

ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA



2023 FEDERAL CONFERENCE COMMUNICATIONS PORTFOLIO REPORT

Wendy Hick and Alana Moller

While rural and remote communications has seen an array of enhancements and improvements over the past few years, the Portfolio remains a focus for Federal Council to guarantee communications services are maintained and continue to be enhanced to ensure our rural and remote students and their families are always provided with adequate communications services commensurate to their needs.

ICPA (Aust) continues to engage with key communications stakeholders in order to raise both ongoing and more time-sensitive topics and issues. ICPA (Aust) remains active in 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 members' issues can be put forward. ICPA (Aust) also participates in regular meetings with NBN Co and Telstra, including Telstra Roundtables with representatives from Federal Council and all ICPA State Councils to discuss topics from across the country. We also engage with the Regional Tech Hub on a regular basis and we are able to assist members with communications needs through this channel. ICPA (Aust) welcomed the announcement by the Federal Government on 29 June 2023 to extend funding for the Regional Tech Hub and the work it carries out for a further three years.

Internet Access

The necessity for adequate internet services commensurate to the educational needs of geographically isolated students continues to be brought forward by members and despite rapid growth and enhancements in rural and remote internet connectivity in recent years, ICPA (Aust) is aware there are still challenges. It is also prudent to ensure that despite these improvements, we continue to advocate for services to be maintained and enhanced. ICPA (Aust) encourages members to raise their specific connectivity challenges and requirements via case studies to be presented to the Federal Government and other stakeholders to ensure that issues can be resolved and future developments are directed to areas with maximum advantage for educational access.

Following the 2022 Federal Conference, ICPA (Aust) wrote to the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, citing all motions carried at the conference, underpinned by an overall request that adequate internet access be available for all rural and remote students with regard to speed, quality, capabilities and cost of the services. In December 2022, the Minister responded with an acknowledgement of the essential nature of reliable communications and referred to the Federal Government's current investment of over \$2.2 billion into regional telecommunications over the next five years including \$656 million for the Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia (the Plan) and over \$1.6 billion to improve National Broadband Network (NBN) services across regional and remote Australia. ICPA (Aust) looks forward to the future developments which may be seen from the Plan and will ensure members are kept abreast of these.

The nbn Sky Muster service, when first launched in 2016, was a gamechanger for internet access in rural and remote Australia and since then a number of initiatives to improve the service have been implemented, including Sky Muster Plus. Many of these developments have occurred as a result of the direct involvement



and requests from ICPA (Aust) and other stakeholders seeking upgraded services for rural and remote residents. nbn continue to commit to enhancing the Sky Muster service and the recent news of the inception of Sky Muster Plus Premium has the potential to resolve some of the major challenges faced by families educating children in rural and remote Australia, including data usage and speed. The key features of this new product include:

- **Uncapped Data Usage***: users can enjoy the flexibility of how they use the internet without worrying about managing a monthly data allowance.
- **Capability to burst faster**: for the first time the 25/5 Mbps wholesale plan can offer burst download speeds of up to 100 Mbps.
- **Lower wholesale pricing**: makes this new plan even more accessible for people in regional and rural Australia.
- More information can be found at the below links:
<https://minister.infrastructure.gov.au/.../regional...>
<https://www.nbnco.com.au/.../nbn-unveils-nbn-sky-muster...>
<https://regionaltechhub.org.au/connectivity-news/>

With the continued free installation of nbn Sky Muster equipment for eligible rural and remote residents and a steadfast guarantee from nbn and the Federal Government that this will continue for the foreseeable future, connectivity opportunities and quality for our members have never been better.

Federal Council are steadfast in our commitment to advocate strongly against any future change to the Sky Muster installation process while this service is relied upon by ICPA members to educate their children in rural and remote Australia. At this time, ICPA (Aust) continues to receive assurances on a regular basis from both nbn and the Federal Government that there are no plans to change the installation process for Sky Muster services.

