



# Engagement Program with Customers Experiencing Vulnerable Circumstances

**Forethought® Executive Report**

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# Recap of Objectives and Approach

# Background and Objectives

The ongoing energy transition and the persistent strain on the cost of living have imposed substantial burdens on people in vulnerable circumstances. Whilst Forethought has conducted extensive research prior to identify and prioritise the value metrics that hold significance for our customers, it has become evident that the voices of these customers were underrepresented.

In line with Energy Ministers' direction to prioritise the achievement of affordable energy and satisfied customers, Forethought conducted a community engagement program with people in vulnerable circumstances\*. The aim of this program was to delve deeper into the needs, concerns, and perspectives of customers experiencing vulnerability, allowing CitiPower, Powercor and United Energy to provide more effective and tailored support.



## Research Objectives:

- Understand the needs of customers in vulnerable circumstances now and in the future from energy distributors to inform the Regulatory Reset 2026-2031;
- Explore how customers facing vulnerable circumstances perceive the energy transition and identify strategies for enhancing accessibility; and
- Identify whether customers experiencing vulnerable circumstances share the same priority areas previously identified in other research.

# Our definitions of customers in vulnerable circumstances have been guided by AER

We acknowledge that there is currently no universally accepted definition for individuals experiencing vulnerability. Therefore, Forethought adopted the definition outlined in the AER's report titled "Towards the Energy Sector."

Consumers experiencing vulnerability' refers to circumstances that mean a person may be less able to protect or represent their interests, engage effectively and/or are more likely to suffer detriment. This includes having insufficient capacity to pay for energy use.

We believe that vulnerability is best understood as a dynamic spectrum, allowing people to transition in and out of vulnerable states rather than a fixed or lifelong condition. In other words, individuals may encounter vulnerability and disadvantage at various stages in their lives, and this status is not constant.

Whilst some definitions of customers in vulnerable circumstances includes Indigenous Australians , they will be engaged in separate research engagements. As Forethought has conducted research with CALD communities, for the purpose of this engagement, we talk to individuals with the following circumstances:



## Low income customers

This encompasses individuals holding a healthcare card, with limited income. This group includes students, single parents, and individuals with disabilities (such as those receiving disability pensions).



## Medical Customers

This includes individuals experiencing of disability and/or mental ill health. These customers may require continuous energy for life support, oxygen, or other medical assistance.

# Who did we speak to?

Forethought engaged with n = 59 vulnerable customers across the CitiPower, Powercor, and United Energy networks in metro and rural & regional areas using a mixed methodology inclusive of:

## 7 x In-person Focus Groups

Customer groups	Location		Total
	Metro	Regional / Rural	
2 x Pensioners (Aged 65 and older)	n=6	n=6	n=12
2 x Youth (Aged 18-24)	n=6	n=5	n=11
Single parents	n=3	n=3	n=6
Low Income (Aged 25-39)	n=3	n=3	n=6
Low Income (Aged 40-64)	n=3	n=3	n=6
<b>Total Respondents</b>	<b>n=21</b>	<b>n=20</b>	<b>n=41</b>

## One-on-one In-Depth Interviews

Customer groups	Location		Total
	Metro	Regional / Rural	
Medically vulnerable customers	n=3	n=3	n=6
Disability	n=2	n=2	n=4
Low Income (Aged 25-39)	n=2	n=2	n=4
Low Income (Aged 40-64)	n=2	n=2	n=4
<b>Total Interviews</b>	<b>n=9</b>	<b>n=9</b>	<b>n=18</b>

Please note that a greater proportion of Powercor customers were interviewed as Powercor has a larger number of customers, covers a larger area of Victoria and tends to have a higher proportion of low SES than other networks. This report found consistent insights across cohorts, however, where differences were found these are called out. Additionally, it should be noted that the report only highlights the voices of customers and does not represent the forthcoming business investments to address their priorities.

Citipower	Powercor	United Energy
n=9	n=40	n=11

Note: The sample frame was designed with location and age as key parameters as they have been proven to be highly correlated with behaviour in the energy industry. There was overlap between the different groups of customers, e.g. Medically vulnerable and Disability, Single parents and Low income, etc.



# Executive Summary

# How did the insights compare to what we already know about vulnerable customers?



## What was aligned to current knowledge?

- High energy costs were a primary concern<sup>1</sup>, with flexibility to alter usage limited by factors including work status, place of work, medical / disability status and income.
- Their knowledge of the energy transition was on par with the general population. They supported the energy transition, but worried that it would be dictated to them, and they would be left behind if they could not afford to be part of it<sup>2,3</sup>
- Awareness of CPPALUE was very low, particularly in metro areas, but experiences with CPPALUE, typically during outages, were recalled positively
- Customers were pragmatic about outages, but expected to receive proactive and transparent communication<sup>4</sup>. Notification letters were preferred for initial notice of planned outages, but emails and SMS were preferred for reminders and notification of unplanned outages

