
Communications Report

Madam President, Invited Guests, Federal Council, Fellow State Councillors and Members, it does give me great pleasure to present the Communications report for the 2024 year.

3 G closure

It would have been great in the Comms world if the 3 G closure had gone to plan and not presented members with so much angst when trying to live their daily lives communicating with those they needed to and transacting essential business and educating students.

Unfortunately, for many of us in rural and remote New South Wales the closure of the 3 G network has been extremely troublesome, with little resolution for some people. The organisation called consistently for a rebate to help members upgrade equipment needed to be able to effectively access the 4 G network. This advocacy did not get traction, but we will still be calling for it. In the last month the Federal Government has put in place a Senate Committee to investigate the shutdown. There are 3 recommendations to be looked at:

- Establishing a program to help customers that have lost mobile phone coverage since the 3 G shutoff, for example, by providing subsidies for boosters, Starlink connections, and replacing equipment that is no longer functional following the shutdown,
- Federal government and the telecommunications accelerate the introduction of mobile services via Starlink,
- Increasing the scope of the National Audit Coverage to include off-road areas, such as private properties.

There are many members who are being directed to Starlink services as their only option to effective communications. This is unacceptable and considerably costly, especially since it is not covered by the Universal Service Obligation (USO).

Following the closure and the extent of the problems being experienced by our members, ICPA-NSW and CWA of NSW put out a joint media release to ensure all levels of Government and Departments and other stakeholders were aware of the issues members were experiencing. In this media release we were calling for the Minister for Communications to expedite the next plan. We are unfortunately still waiting for this to be actioned.

Just prior to Christmas, ICPA-NSW sent a survey out to members to gauge the full extent of the issues surrounding the closure of 3 G. Primarily this information was to assist Federal Council with their advocacy, but the data collected will be very useful as we continue to highlight the communication problems since the closure. A summary of this data was published in the last Top Wire magazine.

Interesting statistics have been gathered from the survey, in that 88% of the respondents acknowledged a decline in their mobile service at their house. 59% of the respondents don't have a landline anymore, which is concerning because they effectively have no voice calling ability. Members reported that there has been a marked reliance on the low earth orbit (LEO) connections and UHF radios. The ability to perform timely emergency services in rural and remote areas since the closure have been noticed, along with members reporting that education and transacting daily business has been challenging.

The many motions in the agenda at this conference will also be very useful in our advocacy going forward. Members can be assured the organisation will be prioritising this issue in our advocacy in 2025.

Please keep ICPA-NSW informed of any issues regarding your connections. There are also five options available to members who have unresolved problems. It is extremely important that you report your issues, otherwise our advocacy is not being backed up. The report rate to Telstra regarding the 3 G problems is very low. Hopefully the options below will assist you to get a message to Telstra about your 3 G connectivity problems.

- Put in a complaint to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) by this link <https://www.tio.com.au/complaints>
- Call the Telstra helpline by dialling 1800 990 853 between 8am to 7pm Monday to Friday AEDT.
- Email – telstracomplaints@team.telstra.com
- Use an online form with Telstra <https://www.telstra.com.au/contact-us/feedback-complaints/make-a-complaint>
- 24 hour chat option with Telstra in their app.

Inquiry into the Universal Service Obligation (USO)

ICPA (Aust) put a submission into the review of the USO. States were invited to provide comment to the submission, which I did. It is important to remember that the USO only refers to landlines and not mobiles as they are not stationary. An important change to the USO will be the removal of the Copper Continuity Obligation so that Telstra can invest to bring new technologies to regional and rural customers.

Telstra Regional Advisory Committee (RAC)

Telstra has reviewed the structure of these committees. All ICPA representatives have been removed from the Committee, as Telstra believes our partnership is a strong enough connection.

School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI)

The free internet available to families who have school-aged students and do not have access to the internet has been extended until June 2028. The government has announced an additional \$4.9 million in funding to extend the School Student Broadband Initiative. With this extension, up to 30,000 families will be able to access the program, ensuring that more

children have the same educational opportunities as their peers. Please seek out the program and apply if you fit the criteria.

I have received a comment that the SSBI is working extremely well. It is easy to navigate, a great service when you order, and the internet is working perfectly.

NBN Sky Muster Plus Premium Plans

Are you a member who is dealing with limited data plans on Sky Muster? If so, it is really time to look at a Sky Muster Plus plan. These plans have been around since 2023 and may be very helpful to your connection world. There are three plans available and only 30% of people have taken the next step to a Plus plan which will give you access to unlimited data:

- Sky Muster Plus Premium – high tier option
- Sky Muster Plus Premium – mid tier option
- Sky Muster Plus Premium – entry tier option

NBN Fixed Wireless Speed Boost

There has been an announcement of a \$750 million investment made up of \$480 million from the Commonwealth Government and an additional \$270 million from NBN Co to upgrade the NBN Fixed Wireless network.

