

# CUSTOMER VULNERABILITY ROUNDTABLE

## Outcomes Report



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## REPORT

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### Prepared for:

#### Victorian Electricity Distributor Businesses

AusNet, Jemena, CitiPower, Powercor, United Energy

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# 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To support the development of Victorian electricity distributors' 2026-31 price reset regulatory proposals, a two-part stakeholder roundtable series was delivered. The roundtables focused on conversations about how Victorian electricity distributors can best support customers experiencing vulnerability.

The sessions were designed to support the development of tangible solutions and recommendations that will be brought forward by each distribution business to the Australian Energy Regulator (AER), where they will propose the changes and investments they want to make during the upcoming regulatory period.

The first roundtable was held on Tuesday 9 May 2023 with the feedback used to shape emerging proposals. A copy of the full feedback report from the first workshop is available [here](#).

This report provides an overview of the feedback from the second roundtable, held on Monday 18 September 2023.

Based on feedback from the first session, Victorian distributors provided participants with an overview of:

- outcomes from the first vulnerability roundtable and explained how it is shaping Victorian electricity distributors emerging proposals.
- additional feedback they were seeking from participants about:
  - An inclusive transition
  - Natural disasters and reliability
  - Partnerships.

Participants shared their insights on the key discussion areas with the key outputs summarised below:

## An inclusive transition

### Challenges:

- disparities in how rural communities bear the impacts of hosting energy infrastructure sometimes without access to renewable energy.
- the social and emotional aspects of the energy transition, particularly for older individuals.
- growing complexity of energy products and the need for better consumer protection.
- unique challenges faced by First Nations communities.
- lack of clear communication and information mismanagement.
- customers have varying levels of readiness for the transition.

### Inclusive – no one left behind:

- empowering customers to make informed choices by providing targeted products.
- tension between current cost of living crisis and ability for people to engage in energy transition.
- the significance of energy efficiency initiatives and the provision of rebates in facilitating the transition.

### Customer agency and increasing the understanding of the energy transition:

- importance of tailoring information and support to cater to the unique requirements of various communities and individuals.
- the need to bridge information gaps by increasing understanding and trustworthy communication channels.
- concerns were expressed regarding the labelling of individuals and the potential for a perceived meritocracy in language usage and the adoption of environmentally friendly energy solutions that may not be affordable.

## Natural disasters and reliability

### Community hubs:

- Importance for resources to be provided for local communities to organise themselves.

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- Mobile Emergency Response Vehicles (MERV) acknowledged for providing essential services during incidents.
- First Nations specific community hubs to be considered to align with existing organisations and Reconciliation Action Plans.

### **Community information and activation:**

- importance of collaboration between telecommunications providers and Victorian electricity distributors to ensure access to real-time information during bushfire.
- more technical information required about roof top solar installations and islanding during emergencies.
- need for better information about preparing for unplanned outages.

### **Access to loan generators/ energy supply:**

- concerns were raised about the maintenance, safety and tracking of generators provided to customers.
- need to be aware of existing batteries and their locations in rural communities.
- suggestions to explore Standalone power systems (SAPS) and potential for co-funding models.

## **Partnerships**

### **Examples of successful partnerships:**

- support for “Bring Your Bills Day” program and expanding to transition topics.
- success of DEECA partnership and another partnership for the power bonus scheme.

### **Partnership ideas:**

- range of diverse partnerships proposed including collaborations with councils, businesses, and real estate agencies to provide localised information on electricity optimisation, alternatives for high-heat cooking, and transition from gas.
- partnering with gas networks for an orderly gas to electricity transition and telecommunications partnerships.

The findings of this report will be shared with Victorian electricity distributors for their consideration to inform their thinking on customer vulnerability issues as they develop their 2026-31 regulatory proposals.

## 2 ROUNDTABLE OVERVIEW

### 2.1 Overview

The Victorian electricity distributors are embarking on the 2026-31 regulatory process. One of the considerations in this process is what additional support can be provided to vulnerable customers. Once the Victorian electricity distributors submit their regulatory proposal to the AER, the AER will assess these proposals and determine whether the distributors may include the investment required for any additional support in their network charges to customers.

