

3. Expedite universal service modernisation

The Committee recommends the Australian Government expedite modernising the USO and the Statutory Infrastructure Provider (SIP) regime by merging them into a unified service obligation. NBN Co, as the provider of last resort, and other SIP operators would be required to provide voice-capable broadband services with minimum speeds and standards for all premises.

The Committee also notes that continued public ownership of NBN Co will be crucial to ensure that service standards are met under a modernised USO in regional, rural and remote Australia.

The contractual Copper Continuity Obligation (CCO) should be phased out where and when proven and effective voice-capable broadband services are available.

The Committee further recommends:

- NBN Co be tasked and funded to implement, in consultation with industry stakeholders, a plan to manage the needs of different cohorts of regional, rural and remote users
- the modernised USO be technology-neutral
- the modernised USO be flexible, ensuring that minimum speeds, quality and other standards are readily adaptable so they remain relevant to changing needs
- premises without terrestrial mobile coverage have access to an affordable secondary redundant broadband service including optional battery backup, with government contributions as necessary
- when a modernised USO is introduced, the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) is updated and strengthened to provide appropriate protections for regional, rural, and remote consumers
- public phones (payphones) be embedded as a free service for domestic calls. Once current contractual obligations expire, the Australian Government should consider tendering for a provider to operate public phone services.

4. Consumer protection

The Committee:

- recommends a full review of consumer protections and service standards to consolidate and strengthen protections contained in a multitude of legislative instruments
- supports the ongoing TCP Code review with a focus on strengthening enforceable consumer protections, in particular, ensuring commission-based sales incentives do not undermine the fair treatment of vulnerable consumers.

5. Affordability

The Committee recommends:

- the introduction of pre-paid, low-cost broadband plans in remote First Nations communities, as proposed by the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group
- the Australian Government facilitate extending these options, promoting affordability and access for all regional, rural and remote Australians
- developing an initiative for unmetered access to critical government websites for users on limited data plans
- ongoing availability and funding for the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) to ensure all school-aged children have access to broadband internet, along with initiatives to increase awareness of the program in regional, rural and remote Australia.

6. Develop a national telecommunications data platform

The Committee recommends the Australian Government establish a national telecommunications data platform. Managed by the ACMA or the ACCC, the national platform should include:

- For consumers: an interactive online tool that allows consumers to easily access detailed information on broadband and mobile service availability in their area, helping them make informed decisions about their connectivity options across Australia.
- For the restricted use of Australian and state and territory governments: information about the location of telecommunications infrastructure assets for the purpose of investment and emergency planning and response.

Telecommunications providers should be required to supply data to governments in standardised formats to enable comparisons between locations and providers. This will enhance transparency in broadband and mobile coverage and help guide infrastructure investments, especially in underserved rural and remote areas.

The Committee further recommends that the Measuring Broadband Australia (MBA) program is continued beyond its current contract enabling the ACCC to monitor service performance.

7. Regional telecommunications strategy

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a regional, rural and remote connectivity strategy. The strategy should be a vision for regional telecommunications and guide future investment and the regulatory environment for the future.

8. Modernising government programs

The Committee recommends that rigorous evaluations of the Australian Government's current rounds of telecommunications investment programs be conducted to ensure public investment is well targeted and delivered effectively. Further, the Government should ensure that future rounds of existing and new programs, are fit for purpose by:

- considering technology developments, such as LEO satellites and DTH capabilities
- mandating meaningful community engagement throughout each project phase, with special emphasis on First Nations communities both as title holders and consumers
- prioritising competitive retail and infrastructure options where viable
- addressing connectivity literacy and affordability
- enhancing resilience and capacity
- recognising the value of cross-government collaboration and planning.

To increase transparency, the Government should create a public website to track milestones for all funded telecommunications projects. This platform would keep regional, rural and remote communities informed about infrastructure rollouts by providing regular updates on timelines, potential delays, and their causes, thereby building trust and awareness of government efforts to improve connectivity.

9. Support for the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group

Recognising the value of the work of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group, the Committee recommends that it be continued as a standing initiative. Consideration should be given to adopting relevant First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group recommendations across regional, rural and remote communities to address the digital divide.

10. Embedding community Wi-Fi

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government:

- continue funding contributions for existing Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) facilities
- invest in new community connectivity hubs to provide community Wi-Fi services during emergencies and natural disasters
- expand investment in mesh Wi-Fi networks in remote First Nations Communities allowing a choice from a tailored menu of connectivity options that best meet local needs and noting that communities without mobile coverage should be prioritised
- invest in and promote free public Wi-Fi initiatives in key locations across regional, rural and remote Australia.

11. Transition oversight

The Committee recommends comprehensive independent monitoring and public reporting during large-scale telecommunications transitions, such as mobile technology switch offs and the migrations required for modernising the USO. The ACMA could be well-placed to perform this role.

12. Expedite planning approvals

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government should exercise its power to expedite planning approvals for large telecommunications infrastructure projects, such as tower installations in regional, rural and remote Australia and in instances where Australian Government funding has contributed to projects.

13. Powering connectivity

The Committee recommends that regulation be introduced to require:

- minimum backup power periods for new critical telecommunications infrastructure installations in regional, rural and remote Australia, with existing assets to be captured over time. The backup period would be regularly reviewed to take account of changes in storage and network technology
- energy providers to give high priority to restorations of power for critical telecommunications infrastructure in regional, rural and remote Australia
- energy providers to prioritise energy connections for new telecommunications installations.

14. Evolution of Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committees

The Committee recommends replacing the current appointment of Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committees every three years with a permanent Regional Telecommunications Commissioner or Regional Telecommunications Advisory Panel. Given the rapid pace of technology change, increasing complexity of the market and the need to modernise the USO, continuous oversight is required.