

COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

Kristen Coggan

This year in Communications we have seen many improvements and concessions made. COVID-19 very quickly identified the downfalls of regional communications in Australia and accelerated some solutions needed to help improve and enhance rural, regional, and remote connectivity services and usage.

The Federal Government, the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications Australia, the Regional Rural and Remote Communication Coalition (RRRCC), the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), Better Internet for Regional, Rural and Remote (BIRRR), the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO), the National Broadband Network (NBN Co), Telstra and many retail service providers collaborated quickly and effectively to resolve several communications challenges which were raised in motions from the 2019 conference.

ICPA (Aust) continues to work closely with the Federal Government, telecommunications companies and other like-minded stakeholders to seek the maintenance and development of adequate, affordable and reliable communications services for families in regional, rural and remote areas, particularly for the purpose of educational outcomes. Federal Council continues to be a part of the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC) and we take forward our members' issues to be discussed in the RRRCC forums. ICPA (Aust) also participates in the RRRCC delegations to speak with those in government and this provides opportunity to raise concerns in an additional capacity. As a member of the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) and more recently selected to have a representative on the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) Consumer Panel we hope to further increase awareness of communication challenges for rural and remote students and their families. ICPA (Aust) sat on two weekly NBN Co roundtables during the COVID-19 peak, the "Education COVID-19" group and the "NBN Co COVID-19 Response Regional Roundtable". These groups worked through solutions for students and rural families at the onset of the restrictions, children home from school and we continue those discussions as required now. I welcome any feedback from members, good or bad regarding their connectivity experience during this time so I can pass on to NBN Co.

INTERNET

ICPA members continue to be concerned with internet and seeking appropriate, affordable, and adequate internet services for students.

The COVID-19 virus has seen much discussion of how education will be delivered if/when schools need to close. While a serious situation, it also has highlighted some of the issues already facing rural and remote students such as data restrictions, resourcing and supervision in the classroom for Distance Education students as mainstream schooling families encountered the same considerations when their children required schooling from home for a period.

Sky Muster Plus, has the ability to greatly assist regional, rural, and remote students, including tertiary, boarding and rural school students, by providing unmetered download capacity for educational sites, as well unmetering of anything other than streaming sites and VPN usage. This proved itself during the COVID-19 lockdown where many students were home, working on many different platforms successfully at once. For customers, ordering or changing to Sky Muster Plus is a much quicker and easier process than applying for an education port and Sky Muster Plus offers greater download capacity. ICPA (Aust) was incredibly pleased to see the recent enhancements added to the Sky Muster Plus product. Lower price points added unmetered data and the ability to purchase extra data blocks

has seen many families and students able to study in ways that have not been possible before for satellite customers. ICPA (Aust) continues to analyse the costing and services of the Sky Muster Plus product, as this could be a viable alternative to an Education Service (ed port) for many of our members. The unlimited content with Sky Muster Plus is now quite extensive and NBN Co have been working with ICPA (Aust) to identify further educational sites for unmetering, which we hope may eventually include some educational video sources, therefore allowing greater download ability and better affordability than the traditional Education Port. We are in constant communication with NBN Co regarding developments and look forward to any further improvements to assist rural and remote students.

ICPA (Aust) have been in contact with Telstra regarding unmetering of educational sites for mobile broadband users and hope to have some further discussions with them in this area. Also, Telstra are collaborating with us regarding alternative voice options, timely maintenance and fault rectification processes and suitable temporary alternatives.

Federal Council continues to be part of the discussion around the cessation of 3G and keep the needs and experiences of our members in the fore of this issue.

NBN Co and Telstra assistance packages

With many schools returning to face-to-face teaching, NBN Co and Telstra are continuing to help connect and support families. To help Australians respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, NBN Co is providing up to \$50 million to assist phone and internet providers to support low-income family households with school-aged children who do not currently have an active **nbn** connection at home. This funding helped phone and internet providers create more affordable offers to connect eligible families during term two of school. More than 20 phone and internet providers have agreed to participate in this program. More details can be found at the following links

<https://www.telstra.com.au/covid19/supporting-you-during-covid-19>

<https://www.nbnco.com.au/campaigns/covid-19/education-assistance-package>

<https://www.nbnco.com.au/campaigns/covid-19>

ICPA (Aust) would like to reiterate again that if you are experiencing problems with your connection, no matter what type, please do not put up with it. Communications should, and can, work very well. The first port of call is to contact your provider. Keep track of any dates of calls, case numbers, etc. If you continue to experience problems, please let ICPA (Aust) know by emailing me with the relevant details, and I will try to assist where I can. My email address is kristen@icpafc.org.au

Federal Council would also like to advise members that in areas where ADSL remains, it is possible for consumers to have both ADSL and either nbn fixed wireless or Sky Muster internet services.

