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Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts
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Re: 2024 Better Delivery of Universal Services

The Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the 2024 Better Delivery of Universal Services Discussion Paper. Seeking stakeholder feedback on a reformed Universal Services Framework (USF) is essential to ensure that any proposed reforms accurately reflect the diverse needs and concerns of consumers. As representatives of rural, regional, and remote (RRR) communities and consumers, we understand the critical importance of reliable and accessible telecommunications services for all Australians, regardless of their geographical location.

The RRRCC is an alliance of 21 organisations with a shared interest in improving telecommunications and consumer protections, in RRR areas. The Coalition was formed in 2016 to raise awareness of the important role of connectivity for RRR Australians and to advocate for continued improvements, not just to infrastructure but also to consumer safeguards, quality of service standards and digital inclusion. Being a Coalition of respected volunteer and advocacy organisations, the RRRCC have relied heavily on the content of our member's submissions and recommendations in developing this submission. The RRRCC supports the submissions of each of our member organisations who have submitted to this discussion paper.

RRRCC members who have provided separate submissions include:

- Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN)
- AgForce
- Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia (BIRRR)
- Isolated Children's Parents Association (ICPA)

RRRCC recommends the Government be less reliant on written submissions and promote more interactive engagement, whether face-to-face or online, particularly for time-constrained volunteer groups. These interactive methods not only foster stronger relationships and teamwork but also accommodate busy schedules, allowing volunteers to contribute meaningfully with on-the-ground consumer experience, despite time constraints.

RRRCC Goals

While much has been achieved, there is still more to do to ensure equitable access to quality, reliable, resilient and affordable telecommunications services for RRR consumers. The events of recent years reinforce what regional communities already know - **telecommunications services are essential**. The RRRCC revised its priorities for action in 2023 and will continue to advocate for #betterbushcomms. The RRRCC's advocacy efforts are focused on five high level goals.

The RRRCC's five goals are:

1. A national regional, rural, and remote strategic framework and plan for future development and investment in regional communications
2. Affordable communications services for regional, rural, and remote Australia
3. Guaranteed access to equitable voice and data services that meet minimum service standards
4. Continued programs to expand mobile coverage (both voice & data) and improvement in data speeds through increased capacity.
5. Funding and implementation of Connectivity and Digital Literacy capacity building for regional, rural, and remote Australia

Under each of these goals, there are a number of asks that the RRRCC recommends the Committee consider when developing their report. Of relevance to this discussion paper are the following asks:

- The Australian Government commits to a legislated minimum voice communication standard and upgrades to ageing infrastructure through a reformed Universal Service Obligation, **ensuring any alternative voice technologies are proven to have greater reliability and performance quality for regional, rural, and remote consumers than the technology they replace.**
- The Australian Government legislates new and improved minimum service guarantees, including the introduction of adequate performance quality metrics for all services. These should be monitored against independent benchmarks for each service type for connection, fault repair and appointment keeping time frames for nbn Co. and other Statutory Infrastructure Providers.
- The Australian Government investigates the use of escalating fines for failure to meet the standards for each service type, with customers adequately and automatically compensated when baseline timeframes are exceeded.
- The Australian Government instructs the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to prioritise addressing misleading and deceptive information in the telecommunications industry.
- The Australian Government initiates and funds a place-based and community-driven First Nations-led connectivity and digital education program.

Submission from the Rural Regional and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC)

Key Outcomes of a Modern Universal Service Framework:

The RRRCC underscores the necessity for a reformed and modernised Universal Service Obligation (USO), distinct from the existing SIP for broadband, mandating universal communication redundancy and Short Messaging System (SMS) services for all consumers. Access to reliable, resilient redundancy in telecommunications should be universally accessible to all Australians, irrespective of their geographical location, and should adhere to stringent quality, reliability, affordability, and consumer guarantee standards.

Telecommunications as an essential service

In light of the Australian government's endeavours to reform and modernise the Universal Services Framework (USF), it is imperative to acknowledge and address the varied needs of consumers across the nation, particularly those residing in RRR areas. The proposed reforms should prioritise the

establishment of robust communication redundancy measures, which are indispensable for ensuring uninterrupted connectivity, especially during emergencies or service outages in rural and remote areas, where telecommunication infrastructure vulnerabilities and geographical challenges exacerbate communication difficulties. Telecommunications services are no longer a luxury but an essential utility akin to electricity and water. In remote areas, where physical distances are vast and access to essential services is limited, telecommunications serve as a lifeline for accessing healthcare, education, emergency services, and economic opportunities. Recognising telecommunications as an essential service underscores the urgency of ensuring equitable access and reliability for all Australians. Currently this is not the case in all Australian States and Territories.

