ICPA (Aust) , the Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia (BIRRR) team and other organisations for regional, rural and remote communications assistance and independent advice to be made available. Federal Council encourage members to become acquainted with the Hub services and make contact with the team to assist with addressing communications issues which may arise. The Tech Hub can be contacted by:

Telephone: 1300 081 029
Email: helpdesk@regionaltechhub.org.au or
Website: https://regionaltechhub.org.au.

They also have a social media presence by way of an interactive Facebook Page where members of the public can raise and discuss communications issues. Federal Council work closely with the Hub staff and were part of the Regional Tech Hub Stakeholder Reference Group and currently have a representative on the Regional Tech Hub Advisory Panel.