

2014

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE
REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL EMERGENCY TRIPLE ZERO (000) OPERATOR
DISCUSSION PAPER**

1. Background

On 8 July 2014, the Minister for Communications, the Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP, announced that the Department of Communications will undertake a review of the national Triple Zero (000) operator.

The review will consider how the national Triple Zero operator should adapt to the changing communications environment so that it can continue to support a world class Triple Zero emergency call service into the future.

Established in 1961, Australia's Triple Zero emergency call service has become highly trusted by the community and currently answers about 9 million calls each year. Although improvements have been made to the service, it remains a 'voice-only' service, reflecting the period in which it was established. However, the communications environment has changed dramatically since then, presenting exciting opportunities for the service (such as new ways of requesting emergency assistance) as well as challenges (such as locating calls from mobiles phones and internet devices).

The Triple Zero service needs to keep up with this changing communications environment or it runs the risk of not meeting community expectations. The national Triple Zero operator plays an important part in delivering the service by answering calls to Triple Zero from anywhere in Australia and transferring them to the relevant state or territory emergency service organisation.

In 2012, the Australian Government and Telstra agreed that Telstra would continue as the national Triple Zero operator for up to 20 years, subject to a competitive tender to be issued by 23 June 2016. The tender provides a valuable and timely opportunity to reconsider the arrangements for the national operator.

The Department of Communications released a discussion paper as part of the review's public consultation process. This provides a summary of the Triple Zero service and the role of the national operator, discusses the future of the service – including community expectations, challenges and opportunity, and discusses the arrangements necessary to support the service in the future.

2. Addressing Questions in Discussion Papers

Question 1: Community expectations

It is commonly accepted that community expects the Triple Zero service to be contactable anytime, anywhere, easily, quickly and free of charge.

Are these your expectations of the Triple Zero service now and into the future? Are your expectations currently being met? Why or why not?

Government response:

Triple Zero is a national community service. The Emergency Call Person (ECP) service that is currently provided meets expectations. However either through the detriments of cost or regulation it has been unable to innovate and adapt at the pace of community expectations.

The ACT Government expects the triple zero service to remain free and accessible into the future as it seeks to provide more communication methods.

Question 2: Challenges facing the Triple Zero service

Ongoing changes in the communications landscape, and certain expectations in the community regarding the nature of the service, present challenges for the Triple Zero service. These challenges include locating callers, the quality and prioritisation of VoIP calls, extreme call volumes during disasters and non-emergency calls.

What are your views on these challenges and what further steps could be taken to address them? What other challenges need to be considered?

Government response

Changing, new and expected technologies will further challenge the ECPs ability to meet community expectations.

The receipt and handling of multiple contact methods also presents a challenge to the triple zero Emergency Services Organisations (ESOs). This is not simply about the ECP managing the inbound request, it is about a collaborative system that allows the ECP to conduct their business as filter and post-box and for the ESO to accept the inbound request in whatever form it takes.

There is a workload risk to ESOs if they are expected to manage the initial contact from the public as it exposes the ESOs to a higher hoax and misdirected call load. This would impact on the efficiency of the emergency communication centres of the ESOs due to increased workload, and has potential additional costs for the ESOs. The ACT Government supports a version of the ECP that continues to filter and direct contacts as required.

Extreme call volumes are a continuing hazard for ECP and ESOs. There will never be enough call takers anywhere if the incident is sufficiently big enough. The ACT Government supports the continuing education of the community redirecting their thirst for information to sources other than emergency communications centres. The management of extreme call volumes at the ESOs needs to be managed collaboratively with innovation and cooperation between the states and territories, the ECP and technology.

Question 3: Other ways of requesting emergency assistance

The only way of contacting Triple Zero is with a voice call and this is likely to remain the primary way of requesting emergency assistance. However, people use a range of other ways to communicate, including SMS, email, instant messaging, video calls and social media.

In addition to voice calls, is it desirable to have other ways of requesting emergency assistance? If so, what ways and what challenges do you foresee?

Government response

As demonstrated in the Triple Zero Research paper there is still a high expectation within the community that voice is the primary 000 contact method. Despite this, anecdotal evidence presented at National Emergency Communications Work Group (NECWG) indicates there is a section of the community that already expects other communication methods be available to request assistance (SMS, Social Media).

