

# ACCAN 2022 CommsDay Congress Speech

Andrew Williams – Acting CEO

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Good morning,

Before I begin today, I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Peoples of the Kulin Nation. I also pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

For those who don't know me I've been with the organisation for just under three years now, initially as Director of Operations and Deputy CEO role, and moved into this role when Teresa Corbin departed last October.

After more than two years of zoom and teams meetings it's great to be here in person and see some familiar faces in 3D for the first time.

My ACCAN journey has provided a great opportunity to gain an understanding of the myriad issues in this space and I'm committed to our ongoing mission of ensuring that communications services are trusted, inclusive, and available for all.

As many of you are no doubt aware, for many years ACCAN has represented consumers on a wide range of issues which are encapsulated in our priorities:

- Increased reliability
- Improved accessibility
- A fairer telco market
- Affordable telecommunications
- Better infrastructure
- Growing consumer confidence

You'll no doubt be pleased to hear that I'm not going to go into detail on all of these this morning.

Instead, I want to focus on two key areas today:

Firstly, following on from the Minister's presentation, the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review, with specific attention to some work we're doing in support of Indigenous consumers and;

**ACCAN**  
**MEDIA**  
**CONTACT**

Melyssa Troy  
Mobile: 0409 966 931  
[media@accan.org.au](mailto:media@accan.org.au)

*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.*

Secondly the need for a fairer telco market.

## 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review

To set the scene, as we're all aware, the last few weeks have brought about massive challenges for Australians with floods devastating much of South-east Queensland and large parts of New South Wales.

We've heard many stories from our members and the general public on the ground about the difficulties they're facing when it comes to communications in these areas.

Issues with mobile phone reception have meant that many ATMs and EFTPOS facilities were inoperable. Some families were unable to stay in contact with relatives who had been evacuated, contact insurance companies, or read news about road closures.

While we recognise the positive efforts of the telco industry and NBN Co to provide temporary measures such as COW SATs and free access to data, we now need to think about the structural changes that are needed to keep our communities connected when the next inevitable natural disaster arrives.

So often when we think about hardening mobile networks, we think about how to make them more resistant to bushfires – but if these latest floods are anything to go by, we will need to cast our minds further to ensure that Australians have access to these vital services during a wide range of emergencies.

It is clear that the experiences of regional communities during the last few years have highlighted and heightened the need for access to reliable, resilient and affordable telecommunications services.

It's with this context in mind that this morning I'd like to talk about the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review, and ACCAN's wish list for government action off the back of the Committee's report.

The Review, expertly chaired by Luke Hartsuyker, has outlined more than a dozen key findings relating to issues such as digital connectivity, reliability of regional communications services, and digital inclusion.

ACCAN is pleased that many of the recommendations from the Committee mirror those put forward in our own submission to the Review, not the least of which is our focus on the need for national recognition of telecommunications as an essential service.

I understand that I am likely preaching to the converted here, as most everyone in this room understands the vital nature of telecommunications, especially in times of disaster and natural emergencies.

Unfortunately, due to the designation of essential services primarily being the role of states and territories, there is no uniform approach to this matter. Surprisingly, only Queensland currently recognises telecommunications as an essential service.

Other states and territories have somewhat oblique references to the issue in their respective Emergency Services legislation, but we want to make it an explicit requirement.

Without the essential service designation, telcos face logistical barriers when it comes to restoring services which often result from power outages.

ACCAN supports Infrastructure Australia's recommendations that telecommunications be classified as an essential service, as well as creating a clear legislative framework for improved policies and processes for state and territory governments and network operators to plan, manage and provide resilient services.

The telecommunications sector would then receive support and protection from state and territory emergency services to resolve any logistical issues which may arise, such as the need for priority access to fuel and allowing for vegetation removal or management.

The issue of access to fuel could also be alleviated if mobile towers in remote areas were to receive extra backup power supply to last between 4-7 days. This would ensure maintenance of communications services during power outages, and to allow sufficient time for technicians to restore the service.

ACCAN welcomed the Federal Government's recent announcement that they are providing \$10 million in upgrades to reinforce the resilience of mobile networks in regional areas.

This much welcomed funding under Round 2 of the Mobile Network Hardening Program will mean Optus, Telstra and TPG Telecom will deliver 544 mobile network resilience upgrades across the country.

Following stage 2 of this program, we would like to see an audit of mobile towers at high risk of natural disaster be carried out to determine whether an additional round of funding is required.

We'd also like to see the telco industry convene regularly to discuss the reliability of telecommunications infrastructure and measures to facilitate quick and easy restoration of services.

#### *Indigenous Steering Committee*

One of the key groups impacted by the potential outcome of the review are those in Australia's regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities.

ACCAN has long been concerned about digital exclusion in remote Indigenous communities, particularly due to the inadequacy and limited availability of communications infrastructure in these areas.

The true extent of digital exclusion in remote Indigenous communities is unclear due to significant data and knowledge gaps.

A patchwork of piecemeal policy responses from successive state, territory and Federal Governments have left many of the more than a thousand remote Indigenous communities chronically underserved by telecommunications infrastructure.

Worryingly, reports indicate that the digital divide facing First Nations people in remote communities – and in other areas – is widening.

