Telstra Response: Proposal to make the Telecommunications (Customer Communications for Outages) Industry Standard 2024

Public submission

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1. Introduction and executive summary

Telstra welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Communications and Media Authority's (ACMA) consultation paper on its proposal to make the Telecommunications (Customer Communications for Outages) Industry Standard 2024 (the Standard).

At Telstra, we are dedicated to providing high-quality services to our customers. We continuously strive to enhance these services and help Australians stay connected. Like the Australian Government, we understand that reliable access to phone and internet services is essential for work, education, health, entertainment, social connection, and government services. While network outages can disrupt our daily lives and may pose significant risks to the health and safety of our community, we believe clear, informative and suitably directed communications to customers is critical for minimising this impact.

We support the intent of the Standard to ensure that customers are suitably informed during an outage. The Standard provides the flexibility to use various communication channels to keep our customers informed and facilitates information sharing across Carriage Service Providers (CSPs), both of which are critical to enable us to meet the intent of the Standard.

However, we do consider some enhancements need to be made to the Standard to ensure it can be implemented effectively and consistently across CSPs. This includes refining open definitions, a more customer centred approach to timing and delivery of notifications, acceptable usage of shared information, and ensuring CSPs have the ability to design and build a robust capability to both comply with the Standard and provide the intended positive customer experience within an appropriate timeframe. Our submission details these views on the enhancements in section 3 and respond to each of the ACMA consultation questions in section 4,

We also appreciate the ACMA is considering how to address multiple recommendations from the Bean Review Final report in parallel. Telstra considers that the recommendations to amend the Complaints Handling Standard and adopt a standard approach to customer resolution in outage situations needs to be considered together with the new Communications Standard. For example, amending the Complaints Handling Standard to require that any contact by a customer about an outage must be treated as a complaint, will simply overload the complaints handling process and result in an inferior customer experience. Instead, it would be better to insert a requirement in the Customer Communications Standard for Outages ensuring CSPs clearly inform customers about the options for escalating concerns and making complaints. We set out our views on these matters in section 2.

2. Related recommendations

Telstra's considers that the Bean recommendations 10, 12 and 13 are interrelated, and in order to deliver a holistic and customer centred approach in outage scenarios, they need to be considered in conjunction with each other. While it would be more convenient if they were incorporated within a single legislative instrument, our key point is that they should be made holistically and in contemplation of each other.

Our initial views on each of the complaints handling (Recommendation 12) and customer resolution proposals (Recommendation 13) are outlined below.

2.1 Complaints handling and resolutions available to consumers affected by outages

Telecommunications (Complaints Handling Industry Standard Amendment) Direction 2024

Change definition of a complaint to include customer contact relating to network outages.

Based on prior conversations with the ACMA, our understanding is that the overarching intent behind this proposed change is to make escalation options clear to customers.

Telstra fully supports making escalation options clear to customers, particularly in outage scenarios, but do not believe that the change to the definition of a complaint will achieve the desired outcome because:

- the majority of customers who contact their CSP during an outage are seeking information on when service will be restored, rather than wanting to raise a complaint;

- a formal complaint is not the appropriate vehicle to accelerate an outcome relating to a major network outage;

- in the case of a known outage, CSPs will have already mobilised to resolve it, and a potential influx of complaints will not assist in the technical restoration of root cause issues causing major outages;

- there could be the unintended consequence of overwhelming CSP support centres if all contact about outages were treated as complaints, inhibiting their ability to resolve other customer complaints; and

- the Complaints Handling Standard in its current form already allows for contact about outages to be treated as complaints as appropriate.

Accordingly, we submit that the better approach is, rather than amend the Complaints Industry Standard to mean that any contact by a customer about an outage must be treated as a complaint, to include a requirement to communicate escalation options within this Standard. This could include the various options or avenues to make complaints within the CSP. We suggest that communications about outages should include information about how a customer can raise a complaint or escalate their issue if they are not satisfied with a CSP's response. We believe that this approach would better serve the interests of all customers while also providing a more effective means of addressing their concerns. It also continues to leave open the ability for customers to raise a formal complaint if they wish to.

