



## Policy Priorities 2021

ACCAN's purpose is to work for "communications services that are trusted, inclusive and available for all." Our Strategic Plan can be viewed at [accan.org.au](http://accan.org.au).

In 2021 ACCAN efforts will be focused on the following priority areas, informed by the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on consumers' use of communications services. At the same time, we will be responsive to emerging issues, and engage with government and industry consultations in areas of significance for telecommunications consumers.

Our policy priorities are developed in close consultation with ACCAN members, and are informed by our knowledge and analysis of the communications market.

### Impact of COVID-19

The challenges of 2020 have impacted consumers' use of communications services profoundly. COVID-19 lockdowns have accelerated reliance on broadband services, as consumers switched online for work, education, delivery of health and other professional services, and staying in touch. The changes will be enduring for the foreseeable future, and longer term. This context has exacerbated pre-existing digital disadvantage due to affordability barriers, lack of digital skills and confidence, lack of suitable products and services. It has highlighted the poor customer service provided by many telcos causing considerable customer detriment, as well as weaknesses in telco financial hardship responses.

ACCAN's focus will be on network and industry performance to ensure resilient communications services in times of peak demand and emergencies. We will advocate for affordable access to services and devices to minimise the disruption of switching to remote learning, and for greater availability and choice of services suited to the needs of small businesses. We will engage with government and industry to reduce barriers for older people using the internet, and for investment in the support all consumers and small businesses need to engage and diversify online. We will continue our advocacy for significant improvements in telco customer service. We will support the development of a First Nations Digital Inclusion Strategy to overcome the entrenched disadvantage experienced in poorly served remote communities, left even more isolated during COVID lockdowns.

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN)  
*Australia's peak body representing communications consumers*

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## **Increased reliability**

Stronger foundations are necessary to support the delivery of essential communications services. Our communities and small businesses are more reliant on telecommunications than ever before, and yet arrangements to support increased reliability have not changed substantially in 20 years.

ACCAN will advocate for the introduction of arrangements for fast connection times, prompt fault repair, punctual appointment keeping and consumer and small business compensation if timeframes are not met. We will seek network reliability measures for all networks to minimise disruptive outages, and robust, accelerated arrangements for priority assistance customers, to assist those with serious health conditions and disabilities stay connected while at home.

## **No Australian Left Offline - affordable telecommunications for all**

Home broadband services have become increasingly expensive, and are out of reach for many households facing tight budgets and more financial demands.

ACCAN's priority is that No Australian is Left Offline – that all households that can benefit from connection to a fast NBN broadband service are able to do so. We will continue to advocate for the delivery of an affordable, concessional, home broadband service for households on limited incomes. Cost savings for government service delivery are significant, and the social and economic benefits of NBN will be maximised with greater take-up of services.

We will also work to ensure that programs to deliver direct relief to low income individuals are available across a choice of providers, and that consumers have the information they need about services suited to their budget where choice is available.

## **A fairer telco market**

The harm for consumers caused by poor customer service, questionable selling practices, unfair treatment of vulnerable consumers, and information asymmetry in the telecommunications market is underestimated

We will work for reforms to deliver stronger consumer protections to underpin a fair and competitive communications market that delivers for all consumers and small businesses. We will provide a strong evidence base to support measures to lift performance, increase transparency and accountability, and rectify systemic issues. We will also prioritise our advocacy for underlying reforms to support positive consumer outcomes, and fair treatment of customers by telco providers. We will review and inform consumers about new plans and offers in the market, and advocate for products best suited to consumer needs.

## **Growing consumer confidence**

Consumers want to engage online, but many have deep concerns about the security of their personal information, manipulative practices, and fraud. Others feel disempowered by the lack of transparency surrounding how their personal information is gathered, stored and shared by third parties. Many consumers lack the opportunity and confidence to use the internet and are challenged by technology that could improve their lives.

We will work for improved privacy protections for Australian consumers that are comparable to international best practice, and for measures to tighten protections for consumers at times of vulnerability and abuse. We will advocate for a framework to build trust in the Internet of Things, and support initiatives to assist consumers to get online, particularly for remote communities that could benefit the most. We will support the introduction of the consumer data right in telecommunications, but only if consumer privacy is not compromised and consumer information protected from exploitation.

### **Better infrastructure**

The near completion of NBN means a broadband infrastructure upgrade for most Australians, but there remain many that are underserved. Some are still waiting for NBN to become available and others for upgrades, while in remote Indigenous communities last mile infrastructure is badly needed. There is strong demand for increased mobile network coverage in regional areas, as well as on transport corridors and high-risk emergency areas. Technology used to deliver fixed voice services in remote and rural areas is aging and unreliable, and an estimated 235,000 premises are connected to ADSL outside NBN's fixed footprint with no adequate future plan for service transition if ADSL is withdrawn.<sup>1</sup> 5G networks are rolling out but availability is limited.

We will advocate for place-based solutions to better match infrastructure to the needs of consumers, whether over NBN, smaller fixed line networks, local fixed wireless, mobile, or last mile connectivity. We will engage with Federal, state and territory governments to deliver funding for infrastructure improvement programs. We will focus on future service delivery arrangements that support the best outcomes for regional and remote consumers, small businesses, and poorly served remote Indigenous communities. We will keep a watch on 5G rollouts and monitor plans to withdraw 3G, advocating for full transparency about the costs, limitations and implications of these services and network changes.

### **Improved accessibility**

Many Australians with disability continue to be excluded from our increasingly digital society, and there are many barriers to access that must be overcome. National Relay Services (NRS) have limited availability, Australian free to air and subscription television is inaccessible for people who are blind or have vision impairment, and a significant amount of television content is inaccessible for people who rely on captioning; real-time access to emergency services for consumers who are Deaf, Deafblind or have hearing or speech impairment is still not possible. Access to online government services also remains difficult for some people with disability.

We will continue to work closely with our members, industry and government stakeholders to improve communications access and inclusion across all areas in which barriers exist. We will work to make sure that all National Relay Services are available 24/7. We will work with our members to advocate for increased captioning and audio description services across free-to-air and subscription television. We will promote the provision of up-to-date, independent and appropriate information

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.communications.gov.au/documents/development-universal-service-guarantee-summary-report>, p.17

about digital communication equipment and services in accessible formats. We will continue to promote the adoption of a whole-of-government procurement policy for accessible information and communications technology. We will engage with our members and the disability sector to realise the goals set out in our [Ideal Accessible Communications Roadmap](#).