

ACCAN welcomes USO preservation, pushes for broadband inclusion through legislation

ACCAN welcomes the Morrison Government's commitment to preserve the current Universal Service Obligation (USO) arrangements to guarantee fixed voice services to Australians, however stresses the urgency in extending guarantees to include broadband services through legislation.

The USO refers to the obligation to ensure that all Australians can access a Standard Telephone Service, regardless of where they live or work. Telstra is currently contracted to deliver this obligation and uses a range of technologies to do so, including its fixed copper network, and radio and wireless services.

The commitment that existing fixed-voice services in regional Australia will continue to be underpinned by Telstra's Universal Service Obligation is very important for consumers and businesses across the country. It means that they will be able to take advantage of safeguards included under the agreement, including 24-hour free access to emergency service numbers, access to the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG), and priority assistance.

"For many regional, rural and remote Australians, having access to a reliable communications service is absolutely vital. A working telephone line is not just a utility for many in these communities, it is a lifeline," said ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin.

ACCAN also strongly supports the Government's commitment to creating a new Universal Service Guarantee that embraces broadband, as well as the traditional phone services. Consumers have repeatedly emphasised the importance of having a reliable broadband connection in today's increasingly connected age.

Ms Corbin noted the importance of getting new arrangements in place to underpin the delivery of broadband. Currently, there is a policy expectation that NBN will deliver fast broadband to all premises, but this is not underpinned by any legislated obligation. Legislation introduced in March 2017 in the Federal Parliament will address this gap; frustratingly this legislation is yet to be passed.

"It's more important than ever that this legislation is passed as soon as possible. Modern communications services are essential and that includes access to broadband and voice services," said Ms Corbin.

While welcoming the government's decision, ACCAN notes that service maintenance of existing voice services in regional Australia remains a serious concern. There have been many reported instances where consumers have been left without services for an unacceptably long period, and have been told new parts are not readily available for repairs both for the copper and HCRC network. ACCAN would like to see any proposed new arrangements to the USG clear performance standards to ensure the quality of voice networks.

ACCAN will be raising these concerns with the current review of telecommunications consumer safeguards that is being conducted by the Department of Communications which focuses on the reliability of services. Additionally we support the recommendation of the Regional Telecommunications Review that an audit be conducted into the management of exemptions to regulated connection and fault repairs.

ACCAN will also be consulting with consumers widely about the proposed changes to payphones, especially for remote Indigenous communities. The Report identifies the importance of aligning location of payphones to real need.