



Media Release

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ACCAN urges caution on changes to consumer protection for telco services

ACCAN, Australia's peak body for communications consumers, says the government's deregulation proposals which could affect the amount of time consumers have to wait to get a landline phone connected or fixed must be more comprehensively reviewed. ACCAN has also flagged concerns around proposed changes to privacy rules for the telco industry.

In its submission to the Department of Communications deregulation bill, ACCAN urged caution regarding proposed changes to the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) Standard. The Standard, applicable to landline phones, currently requires providers to connect a service, repair a fault and attend appointments within a maximum timeframe.

"Landline phones are still the number one communications service for a lot of consumers, especially the elderly, those in regional and remote areas, and people with disability. It is also vital for small business who can lose customers when their communications services are not in good working order. The CSG is an important consumer protection and isn't something we can simply do away with. We understand that it needs updating, especially in light of the NBN, however we must err on the side of caution as this is an important issue for Australian consumers," said ACCAN CEO Teresa Corbin.

The department's current proposal would potentially see individual consumers go it alone in negotiating connection and repair timeframes as well as compensation with their telcos. With a lack of bargaining power this could mean longer wait times and no compensation for delays.

"We know that individual consumers, especially the vulnerable and disadvantaged, are not well placed to negotiate their own contracts. We need, at the very least, some principles-based requirements that are applied to all telcos as well as a default safety net and a service standard for NBN Co," said Ms Corbin.

Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman stats from last financial year show despite significant complaint reductions in most areas, complaints about fault repairs, timely connections for new services and keeping appointments all increased.

"The fact that we've seen an increase in complaints regarding landline connection and repair issues and this just shows how important the landline phone remains to some Australian consumers," said Ms Corbin.

ACCAN suggests that a lot of consumer frustration would be alleviated if consumers were able to track the progress of repairs or a new connection, and if telcos kept their promises for appointments or contacted you within 24 hours when the time was going to change.

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The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is Australia's peak communications consumer organisation. The operation of ACCAN is made possible by funding provided by the Commonwealth of Australia under section 593 of the Telecommunications Act 1997. This funding is recovered from charges on telecommunications carriers.

Proposals discussed for reforming the telecommunications privacy regulation include exempting telcos with an annual turnover of less than \$3m, exempting metadata, and decriminalising privacy offences by telco providers.

"Given the large amount of information held by the industry about its customers (personal details, content of communications, metadata such as internet browsing history), we believe that any reforms need to maintain existing levels of protection, not reduce them," said Ms Corbin.

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BACKGROUND

ACCAN's submission on deregulation supports proposed amendments to arrangements for pre-selection, Part 9A of the T(CPSS)A, retail price controls and the local presence plan. We have identified issues for further consideration around Part 13 TA and the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG), and are generally supportive of changes to Telstra's Priority Assistance (PA) arrangements, although with some qualification.

The complexity of reforms in privacy and CSG, combined with their significant implications for consumers and the general community, necessitates more in depth consideration and consultation. There are a number of longer term industry arrangements that will change as the local infrastructure provider moves from Telstra to the NBN that will impact on the CSG. Once the framework for the NBN is conclusively established, it will be timely to comprehensively review existing arrangements. In the meantime, we welcome continuing involvement in discussion around these important matters.