
Communications Report

Madam President, Distinguished Guests, Councillors and fellow members of ICPA, ladies and gentlemen. It is with great pleasure that I present the 2021 Communications Report to you today.

Ramifications for Education with the Global Pandemic

Like no other year, 2020 was the year that Communication for education was a reality for many rural and remote students, as students who had never done online learning before navigated their way through this platform for their day-to-day lessons. Due to the pandemic, most boarding school students spent the whole of term 2 in 2020 at home and parts thereof for the following terms. ICPA NSW is ever grateful to NBN Co who allowed so much of this online learning to happen through Skymuster Plus because NBN Co swiftly upgraded plans to allow unmetering of many educational sites and offered affordable data plans, as well as being ready to troubleshoot any problems members were experiencing. Thank you NBN Co, we can't thank you enough.

In the space of home learning, the schools did an amazing job to ensure from their end, that portals were set up and work was accessible online. We at ICPA NSW are in awe of our boarding schools and how they tackled the complex task of allowing rural and remote students to continue their studies from such far-flung distances.

It is not surprising that the peak for data usage moved from night to all day, when considering the ramifications of people working from home and students doing online learning.

It is also not surprising to learn that the attendance of pre-schoolers attending preschool increased fourfold during the pandemic, as these students embraced online learning.

If there is one positive from the pandemic, it is that telecommunications are moving forward in the digitalised world at a much faster pace than would have otherwise.

Unmetered Educational Sites

As I write this report, Telstra is working with ICPA (Aust) to update the unmetered educational sites they offer. Telstra is are open to suggestions, so if you have any suggestions please get in touch with me.

ICPA NSW membership of the Telstra RAC

ICPA NSW continues to be a member of the Regional Advisory Committee (RAC) for Telstra. This dialogue and meetings are extremely worthwhile as all industries who utilise communication have a seat at the table, and we therefore have an opportunity to discuss with the Telstra Rural and Remote Department, issues pertinent to our members.

Telstra Regional Advisory Network (RAN)

Recently, Telstra has launched the Regional Advisory Network (RAN) which is designed to help regional customers with connectivity issues be it at home, in the business or on the road. Telstra is keen to fix these problems by hopefully putting the right people on the job who understand the issue and who can find a resolution.

Telstra Call Centres

ICPA NSW is happy to hear that the Telstra off shore call centres are being moved back to Australian shores. These call centres were shut down until mid-August due to the pandemic, and all calls were rerouted back to Australia. This has demonstrated that customers being answered by an Australian Call centre is much more effective, hence the expediting of this move back to Australia. Customers were experiencing larger wait times for their calls to be answered. Staff in Australia who were redirected to answering calls from home, which generally were bound for the centres, enjoyed the experience of helping customers. From an ICPA NSW point of view these centres cannot return to Australia fast enough, as the end of 2021 is still too far away. The Namoi Branch had a motion in the Conference agenda last year asking “That ICPA-NSW continues to liaise with Telstra to ensure that there is a direct line as a point of contact within Australia for all rural and remote customers.” It is hoped with the return of these call centres to Australia that the contact will be much more direct and meaningful.

Digital Literacy

Digital Literacy is a problem for many, and as we move faster towards more digitalised communication avenues, the literacy problem will be ever so prevalent. If you are unsure you need to ask your question. Rumours such as ‘you will lose your landline if you switch to an NBN connection’, is a myth. The other common rumour is ‘I am not able to get an NBN connection’. That is far from the truth. The only reason you would not be able to get an NBN connection is because you are with a provider that does not offer an NBN connection.

NBN Co meetings

Throughout the year, ICPA NSW has been lobbying for a structure whereby we can have regular contact with NBN Co. This is an easy way to communicate issues, before they are bigger issues, which is very helpful to our membership. We are hopeful of a structure during 2021.

Twelve Satellite Schools getting Fibre cable connections

In October 2020, there was much excitement amongst the membership and in particular the Balranald and Rankin Springs Branches when Minister Sarah Mitchell, Minister for Education in NSW announced that the twelve remaining regional schools connected by satellite will be connected to fibre cables over the next eighteen months. ICPA NSW has been lobbying many governments over many years to get the communication for these schools improved. The twelve schools are: Booligal Public School, Clare Public School, Colo Heights Public School, Enngonia Public School, Louth Public School, Macdonald Valley Public School, Naradhan Public School, North Star Public School, Upper Coopers Creek Public School, Wanaaring Public School, Wattle Flat Public School, Weilmoringle Public School. The whole school communities will share in the benefits of this fibre connection, as administration tasks will enjoy the reliable connection, whilst the students will be able to watch programs like ‘Behind the News’, which are part of the curriculum. Whilst this win is not transferring the said schools to the NBN sky muster satellite, we are certainly hopeful that communications for these schools will be much more reliable and timelier.

