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Telecommunications Service Inquiry

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On 15 and 24 May 2001 the Commonwealth Government announced its response to the report of the independent Telecommunications Service Inquiry (TSI) also referred to as the 'Besley Inquiry' after its Chair, Mr M A (Tim) Besley AO. The TSI's report, [Connecting Australia](#), as provided to the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts on 30 September 2000.

The Minister announced detailed initiatives to address each of the TSI's 17 recommendations, and concerns outlined in the report relating to fixed and mobile telephone services, Internet speeds and reliability and low levels of awareness about telecommunications issues in regional, rural and remote areas.

Click on each of the initiatives below for a brief overview description of the initiative and a progress report.

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1. Improved service connection times

In response to concerns raised in the TSI about the timeliness of installations and repairs and reliability of basic services the Government announced it would reduce maximum

telephone service connection times from 12 to six months. The Government also announced it would improve the availability of temporary services - including ensuring that no one waits more than 30 working days to access a telephone service.

Implementation

Arrangements to reduce connection times and improve availability of temporary services commenced on 15 October 2001. This followed amendments to Telstra's universal service Standard Marketing Plan and the Customer Service Guarantee Standard, following [public consultation](#) undertaken by the Department and the ACMA.

[Click here for further information on Government initiatives to improve service connection times.](#)

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2. Mobile phone coverage for towns with a population of 500 or more

In response to concerns raised in the TSI about mobile phone service coverage in regional areas, the Government announced on 9 August 2001, a program for extending terrestrial mobile coverage to towns with a population of 500 or more.

Towns were selected on the basis of size, degree of coverage and viability of ongoing service provision.

Contributions from towns with no coverage are expected from communities, which is broadly consistent with the current Networking the Nation (NTN) program.

Implementation

By the end of June 2003, 59 towns had received improved mobile phone services.

[Click here for further details of the program.](#)

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3. Mobile phone coverage for towns with a population of less than 500

Under the program, funding is allocated to improve mobile phone coverage to 55 towns with populations of less than 500.

Implementation

After a competitive tender process, Telstra was awarded the contract to provide improved mobile phone coverage to 55 towns, with populations under 500. Telstra is progressively rolling out the infrastructure, due for completion in June 2004. By the end of June 2003, 11 sites had been commissioned.

[Click here for further details of the program.](#)

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4. Mobile phone coverage for selected regional highways

Under the program, funding is allocated to improve mobile phone to sections of 34 regional

highways.

Implementation

Following a competitive tender process, Telstra was awarded the contract to provide improved CDMA mobile phone coverage to 34 regional highways. The designated highways are due for completion by June 2004. By the end of June 2003, 22 lengths of highway had been commissioned.

[Click here for further details of the program.](#)

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5. Mobile phone coverage for South West Western Australia

This program, called the Wireless West program, is a joint initiative delivering improved mobile phone coverage to the South West land division of Western Australia. The Commonwealth Government, Western Australian Government and Telstra have equally invested funds towards the program.

Implementation

Telstra is constructing 45 CDMA mobile base stations under the program. Construction is due to be completed by December 2003. At the end of April 2003, 31 of 45 sites had been commissioned.

[Click here for further details of the program.](#)

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6. Satellite phone handset subsidy

The scheme provides a subsidy towards the purchase of a satellite mobile phone handset for individuals living or working in areas beyond CDMA or GSM terrestrial mobile coverage-- as well as community groups, small businesses, not for profit organisations, and volunteer emergency services operating in these areas. Applications will be accepted until January 2004.

Implementation

Over 1500 applications had been approved by the end of June 2003.

[Click here for further details of the program.](#)

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7. Internet Assistance Program (IAP)

In response to concerns raised in the TSI about Internet speeds, the Government announced it would establish - in collaboration with Telstra - a \$50 million IAP to operate for three years. The aim of the IAP is to help users maximise Internet speeds and achieve equivalent speeds of at least 19.2 kilobits per second for web and email applications. The program includes an Online Help Service to provide advice to users and a Technical Support Service to help users whose problems cannot be resolved by online advice.

Implementation

The IAP has been operating in all regional areas since 3 September 2001 and in metropolitan areas since 4 March 2002.

An independent advisory panel has been established by the Government to ensure the IAP is competitively neutral and, where relevant, help consumers with other issues such as dispute resolution.

The Commonwealth signed a Deed of Agreement with Telstra on 29 September 2001, which sets out funding contributions and other responsibilities of the parties.