NBN Co continues to transform the way regional Australians can access and use high speed broadband. These speeds are to be available during busy periods as regional Australians use more data than ever before. The aim is to support the rise of remote healthcare, working and learning from home and connecting rural entrepreneurs to the world and allow people to stay connected to family, friends and their community.

NBN Co has upgraded its existing Fixed Wireless towers with the installation of new technology along with software enhancements to help deliver overall enhanced nbn network speeds and coverage to regional Australia.

NBN Co has just completed the Fixed wireless upgrade with the key benefits for those in regional and remote Australia being:

Faster speeds: Around 800,000 homes and businesses, with more than 210,000 in NSW, can now enjoy faster speeds, including during busy periods.

New high-speed plans: Two new high-speed tier plans are now available via participating retail service providers, offering peak wholesale nbn network download speeds of up to five times faster than what was previously available.

Expanded access: More than 120,000 homes and businesses previously within the nbn Sky Muster satellite service footprint now have access to nbn Fixed Wireless for the first time.

Enhanced performance: Improved network performance for uncapped data plans under nbn Sky Muster Plus.

NBN Co announces upgrades for remaining homes and businesses on Fibre to the Node

* NBN Co will provide new upgrade paths for the remaining homes and businesses across Australia on the Fibre to the Node network, enabled through an investment with the Australian Government.

* The investment is expected to benefit around 622,000 homes and businesses, with more than half located in regional Australia with the Far West being an area to benefit from the upgrade. More than 95 per cent of premises will have the option to upgrade to nbn full fibre via nbn Fibre to the Premises. The remaining five per cent require further design work to confirm the appropriate upgrade path.

* nbn full fibre is faster and more reliable than Fibre to the Node and enables access to nbn's fastest upload and download speeds.

NBN Co will upgrade the remaining Fibre to the Node network across Australia, backed by an equity investment of up to \$3 billion from the Australian Government, in addition to more than \$800 million from NBN Co.

Work on the upgrades will start immediately and be completed progressively. The upgrades are expected to be completed by the end of 2030.

NBN full fibre is faster and more reliable than Fibre to the Node, which uses ageing copper to deliver broadband services, this means for homes and businesses, that they will have faster broadband speeds enabling more people and devices to be online at the same time with minimal disruptions. This means smoother streaming, faster downloads and uploads, and stronger connections - even with multiple devices online at the same time.

A decade ago, the average Australian home had seven internet-connected devices and consumed around 40 gigabytes per month. Today, the average household consumes more than ten times that amount across 22 internet-connected devices. Within the decade, the average monthly download usage is forecast to reach more than 1,100 gigabytes across around 40 internet-connected devices.

Digital Divide

In December 2024 'The Digital Equity and Education report' was released. The digital divide is something this organisation has been highlighting for your years. This report talks about access to devices, internet connectivity and digital literacy. Students in regional NSW are at a distinct disadvantage in their experience of digital inclusion compared to their counterparts. During covid the Government made a commendable effort in providing some support, but unfortunately these supports have been reversed, and the gap is widening.

The effects of digital inequity are not limited to the classroom and education, they actually reverberate across our communities, impacting future employment, social inclusion, and wellbeing.

The report flags 5 top priorities to address digital inequity in education.

1. Do not assume students are digitally included
2. Meet the digital needs of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and asylum seeker/refugee students
3. Implement comprehensive and targeted digital literacy programs in schools
4. Invest in digital infrastructure in regional NSW where higher levels of digital exclusion are recorded
5. Strengthen digital equity data collection and research.

Regional Telecommunications Review

In December 2024 submissions into the latest Regional Telecommunications review closed. ICPA (Aust) provided a submission to the review that ICPA-NSW had input into. Branch motions were used in the submission.

Regional Tech Hub

The Regional Tech Hub is a great free resource for any telephone or internet technical problems you may be experiencing. The phone number for the Hub is 1300 081 029. The Hub is only open for limited hours, but you can always leave a message for a return phone call.

The hours of operation are:

Mon: 12pm – 5pm
Tues: 12pm - 5pm
Wed: 9am – 2pm
Thur: 9am – 2pm
Fri: 9am – 2pm

Road Trips

Both Telstra and NBN are keen to travel to branch areas and participate in information days, field days or whatever is on. Please be in touch for their details and you can contact them to make the arrangements.

Deputation

Thank you to our communication stakeholders who are always happy to meet with us on deputation. It is always worthwhile to discuss the policies of the organisation relating to communication.

Thank you to my fellow State Councillors who work tirelessly on a volunteer basis for you, our members.

Please remember to reach out if you have communication issues and hopefully, we will get some resolution to the current issues.

Libby McPhee
Communications Portfolio Leader