Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"

Submission

to the

Review

into

Consumer Safeguards – Part B Reliability of Services

from the

Federal Council

of the

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

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Consumer Safeguards Review Consultation – Part B Reliability of Services*.

Since 1971, ICPA (Aust) has represented families living in rural and remote regions of Australia, who are passionate about the sustainability and prosperity of the industries they work in. Research indicates that the ability to access affordable and appropriate educational services plays a major factor in determining if a family will remain in rural and remote locations. The goal for our 2700 member families is to achieve equity of educational opportunity for all children living in rural and remote areas, ensuring they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their aspirations and abilities rather than the location of their home. Remote and isolated locations in Australia provide the greatest challenges for improving provision of education options and pathways for children and families. In terms of educational and social development and to make sure their educational outcomes are not compromised, rural and remote students need the opportunity to an education that is commensurate to their needs allowing them to realise their educational potential and presenting a pathway which provides educational parity with their urban peers.

Many of the families that ICPA (Aust) represents have limited communication services where they live. A majority rely heavily on landlines for a voice service and have no mobile coverage at all. A small percentage of families are able to access limited mobile service with the assistance of antennae and boosters, but can only receive the coverage in set positions. Some families living in rural and remote areas who have the Sky Muster satellite internet service are ulitlising options such as Wi-Fi calling, but it is currently not seen as an adequate replacement for their main landline service. Internet service for a large number of our members is provided by nbn Sky Muster satellite, with a smaller portion being able to use mobile broadband and even fewer with fixed wireless.

Geographically isolated students who study via Schools of Distance Education or Schools of the Air due to the distance they live from a school, rely heavily on telecommunications to access daily lessons, via both telephone and internet. Most of these children would be in the 0.7% of the population that have no access to any mobile network and the majority would also be in the 3% of the population that will rely on satellite to access the internet.

Our member families also attend small rural schools that are dependent on internet for schoolwork, research, teacher assistance/mentoring, specific needs sessions as well as landlines for contact for teacher support, emergencies and general administration tasks of a school. There are quite a few rural small schools which are not in mobile coverage areas and struggle with receiving adequate internet service.

Some of our members are experiencing problems with ongoing use of the Sky Muster™ satellite services including dropouts, poor speeds, slowed services, insufficient data amounts, latency and connection difficulties.

Commonplace online activities for those living in cities such as watching lectures, banking, cloud computing, working on research projects, or watching television is nearly impossible for those not very far from the cities themselves due to data restrictions of the Fair Use Policy for satellite internet.

Telephony is also a major concern particularly for those students studying via distance education. Landline telephone services play a significant role in providing the voice services to accompany 'on air' lessons with teachers and classmates, as well as additional lessons and seeking assistance from teachers at the School of Distance Education Centre. Because a large portion of geographically isolated distance education students live outside of mobile coverage areas, maintaining landlines and ensuring that these services continue is paramount for distance education

students. When internet services fail, the availability of landline phones ensures that distance education students still have connectivity and are able to continue participating in their lessons, even if the video/online portion is out. At this time, VoIP is not considered to be a reliable or suitable source for audio in distance education lessons, and until such time as an alternative, appropriate and reliable voice technology is available, landline telephony services need to exist, be maintained and be repaired in a timely manner for distance education students.

Internet connectivity is a key factor in providing students living in geographic isolation with access to curriculum opportunities and extra-curricular endeavours. Access to reliable and adequate internet must be a priority to ensure these students have educational opportunity.

Priority internet and phone service repairs for Distance Education students residing in rural and remote areas must be factored into policy as currently students can be offline for many weeks waiting for their service to be repaired. Without phone or internet working for these students, schooling essentially stops. ICPA (Aust) requests that a priority assistance for distance education students similar to the medical priority assistance available for customers with a medical condition be created to ensure that geographically isolated students who have no other means of schooling, can continue their education with minimal disruption.

ICPA (Aust) branches and members have raised a number of issues concerning communication service installation, fault reporting and repair times through motions and discussion at ICPA (Aust) Conferences. ICPA members continue to ask for more efficient fault reporting methods as well as better communication from providers regarding installation, repairs and repair dates.
Motions from the 2018 ICPA (Aust) Conference included requests that a satellite phone be provided to distance education students if their usual voice service cannot be repaired within 3 working days, that repairs and installation of phone services be prioritised for distance education students, there should be enforcement to ensure providers meet Customer Service Guarantee (as well as the incoming USG) guidelines and the implementation of a regional/rural/remote communications help centre to assist with fault reporting/action, information on products available and technology assistance that meet the needs in specific locations.