In recognition of the importance of having a First Nations led response to these issues, ACCAN has convened an Indigenous Steering Committee, chaired by Dr Heron Loban – a Torres Strait Islander woman and former ACCAN Director.

Guided by this Committee we aim to close the digital divide for First Nations consumers in a way that is genuinely representative of the interests of First Nations peoples.

Last week, this Steering Committee wrote to Minister McKenzie advocating for the Federal government to fund the implementation of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan and any activities identified within it.

The Committee also emphasised the importance of the Federal Government investing in local-level, community-informed and co-designed solutions to resolve infrastructure connectivity problems in remote Indigenous communities.

We cannot roll-out a cookie cutter approach to digital inclusion across the country and expect it to work for the wide variety of communities impacted.

Instead, we must trust the local experts on the ground to guide the creation of programs that will assist their communities to get online and develop the digital literacy skills necessary to benefit from the online world. We're fortunate to have some of these experts on our committee.

Finally, ACCAN's Indigenous Steering Committee is calling on the Federal Government to act within the year to collect baseline data and report on digital inclusion for First Nations people in Australia, including

those living in regional and remote areas, in accordance with the data development areas under Outcome 17 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

If we do not know the exact extent of the digital inclusion gap within these communities, it is very difficult to design programs that aim to address the problem.

## Fairer Telco Market

Next this morning, I'd like to provide some insight into our call for a fairer telco market.

What do we mean by this?

Poor customer service, irresponsible selling practices, unresponsive or uncontactable telcos, unfair policies, procedures and dispute resolution issues, and information asymmetry in the telecommunications market are causing considerable harm to communications consumers, especially those experiencing vulnerability.

There is a lack of information and promotion of affordable devices and services, and at the same time a confusing array of complex offers, which results in consumers entering contracts for products not suited to their needs.

Fairer market conditions would address existing information asymmetries in the communications sector to support consumers to make well informed communications purchases.

ACCAN believes that one of the most practical ways to level the playing field is through the implementation of a trusted independent plan comparison tool.

We see this tool addressing consumer knowledge gaps and providing accurate and customisable information about the availability and price of various phone and internet services - similar to the Government's Energy Made Easy website.

The Energy Made Easy price comparison tool relies on data provided by energy companies about every plan they offer. Energy companies must develop a Basic Plan Information Document (BPID) and the Detailed Plan Information Document (DPID), which accompany each energy plan on the market. This is submitted to the Australian Energy Regulator for inclusion in the searchable data base.

With a bit of effort, these arrangements could be mirrored in telecommunications. Small changes to Critical Information Summary requirements could bring greater consistency and feed into a telecommunications-specific plan comparison tool.

While comparator sites like Finder and WhistleOut do help consumers compare products on the market, the major issue from our perspective is that they are not independent.

They rely on advertising and sponsorship from providers that results in them boosting some players, while neglecting others from their selection of services all together.

Consumers need to be able to trust that they are being given the full range of services on offer without any commercial incentives getting in the way.

### *PIAC/ACCAN Research*

I also thought I'd take the opportunity to give you a heads up on a related research project we've just commissioned.

Information asymmetry goes beyond knowing what products and services are on offer and extends to being aware of how you can pay for those products and services.

ACCAN has been concerned by reports that customers are experiencing hardship due to a lack of options when it comes to paying their telco bills.

Earlier this year, we began a joint research project with the Public Interest Advocacy Centre to explore the ways that people pay their telco and energy bills.

In particular, this study will look at 'hidden debt', when people take on other forms of debt in order to pay their telco bills.

We are now starting to receive the first data back from this research, and the findings raise some interesting insights.

For example, compared with the energy sector, telcos are less transparent about additional fees and costs associated with paying your bill, generally offer customers fewer options to pay their bills, and overall have higher additional processing fees.

We know that in recent years, there has been an industry-wide push from telcos to promote direct debit as the primary form of payment.

Of the 82 telco retailers reviewed, 90% offer direct debit as a form of payment, with many telling customers it is "the easiest" and "most efficient" way to pay.

Despite this, our research shows that a significant percentage of telco customers avoided paying by direct debit in the last two years.

Other early key highlights from the research, which is still in the field, include: information about billing costs aren't always easy to find, consumers want flexibility and autonomy with their bills, and certain groups are more likely to suffer from unfair or inflexible payment or billing practices.

We anticipate that this research will be complete and ready for publication mid-2022. Once complete, the results of this research will be used to inform recommendations for fairer and more transparent payment mechanisms for consumers.

In closing, the last few weeks have demonstrated the vital nature of reliable, and accessible telecommunications services.

There is no doubt that the telcos have stepped up to the plate to provide as much support as possible to the impacted communities.

Through flood, fire and pandemic, this industry always steps up and we acknowledge and appreciate this.

ACCAN's focus is that it should not only be in times of natural disaster or great turbulence that we take stock of the important role of phone and internet services in the lives of Australians.

If nothing else, the last few years has emphasised how, more than ever before, telecommunications is an essential service.

We need to be doing more to ensure that people across Australia are guaranteed access to communications services that are trusted, inclusive, accessible, and available for all.

Thank you.