### Rural and regional vulnerable customers

- Regional and rural customers urged CPPALUE to provide a clear vision for the future, inclusive of contingency plans, to effectively manage potential major outages resulting from the energy transition. They seek assurance and transparency regarding how CPPALUE plans to address increased electricity demand and potential disruptions<sup>5,6</sup>



## What was new?

- Vulnerable customers were often more aware of their individual / household energy usage.
- As vulnerable customers navigate the energy transition, they expressed the foremost desire to gain a sense of agency and control. They saw education and communication as one tool in achieving this goal.
- They were more likely to equate affordability to the amount they paid for energy rather than value for money due to limited disposable income.
- Customers with limited flexibility to alter their consumption (full-time workers, typically younger, and medically vulnerable customers or those with a disability) generally would not be able to take advantage of time of use (TOU) tariffs and were worried that they could be disadvantaged.
- Two key factors limiting accessibility to the energy transition were residential status and/or income, which made it difficult to be future-focused.
- For vulnerable customers with more flexibility in engaging with the energy transition, the main driver for adopting renewable energy (e.g., solar) was the potential financial benefits. The broader customer base also shared this sentiment, but demonstrated a willingness to share excess solar production with the community which was not yet evident amongst vulnerable customers<sup>7</sup>.



# Vulnerable customers had a need to feel informed and in control

To support this objective, the key needs across three priority areas included:



## Cost of Living Pressures

- Vulnerable customers asked for information on energy usage and tariff structures to reduce costs. They suggested that retailers provide clarity on how much energy different appliances consume and the price difference between peak and off-peak rates, which could develop a better understanding towards lowering bills.



## Participating in the Energy Transition

- Educational campaigns regarding the energy transition and how vulnerable customers can be supported in transitioning to renewables taking into account their residential status and income, delivered by retailers with the support of CPPALUE.
- Greater Government incentives for installing solar panels, particularly for property owners.



## Maintaining Proactive and Transparent Communication

- According to rural and regional customers, who faced greater vulnerability to extreme weather and reliability challenges, there was a strong emphasis on the need for clear, timely communication from CPPALUE about outages
- Vulnerable customers also wanted CPPALUE to communicate its vision for the future, especially regarding backup plans for managing major outages in rural and regional areas.

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a patterned top, is looking down at a document she is holding. She is standing in front of a house with a white door and a porch. The background is slightly blurred, showing some greenery and a person in the distance. The overall image has a blue tint.

## Cost of Living Pressures

High energy costs were top of mind for vulnerable customers who were unsure how to lower their bills whilst facing factors limiting their ability to alter consumption. They wanted support from retailers to be more informed about their energy usage and tariff structures to feel in control.

## Cost of living pressures were a concern for all vulnerable customers, who did not have the luxury of a disposable income enjoyed by the broader customer base

- Most customers noted that their bills had increased significantly despite no change to their energy consumption.
  - This was particularly concerning for vulnerable customers who were more likely to be on fixed incomes\* (e.g., Pension, Disability Support Pension) with little, if any, room to move financially.
- Consequently, compared with the broader customer base which typically equated affordability to the value they received for their money (e.g., reliable supply), vulnerable customers were more likely to equate affordability to the amount they paid.
- Some regional / rural customers believed that their bills were higher than metro customers, but were not necessarily aware of the reason for the difference which caused some frustration.

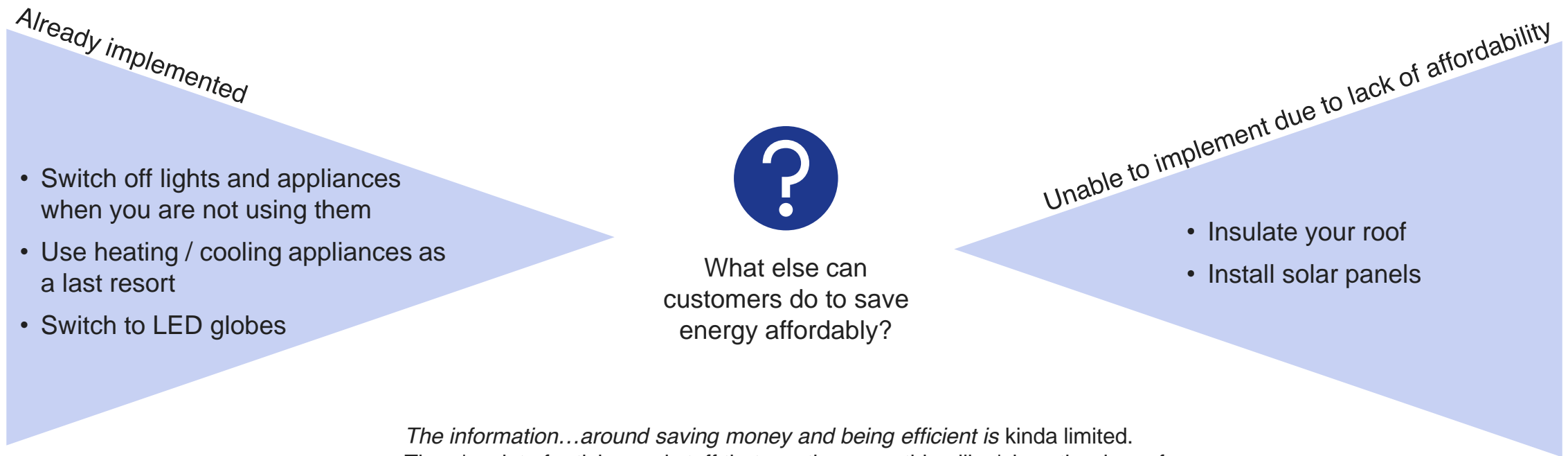
“ There's been such a rise in energy prices. We've gone from having a bill of \$150 a month to \$400 and there's been no change in what we've *done through personal habit.*”  
– **Male, 47, Medically Vulnerable, Metro**

