

## ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA



### 2021 FEDERAL CONFERENCE COMMUNICATIONS PORTFOLIO MOTIONS

---

#### **A8. Mount Isa Branch of the Air (Qld)**

**CARRIED**

"That ICPA (Aust) continue to advocate to government and telecommunications providers to ensure that communications services for the purpose of education in geographically isolated areas are maintained, expanded and do not diminish."

#### **Explanation:**

We thank the ICPA Federal Council and State Councils for continuously raising concerns regarding communication services in rural and remote areas for the purpose of education and student safety wherever possible as well as participating in numerous stakeholder groups, consultations and placing submissions.

Technology changes at a rapid pace and sometimes new developments in communications have consequences for families needing to educate their children in geographic isolation. Our families risk being "left behind" as the communication gap widens when impacts of communications advances do not consider the effect on regional, rural and remote families and services can be lessened or compromised, sometimes unintentionally.

A few examples which have occurred in recent times-

- Mobile coverage - transitioning from 3G to 4G – 4G coverage appears to have a smaller footprint of coverage than 3G and many customers in rural/remote areas will be required to transition to new equipment and infrastructure at their own cost in order to use the service, communications are also moving towards 5G, will this be even less coverage for these families?
- Alternative Voice Service Trials (AVST) - to hopefully identify new technologies which might effectively replace struggling systems such as High Capacity Radio Concentrator (HCRC) phone services, but unfortunately, the trial has been heavily Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) heavy and at this time doesn't appear to have solutions to offer as a second source of communication for geographically isolated families other than relying on internet service for both data and voice purposes.
- Changes around Band Spectrum regarding Free to Air TV and also 850/900 MHz Auction Allocation Limits which may impact on free to air television channels/content available as well as quality of mobile coverage and expansion of mobile services in rural and remote areas.

We appreciate ICPA (Aust) keeping abreast of these and other developments and ask that they continue their strong advocacy wherever possible to ensure that communication services are not lessened in the bush as a result of new programs/technologies being rolled out.

#### ***Internet Access***

#### **A9. Western Downs Branch (Qld)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) continue working closely with stakeholders to ensure that Sky Muster Plus continues to cater for and be further enhanced to support all geographically isolated students and their needs.”

**Explanation:**

Western Downs Branch would like to pass on our gratitude and thanks to the Minister for Communications, The Minister for Regional Communications, NBN, BIRRR and ICPA Australia for the implementation of the Sky Muster Plus product. The Sky Muster Plus product is a game changer for geographically isolated students, including but not limited to, Small school, University, TAFE, Early Childhood and Boarding students who previously did not qualify for an Education Port. The unlimited data included in this product means students can study and learn without jeopardising their households' monthly data allowance.

**A10. Katherine Branch (NT)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) continue to request the Minister for Communications ensure all geographically isolated students have adequate internet access with regard to speed, quality, capabilities and cost of the service.”

**Explanation:**

We acknowledge and thank ICPA (Aust) and the Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia for their continuous and effective lobbying of the Federal Government, Telstra, nbn<sup>TM</sup> and other providers on internet issues in the bush. In particular, the negotiations with nbn<sup>TM</sup> to provide dedicated ports for education an important breakthrough. The prioritisation of installations required for education is paramount. Many students, however, such as tertiary and training students, students of small rural schools and boarding students' home on “holidays”. These families are required to use their business/family internet for education. Also, the NT is in flux with regard to internet provision for distance education and so some families are also using their own internet for that.

While expected data speeds, plan sizes and service reliability are continually improving, our members have concerns about the data allocations in plans being heavily loaded towards unreasonable off-peak times. The Mb/\$ continues to fall extremely short of those available to our urban counterparts, thus ensuring maintenance of the internet divide between regional and urban areas.

**A11. Alice Springs Branch (NT)**

**CARRIED**

“The ICPA (Aust) lobbies the relevant Ministers and Departments to ensure that internet costs for working, traveling families of geographically isolated children enrolled in distance education have access to subsidised transportable satellite internet and all associated costs involved with purchasing these kits are also subsidised.”

**Explanation:**

Put simply there is currently minimal kits and internet plans available in Australia for families who frequently travel and move due to work commitments. The kits that are available at present which are only ONE cost in excess of \$18,000 and internet plans start from \$300 per month.

**A12. Alice Springs Branch (NT)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) advocates to satellite internet providers to develop an affordable product that traveling families can access for the delivery of education.”

**Explanation:**

Currently for traveling, working families there is only one satellite internet company that caters for frequently moving teams and as this is the only company, they can and do charge through the roof as there are no other options or competition in Australia at present.