2.2 Resolutions available to consumers affected by outages

We are aware that there will be a proposal in relation to an industry wide standardised approach to the form of resolutions available to consumers affected by an outage. Telstra's preferred approach is grounded in the principle of providing the service paid for and realising a credit or value relief for the period of network unavailability, pro-rated from the plan fee for affected services and applied to the next available service payment. Notification of the credit or value relief would occur once applied to the account and before the payment request.

3. Clarification of statements and definitions

Statement	Comments
End users who require urgent assistance • Section 20 (1)(b) manage real time or near real-time communications with end-users who require urgent assistance during a major outage.	Further clarity on the definition of 'end-users who require urgent assistance' is required. It may also be technically impossible to identify individual cohorts or to separate customers who require urgent assistance during certain mass disruptions of service. E.g. in a core network outage. Aligning the definition to an existing prioritisation mechanism (e.g. Priority Assistance customers) would resolve this. **Recommendation**: Amend the requirement to say "...who have previously notified a CSP that they may require urgent assistance during a major outage e.g. by notifying the CSP that they are Priority Assistance customers".
End user • The definition of an "end user" requires further refinement to ensure it clearly captures the intended cohort and is able to be effectively applied.	In the context of CSPs ability to communicate with an end user, there are instances where a CSP may not have contact details or the ability to contact some cohorts of end users. For example, Telstra has enterprise customers with > 500k Internet of Things (IoT) SIOs (e.g. households with meter readers, etc). These end points cannot be notified and, in an outage, would require CSPs to issue public communications for a single customer incident. In some instances, even where there may be a real person as an 'end user' the CSP may not have the user's contact information, e.g. enterprise, large and medium business customers typically have an I.T. department or single account holder with multiple services. The 'end user' definition also presents a similar challenge for some consumer services like family

	groups with a single main account holder for multiple services (spouse, children etc.). **Recommendation**: Include definitions in s.5 for: 'end user' - which excludes enterprise, government, and large & medium business customers and includes a provision to only notify the account holder or an authorised representative.
Carriage service • The application of the Standard needs to be clearer in terms of which services are captured, may need to focus the intent as 'Carriage Service' captures additional products and services which do not align with the stated objective.	The Act defines a "carriage service" as a service for carrying communications by means of guided and/or unguided electromagnetic energy. If the Standard is applied to 'carriage services' or is inclusive of data, without the exemption detailed under 'end user' above, this would include Internet of Things (IoT) and machine to machine (M2M) services using fixed or mobile connectivity. This includes vending machines, Parcel Post boxes or other unmanned end points. These types of services should be excluded as we understand it is not the intent of the Standard to capture services of this nature. **Recommendation:** Include a definition in s.5 for 'carriage service'- which carries the same meaning as the Act but excluding certain carriage services, such as IoT and M2M services. Alternatively, the definition of the carriage service would need to align to a proposed definition detailed below under 'Full/Partial unavailability' to 'consumer or small business voice or data services'.
Significant local outage • Significant local outage definition lacks geographical context for 'local'. Under the current definition a significant local outage could be used to describe a dispersed national outage but should only apply to SIOs impacted in a common area/region.	The lack of geographical context for a local outage may result in: - Inconsistent application of the Standard amongst CSPs, e.g. an outage meeting the threshold of 50,000 SIOs could be defined differently by each CSP including suburb/town, state, multi-state or nationally. - The current significant local outage definition of > 50,000 SIOs, > 6 hours but not a major national outage could result in unnecessary communication to end users as it potentially includes dispersed national outages which shouldn't meet the threshold for notification. The notifications could also potentially cause confusion and drive a poor customer experience due to the content required in the communication, e.g. telling

