

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Design of Alternative Voice Trials Paper

from the

Federal Council

of the

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

ICPA (Aust)

February 2020

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Aust) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed Design of Alternative Voice Trials in rural and remote areas of Australia. ICPA (Aust) ICPA (Aust) 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 and work 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 families live on isolated stations, great distances from their nearest community with their only access to education, including early childhood education, being via distance education programs.

Students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia and who are enrolled in Schools of Distance Education, rely heavily on telecommunications to access daily lessons, via both telephone and internet. Most would be in the 0.7% of the population that have no access to any mobile network. Our member families also attend small rural schools that are currently dependent on landlines for contact for teacher support/assistance/mentoring, emergencies and general administration tasks of a school. There are quite a few rural small schools which are not in mobile coverage areas.

Question 1: Should the department be seeking to achieve other objectives through the trials? If so, how would this affect the design?

1. The long term viability of technology that is being trialled will not be able to be ascertained in a limited trial time – perhaps an increase in the duration of the trial period should be considered? With a need for long term alternative solutions, it is essential that trials of alternatives are done on a long term basis to evaluate their longevity.
2. Ease of installation plus ease of repairs especially considering the remoteness of locations – if the service goes down in a flood situation how will it be repaired?
3. Communication service installation, fault reporting and repair times on any alternative technology to be improved.

ICPA (Aust) encourage the Department to work collaboratively with rural and remote communities to ensure the RCP meets the communication needs of each location – consultations should be thorough and include consumers/locals/on the ground people on the performance of the trials technology from a broad range of rural, remote and very remote circumstances. Consultations should not only rely on feedback from providers of the new technology as to its success.

Question 2: In terms of the deliverables for customers, do you have any concerns about the proposed design of the trials or suggestions to improve it, for example, locations for the trials, how best to recruit consumers to take part, requirements on CSPs, and service requirements?

- Timeframe of trial may be a problem – need to be expansive period of time to fully assess the viability of the technology
- Depending on how long the technology takes to install, set up etc, trial time may be even more limited.

Question 3: In terms of the needs of CSPs, do you have any concerns about the proposed design of the trials or suggestions to improve it, for example, information required, capping of customer numbers, timeframes, level of funding available, and the approach to payment?

- Timeframes for Trials need to be extensive/expansive and ongoing to get an accurate trial eg. In a twelve month period in a drought situation there may not be any weather events that will affect the technology

- Trials need to be undertaken in a range of circumstances and a wide range of rural, remote and very remote sites to assess factors such as terrain, power supply type (especially where the technology is reliant on electricity supply), weather, accessibility to the site, etc and their effect on the alternative technology being trialled.

Question 4: Do you have suggestions on what should happen at the end of the trials, noting that Government funding will cease?

- Trials could be extended where not enough data can be gained or where it is an alternative that may be viable need to continue trials to check long term viability.
- Extended trials could take in more and varied sites to check for viability of the alternative technology across rural, remote and very remote areas.
- ICPA (Aust) advocates that all geographically isolated customers should have access to two forms of communications for safety reasons due to the nature of where they live. Any volunteers who participate in the trials should not be left with only the one technology if they choose to keep the alternative technology they have been trialling in the event that the new technology should fail.

Question 5: Do you have any comments on the stakeholder reference group? What stakeholders should be represented on the groups? Would you like to nominate anyone as a possible member?

- Education stakeholders, as much of rural and remote education is dependent upon communications.
- Local, on the ground stakeholders.
- “Trusted sources of information” - stakeholders who have a focus on rural and remote areas such as ICPA (Aust), BIRRR, Country Women’s Association and other groups who formulate the Rural, Regional and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC)

Question 6: Do you have any comments regarding the criteria for assessing proposals and contracting CSPs? Department of Communications and the Arts December 2019 Design of Alternative Voice Service www.communications.gov.au Trials—request for comments and www.arts.gov.au Page 9 of 9 expressions of interest www.classification.gov.au

- No comment

Question 7: Do you think regular surveys of trial customers would be useful? Do you consider there are any particular matters that should be monitored and evaluated during the trials in addition to those identified (e.g. service outages, quality issues and customer turnover)?

- Reliability, ease of installation, customer service
- Repair times - sites where the alternative technology is being installed or may be installed in the future are remote locations where currently it is difficult to have services repaired and elongated repair times are common. The need for access to adequate repair mechanisms needs to be considered for any new or alternative technology
- Support for customers ‘learning’ new technologies, ease of use of the alternative technology.
- Affordability
- How the alternative service compliments or supports current services available in the area should also be monitored. Many people living in geographic isolation require a minimum of two communication services in order to ensure that they have some form of communication

at most times- current technologies can see communications down from power outages, weather events (rain fade for nbn Sky Muster satellite) and faults. Alternative services should also look at being independent of already existing services so that those living remotely will have surety with a balance of communications methods available to them.

- Consideration of the stability of the service and if there are noticeable variations in quality of the service – are there specific times when the service is not as effective than others? Does the weather (rain, wind) affect the service?

Question 8: How would the trials be best promoted to rural and remote customers by both the department and CSPs? How would the results of the trials be best communicated once they are complete?

- Needs to be broadly publicised – especially to alleviate any concern/misunderstanding of what is occurring and to ensure that consumers are well-informed of their choices when selecting Communications services in rural and remote areas.
- Groups such as Regional Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC) could be helpful in obtaining expressions of interest for the trial, being a body of 20+ rural/regional/remote focus groups interested in overcoming communications challenges in rural/remote areas, they would have access to consumers who may wish to trial the alternative services. RRRCC and their member bodies would also be well placed to share the results of the trial.
- Results of the trial could be relayed through avenues such as the Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association Federal Conference, CWA Conference etc., or through these groups’ newsletters and portfolio reports.
- It is important to get a good cross section of rural, remote and very remote customers as their communications needs as well as what is available to them varies greatly.