

Summary

Game Changer Industry Roundtables

Workshop 1 – Centralised Funding and Support

Wednesday, 26 April 2023

10:00 am – 11:30 am (AEST)

Location: Microsoft Teams

Facilitator: Leah Sertori, Executive Central Group

Attendees: Industry experts (4), Design Group observers (1) and Game Changer secretariat

Background

- The purpose of this roundtable workshop was to explore examples and case studies to gain insights into potential barriers and enablers for ideas related to centralised funding and support, including the shared funding pool, central service body, and increased energy supply chain investment in the Financial Counselling Contribution Scheme.
- Industry experts were invited by the AER secretariat based on their experience with related initiatives, identified with reference to feedback provided by the Design Group and Leadership Group (primarily through the idea assessment and prioritisation survey).
- The workshop began with an introduction and overview of the Game Changer, including the problem statement, design challenge, case for change, process to date, and a brief description of relevant ideas.
- The main part of the workshop was a facilitated conversation focused on key discussion questions. Feedback was recorded by the secretariat on slides during the discussion, which were subsequently shared with the Design Group.
- The workshop concluded with a summary of next steps, including sharing the workshop feedback with the Design Group to inform further development of relevant ideas.

Discussion

1 Based on your experience, what must be considered to ensure a shared funding model delivers improved outcomes for consumers?

- It is important to ensure that funding contributions are adequate, equitable and locked in for at least a few years to allow for building trust, fine-tuning processes, and gathering data on the effectiveness of programs.
- A shared funding pool is best supported by ensuring both consumers and industry buy in to the initiative and are part of the design process.

- A shared leadership model (including shared ownership, purpose and commitment to the process) would best support collaboration and cooperation between industry, community and government.
- Transparency and organisational culture of participants are critical, including an aligned organisational purpose and genuine commitment to help customers.
- Support needs to be seamless and focus on consumers. Consumers should be able to access support directly. If retailers are going to have a role as ‘gatekeepers’, it will be important to improve the identification of vulnerability across the sector.
- Depending on the operating model, there may be very high demand for support.

Examples referenced in this discussion:

- Thriving Communities Partnership ‘One Stop One Story Hub’ ([link](#))
- Commonwealth Bank Domestic & Family Violence Emergency Assistance Program ([link](#))

2 Based on your experience, what are the most critical enablers or barriers at each stage of setting up a centralised funding or support model?

Establishing a shared funding or support model

- Successful initiatives have built a ‘coalition of the willing’, who are attracted by a commitment to the envisioned outcome and a desire to make a difference for people. However, this can take many years and requires a leap of faith from those involved. It is also important to be realistic and recognise that 100% commitment is unlikely to be achieved.
- Integrity, purpose and passion are critical for those leading this process. A long-term trusted advisor is needed, as well as consistency in personnel.
- Building commitment from industry is essential and requires trust and openness. Those leading the process must set out a clear outcome and implementation plan, give voice to those who are committed to the outcome and can make decisions, and share regular feedback on progress and outcomes.

Implementing a shared funding or support model

- An implementation committee could be established with a balance of community and industry representatives, as well as an independent chair. An effective chair has a critical role to play in bringing everyone together, reminding them why they are there and helping them find common ground, which may take up to a year to achieve.
- It is important to support the staff providing services to consumers experiencing vulnerability, and to make it as easy as possible for consumers to access services.

Examples referenced in this discussion:

- Thriving Communities Partnership ‘One Stop One Story Hub’ ([link](#))
- Yarra Valley Water’s vulnerability program, WaterCare ([link](#))
- Way Forward, a small non-profit debt relief provider ([link](#))
- Harvard Business School case study quantifying the cost savings of a National Australia Bank program to support consumers experiencing vulnerability ([link](#))

3 Based on your experience, what are the advantages and disadvantages of a centralised service model?

- There is a concern that retailers are not meeting their obligations, and the creation of a centralised service model may ‘lower the bar’ or create perverse incentives in which consumer vulnerability becomes a matter of ‘pass the parcel’.
- The idea of a centralised third party dealing with customers from all participating organisations is not appealing to businesses that feel a sense of responsibility to support their customers, have established training, processes and systems to do so, and want the flexibility and ability to work with the customers they serve.
- However, not all businesses are effective in engaging and providing support to consumers experiencing vulnerability, and consumers pay the penalty for this. A central service model could therefore act as a safety net for consumers.
- Other potential benefits of a central service model include:
 - providing an opportunity for learning, knowledge sharing and collaboration across the sector (for example, the opportunity for retailers to share and learn how to improve the customer journey and experience)
 - providing support to consumers that they currently do not receive or struggle to access (such as energy efficiency supports, disconnection supports, debt relief, or more holistic supports that could ‘really change the lives’ of consumers experiencing vulnerability)
 - shared leadership, with like-minded people working together to generate the right outcomes
 - focusing on where there are gaps and areas for improvement.
- It is important to clarify the scope of services provided by a central service body and the customer journey under this model. Training, advice and support from a range of groups is also required to advise what needs to happen and how to improve.

Examples referenced in this discussion:

- Thriving Communities Partnership ‘One Stop One Story Hub’ ([link](#))
- Uniting CareRing ([link](#))

4 Based on your experience, what are the most effective ways to deliver centralised support to consumers experiencing vulnerability?

- An independent service body may promote increased consumer engagement, particularly among those who are already disengaged from their retailers. The different nature of the relationship (for example, the absence of a debtor–debtee relationship) may facilitate greater trust and give consumers the confidence to reconnect.
- Recognising that energy is often an ‘entry portal’ into a broader range of issues, a central service body could provide more holistic support to consumers, including by connecting consumers with a range of tailored services, providing financial counselling directly, or delivering energy efficiency and targeted retrofit programs (noting, however, that it should not duplicate existing programs being delivered by others).
- It is important for a central service body to work from a strengths-based model rather than a deficit model, and ensure that the needs and perspectives of consumers (based on actual conversations, not just ‘paper-based exercises’) are taken into account.
- A central service body could tap into existing expertise and ensure this is better shared across the sector, improving coordination and operating as a ‘brains trust’.