

Time to act on affordable broadband

With millions of Australians facing extended lockdowns, the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) has called on NBN Co to fast-track the introduction of a low-income product to allow struggling households to work and learn remotely.

The call to action comes as part of the consumer advocacy group's submission to NBN Co's Special Access Undertaking Variation 2021 Discussion Paper.

"Communities in New South Wales are now entering their sixth week of lockdown. For those in Greater Sydney, that has meant homes have had to double as offices and classrooms for millions of Australians," said ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin.

"The sad reality is that not everyone has access to a reliable broadband connection at home. Some households have had to try and support simultaneous work meetings and online education from a single slow hotspot from a mobile phone, while others have been unable to learn online at all."

In 2020, ACCAN welcomed NBN Co's introduction of measures to help connect unconnected households during the nation's widescale lockdowns through its Education Assistance Package. While NBN Co last week announced a COVID-19 relief credit payment of \$5.2 million across eligible internet retailers to help mitigate the cost of increased data demand induced by lockdowns, there has been no direct effort to assist struggling households.

In this context, it is vitally important that NBN Co prioritise its work on a low-income product flowing from its two latest pricing consultations.

"NBN Co has been consulting on a low-income product for vulnerable households since 2019, and we were led to believe that this much needed product would finally come to market this year," said Ms Corbin. "We're still waiting."

ACCAN has urged NBN Co not to stall the roll-out of the valuable low-income product by waiting until it is incorporated in the SAU.

"People need connectivity now; they can't afford to wait for months and months until the regulatory process is over," explained Ms Corbin.

On the proposed changes to CVC and AVC in NBN Co's Discussion Paper, the peak body for communications consumers reiterated that any pricing changes must ensure lower speed plans are an affordable option for consumers.

ACCAN considers that if CVC charges were to be removed, the rebalancing of prices must not disproportionately impact slower speed services. This is important as the consumer impact of increasing the price of speed tiers 12-50 Mbps will be significant considering these cover 81% of NBN Co's residential services in operation.

"Getting the NBN pricing mechanism right is a tightrope exercise, but it is vital," said Ms Corbin. "Communications services are now an essential service, and we must do everything we can to make sure that they are affordable, available, accessible, and inclusive for all."