Communications availability across Australia

Broadband rollout: Bring it on

Working towards better regional telecommunications

ISSUE **18**
SUMMER 2016

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Australia's peak body for communications consumers

PLUS: nbn satellite lifts off | Rolling out improved mobile coverage

Our CEO: **Teresa Corbin**

The summer 2016 edition of the ACCAN Magazine focuses on the important issue of communications availability and the work being done to ensure that all consumers have access to broadband, fixed-line services and mobile communications.

Our summer Feature explores the recently updated nbn Three-year construction plan. The plan outlines the expected date that nbn will commence building the network in the suburbs and towns listed. We welcomed this information from nbn, but still have concerns that some consumers will be waiting up to five years for adequate broadband.

The Policy section looks at the launch of nbn's first satellite, Sky Muster and the Federal Government's Mobile Black Spot Programme. Sky Muster will provide broadband services to consumers living in rural and remote areas when satellite services become available in the first half of next year. The Mobile Black Spot Programme aims to deliver improved mobile coverage to regional and remote areas that are currently underserved.

Recently we completed some small business research that found the phone and internet plans being offered to these consumers aren't meeting their needs. Along with the research we've included some tips to help small businesses choose the right products to suit their needs.

The Spotlight article covers the 2015 Regional Telecommunications Review Report. The Report contains 12 recommendations for improved regional telecommunications services relating to consumer safeguards, mobile coverage, the NBN and more.

For all the latest ACCAN updates, follow us on Facebook (facebook.com/accanau) or Twitter (twitter.com/ACCAN_AU). Our smartphone app, My Phone Rights, is full of useful information for communications consumers and is available on Android and Apple smartphones. As always, if you have any comments, suggestions or feedback, please email ceo@accan.org.au or call me on 02 9288 4000 / TTY 02 9281 5322.

Warm regards
Teresa Corbin
ACCAN CEO

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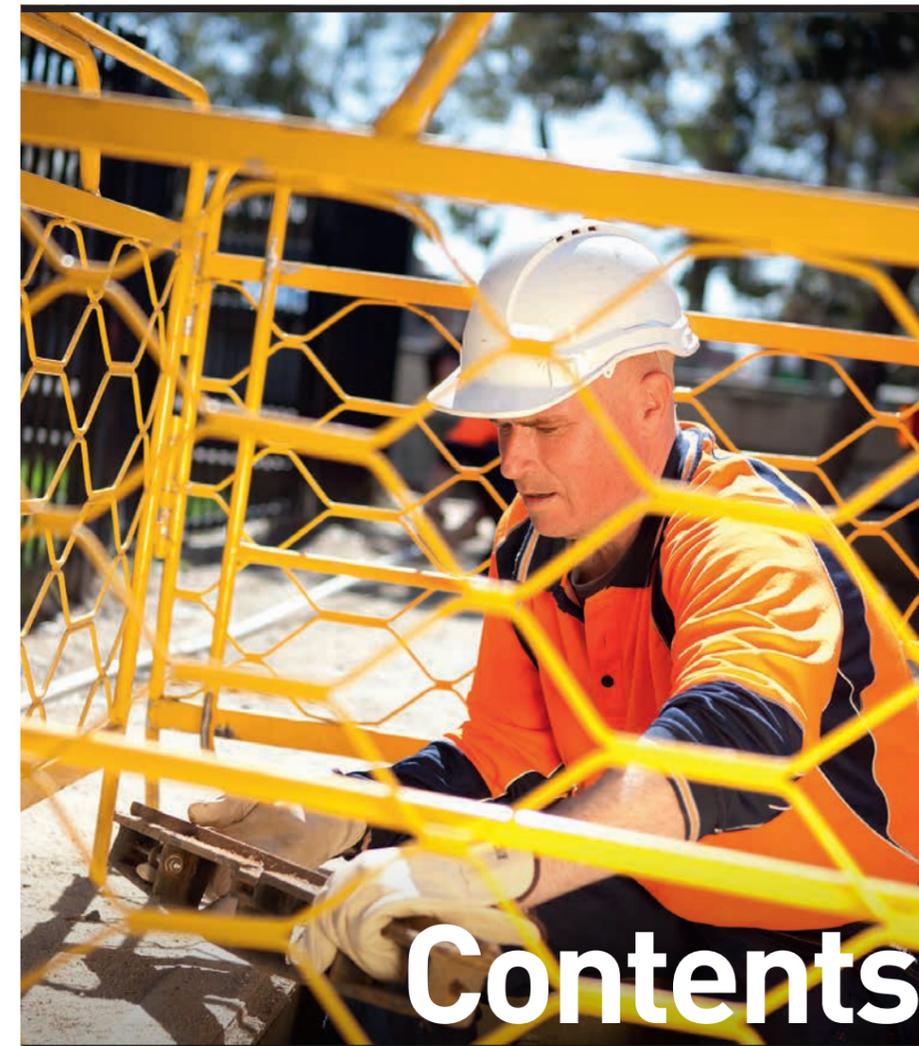
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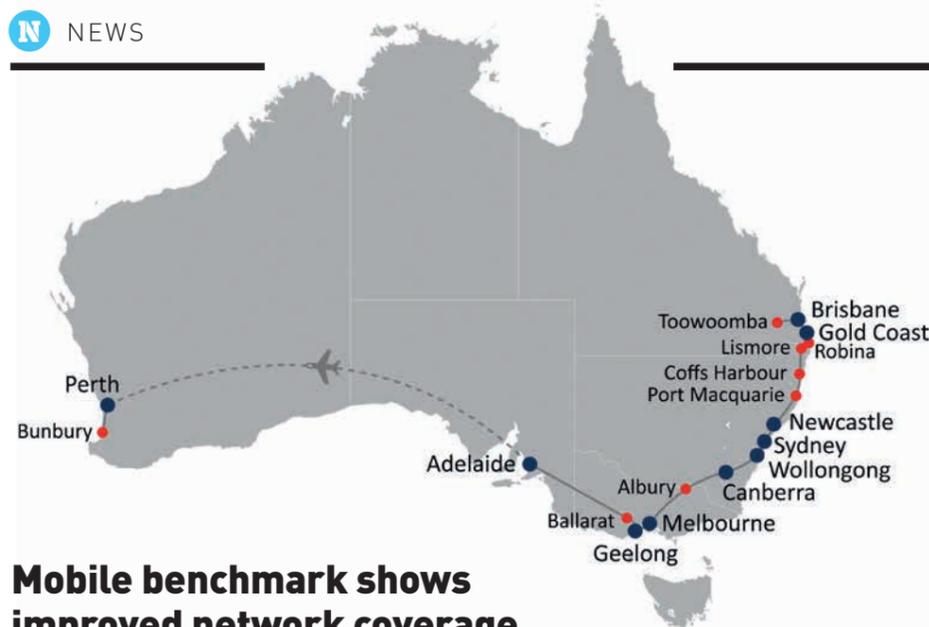
Mobile benchmark shows improved network coverage

