

Government and telecommunications companies agree measures to help keep people connected through COVID-19

During this COVID-19 crisis, the operation, delivery, construction, maintenance and repair of telecommunications services are essential for the continued functioning of Australia's society and economy, particularly with so many people working and studying from home.

The Government recognises the important steps the telecommunications sector has taken to keep Australians connected with friends and family, to schools, and to work. This includes substantial additional investment in network capacity, creating new jobs to help those displaced in other sectors and providing a range measures, including expanded data allowances, to support customers, including those facing hardship.

At this time, connectivity to communication services is as critical as ever for all Australians. Keeping Australians connected, including those who experience hardship and may be unable to pay their bills due to the COVID-19 crisis, is a key priority for telecommunications providers and the Government.

The Morrison Government and the industry have agreed a set of principles, as a minimum baseline across industry, to ensure all Australians can remain connected. This includes putting in place hardship measures for those unable to pay their bills, for example due to having suddenly lost their jobs. It also includes prioritising the connection and restoration of services for customers who are vulnerable, or where there is no other fixed or mobile service at the premises.

Customers experiencing hardship are encouraged to contact their service providers to discuss their situation. Customers who can pay their bills should continue to do so, to help ensure the continued financial viability of telecommunications providers.

To assist with financial hardship as a result of the COVID-19 crisis and with continued connectivity, telecommunication providers have committed to the following key principles:

1. Provide all consumers and small business customers¹ in financial hardship, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper payment², who contact their service provider for assistance, a payment plan or hardship agreement.
 - a. Be prepared to waive late fees, interest charges and charges for collection of overdue amounts for consumers and small business customers who are on a payment plan or hardship agreement.
 - b. Be prepared to modify existing financial hardship plans if a customer's changed circumstances make this necessary.
2. Not disconnect consumers or small business customers, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper payment, who are in financial hardship and have entered a payment plan or hardship agreement, without their agreement³.
3. Defer referrals of consumers or small business customers, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper payment, who have entered and are complying with an active payment plan or hardship agreement to debt collection agencies for recovery actions or credit default listing consistent with that plan.
4. Provide appropriate hibernation options, which could include waiving disconnection, reconnection or contract break fees, for small business customers, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper payment, that have suspended operations, along with support as they recommence their business activity.
5. Provide clear, up-to-date and readily available information about arrangements available to consumers and small business customers, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper payment, in financial hardship, and prioritise calls seeking hardship support.
6. Be aware of the criticality of connectivity for all consumers and small business customers, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper payment, and the need to ensure everyone, including vulnerable consumers, remain connected. Priority should be given to connections, service restoration and repairs, and prioritising connection for those who need them most, such as Priority Assist customers.

These measures will be reviewed on 30 June 2020, or earlier if social distancing restrictions are eased.

Note: Telecommunications providers which are small business entities and are eligible for the JobKeeper payment are not covered by the above key principles. The principles apply to existing consumers and small business customers, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper payment.

¹ As defined in the industry's Telecommunications Consumer Protections Code.

² A small business entity as defined by the ATO if you are an individual, partnership, company or trust that is carrying on a business and has an aggregated turnover of less than \$10 million.

³ The plan must be active and the customer must meet the terms of the plan. A service may be disconnected without agreement if the customer cannot be contacted.