RURAL AND REMOTE COMMUNICATIONS

ICPA (Aust) has more than forty years' experience of advocating for educational issues on behalf of families living in rural and remote Australia. Our organisation is well positioned to contribute to the discussion on **rural communications** from a user's point of view. The majority of families ICPA (Aust) represents fall into the category of the approximate seven per cent of premises in Australia that will be serviced by either fixed wireless or satellite internet connections.

Families living in rural and remote locations frequently use their homes as the base for their businesses with the home often doubling as the classroom for distance education students as well. For our members, access to adequate, affordable and reliable internet and telephone services is vital for the delivery of education, accessing government services and for enabling enterprises to conduct their business.

ICPA (Aust) has strong and clear views on the communication requirements for the non-urban population, which have come about due to the inequities experienced over the last decade or so in comparison to available metropolitan services. We are aware that delivering services to the rural and remote population similar to what is available in metropolitan areas, is far more expensive and time consuming to deploy. Therefore, it is essential that the capacity of the **nbn** Sky Muster service is sufficient for both current and future demand. The roll out of **nbn**™ Sky Muster service has been welcomed but not without problems. Service provider call centres and volunteer groups have been overwhelmed at times with requests for assistance with problems that they often have no control over. A dedicated rural and remote communications call centre with trained staff that understand rural and remote needs will assist immensely with these issues. ICPA (Aust) is grateful for the announcement of nbn Local, however this service can be difficult to access for the average customer without an organisation or contact relaying the information. Volunteer groups such as Better Internet for Regional, Rural and Remote Australia (BIRRR) provide a tremendous advisory and support service, however, they cannot continue to deal with the amount of cases they are presented with, nor should they be required to. A hub where rural and remote customers can deal directly with one specific support centre for assistance with faults or guidance on appropriate services and products for both internet and telephony is needed.

ICPA (Aust) supports the nbn Sky Muster Education Service (i.e. Education Port) and requests a priority installation and repair service be in place for families educating their children via distance education due to geographic isolation. ICPA members request that the education port availability be extended to geographically isolated tertiary students studying both externally and on campus so that they may complete assessments and assignments while in areas covered by Sky Muster internet. Rural students studying at small rural schools should also be able to benefit from the education port to assist with data usage when they are at home sharing one Sky Muster connection for the family's needs including personal, business and schooling.

Efforts should continue to increase the **mobile phone service coverage** in rural and remote areas to fill the void of telephony services. ICPA (Aust) requests that all mobile black spot areas containing a rural school be considered as a priority under future Mobile Black Spot Program rounds. In addition, ICPA (Aust) encourages all governments and service providers, to investigate the utilisation of existing communications infrastructure and resources, (particularly in rural and remote areas) to provide alternatives to satellite internet delivery. This would allow more customers to access fixed wireless internet services and reduce the number of people dependent on satellite internet, further reducing the risk of future satellite congestion.

The Productivity Commission's Report on the Universal Service Obligation caused great concern among ICPA members that landlines, which geographically isolated families depend on for voice services, will cease to exist and Sky Muster customers moved to VoIP services as their only means of telephony. ICPA reiterates that families living outside of city centres, due to the nature of where they live, require two

separate forms of communications (i.e. phone/voice and internet/data as separate services and not relying on the same mode of delivery) so that if one fails, the other is still available. VoIP through Sky Muster at present is far from a reliable service and even nbn itself recommends that customers "Consider keeping your copper service active in nbn™ Fixed Wireless and Sky Muster™ satellite areas if you rely on landline phone services in emergency situations". Sky Muster service can be affected by weather events and power outages.

ICPA (Aust) requests assurance that rural and remote students experiencing phone or internet outages and faults will be attended to as a matter of urgency.

ICPA (Aust) is grateful for the recent government announcement of the Stronger Regional Digital Connectivity Package including a digital tech hub which should provide assistance for landline and data needs of rural and remote users.

ICPA (Aust) requests that the Education Port Service be expanded to include tertiary students, students at rural schools and boarding students who use the Sky Muster service for assignments, assessments, research and education when at home.

ICPA (Aust) requests that the USO/USG remain on landline telephony services for those living outside of mobile coverage areas and that these landline services continue to be maintained and upgraded as necessary.

ICPA (Aust) supports the establishment of an independent Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Help/Service Hub to assist with troubleshooting, identifying suitable products for situations/areas and providing technology upskilling to enable those living in rural and remote areas to fully utilise available communications.