



Standing Advisory Committee Consumer Affairs Meeting Report

Tuesday 8 February 2012 10.00am – 4.00 pm

Members Present: Johanna Plante – Chair, ACCAN Board
Loretta Kreet – Legal Aid Queensland
Karin Ness – Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre
Rachel Milfull – Financial Counselling Australia
Andrew Crouch – Centre for Appropriate Technology
Ian Butterworth – Telecommunications Consumer Group, South Australia
Jo Benvenuti – Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre
Victoria Rubensohn
John Wood

The Chair welcomed newly appointed SACCA member, Karin Ness, representing the Northern Rivers' Community Legal Centre.

Presentation – Chris Dodds, Chair, Telstra Low Income Measure Advisory Committee

This year is the tenth anniversary of the scheme during which time \$2 billion has been allocated towards this program. LIMAC incorporates various forms of financial relief for Telstra customers only. Chris discussed challenges about access to low-income measures. The major challenge is the changing nature of telecommunications and how packages will be shaped in this new environment. The bill assistance vouchers are the only service that currently covers internet use. It was suggested that people with technical expertise, those aware of consumer needs and low income experts come together to design a simple internet product that provides low income consumers with cheaper access and limited downloads (eg \$25 a month). A possible way forward in the new NBN environment could be a generic licence condition that requires a low income assistance package.

Telco sales staff

Members commented that better education of sales staff is needed with staff appearing more interested in selling a new product instead of servicing existing clients. ACCAN has discussed this with the major telcos who all agree that training their staff is a challenge. Where ACCAN has provided specific examples of shortcomings, the telcos have been quick to respond.

Mobile phone towers

Members raised a concern that Telcos have appeared to stop building mobile phone towers and questioned whether this was because of the NBN rollout. ACCAN confirmed that the carriers were not under any obligation to build mobile phone towers but they are expanding as per their commercial interests. It was noted that erecting mobile phone towers is a vexed issue as some communities want them while other communities are in strong opposition.

Telstra 1223 free call number

Members felt Telstra should promote its free directory assistance number, 1223, as opposed to the costly 1234 number. ACCAN explained that the ACMA has proposed to change the '12' number range that directory services currently use. The meeting noted that there was confusion about what number to call and at what cost. The ACMA's is proposing to close down the 12 number range over five years. Telcos will move directory assistance services to the 19, 13 or 18 range depending on the cost of the service. Members were supportive of this change.



Telstra Regional and Rural Presence Plan consultation

Telstra's Regional and Rural Presence Plan is under review. Telstra is required to update the plan every 3 years in accordance with its license requirements and has identified specific issues for older Australians, low-income and other vulnerable consumers. Submissions are due 26 February 2012. ACCAN will circulate the plan amongst SACCA and relevant ACCAN members.

Presentation – NBN Co., Consumer Information Strategy

Sabiene Heindel, Senior Advisor in Stakeholder Relations at NBN Co explained that NBN Co will be undertaking a large public information campaign on migration to the NBN. NBN Co has consulted with ACCAN, retail service providers, cablers and other consumer representatives. NBN Co is aware that end-users wish to know the potential of the new network and how people in regional areas can achieve equity with consumers in metropolitan areas. End-users expect a seamless experience of transition to the NBN.

Consultation on battery back-up for NBN boxes

Some members felt that opt-in is the right process and a checklist should be available for consumers so they are aware of what they need to do in relation to back-up. Other members felt that the battery-back up should always be free and considered this to be part of an 'always-on' universal service, whether for fibre, wireless or satellite. NBN customers. SACCA members questioned the environmental impact of battery replacement and encouraged a broader discussion with environmental groups.

Broadband low-income measures

Evidence from the Home Internet project suggests that for those communities cost was the most important factor in them not connecting. Looking at the budget of people on income support will provide evidence that access to the internet is costs prohibitive. There should be research from providers' data including the number of people who fail to pay or are disconnected for non-payment. Financial counsellors report seeing single parent families who cannot afford internet access and using the library is not convenient.

TCP Code update

ACCAN has notified its members about its decision to vote against publication of the TCP Code and had also put out a media release. The ACCC, DBCDE, and the ACMA have also been briefed about ACCAN's position. The ACMA will now make a decision as to whether or not they will register the Code or further regulation is required. Members discussed the implications if the code is not registered by the ACMA, including the possibility that standards will be developed to regulate the telecommunications industry.

TIO governance

ACCAN made a submission to the TIO review in March 2011 and we are still waiting for the release of the government's final report in response to the review. In the meantime members welcomed ACCAN working with Choice, Consumers Federation Australia, ACOSS, FCA and the National Association of Community Legal Centres on governance structure.

Financial hardship

The TIO recently hosted a telco financial hardship roundtable for the first time. The attendees included large and small telcos, consumer representatives and financial counsellors. This is only the beginning of ongoing discussions. It is hoped that good financial hardship policies will be developed as a result of the roundtable discussions.

Fair Calls campaign update

In November 2011, submissions to the *Freephone and local rate numbers* consultation closed. Over 1000 campaign emails and over 80 key organisational submissions in support of the ACMA's proposal were sent to the ACMA.