



**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia**

**FEDERAL COUNCIL**

**"Access to Education"**

**SUBMISSION**

**to the**

**Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee**

**on the**

**2011 - 12 Regional Telecommunications Review**

**Issues Paper**

**From the**

**Federal Council**

**of the**

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia**

**ICPA (Aust)**

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**SECRETARY**

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The Federal Council of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to have input into the discussion paper on the 2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review Issues Paper.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. It encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. The member families of the Association reside in rural and remote Australia and all share a common goal of access to education for their children, and the provision of services required to achieve this. Our children are educated in small rural schools, via distance education programmes on isolated properties, at boarding schools and may have access to early childhood services. They may reside at home, boarding school or a school term hostel to access their secondary education.

Access, reliability, and affordability of service are the most pressing communication issues for our members residing in rural and remote Australia. Like all Australians, our members desire equity of access as a basic requirement in the provision of all telecommunication services.

## **1 The digital economy**

### **Question 1**

**How is the use of telecommunications services; and information and communication technology (ICT) evolving in different industry sectors and what is the impact of these changes in regional Australia?**

Having access to reliable and affordable telecommunication services has changed the way rural Australians interact with their business associates, health and education providers, as well as introducing a broader use of technology for social interaction. Gone are the days of total reliance on telephone and postal mail services.

It is essential that government understands the importance of accessing these services for consumers with homes located in rural and remote areas. These homes serve as not only the family home but also the office for their business and most importantly function as the isolated schoolroom for many young students who live too far for daily attendance at their nearest school.

ICPA acknowledges that the NBN will provide a critical piece of enabling infrastructure; the Association is pleased that the government has recognised the importance of establishing early trials of the technology to demonstrate its impact and to set the stage for broader systemic adoption in education, healthcare, and government service delivery. ICPA cannot stress too strongly how critical this is for rural and remote users.

Trials of new technology are vital to ensure the technology does work as expected in the field. These trials need to be carried out in varied terrains across rural and remote Australia and not be solely conducted close to regional centres as a matter of convenience. Too often

new technologies, when placed into operation in rural and remote areas, do not perform as well as field-testing has shown. Lack of operational reliability is often one outcome which then results in frustration on the part of the consumer.

Initiatives such as digital hubs and the Broadband for Seniors programme are welcome options put in place in some areas to educate people about the benefits of taking up opportunities presented by the digital economy. Ability to access these programmes is an inhibiting factor for participation by many rural and remote residents, yet these are the very consumers such programmes are aimed at. Somehow these initiatives must be delivered beyond major centres if there is to be a greater uptake of new technology by Australians living in outer regional and remote areas.

It is important to note that data allowances available for satellite and wireless services are still well below those offered on other networks. To ensure full participation in the digital economy this will need to be addressed for those individuals, businesses, and education providers who are users of these services.

ICPA notes the concern expressed in the review issues paper over the low number of regional businesses having a web presence. Not all businesses in rural and remote areas have a need for a web presence. The individual nature of the business dictates the necessity for a web site; thus, the use of this as an indicator of challenges needing to be overcome before rural people can take full advantage of opportunities presented by the digital economy, is not necessarily an accurate one.

#### **Question 4**

**The NBN will help the range of online government services to continue to expand. The committee is interested in views and experiences about engaging with government services online, whether local, state, or federal.**

- ICPA recognises that the expansion of online government services will lead to positive outcomes for rural and remote users. For example, many of our families make use of the capability of the Centrelink site. Accessing online information and filling out forms, with the ability to submit forms and accompanying application data online, can relieve the frustration of lengthy phone calls.
- For rural and remote communities that do not have a representation of government services in their towns, hook-up via video link could become the norm instead of travelling vast distances for appointments. Access to a medical specialist would be possible without the need for overnight stays away from home. The stress on the family of having to pack up and drive many kilometres to attend an appointment in a major centre could be reduced by being able to access information using a video link in the medical facility of the local town. Medical appointment rebates which can currently be submitted online allow for timely reimbursement directly back to the user's account, instead of having to rely on the postal service for such transactions to take place.
- People engaged in primary production find the free, and user-pays additional, services provided by the Bureau of Meteorology, are critical tools required in

decision making for their business. Obviously a reliable internet service is crucial for this access.

## **2 Regional health and education outcomes**

### **Question 7**

**Do you have ideas for ways in which high-speed broadband could enhance the delivery of education and healthcare outcomes in regional communities?**

- Face-to-face consultations via video conferencing could see a whole new way of addressing the issues faced by a family in trying to access specialist services for their children who have learning disabilities. e.g. speech therapy
- Studying at a tertiary level externally could be more engaging with the use of video streaming of lessons or downloadable interactive material. A virtual classroom would suit the learning style of some people and offer an alternative educational pathway that still has the capacity to engage both teacher and student.
- For children who study via distance education, increased broadband availability could mean online lessons would be more interactive and the greater speed and broadband width would allow a greater choice of educational programmes to be offered and undertaken e.g. music lessons could be done via video interaction. Some small rural schools currently offer language lessons where the teacher conducting that lesson remains in their metropolitan or regional area school and the distance education student accesses the lesson from their home classroom.