**A13. Alice Springs Branch (NT)****CARRIED**

"That ICPA (Aust) lobbies the Australian communications and media authority (ACMA), the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts and other relevant political figures to work proactively with companies attempting to bring universal broadband internet to Australia, including satellite-based internet like Starlink."

**Explanation:**

Education in remote Australia relies more and more on fast, reliable internet connections with large download limits. Internet requirements are only expected to increase. In particular, download requirements are increasing because more and more video content is needed for research and class delivery. Sky Muster has generous exceptions on data usage, but those exceptions don't extend to most video content. Universally-accessible fast internet with large download limits could be available in Australia within 2 years. This would be especially welcome to families who move around in remote areas, for whom there is no current affordable or practical solution for internet provision.

SpaceX' Starlink system is the most advanced and promising universal broadband internet system. It is currently in beta in southern Australia (below 32 degrees latitude). It provides 50-150 Mbit/sec connection with a latency of 20-40 milliseconds for \$139/month. Downloads are currently unlimited. The connection equipment costs \$809 including delivery and in most cases can be installed by the end user. Additionally, Starlink could be used for 4G and 5G small cell backhaul, allowing cheaper expansion and upgrade of mobile phone networks into remote areas.

The Starlink beta is expected to expand to more of Australia by the end of 2021. Speeds are expected to increase (possibly upward of 300Mbit/sec) and latency is expected to decrease. Currently the service is only available at a fixed address, but this restriction is expected to be lifted in 2022.

The ACMA has given approval for SpaceX to operate in low and remote density areas until 2025. However, some sites for earth stations are only licenced until 29 October 2021.

In the ACMA's spectrum management consultation paper, April 2020, they state: "Under current law, specific allocation processes depend on ACMA and, in some cases, Ministerial decisions made during the planning and allocation stages, and reflect other relevant government policy considerations about planning priorities. Information from incumbent and prospective spectrum users about the demand for access to specific bands and the timing of any possible allocation will also provide important input to allocation decisions." The ACMA periodically consults stakeholders on upcoming decisions. It would be great if the ICPA (Aust) could monitor and submit papers into these discussions on behalf of ICPA member families in their quest for affordable and adequate internet. <https://www.acma.gov.au/have-your-say> Keeping the perspective of remote families in the ears of politicians and ministers on these matters is also important.

**A14. Western Australia State Council (WA)****CARRIED**

"That ICPA (Aust) seek an assurance from nbn that the installation of a Sky Muster service and its hardware will continue at no cost to rural and remote student households, to ensure affordable access to education for rural and remote students."

**Explanation:**

Currently all equipment and a standard installation are provided free-of-charge to consumers and is covered by the nbn. Should this situation change in the future there is concern as to what nbn will have in place with regard to geographically isolated distance education students accessing education at an affordable cost to parents.

As a result of COVID-19 and online learning from home, a great number of members have installed a Sky Muster service. There are however members who are yet to change over; for some, it is a lack of knowledge of what Sky Muster services offer, or the cost of breaking existing contracts and for others it is due to students not yet commencing distance education and therefore parents seeing little need for large data allowances.

We want to ensure that the future uptake of a Sky Muster service is affordable for parents of rural and remote students.

WA State Council would like to thank Federal Council for their continuous effort to bring reliable and affordable internet connectivity to rural, remote and regional families.

**A15. Western Australia State Council (WA)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) lobbies nbn for all geographically isolated students enrolled via distance education schools to have access to the Sky Muster education port or alternative service.”

**Explanation:**

ICPA (WA) would like to see access to the education port available to all students studying via distance education, with the option for those enrolled in a non-government school program funding their own access.

In WA, only students studying via distance education and enrolled through Schools of the Air (SOTA) or School of Isolated Distance Education (SIDE), qualify for the Sky Muster education port which the WA Education Department funds.

There have been instances where students studying via distance education through private campuses have been told by nbn they do not qualify for the education port and referred onto the state Education Department who have declined access.

**A16. Western Australia State Council (WA)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) continue to lobby nbn, relevant Ministers and Departments to ensure that video streaming for educational use is included in future Sky Muster Plus plans for geographically isolated students studying via distance education.”

**Explanation:**

ICPA WA thank providers of the Sky Muster Plus products for providing unmetered content. It is imperative that video streaming, including YouTube, that is actively used by educational establishments, be included in the delivery of education programs for geographically isolated students studying via distance education.

***Mobile Coverage/Service***

**A17. Kindon Branch (Qld)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) lobbies Minister of Communications, Minister for Regional Communications, Minister for Regional Education and relevant bodies for rural and remote schools to continue to be a priority in future Mobile Black Spot Program rounds and that mobile coverage solutions when implemented extend beyond school grounds.”