<u>**Proposal 1 and 2**</u>

☑ **Proposal 1—Mandatory rules will cover how consumers and small businesses are connected, and stay connected to, fixed telecommunications networks, including appointments.**

Timeframes for network connections

Area	Existing connection or close to required infrastructure	Not close to required infrastructure
Significant Urban Areas[1]	Within 2 working days	Within 10 working days
Other	Within 3 working days	Within 15 working days

Timeframes for repairs

Area	Repair time
Significant Urban Areas	End of next working day
Other	End of second working day

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[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics designation for significant town and city areas of 10,000 people or more

☑ **Proposal 2—Providers must focus on keeping customers connected to a service if timeframes cannot be met**

Issues for comment

1. Are the proposed timeframes to connect or repair a service reasonable?

ICPA (Aust) supports that timeframes for connections and installations must be identified to ensure customers have some assurance and guidelines around their communications service. These timeframes should be applicable to all providers as well as fixed line services and must include all voice providers, not just one. ICPA (Aust) is concerned that Proposal 1 only has two categories, Significant Urban and "Other". Quite a few differences exist between areas that are not urban and this will affect timeframes. While it is reassuring that "very remote" locations should have a reasonable timeframe for installation and repair, particularly for "regional" areas who may be just outside a main city, the timeframe for installation in particular may hinder a customer trying to get a timely install. This new timeframe could potentially disadvantage those that are more regional rather than remote with better infrastructure to draw their times out longer to keep even with very remote areas that may take longer to install. While we realise these are "maximum" guidelines, there is a vast difference between infrastructure and ease of travel to remote or very remote areas, regional areas and those just outside of city centres.

2. Will the proposed arrangements and penalties for missed appointments provide suitable incentives for industry?

Enforcing timeframes is paramount. Many families living in geographic isolation have a lack of access to other means of communication and they often live great distances from other services, people, infrastructure or assistance in emergencies. ICPA (Aust) appreciates the suggestion of $100 to compensate customers if an appointment is missed, however this amount may not be enough to deter providers from repeatedly missing timeframe deadlines. The amount of penalty needs to be significant enough that providers seriously consider them. To meet the timeframes in rural and remote areas, the penalty needs to be enough that providers are dissuaded from taking the penalty as the cost to attend an area within the timeframe may be more costly than the $100 penalty. Compensation for missed appointments or timelines needs to be enforced and happen from the providers' side, not depend on the customer to request compensation. Customers often do not know their right to compensation. For families living in rural and remote areas, service appointments can mean the entire rescheduling of a mustering program or school schedules in order to wait for a technician. Missed appointments are extremely frustrating especially when it is coupled with no contact informing the customer that the technician will not be attending that day.

3. Are there other options that could help maximise service continuity for people with a diagnosed life threatening medical condition?

No comment

4. Should providers be able to seek approval from the ACMA to offer services with different reliability timeframes on a product by product basis (which if approved would then become binding)? If so, what process and criteria would best support this?

No Comment

5. Should consumers be given the option to exit their service contract without penalty where frequent or recurring faults occur?

The majority of families that ICPA (Aust) represents are very limited in their choice of provider for either phone or internet services, so being able to exit their service contract without penalty may not

be possible as particularly with voice services, there may not be another provider to switch to. However, ICPA (Aust) feels the ability should be in place for a customer to exit a contract without penalty if there are frequent or recurring faults and another provider can be sourced.

6. How can industry best ensure consumers are not left without a working fixed connection for lengthy periods? What alternative service arrangements are reasonable?

Increased mobile coverage or assistance to gain tools to utilise mobile coverage would greatly assist customers living in regional, rural and remote areas with having a backup form of voice service if their main landline is not working. ICPA (Aust) members have asked that a satellite phone be provided for any student whose main voice service is inoperable and not repaired within 3 working days. Customers should not have to pay for a service that is not working, but they should also be entitled to compensation for the loss their business or time lost in the schoolroom that occurs when there is no working service. A "zero" bill does not cover the cost of business lost, school lessons that must be made up at a later time or the inconvenience of no service.