“ My general electricity bill has doubled from what it was three months ago... I was averaging \$65 a week on what I would consider would be low usage and that has just about doubled them in my last couple of *bills have been around \$120.*”  
– **Male, 63, Low income, Metro**

“ *I feel like our prices are more expensive than the city...My parents have told me - that's a house of five people - how expensive their electricity bill is in metropolitan Melbourne and it's no more than \$300 whereas I'm paying about \$700...I don't really understand why it's such a big gap between one person and five people.*”  
– **Female, 24, Youth, Regional / Rural**

## Vulnerable customers felt like they were already doing everything they could to save energy and reduce their bills

They generally believed their usage was not excessive, when comparing their usage with other households via their bills. Some customers felt that they were already taking somewhat extreme measures, e.g. not using certain appliances at all.



*The information...around saving money and being efficient is kinda limited. There's a lot of articles and stuff that say the same thing like 'close the door of the rooms you're not using when you're heating it' and 'make sure your home is insulated', but they don't go further than that...What can I buy to turn it off itself? And also smart homes. What can they do for me that will save energy?"*

– Female, 40, Disability, Metro

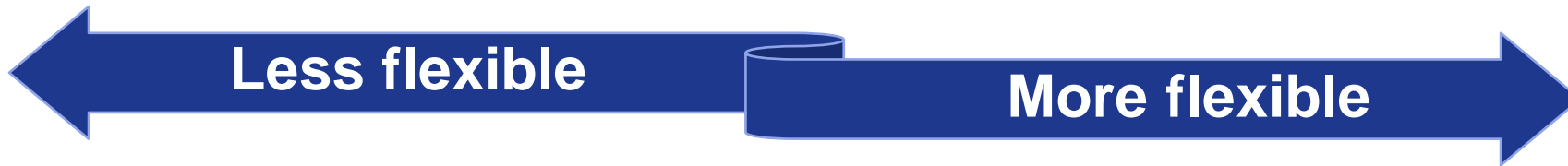
Amongst a small sample, vulnerable customers were typically more aware of their energy usage, with some monitoring their consumption

“ My [retailer] also has an app and when I turned the aircon on, it would spike quite a bit in price, so I basically never put it on.”  
– **Female, 23, Youth, Metro**

“ I think about energy daily because of the Powerpal.”  
– **Female, 39, Low income, Regional / Rural**

- Younger customers were more likely to have downloaded their retailer’s app to monitor consumption.
  - Some apps allowed for real-time monitoring for those with smart meters.
- Others received weekly emails from their retailer about their energy usage with tips on how to save.
- Customers who had a Powerpal enjoyed having a greater understanding of their consumption and how much energy their appliances were using.
  - Few customers mentioned a Powerpal, but wanted access to a tool with this capability to have more control over their usage, highlighting the importance of increasing awareness of the ability for Victorian residents to claim a free monitor.
  - However, alternative methods of monitoring consumption were needed for those living in an apartment who could not install the device.

## However, a range of factors affected vulnerable customers' abilities to alter their consumption behaviour



- Younger customers
  - More likely to be at work during the day
- Customers working in an office regularly
- Medically vulnerable customers or those with a disability
  - Heavily reliant on energy to meet their health needs (e.g., regulating body temperature) or make their lives more bearable
  - More likely to be at home during the day, but required energy throughout the day

“Temperature regulation's not working properly in my body...I definitely use a lot more electricity during winter just because I can't get warm. There's a lot of [devices] also that makes life more convenient to manage my fatigue and pain.”

– Female, 40, Disability, Metro

- Customers who spent most of their time at home
  - Retired or part-time workers
  - Older customers
    - More likely to engage in non-energy activities, e.g. waiting for a sunny day to do the washing
  - Those on Government support, e.g. pension, disability support payment\*

“I'm adaptive and the fact that I do work from home a lot of the time and I can choose when I do particular jobs.”

– Male, 63, Low income, Metro

Compared to the broader population, vulnerable customers:

- Had as much or more flexibility to reschedule household tasks to different times.
- Were significantly less likely to use dryers or dishwashers.
- Were significantly more likely to earn an income between \$18,001 – \$45,000 (46.2% vs 19.1%) and significantly less likely to earn an income above this range.