The 2015 P3 CommsDay Mobile Benchmark Australia showed improved results for the three carriers tested – Telstra, Optus and Vodafone.

The benchmark tests the telcos on voice and data performance in major metro areas, small towns and cities and connecting highways. This year's test covered 70 per cent of the Australian population.

Telstra was the best in test for 2015. However, all three operators had improved their network coverage compared to last year's results showing the continued investment in mobile coverage.

"ACCAN congratulates P3 and

CommsDay on this important initiative because it provides consumers with independent benchmarking so they can make informed decisions," said ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin.

When choosing a mobile provider consumers should:
• Compare performance of the network operators using the Mobile Benchmark
• Compare plans and prices using comparator websites like WhistleOut to ensure they're getting the best deal
• Compare coverage maps from the providers as a guide to see if they are likely to get coverage in the areas where they live and work

Broadband performance monitoring is needed

In September we welcomed the ACCC's release of its pilot broadband performance program. The pilot proved that performance reporting is needed in Australia.

Such a program has the potential to inform consumers about how broadband services are performing before they decide to sign up to a service.

Broadband performance is complicated. Currently consumers cannot easily compare the quality of competing services and make

their decisions based on price and internet speeds.

"The pilot showed variations in services from different providers that will be important to consumers in recognising which products offer quality," said Teresa Corbin. "Broadband performance metrics would help consumers make more informed choices and we would support the ACCC undertaking a national Broadband Performance Monitoring and Reporting Program."

Remote Indigenous Media Festival

ACCAN attended the Remote Indigenous Media Festival in Lajamanu - a small community of 700 people on the edge of the Tanami Desert in the Northern Territory.

The festival had a positive and optimistic atmosphere with people from all over Australia attending to work towards a common goal. The week consisted of workshops, short courses and industry forums.

On the first day a welcome to country ceremony with a traditional welcome song and dance was performed. Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Nigel Scullion, opened the event along with elders from the community and the chairman of the Indigenous Remote Communications Association.

The festival was a good opportunity to interact with ACCAN members and stakeholders and to hear about issues that affect the remote media industry.

The importance of community media in creating cohesiveness, preserving culture and traditional stories was celebrated during the festival.

2015 Apps For All Challenge Winners

The winners of the 2015 Apps For All Challenge were announced at the ACCAN National Conference.

Winners were awarded a cash prize from the Challenge sponsor, Telstra. During the ceremony Emeritus Professor, Ron McCallum, delivered an inspiring speech on how smartphone applications help him in his everyday life. This video is available on YouTube: youtube.com/ACCANvideo.

And the winners are:
Most accessible mainstream app - RentRight – Consumer Affairs Victoria
Most innovative app designed for people with disability or older Australians - NRS app – National Relay Service
Most accessible children's app - Thread – The Carly Ryan Foundation
Most accessible game app - Rapitap – 22 Point

Starting a conversation around affordability issues

We're pleased to report that our 2015 National Conference, *Dollars and Bytes – Communications affordability now and tomorrow*, was a success.

The Conference brought together thought leaders from industry, consumer groups, regulators and government to help start a conversation around the important issue of affordability.

Over the two days we looked

at Indigenous and regional perspectives, competition and pricing, digital inclusion and more.

"With over 200 participants, including more than 50 speakers and panellists across the two days, we were able to really explore the issue of affordability and discuss what can be done to close the affordability divide," said Teresa Corbin.

Highlights included the keynote presentation by UK telecoms expert, Claire Milne, the debate on digital disruption and the panel for the session: Communications Affordability, the Way Forward which was made up of representatives from Telstra, Optus, Vodafone, amaysim and Jeenee Mobile.

Transcripts, presentations and select session videos are available on the ACCAN website at: accan.org.au/accanevents.

Bad auto-captions are a joke!

Recently ACCAN has been working to bring attention to the growing issue of inaccessibility of online audio visual content being posted to websites.

We formed an alliance of organisations representing the interests of Australians who are Deaf, hearing impaired and those who rely on captions for information to raise concerns around the amount of video content that is being auto-captioned on YouTube. The vast majority of the captions on these videos are not being reviewed for accuracy or readability.

