

**Madam President, Distinguished Guests, fellow State Councillors, Members, Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to present the Communications Report for ICPA-NSW at the 2023 conference.**

Communications with Telstra and NBN has continued in a virtual form. ICPA-NSW is very thankful that this line of communication is always at the end of the phone line or computer if we have a question or a suggestion to make. We are ever grateful of the linkages that have been forged with these two communications organisations.

At our main deputation in June, we took the Namoi motion requesting that when 3 G services are switched off that the rural and remote service is equivalent or better than what we currently have.

We also raised the need for comprehensive information on the conversion of 3 G to 4 G connectivity to all remote and local communities. This communication needs to be in all formats including social media, written articles and town hall meetings.

ICPA (Aust) and ICPA-NSW have held many meetings regarding the closure of 3 G in June 2024. In the later meetings we have been pinpointing areas where service has diminished. I ask you to make contact with me if you have specifics as this will assist Telstra with their desire to ensure everyone has a comparable service. Thank you to anyone that has given me specifics. Towers are being upgraded in areas that are being identified.

Many people are experiencing diminishing service coverage as we move closer to 3 G being switched off.

The long-standing motion of upgrading equipment when 3 G is switched off was also raised. Telstra is providing ICPA with a list of dates which should help to determine whether devices and boosters are compatible with 4G. This information will be communicated to members when it is available.

Members are able to check to see if their devices will be 4 G compatible by going onto:  
<https://www.telstra.com.au/coverage-networks/check-imei>

At deputation we took the opportunity to raise the need for Telstra's assistance line to rural and remote students and their families be further enhanced to ensure this assistance is more effective for the customers.

During deputation we were able to advocate for rural and isolated students to have access to an unlimited data allowance with all internet service providers. This is important and every student and their families need to be able to access unlimited data. At peak times, when families are together, data allowances are being exceeded rapidly when students are applying online for university courses, or other tertiary courses. These days these students generally have work to do during the holiday periods. Therefore, they need an unlimited allowance of data.

To assist students with their studies at home the NBN Sky Muster Plus Plans have been enhanced. From July 1, 2022, these plans now include:

- Off peak will run from midnight to 4pm
- Access to virtual private networks (VPN)
- Video streaming for 16 hours a day between 12 am and 4 pm without it counting towards your monthly data allowance.
- Activities such as online shopping, emails, internet banking, audio streaming, video calling, and Wi-Fi calling are available without any count towards data for 24 hours per day.

The un metering of data on the NBN Sky Muster plan is of huge assistance to students learning. ICPA-NSW is grateful to NBN for assisting these students with the availability of these plans.

The NBN and the Commonwealth Government earlier in the year announced a \$750 million investment in the Fixed Wireless and Satellite Upgrade. It is hoped that this upgrade will boost connectivity for people across regional Australia.

As of 1 July 2022, NBN introduced changes to deliver more data and they have lengthened the off-peak period for Sky Muster Plus to most of the day. For those customers just on Sky Muster the monthly data allowance has been increased to 55GB. Once the Fixed Wireless and Satellite upgrade is complete NBN expect to bump the data allowance up to 90 GB.

65% of Sky Muster customers are on Sky Muster plus plans. NBN want to increase this, especially since the new announcements in July. The lowest Sky Muster plus plan is around \$50. This is a solution for educational needs.

There are 900 000 customers on fixed line and satellite connections. It is reported that less than 10 000 of these premises would be in a non NBN Connection area. To find out if you can get an NBN connection go to the NBN website-[NBNCO.com.au/check my address](http://NBNCO.com.au/check-my-address).

ICPA-NSW is of the opinion that NSW Department of Education needs to ensure that Distance Education home sites are upgraded to NBN Sky Muster Plus plans as a matter of urgency.

The NSW Department of Education has begun the process of moving Distance Education students to an NBN connection.

During the year Geographically Home Isolated Distance Education families indicated that 44% of them were having daily issues and 42% were having weekly issues with using video platforms. The quality and interactivity of the content of the video platform revealed that 40% had a poor experience, 20% very poor and 29% indicated the experience was satisfactory.

There is no doubt the black spot program needs to continue to expand to reduce the lack of mobile service coverage area that currently exists in rural and remote areas. The mobile phone is an essential tool for educational needs and rural and remote families and further funds need to be allocated to reducing the uncovered mobile service area.

During the year the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) surveyed people to gauge their indication as to whether their telephone and internet services were affordable. 70% of people agreed that their phone and internet costs were affordable,

while the other 27% regarded their phone and internet costs as unaffordable. There were 3% that were unsure.

The key findings to this survey were:

- 1) People on low incomes experience greater difficulty affording their phone and internet services.
- 2) Consumers think all telcos should provide an affordable internet plan.
- 3) Access to free public wi-fi can be a useful tool to improving access to certain digital services.

In September at the Australian Communications Consumers Action Network (ACCAN) conference all things about better basics in communication were discussed. For many of us, in rural and remote Australia we know exactly what this is like, as we long for a better basic service to connect to our country, the world and transact business on a daily basis. Our distance education students are a prime example of disadvantaged students trying to learn on the current communication technologies.

At this conference it was interesting to hear, from Wendy Field the Head of Policy, Programs and Strategy with the Smith Family Charity. Especially since COVID this charity has seen an increase in their need to provide devices, and support to disadvantaged students. There is a program whereby Optus customers are donating their unused data to the Smith family. This data is then distributed from the charity to students in need.

During the year Telstra made calls from telephone boxes free of charge. This change was to ensure anyone in desperate need of help were able to access help instantly.

At the Bourke conference, March 2022 Rankins Springs asked for TP 1 and TP 2 schools with satellite internet connections to have a secure and consistent connection. All schools need a secure and consistent connection, especially since many schools are emergency evacuation points in times of an emergency. The Louth State School were also experiencing difficulties with their phone lines, which hopefully have been rectified.

It is hoped that the insights that you have given today with the OSCAR (Online Skills check and Resources) survey will assist NBN Co develop technology that will help you enhance your skills for the future.

In August ICPA (Aust) provided information to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Regional Mobile Infrastructure Inquiry regarding mobile roaming.

ICPA-NSW is fortunate to have a seat on the Telstra Regional Advisory Committee (RAC). These quarterly meetings are an opportunity to raise members issues. Lately the meetings have been with other states, which can be helpful when the issue is being experienced in other states too.

Telstra and NBN Co genuinely want to tour branches and discuss connectivity, digital literacy and any other issues you wish. I therefore ask you to organise a time suitable for your branch and get on the roadshow. It is hoped that these roadshows will include the NSW Farmers and the CWA of NSW.

During the year the Rankins Springs branch hosted some of the NBN team and the then new Minister for Communications Ms Michelle Rowlands to learn about communications needs on farm. NBN and ICPA-NSW are grateful to this branch for taking the time to host this event at short notice, and in particular many thanks go to Peter and Meagan McCarten and Kerrie Johnston from the Rankins Springs Branch.

ICPA (Aust) are always available to answer questions about communications issues. In December we held a catchup with all the States to discuss the current issues and effects on each of the states. It is always an important discussion, and it is great that ICPA (Aust) organise this on our behalf.

The Regional Tech Hub is available to anyone living in rural and remote Australia who maybe experiencing communication difficulties or have a question about suitable devices. Please remember to use this hub if you have a question. These days you can book a call at a time that will suit you. Please remember to use this Hub if you have any questions.

Stay in touch and connected.

Libby McPhee  
Communications Portfolio Holder