

Universal service obligation review looks at how the load is shared

An issues paper was released recently as part of a review of the telecommunications universal service obligation (USO) by the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator Helen Coonan.

The USO Review is examining the architecture of the universal service regime and the most effective way to deliver universal services to consumers. It will take account of changes in technology and in the Australian telecommunications marketplace and will consider whether the load is being shared equitably by industry. The review has a broad focus and seeks innovative ideas and approaches for the delivery of USO services.

The USO is a key safeguard for consumers ensuring that all Australians, including people in rural and remote Australia, have access to essential telephone services and payphones. The review provides an

opportunity for consumers to have a say on the effectiveness of the USO arrangements and gives telecommunications providers the opportunity to provide input on how the requirements of meeting the USO can be shared equitably.

The USO review will consider whether it is appropriate for Telstra to be the USO provider in all circumstances. For example, should Telstra be required to be the universal service provider in a greenfield estate where another company wins the development contract to be the infrastructure provider for that estate? Or should the company that wins that contract also bear the responsibility for the provision

of a telephone service in that new estate?

The universal service regime is funded by an industry levy.

The 2004 *Review of the Operation of the Universal Service Obligation and Customer Service Guarantee* found that, at the time, the universal service regime was broadly meeting its legislative objectives. However, changes in the telecommunications market since that time have raised new challenges for the USO regulatory framework.

The USO relates to the provision of basic telephone services and payphones. These services have generally been provided by fixed copper infrastructure, but can now be delivered through other means,

such as using voice over internet protocol, and mobile and broadband networks. The review will consider the provision of voice and payphone services under the universal service regime. It will also consider the most effective and cost-efficient way to deliver these services to consumers.

Submissions should be sent to the USO Review, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, by email to uso@dcita.gov.au, by mail to GPO Box 2154, Canberra ACT 2601 or by fax to 02 6271 1850. The closing date for submissions is 1 November 2007. The issues paper is on the department's website at www.dcita.gov.au/uso.

We encourage consumers to make submissions commenting on legislative, regulatory and self-regulatory initiatives and changes. We also need to gather information from consumers by fostering close relationships with user and consumer organisations such as the ASCCA and listening to what you have to say, and more formally through mechanisms such as our Consumer Consultative Forum.

Access to communications

The accessibility of standard telecommunications services has long been a basic tenet of Australia's telecommunications regime. Provisions such as the universal service obligation, the Customer Service Guarantee, the National Relay Service, the standard telephone service, interconnection, pensioner subsidies and price caps are about making sure all Australian telephone subscribers—including people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment—can communicate on an equivalent basis with all other subscribers, irrespective of where they live or, to a lesser extent, their financial circumstances.

With the developments in computer and communications technologies, new opportunities are emerging for improving communications for all Australians—including those with disabilities and the rapidly growing seniors sector. However, the proliferation of these technologies also has the potential to exclude certain sectors—the same technological advances that have brought immense benefits to our society and economy can present significant barriers to the people who could benefit most from these services.

An emerging example is voice over internet protocol—VoIP. At present, people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment can use telephone typewriters (TTYs) to have real-time interactive text conversations over the public telephone network—either directly with each other or with voice telephone users through the National Relay Service. However, such conversational, character-by-character text telephony is not currently available on VoIP services, and services such as email and instant messaging are not real-time, nor do they offer truly interactive conversation.

Around the world, different approaches to access and participation are being explored. Cptel is an integrated voice and text telephone service—a captioned telephone—that looks targeted to users who prefer to speak their side of the conversation, but would benefit from receiving both speech and text in response.

The full text of Ms Plante's speech is on the ACMA website at www.acma.gov.au (go to Home > About ACMA: News & media centre > Speeches).