An ad hoc survey of Australian Government websites found a range of problems with captions, including videos with no captions, captions with misspellings and videos with completely incomprehensible captions.

"There is an increasing amount of captioned audio visual content on the internet and we expect all captions to be accurate, readable and comprehensible," said ACCAN Disability Policy Advisor, Wayne Hawkins. "Bad auto-captions are not only inaccessible, but they reflect badly on organisations and make their videos look like an unintended joke."

In the same way that any text document published online is edited for accuracy, captioned content needs to be edited for readability and comprehensibility before being published.

The alliance has contacted Federal Members of Parliament and all major political parties to inform them of this ongoing issue.

"We strongly support Google's initiative of providing automatic captioning on YouTube videos. We are discussing with the company how it can have a greater role in both helping to increase awareness of the importance of closed captions, and ensuring that closed captions on YouTube videos are accurate," added Mr Hawkins.

Broadband rollout: **Bring it on**

October saw the much anticipated release of a list of suburbs and towns that the national broadband network (NBN) will extend to in the next three years. To date, nbn has reached 11 per cent of premises (1.4 million premises).

With the announcement of the new construction areas, it is expected that it will reach 75 per cent of premises (9 million premises) in the next three years. The expected increase in the amount of homes and businesses it plans to connect puts a spotlight on its new slogan: "Bring it on."

For consumers this announcement is a glimpse of hope that the NBN is coming to them or an area near them. The NBN is rolling out, full steam ahead.

This, however, makes the announcement more of a marketing ploy rather than informing and empowering consumers.

Providing better information on the timing and range of technologies being rolled out across Australia was the subject of one of the recommendations of the 2015 Regional Telecommunication Review Report, also released in October. Hopefully, further measures will be undertaken by nbn and the Government to inform and empower consumers following this recommendation.

What is the construction plan?
The announcement provides the expected date that nbn will commence building the network in the suburbs and towns listed. The NBN rollout occurs in three main stages; preparation for build, building of the network and services available; the plan announces the expected date of the second stage.

For the first time the plan outlines the technology that will be used in each suburb and town as part of the multi-technology mix. Until now there was only a rough guideline of what technology will be used in each area.

For suburbs and towns that are listed, it takes about 12 months after building commences before consumers are contacted by nbn, notifying them that they can purchase services through a retail provider, for example Telstra, Optus or iiNet. Therefore the last construction areas on this plan (construction to begin in H2 2018) will likely not be able to purchase services until mid-2019.

The NBN rollout – what is happening?
The nbn 2016 Corporate Plan provides an indication of the ramp up needed to reach its target of 11.9 million premises by 2020. Premises that are due to receive the fixed wireless and satellite technology are largely all expected to be able to order services by financial year 2018. Fibre-to-the-node/basement (FTTN/B) will begin to be available in 2015 but will really kick off in 2016 and 2017. Likewise, nbn hybrid fibre-coaxial (HFC) will be available to millions by 2018. The rollout and availability of these technologies is quicker than the fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP) technology.

The winners and those in limbo
As with any large infrastructure project, there will be premises that are the last to be reached. The suburbs and towns in this announcement can now plan their broadband services, knowing how long they have with their current infrastructure. For some this will be an eager wait.

The winners, those due to connect in the next three years will include consumers who will be receiving fixed wireless and satellite technology, mostly in regional and remote areas. In terms of states, Tasmania, as long promised, will be the first state fully connected. The ACT will be last passed the post.

Unfortunately, 25 per cent of consumers in the suburbs and towns not mentioned in the plan and not currently connected are likely to have a bit of a wait before they will be let into the nbn club.

While most of these consumers will have alternative services which they can use, there is a high number of premises which cannot access adequate services. Particularly if there are no ADSL ports available or they live too far from an exchange.

### Interim services for poorly served areas
This construction plan provides a timeline to industry on the length of time consumers will be waiting for the NBN – or how long they can utilise current services. Some suburbs and towns on the list will use legacy technology for a number of years. If a town is not on the list it will be at least four years before they can order services. This is a significant timeframe, in which case there is an argument that industry can earn a return from providing interim services.

ACCAN is calling on the telecommunications industry to address any gaps and provide affordable interim solutions for these consumers. In particular, Telstra should maintain existing services and investigate alternative solutions for consumers in exchange areas without available services. Consumers who will be waiting a number of years for adequate broadband should be offered alternative services.

Consumers, who wish to check if their town or suburb is included in the construction plan, should go to: nbn.com. au/3yearplan.

