

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of WA (Inc)

STATE COUNCIL

"Access to Education"



SUBMISSION

to the

Regional Telecommunications

Independent Review Committee

on the

2011 - 12 Regional Telecommunications

Review Issues Paper

Lynette Gittos

Communications Portfolio

ICPA WA State Council



December 2011

ICPA WA is pleased to have the opportunity to have input into the 2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review.

ICPA WA is a voluntary parent body dedicated to ensuring that all students, no matter where they live, have equality of educational opportunity at all stages of their education. Membership includes a cross section of Western Australia's rural population and includes fishermen, miners, itinerant employees, indigenous families, farmers, pastoralists and small business owners.

Telecommunications and ICT delivery play an important role in achieving this aim.

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?

Rural and remote Western Australia (WA) is becoming more reliant on the use of telecommunication services and ICT which is evolving at a remarkable speed.

However with increasing demand and use comes the need for reliable and affordable access.

The current technology and many ICT services available in rural and remote areas is costly in comparison to urban based services.

It is often not reliable nor capable of delivering what people require eg drops out, too slow to connect or download and therefore rural and remote customers are unable to fully, utilize and keep abreast with the latest developments.

Question 2

What is needed to extend and accelerate the role of telecommunications services and ICT in delivering benefits to regional economies?

The technology and services must be accessible, reliable and affordable. Once that is achieved rural and remote communities will be better able to tap into and reap the benefits of what is available.

Dedicated service providers that can adequately and fully cater and ably service rural and remote customers is essential.

Constantly rural and remote customers are wrongly advised about products and services simply because the provider is not aware of nor understands the unique circumstances that customers in these locations have.

Question 5

What are some examples of what you want to see happen to encourage greater participation in the digital economy by people living and working in regional Australia?

What is needed:

- Affordable access to the new technologies
- Higher level of guaranteed consistency of the services from the service providers.
- Increased bandwidth for satellite broadband to compensate for the increase in users.
- An emphasis on educational programs in the use of these
- Financial assistance to access these educational programs
- Educational programs to be offered in several different rural centres at appropriate times
- That the minimum number of participants required to run a program be flexible
- Availability of appropriate trained personnel to help with difficulties -specialising in rural issues
-

Question 6

What are the main barriers to regional communities increasing their use of information and communications technologies and do you have any ideas for ways in which regional communities could progressively overcome these barriers?

The main barriers include

- Lack of access to the technology
- Lack of consistent and reliable services
- Cost involved with accessing technology and services
- The lack of relevant and current information

<u>Barriers</u>	<u>Ideas to overcome these barriers</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of access to the technology • Lack of consistent and reliable services • Affordability - Cost involved with accessing technology and services • Lack of knowledge about what is available • Lack of bandwidth due to limited capability of current technology • Time and cost to install a service • Time, distance and cost to maintain, service and repair equipment • Lack of access to appropriate reliable and timely customer service and support • Lack of availability of trained personnel to maintain and repair equipment. • Communication and education on relevant and up to date information and services and technologies that are available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of NBN services • Ensure the technology is capable and actually works in the location. • The technology that is available must be affordable no matter what the means of delivery is. • Dedicated rural and remote providers • Providers that can guarantee correct and relevant information and provide specialised services including installation, maintenance and repairs. • A better understanding from providers on the location and conditions of customers in rural and remote areas • Local technicians. • Varied methods of delivering information. • Online courses • Locally rural trained and run courses similar to first aid course and men's health clinics

The NBN as the 'plumbing' or conduit has the potential to lay the foundation to assist in overcoming many of these barriers.

ICPA WA believes that when the 'plumbing' is adequately installed, communities will indeed embrace and utilize but that installation and accessibility has to occur first and that is not

necessarily something that communities can do single handedly. It requires assistance from the likes of government agencies, private organizations and reliable service providers.

It is then up to communities to get in the driver's seat to make the technology work and benefit them.

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?

The potential for enhancing the delivery of education and healthcare in WA is enormous and there are many examples of how the internet is currently being utilised to enhance outcomes particularly in education in WA.

High-speed broadband which is accessible, reliable and affordable will further improve the current education and indeed health services to a greater level along with providing many more experiences and opportunities that have not yet been tapped into simply because of the lack of access.

