
Better Delivery of Universal Services: *Having Your Say on the USO*

The Australian Government is currently reviewing the future of the Universal Service Obligation (USO) beyond 2024. This blog post aims to answer some of the general questions consumers may have about this important consumer protection.

What is the Universal Service Obligation (USO)?

The USO is a legal requirement that guarantees a person's access to a standard fixed landline phone service provided by Telstra, regardless of their location in Australia. The USO also covers the provision of public payphones by Telstra throughout Australia.

Why is the USO important?

The Australian Government is currently [seeking feedback](#) on the future of the USO. Since its inception in 1999, the way we communicate has changed dramatically. Communications have become increasingly essential for work, education, accessing government and non-government services, and socialising. The USO remains particularly important in ensuring people living in regional, rural, and remote areas have access to essential communications services. The upcoming consultation presents an opportunity to update and strengthen everyone's right to access communications services.

How could the USO be updated?

The current USO only provides consumers with a right to a standard telephone service. A standard telephone service refers to a landline (home phone) connection many of us grew up with, and [must provide](#) access to local, national and international calls, untimed local calls, and free access to emergency service numbers.

These services are essential, and for many individuals residing in regional, rural, and remote areas they are a reliable and trusted lifeline during natural disasters and emergencies.

However, communications technology and public expectations have changed since the USO was introduced, and USO reform may provide opportunities to get a better deal for consumers and ensure more reliable and robust services.

Landlines are a reliable way to make calls and contact emergency services, but they lack the flexibility of alternative technologies like mobile phones. Consumers expect to use mobile communications, and for many consumers who do not live at a permanent address a mobile connection is essential.

Doing business, accessing government services and education is all increasingly happening online, meaning that consumers require a data connection to live, study, and work.

Payphones are still an important part of Australia's public communication infrastructure. Payphone services facilitate calls important for safety, wellbeing, and personal interconnection. [According to Telstra](#) over 250,000 calls were made via payphones to emergency services in a 12-month period during 2022-23. That is over 680 calls per day. The new USO should take into account the role payphones play as a communications tool of last resort.

Who pays for the USO?

The USO is funded through the Telecommunications Industry Levy (TIL). The TIL is collected from industry participants, who ultimately pass some or all of these costs to the end user consumer through the prices they charge. This, alongside additional public funding, funds the USO.

ACCAN's role in the USO review

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is the national peak body that represents all consumers on communications issues including telecommunications, broadband, and emerging new services.

ACCAN is committed to undertaking in-depth stakeholder engagement on the future of the USO to ensure communications services are trusted, inclusive, accessible, and available for all.

We will be seeking the input of our member organisations in late January and early February 2024. Our next members roundtable will be held in early February 2024. Expect to receive more information about this in the near future.

How do I find out more?

For more information, [follow ACCAN](#) on social media and read the [government's consultation paper \(including a background on the USO\)](#).

If you would like to provide your view on the future of the USO, please contact the ACCAN Policy Team via info@accan.org.au.

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is Australia's peak communication 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.

ACCAN is committed to reconciliation that acknowledges Australia's past and values the unique culture and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. [Read our RAP](#)