NBN Satellite Coverage

⬡ Narrow Spot Beam   ⬡ Wide Spot Beam

This map is for illustrative purposes only
August 2015
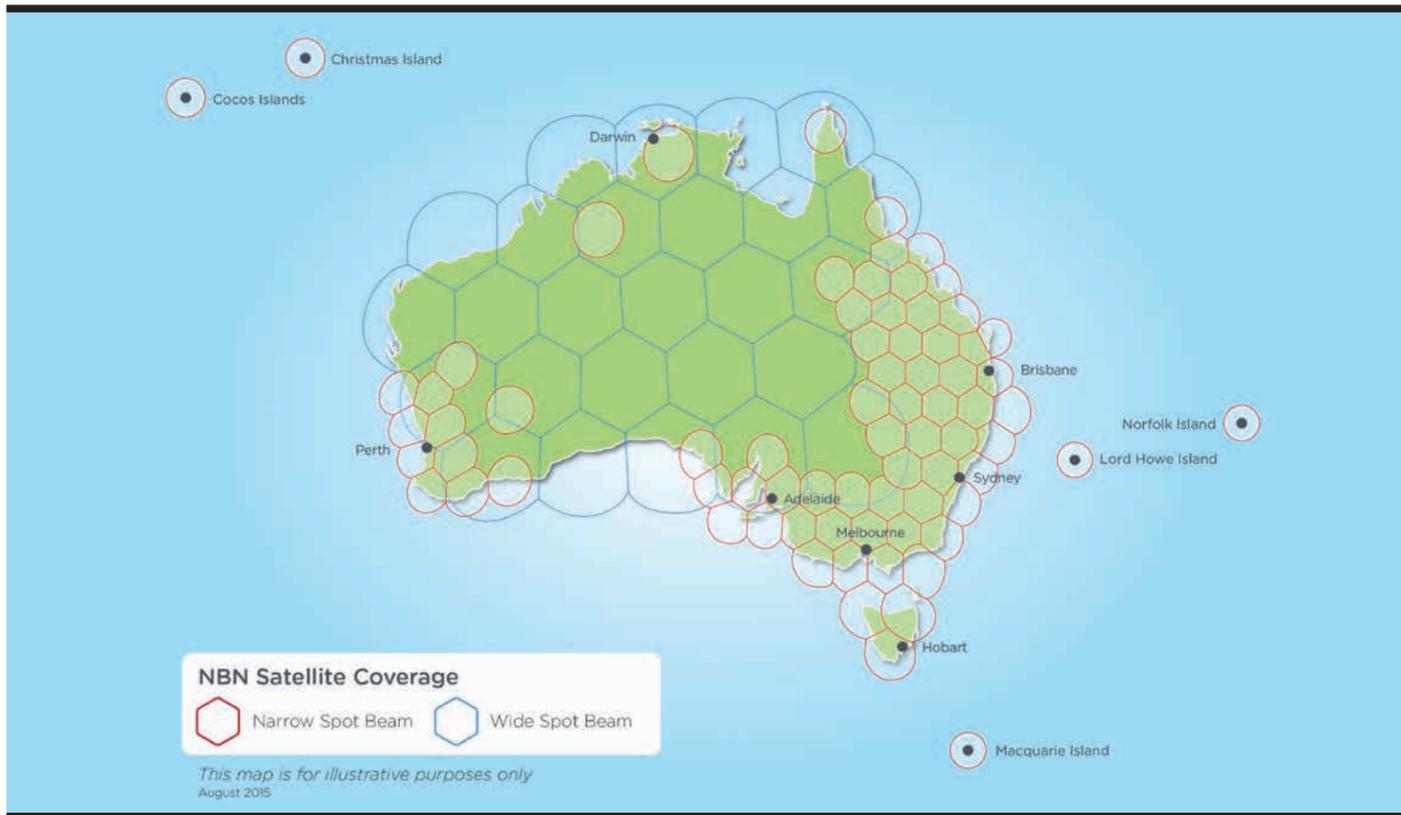
nbn satellite lifts off

Sky Muster, nbn's first satellite, was successfully launched on 1 October by Arianespace in French Guiana.

nbn, its stakeholders and many consumers around Australia waited with bated breath while the rocket carrying the satellite lifted-off and made its way into space. Satellite launches are notoriously perilous. There were a number of stages that had to be passed before the launch was declared a success and a cheer erupted from the crowd.

Even now further work needs to be completed to get the satellite into the correct position and it must be tested before services become available. These are expected to be available in the first half of 2016.

The successful launch of Sky Muster is an important milestone in the delivery of fast broadband to regional and remote Australia. Eventually it will provide fast broadband connections to three per cent of premises across the country. That's around 400,000 homes and businesses.

Primarily the nbn satellites will serve consumers in regional and remote areas including the islands that make up Australia.

Many consumers in these areas currently have poor broadband or no broadband connections at all. Many face difficult situations created by the lack of adequate services or the exorbitant costs of getting services.

It is expected that retailers will begin to announce the satellite plans that they will offer in the coming months. While there will be fair usage policies applied, these are likely to offer greater services and faster speeds to what is currently available.

Consumers on current satellite plans, including the interim satellite service, often report very slow speeds or insufficient data to last the month.

These services offer low speeds and data allowances, usually up to 6Mbps download speeds and up to 20GB of data a month. They often come with very high set up costs, making them unaffordable for many consumers.

People increasingly need a reliable and affordable internet connection to access essential services such as education, banking and health. Consumers with poor broadband can often be cut-off from services that city-dwelling consumers take for granted. For example, students in remote areas are affected by poor broadband services as they are unable to access lessons and educational materials.

In 2016 nbn will launch its second satellite. The launch date has not yet been set.

Rolling out **improved mobile coverage**

Mobile coverage is a key issue for many consumers. In 2014 ACCAN held a forum on this issue and also released the Community Consultation Guide to help communities put forward a business case for improved mobile coverage. The Guide is available online at: accan.org.au/consumer-info.

Following a competitive selection process, in June 2015, the Federal Government announced that Round 1 of the Mobile Black Spot Programme will deliver almost 500 new or upgraded mobile base stations around Australia.

The Programme received support from the Federal Government, State Governments, Telstra, Vodafone, Local Governments, businesses and community groups with a total of $385 million invested to improve mobile coverage across the locations selected in Round 1.

ACCAN welcomed the Round 1 locations announcement as a step toward resolving mobile coverage issues for some areas around the country. The improvements will have positive effects for both consumers and businesses.