**Explanation:**

Rural and remote schools right across Australia are the hub for many communities and often the first port of call in many situations. They are the place that people gather to when an emergency happens in a district. Some schools are so isolated that they are the desired place to house defibrillator machines as they are the go-to point during a crisis. While these schools have the task of overseeing such important life saving devices, many do not have the mobile service to ensure adequate medical advice is received in such an emergency.

With minimal or no mobile coverage for areas outside of some schools they find themselves often in situations where motorists come in for help asking to use the school phone which pulls teaching staff away from classrooms to identify and record who is on school property or even on-site Principals in adjacent residences woken at all hours with demands for assistance. To entice and maintain valuable school staff to remote small schools is difficult. It is imperative that they are provided with not only a safe and secure workplace but also for privacy in their home.

Some schools are going to the extraordinary length of purchasing their own mobile booster hardware out of their school or P & C funds to ensure that mobile service is available on the school grounds. However, this privately supplied coverage usually does not extend beyond the school fence. Communities and those travelling past these schools with private signal boosters soon learn that they can access some limited service at the school. In attempting to get connection from the mobile boosters at rural schools, people are entering school grounds in order to make calls. Schools usually require records of who is on school grounds, contact details etc and also ensuring the purpose of being on the grounds is known. Handling extra visitors who merely want to use phone service uses up valuable time for teachers and staff. The interruption to school routine could be minimised if rural schools had more general mobile coverage. The footprint for this coverage needs to extend beyond the school perimeter and sufficient infrastructure needs to be in place to ensure this can happen.

Rural and remote schools need to continue to be considered as priority for mobile coverage under future Mobile Black Spot Program rollouts and ensure that when mobile coverage is installed the coverage reaches outside school grounds.

**A18. Western Australia State Council (WA)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) lobby the Minister for Communications and telecommunication providers, to investigate the reliability and capacity of backup power on mobile towers to ensure a consistent and uninterrupted delivery of educational programs to geographically isolated children and rural and remote schools.”

**Explanation:**

Members continue to report significant issues with the reliability of the backup battery on mobile towers during extended power outages. We request that these concerns are raised when in meetings with telecommunication providers.

When some of our members experience power outages they also lose mobile phone coverage. It has been explained that a number of the battery backups on mobile towers are aging and it only becomes apparent when there are power outages, that these battery backups are failing. The issue of battery back-up failures also applies to local exchanges and so affects the ability to communicate via landline.

The recent cyclone in WA caused a massive amount of damage to properties in the Midwest and surrounding areas. The inability to communicate during times of crisis caused a great deal of additional stress and anxiety.

ICPA (WA) acknowledge that cyclone Seroja was a catastrophic event, however as a society, and particularly in education, we are encouraged to adopt new technologies and methods of learning but events like cyclones highlight our vulnerabilities at locations not only locally but throughout Australia when a system is down. Without a reliable mobile and communications network student learning is being impacted.

### **Telephone**

#### **A19. Collarenebri-Mungindi Branch (NSW)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) ask Telstra to review its customer service and telephone assistance lines to more effectively assist rural and remote students and their families.”

#### **Explanation:**

The current 13 22 00 line for support is inadequate. After you have punched in all the numbers for account purposes the message tells you a link has been sent to your mobile for you to follow and chat with a Telstra assistant. That rarely happens. You can't ring your local Telstra shop regarding plans or purchasing a new phone or purchasing a SIM, they are unable to help you unless you go into the store and present identification. When Telstra stores are not located locally this is less than helpful to rural and remote customers.

#### **A20. Collarenebri-Mungindi Branch (NSW)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) ask Telstra to urgently expedite the moving of all Telstra call centres to the mainland of Australia, to assist students and their families.”

#### **Explanation:**

Rural and remote students and their families have experienced problems with the overseas call centres for far too long. All Telstra call centres need to be moved back to Australia urgently, so that they can effectively assist customers need to troubleshoot issues. During COVID these centres operated from within Australia and most customers saw a huge difference in the assistance being received.

#### **A21. Territory Wide Branch (NT)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) advocates to the Minister for Communications, other relevant Ministers and telecommunications companies to ensure that in rural and remote areas of scant to no mobile coverage landlines, such as radio telephone, optic fibre or any other service currently being used are not replaced by a voice service over satellite internet.”