To help inform the development of their regulatory proposals, the Victorian electricity distributors delivered a two-part roundtable series to better understand stakeholder and customer perspectives about the issues they are seeking to address through the development of new ideas to support customers experiencing vulnerability.

The first session was held on Tuesday 9 May 2023. The objectives of that session were to:

- Develop a mutual understanding of what vulnerability means now in the context of energy and how Victorian electricity distribution businesses impact it.
- Understand the challenges and impacts that customers experiencing vulnerability could encounter in the future as the electricity system changes.
- Consider what support the Victorian electricity distribution businesses could directly provide (or facilitate) to support these customers.
- Capture informed insight that can be used to develop tangible recommendations in distribution businesses' 2026-31 proposals, working together to identify ways to ensure no customer is left behind or faces energy poverty or disadvantage where it is preventable.

The feedback shared in the first session has been actively considered by the Victorian electricity distributors. A copy of the full feedback report from the first roundtable is available [here](#).

The second roundtable was held on Monday 18 September 2023. In this session, the Victorian electricity distributors shared their developing proposals and asked stakeholders for assistance in testing and refining their thinking.

The objectives of the second session were to:

- Share the outcomes for the first vulnerability roundtable and explain how it has shaped Victorian electricity distributors emerging proposals.
- Clearly define the problems Victorian electricity distributors are looking to address through proposed changes as part of the 2026-31 regulatory process.
- Explain emerging thinking and seek feedback on proposals to help refine the recommendations.
- Seek specific ideas on tangible solutions for Victorian electricity distributors to consider.

During the session, the Victorian electricity distributors provided an update on their submission and topics covered in the first roundtable. Based on feedback, the Victorian electricity distributors put forward the following topic areas for further discussion during the session:

1. An inclusive transition
2. Natural disasters and reliability
3. Partnerships

This report details the outcomes of this session. The feedback from the roundtable will be used by the Victorian electricity distributors to further refine their regulatory proposals.

## 2.2 Roundtable participants

Recognising that vulnerability takes many forms and can be experienced across a broad spectrum of demographic groups, individuals from a range of community and social service organisations were invited by Victorian electricity distributors to take part. Participants were chosen based on their demonstrated understanding of the lived experience of people facing vulnerability and how they interface with the energy system, alongside their deep expertise and experience with these issues. The Department of Environment, Energy, and Climate Change (DEECA) and AER representatives were invited to attend the sessions.

The following participants attended the second roundtable:

Table 1: List of attendees from external organisations

Name	Organisation
James Lazzaro	Anglicare
Keicha Day	Gunditjmara and Yorta Yorta, Chair of the First Peoples Advisory Committee for CitiPower, Powercor and United Energy
Piang Lilian	Chin Community Victoria Inc.
Martin Turnbull	COTA Victoria
Zoe Pilven	Department of Energy Environment Climate Action
Gavin Duffy	St Vincent de Paul
Rory Anderson	Victorian Council of Social Services
Surmeli Yesilyurt	Ethnic Communities Council Vic (ECCV)

Table 2: List of attendees from the AER

Observers	Organisation
Mark Feather	Australian Energy Regulator (AER)
Matthew Morrison	Australian Energy Regulator (AER)

Table 3: List of Victorian electricity distributor representatives

VICBD representatives	
Charlotte Eddy	AusNet
Jildau Schotanus	CitiPower, Powercor and United Energy
Brent Cleeve	CitiPower, Powercor and United Energy
Matthew Serpell	Jemena
Louise Baring	Jemena
Anson An	Jemena

## 2.3 Roundtable process

**Timing:** 10:00am to 12:30pm

**Location:** Jemena Corporate Office located at Level 16, 567 Collins St

**Facilitator:** Kate Eskdale, National Lead – Communications and Engagement, RPS

**Support facilitator:** Isabelle Chan – Communications and Engagement, RPS

All participants were given a pre-read pack to provide context and information about the topics being discussed. The session provided participants with an update on feedback from the first roundtable, followed

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by a detailed presentation on the three key topics identified to be brought forward and tested with participants.

In these presentations, the Victorian electricity distributors explained how feedback from the first session had been used to shape their thinking. They then articulated the problems they were looking to solve and posed a series of questions for the participants to share their views. This included a facilitated discussion with the group to provide participants with the opportunity to ask questions, to clarify their understanding, and to draw out ideas on tangible solutions for consideration. The outcomes of these discussions follow.