One area that will benefit from the Mobile Black Spot Programme is Indi in northeast Victoria. Under Round 1 of the Programme, 30 new mobile towers will be built in the area. The rollout of the towers will begin at the end of 2015 and continue over a three year period.

Throughout Indi there is a strong belief that access to telecommunications services can transform people's lives. Residents fear that without improved mobile coverage the world is leaping ahead of them as they continue to be poorly served.

Even more important, improved mobile coverage will help to keep Indi residents informed during bush fire season and other emergencies. In previous emergency situations residents have received broadcast text messages several days after the emergency occurred.

In another positive step the Federal Government announced a second round of the Mobile Black Spot Programme with a commitment of an additional $60 million in funding. Round 2 nominations are due by 31 December, 2015. We expect it will operate under similar guidelines to the first round.

The competitive selection process for Round 2 is scheduled to commence in early 2016 with successful locations expected to be announced by the end of the year.

Round 2 will offer further opportunities to meet unmet demand for mobile coverage improvements across more locations in remote and regional Australia.

How to get **the best internet available**

Choosing the right internet plan can be a bit of a task. You have to choose the plan and the type of internet that's right for you. Here's our top tips on how to get the best internet available in your area.

1. Check what services are available for your premises

Knowing which network(s) connects to your house will give you an idea of which retailers will offer you services. To find this out you should put your address into the Australian Government's MyBroadband website (mybroadband. communications.gov.au). MyBroadband also gives information about the availability and quality of mobile broadband. This might be a good alternative if you don't use the internet very much, but can be very expensive for heavier users. Generally, if NBN is available it will be the highest quality internet connection. The official NBN rollout map on the nbn website gives some information about the current rollout.

2. I can't get any internet coverage for my house!

Some premises are outside the range of fixed broadband networks and it is a bit more difficult to track down the best solution. The websites above won't have much information to help, but there may be other wireless or satellite options available. Start by doing a Google search for 'fixed wireless' providers in your area.

3. Picking an ISP

Once you know what kind of internet is available you can start looking for the best internet service provider (ISP). For example, if you are served by NBN, a list of retail providers for your premises is available on the nbn website (nbnco.com.au). If your network does not provide a list of ISPs then it can be very difficult to find out which retailers offer services to your premises and may require checking a number of providers' websites. If there are a number of ISPs available in your area then you should consider what they offer in terms of customer service and broadband performance. You can search Whirlpool forums for discussions on providers (forums. whirlpool.net.au).

If you're just using your internet service for basic web browsing and email, most ISPs are okay, but if you want to make the most of new services like video streaming you'll need a solid performer. At the moment there aren't very many independently verified ways to compare ISP performance. The two major ones are the Google Video Quality Report (google.com/ get/videoqualityreport) and Netflix's ISP speed index (ispspeedindex. netflix.com).

4. Price and plan inclusions

You can compare the price and inclusions for the broadband plans of most ISPs using comparator websites like WhistleOut (whistleout. com.au). When you find a plan that meets your needs contact the ISP to make sure it can offer services to your house. Once you're signed up, the connection process usually takes about 10 working days for a new fixed broadband connection and around four hours for a transfer from an existing supplier.
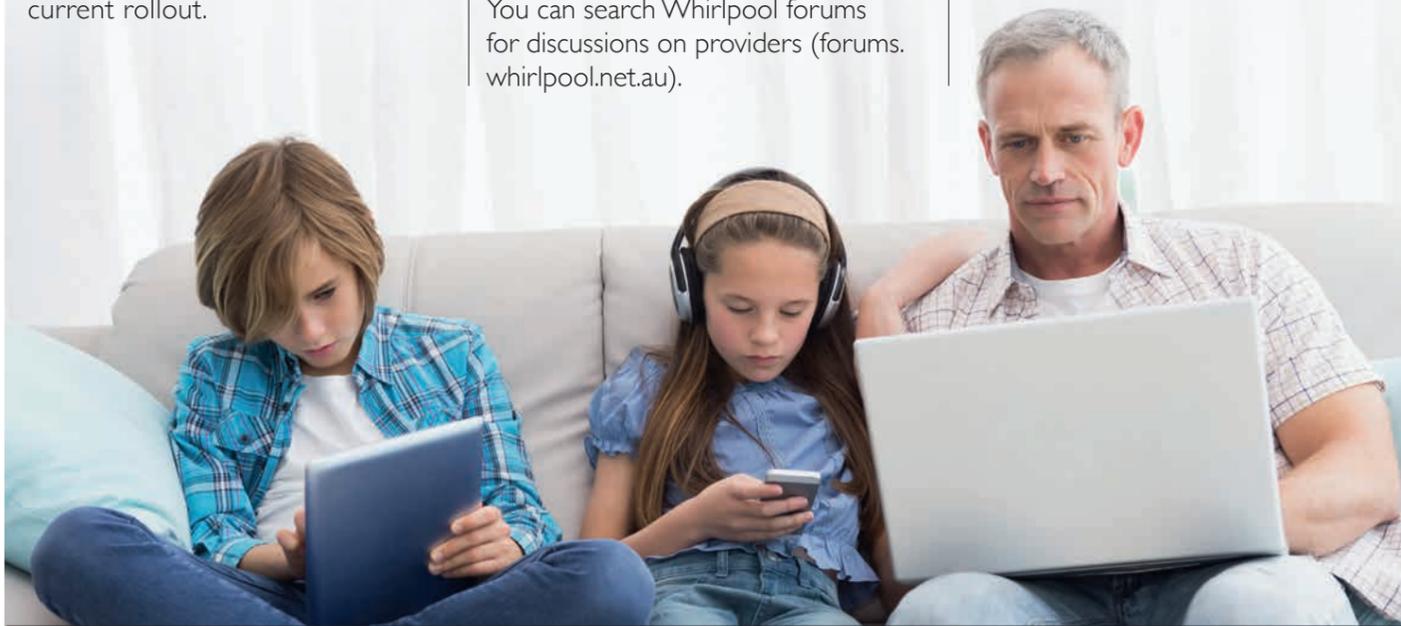
Poor mobile reception: **what can you do?**

From time to time most of us will have a call drop out, delayed texts or slow internet on our mobile phone. But constant mobile reception issues can be frustrating for consumers. If you regularly have mobile reception problems, then you are not getting the service you're paying for. Here's what you should do if you're experiencing poor mobile reception regularly.