3G Closure

Telstra is keen to work with customers and stakeholders around any concerns they have about changing devices or technology types to be ready for the 3 G closure. Telstra has already begun planning the process to upgrade areas where there is only 3 G coverage to 4 G. Relevant Ministers have not answered the call from the Naomi Branch in resolution A 23 in the 2020 conference agenda “to provide a rebate for rural and remote customers who will need to upgrade equipment (aerials and boosters) to change from 3G to 4G.” ICPA (Aust) is also working on this resolution.

The Booligal tower is to be upgraded from a 3G to 4G tower in January 2021.

Lack of Service

There have been numerous complaints that the mobile service has dropped considerably. Members report that in areas previously where they use to get service, the service is no longer available. ICPA NSW has made Telstra aware of this. Telstra is keen to hear about any areas with as much specifics as possible. These specifics could be (date, time, location, device, and for how many kilometres). Please be in touch with me if you can provide such information, as it may fast-track a solution.

Clare and Tilpa Small Cells

Late in 2020 the small cell tower was installed at Clare. The Balranald branch has been vigilant in bringing this request to previous conferences. There were some land acquisition issues delaying the installation of the tower.

In the later part of 2020 the Tilpa, Naradhan, Packsaddle, Pimpara Lake Road, Spring Plains, Naree Station, The Lake Tower, Enngonia and Monteagle all had small cells switched on.

Mobile Black Spot Programme

The two motions in the 2020 conference agenda; A 25 from Monaro Branch asking “That ICPA NSW assist ICPA (Aust) to continue lobbying all telecommunication companies and governments for mobile service coverage in rural and remote blackspot areas,” and A 26 from Naomi Branch “That ICPA NSW continues to assist ICPA (Aust) to advocate for better mobile coverage in rural and remote areas” have been in our deputation discussion papers and raised at these meetings and letters written.

In September, Telstra was supposed to have installed 80 mobile black spot towers across Australia in 2020. Moving forward this issue will remain on our agendas.

Regional Tech Hub

The Regional Tech Hub which is under the auspices of the National Farmers Federation is up and running. Before the establishment of the Tech Hub, BIRRR provided this vital service. Congratulations to BIRRR on an extraordinary service well done. ICPA (Aust) sits on the Stakeholder Reference Group for the Regional Tech Hub which meets regularly. For independent, free advice about telecommunication services for regional, rural and remote Australians go to <https://regionaltechhub.org.au/> or call their hotline on 1300 081 029.

Texting over WIFI

During 2020 consumers who could not text on a WiFi connection gained the privilege. You can use WiFi calling and messaging any time that your phone has a steady WiFi signal. You can do so without a cellular connection, so even if your phone is not able to make regular calls, you can WiFi call/text as long as you have the internet. This allows you to bypass expensive cell phone plans.

NBN Co Donated Computers to Education

Late in 2020 the NBN Co donated 100 computers to education uses. ICPA NSW is very proud to be able to support this program and assist NBN Co with the delivery of the refurbished computers, which were only about 2 years old. Distance education and School of the Air families received some of the computers allocated to NSW whilst the Mungindi Community Preschool was able to get two for the students to use whilst at Preschool.

Emerging Minds Podcast on Drought

I represented ICPA NSW and sat on the Committee with other stakeholders from South Australia and New South Wales to assist Emerging Minds develop Podcasts about drought in an effort to help people understand how young children are affected and have to cope with the effects of drought on the rural family enterprise. The 8 series podcast “Talking about Drought” focussed on supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of children, with a unique lens on those aged 0-12 years. In a six-month period 3048 people have listened to the podcasts. It was rewarding experience. The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health which is funded by the Australian Government provided the funds for the podcasts.

Understanding Screen Addiction and Responsible Digital Use

Screen addiction is becoming a very real problem. This problem has become ever so prevalent with Covid 19 lockdowns. However, it is more than time children and adults learn and develop healthier digital habits.

There is now a useful resource called “Understanding Screen Addiction and Responsible Digital Use”. This resource talks about how technology has changed over the years with 72% of adults considering a smartphone their most essential device. This addiction and devices affect our brains and behaviours. Please take some time to check the helpful tips and useful advice for tackling device addiction, at

<https://www.comparethemarket.com/broadband/content/screen-usage-guide/>

Active and Creative Kids Vouchers

There is still \$1m of unspent kids vouchers in New South Wales. The Office of Sport in NSW would like parents to think about how they can use these vouchers. There are two Active vouchers available per year and one Creative voucher. The vouchers can be sourced from Service NSW.