	an end user that they are experiencing a significant local outage when others local to them are not in fact experiencing the outage. **Recommendation:** A geographical definition (single/adjacent state suburb/township, Postal Area etc.) would remove inconsistency in the application of the Standard and support the intention of informing local communities. Further commentary is included below in response to the specific consultation paper question about this.
Full/Partial unavailability • The application of the Standard focuses on full or partial unavailability of a telecommunications network but does not provide for the fact services are constructed of multiple components e.g. end users could face a significant disruption of their service while basic network connectivity is unaffected.	Many service outages result from a logical (software) or component issue which do not impact the availability of the physical network. Some of the challenges we envisage with the full or partial unavailability concept include: - Inconsistent application of 'partial unavailability' by CSPs as this could be anywhere from 1-99% of service unavailability. This is further complicated when considering services comprise several parts (e.g. mobiles service could include voice call, SMS, data, voicemail, call forwarding etc., or a single part impacted). - It can be difficult to accurately determine the percent of impacted SIOs. Partial could be measured against SIOs nationally, of the service group (mobile or fixed), within zone etc. **Recommendation:** We suggest replacing 'unplanned full or partial unavailability of a telecommunications network' with 'unplanned significant adverse impact to consumer or small business voice or data services' along with several examples of what constitutes significant adverse impact as an alternative. A 'significant adverse impact' means that the services are degraded to the extent that the end user cannot use the 'core aspect' of the service e.g. for a voice service they cannot make and maintain a call. For a data service they cannot access the internet.

4. Consultation paper questions

4.1 Objectives and requirements of the direction

Question 1: Does the draft standard fulfil the objectives and content requirements of the direction? If not, please explain why and describe any alternative and/or additional approaches that could be used to meet these.

Response:

As outlined in our responses in section 3 and 4 we do not feel that the standard can currently fulfill the objectives of the direction, largely due to the potential for negative impacts on the customer experience through inconsistency of application and ensuring CSPs have sufficient time to appropriately design, deploy, and educate staff and customers of changes to communications.

4.2 Definition of a major outage and a significant local outage

Question 2: Is the definition of a major outage appropriate? If not, why not?

Response:

Parts (b) and (c) of the Major Outage definition are appropriate but the use of 'end user' and full or partial unavailability in this context present challenges to the consistency and effectiveness of communications as detailed above.

Question 3: Does the definition of 'significant local outage' meet the objective of the direction that it should capture outages that are lesser in scale than major outages, but have a significant impact on local communities?

Response:

The definition does not provide a clear explanation of the term "local". This ambiguity raises concerns about interpreting "local" in the context of geographically dispersed outages. An example of 50,000 services in operation spread across the country highlights a scenario where the definition's lack of geographical specificity could lead to inconsistent application of the standard across CSPs.

We recommend a clear definition of 'local' in the statement, as a criteria such as 'affects services in a single or immediately adjacent suburb(s)/town(s)'.

Question 4: Is it appropriate to exempt planned outages and outages caused by natural disasters from the definitions?

Response:

Yes.

Planned outages are typically scheduled after hours and have built in communication processes, so the requirement for further communications with for example a 2-hour frequency would result in excessive communications to end users, with little to no benefit.

Natural disasters generally comprise of many individual outages, with complicated and extended restoration efforts. They are generally well communicated and do not require additional notification.

4.3 Exemptions for certain carriers and carriage service providers

Question 5: Are there certain classes of carrier and carriage service provider that should be exempt from the requirements of the standard? Please explain your answer and give reasons for your position.

Response:

Our view is that the intention of the standard is to ensure customers are informed in a meaningful way when experiencing significant disruptions to essential communications and services, as such all operators must be required to implement the Standard to ensure that objective is met across the industry.

4.4 Different classes of customers

Question 6: Should the standard deal with matters differently for different classes of end-users of carriage services supplied by carriers and carriage service providers?

Response:

The intent of the Standard seems to focus on consumer and small businesses but currently would extend well beyond. For example, Enterprise, Government, large and medium businesses with machine to machine, IoT services, fixed voice lines, and mobiles services etc. Consideration should be given to amending the definition of 'end user' or exempting these customer cohorts from the legislative instrument to ensure focus remains on consumer and small business communication, impact, and support.

4.5 Feasibility and cost

Question 7: Are the proposed requirements robust and feasible?