Before signing up
Be sure to ask providers about mobile

coverage in the areas where you live and work. Providers have an obligation to make this information available to you and will also often have coverage maps on their websites. Use these resources as a guide to see if you'll get coverage at your house and work place.

After signing up
If you experience persistent drop outs and chronically poor mobile reception where you live and work, it means you are not getting the full benefit of the service you have paid for.

Here's what you can do:
1. Keep records
Keep a record of when and where you get poor reception. Before you contact your provider, make sure you gather all the information you've collected on your reception issues.

2. Contact your provider
Contact your phone company and tell them you have a complaint about mobile reception. Give them details about when and where the issue occurs. Make a record of each complaint you make to your service provider.

3. Agree on a solution with your provider
You might want a one-off or regular discount on your bill. Your phone company might offer you a new handset or SIM that works better with their network.

4. If you can agree
If you and your phone company can agree on a solution, they have 10 days to do what they promised.

5. If you can't agree
If you can't agree on a solution, ask to speak to a manager or supervisor.

6. Still having problems?
If the problem continues you can ask to exit your contract without paying a cancellation fee. If you are still not happy with the way your complaint is handled, or the problem doesn't get fixed in 10 days, you should contact the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) online (tio.com. au) or by phone: 1800 062 058. The TIO is a free service that will help you to resolve your complaint quickly.

Telcos need to update **SMB plans**

 New ACCAN research found that telecommunications packages for small businesses are not adequately aligning to small business needs in the digital economy.

The massive shift toward a more mobile workforce has seen many small business operators blend their home and work lives together. They work on the go and would benefit from being able to access their broadband connections from different locations, but many of the offerings are inflexible for those who have embraced the digital economy.

The report, *Informing Small Business*, looks at small business market offerings and contains a survey of 200 SMB operators. The full report is available on the ACCAN website.

Service guarantees

A lot of small businesses rely on an internet connection to do business. But the report found that for the most part, these are not offered in SMB plans. Around half of those surveyed said their phone and internet plans offered no service guarantees.

Due to the lack of guarantees, small business plans appear to be 'empty products' that don't offer more value above residential consumer plans. The good news is that according to the study, these plans are comparably priced to residential consumer plans.

ACCAN questions the need for telcos to have designated business service packages when in today's environment it is likely that many small business operators already subscribe to residential consumer services.

If they were available, in many cases service guarantees for SMB plans were not easily located online and call centres

provided contradictory information in relation to the terms and conditions available on telco websites.

Do small business plans offer anything extra?

Telcos argue that their small business services come with additional features that set them apart from a residential plan. However, the study raises questions for ACCAN about whether the business owner is able to access these features or if the call centre staff are adequately trained to offer the advertised higher levels of service to their customers.

When asked whether they have access to a specialised small business call centre, 55 per cent of phone users and 67 per cent of broadband users surveyed said no or were unsure if they received this service.

ACCAN believes that there is a need for telcos to invest in more staff training about small business products so they can better meet consumer needs and offer dedicated services for SMBs especially if this is what is being advertised to them.

Information on small business plans needs to be readily available. Documents that set out the terms and conditions of products were found to be very long and as many SMB owners are time poor they are unlikely to have time to read these.

Which broadband product is right for my business?

When trying to decide which broadband product is right for your business, investigate:
- What types of broadband services are available to you?
- Which type of service would best suit the needs of the business in terms of speed, mobility and data allowance? Refer to your broadband bills from the last 6-12 months to calculate your typical usage.
- Do you need both phone and broadband services? If so, consider bundling - getting all the services from the same telco. You might also want to include mobile services in this bundle. This could save you money but make sure that all the services meet your needs otherwise you could end up spending more than you need to.

- Current service issues in your area - Whirlpool forums may offer personal opinions of the services in your area. This may prompt you to query your provider about the specific issues prior to signing up for a service. Some examples are slow speeds, service interruptions or a lack of ADSL ports at your local exchange.

How do I get a value for money product?

- Check for the availability of the service at your premises and ask your preferred telco about connection times, viability of the infrastructure at your address and what service levels they offer. You don't want to be held to a contract for a service that you can't use.
- Check your bills from the last 6-12 months to see what you're getting

charged and to determine if your plan meets your needs. If you keep going over your limits, then it might be time to look for a new plan.
- Shop around, use comparison websites like WhistleOut.com.au to compare products from a range of providers.
- Have a plan for broadband outages and accommodate this into your selection of service. Options to consider:
  - Work from home using your personal broadband
  - Use a mobile broadband service
- Consider bundling if you have phone and mobile needs, but don't pay for services you don't use.
- Review your plan every 18-24 months in line with your business plan.
- Use your provider's tracking tools to track your usage.
- Check your bill regularly to identify any out of the ordinary charges.