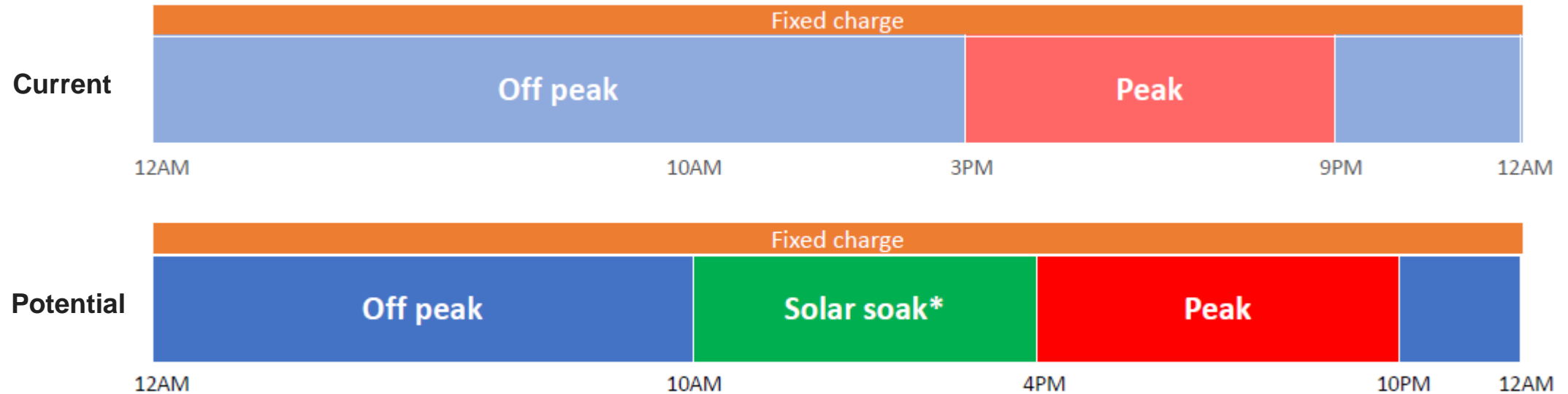
(Customer Values Study, 2024)

## These factors played a role in how the potential tariff structure was received

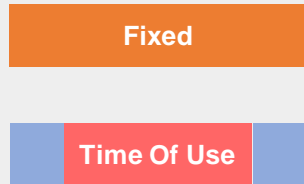
Customers had a varied understanding of tariffs. Most could identify that it affected how you were charged for your energy usage, but often did not know what tariff structure they were on or how the different structures could affect them and found it difficult to compare retailers because they presented the rates differently.

Customers were presented with the current and potential tariff structures below and asked for their feedback, with particular focus on:

- Fixed charge vs time of use (TOU) structure
- Shift in peak time by one hour
- Introduction of the solar soak period



## Customers preferred a structure that they felt would best allow them to save on their electricity bills



- Customers with greater flexibility who spent most of their time at home preferred the TOU structure and saw it as an incentive to be more mindful of their consumption behaviour and adapt it to take advantage of lower rates during the day.
  - Single customers, in particular, felt this structure would be perfect for them as they had ultimate control over how all their appliances were used.
- A flat rate was preferred by customers with less flexibility to change their energy usage as they were more likely to do energy-heavy activities during peak time.
  - However, low income customers were concerned about having lack of control with a flat rate and worried that the rate may be too expensive.

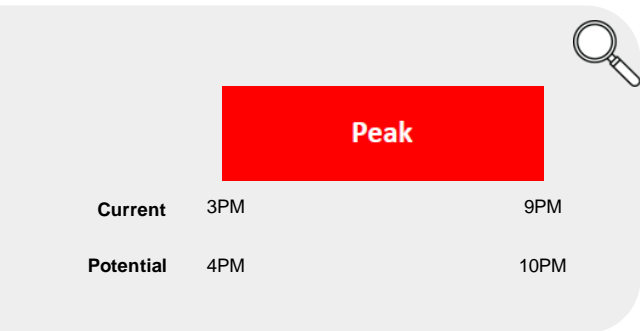
“ It's just me, so I'm basically controlling when things are used in the house so I would definitely be conscious if it's on or off peak...to *save money or reduce consumption.*”  
– **Female, 52, Disability, Regional / Rural**

“ If it was a flat rate, that means that there's no chance to have it be cheaper in any way, shape or form...Just with the inflation we've have in the last several years, I could see that flat rate beginning fairly low and then going up very quickly and then there's nothing you can *do about that...it takes away that autonomy.*”  
– **Female, 29, Low income, Regional / Rural**

“ Because my power costs the same at any time of the day or night, then I'm not overly worried at this point on how or why we use power? Give me *cheaper rates then I'll adapt.*”  
– **Male, 63, Low income, Metro**