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8. Other Internet initiatives

In response to TSI recommendation 7 relating to NTN programs and the TSI's concerns on Internet access, the Government announced it would:

- a. adjust the Building Additional Rural Networks (BARN) initiative to support the development of high speed regional networks, and
- b. direct the ACMA to request an industry code of practice setting out Internet service provider responsibilities for providing information and optimising data speeds including equipment requirements.

Implementation

- a. This initiative is in place. Funding guidelines for the BARN program have been adjusted to support high speed regional networks.
- b. Following a direction from the Minister, the ACMA has facilitated the development of an industry guideline which is available at http://www.acma.gov.au/ACMAINTER.131204:STANDARD:618421349:pc=PC_2044.

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9. National Communications Fund (NCF)

In response to TSI Recommendation 8, the Government announced it would establish a competitive grants program, with program funds available in 2002-03 for three years - to fund significant regional telecommunications projects in the education and health sectors. The aim of the NCF is to improve service delivery in those sectors, with priority given to projects that also improve telecommunications services generally in regional communities. Contributions will be sought from applicants including equal funding from State and Territory agencies.

Implementation

Applications for funding under the NCF closed on 28 February 2002 and 59 applications were received. The Prime Minister announced the successful applicants on 18 July 2002.

[Click here for the NCF Index Page.](#)

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10. Community information campaign

In response to concerns raised in the TSI report about low levels of awareness in regional, rural and remote Australia, the Government announced it would conduct a \$6.9 million community information campaign. The aim of the campaign was to increase awareness of:

- the benefits and opportunities available through existing Government communications funding programs
- the availability of commercial communications services, and
- consumer safeguards and rights.

The campaign includes funding to provide ongoing online information resources on regional communications issues.

Implementation

The publicity information campaign (TV, radio and print) commenced in early September 2001 but was discontinued after the election was announced in October 2001.

The New Connections website was launched in September 2001. The website includes information contributed by regional service providers about their services, information about major funding programs, and information on Government regulations. The website includes an online mapping facility.

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11. Funding for consumer representation

In response to TSI Recommendation 14, the Government announced a \$3.4 million program over four years from 1 July 2002 to fund consumer representation and research in telecommunications. This included greater priority to representation for people with disabilities and in regional areas.

Implementation

The Government announced the increase in funding for disability groups in consumer representation grants in July 2001. The successful applicants for funding in 2002-03 have now been announced.

[Click here for further information on grants for consumer representation and research.](#)

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12. Enhanced payphone services for remote Indigenous communities

In response to TSI Recommendation 17, the Government announced it would enhance the availability of payphone services for remote Indigenous communities under the Universal Service Obligation. The initiative, which will require close consultation with Telstra and Indigenous communities, is a first step in improving service levels pending development and implementation of a comprehensive long-term strategy (Initiative 13).

Implementation

Extensive consultation has taken place, more accurate data has now been gathered and priorities identified, and a work plan and a progress reporting regime is now in place.

Further development of this initiative will be integrated into the Telecommunications Action

Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities (TAPRIC), the wider Government response to remote Indigenous telecommunications needs (see Initiative 13).

[Click here for further information on Initiatives 12 and 13.](#)

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13. Telecommunications needs of remote indigenous communities

In response to TSI Recommendation 17, the Government announced it would conduct a major \$0.4 million study of the telecommunications requirements of remote Indigenous communities, including development of a detailed action plan to address their needs.

Implementation

The study has been completed following extensive consultation with remote indigenous communities, their representatives, and other key stakeholders. The Government has now announced a Telecommunications Action Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities (TAPRIC), which is supported by a funding package over three years for five separate program areas.

 [Click here for further information on Initiatives 12 and 13.](#)

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14. Training in use of teletypewriter (TTY) equipment

In response to TSI Recommendation 16, the Government announced that:

1. the Department would assess the extent of unmet needs for TTY training, in consultation with the ACMA and other relevant organisations. Additionally, the Department would negotiate, as required, with the National Relay Service (NRS) provider to have training incorporated into the NRS, and
2. longer term options for meeting telecommunications equipment needs of people with speech and/or hearing impairments and people with other disabilities would be assessed.

Implementation

1. A new framework for additional TTY training has been agreed by the Department, ACMA and NRS provider, Australian Communications Exchange (ACE).
2. An assessment of longer term options for meeting needs of the speech and hearing disabled has been provided to the Minister. As a result of this review, the Department's Communications Research Unit has been asked to conduct background research into disability equipment issues.

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15. Information for consumers on availability of certain services

In response to TSI Recommendation 15, the Government announced that the ACMA would be directed to review the adequacy of information made available by telecommunications companies on emergency and health-related priority services. The ACMA would be required to develop appropriate measures to address any deficiencies.