Redundancy

A modern Universal Service Obligation (USO) must prioritise the provision of communication redundancy methods for all consumers. Redundancy ensures that individuals have alternative means of communication during emergencies or service disruptions, safeguarding lives and livelihoods in isolated areas where telecommunications infrastructure vulnerabilities are prominent. A modern USO must be adaptable to technological advancements and remain flexible to effectively meet the needs of RRR consumers. With voice services increasingly delivered via broadband, the focus should expand beyond traditional voice-only services to encompass affordable redundancy across various communication platforms. This shift is critical for RRR consumers, particularly those with no, limited or marginal mobile coverage, as it ensures uninterrupted connectivity and access to essential services, safeguarding lives and livelihoods in isolated areas. Therefore, flexibility in the USO framework is essential to accommodate evolving technological landscapes and address the diverse needs of RRR communities for reliable and accessible telecommunications services.

Statutory Infrastructure Provider (SIP) regime

As part of the USF reform, it is also crucial to modernise and revise the Statutory Infrastructure Provider (SIP) regime for broadband. With the continuous evolution of technology and the growing importance of broadband connectivity, the SIP regime must adapt to effectively cater to the changing telecommunications landscape. A modernised USF should guarantee universal service outcomes that mandate the provision of high-quality, reliable, resilient, and affordable redundancy communication options, accompanied by stringent consumer guarantees. These solutions should be tailored to specific

locations, with extensive community engagement and consultation, while remaining flexible and adaptable to accommodate technological advancements and demographic variations.

Key considerations for a reformed and modernised USF include:

Establishing an acceptable baseline universal service for redundancy in telecommunications is crucial for evaluating the suitability of new technologies in regional and remote areas. If a USO is to be technology agnostic it must protect consumers by ensuring the following key factors are met and enforced:

Accessibility: Prioritising redundancy in communication services is essential to mitigate the impact of service disruptions and safeguard consumers from total communication failure. Ensuring that redundancy in telecommunications and SMS messaging is universally available to all Australians, with a focus on addressing service gaps in hard-to-reach areas is critical. This should involve extensive community consultation so that solutions are fit for purpose and consider cultural, affordability and environmental concerns.

Connection, repair and appointment-keeping: Providing priority assistance, transparent and enforceable customer support guarantees and information, and improving installation and repair timeframes to align with improvements in transportation and infrastructure are all key factors that should be considered in a reformed USO. Consumers must be able to report a fault easily and without excessive troubleshooting or wait times. Retail Service Providers (RSP's) - particularly those responsible for delivery of USO services, must ensure multiple contact methods are made available for consumers to report issues and faults. Enforcement of these standards needs to be strengthened, with RSP's who cannot meet these requirements subjected to escalating fines.

Service quality: Establishing minimum standards for voice and broadband service quality and implementing and enforcing robust quality metrics are key to a reformed USF. Where Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) is used as a voice solution, universal service providers must ensure voice quality meets base Mean Opinion Score (MOS) guidelines. It is essential that voice services have voice prioritisation and standards are developed for addressing and monitoring of factors such as latency, packet loss, jitter, echo, noise, call drops, and download/upload speeds to ensure minimum standards of broadband and voice quality.

Service availability: Guaranteeing a high level of reliability, with a demonstrated uptime of 99.99% should be mandated under a reformed USF. Additionally, a reformed USF must ensure that new emerging technologies are trialled and tested and will cope with Australian weather and environmental conditions, in particular monsoonal rain and smoke. Several of our member groups have noted rain fade and service failure during bushfires on both nbn Sky Muster and Starlink connections. Any new technologies must be proven to be of sufficient quality and reliability in the conditions and environment they are designed to operate in and be trialled and tested by local consumers.

Service requirements: The reform of USO services necessitates the retention of all current service requirements and protections, encompassing essential features like number portability, caller ID, and message bank functionality. Furthermore, the ability to order standalone voice services should remain a fundamental aspect of the reformed USO, ensuring that consumers have the option to access reliable voice communication services independent of broadband or other bundled offerings. In addition to these existing requirements, it is imperative to introduce universal access to SMS messaging under the reformed USO framework. SMS messaging has become an integral mode of communication in today's digital age, facilitating quick and efficient exchanges of information across diverse demographics. By mandating universal access to SMS messaging, the reformed USO would ensure equitable access to this essential communication tool for all Australians, irrespective of their location or technological infrastructure limitations.