Coupled with the recent Sky Muster enhancements, other new and alternative services now becoming available are potentially pivotal for those families, in particular those who require affordable portable internet products for the delivery of education to students from transient working families in remote locations of Australia. While Federal Council has maintained advocacy with the Federal Government and NBN Co for affordable solutions for these families working in remote locations of Australia, we are aware that alternative services such as Starlink and other transportable options are becoming more available and may provide a solution to this problem for some, however no subsidy yet exists to assist families with the associated costs of these services.

ICPA (Aust) and nbn have collaborated on a series of short videos to help answer common questions that our members and others may have regarding nbn internet services that are available to them. In these videos, Federal President Alana Moller speaks with Elise Petty, Executive Manager Education and Regional Stakeholder Relations, nbn, to learn more about nbn, the different types of technologies and nbn SkyMuster® services. We are pleased to be able to share these videos with our members and the videos can be found [here](#).

Telephone

Federal Council continues to communicate with Telstra and the Federal Government to ensure that the concerns of our members are heard, including roundtable meetings with Telstra personnel, at which representatives from Federal Council and all ICPA State Councils are in attendance.

The importance of the continued advocacy of ICPA (Aust) in the communications field is no more evident than as part of the ongoing concern regarding landline services and the sunseting of the Consumer Service Guarantee (CSG).



In March, ICPA (Aust) welcomed an opportunity to contribute to the Thematic Review of the Consumer Service Guarantee (CSG) Consultation Paper. The CSG regulates the timeframes for connection, repairs and appointments for fixed telephone services and the paper sought feedback and guidance from stakeholders on the future usefulness and continuation of the CSG instruments in light of the scheduled sunset of the Guarantee on the 1 October 2023. Our feedback was well-defined and simple; that while there are ongoing concerns in the area of communications in rural and remote areas, the current CSG framework should be retained and upheld, along with extending its protections across more services to ensure that all consumers are protected regardless of the service they utilise and even if their communications usage changes over time.

In early June it was pleasing to learn that the Minister had made the decision to continue the CSG for another three years following the Thematic Review, citing that her decision was *“about putting the consumer first again.”* This is a positive and valuable outcome for ICPA members, particularly those who continue to rely on Telstra legacy network services, including copper lines and high-capacity radio concentrators (HCRC), along with those members whose children attend small rural schools that are still dependent on Telstra legacy services for contact to access teacher support, assistance, mentoring, emergency help and general administration tasks of a school. ICPA (Aust)’s full submission can be found [here](#) and Minister Rowland’s media release announcing the decision to retain the CSG can be found [here](#).

At the 2022 Conference, ICPA members reiterated the call for their voice services to be maintained to adequate standards and the above announcement by the Minister provides reassurance that this should be occurring. In a response from the Minister following our correspondence sent after the Conference, we were encouraged by her commitment to ensuring residents in Australia have access to telephone services, regardless of where they live or work. The Minister did note however that CSG arrangements may be temporarily suspended where there is a service disruption caused by severe weather or other factors beyond Telstra’s control, however in these situations Telstra must either write to individual customers or publish details of mass service disruptions on their website, which can be accessed on their website [here](#) and focus must be on getting services back in operation as soon as possible.

Minister Rowland suggested that ICPA (Aust) should provide details of particular geographic problem areas or individual cases where repairing of voice services is particularly poor and there appear to be no extenuating circumstances to the Department of Communications for review. Federal Council therefore encourages members to raise any issues they have with us to be forwarded for review.

ICPA (Aust) has also reasserted the request that existing landline services remain in place and continue to be maintained until a tested, reliable, affordable and appropriate alternative voice service is made available for those living in rural and remote areas. The Minister’s response gave reassurance that this would be upheld. The Minister indicated that while the Government is open, in principle, to alternative means of delivering services to the community and acknowledged that there are a number of providers currently testing or rolling out voice services delivered through wireless and low earth orbit satellites, any changes would require measured consideration, consultation and collaboration with relevant stakeholders. She also confirmed that the performance, reliability and cost of alternative services would need to be appropriate to satisfy the needs of users. ICPA (Aust) is encouraged by this commitment.