*Image of participants engaging in discussions.*



## 3 TOPIC ONE: AN INCLUSIVE TRANSITION

Charlotte Eddy, General Manager Regulation (Distribution), AusNet, built on the discussions from the first roundtable by providing an overview of the Stepping Up report recently published by Energy Consumers Australia. Charlotte highlighted the key findings and challenges in decarbonising homes and the recommended coordinated approach toward an inclusive transition for households.

Following this, Kate Eskdale, RPS, facilitated a group discussion to provide the opportunity for clarification and feedback. The outcomes of these discussion follow:

### 3.1 Challenges

#### 3.1.1 Distribution of impacts and social license

- Two participants emphasised the need to consider the distribution of impacts and social license issues. It is crucial to recognise that some communities will bear a disproportionate burden of hosting energy infrastructure. Therefore, the distribution of impacts between inner city and rural communities will be different. It was noted this aspect is not addressed in detail in the Stepping Up report and will require careful consideration in transition planning by Victorian electricity distributors.

#### 3.1.2 Social and emotional aspects

- A participant raised concerns about the social and emotional aspects of the transition, particularly regarding older individuals. Questions were raised regarding how people receive information about the transition, potential lack of trust in institutions, and the divide between digital and non-digital communication channels, which can also impact vulnerable groups. This emotional dimension adds complexity to the transition process.

#### 3.1.3 Energy products are becoming increasingly complex

- A participant highlighted the evolving and decentralised nature of the energy business, where products are becoming increasingly complex and targeted to specific customer segments that benefit from the transition. This complexity poses a challenge in ensuring that customers experiencing vulnerability are not left behind during the transition. To address this, robust consumer protection frameworks should be established to complement the evolving product landscape along with clear and unbiased information.

#### 3.1.4 Unique challenges faced by First Nations communities

- A participant noted the unique challenges faced by First Nations communities in the context of the energy transition. These challenges include negotiating complex issues related to Native Title, Cultural Heritage Management Plans (CHMP), treaties, and representation. First Nations people as right holders, often find themselves in direct negotiation with businesses and large-scale projects, such as offshore windfarms. However, while these negotiations are ongoing, some members of these communities are falling behind on their energy bills, creating financial stress.

#### 3.1.5 Lack of clear communication and information mismanagement

- Two participants noted that there is a pressing need for a centralised, single source of information, especially for non-native English speakers. The participants provided valuable insights from the perspective of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, where senior members often lack digital literacy and rely on family, friends, or language-specific radio for information. The participants cited the positive example of receiving up to date COVID information from the Department of Health website.
- Another participant echoed the prevalence of misinformation during the energy transition, often originating from friends, outdated sources and in some circumstances retailers. An illustrative example that was discussed involved retailers promoting expensive carbon-neutral plans to

customers as the “best option”. These customers may not have the financial means to afford such options and are not offered a base level plan. This issue underscores the need for clearer, more transparent information dissemination and the consideration of affordability constraints for customers when presenting eco-friendly alternatives.

### 3.1.6 Varied levels of transition readiness

- A participant also highlighted that transition readiness varies significantly among different demographic groups. Some groups may be more prepared and equipped to navigate the complexities of the energy transition, while others may lag behind due to various factors, including socio-economic conditions, access to information, and historical experiences.
- Another participant echoed this and added that distributors should actively engage with communities to bridge these gaps.

## 3.2 Inclusive - no one left behind

### 3.2.1 Targeted products

- A participant highlighted that agency is key and customers should be empowered to make the right decisions for themselves through clear information that is relevant for their situation.
- A participant noted that it becomes essential to identify target groups and develop support structures to empower specific groups within the transition. For example, information about the transition away from gas and suitability of alternatives.
- Another participant cited that older individual aspired to be part of the transition, but information and structural barriers prevent this and there needs to be a holistic way of engaging with them.

### 3.2.2 Tension between current cost of living and energy transition

- The tension between immediate financial concerns and the broader challenges associated with the energy transition were highlighted by several participants. It is difficult to get people to focus on energy transition when faced with more immediate issues of cost of living, affordability and access to basic necessities like food, healthcare and switching on a heater during the colder months.
- A participant noted that new immigrants within CALD communities may exhibit a fear of authority, hindering their ability to engage effectively on matters such as paying bills let alone energy transition. This point was echoed by another participant who noted that the historical trauma endured by First Nations people can lead to some customers prioritising paying energy bills over buying food, due to the fear of the retailer requesting payment. This further complicates engagement in the transition process. This trauma can make participation a daunting and emotionally charged experience.

