



Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

Members Advisory Forum

Meeting Report

Tuesday, 21 March 2023, 11:00am – 1:00pm AEDT
by videoconference

PRESENT:

Claire Bailey	ACT Council of Social Service
David Hofierka	Consumer Action Law Centre
Tania Clarke	Consumer Action Law Centre
Alex Tewes	COTA Australia
Joy Beames	Country Women's Association of Australia NSW
Unaisi Buli	Indigenous Consumers Assistance Network
Caitlin Perry	NT Council of Social Service
Robin Gregory	Regional Development Australia Northern Territory
Greg Ogle	South Australian Council of Social Service
Karen Bentley	WESNET
Joseph Nunweek	Westjustice

ACCAN:

Julian Thomas	Chair
Andrew Williams	Chief Executive Officer
Gareth Downing	Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Kelly Lindsay	Consumer Engagement and Membership
Con Gouskos	Policy Officer

APOLOGIES:

Cassandra Goldie	Australian Council of Social Service
Veronica Johnson	Broome Circle
Jess Kirby	Choice
Erin Turner	Consumer Policy Research Centre
Gerard Brody	Consumers' Federation of Australia
Yaso Ponnuthurai	Ethnic Communities Council of WA
Mohammed Al-Khafaji	Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia

Jane Hutchinson	Hobart Legal Centre
Thea Bray	Public Interest Advocacy Centre
Louise Giolitto	WA Council of Social Service
Helen Campbell	Women's Legal Service NSW

The purpose of ACCAN's Member's Advisory Forum (MAF) is to identify the most important communications consumer issues from the perspective of ACCAN's members and the people they represent. This then informs the development of ACCAN's policy priorities for the 2023-24 year.

MAF participants are welcome to use this document in reporting back to their organisations. This report will also be sent to invited representatives who were unable to attend.

1. Background

ACCAN's consumer consultation is ongoing and multi-format. We hold our formal advisory forums annually and aim to meet regularly with our member organisations. We regularly review the advisory forum format and content to support effective engagement.

Our aim is to provide an opportunity for genuine two-way communication that best allows us to hear from our members and other stakeholders about their communities' communications issues. This allows us to ensure that our work priorities and policies address issues of concern and meet our member's needs.

The objective of the forum was to inform the development of our 2023-24 policy priorities, and our policy themes.

2. Priorities 2022-23

ACCAN's 2022-23 policy priorities have formed the basis of our work over the past financial year. Our policy priorities included:

- Affordable telecommunications for all.
- A fairer telco market.
- Better infrastructure.
- Growing consumer confidence.
- Improved accessibility.
- Increased reliability.
- Emerging issues.

Since the beginning of FY22, ACCAN has submitted over 65 consultations.¹ The majority of this work can be found on the ACCAN web site, however closed submissions may not appear. Our engagement with regulators and industry has been very strong. ACCAN has represented the interests of communications consumers across more than 30 regulatory and industry forums.

¹ As of 21 March, this figure was over 40.

3. Developing priorities 2023-24

ACCAN has revised our approach to our policy priorities and asked for members' input to assist with identifying the themes and issues we intend to focus on in 2023-24. Our past policy priorities have often been detailed and at times overlapped, providing an opportunity to streamline to a more coherent, shorter list that points more clearly to our focus.

This review was undertaken with a view to:

- Clearly articulate our enduring priorities to members and demonstrate our ongoing commitment to representing long-standing issues for communications consumers.
- Support the development of policy themes and in so doing:
 - narrow the focus of our proactive policy work to derive the greatest value for consumers from available resources.
 - engage in more advanced planning at the annual and biennial level to inform our forward research and policy agendas.

Enduring priorities are long-standing communications policy areas that will always be prioritized by ACCAN and in effect reflect our fundamental or core policy work. The following were put forward for consideration.

- **Digital inclusion** – promoting digital inclusion, with a particular focus on affordability and accessibility, supporting low-income consumers, people with disability, and First Nations Australians, along with regional, rural, and remote consumers.
- **Better infrastructure** – promoting better, more reliable, and resilient communications infrastructure.
- **Consumer protections and a fair telco market** – comprehensive protections for small businesses and consumers.

Future potential policy themes are key policy areas of potential focus for proactive work that ACCAN would review on an annual or biennial basis. The following were put forward for consideration.

- Sustainable and ethical communications.
- Frontiers in technology facilitated abuse, coercion, and control.
- Youth communications.
- Resilience in communications.
- Personal information and cybersecurity.
- Housing and homelessness.
- Consumer economic values.

4. Participant feedback

Forum attendees contributed information and views regarding both the enduring priorities and potential policy themes for 2023-24. The meeting slide deck and a Survey Monkey poll were distributed post meeting to attendees for further consideration. These materials were also sent to those invitees who had sent apologies, to provide an opportunity to provide their feedback and priorities.

Participants indicated strong support for ACCAN's enduring priorities with some additional issues to be considered relevant to:

Digital inclusion

- Identification of further groups experiencing vulnerability, such as inmates and people recently released from prison.
- ACCAN to consider the inclusion of a definition of 'digital inclusion' and who it applies to.

Consumer protection and a fairer telco market

- Consideration to the priority being further broken down into financial hardship, sales practices and addressing Domestic and Family Violence (DFV).
- Sales practices continue to be a significant problem; industry should be aiming for best practice in comparison to other essential services/industries.
- The ongoing issue of the quality of customer service. Participant feedback was that ACCAN has a very important role to play in establishing and defining a digital ombudsman.

Participants did not identify any additional enduring priorities for consideration.

Prioritised future potential themes.

An identified list of future potential themes were presented for consideration. Discussion included a high-level view of scope, materiality, and program of work for each theme.

Participants did not identify any further potential policy themes.

Feedback from both attendees and the poll participants ranked the order of priority as;

1. **Housing and Homelessness.**
2. **Frontiers in technology facilitated abuse, coercion, and control.**
3. Personal information and cybersecurity.
4. Resilience in communications.
5. Consumer economic values.
6. Youth communications.
7. Sustainable and ethical communications.

While ranked at position 4, Resilience in communications was discussed at length. Participants agreed that communications should be seen as an essential service. ACCAN should continue to keenly participate in the ongoing Telecommunications Sector Risk and Resilience Profile project being progressed by the ANU which will further inform work in that space.

5. Next steps

The strong support for the enduring policy priorities is noted and with this support ACCAN will continue to work with consumer stakeholders on these priorities throughout 2023-24.

ACCAN will additionally commit to proactive pieces of work in the following areas as identified as highly priority from the feedback provided by participants.

1. Connecting the community
2. Frontiers in technology facilitated consumer harm.

The titles of these themes have been revised to reflect the broader remit of the policy themes, reflecting the feedback from internal and external stakeholders that the initial titles of 'housing and homelessness' and 'frontiers in technology facilitated, abuse, coercion and control' may be narrower than the intended scope of these themes.

ACCAN will continue to actively engage with members and other consumer stakeholders. Our consumer engagement is intended to be ongoing. Quarterly member meetings will complement the advisory forums and we strongly encourage our consumer stakeholders to contact us should you seek support or assistance on existing or emerging communication issues.