Implementation

The ACMA reported to the Government on the adequacy of information following a public review, concluding that levels of information were not adequate. The ACMA is implementing measures to improve information dissemination, such as amendments to the Telecommunications (Standard Forms of Agreement Information) Determination 1999. In May 2002, the Government imposed new licence conditions on Telstra designed to maximise service continuity for customers with a diagnosed medical condition who are at risk of suffering a rapid, life-threatening deterioration in their condition. Under the conditions, Telstra has been required to review and, as necessary, reform its customer management and other systems for priority services. Telstra's new priority assistance arrangements were announced on 17 September and will commence on 30 September 2002.

The Government has asked the ACMA to work with industry and the Australian Communications Industry Forum to achieve a consistent approach to the provision of priority services through an industry code under Part 6 of the Telecommunications Act 1997.

Further information is available at http://www.acma.gov.au/ACMAINTER.131204:STANDARD:618421349:pc=PC_2044.

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16. Reviews of Universal Service Obligation (USO) contestability

In response to TSI Recommendations 3 and 4, the Government announced it would continue to monitor the effectiveness of USO contestability and review it over the life of the program.

Implementation

The USO contestability pilots commenced on 1 July 2001. Industry comment was sought on the operation of the pilots after twelve month of operation in July 2002. The Government is continuing to evaluate and monitor their operation.

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17. Review of telecommunication specific competition regulation

In response to TSI Recommendations 1, 2 and 6, the Government announced it would direct the Productivity Commission to consider in its review the implications of developing telecommunications competition across the country, particularly in regional Australia, and to consider the current pay television programming arrangements.

The Government also announced ongoing reviews of telecommunications-specific regulation would be required to consider the regulatory impact on competition development in regional, rural and remote areas.

Implementation

The Productivity Commission submitted its final report to the Government on 21 September 2001. The Government responded to the report by media release on 24 April 2002.

Legislation to address specific issues in relation to telecommunications competition

regulation was passed in the Parliament on 20 September 2001.

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18. Appointment of a new 'regional' member to the ACMA

In response to TSI Recommendation 10, Mr Allan Horsley was appointed to the ACMA in December 2000 and began duties in March 2001.

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19. Reliability standards and improved quality of service reporting

In response to TSI Recommendations 9, 11 and 12, the Government announced that it would:

1. implement reliability standards, and monitoring and enforcement arrangements for services provided under the USO
2. improve the quality of service reporting for major service providers to allow consumers to make more informed decisions on price and quality, and
3. direct the ACMA to adequately monitor faults and investigate extreme cases of failure to meet CSG standards.

Implementation

In response to TSI recommendation 9, the Government has approved a range of activities by the ACMA to improve the quality and volume of data that is available to consumer to assist them make informed decision about telecommunications services. This has included new education campaigns, a complete redesign of the ACMA's website and the development of 'toolkits' for consumers. The ACMA has already released its Mobile Tool Kit, which is designed to help consumers choose the best value mobile phone products and services to meet their unique needs.

In response to TSI recommendation 11, the Government has put in place the Network Reliability Framework (NRF) to monitor and improve the reliability of telephone service provided by Telstra. The NRF came into effect on 1 January 2003 and requires Telstra to meet performance standards, particularly in relation to multiple faults, for its 7 million residential and small business customers. If the threshold level of multiple faults is breached, Telstra must investigate and take action to fix the problem, as required by the industry regulator, the ACMA.

In response to TSI recommendation 12 the ACMA will introduce a new level of monitoring and reporting whereby all major service providers will be required to report quarterly on:

- The distribution of times taken to connect and repair services nationally
- The distribution of times taken to connect and repair services at the operational level; and
- Exception reports on any operational areas where the percentage of cases exceeding the CSG standard plus five working days is greater than 1 per cent.

Further information can be found at

http://www.acma.gov.au/ACMAINTER.131204:STANDARD:618421349:pc=PC_2044.

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20. Review of Customer Service Guarantee (CSG)

In response to TSI Recommendations 5 and 13, the Government announced it would direct the ACMA to conduct a review of existing CSG arrangements. The review is to assess the need for changes to reflect the increasingly competitive telecommunications market-where services are delivered through an increasingly diverse range of technologies.

Implementation

The Minister has accepted the ACMA's report and a public announcement was made on 29 July 2002.

Further information can be found at

http://www.acma.gov.au/ACMAINTER.131204:STANDARD:618421349:pc=PC_2044.

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