### 3.2.3 Energy efficiency

- A participant suggested amplifying the importance of energy efficiency and offering rebates as part of the transition. This can benefit various groups, including those transitioning to electric vehicles.

## 3.3 Customer agency and increasing the understanding of the energy transition

### 3.3.1 Tailoring information and support

- A participant representing CALD communities noted that it is critical to tailor information and support specific needs of various communities and individuals within them. An example cited was the reliance of gas stoves for high heat in Asian cooking and that there should be information about the benefits of using an electric stove.

- Another participant cited the example of older individuals requiring peer support when applying for the recent \$250 power saving bonus. The individuals found it useful to sit next to someone else who could walk them through the process step-by-step.
- To better support different groups, participants acknowledged that Victorian electricity distributors will need to explore different channels to engage with different groups. Examples include going to culturally safe spaces in-person to engage with the community and using both digital and non-digital channels to disseminate information.

### 3.3.2 Increasing understanding and trustworthy communication channels

- To make the transition successful, participants collectively agreed that there is a need to increase the understanding of the energy transition among the broader community including what the energy network may look like in 2031. This involves identifying organisations and channels that are seen as trustworthy that can provide clear and easily accessible information. Some participants mentioned the Victorian Government could play a key role as distributor of clear, unbiased information.
- A participant also noted that information should be conveyed in simple terms and that key information should be translated. They cited an example of translated materials where the language used is highly technical and even individuals that spoke the language fluently struggled with understanding the collateral. This illustrated the need for community champions that can assist in the translation to a 'community language' and distribute the information to the community. This has worked well through COVID.

### 3.3.3 Fear of meritocracy

- A participant pointed out that the use of language when addressing customers is important. This prompted a discussion on whether labelling individuals as "have not" or "vulnerable" is appropriate as it increases the divide.
- Another participant agreed and highlighted an emerging meritocracy, where certain individuals may feel "superior" for choosing the environmentally friendly option such as installing solar, whilst others may not be able to afford this, or are renting, and consequently have no access to solar.

## 4 TOPIC TWO: NATURAL DISASTERS AND RELIABILITY

Brent Cleeve, Head of Regulatory Policy and Compliance, CitiPower, Powercor and United Energy, presented on the impacts of natural disasters and the importance of energy network to community resilience. He cited examples of major storm, bushfire and flooding events that have impacted customers and the network over recent years.

To assist in shaping the discussion, Brent provided examples of community hubs and Mobile Emergency Response Vehicles (MERV) that had been used to manage recent events. He acknowledged that depending on the community, and the nature of the emergency event, safe spaces can vary from community halls to supermarkets depending on the risks and requirements of the community.

Following this, Kate Eskdale, RPS, facilitated a group discussion to provide the opportunity for clarification and feedback on what Victorian electricity distributors should be considering for the following topics:

### 4.1 Community hubs

Key discussion points are summarised below:

- A participant shared an example from the recent bushfires that affected Mallacoota and its surrounds, where community hubs were set up at secure locations like football fields where the fire had less chance of reaching. It was noted that providing resources for local community to organise themselves is important as they knew what would work best for their local area.
- Another participant acknowledged that MERVs are good as they provide wi-fi and charging to communities in emergency events. The importance of being able to recharge your phone and make contact with others following an emergency was highlighted.
- From a First Nations perspective, a participant noted that community hubs and services will need to be prioritised for each specific nation related to the locations outlined in established Reconciliation Action Plans. They also stressed consideration of cultural sensitives and safe spaces when planning for community protection, alongside tapping into existing relationships with the Country Fire Authority (CFA).