Network resilience: Currently most remote and rural voice services (copper & high-capacity radio concentrator (HCRC) do not require in-home power to operate, providing redundancy in communications in power outages for many residents. Large numbers of rural and remote consumers have unreliable mains power on a day-to-day basis and additionally during extreme weather events. Some RRR consumers operate complicated solar set-ups or generators to access mains power. However, under existing USO arrangements, voice services that work during in-home power outages are not mandated. The current USF lacks specific measures for network resiliency and redundancy options, leaving rural and remote communities vulnerable during service disruptions and power failure, which are common occurrences in these areas. Therefore, a modern USF must address these gaps to ensure uninterrupted connectivity, particularly in areas prone to regular power outages, natural disasters, and adverse weather conditions. Implementing affordable power redundancy for in-premise equipment where powered USO services are connected and enhancing the resilience of telecommunications infrastructure is essential.

Consumer Service Guarantees: Enhancing Consumer Service Guarantee (CSG) benchmarks, refining reporting mechanisms for universal service providers and rigorously enforcing consumer protections will be pivotal in a reformed USO. Comprehensive reporting mechanisms for USO providers should include detailed accounts of instances where obligations are not met. RRRCC recommends raising CSG benchmarks to a minimum of 95% or higher, with continued monitoring and reporting against urban, rural, and remote categories to highlight any shortcomings in rural and remote areas. Current reporting requirements are not granular and do not reflect the lived experience on the ground of many consumers in RRR areas¹. RRRCC advocates for increased transparency in compliance reporting and escalating penalties for recurring faults, particularly emphasising the need for improved scrutiny and action regarding connections and repairs that fall below current CSG benchmarks.

Customer support: Current practice of pushing consumers to use an ‘app’ to report a fault, when the app needs an SMS code and reliable connectivity, is problematic. It will be essential that a reformed USO ensures the USO provider offers multiple, dedicated contact methods for RRR consumers, who often must cobble together connections, use external parties such as their Member of Parliament (MP), BIRRR and the Regional Tech Hub, and spend many hours; just to report an issue with their service. Furthermore, in rural and remote areas there is a lack of telco shop fronts and technicians, highlighting the importance of dedicated RRR contact methods. Currently Telstra have specific 1800 numbers for some remote landline services, the RRRCC strongly urge for this to continue and be expanded under a reformed USO.

Affordability: We live in an increasingly digital world. Access to essential government, banking, health, education, and social services is increasingly reliant on connectivity. To provide equitable opportunities to the population who live in RRR Australia, access to affordable broadband and voice services is a necessity. A reformed USO should include the implementation of appropriate measures to assist low-income consumers in accessing broadband and voice services, including being able to have affordable redundancy. The RRRCC supports ACCAN’s affordability approach noted in their response to the Better Delivery of Universal Services consultation, which “recommends that the Department should:

- Ensure the principle of geographic equality continues to underpin a modern universal service framework.

¹ <https://www.telstra.com.au/consumer-advice/customer-service/network-reliability>

- Consider how a modern universal service framework can better support low-income consumers' access to communications services.”²

Emerging Technologies: If a reformed USO is to be technology agnostic and adaptable, it must ensure that new emerging technologies are proven to meet robust performance quality metrics and are fit-for-purpose, trialled and tested in the areas they are deployed in. USO providers should thoroughly test new technologies, make performance metrics publicly available, and gather consumer feedback prior to launch. Any changes to existing technologies must be clearly outlined and consumers informed well in advance of how changes to their USO service may affect them. **Under the existing USO framework, these crucial processes are lacking.** It is disappointing to see consumers, particularly those in northern Australia, already (prior to USO reform) having voice services replaced with untested technologies with no transparent information on performance and quality metrics and no existing protection under the current USO. USO providers must have well developed migration plans and actively engage with consumers, so they are aware of migration pathways and specifics. There should be a trial period put in place, where a consumer can keep their existing service during the migration processes. Our member groups are concerned that the current Telstra roll-out of emerging/new technologies, without stakeholder and consumer engagement and thorough, robust testing, poses significant risk of communication failure to those reliant on telecommunications services in remote areas.

Regional stakeholders have expressed concerns about relying on Starlink for delivering universal services due to worries regarding sovereignty and the fact that SpaceX is not publicly listed. There are apprehensions about potential threats to national security and the lack of transparency in governance and accountability, prompting calls for exploring terrestrial solutions to ensure greater control and oversight over critical communication infrastructure. Additionally, private companies may face challenges in maintaining market credibility and managing conflicts of interest, which could impact their reliability and long-term viability.