### **Question 8**

**The committee would like to hear from individuals and organisations about their participation in, experiences of, and expectations about, online health and education service delivery.**

The students of ICPA member families receive their education using various delivery methods. One mode is distance education whereby some lessons are delivered via the internet. The teacher can be based at a regional or remote School of the Air or in the metropolitan area at a School of Distance Education. Children studying via distance education have direct contact with their teachers and other students through lessons that are conducted over the internet using programmes such as Centra. The reliability of this service delivery appears to be inconsistent when families are using a mix of different platforms, e.g. 2-way satellite, Next G and various service providers, to receive their internet service.

Schooling via distance education is the only option for many families living in isolated areas. Although a home tutor, (often the mother), assists the children with school work, it is critical that they have reliable and affordable access to their lessons with their distance education teachers. Distance education students are becoming more reliant on the internet for their daily lessons and return of their completed school work and this will only increase with the NBN rollout and the greater utilisation of the improved services on offer. The system must

be reliable and affordable with sufficient bandwidth and speed available, to ensure fully interactive lessons can be conducted.

Presently, many small rural schools experience considerable frustration in their attempt to access online resources that will assist and enhance learning for their students. Teachers report that time spent solving technical problems takes them away from teaching, planning, and preparation time. If students living in rural areas are to reach parity with their urban peers it is imperative that upgrades to broadband links are completed sooner rather than later.

The majority of ICPA members will be in the 7% needing to receive the NBN service by satellite. ICPA is relying on the improved services promised with the rollout of the NBN to alleviate the reliability issues experienced by our members.

E-health is perceived to have wide-ranging benefits for rural families. Adequate internet services that can support telehealth and electronic health records are essential to the ongoing health care of isolated rural and remote clients who do not have access to regular medical services. These services have the potential to save lives, time, and money and make the health system more efficient but will depend on reliable internet access. The opportunity for example, to speak with a specialist health provider whilst still in one's own home or local medical centre, with the provider in a larger regional or metropolitan centre, may decrease access difficulties for many families. This in turn could lessen the stress they may face during times of critical health issues.

#### **4 Developments in the terrestrial and satellite mobile phone sector**

##### **Question 13**

**Have you been able to readily obtain information to improve your mobile phone coverage, such as using an external antenna or choosing particular phones that are better suited to rural or remote coverage?**

Obtaining information can prove difficult especially if the mobile phone carrier's support staff are not familiar with the coverage area or are situated offshore and have no understanding of the topography or distances our members face. We have instances of members having been given incorrect information on the size of an aerial required to boost their mobile service and provide greater service reliability within their residential premises. It becomes a frustrating and sometimes costly exercise for consumers to have to work through various solutions because little accurate information can be accessed.

##### **Question 15**

**What have been your experiences with satellite mobile phones?**

Expensive handsets with limited service providers on offer have not enticed those with other options available to take up a satellite mobile service. Difficulty picking up the satellite at times presents reliability issues. People are looking for dependable service provision. Inconsistent coverage, along with expensive calling costs, are deterrents to the uptake of a satellite mobile service. Subsidising satellite phones as per the government's Satellite Phone

Subsidy Scheme is helpful but with what is considered high call costs, many would-be users choose not to invest in this service.

## **5 Consumer issues**

### **Question 16**

**Are there any significant consumer issues specific to rural and remote communities that you consider are not being addressed?**

The importance of the continuation of the fixed line service for rural Australia has not been acknowledged. Due to the limited availability of reliable mobile services in many areas, it is essential that some sort of fixed phone service is maintained - even if customer numbers are low. This remains a fundamental service requirement for a great number of rural and remote Australians.

### **Question 20**

**How can education and awareness of the risks of using mobile devices such as smartphones be improved for consumers in regional areas?**

The information needs to get out to consumers. Telephone service providers and government should not just rely on consumers being able to attend a shopfront for information or indeed gather information off the internet. If consumers do not know what they are looking for or have no idea of the questions to ask, then it is easy to overlook vital pieces of information. A mix of information presentations with the availability to ask questions is required. A more concerted effort from providers and government to find innovative ways of addressing the issue of getting information out to consumers regardless of where they live needs to be encouraged. Travelling road shows have proven to be beneficial in the past, as has a presence at agricultural and pastoral field days.

## **Other Issues**

### **Question 21**

**Are there any other issues relating to telecommunications services in regional Australia that you would like to bring to the committee's attention?**

At present neither broadband at affordable prices nor a mobile service are on offer in all rural and remote areas. The following points highlight the concerns and importance of the current provision of services in these areas:

- Provision of internet services must contain access to technical assistance.
- When services are introduced, it is necessary for providers to ensure that ongoing upgrades of equipment and improved internet speeds are offered to consumers as they become available.
- Service coverage of mobiles continues to be an issue. One platform for the delivery of all mobile services would appear to be a more cost efficient way to go i.e. the cost of providing a mobile service could be spread across more carriers.
- More mobile towers staggered along the major highways would provide for greater service access and assist with the safety aspect of driving in rural areas.

- Extra costs incurred in having a satellite phone for extended coverage, on the basis of no mobile reception being available, are a deterrent to the uptake of the satellite service. If mobile coverage is available over some of the area, it is considered preferable to have a mobile phone plus associated plan due to the lower costs of mobile calls in comparison to satellite calls. To ensure uninterrupted mobile coverage in many remote areas would require two phones and incur the associated costs, both purchase and call costs.

Initiatives such as the provision of subsidies acting as a safety net do so only up to a point. In most cases, once a subsidy has been received, it is not on offer again should the service provider cease to supply services and thus necessitate a new contract of service being entered into with another provider. This has a real impact on rural consumers who rely on subsidised services being on offer for broadband services to enable affordable access to this service.