

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW Inc.



Response to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

Email: secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

Prepared by:

Mrs. Libby McPhee
ICPA-NSW State Council
Communications Portfolio

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President: Mr Bruce Paynter  
PO Box 2, GLOUCESTER NSW 2422  
Ph: 02 6558 7484 [REDACTED]  
Email: [NSWPresident@icpa.com.au](mailto:NSWPresident@icpa.com.au)

Secretary: Mrs Helen Ponder  
Avondale, BOURKE NSW 2840  
Ph: 02 6874 7431 [REDACTED]  
Email: [NSWSecretary@icpa.com.au](mailto:NSWSecretary@icpa.com.au)

1. *What are the main barriers to people in regional communities increasing their use of digital technologies and possible solutions for overcoming these barriers?*

The main barriers to regional communities increasing their use of digital technologies are the lack of technology available, the lack of service in order to be able to access these technologies and the cost of being able to access these technologies.

For instance; download and upload speeds are generally so slow that you are unable to access much of the technology our city counterparts access. The system will drop out, or the time taken is unjustifiable. In small regional areas there are very few free Wi-Fi spots available to the community. If they are available, that will only be in the larger centres and rural people do not have the time to access this facility when they go to their larger centres to transact business.

Mobile coverage is extremely patchy. For those travelling through regional areas, they regularly pass through black spots so are frequently disconnected from calls or data sessions.

For some properties, mobile reception is unreliable or non-existent, limiting the use of digital technology which can be used in the business and the opportunities which come with it.

Basically, the telecommunications infrastructure in the rural areas is very poor, resulting in reduced use and research of digital technology.

The cost is another enormous barrier. Rural people seem to pay a significant sum of money for a small amount of data. The cost needs to become more affordable. Telstra have only just released a plan with unlimited data, which is unfortunately years too late. As a way of managing Telstra data plans, Telstra suggest you keep logging into your account. When you are on the cusp of using all your data why do you want to do this? Text messaging regarding the amount of mobile data being used is very ineffective as it does not tell you which mobile number is using the data. This and the cost are very painful points of any Telstra plan.

Telstra's structure of handling enquiries is hopeless. Dialing 13 22 00 and talking to an automated voice and hoping to get to an area of responsible personnel is an absolute long shot. The wait time on the line is unacceptable.

With these barriers rural and regional children have experienced huge difficulties in studying at home, and even preparing for study at University where you have to logon to the university site and select courses.

The dropping out of service creates further use of data to start the process all over again. In some cases, the speed has been that slow that it has not enabled the logon to happen.

People have also tried to download medical reports without success because the data speed is too slow.

2. ***How are people in regional communities currently using their broadband service and how might they increase the benefits of using this technology?***

Regional Communities would be using broadband through mobile or satellite devices. Again, slow up load and download speeds would be preventing people from receiving increased benefits from this service. The cost is prohibitive and needs to be more realistic and affordable. The majority of people would use this technology every day for their business and the frustration of using it with the barriers is enormous.

In rural and regional areas, many rely upon Satellite Broadband or Wireless Broadband. Unlimited data plans are very expensive, where available, especially compared to those in urban areas, and those on Sky Muster satellite service do not have access to Unlimited Plans at all. This results in the monitoring of data used for business, educational use, and pleasure. The speeds of this technology are also far less than that of the broadband available in urban areas, resulting in reduced productivity.

Over recent months, this service has not been 100% reliable.

Satellite Broadband is not compatible with Voice over IP (VOIP) due to the latency in the service. This service therefore limits the types of technology which can be used.

Emergency services utilise many forms of communications. In these rural areas where internet is unreliable the Emergency services struggle to use their equipment effectively and in a timely manner. This of course is a major concern because the end result can be loss of life and or property.

3. ***What data-intensive activities are occurring in regional, rural and remote Australia? What digital technologies are needed for these?***

Many businesses are data-intense these days. If you want to find an answer many look to google. Many people are trying to access emails and attachments on the go on their mobile phones or tablets or ipads, which is data intense.

Rural businesses in some cases are linked to accounting services significant distances away and information is being uploaded in the clouds. This pertains to financial information as well as stocktaking and recording of information.

For example, Auctions Plus is an online platform Australia wide, used to buy/sell cattle.

Many businesses are moving away from office-based servers to cloud technology. Like any business, many businesses in regional and rural Australia operate with websites as a marketing tool and selling platform.

Transport companies even have tracking tools. Mapping programs are commonly used to locate contractors and other workers and read water tank levels.

Any business operating system is data intensive and there are so many out there. Producers are moving towards holistic farm management systems which record, production, stocktaking of goods, quantities of chemicals used. The uptake of these

systems is slow due to the use of data to utilise these systems, as well as the connectivity which cannot be guaranteed.

These types of services require an acceptable and reliable speed and continuity.

We really need to see a better mobile infrastructure in rural areas, from a safety perspective and as a communications tool to effectively operate a business, and educate our children.

4. ***How can regional businesses better utilise digital technologies to maximise economic benefits?***

There would be many ways regional businesses could better utilise digital technologies but the lack of a reliable service is preventing these people from reaping and maximising economic benefits in the digital technical world.

