

Telecommunications complaints fall, but serious concerns remain

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) has welcomed an overall fall in complaints to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO), however, raised concerns that small businesses may be suffering as complaint levels from the sector reach a three year high.

Complaint data published today in the TIO's Annual Report 2020-2021 shows that complaints about phone and internet services fell 6.1% in the last financial year. Among these 119,400 complaints, the TIO identified 19,689 complaints from small businesses, the highest volume of small business complaints in the last three years. Concerningly, complaints from small businesses about no or delayed action increased by 28.2% from 2019-2020, failure to cancel a service increased by 67.6% and provider uncontactable increased by 181%.

"Phone and internet services have never been more essential for people in Australia, with much of the country working and learning from home during rolling lockdowns throughout the last financial year," said ACCAN Deputy CEO Andrew Williams. "While it's positive to see that the overall level of complaints has fallen, we can't lose sight of the fact that over 100,000 people have had to escalate a phone or internet problem to the TIO because they weren't able to have their problem resolved by their telco."

The peak body for communications consumers expressed concern that complaints about a provider being uncontactable increased a substantial 115.0% from the previous year. No or delayed action by a provider also topped the list of complaints from phone and internet users, up from number two in the 2019-2020 report.

"When you have an issue with your phone or internet connection, it is up to your provider to fix the problem. It's very frustrating to hear that people are being left without a working connection while they hear little to nothing from their provider about what will be done to solve the issue," said Mr Williams.

To ensure communications consumers are protected against poor customer service, ACCAN believes that the telco industry regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), should more frequently and extensively audit providers' customer service and complaints handling arrangements. ACCAN would also like to see higher penalties applied for telcos that break consumer protection rules such as the ACMA's Complaints Handling Standard.

Mr Williams said the growing number of complaints from the small business community likely reflected the pivot to ecommerce that many businesses have adopted over the past year, and the respective increasing importance of connectivity.

"Whether you're a fitness instructor who has shifted to delivering classes over Zoom or a florist who takes orders over the phone or online, having access to reliable phone and internet services is vital to keep your business up and running in today's age."

Other notable trends in the TIO's 2020-2021 Annual Report include the prominence of complaints against the nation's largest telco, Telstra, who made up 62.1% of complaints in the last financial year.

“We thank the TIO for their ongoing efforts to provide fair, independent, and accessible dispute resolution services. We look forward to continuing to work with the TIO and the telcos to advocate for communications services that are trusted, inclusive, and available for all.”