Rural WA loses many of their potential young workforce and families due to having to move to be educated. With high-speed broadband they would have greater opportunities to continue their education in the local community. This would include university degrees. It would also help with them being able to find work locally and not have the expense of moving from home to the city for work and education. This would take some time as already young people have exited from the community causing such a decline that many leave simply because there are no young people to socialise with. It has the potential of giving our young community members a choice to be educated in the environment that they wish to live. It also gives the opportunity for experienced people to increase their education in the specific field of expertise and therefore bring better services to rural communities.

In WA, the Education Department delivers technology and ICT to its Distance Education students extremely well, predominately through utilizing the Centra software system.

The need for increased bandwidth will always be an issue as ICT continues to advance so it is imperative that rural and remote WA has the means to keep abreast.

Greater bandwidth capacity is required for two reasons firstly the system no longer just caters for geographically isolated students but is available for rural and remote schools which means the demand on the system has greatly increased.

The technology is there but the current system to deliver is not adequate. 2 way satellite is the predominant means that online learning is being delivered to Distance Education students but is

has reached its capabilities. Greater bandwidth ensuring increased download and upload speeds is urgently required so as to access and use what is already available but not being utilized such as basic components like webcams. High speed broadband through the NBN is potentially going to re - revolutionize the delivery of education across the entire state of WA.

However as has been mentioned many times already it must be accessible, reliable and affordable. There is little knowledge or understanding of exactly how the NBN will work and what will be actually provided throughout WA which is impeding the Education Departments ability to ready itself for the changes ahead.

It is a very costly exercise to set up and maintain the services for the likes of Distance Education and there must be measures in place to guarantee the stability of providers.

Question 8

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

It is very common to hear where access, affordability and reliability are impeding the delivery of education to our students particularly in small rural and remote schools

This example highlights some of the current difficulties and frustrations that are being experienced.

At a local small rural school an IT technician is only available once a term in the sixth week. So if there is a fault with any technology or equipment the school is without the equipment until then. Usually when the technician arrives, it is often the case that the fault is unable to be fixed. Usually parts are needed or more expert advice. It is then left until the next term on the sixth week to be fixed. It is very costly getting him up on that designated week (\$300 just for travel before work is done) but to get him for an emergency not on the designated week is even more expensive and the school is unable to afford or justify this extra expense.

4 DEVELOPMENTS IN THE TERRESTRAL 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 phone that are better suited to rural or remote coverage?

Access to information is hard to come by and usually has to be instigated by the consumer and or arises when there is a fault or issue that results in the customer having to contact the provider and then information is obtained.

ICPA WA all too regularly hears of instances where both equipment and accessories such as antennas and patch leads have had to be returned because they are not suitable or compatible. The time it takes to sort these type of issues, particularly when equipment has to be returned via mail, is not only frustrating and costly but can also result in the customer having no service during that time.

For most rural communities there is often only one available provider. It is not uncommon to hear of the information being given that to improve your phone coverage by go to a 'Shop' which can be 100's of kilometres away.

Even face to face contact does not ensure that the correct information is given as often the shop fronts are in major towns and they do not understand the conditions and limitations outside town perimeters. The statement "No you will not require an antenna" is one that is so often incorrect.

Accessing phone support and service that is provided offshore is very difficult and extremely frustrating because of language barriers and the lack of local knowledge. How can someone in India understand that you live on a property and do not have a street address.

There is a need to ensure that current, accurate and relevant information is available and accessible via a variety of mediums to all WA users.

The committee stated in the review that three major mobile phone carriers estimate that their network coverage extends to a high percentage of Australians. It would be helpful to know the percentage of rural Australians that are covered as this would be a more accurate means to highlighting the problems that exist.

Question 14

Are you aware of emerging technologies or initiatives that could be used to improve mobile phone coverage in regional Australia?

ICPA WA believes that if there are devices that can enhance mobile phone coverage and improve the reliability of mobile services then they should be made available as a priority. The safety and well-being of all should be seen as the priority.

Question 15

What have been your experiences with satellite mobile phones?

Satellite Mobile phones are an absolute necessity, albeit costly, means of communicating for anyone living and or working in any location of WA where there is no other form of communication available.

The introduction of a subsidy scheme to assist people living and working in remote areas to purchase a satellite mobile phone has provided an important safety net when people are out of range of normal communication services. However it is still a very costly means of communication and must be used sparingly.