There are also concerns about utilising Starlink as a universal service solution, particularly due to the absence of available voice prioritisation and apprehensions regarding potential congestion impacts in the future. These factors raise uncertainties about maintaining the reliability and quality of

² ACCAN, *Better delivery of universal services (Submission to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 2024)* 22.

communication services, especially regarding foreign owned networks, prompting the need for thorough evaluation and mitigation strategies before widespread roll-outs.

Importance of Mobile Services: Mobile services are pivotal in complementing fixed services, especially in rural and remote areas where connectivity challenges persist. Despite the complexities associated with achieving universal mobile access, recognising the indispensability of mobile services in bolstering connectivity and narrowing the digital divide is paramount. Yet, consumers have encountered myriad challenges with mobile coverage, encompassing issues such as congestion, diminishing coverage, subpar user experiences, and the inability to report mobile faults effectively. It is imperative to view mobile services as integral components of the solution for enhancing connectivity redundancy. Moreover, there is a pressing need to enhance coverage maps to provide clear insights into the expected coverage and experiences at specific locations. With significant advancements and expansions in mobile coverage, spurred by telco investments and government initiatives like the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) and Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP), consumers have increasingly relied on mobile services, often opting to forego alternative redundancy options like UHF radios and satellite phones. Yet, despite significant investment in repeaters and antennas, our member groups are increasingly reporting instances of coverage degradation or congestion that have left consumers grappling with challenges in lodging fault reports, leaving them vulnerable and without reliable means of communication. Furthermore, there are growing concerns regarding 3G shut down, with consumers in marginal coverage areas concerned that even with equipment upgrades, they may be worse off

Role of Payphones: Payphones continue to serve as essential communication methods, particularly in remote areas where access to mobile or fixed services may be limited and for those in vulnerable situations. Therefore, their role in a modern universal service framework should be preserved and enhanced to cater to the needs of underserved communities. In addition to continuing to ensure access is free, enhancements could include enabling payphones to be wi-fi hotspots and charging stations.

Copper Continuity Obligation: The RRRCC is of the firm belief that the Copper Continuity Obligation (CCO) should remain until alternate emerging technologies can be trialled and tested, with performance metrics made available and appropriate consumer safeguards established. Our member groups report that consumers are often being misled in regard to their rights under the CCO, leading them to cancel their USO service or be migrated to a different technology.

Additionally, Telstra is currently rolling out 4G Fixed Wireless (4GFW) and Starlink voice solutions to consumers migrating off NextG Wireless Link (NGWL), HCRC and USO Satellite services. These consumers are not protected under the CCO and there has been no publicly available data released to demonstrate these new technologies can meet quality and reliability metrics or are fit for Australian weather conditions. The current NGWL migration process has been disorganised, with long wait times, billing frustrations, number porting issues, lack of transparent information and in many cases will leave consumers worse off. Due to the frustrations involved in the NGWL migration process, many consumers are opting to disconnect their landlines, leaving them without communications redundancy. This concerns our membership, as one of our key advocacy asks is that new emerging technologies must be proven to have greater reliability and performance quality for RRR consumers than the technology they replace. Under the current USO, this is not occurring and there are concerns that existing legislation does not do enough to ensure the telecommunications industry is accountable and consumers are protected from potentially misleading practices due to industry bias.

Misinformation and Lack of Telco Engagement: Clear communication with consumers and stakeholders is essential to ensure widespread awareness of any changes to existing services resulting from USF reforms. The telecommunications industry should also be adequately informed, with strict penalties in place for any dissemination of misleading information regarding the new framework.

The RRRCC continues to express concerns over the lack of information, transparency, and amount of responsiveness available to consumers in addressing their concerns regarding the closure of 3G services and current universal service connections. Clear communication and active listening are essential for ensuring equitable access to vital communication services, particularly in rural and remote areas. Engagement practices must be improved to build trust and address consumer needs effectively. It is essential that feedback and input from regional stakeholder groups, especially those with examples of lived experience (real life situations) is taken on board and acted upon.

Conclusion

The RRRCC recognises that the key considerations for a reformed Universal Service Obligation (USO) may be comprehensive but are strongly of the belief that these are essential to safeguarding the interests of RRR consumers. These reforms must aim to address long standing neglect in consumer

guarantees and promote equitable access to telecommunications services for all Australians, thereby contributing to the development of a comprehensive and inclusive telecommunications framework.