### 4.2 Community information and activation

Key discussion points are summarised below:

- Participants discussed that communities can struggle to access real time information about the impacts of a bushfire as telecommunications infrastructure is often dependent upon electricity supply. This illustrates the importance of collaboration between telecommunications providers and the Victorian electricity distributors during major events.
- A participant cited an example of an individual with rooftop solar assumed they would have a continuing energy supply in the event of a natural disaster without knowledge that rooftop solar needed to be set up in advance for 'islanding' – to allow continued operation during a power outage. This illustrates the gap in community information about how rooftop solar operates during a major event and the need to pre-plan for islanding.
- Another participant discussed the importance of providing information about unplanned outages. They suggested that information should be provided as translated text messages and Victorian electricity distributors should be encouraged to work with these communities to develop and distribute this information.

### 4.3 Access to loan generators/energy supply (batteries)

Key discussion points are summarised below:

- One participant organisation was involved following the fires near Mallacoota and noted that Victorian electricity distributors hold unique information and access about power supply. The community-based organisation bought over 50 generators to assist with recovery efforts but were unsure where they would be most needed. The organisation called AusNet for information on major

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areas without energy supply on the network. It was noted that in this situation, the community were responsible for the maintenance and safety of the generators once handed over.

- A participant raised concerns about the tracking, maintenance, and safety of generators that were left in communities.
  - In response to this, a Victorian electricity distributor mentioned the challenges in providing for dedicated resources during emergency events for house-to-house visits rather than working on restoring power to larger numbers of customers, highlighting the logistical aspects of maintaining and providing access to generators. They also advised that loan generators/ batteries can be expensive.
- Another participant highlighted the existing batteries in rural communities and the need for Victorian electricity distributors to be aware of their locations in the event of an emergency.
- In the context of energy supply, a participant mentioned the potential use of Standalone Power Systems (SAPs) and exploring split funding models for energy supply.

## 5 TOPIC THREE: PARTNERSHIPS

Matthew Serpell, Electricity Regulation and Compliance Manager, Jemena Electricity Networks, provided an overview of partnership approaches to offer support to customers experiencing vulnerability at a state-wide level and examples of partnership programs.

Kate Eskdale, RPS, then facilitated a group discussion to provide the opportunity for clarification and feedback on what Victorian electricity distributors should be considering for the following topics below.

### 5.1 Examples/ case studies of successful partnerships

Key discussion points are summarised below:

- A participant mentioned successful partnerships with grassroots community organisations, such as the “Bring Your Bills Days” program. They proposed partnerships with local community groups and noted an opportunity to expand on the program by weaving in “higher tech conversations” such as understanding energy transition, solar islanding, controlled loads, and electric vehicles.
- Another participant provided an example of a partnership with DEECA for clients seeking unbiased information about transitioning to solar energy. They noted that many individuals aspired to make the transition to solar but lacked clear guidance on the process and trustworthy sources of information. The Victorian Government was cited as a potential partner for providing unbiased information.
- A participant discussed their organisation’s successful engagement with CALD communities through their channels for the power saving bonus scheme. These channels included their existing advocacy and membership organisations that had their own reach and relationships within the community. The organisation also developed relationships with ethno-specific groups and managed to engage face-to-face with seniors, carers, and the wider CALD community. This illustrates the importance of tapping into existing resources and networks to distribute important information.

### 5.2 Partnership ideas

- From a Dynamic Operating Envelope (DOE)/ Distribution System Operators (DSO) perspective, a participant suggested partnerships with councils to provide information to customers on getting the best use of electricity. This would allow the Victorian electricity distributors to build social license. The same participant suggested partnering with businesses to provide information on load shifting and flexible loads. As part of this, distributors could also provide information on resilience related outages.
- A participant emphasised the need for information about electricity alternatives, particularly high-heat cooking. They cited the lack of information about understanding how electric induction compares as an alternative to gas. They emphasised that information would need to come from a trusted source and be localised.
- Building on engaging with CALD communities, a participant noted that partnerships with school hubs is important. There are existing support networks such as health workers within schools that support families. They emphasised that Victorian electricity distributors should consider where CALD communities get their information and tap into these resources.
- A participant noted that individuals that live in apartments will have unique challenges and cited an example of an apartment owner being unable to install solar panels. They suggested partnerships with real estate agencies, body corporates and property managers to steer conversations on energy transition and other options for the whole building.
- From a First Nations perspective, a participant recommended exploring partnerships with local emergency services like to align with community aspirations and manage them proactively. They also emphasised the importance of prioritising Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) documents and using straightforward language to engage effectively with First Nations communities. They stressed the need for flexibility in language and energy literacy, suggesting an opportunity to revisit thresholds when communities require support.