Response:

Technical Challenges:

- **Real-time Communication Feasibility:** The requirement to offer real-time or near real-time communication channels for urgent assistance during outages, as stated in Section 18 of the Standard, could be technically challenging. The feasibility of providing real-time support, such as live chat, hinges on the nature and severity of the outage. In major network disruptions, the infrastructure required for these communication methods might be compromised, making it difficult to provide real-time support. We acknowledge that the Standard includes "as far as reasonably practicable" but the Standard should make clear that this hinges upon the nature and scale of the outage.

- **Outage Identification Accuracy:** The requirement for rapid outage identification and notification hinges on the sophistication of our network monitoring and diagnostic systems. In the event of 'core' network outages this significantly disrupts our visibility through diagnostic and monitoring tools, impacting our ability to identify the number and type of SIOs impacted. We would face challenges ensuring contact details for one-to-one communications were accurate if required to issue near real time communications in a mass disruption event impacting hundreds of thousands of customers details.

- **Communication Volume:** Sending hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of communications every two hours during a major outage may not be technically feasible from a platform perspective, as these platforms are not currently designed to distribute high volume batch communications through email or SMS in a short time. Another concern is network congestion due to a surge in traffic from sending bulk communications, especially during a significant outage, which could further exacerbate an issue. The Standard does not offer alternative solutions in such scenarios where mass communication might overwhelm already strained network infrastructure. Our strong preference is to prioritise notification through a CSPs native customer application or fetch from known outage notification sources (online) to minimise the risk of increasing impact or duration of a mass service disruption.

Customer Experience Challenges:

- **After-Hours Communication:** Section 15 of the Standard requires that outage updates be sent to an end user every 2 hours until the outage is resolved. The current drafting suggests that this obligation is applicable 24 hours a day, which would create a poor customer experience by pushing updates to an end user after hours when they are less likely to be utilising the network.

Recommendation: Communication notification periods and blackout periods should be included in the Standard to ensure communications remain informative rather than disruptive. Telstra typically limits push communications to customers by only sending between 07:00 to 21:00 to prevent nuisance messaging overnight while maintaining communications via our app and online channels.

- **Frequency of customer communications:** Telstra is supportive of updates being provided to customers in a timely and regular way. However, the frequency and channel should be dependent on the scale and nature of the disruption. In addition to the challenges highlighted above, the proposal to require communications to be sent every two hours during an outage regardless of whether there is any change in outage status could mean that customers receive a significant number of communications that are not necessarily helpful. This could cause frustration in a number of common scenarios especially for significant local outages e.g. for regional and remote areas or where physical network devices must be shipped. The end user may receive several communications advising no change in status or a repeat of the prior message. This becomes even more problematic from a customer experience perspective if such messages are sent through the night.

Recommendation: The maximum period between communications in section 15 (2) change to 24 hours which would operate with the existing section 15 (3) where a material change occurs, whichever occurs first to ensure communications are timely and meaningful.

Question 8: For carriers and carriage service providers, what are the likely costs and benefits of implementation for your organisation? (Please provide specific cost estimates in your response.) Are there alternative ways to achieve the objective of the direction that would be consistent with its terms and provide for lesser costs or greater benefits?

Response:

In reviewing our current ability to comply with the Standard we have identified some processes and publishing capability which has already been developed, however there are significant elements which would require design and development both inside Telstra's environment and with the collaboration of other C/CSPs to enable effective communication. The benefits of this development would mean greater understanding behind the detail of outages and faster identification of customer impact during an outage, but will require significant investment. We are not currently in a position to provide a cost estimate for this.

4.6 Commencement

Question 9: We are seeking views, and the reasons for them, on the earliest practical date for the standard for major outages to commence in full. This must be no later than 31 December 2024.

Response:

Telstra takes our customers experience seriously, and in order to implement the Standard to an acceptable degree and limit adverse impacts to consumers, the definitions and application of the Standard must be clear to begin building the capability. As we work through these areas to ensure they are robust we do not feel there is sufficient time to implement the Standard to the level we and customers would expect. Our preference is for the Standard come into effect in its entirety on 30 June 2025.