The reliability of providers and costs associated with satellite phones does need to be monitored. ICPA WA has heard of at least one provider that doesn't have access to enough satellites and it can take up to 30 minutes to pick up any signal which can then drop out at any given moment. In an emergency this is simply not acceptable.

5. CONSUMER ISSUES

Question 16

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

It needs to be remembered that the NBN is only providing broadband access and that the provision of voice remains important.

Many areas of WA do not have access to either mobile telephone coverage or high speed, broadband internet access. In those areas the land line telephone is still the main means of communication with the outside world. Until such times that there are reliable alternatives to the landline for all rural people it is imperative that landline systems are appropriately upgraded and maintained. There are landline telephone systems in WA (such as that in the Murchison region) that are now obsolete and consumers have had no information from providers or government as to how or when it will be replaced. Temporary and sometimes lengthy outages are common.

There are vast areas of WA that do not have mobile phone coverage, even in towns. For example, there is no mobile coverage between the Midwest towns of Mullewa and Mt Magnet, a stretch of 220km. Yalgoo is about half way between those towns but does not have a mobile tower. Yuna, another Midwest town in a reasonably well populated farming area, does not have mobile coverage. In both of these examples there are safety issues around accidents and fire. A wireless signal would also provide access to better internet services to affected towns and particularly their schools.

An example from a small farming community that has no mobile coverage.

During harvest, when there needs to be regular communication between header, cartage and the office (with all the various grain segregations which bring different prices), as well as to

machinery services dealers for breakdowns. Not to mention the safety aspect. At Binu a St John Ambulance First Aids post has been constructed because of the distance in the service from Carnarvon to Northampton. There are also the large numbers of tourists at the Hutt River Area who are prone to breakdowns and accidents as they have no experience driving on gravel roads. These areas currently have no mobile range.

This example highlights a number of issues facing a remote user.

In remote WA a pastoral business pays an average of \$400 a month for their 2 way satellite internet as Telstra only allow 1gb for 1 month. They can't access wireless as there are no mobile towers close by so satellite internet is their only option. When their landline telephones are down, which occurs frequently, they rely on either the internet or the satellite phone. The satellite phone take 3 minutes to find a signal and then they have to be careful not to move too much or they lose the signal. They have tried access the NBN Interim Satellite option but to no avail and have now given up in frustration. A member of the family has a history of major health issues which makes the unreliable and extremely expensive communications even more concerning.

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?

With the roll out of the NBN there is a concern that there may well be providers that are not able to adequately provide and sustain service to rural and remote WA customers. There is already some apprehension with the current providers that are providing the NBN interim satellite program as most are untried in remote WA and the couple that have been providing service prior are not held in high regard particularly when it came to the length of time for installation, the maintenance of equipment and in particular customer support mostly due to a lack of understanding of the location. Customers are wary of making the switch at this early stage despite the lure of greater speed capacity and lower costs.

It is already a difficult, lengthy and often stressful process to have a system installed in rural and remote locations. Users do not want to be forced to change providers and equipment on a regular basis.

On the other hand current subscribers to a particular provider, who is not currently an approved provider for the NBN interim satellite program, do not want to change to another provider.

This provider is well-established and highly respected in rural and remote WA, providing timely and realistic installation and maintenance, along with local based technical support, customer service and affordable service.

Subsidies and assistance whilst welcomed are often only available for a short or set amount of time and once ceased they may be costly to maintain or indeed it may be difficult to switch to another provider. Many members of ICPA WA switched providers in the last 12 months under the old Australian Broadband Guarantee. This was partly because of the exuberant costs they were incurring through initial and sole provider along with the uncertainty of what if anything would be provided after the ABG finished. Most would not have switched had they been aware of what was round the corner. Because of this they are no longer automatically eligible for the Interim Satellite Service which of course they would have much preferred to have had.

Currently there is equally apathy and skepticism about the whole notion of the NBN. A contributing factor to this is the lack of communication from all quarters. Relevant, regular and concise information needs to be circulated in order to allow rural and remote WA to make informed opinions which in turn will allow communities to be engaged and eager to embrace the future possibilities.

In conclusion ICPA WA foresees, providing that the access, reliability and affordability issues are recognized and adequately addressed and sustained, that the future development of telecommunications and ICT in rural and remote WA is potentially very exciting and will be a valuable tool in enhancing and sustaining rural and remote communities.