As communication technology further changes and innovates, the ACT Government expects the community will demand alternative contact methods. However, these demands need to be considered in conjunction with associated costs, workload factors and the longer term viability of new technology changes.

While the ACT Government supports the investigation and implementation of new contact methods, it recognises the risks of moving too early, only to see the technology fall to the side and investment wasted. The implementation of new technology or contact methods should be considered Australia wide. In support of adopting new technologies the wider ESO base must be engaged to determine timeframes, funding and urgency. The ACT Government seeks ongoing consultation on any proposed changes to method of contacting Triple Zero.

Question 4: Improving information

It is important that emergency service organisations, as well as callers, have the information they need in an emergency. Changes in technology offer opportunities to improve the information available, however, these changes also present some challenges.

What information is essential to emergency service organisations and callers in an emergency and what information is desirable?

Government response

As ESOs, the ESA and ACT Policing are interested in the receipt of information be it voice, image, video, audio, geospatial data or other. Access to timely and pertinent information will enable a more appropriate response and also provide attending crews with better situational awareness.

The provision of data or information to the caller in a non voice manner is of interest although it must be tempered with privacy concerns and false expectations from the community.

The ACT Government supports the investigation and development of information flows between caller and call taker.

Question 5: The role of the national Triple Zero operator

A tender for the national Triple Zero operator is required to be issued by June 2016. The aim of this review is to ensure that the arrangements for the national Triple Zero operator continue to support a world class Triple Zero service into the future.

What criteria should be used to determine the functions of the national operator?

Government response

The role of the national operator needs to evolve and continue to do so into the future. The ACT Government continues to support the national operator as the filter and clearing house of inbound requests for emergency assistance, noting that this may present challenges with new contact methods e.g. social media.

The Triple Zero Research paper proves that voice is still the primary contact method even when other methods are offered. This provides evidence that a national operator is still warranted and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

Question 6: The role of telecommunications providers

Telecommunications providers have regulatory obligations in relation to Triple Zero, recognising their importance in the delivery of the service. However, it is important to consider whether the regulatory framework remains appropriate given changes in technology and the telecommunications industry, the likely direction of the Triple Zero service, and the Government's commitment to reduce the regulatory burden on industry.

Is the current regulatory and funding framework for the Triple Zero service appropriate now and for the future? If not, what changes should be made and why?

The Department welcomes information from the telecommunications industry, when responding to this question, on how much it costs industry to meet the existing regulatory requirements in relation to the Triple Zero service.

Government response

The Triple Zero network operates across the telecommunications network and as such the providers are stakeholders in the delivery of emergency requests for assistance to the ESOs. The funding for Triple Zero connections is a federal issue and should continue to be managed at that point.

Question 7: The role of innovators

Innovative ideas to improve emergency assistance may come from a range of parties such as app developers, device and car manufacturers, research organisations, community service providers and individuals.

What sorts of innovations would most improve the Triple Zero service? How can innovation and third party innovators be supported while ensuring the reliability and integrity of service?

Government response

Innovation is not the real issue; it is the ability of the ESOs to meet the innovators requirements, either through funding to make technology changes or through buy in as new innovations may be unproven or new to the market without longevity to support their inclusion.

All innovation must be tempered with all associated costs, the impost on limited ESO resources and the longevity of the innovation. The implementation of new technology or contact methods should be considered Australia wide. In support of adopting new technologies the wider ESO base must be engaged to determine timeframes, funding and urgency.

Question 8: Cooperation and decision-making

There are a range of parties with interests and responsibilities in relation to Triple Zero. It is important that there are effective cooperation and decision-making arrangements in place amongst these parties so that the service can continue to adapt and respond to issues as they arise in the future.

What things do the current cooperation and decision-making arrangements for Triple Zero do well? What things do they not do well? What changes are needed so the service can better adapt and respond to issues in the future?

Government response

The Triple Zero network is an important government provided service. It involves both Government (federal, state and territory) and commercial providers/entities and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future. The ACT Government continues to support the role of a regulator and also NECWG as an expert advisory group as the Triple Zero network evolves into the future.