# Customer Consultative Group Meeting Communiqués

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**CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP**

### Meeting Communique – 24 May 2021 teleconference

1. The Australian Energy Regulator’s (AER) Customer Consultative Group (CCG) met on 24 May 2021 (see membership list below) to discuss current issues affecting residential and small energy customers.
2. The CCG Chair, Jim Cox updated members on key areas of AER work including:

* the fourth update of the Statement of Expectations to extend retailers’ support of customers to 30 June 2021
* compliance and enforcement activity including the determination of 2021-22 priorities
* the AER’s recent review and approval of 2021-22 electricity distribution tariffs proposed by 9 businesses across NSW, Queensland, the NT, SA and Tasmania
* the proposed research to inform the Better Bills Guideline
* the recent release of the third Default Market Offer.

1. AER staff presented an update on the CCG Review – including recruitment of CCG members and Chair:

* A 2019 internal review included consultation with staff, CCG members and looked at other similar groups. A survey and workshop were also held.
* A new separate Chair is to be introduced to help raise issues with the AER outside of meeting and shape the agenda.
* Member representation of the new group to target broader diversity, including small business, Indigenous and disabled consumers.

1. AER staff presented an update on the development of the Consumer Vulnerability Strategy. CCG member feedback included:

* the importance of understanding that vulnerability is a consumer’s experience, not a personal attribute
* the Strategy should foster a shift in culture across the sector that supports consumers
* the AER needs to hear from consumers directly about their experiences, as well as through advocates.

1. ACCC staff presented an update on consumer awareness of the ACCC Electricity Retail Code, including:

* the 2 limbs of the Code (the price cap and reference price)
* research showing that awareness is low and consumers aren’t getting the full benefit of using the reference price as a tool to compare offers.

1. AER staff presented an update on the AER Network Performance Reporting work plan noting that:

* the AER to publish the 2021 Electricity Network Performance Report in September
* the written report will include core network measures such as total revenue, capex/opex, RAB movements, reliability and network profitability
* focus areas include the impacts of COVID-19 on network revenues and returns, seasonal reliability, network safety reporting and the return on regulated equity profitability measure.

1. CCG members reported on their key areas of activity and concern which included:

* ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic
* debt accumulation for residential and small business consumers
* the impact of reduced Job Keeper payments and employment
* lack of retailer engagement and support for consumers with limited ability to pay bills
* the reluctance of culturally and linguistically diverse customers to make a payment assistance plan with their retailer
* changes in gas network policy, which could particularly impact older and culturally and linguistically diverse consumers.

**Attendees  
  
CCG members**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CCG Chair | Jim Cox, AER Board Member |
| ACT Council of Social Service | Geoff Buchanan |
| Brotherhood of St Laurence | David Bryant |
| Council on the Ageing Australia | Robyn Robinson |
| Ethnic Communities Council of NSW | Iain Maitland |
| Public Interest Advocacy Centre | Douglas McCloskey |
| Queensland Council of Social Services | Wendy Miller |
| Renew | Dean Lombard |
| St Vincent de Paul Society | Gavin Dufty |
| Tasmania Council of Social Service | Stephen Durney |
| Uniting Communities | Mark Henley |

**Apologies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AER Chair | Clare Savage |

**AER Representatives**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AER Board member | Catriona Lowe |
| AER Board member | Eric Groom |
| EGM Consumers, Policy and Markets | Kathie Standen |
| GM Consumers | Arek Gulbenkoglu |
| Director, Consumer Engagement and Insights | Simone Tyson |
| Consumer Engagement and Insights | Jenny Li |
| Consumer Engagement and Insights | Rohan Smith |
| Director, Consumer Policy | Bronwen Jennings |
| Consumer Policy | Sarah Wilson |
| Consumer Policy | Anna Tupicoff |
| Regulatory Information Management & Reporting | Kieran Anglim |
| ACCC Electricity Markets | Tanja Warre |
| ACCC Electricity Markets | Katie Noseda |



**CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP COVID-19**

### Combined Communique – 27 May to 25 August 2020 teleconferences

Following the onset of COVID-19, the Customer Consultative Group (CCG) met more regularly as the CCG COVID-19 Working Group, to provide the AER with timely information about the impacts of COVID-19 on energy consumers. Four virtual meetings were conducted between 27 May and 25 August 2020.