The need for a transportable Sky Muster service solution for families who do not have a permanent address or location for distance education schooling, i.e. in stock camps, fencing camps, droving, etc. has once again been brought forward. Federal Council has been made aware of several distance education families facing further isolation as their students are unable to participate in online lessons due to unavailability of Sky Muster when a family does not have a permanent address or dwelling to affix it to. A transportable means of delivering internet is needed for these types of families to ensure that their students can join in online lessons, interact with classmates, and keep up with schoolwork. ICPA (Aust) is currently raising this situation with the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts, the Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government, the Minister for Regional Education and Decentralisation and the Distance Education Broadband Working Group.

ICPA (Aust) continues to work with the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications and NBN Co to ascertain rural and remote student requirements and seek expansion to include additional cohorts such as tertiary students.

The new Statutory Infrastructure Provider (SIP) regime requires NBN Co and equivalent companies to provide a download speed of at least 25 megabits per second and an upload speed of 5Mbps during peak hours.

From 1 July that speed is to be available to all whether they live in the city or the outback.

This is part of an expanded Universal Service Obligation, which previously related to just phone lines, but now includes broadband, including Sky Muster and Fixed Wireless services.

TELEPHONE

Motions around telephone services at the 2019 conference highlighted many concerns for members regarding fault restoration and repairs. The Government has assured ICPA (Aust) that it continues to have consumer safeguards in place in relation to telecommunication services. These safeguards include the Customer Ombudsman (TIO). Members who are experiencing protracted difficulties getting service faults resolved should seek advice from the TIO if they are dissatisfied with their service provider.

ICPA (Aust) continues to maintain contact with Telstra to raise members' issues. We can inform members that copper phone lines will not be disconnected in rural and remote areas where no other alternative voice service is available. Federal Council can also confirm that battery backup and replacement batteries can be provided by Telstra and Telstra can advise options for Universal Power Supply (UPS) and other systems with backup capabilities.

ICPA (Aust) has contributed to the discussion for Mobile Blackspot Program (MBSP) Round 5A. We continue to support the expansion of the Mobile Network and increased solutions to mobile black spots. Our members tend to live in the 1% of Australia that does not have mobile coverage. Depending on where our families live, mobile coverage ranges from somewhat available (often through antennae and boosters that families pay to have installed themselves) to non-existent. ICPA's main concern for our members through the MBSP has been to seek the priority of rural schools to be included in future MBSP rounds, for a few reasons - safety, particularly at one teacher schools, as well as the ability to contact parents enroute to and from the school if a situation changes at a small school and parents need to be notified (teacher being sick for example and needing to leave the school). It is also a matter for community safety as rural schools are often an evacuation point or gathering area for shelter in many small rural towns. ICPA welcomed then Minister for Regional Communications, Senator Bridget McKenzie's assurance that schools would be a priority under future rounds, and we advocate that this remain the case.

Our members also seek expansion of the MBSP into rural and remote areas to offer them a second service option for voice and internet at their places of school, work and home. This ensures that schooling (most notably for students enrolled in Schools of Distance Education or Schools of the Air) can continue if the main service (often a landline phone and satellite internet) is down. Again, having mobile service is also beneficial for safety, especially for families who may live quite a distance from their nearest neighbour or point of assistance.

There are a number of rural students whose families travel due to the type of work they are involved in (stock camps, fencing contractors, prawn/fishing trawlers) and they find it very difficult to

participate in their school lessons when outside of internet or voice service. Having larger areas covered by mobile service also assists these students to keep up with their lessons and interact with classmates. Having increased access to handheld antennae devices and external mobile coverage would also greatly assist these students.

ICPA has previously also commented on MBSP 5A Key Design Point 6 that Mobile Services need to continue for a significant amount of time after any Asset Completion in a geographically isolated area, it is very difficult for these areas to try to get other options in place or things going again if services are short term.

ALTERNATIVE VOICE SERVICES

ICPA (Aust) continues to consult with the relevant stakeholders and bodies on alternative voice services and trials. Please find our submission here -

<https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1238/federal-submissions/icpa-aust-submission-into-alternative-voice-trials.pdf>

ICPA (Aust) has offered the department and stakeholders the possibility to provide test cases for these trials when they are required.

DIGITAL TECH HUB

As I write this, tenders for the creation and implementation of a digital tech hub close in the next 3 days. This initiative has come about upon recommendation from the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review that was completed in 2018 and its report presented in 2019. Following on from the announcement by then Minister for Regional Communications, Bridget McKenzie, that this would become a reality, ICPA (Aust) is working closely with Minister Fletcher, Minister Coulton, the Department and other stakeholders including Better Internet for Regional Rural and Remote (BIRRR) and the Regional Rural and Remote Communication Coalition (RRRCC) to ensure education is included in the guidelines for the content of the hub.

ICPA (Aust) has been well supported in our telecommunications issues by the State Councils, our Branches and members and we will continue to raise these concerns wherever it is possible to have them addressed. Thank you to my fellow Communications councillors: Wendy Hick, Sally Sullivan and Jane Morton for their support and encouragement over this last year. This portfolio is truly a joint effort by all involved, and I have appreciated the assistance and discussion provided to me.