The engagement and uptake of technology is limited due to limitations in the infrastructure available required to operate this technology. There is no doubt that much more could be achieved to help improve productivity, processes and safety if we had better infrastructure available to rural and regional areas.

We hear a lot about the importance of collecting data. If only we had better data to analyse. The world is our oyster. We need data technology in place to collect this data easily.

5. ***What can be done to improve access to and uptake of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities?***

Many of these indigenous communities are rural and remote communities. Increased coverage and reliability from all forms of technology will improve access.

Upskilling would need to be considered as well.

6. ***Are there practical examples of how communications services can improve the wellbeing of people in remote Indigenous communities?***

One practical example, would be better use of telehealth, if the infrastructure is enhanced. It is costly in both time and money for people to travel to appointments in the city when much of it can be done on telehealth connections these days.

Upload and download speeds need to be improved for the uptake of this technology as well as greater infrastructure.

7. ***What skills do people need to get the most from their digital technologies, and where can they learn these skills?***

In regional and remote areas, it can be difficult for people to gain skills. Many would have to travel significant distances to access training and then would not necessarily be using a similar digital technology to the one they would be using in their own environment. Depending on their internet speed they maybe able to do some online training, however at the moment data speeds make training online a very unreliable option.

There is so much to be learnt, and this is best learnt when using the products. This is how you gain a true understanding of the use and potential.

Rural businesses tend to share a lot of knowledge with other businesses and news and opportunities travel fast.

People will only research technology when they have the infrastructure in place which will support the usage.

8. ***Have you had ongoing issues affecting your satellite or fixed wireless broadband service? If so how have you overcome these issues?***

There have been significant and numerous ongoing issues. Firstly, it is difficult to get your services repaired when faults occur. Generally, you have to wait a week to have Telstra come and assess and maybe fix the problem. Very few problems can be fixed online. Rural people have to wait for the problem to be fixed and so does their business. This wait time can be very frustrating when you are selling product to market or have purchased product which is being delivered. There are instances in the rural communities where contracts have been lost due to the inefficiencies of our telecommunication services. This has resulted in the product having to be re-contracted generally for a lesser amount per tonne. This is then a direct loss of income.

There is also the down time in not being able to pay bills on time or return completed paperwork in the required timeframe.

Members have reported the greatest issue with the NBN Satellite is not being able to use a VOIP phone and connect to their office telephone system based in Sydney, due to the latency of satellite internet.

In many cases Wireless Broadband does not receive a very good signal, especially given the amount of black spot areas throughout rural and regional Australia.

With upgrades to services and outages for extended periods rural producers find it difficult to conduct business effectively. Even cloudy days can have an impact on data speeds.

One recent issue was with upgrading Telstra plans. It resulted in plans being cancelled, resulting in no internet service at all, new devices arriving in the mail with no information of what the device was for. New sim cards being sent with no phone numbers for the devices that they are to be inserted into. Six weeks later this issue was still trying to be resolved with Telstra, and all the while Telstra had no idea where the rural person was located. In trying to resolve the problem the rural customer was being told to drop into a Telstra store and pick up a new sim. Issues are not easy to resolve.

9. ***If you are in an area with access to the Sky Muster satellite service and you have not taken it up, why not?***

Education is one of the biggest issues surrounding the Sky Muster satellite. Customers should have been sent a flyer simply pointing out they can connect to Sky muster for their telecommunication if it was available in their area.

10. ***What economic or social indicators could be used to guide investment to further improve mobile coverage?***

All Australians are entitled to an equal level of telecommunication service. It is very discriminative to improve mobile coverage on an economic and social basis. We are all deserving of such technologies.

11. ***Is information readily available regarding how to use devices to improve mobile reception in areas with poor coverage? Eg Information about external antenna equipment?***

Information is definitely not available about how to use devices and how to get the best out of your device and maximise the coverage with your device.

The lack of education is one of the key factors why we have so many Australians floundering with using and up taking the technologies available. An example of the lack of education is particularly evident with the introduction of the NBN. Service providers need to be vigilant in coming into an area and be prepared to have town hall meetings to introduce people to the technology.

In particular Telstra stores are so confusing. There is equipment that has a Telstra brand attached to it and then there are extremely similar pieces of equipment which will do exactly the same job, but do not have the Telstra brand, and are sold from Telstra licensed stores. There is Telstra and Telstra Countrywide. The Cel Fi Go and Telstra Go units are a perfect example of confusion plus.

Telstra Country wide generally have a good knowledge of their areas. However, ringing the 13 22 00 from regional areas is a complete disaster. Most of the time you don't even get to talk to people who can speak English. This makes, communication with Telstra, very frustrating and very ineffective.

12. ***What emerging digital services will be of most benefit to regional businesses and what are the data needs of these services?***

The filling in of the black spots would have to be one of the most benefits to regional areas. A reliable internet service is paramount.

13. ***What broadband services are people using other than those available through the NBN?***

Mobile broadband is the other most common form of service being used, when it is available. Many rural and remote customers have no access to any mobile service.

14. *How can more competition be encouraged in the provision of broadband services in regional Australia?*

We are starting to see competition. Cost effective plans are rolling out with unlimited data uploads and downloads. Government assistance would also assist with competition.