## Customers with less flexibility to change their usage behaviour had concerns about the shift in the peak time and many questioned the change



- Customers with less flexibility typically worked during the day and arrived home after the peak period started (usually after 5pm) when they needed to do energy-heavy activities. As such, the shift represented an additional hour of peak time to these customers.
  - Waiting until 10pm to take advantage of off-peak rates was a concern for parents with young children and youths living in share houses who did not want to disturb others late at night.
- Customers with greater flexibility did not feel strongly about the shift as they could adapt their usage.
- Some questioned whether shifting the peak time actually represented a shift in peak energy demand, or whether energy companies just wanted to make up for the hour lost to the solar soak period. If the former, customers suggested that the associated shift in peak energy usage be communicated for transparency.



Workers wouldn't be able to take advantage of it, but I'm not working so I would...Workers would always be in peak hour whereas if it stopped at 9, they could get away with doing some things after 9 o'clock, but 10 makes it difficult."

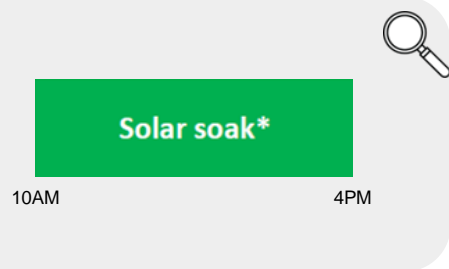
- Female, 61, Low Income, Regional / Rural



I don't see how it would be different cause I thought that peak load was when most people were using [electricity]...It seems like they're just putting it up for an extra hour."

- Male, 27, Youth, Regional / Rural

## Generally, the solar soak period was appealing, but most customers were not in a position to take advantage of it



- Most customers received the solar soak positively, particularly solar customers who were already set up to benefit from it.
- However, those who worked full time and could not work from home saw no benefit unless they could store and use the solar energy from that period once they arrived home. Even customers with greater flexibility to adapt their energy consumption typically could not afford the upfront cost of installing solar panels and therefore would not be able to benefit from the solar soak.
- A few customers, particularly low income customers, were concerned that the peak and off-peak rates would increase in light of the solar soak, which would further disadvantage them.

“ For an at home parent, it's probably great, but for someone like myself who's single, works and I'm not home between 10am and 4pm normally, that's a bit useless to me...My time to do everything is that 4pm to 10pm time slot.”  
– Female, 41, Medically Vulnerable, Regional / Rural

“ It's a great option, I think, for people that are home, like with small children, etcetera, that are relying on electricity all day or like ourselves that work from home.”  
– Female, 44, Medically Vulnerable, Metro

“ If they are going to do free electricity, what are they going to bump up instead?”  
– Female, 38, Low income, Regional / Rural

Overall, customers wanted support to feel more informed about their energy usage and tariff structures, which they expected from their retailers

**As retailers were perceived to be accountable for customers' energy costs, they were expected to be responsible for providing information that would give them a greater sense of control, which could be provided along with their bill.**



### Support to understand energy usage

- Identifying how much energy different appliances use
  - This could be achieved by working with all retailers to provide in-app functionality to monitor consumption, and in almost real-time for smart meter customers
- Alternatives to Powerpal for those living in apartments



Campaigns that tell us how much it costs to run different types of fans and things like that. You know, your typical box fan compared to evaporative cooler, up to your split systems and ducted cooling. What does it cost per hour to run each of these kind of things?"

– Female, 61, Low income, Regional / Rural



### Clarity regarding tariff structures

- Clarity on peak and off-peak time periods
- Price difference between peak and off-peak rates
- How to find the rates on your bill
- Potential cost savings between fixed and TOU structures specific to customers' abilities to influence when they consumed energy



If I was a bit more familiar with what the differences [in cost between peak and off-peak] might be and how much I could potentially save doing that, then it would be worth paying attention to."

– Male, 27, Youth, Regional / Rural



# Ability to Participate in the Energy Transition

Whilst vulnerable customers supported the energy transition, they expected CPPALUE, along with retailers and the Government, to make the transition more accessible so that they would not be left behind.

## Vulnerable customers had a varied, but generally limited understanding of the energy transition



“ *Not [familiar] at all.*”  
– Female, 41, Medically Vulnerable, Regional / Rural

“ Moving from coal and fossil fuels to renewables.”  
– Male, 25, Low income, Regional Rural

“ Trying to transition into more sustainable ways of using energy by changing the way we receive energy as well as how it's generated in the first place via solar panels and wind farms.”  
– Female, 39, Low Income, Metro

“ *I don't know if it's my age group...but it's not something I'd physically go and look up on the Internet.*”  
– Female, 55, Medically Vulnerable, Metro

“ Moving from fossil fuels to green energy, so moving away from relying on coal power to solar and hydro and wind.”  
– Male, 21, Youth, Regional / Rural