Working towards better regional
telecommunications

The triennial Regional Telecommunications Review Report was released in October to much fanfare. The latest Report contains 12 recommendations for improved regional telecommunications services.

The regular review is important as it is the only review that examines the equity between urban and regional telecommunications services. The Review Committee came to its findings after receiving over 400 submissions as well as completing a series of webinars, meetings and teleconferences.

ACCAN's submission to the Review focused on consumer safeguards, the NBN rollout and how additional infrastructure policies can address remaining issues in regional Australia.

The timing of the Review created challenges as two large infrastructure projects (the NBN and Mobile Black Spot Programme) are still in motion. Three issues emerged in the committee findings; the importance of mobile coverage, the potential of the NBN and the need to develop consumer safeguards.

Upon its release, ACCAN welcomed the Report as it identified many issues that our regional, rural and remote stakeholders and members had raised.

Changes to consumer safeguards

In particular, ACCAN welcomed the recommended changes to consumer safeguards. The Report noted that safeguards needed to expand beyond only guaranteeing "increasingly irrelevant" voice services.

The Review Committee urged the Federal Government to work with industry and consumer groups to develop a new Consumer Communication Standard for voice and data. This Standard would be technology neutral and better address availability, accessibility, affordability, performance and reliability issues. It would also be subject to transitional arrangements, with grandfathering provisions to protect consumers who are still reliant on legacy services.

Additional measures which protect low income groups and ensure that all consumers can access government and education sites were suggested. The Report also recommends the establishment of a new funding mechanism, called the Consumer Communication Fund, which would support loss making services in regional Australia. There would be scope for the Fund to include non-commercial NBN services and it would adhere to the principles of "technology neutrality, contestability, economic efficiency, transparency and sustainability."

Examining the future of consumer safeguards is a priority area for ACCAN. We are already working on a consumer white paper looking at the future of the Universal Service Obligation (USO), and a new consumer guarantee fit for the future telecommunications environment.

Mobile coverage

Like previous regional reviews, the importance of mobile coverage was clear to the Committee. It considered that future funding for extension of mobile coverage would require a greater degree of examination of the social and economic benefits to regional Australia. Furthermore, the Committee suggested that more could be made of the NBN infrastructure to extend coverage.

More regional and remote areas will have the chance to nominate for improved mobile coverage under the second round of the Mobile Black Spot Programme. ACCAN understands that the Department of Communications and the Arts is developing the criteria for the second round of the Programme.

NBN

A number of the recommendations related to the NBN and in particular the satellite services. The Committee expressed concerns over the limitations the technology and nbn have placed on regional consumers, in particular, whether consumers will have access to sufficient data allowances.

The Review called for nbn to consider the structure of its satellite fair use policy and wholesale tariffs for the long term satellite program to minimise the impacts of "shaping and suspension" of services. Furthermore, the Report recommended that the investment in NBN should be leveraged and made a number of recommendations related to the rollout of the NBN.

Future

Fundamental changes for the industry were identified in the Report. These changes will require a multi-stakeholder, cross party and industry collaboration to achieve. It is vital for regional consumers that action is taken on the Report's recommendations. At the time, ACCAN called on the Government to prioritise its response to the Report to ensure these changes are put into place in the near future.

The Report recommended that ACCAN continue to make representations on the accessibility and affordability of services. ACCAN's core work is focused on better communications for all Australians, but particularly to represent those consumers who are currently the most poorly served.

BCR Chief Economist, **Dr Paul Paterson**

Dr Paterson, you have worked as an economist in the communications sector for over 20 years, what would you say is the biggest development in that time?

Yes, a long time with huge changes. In this time I have worked as an economic consultant, a regulator and as a senior executive in both the public and private sectors, in Australia and overseas. During this time I've seen many impressive developments in the comms sector, including the:

- Release of the first smartphone and subsequent huge uptake that put the internet at virtually everyone's fingertips
- Extensive availability of high speed broadband networks (fixed and mobile), including the NBN in Australia
- Proliferation of cloud computing, and the rapid and far-reaching rise of new digitally-based service providers, such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple and Netflix

However, for me the biggest development—that reflects all of these changes—is the full scale arrival of much-anticipated convergence in all its various forms – fixed/mobile,

telecoms/media networks and products, and of course the convergence of communications with every aspect of the economy. This has revolutionised the way we communicate, learn, interact, conduct business and consume content at the economic, societal and individual level.

The Bureau of Communications Research (BCR) was established in 2014, why was it important that such a body was established?

The BCR was established as a progressive advocate for, and exponent of, research and analysis to support evidence-based public policy development in the online world. Since September 2014, we've engaged with stakeholders across government, industry and the research community to understand their issues and priorities and opportunities for partnering. Importantly, we have also supported the Department of Communications and the Arts with a number of policy-focused commissioned projects.

The communications, digital technology, media and post sector is central to Australia's overall economic competitiveness and productivity. However, we need to understand

how the digital revolution is shaping our economy, undertake research to ensure that this is as productive and economically efficient as possible and identify the barriers to future growth and competition. The BCR strives to inform good public policy in each of these areas and provide economic research and analysis for the department, the Minister and the country. A big challenge, but one we are excited to embrace.

The BCR has an ambitious work program for the year, what can we expect to see being produced and which project are you most excited about?