- Another participant highlighted the role of retailers in providing advice and support to customers during the energy transition and suggested the need to update their scripting. An example included retailers advising their clients to cook once a week and reheat their food to use less energy. This illustrates the need to consider how retailers have the obligation to support customers.
- A participant noted an opportunity for Victorian electricity distributors to serve as touchpoints for customers, potentially through connection welcome packs.

### 5.2.1 Industry partnering suggestions

- A participant proposed that Victorian electricity distributors could work with gas networks for an orderly transition and to make sure customers experiencing vulnerability are considered during each step.
- A participant mentioned the need for holistic information about energy transition including the potential cost of rewiring houses to allow for electrification as part of the shift away from gas. To support this, the development of energy efficiency grants targeted to customers experiencing vulnerability is important.
- Another suggestion was for Victorian electricity distributors to partner with telecommunications companies to plan for emergency response scenarios. There is a key driver for vulnerable community members to have access to electricity and communication services following an emergency.

## 6 PARTICIPANTS FEEDBACK ON EVENT

Participants were asked to complete a short survey at the end of the session to share their feedback.

**Table 4. Participant feedback**

<b>1. Participant feedback</b>
<b>Using the scale below, please evaluate the workshop</b>
<b>The workshop timing was appropriate.</b> – All participants respondents ‘Strongly Agree’ (4) or ‘Agree’ (6).
<b>The workshop objectives were clearly stated.</b> – All participants respondents ‘Strongly Agree’ (4), ‘Agree’ (5), or ‘Neutral’ (1).
<b>The facilitator presented clearly and logically.</b> – All participants respondents ‘Strongly Agree’ (7) or ‘Agree’ (3).
<b>The workshop content was interesting.</b> – All participants respondents ‘Strongly Agree’ (8) or ‘Agree’ (2).
<b>The facilitator allowed me and others to have a say.</b> – All participants respondents ‘Strongly Agree’ (9) or ‘Agree’ (1).
<b>There were opportunities for me to participate in an engaging and appropriate way.</b> – All participants respondents ‘Strongly Agree’ (7) or ‘Agree’ (3).
<b>2. Do you have any suggestions about how the workshop could have been improved?</b>
The reading material could have been emailed earlier a week in advance to enable time to read and comprehend the information.
More time to yarn.
Not at this time.
Nope all good great job.
Good sized group but a few key perspectives missing (e.g. disability). Some technical issues needed a bit of explanation.
<b>3. What did you value most about the workshop?</b>
The sharing of ideas and information of participants.
Participants’ inputs and ideas are taken well.
Having the opportunity to speak and advocate.
Being able to collaborate with others in the sector but also those other stakeholders such as DBs and the regulators.
Good group discussion, everyone able to contribute their ideas in an open way.
The size of the group was good for facilitating discussion.
Right amount of time and good topics.
Great openness to input and new partnerships.
<b>4. Do you have any other comments?</b>
Grateful for opportunity to participate.
Thanks everyone.
No thank you
Nope all good
COTA VIC has an ongoing interest and would like to be engaged further.



## 7 NEXT STEPS

Findings of this report will be shared with the Victorian electricity distributors for their further consideration. The feedback shared will be used to inform the services they provide and if there should be any changes proposed via their 2026-31 regulatory proposals.

The Victorian electricity distributors also presented on future initiatives for attendees' involvement. These included:

- The "Game Change" initiative, led by the AER, which aims to improve outcomes for vulnerable consumers through better balancing costs and risks in the sector. The AER is engaging in extensive consultations, involving various stakeholders such as welfare, economic, market, and government agencies, as well as industry participants and ombudsmen. They have conducted a thorough assessment of proposed ideas and are currently seeking feedback throughout the latter half of 2023 to advance their initiatives further.
- The Essential Service Commission of Victoria is rolling out two customer-focused programs: "Getting to Fair" which aims to improve access to essential services. The second program is the "Payment Difficulty Framework Implementation Review" which seeks to enhance support for customers facing payment challenges, with a focus on retailer-related initiatives. While these programs are retailer facing, attendees were asked if they would like to explore the role of network businesses in the initiatives.



Image of roundtable participants.

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