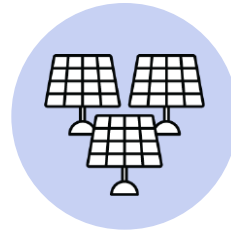
# Most customers were supportive of the transition and hoped for a future with greater reliance on renewable energy

10 years from now, customers hoped that the future of energy would include:



Greater energy efficiency with minimal negative environmental impact, possibly with tighter standards around household appliances

“ Hopefully [I'll be using energy] more efficiently...It's probably more the products that we use to utilise electricity are more efficient.”  
– Female, 55, Medically Vulnerable, Metro



Accessible and affordable renewable energy, particularly greater solar usage

“ The local Council are putting solar on all of their public buildings and they're going to generate solar and sell at a cut price to local residents, including renters...So there's probably a hope in the future that maybe I can plug into that...and maybe I can get cheaper power.”  
– Male, 63, Low income, Metro



Self-generation and self-sufficiency

“ I expect that I would have solar and enough battery that I wouldn't be as reliant on base load and my bill would be relatively small.”  
– Male, 41, Medically Vulnerable, Regional / Rural

## However, Residential Status and Income were two key reasons why vulnerable customers felt that they could not participate in the energy transition



### Residential status

Many customers rented\* and did not have the power to make their home more energy efficient. Additionally, the homes they lived in were typically old and not optimised for energy efficiency, for example:

- No double glazing
- Inefficient heating and cooling appliances
- Not well-insulated

Others lived in embedded networks where there was no choice of retailer.

“ It’s a rental, so I’m not allowed to [install solar panels] because it’s not my house.”  
– Male, 41, Medically Vulnerable, Regional / Rural



### Income

Single parents and low income customers were particularly concerned about being left behind in the energy transition and facing harder financial circumstances as a result.

It was more difficult for them to envision a future where they could afford to transition to renewable energy as they were primarily focussed on making it through each day.

“ I have looked in solar panels, but it’s just expensive...by the time we do get any money back...I could be in my grave.”

– Female, 62, Low income, Metro



## The interplay of these variables was particularly evident in the context of solar energy

Vulnerable customers were very supportive of solar energy and many wanted to install solar panels to save on their energy bills. However, as many customers were renters, they were reliant on the property owner to do so...

“ I would like to get solar panels, but you just can't do it when you're renting. Most of the landlords just aren't in on it.”  
– Female, 61, Low income, Regional / Rural

...and customers who were in a position to install solar panels could not afford the upfront investment and thought that it would take too long to realise a return on their investment as they felt that the feed-in tariff was low. This was in contrast to the broader customer base which increasingly wanted to share excess solar production with the community and were less focussed on the financial return (Future Home Demand, 2023).

“ We've looked at some solar options, but, to be honest with you, we're not going to go down that path because it's far too expensive for the return you get.”  
– Male, 47, Medically Vulnerable, Metro



## Vulnerable customers were worried that the transition would be forced upon them, and they would be left behind

- Customers felt like they did not have a say in what the transition looked like and were concerned that it would be dictated to them by the Government and energy companies, regardless of whether they felt ready for changes.
- They were unsure whether they would be well informed of changes that they would be required to implement and what would happen to them if they could not afford to make those changes.

“ I'm assuming that some [changes], if not all of it will be *mandatory.*”

– Female, 40, Disability, Metro

“ Consumers have limited options to influence the transition. It ultimately relies on distributors' actions and Government *policies to support them.*”

– Male, 47, Low income, Regional / Rural

“ The only issue with [the energy transition] is the cost to the *consumer who can't afford to put [renewables] in.*”

– Female, 42, Low income, Regional / Rural



## Customers' concerns were apparent when considering the transition from gas to electricity

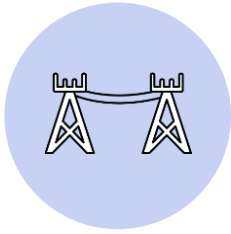
- Customers seemed to feel that the transition was happening around them, with a few noting the phasing out of gas connections in new homes.
- There was concern that they would not be given adequate notice to prepare and they questioned who would be expected to pay to transition to electricity when the transition was not a choice they made.
- A few customers were also concerned that the grid would not be ready to handle the increased demand and wondered what would happen to existing gas lines and gas meters.

“What's it going to cost us when we don't have a choice?...If things change radically, we need to be prepared and financially prepared...we need to know *that sort of stuff.*”  
– Female, 52, Disability, Regional / Rural

“When they stop the gas here, this will put more pressure on electricity. Where *are they going to get this from?*”  
– Male, 66, Pensioner, Regional / Rural

# Support from energy companies and the Government was expected to make participating in the energy transition more accessible

## Vulnerable customers wanted support in the form of:



Clarity on what the energy transition is, what changes will be involved and when, the role of different energy companies in this process, and how customers will be impacted and supported.

- Information about the transition from gas to electricity was the most immediate need.



Government incentives for installing solar panels, particularly for property owners and community solutions, e.g. generating solar and sharing it with residents.