If the Standard comes into effect on the original proposed date of 31 Dec 2024:

We will not be able to:

- build the functionality for communicating to 'all' CSPs about our outages. To do this appropriately and consistently, we require cross-industry alignment and cooperation to create communication interfaces (API) where they are not currently established which will take significant time; and

- develop robust communication processes and automated tools required for communicating outages to enterprise customers, as we currently rely on established customer relationships with Telstra account teams to communicate with authorised representatives.

We may be able to:

- implement features that utilise existing interfaces/comms channels such as communicating to consumer and wholesale customers the required information in line with the Standard (with email as the only feasible direct communication channel).

Given the challenges detailed in this response, if a delay to the Standard is unacceptable, a period of forbearance may be required. Many CSPs will have shutdown periods, and network/I.T. embargos to ensure the stability of their networks leading into December and January. The short lead time will likely present a significant challenge to the design/build of internal impact identification and communication solutions, agree and build of intercarrier communication systems, staff resourcing and training, and preparing the public through communications campaigns to avoid creating confusion or concern the new notifications are spam or malicious. Most importantly, if the Standard is not delayed then the solutions developed could very well result in a less than adequate customer experience.

Question 10: We are seeking views, and the reasons for them, on the earliest practical date for the standard for significant local outages to commence in full, noting that this must be no later than 30 June 2025.

Response:

This timeframe is achievable in principle but requires a detailed feasibility assessment.

4.7 Additional/preferable requirements

Question 11: We are seeking feedback on whether there are:
- Additional matters aligned to the objectives which should be included in the standard?
- Matters included in the draft standard for which alternative arrangements should be considered?

Please provide evidence to support your position.
Response:

Complaints Handling Standard

As noted at the start of this submission, Telstra's view is that the Complaints Handling Standard, and the proposal for a standard approach to customer resolutions should be viewed holistically. Ideally all these related requirements would be contained within a single legislative instrument addressing all the key customer needs during an outage: communication, escalation and resolution., but failing that, our key point is that they should be made in contemplation of each other given the changes proposed are all related.

Use of Information

Some of the information the Standard requires be shared with other CSPs is confidential/proprietary in nature and should only be used for the purpose of the Standard.

To address this concern, Telstra recommends including a clause in the Standard that explicitly restricts the usage of outage communication information/data. This clause should state that any CSP receiving such information must use it solely in accordance with the Standard. Specifically, the clause should emphasize that the information is to be used exclusively for informing end-users during of an outage and not for any other purposes, such as competitive advantage, marketing, or data analysis.

By implementing this clause, it will provide a clear guideline for CSPs on the acceptable use of this information, thereby preventing any potential misuse. This measure will help build trust among stakeholders and ensure that the primary objective of informing end-users during outages is achieved without compromising the data's intended purpose.

Requirement to share information with other carriers, carriage service providers and relevant stakeholders

Telstra acknowledges the requirements outlined in Division 2 Section 17, which mandate that CSPs must share information with other carriers and CSPs whose end-users may be affected by an outage. However, we propose that such notifications should be limited to situations where interconnection arrangements are in place, but only where those interconnection arrangements do not have existing interconnect communication channels, protocols, and arrangements. This approach ensures that the process remains efficient and leverages the established relationships and systems that are already in place, whilst ensuring that all interconnect arrangements are accounted for. By doing so, we can maintain the integrity and effectiveness of the communication process while avoiding unnecessary duplication of efforts and potential confusion. Telstra would be happy to brief the ACMA on these existing interconnect communications channels, protocols and arrangements.

Telstra believes that this approach will facilitate timely and accurate communication during outage situations, ensuring that all relevant parties are informed without overburdening the carriers or carriage service providers with redundant processes. It will also help in maintaining the continuity and reliability of the telecommunications network, ultimately benefiting the end-users.

5. Concluding comments

We believe the issues we have raised in our submission if addressed as we suggest will ensure the Standard is applied consistently across C/CSPs, improve the customer experience and expectation, whilst raising the overall standard for outage communications in industry.

We look forward to continuing to work with the ACMA to refine and implement a robust telecommunications customer outage standard.