At every opportunity, ICPA (Aust) has also raised this topic with Telstra, including during the Regional Telecommunications Policy Workshop in late October 2022 and in the meeting with all ICPA Councils held recently. We have also implored that any testing or investigation of alternative services needs to be undertaken in real life situations and in particular in remote locations where our members will be impacted by any changes. We have received assurance from Telstra that this will be the case. Federal Council understands this is a considerable concern for those members who may be impacted and will continue to ensure we maintain robust advocacy on this topic.



Mobile Coverage/Service

Following the Federal Conference, requests were again made to the Federal Government and other stakeholders for the expansion and ongoing maintenance of mobile networks across rural and remote Australia, for both rural schools and for families who rely on mobile coverage for education needs. In correspondence with Minister Rowland, we reiterated the need for small schools that are currently without reliable mobile coverage to be prioritised in future Mobile Black Spot Program rounds or similar future funding programs and where these schools have been provided with mobile coverage, that the footprint of the coverage goes beyond the school grounds. The Minister's response was encouraging, citing that the Government's Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia Plan announced in the October Federal Budget includes \$400 million in funding to boost mobile coverage on regional roads and to improve mobile coverage and resilience in rural and remote communities, which will support improved public safety in regional areas, complementing existing mobile coverage at local schools and other community hubs.

ICPA (Aust)'s correspondence was also sent to relevant MPs and Senators and we welcomed assistance from The Hon Nola Marino MP, Shadow Assistant Minister for Education, who wrote to Minister Rowland supporting our advocacy.

Further to maintenance, upgrade and improvement of mobile coverage, we also raised with the Minister the need to ensure current mobile services have sufficient backup power to provide consistent and uninterrupted delivery, where the education of children is reliant on mobile coverage. We referred to members' known issues with reliability of backup batteries on mobile towers during extended power outages, and the need for a better system of identifying this failure and replacement of expired batteries. The Minister acknowledged these concerns and cited the Government's Mobile Network Hardening Program, which is providing up to \$24.1 million in funding to the mobile network operators to deliver over 1000 projects to strengthen the resilience of regional telecommunications infrastructure, including over 500 upgrades to battery backup to at least 12 hours as a program aimed at addressing such issues and boosting telecommunications resilience. Consultations were held between the Government and members of the public, the telecommunications industry and government stakeholders on the design of Round 2, including draft Grant Opportunity Guidelines and these consultations closed on 30 May 2023. Following the feedback received during the consultation phase, Round 2 of the Mobile Network Hardening Program is expected to open for applications in the coming months.

The above mobile connectivity topics have also been raised in a number of other forums, including a roundtable with representatives from Telstra and all ICPA Councils, where backup power was discussed extensively. Attendees were assured that Telstra is keenly aware of these concerns and continue to expand their resiliency programs and emergency response for the mobile network. Reference was made to stand alone power systems (SAPS) which are being delivered to more remote areas as well as the early rollout of Automatic Transfer Units, an electronic box/switch that is at the Telstra Exchanges, which will allow emergency services and other non-Telstra personnel to hook up a temporary generator. The key to addressing this issue, particularly in disaster situations, is ensuring that consultation and collaboration occurs between a variety of parties, including Telstra, other voice/data service providers, electricity companies and other organisations such as the Bureau of Meteorology.

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the announcement of Round 3 of Regional Connectivity Program (RCP), bringing together the Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP) and the RCP in two streams with a grant opportunity of up to \$160 million to improve mobile and broadband connectivity in regional, rural and First Nations communities across Australia, with the following features:

- A \$110 million Regional Connectivity (Round 3) stream for place-based solutions that deliver new or upgraded broadband services or upgraded mobile services in eligible locations across Australia; and
- A \$50 million Mobile Black Spot (Round 7) stream that delivers new handheld mobile coverage to rural, regional and remote locations across Australia.