A key challenge for the BCR, as a small team, is to balance the competing priorities, focus on adding value and, above all, be relevant and influential in a sector that is more and more fundamental to the economy and the whole of society. A key part of the change is balancing the mix of work that informs and supports departmental policy development and advice such as the BCR's analysis of funding options for NBN non-commercial services, and publications such as our Leading Indicator series and the soon-to-be-released study of the contribution of the digital platform to productivity growth. Both of these projects absolutely capture my imagination and will make an important contribution. But not only these. Something very significant and exciting we have done in the interests of evidence-based policy development is establish for use by our policy colleagues a comms sector big data warehouse along with a set of cutting edge analytical tools and a bunch of the experts to guide staff in their use. We are part of the data revolution!

Going online on behalf of others

We have reached a point in modern society where we seem to go online for everything. To organise meals, book transport, pay bills, earn an income, vote, communicate and of course, obtain all sorts of goods and entertainment.

Yet, there are still some people who can't or won't go online. For some, a **proxy internet user** takes their place: someone who goes online on behalf of others. Usually an informal relationship, proxy users are an overlooked group of consumers. It is easy to assume that proxy users undertake practical internet activities, such as shopping or checking timetables, on behalf of others, but it could be that they undertake a much

wider variety of activities altogether.

In the 2015 ACCAN Grants Round, Neil Selwyn, of Monash University, is investigating proxy users and trying to discover who they are, their relationships with the people they assist, the sorts of technology expertise they have, what social networks they use, and so on.

It might be that most proxy users have close relationships with the person they proxy for. For example they may be family members, carers, friends or neighbours; or they might be work colleagues or technology-related community actors, such as librarians, or the local IT retailer.

Little is understood of their reasons and motivations for acting as a proxy internet user, and why the 'real user'

is not online. The barriers faced by proxy users in providing effective assistance are also unknown.

Perhaps the biggest question of all is how can these proxy users best be supported with the right sorts of resources, training or support networks?

The project will undertake a survey of proxy users, in-depth interviews and workshops so that we can produce useful resources and policy guidance for this often hidden group of consumers.

If you're a proxy user and would like to complete the survey, use this link to access it - bit.ly/online4others. **For more information on the project contact the ACCAN Grants Team via grants@accan.org.au.**

Battling for better broadband

Residents of the Northern Illawarra area in New South Wales have been experiencing poor broadband services for some time. With a population of about 20,000, there are around 7,100 households in the area.

Despite being less than 55 kilometres from the centre of Sydney, a large number of the residents have access to broadband that is little better than dial up services. Some have no ADSL connection at all.

Frustrated by the lack of services, residents in the area have started a Facebook page – 2508+ Disconnected – to band together so they have a stronger voice to let telcos, ISPs and relevant stakeholders know about the lack of quality services available in the area.

Where it all started

After four and a half years of battling with Telstra for an ADSL connection and poor mobile broadband services, someone in the community suggested the residents start a Facebook page, says 2508+ Disconnected Campaign Coordinator, Mark McKenzie.

"We had never used it before so we got the kids to help us register and start-up a Facebook Page," adds Mr McKenzie. "We were stunned at how fast interest in the page grew, with most suggesting that they were very appreciative that someone had taken the initiative on these long standing problems."

"The poor internet services in our area is constraining small business productivity and making it difficult for students to complete online assignments. In fact, there are a number of families in our area who send their high school students to stay with friends and family in Southern Sydney during the week just so they can get access to a reasonable internet service to complete assignments."

Many home-based businesses are forced to work from serviced offices in Southern Sydney (at additional expense) or purchase very expensive mobile broadband.

So prominent are the issues in the area that only after a few months of starting the Facebook group it already has over 1000 'likes.' This was mostly achieved through word-of-mouth.

Goals for the group

2508+ Disconnected has four key goals it wants to achieve.

"The first is to educate people on the things they can do as customers, to seek remedy of the problems they are experiencing," says Mr McKenzie. "Our membership of ACCAN has been very helpful in this area given the materials available to inform communication customers of their rights."

Secondly the group is aiming to get a resolution of longstanding issues associated with poor copper infrastructure in the area. This has been challenging for residents as Telstra seems unwilling to allocate resources and money to provide the upgrades.

The third goal was to influence nbn to include the Northern Illawarra area in its rollout construction plans.

In July 2015, when the campaign began, the area was not included in nbn's five year work programme. However, on a positive note, in October, residents learnt that the area has been added to nbn's Three-year construction plan. Construction is scheduled to begin in 2H 2017.

Influencing the Federal Government to introduce minimum service standards for broadband services is the final goal of the group.

"The most amazing thing we have learnt to date is that, despite households paying significant sums of money, the ISP's have no obligations to provide a minimum service in terms of up-time and service speed," says Mr McKenzie. "Consequently, we are very supportive of the ACCC and ACCAN's calls for the introduction of a National Performance Monitoring and Reporting Programme to make these companies accountable for providing the service that they charge for."

Establishing a community group

In setting up the group, Mr McKenzie and his fellow residents have learnt that communities need to band together and make noise about the poor services they are receiving.

"ISPs - particularly Telstra - will try and prevent this by suggesting that they would prefer to deal with customers on an individual basis. We believe that the goal of this strategy is to make you feel like you are the only one with the problem - that is, make the problems look smaller than they actually are."

Only by banding together the residents were able to get an accurate picture of how extensive the issues are. This critical mass has given the community the credibility needed to make ISP's and politicians take notice.

In just a few months the group has already achieved one of the goals and has received a solid following on Facebook. Recently, the group has also started running stalls at community events to further spread the word.

Consumers who are experiencing similar issues are encouraged to set up Facebook groups and to connect on social media to form a united voice. If you're unsure of how to use social media, ask for help from your children, family members or friends. There are clear benefits of forming a community of individuals with common goals.

> "Poor internet services in our area is constraining small business productivity and making it difficult for students."