The CCG discussed current issues affecting residential and small energy customers, with a focus on the impact of COVID-19, the AER’s response, and available protections for vulnerable customers. This Communique combines the key discussion points and themes from these virtual meetings.

**AER activity updates**

* The AER maintained regular communication with retailers regarding the Statement of Expectations (SoE) requirements and other COVID-19 issues. Over this period, the SoE was revised and extended in the context of ongoing uncertainty and the slow re-emergence of the Australian economy. The AER was particularly alive to issues of disconnections and debt accrual for customers experiencing financial stress.
* Additional SoE related reporting was sought from retailers and distributors.
* The AER collected retailer data to get a real time gauge of hardship programs.
* Energy Made Easy was relaunched in April 2020.
* The AER’s 2020-21 compliance and enforcement priorities were released 6 August 2020.
* The Default Market Offer was applied from 1 July 2021.

**Presentations**

* The AER’s Consumer Policy team presented on COVID-19 consumer impacts. This included efforts to anticipate issues for the next 18 months - particularly regarding policy and protection gaps.
* The Consumer Policy Research Centre overviewed the findings of their latest 'Consumers and COVID-19: from crisis to recovery' survey.
* The AER Retail Performance Team discussed the COVID-19 Retail Data Dashboard and highlighted key insights.

**Member reports**

* Member reports focussed extensively on the continuing impacts of COVID-19 on consumers.
* Consumers on income support continued to need less support than prior to COVID, due to the increased JobSeeker supplement. Middle income earners may have been experiencing more financial difficulty due to existing higher committed costs, such as rent, which were based on their (previously) higher incomes.
* Consumers in states with longer and harder lockdowns were expected to be worse hit, with higher winter bills and debt levels affecting a wider spread of consumers.
* Retailer behaviour exacerbated vulnerability with services contacted by consumers on bridging visas and others who do not qualify for government financial assistance (an issue raised by multiple members in the past).

**Attendees**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| AER Chair |  | 27 May | 30 June | 30 July | 25 August |
| Sarah Proudfoot |  | Y | Y |  |  |
| Arek Gulbenkoglu |  |  |  | Y | Y |
| CCG Members |  |  |  |  |  |
| ACT Council of Social Service | Geoff Buchanan | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| Brotherhood of St Laurence | David Bryant | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| Consumer Action Law Centre\* | Katherine Temple (25/8), Jake Lilley (30/6), Patrick Sloyan (30/7) | N/A | Y | Y | Y |
| Country Women’s Association Australia (CWAA) | Tanya Cameron OAM | Y | Y | Y | Apol |
| Council on the Ageing Australia | Robyn Robinson | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| Ethic Communities’ Council of NSW | Iain Maitland | Y | Y | Y | Apol |
| Financial Counselling Australia\* | Lynda Edwards | N/A | Y | Apol | Y |
| National Retail Association | Ian Winterburn | N | N | N | N |
| Public Interest Advocacy Centre | Craig Memery (27/5), Douglas McCloskey (30/6, 30/7, 25/8), Thea Bray (27/5, 30/7, 25/8) | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) | Rose McGrath (30/6), Luke Reade (27/5), Wendy Miller (30/7) | Y | Y | Y | Apol |
| Renew | Dean Lombard | Apol | Y | Y | Y |
| St Vincent de Paul Society | Gavin Dufty | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| TASCOSS | Stephen Durney | N/A | Y | Y | Y |
| Uniting Communities | Mark Henley | Y | Y | Y | Y |

\*The Consumer Action Law Centre and Financial Counselling Australia joined the CCG in June 2020.