7. How frequently, and in what way, should maximum connection, repair and appointment keeping timeframes be reviewed?

Ideally, a way to keep track of data showing repair and appointment keeping times should be in place to have a mechanism to determine if current guidelines/penalties are working and when they are not bringing about the desired effect of meeting those guidelines, at which time a review should occur.

☑ **Proposal 3—Network infrastructure providers that support the supply of retail services to consumers will be required to publish network reliability metrics and to report to the ACMA on network performance.**

Issues for comment:

1. What information on network reliability is most meaningful and valuable to consumers?

Most families that ICPA (Aust) represent have little to no choice or very limited choice in service providers, so reports on efficiency may not be as critical for rural and remote areas. However, with having multiple broadband providers even with Sky Muster satellite, there has been an increased interest in performance and reliability from rural and remote customers. For many living in these areas, this is the first time that they have had the ability to switch providers if unhappy with performance or service. Reports on outages and fault repair times will be beneficial for families, especially as they get used to the idea of changing providers if the service is not meeting their needs.

2. How should network reliability information be made publicly available, and how often should providers be required to report to the ACMA?

No Comment

3. If and how should consumers be advised of major outages and timeframes for remediation?

ICPA (Aust) supports customers being advised of major outages and timeframes for remediation. Notifications of outages and repair timeframes should be available through as many points of delivery as possible as customers may only have access to some methods of communications when there are outages. Some means that are currently being employed and are effective are phone numbers that can be called to advise of outages, social media posts and direct texts. Another platform would be in ensure prominent groups such as Better Internet for Regional, Rural and Remote Education and

perhaps local government councils are aware of outages so that they can facilitate the sharing of information to customers in a wide area.

☑ **Proposal 4—The ACMA will be responsible for the collection of data relating to fixed connections, repairs and appointments, with reporting obligations applying at both wholesale and retail level. The ACMA will publish the results.**

Issues for comment:

1. **What industry data should be provided to the ACMA for analysis and reporting, and how often should this be provided (for example, monthly, quarterly)?**

Information such as outages, number of fault reports, repeated faults, repair times, as well as times of service not fully meeting the specifications of the customer's plan (ie slow upload or download speeds) would be very helpful.

2. **How often should the ACMA publish reports and analysis (for example, monthly, quarterly or half yearly)?**

ICPA (Aust) does not have policy around the frequency of ACMA publishing reports and analysis, however ICPA (Aust) supports reports being produced frequently enough that the information is timely and useful for customers.

General issues for comment

1. Do the proposals in this paper address the major issues of concern with the current framework for reliability of services? If not, what additional measures could be included?

No further suggestions

2. Are there any unforeseen issues or unintended consequences of the proposals?

No Comment

3. What considerations should be taken into account in implementing the proposals outlined in this paper (based on forecast completion of the NBN rollout by 2020), including practical timeframes for implementation?

No Comment

4. Are there any other issues that should be brought to the Government's attention?

With regards to product and plan purchase, providers should have an obligation to be well informed and understand a customer's need and location intended for the use of products and plans sold. For example, voice service providers and telco shops should have a duty to provide customers with accurate information as to which phone handsets will work specific to the customer's needs. Telstra has the "blue tick" for phones that offer better service in rural and marginal mobile coverage areas than "non-tick phones". It should also be more apparent to regional, rural and remote customers what areas phones with certain technology will work. Having 3G or 4G service available in some areas is quite confusing for customers and in particular anyone travelling to a non-urban location. Many providers do not operate in rural and remote areas, however, customers can still purchase phones/service from these providers and not be told they will not work where the person wants to primarily use the phone. Many regional and rural towns have very limited coverage outside of the town area itself but several providers may offer service inside of the town. This is very problematic for customers who may live outside the town centre and purchase a phone in town. There is

particularly a need for providers to have better understanding of where customers live and what is available in that area with internet. Numerous people who live in Sky Muster satellite only areas when inquiring about internet have been told that they can get ADSL and have been taken down the path of ordering this service only to find out that it's not available in their area. Providers should have an obligation to accurately assess the customer's desired use for the service/product they are purchasing and the capabilities of that item in their area. ICPA (Aust) members request the formation of a Regional, Rural, Remote Help Centre which can assist with determining best product for use as well as assistance with fault exploration and reporting for customers living outside of metropolitan areas.