



Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (Inc).

"Access to Education"

Submission

to the

Department of Communications

Mobile Coverage Programme

from the

Federal Council

of the

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

ICPA (Aust)

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Submission on the Mobile Coverage Programme Discussion Paper

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Aust) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment from the perspective of families living in rural and remote Australia, on the discussion paper on the Mobile Coverage Programme.

ICPA is a voluntary parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. This encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. The member families of the association reside in rural and remote Australia and all share a common goal of achieving access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this.

Many of our members live on isolated stations, great distances from their nearest community with their only access to education being via distance education programmes. Many of these same members conduct their businesses from these same rural and remote locations. For our members, communications is important for both the delivery of education as well as enabling enterprises to conduct their business which includes engaging in competitive commercial activities, relying on ready access to communication tools to do so.

Access, reliability, and affordability of service are the most pressing communication issues for our families residing in rural and remote Australia. Like all Australians, our members desire equity of access as a basic requirement in the provision of telecommunication services. Lack of sufficient mobile coverage impacts our members in their general access to communications, at an efficiency level when trying to conduct business and at a safety level when driving long distances for family, educational or business purposes. ICPA welcomes the funding commitment to improve mobile coverage and the associated competition in rural and remote Australia.

With many of our regional towns and locations having low population numbers, the preference for commercial viability in the provision of new services, often cannot be met. If we are to have commercial viability as the qualifier for a decision on the placement of a new mobile tower, it is likely that the status quo will remain and few new towers will be erected in rural Australia. ICPA believes the government will be required to accept the situation of low population areas still requiring mobile services and give consideration as to how the needs of these areas can be met. ICPA puts forward that to meet the population need, it is likely that subsidies will need to be offered to either consumers or service providers, to attain the goal of increased mobile coverage in rural Australia.

Depending on where one lives, provision of a service may be a priority where no service exists whilst for others with limited mobile service, the availability of a choice of service providers, leading to increased competition and competitive pricing schedules, may be the consumer focus. ICPA does not favour increasing the service capacity of existing services ahead of the implementation of new services in areas currently devoid of mobile reception.

Due to the vastness of our country, it is difficult to nominate specific areas for the priority of the installation of mobile services owing to so many locations being without service. Many of our members have no access to mobile services on a daily basis from their place of residence. There is no doubt about the need for the expansion of mobile services in order to enhance daily communication activity for these people.

ICPA sees the priority for increases to mobile services as being more mobile towers staggered along the major highways. These are required for greater service access and to assist with the safety aspect of driving in rural areas. In rural Australia, on many of our major roads, including highways, there are long stretches of road with no mobile coverage.

When accidents do occur on these major roads, people frequently have to rely on 2way radios (if available) to both advise of the accident and to transport messages to an area where a landline can be located or mobile reception is picked up. Sometimes only then can notice of the accident be given and medical advice sought. Accuracy of the transfer of information can be vital and there is no guaranteeing that this is reliably carried out when depending on precise information transfer between numerous parties. Further, the issue of initial transmission of personal medical information over a 2way radio because no other form of communication is available, is not desirable.

ICPA suggests the following three examples as representative areas that would fall under both the Mobile Network Expansion Project and the Mobile Black Spots Project. They exemplify the criteria we are suggesting for choosing new locations for mobile towers.

- Paynes Find in Western Australia is on a major transport route - The Great Northern Highway - and has no mobile coverage for 150 km in either direction along the highway. Whilst the number of permanent residents is few being on a major transport route and main route for tourists, road accidents frequently occur and lack of mobile communication is an issue. Satellite phones do not always receive an adequate signal and present reliability issues. Lengthy delays can occur when emergency services are required to find the nearest home to access a landline.
- In the Balranald area of New South Wales, Clare Public School is an emergency evacuation point in the event of bushfires and other natural disasters. Clare Public School, as the centre of the community, holds the Royal Flying Doctor medical chest and a defibrillator in case of a medical emergency. Unfortunately, Clare Public school has no mobile phone coverage so all communication not via a landline, must first go through the UHF radio base located in the school teacher's residence and then be relayed to the relevant authorities. Again, this is not a highly populated area but one that is essential to the wellbeing of the community.
- The Lynd Highway north of Charters Towers in Queensland, only has coverage for 20km north of town and then nothing until Mt Garnet - a distance of around 400km. As a major inland and flood alternative route, the road carries a lot of general traffic plus a great deal of heavy freight on a largely, one - lane road. In this mix are many local families – often women and children – travelling to attend distance

education school events. Many grey nomads use the road and frequently incur accidents involving livestock.

The provision of shared service by mobile carriers, to enable mobile roaming, could be readily achieved in areas where mobile reception currently exists and would be of benefit to many mobile phone users in rural areas. Whilst successful roaming depends on both the types of phones used and a commercial arrangement between providers, the advantage to people living, working and travelling through the more remote areas of Australia is that there could be a service where one was not possible beforehand.

Funds being of a finite amount leads our organisation to suggest that there be no doubling up of infrastructure with regard new tower installations. Shared usage of towers would provide better value as opposed to each service provider building a separate tower, particularly in areas of low population. ICPA sees cooperation and collaboration of service providers as being the most efficient way to achieve the aim of the Mobile Coverage Programme. This collaboration could take place at all levels of government commencing with local government.

It has been stated that government does not intend to specifically quarantine funds for increased mobile services to rural and remote areas. Our organisation believes that unless some consideration of 'regional loading' is contained in the equation for deciding further development of communication infrastructure in rural and remote locations, discrimination against rural residents will continue. Without a funding boost to this section of the Australian population, those residing in rural and remote Australia will find it difficult to achieve par with their urban counterparts due to historically low initial levels of funding. Lack of equity will continue as an issue for rural Australia.