Information for customers in high-density living about how to transition to more renewable energies through their appliances, etc.\*



What they're looking to do in the future and how they're planning on implementing it too and what *their timelines are to do these things.*"

– Female, 55, Medically Vulnerable, Metro



If the State Government offers enough incentives for a decent solar set up to reduce your bill...and they should be offering some better *lean-in tariffs for solar set up.*"

– Male, 41, Medically Vulnerable, Regional / Rural

\*The need for information about the transition from gas to electricity is important as Victoria uses more gas than any other Australian state or territory (Victoria State Government, Energy, Environment and Climate Action, 2023)

\*\*Solar energy penetration is lower in areas of high density living which is proportionately higher in Victoria than in other states, with 24.7% of residents living in flats, apartments, units, semi-detached terraces and townhouses (Roy Morgan, 2022).



## Retailers were expected to be the main conduit of information, with support from CPPALUE to inform customers about the energy transition

- Despite generally low awareness of CPPALUE, customers trusted their distributor to provide information about the energy transition, particularly as compared with retailers and the Government.
  - CPPALUE was perceived to have a greater interest in managing energy demand by building the infrastructure to allow for effective distribution of renewable energy, rather than financial gain.
- However, in light of low awareness, customers suggested delivering educational campaigns through retailers with whom they had the greatest interaction.
  - This was a particular concern for younger customers who were more likely to think that the information could be spam.

“ [Powercor] have a vested interest rather than just a purely financial interest like the retailers do... The retailers are there to tell you whatever they want to tell you to make money. The distributor wants to keep you long term regardless of which retailer you're [with] so I think they've got more interest in teaching us all.”

– Male, 41, Medically Vulnerable, Regional / Rural

## Customers suggested a variety of channels to disseminate information about the energy transition

- Key channels mentioned by customers included:
  - Brochures;
  - Emails;
  - Social media posts;
  - Short videos within retailers' apps succinctly explaining the energy transition and how customers could prepare for upcoming changes.
- Receiving this information at a quarterly cadence was considered appropriate as not to overwhelm customers.
- A few customers also expected CPPALUE to engage with local communities to disseminate educational information and understand their specific needs and concerns, allowing them to feel part of the transition.



“ Social media would be most effective and I would also be interested in having an app with short videos and pictures.”  
– Female, 41, Medically Vulnerable, Regional / Rural



# Maintaining Proactive and Clear Communication

Customers generally viewed their interactions with CPPALUE positively, underpinned by timely and detailed communication regarding outages that was critical to maintain.

Experiences with CPPALUE were typically limited to outages, but were generally recalled positively by customers

CPPALUE were perceived to respond quickly to outages and maintenance issues, and provide proactive and clear communication, with most customers rating satisfaction with their distributor highly.\*

\* Please be reminded that the sample was comprised of a larger proportion of Powercor customers, who had higher unprompted awareness and familiarity with CPPALUE.

“

During a recent unplanned outage, I received timely text updates from Powercor. The communication met *expectations.*”

– Male, 47, Low income, Regional

“

[Powercor] are super quick if you have a problem. If there is *a storm, they are the first ones there. I reckon they're doing a good job. I have seen them every day trimming trees for the past two weeks, working hard.*”

– Female, 74, Pensioner, Regional / Rural

“

On someone's property I saw a tree branch that had fallen on the power line that goes to the house, so I rang up the local council and asked 'who do I ring in regards to this?' because it looked dangerous to me. And obviously that was sorted out because I walked past the place and the branch *was no longer on there.*”

– Male, 63, Disability, Metro

## Medically vulnerable customers, in particular, appreciated the help they received from CPPALUE to meet their energy needs

CPPALUE was seen as being particularly accommodating for Medically vulnerable customers, including:

- Providing frequent updates about when power will be restored during an outage;
- Providing a specific phone number to obtain outage information quickly; and
- Ensuring energy supply during outages through availability of alternative energy sources (e.g., providing backup generators) or making arrangements for customers (e.g., transport to a motel with power).



### Case Study

#### Male, 41, Disability, Regional / Rural

This customer had severe sleep apnoea that necessitated a continuous supply of electricity for his CPAP machine.

"Momentum Energy actually contacted Powercor on my behalf and then Powercor contacted me to take me through what options were available...It was really easy actually. They sent out somebody, they sat down, went through everything that was available, what was covered with Government subsidies at the time, and worked out what would be the best options for me at that point...*They sent a technician out, they wired everything up, showed me [how to disconnect it if needed], walked me through all the steps. They couldn't [have done] anything better.*"



## Customers were pragmatic about outages and did not have high expectations for CPPALUE to meet

- Customers understood that outages would happen from time to time and that, when they did occur, trusted CPPALUE to resolve it as quickly as possible to maintain reliability.
  - This was particularly important to regional / rural customers who were more likely to experience an outage. Pensioners in Shepparton wanted CPPALUE to ensure that there was a vision for the future, including back up plans, to manage major outages, aligned with previous findings (Powercor Rural and Regional Summit, 2023 and Powercor Broad and Wide, 2022).
- Generally, customers did not view community liaison managers or Mobile Emergency Response Vehicles (MERVs) to be essential unless a major disaster had occurred as a result of an extreme weather event. In that case, CPPALUE was not expected to be responsible for organising this, but rather, local council or VICSES.