#### **Explanation:**

In rural and remote areas communication is one of the most important tools in regards to education. Technology has advanced greatly which has assisted with the deliverance of distance education material, online classes, and aids in the formation of a solid relationship with teachers who might teach from a base a large distance away. Verbal communication via a phone is one of the important tools that connect the distance education school with the pupil and this link should always be a continuous and permanent connection. In urban areas landline services are currently received over the nbn service using Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP). The Federal Government is working with several retail service providers to trial landline services over satellite internet (Sky Muster) utilising a VOIP service for satellite technology. If this trial is successful then it is a strong possibility that existing landline services over radio telephone, optic fibre etc. will be moved to a service over Sky Muster internet. This will be very detrimental in rural and remote areas where there is no other form of communication such as mobile coverage. If the satellite system fails, there will be no other way for our children to reach their distance education provider and also of importance emergency services in

times of an emergency. Where this is the practice of utilizing VOIP in urban areas for the landline there is also a strong mobile system so when one goes down you still have the other to use in times of education, health, and emergency. In rural and remote areas where there is no mobile coverage or very scant mobile coverage then there will be no way to communicate if the satellite is offline and therefore all communications with the distance education provider will be cut which would be very detrimental in times of major assessments.

**A22. Western Australia State Council (WA)**

**D/C by A21**

“That ICPA (Aust) continue to lobby the Minister for Communications to ensure the retention and maintenance of landline services in rural and remote areas, until another means of reliable, affordable and appropriate voice service is available.”

**Explanation:**

The Universal Service Obligation (USO) should remain on landline telephony services for those living outside of mobile coverage areas and these landline services should be maintained and upgraded, as necessary. Currently there are ICPA members who rely upon their landline as their only means of reliable and affordable voice service due to poor mobile coverage, so it is imperative that the landlines are retained and maintained.

ICPA (WA) acknowledges and thanks ICPA (Aust) for its advocacy that families living in rural and remote parts of Australia, due to the nature of where they live, require two forms of communications i.e., phone/voice and internet/data/voice - each as a separate service not solely relying on the same mode of delivery and thus ensuring if one service fails, the other is still available.

**A23. Western Australia State Council (WA)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) continue to lobby the Minister for Communications to ensure fault restoration and entitlements for geographically isolated students and their families occur within the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) guidelines.”

**Explanation:**

The CSG guidelines for repairs in remote service locations is 3 full working days after report. Recently members have experienced being without a fixed service landline for a period of six (6) weeks from the first date reported. Repair dates had been given only to be extended on numerous occasions. Members were either not offered an alternative service and/or due to poor mobile coverage were unable to rely on a consistent service from the existing mobile tower, leaving members with a lack of communications. ICPA WA acknowledge that if eligible, there are CSG financial entitlements when repairs cannot be effective within the CSG guidelines. However, members are concerned at the number of repeated extended outages occurring in aging exchanges, especially when the supply of parts is the cause for the delay (although this is not conveyed to the customer).

**A24. Queensland State Council (Qld)**

**CARRIED**

“That ICPA (Aust) ask the Minister for Communications to investigate the reliability of voice services in non NBN cable serviced areas.”

**Explanation:**

Some voice services especially those on older copper lines have become unreliable and untenable. Multiple faults are reported over short periods of time. The line is fixed, only to have another breakdown within weeks and this process begins again. These areas often have no mobile service. Every Australian especially those in rural and remote locations trying to educate their children need a reliable and consistent form of communication.

**S3. Yaraka Isisford Branch (Qld)****CARRIED**

"That ICPA Australia lobby the Minister for (Regional) Communications to ensure that any proposed solution intended to replace existing Rural & Remote telephone services have equivalent or improved facilities and functionality as existing services."

**Explanation:**

Telephones are a vital component of education delivery in rural and remote areas. There is a real risk that technologies being trialled to replace radio services (HCRC) will be Plain Old Telephone Services (POTS) without things like call waiting, call forwarding, and so on.

**S4. St George Branch (Qld)****CARRIED**

"That ICPA (Aust) lobby phone providers, the Federal Government and relevant Ministers and Departments to introduce a subsidised connection of additional phone lines as required for educating geographically isolated students through Distance Education."

**Explanation:**

Schools of Distance Education are requesting families install additional phone lines to allow for more accessibility to on air lessons. Families with several students completing their education through Distance Education are often required to be on air for lessons at the same time. Currently a connection fee is \$329 if the connection is straightforward and can use existing phone connections followed by the additional \$55 monthly cost for the home phone plan. As this line is for the sole purpose of calling 1800 numbers for the use of on-air school teleconferencing, a financed connection for the additional phone line/s would help alleviate the financial burden to families and ensure students are able to receive their required lessons.