A list of funded projects under Rounds 1 and 2 of the Regional Connectivity Program can be found [here](#) and Federal Council look forward to sharing with members the results of these Rounds. The Regional Connectivity and Mobile Black Spot Grants applications have been extended to 11 August 2023, to allow mobile and broadband providers more time to work with local communities and state and territory governments develop beneficial connectivity solutions. ICPA (Aust) supports any proposed projects which will expand and improve connectivity for our members.

Low Earth Orbit (LEO) Satellite Services

The potential for Low Earth Orbit (LEO) Satellite services to enhance rural and remote communications and provide increased choice and opportunities for ICPA members, both in the areas of telephony and internet is becoming more apparent, including those services currently available such as Starlink, as well as emerging developments in this space. In October 2022, the Federal Government announced they would create the Low Earth Orbit Satellite Working Group to examine the future role of satellite technology in delivering telecommunications services and to explore the capability, features, affordability, consumer support and commercial sustainability of LEOsat products. The group will look at the potential role of LEOsats in regional, rural and remote connectivity, including mobile coverage and better delivery of universal telecommunications services. In February 2023, the first meeting of this group was held and included industry participants speaking on their use of satellite technology and opportunities for future growth – particularly in rural and regional communities. The Federal Government expects the Working Group to provide advice and feedback on possible regulatory reforms to support the industry to ensure telecommunications regulation keeps pace with emerging technologies.

Further to this, in recent months several announcements have been made by key telecommunications companies signalling their intentions to investigate and utilise LEO technology in their networks. In June, nbn announced its intention to explore LEO technology to enhance their connectivity solutions for those within the nbn satellite footprint. A media release on this can be found [here](#).

Also in June this year, Telstra announced an agreement with OneWeb to deliver one of the world's largest rollouts of OneWeb Low Earth Orbit (LEO) backhaul for a commercial mobile network. In a media release from Telstra on the 23 June, the following key points were noted:

- Later this year Telstra will begin moving hundreds of existing remote mobile base stations currently using satellite backhaul to OneWeb's LEO solution.
- It is envisaged that 25 Gbit/s LEO capacity will enhance the customer experience when using real-time applications such as voice and video calling.
- The deal aims to improve options for consumers, small business and enterprise customers living or working in rural and regional Australia, especially in remote areas.

More information can be found [here](#).

Further to this announcement, in early July, Telstra again reaffirmed its commitment to providing connectivity options for their consumer and business customers utilising a satellite product, announcing they have signed an agreement to become the first provider in the world to offer voice-only and voice plus broadband powered by Starlink to rural and remote Telstra customers. ICPA (Aust) looks forward to working closely with Telstra in order to understand future developments for our members from this agreement. More information can be found [here](#).

ICPA (Aust) understands the potential for LEO technology to provide improved and alternative choices and options for our members. However we continue to maintain that it is essential that any changes to current services should not be made unless an equivalent or better alternative is available and that rural and remote residents are not left with communications reliant on only one source. We will keep members informed of any future developments in regard to further information or developments in the LEO satellite services space and



assure members their interests continue to be represented as these technologies are explored, established and advanced.

Distance Education Materials

A motion carried at the 2022 Conference sought that geographically isolated distance education school materials be classified as essential mail and as such, their delivery be prioritised during mail disruptions, such as a natural disaster. Federal Council raised this request with the Minister for Communications, whom has jurisdiction over Australia Post, citing the case study included with the motion. The Minister contacted Australia Post directly for clarity on the situation noted and both the Minister and Australia Post recognised the critical importance of adequate postal services for those in regional, rural and remote areas and the great concern that delays have on the people in these communities. However, Australia Post advised that it is not possible to identify articles containing school supplies or prioritise such items. It was highlighted though that in an extreme weather event, Express Post items are amongst the first delivered and therefore it was recommended that the Express Post service be utilised to ensure educational items are expedited through the network in these circumstances. ICPA (Aust) trusts this may assist members in future circumstances.

The Communications Portfolio continues to be an eventful, yet often gratifying portfolio when exciting and positive developments occur. I would like to thank all of the Councillors who have assisted with the Portfolio over the past twelve months, including Wendy Henning, Laura Stalley, Ali Allison and Kylie Toynton.