“ If it's an unplanned outage, they can't do much about it other than try *and fix the problem.*”

– Female, 62, Low income, Metro

“ [A community manager] sounds like a good idea, but practically, I don't think it would work. Once you're in that situation, so is everyone *else and a case manager can only do so much at the one time.*”

– Female, 41, Low income, Regional / Rural

“ If there was an extended outage, I could certainly absolutely see the *value of [MERVs]...I'd never heard of it until you just mentioned it.*”

– Female, 55, Medically Vulnerable, Metro

## Customers expected to receive proactive and transparent communication regarding outages, consistent with the needs of the broader customer base

**When asked what customers' priority areas were regarding electricity, timely outage awareness messages during unplanned outages and accurate outage restoration times were typically in the top two priorities.**



Timely messages meant that customers were informed immediately and knew that CPPALUE was working to fix the issue.

- Timely messages during planned outages were also important, especially for Medically Vulnerable and Disability customers who may need to prepare to manage their condition whilst without power.



Restoration times were found to be mostly accurate, but customers preferred to receive a broader timeline, or at least be updated if a delay was going to occur.



I received [communication] around 5 days in advance which was good because it meant that I could position myself somewhere else so that I could move during those hours [due to her medical limitations].”

– Female, 44, Medically Vulnerable, Metro



30 minutes is acceptable...If you know you're going to go past that hour mark, there should be a message that pops up on your phone that says 'hey, there's going to be a delay'.”

– Male, 20 Youth, Metro

## The importance of maintaining communication was highlighted by customers who recalled times when they had not been notified about outages

- Whilst it was noted that communication had improved over the last few years, some customers did not always receive notifications regarding outages which caused frustration as they were not able to prepare.
- Similarly, customers were also annoyed when they were not notified when a scheduled planned outage had been cancelled.

“ I only hear from them when power is out locally. Some of the times, we don't get a message for an hour or more. I would like to know asap, even no ETA. At least tell me know it's not just my home.”  
– Female, 30, Single Parent, Metro



### Case Study Female, 40, Disability, Metro

“[United Energy] planned for an all-day outage from earlier than when I get ready for the day which was stressful...The power hadn't gone out yet when it was supposed to...[the outage] never happened. I cancelled stuff and I planned all this stuff... It was meant to finish at 4pm and they messaged me at 3pm...to say it *wasn't going to happen.*”

# Customers preferred to receive detailed communications with as much notice as possible via a mixed communication method



## Timing

- For planned outages, customers expected at least two weeks notice and reminders.
- Upon an unplanned outage occurring, customers expected to receive notification within 15 minutes.
- Customers also wanted to receive confirmation that power had been restored immediately post-outage.
  - Medically vulnerable customers were the only ones to mention receiving these messages.

“ You can prepare yourself. You're not going to be shocked with [a planned outage] suddenly happening.”  
– Male, 63, Disability, Metro



## Channel

- Letters were preferred for initial notification of planned outages.
  - This was particularly useful for customers living with others who may not receive outage notifications.
- Emails and SMS were preferred for reminders and notification of unplanned outages.

“ If just one of us gets the messages because I [pay] the electricity...then he's not gonna know and the power's going to be out, but if it's in a letter and it's out just on the fridge, then everyone can see it.”  
– Male, 21, Youth, Regional / Rural



## Information

- Customers expected to be notified of:
  - Date and time of the outage (planned) / Outage occurring (unplanned)
  - Expected outage restoration time
  - Contact details / Website for more information
  - Confirmation of power restoration
- About half wanted to be notified about the cause of the outage

“ I just want to know what's going on. If they tell you from the start, you don't need to make 19 phone calls to find out what's going on.”  
– Female, 41, Medically Vulnerable, Regional / Rural

# Summary of ideal communication approach

	Pre-outage			Outage	Post-outage
Timing of communication	Two weeks prior	One week prior	1-2 days prior	Day of the outage	Immediately post-outage
Preferred channel	Letter and a follow up email	Email	SMS	SMS	SMS
Information required	<b>Planned</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Date and time of the outage</li> <li>Expected outage time</li> <li>Contact details / Website for more information</li> <li>Cause of the outage</li> </ul> <b>Unplanned</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>N/A</li> </ul>			<b>Planned</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reminder of the outage taking place (beginning of the day)</li> <li>Expected outage time</li> <li>Contact details / Website for more information</li> </ul> <b>Unplanned</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Notification that an outage has occurred (within 15 minutes)</li> <li>Expected restoration time</li> <li>Contact details / Website for more information</li> <li>Cause of the outage</li> </ul>	
	<b>Planned and Unplanned</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Confirmation of power restoration</li> </ul>				



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