Quarter 4, FY19-20

The summary below outlines ACCAN's activities from 1 March – 31 May 2020.

The reporting period was dominated by the impacts of COVID-19 which due to the essential nature of telecommunications services at this time has provided a strong platform for ACCAN to continue to advocate on consumer policy positions across the breadth of our key policy priority areas: Increased reliability; No Australian Left Offline – affordable telecommunications for all; A fairer telco market; Growing consumer confidence; Better infrastructure; and Improved Accessibility. With the majority of the Australian workforce and student population working and learning remotely and a mass transition to telehealth during this period, there has never been a greater need for reliable, affordable and accessible telecommunications services. It is pleasing to note that many of ACCAN’s policy recommendations, particularly with respect to affordable broadband services have been a focus for the entire sector during the national emergency. The industry-wide cooperation has also been a noteworthy highlight during the period.

ACCAN’s activity has included:

* Eighteen submissions to government and industry consultations;
* Appeared before the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster arrangements;
* Convened the Western Australia Affordable Broadband virtual roundtable in collaboration with nbn Co; and
* Participated in the Australian Human Rights Technology and Disability roundtable;

Activity specifically related to COVID-19 has included;

* + Co-ordinating a community letter to the Minister for Communications and the Arts identifying measures needed to overcome barriers in accessing communications for low income consumers
* Tracking telco responses and informing consumers through an online ACCAN portal and presenting at community forums
* Working with RSPs and NBN Co to develop assistance packages, and
* Community sector engagement focused on improving the COVIDSafe app.

ACCAN’s contribution to positive consumer outcomes during the period is highlighted by the following examples:

* NBN Co announced its $150M COVID-19 support package - ACCAN engaged on this before and after its launch with all stakeholders utilising our research and evidence base work under our policy priority of No Australian Left Offline.
* 50 per cent of the recommendations made in ACCANs Community endorsed COVIDSafe letter to the Government were adopted in the Privacy Amendment (Public Health Contact Information) Act
* ACCAN’s support of the Telco Reform package and Regional Broadband Scheme RBS was acknowledgedby the Minister for Communications. ACCAN has worked to progress this legislation under our policy priority area of A Fairer Telco Market.

A number of ACCAN’s recommendations to the Australian Parliament 5G Inquiry were included in the Committee’s report, reflecting ACCAN’s work in our policy priority areas of Better Infrastructure and Growing Consumer Confidence**.**

The 2020 Round is now in its final stages of assessment, with 24 of 55 Expressions of Interest invited to submit full applications. EOIs were assessed via video link on 25 March. Full applications are currently with the Panel, who will again meet in early June to agree on the final list of recommended projects.

The COVID-19 restrictions on movement introduced during the reporting period have had a significant impact on existing grantees. Most projects have required a blanket extension on the remainder of their work. Some are also adapting methodologies in order to still reach their stated aims, albeit via a revised route.

From 1 March - 31 May 2020, ACCAN published six news stories. ACCAN also launched its Consumer Education project, Talking Telco, this quarter. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions it was not feasible to hold a physical launch event, however it was especially pleasing that Minister Fletcher agreed to support a virtual launch by video. This includes nearly 70 resources across 10 topics addressing common consumer concerns such as how to choose an nbn plan, or what to do if they can’t afford their bill. In an Australian first, Talking Telco also includes videos for Auslan users about phone and internet services, as well as resources in Easy English and community and Indigenous languages.

ACCAN’s total membership is 205, comprising 109 organisational and 96 individual members; reflecting a slight increase from the previous period. The COVID-19 issues have highlighted the value of having a strong advocate for telecommunications consumers and ACCAN will continue to leverage this value proposition to existing and prospective members.

ACCAN’s consumer representation increased significantly during the period, with many activities specifically related to addressing COVID-19 issues. ACCAN staff represented consumers on 33 occasions across 17 separate committees, engaged with government and regulatory bodies on 26 occasions, and industry bodies on 29 occasions. Despite not being able to meet in person, COVID-19 restrictions did not impact ACCAN’s ability to engage with members and consumer groups. These engagements increased during the period, with the majority being conducted via technology. A total of 62 engagements were conducted throughout the period.

The ACCAN Board met on 5 March for its first meeting of 2020 where representatives from the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications also presented on a number of issues.

As a result of the COVID-19 social distancing restrictions the ACCAN office was closed on 23 March with all staff to work from home until further notice. Staff have made this transition exceptionally well.

This quarter, ACCAN generated 398 media hits across national print, online, TV and radio. This is an average of 133 items per month.

During this period, ACCAN responded to a total of 14 media enquiries. These covered a range of topics including NBN pricing, Telstra reliability issues, Optus’s ACCC fine for misleading conduct, Consumer Data Right and telcos, NBN issues, telco bushfire resiliency, the ACMA’s communications report, and fraudulent mobile number porting.

ACCAN proactively provided comments to the media on a range of other major issues including: Talking Telco, Telecommunications Reform Package, NBN $150M Assistance Package, Accessible Telecoms and more.