**Regular AER Representatives**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AER CEO – Dr Liz Develin | AER Board member – Jim Cox |
| AER Board member - Catriona Lowe | General Manager, Compliance and Enforcement – Jacqui Thorpe |
| Consumer Engagement and Insights team members | Compliance and Enforcement team members |



**CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP**

### Combined Communique – 17 March and 6 April 2020 teleconferences

The Australian Energy Regulator’s (AER) Customer Consultative Group (CCG) meeting was conducted over two teleconferences held on 17 March 2020 and 6 April 2020. The CCG (see membership list below) discussed current issues affecting residential and small energy customers. This Communique combines the key discussion points and themes from both teleconferences.

**17 March teleconference (Chaired by AER Board member Jim Cox)**

1. The AER and members discussed early impacts on energy consumers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. CCG Chair, Jim Cox, noted key areas of work for the AER since November 2019 and provided updates on:

* the review of the CCG
* recent enforcement work and current court proceedings
* VCR figures released and WALDO modelling
* Integrated System Plan (ISP) consumer engagement.

1. Members met for a Members Only discussion, after which they provided a list of issues for the AER to respond to at the 6 April teleconference.

**6 April teleconference (Chaired by AER Board member Catriona Lowe)**

1. Ms Lowe opened by noting the visible impacts of COVID-19 on the community.
2. Ms Lowe also responded to a list of issues provided by members, including:

* the difficulty of submissions due over the Christmas holiday period (and the general volume and tight timeframes of submissions)
* coordination between energy market bodies
* the funding for consumer engagement in the energy sector and changes in approaches to consumer engagement during the COVID-19 crisis
* the future of gas as a transitional source of energy; and
* distribution businesses’ response to disasters, particularly bushfires.

1. The AER provided an overview of the AER’s recently released Statement of Expectations, followed by member feedback on how COVID-19 is impacting consumers and potential future impacts for the AER to consider.
2. The AER provided CCG members an update on recent research on regulatory responses to consumer vulnerability research and led a discussion on how to incorporate COVID-19 impacts on consumers as a priority in the AER’s consumer policy work program.
3. Lynne Gallagher, Interim CEO of Energy Consumers Australia (ECA) gave an update on ECA funding for organisations needing to adjust their engagement strategies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. The AER led a discussion on the implications of COVID-19 on the development of the 2020-21 Default Market Offer (DMO). Members provided verbal feedback that was formally documented as a submission to the AER’s consultation on this matter.

# **Attendees** (Date in brackets indicates when attended)

**CCG members**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CCG Chair 17 March  CCG Chair 6 April | Jim Cox, AER Board member  Catriona Lowe, AER Board member |
| ACT Council of Social Service | Geoff Buchanan |
| Brotherhood of St Laurence | David Bryant |
| Country Women’s Association Australia (CWAA) | Ruth Cargill (17/3); Tanya Cameron OAM (6/4) |
| Council on the Ageing Australia | Robyn Robinson |
| Ethic Communities’ Council of NSW | Iain Maitland |
| National Retail Association | Ian Winterburn (17/3) |
| Public Interest Advocacy Centre | Craig Memery |
| Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) | Rose McGrath, Luke Reade (6/4) |
| Renew | Dean Lombard |
| St Vincent de Paul Society | Gavin Dufty |
| Uniting Communities | Mark Henley |

**Observers**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Energy Consumers Australia (ECA) | Jacqueline Crawshaw, Lynne Gallagher (6/4) |

**AER Representatives**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AER Board member | Catriona Lowe |
| General Manager, Consumers and Markets | Sarah Proudfoot |
| Consumer Engagement and Insights team | Simone Tyson, Pablo Albornoz, Carly Weate (17/3), Charlotte Marshall (6/4), Jenny Li (6/4) |

**Apologies for 6 April session**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AER Board Member  National Retail Association  Tasmania Council of Social Service | Jim Cox  Ian Winterburn  Stephen Durney |



**CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP**

### Meeting Communique – 26 November 2019

1. The Australian Energy Regulator’s (AER) Customer Consultative Group (CCG) met on 26 November 2019 (see membership list below) to discuss current issues affecting residential and small energy customers.
2. CCG Chair, Jim Cox, welcomed the new AER Chair, Clare Savage. Mr Cox noted key areas of work for the AER since July 2019, including:
   1. a number of enforcement actions initiated by the AER against various energy operators
   2. work promoting hardship protections to consumers
   3. the status of the Energy Made Easy website redevelopment; and
   4. the extension of the Consumer Challenge Panel review; and the progression of the CCG review.
3. AER staff presented an update on recent work on vulnerability and hardship. There was then a discussion with CCG members on:

* research by the Consumer Policy Research Centre on regulatory approaches to consumer vulnerability;
* follow-up actions and monitoring of the new Hardship Guideline.

1. An Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC) staff member provided an update on current issues/upcoming work for the AEMC, including:

* a draft decision on regulating conditional discounts to ‘reasonable’ levels
* customer switching rule change; and
* AEMO procedural change.

1. During CCG members’ time, members joined the CCG Chair and the AER Chair to discuss a range of issues including:
   1. current arrangements for consumer engagement and resourcing for consumer advocates
   2. the communication of the Values of Customer Reliability data
   3. the staffing levels and supply of service in rural and remote areas; and
   4. early impacts of the Default Market Offer on consumer bills.

**Attendees**

**CCG members**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CCG Chair | Jim Cox, AER Board Member |
| Brotherhood of St Laurence | David Bryant |
| Country Women’s Association Australia (CWAA) | Tanya Cameron OAM |
| Council on the Ageing Australia (COTA) | Robyn Robinson |
| Ethic Communities’ Council of NSW (ECCNSW) | Iain Maitland |
| National Retail Association (NRA) | Ian Winterburn |
| Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) | Craig Memery |
| Queensland Council of Social Services (QCOSS) | Luke Reade |
| Renew | Dean Lombard |
| St Vincent de Paul Society | Gavin Dufty |
| Tasmania Council of Social Service (TasCOSS) | Kym Goodes |
| Uniting Communities | Mark Henley |

**Observers**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Australian Energy Market Commission  Tasmanian Ombudsman | James Hyatt  Richard Connock |

**AER Representatives**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Chair | Clare Savage |
| General Manager, Consumers and Markets | Sarah Proudfoot |
| Consumer Engagement and Insights team | Simone Tyson, Anh Cao and Pablo Albornoz |

**Apologies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| QCOSS | Rose McGrath |
| TasCOSS | Bernadette Jago |
| AEMC  ECA | Kate Wild  Jacqueline Crawshaw |



**CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP**

### Meeting Communique – 23 July 2019

1. The Australian Energy Regulator’s (AER) Customer Consultative Group (CCG) met on 23 July 2019 (see membership list below) to discuss current issues affecting residential and small energy customers.
2. CCG Chair, Jim Cox, welcomed Susan Helyar, Director of ACTCOSS as a new CCG member. The Chair also noted key areas of work for the AER since March 2019, including:
   1. the commencement of the Default Market Offer on 1 July 2019
   2. an update on the ACCC’s Retail Electricity Pricing Inquiry recommendations since its release a year ago
   3. regulatory work with embedded networks
   4. network regulatory determinations in NSW for Ausgrid, Endeavour Energy and Essential Energy.
3. AER staff presented on a range of topical issues and current projects. These included the:
   1. Retailer Reliability Obligation – the development of a series of RRO guidelines
   2. Values of Customer Reliability – the consultation process and results from a pilot survey conducted in May 2019
   3. Consumer Challenge Panel Review – the proposed approach, scope and matters that will be considered during the review
   4. re-development of AER’s Energy Made Easy website.
4. During Members’ time, the CCG Chair and members discussed a number of key issues including:
   1. the future of regulation and the role of consumers in the decision making process
   2. the Default Market Offer and reference bill, and ideas to measure their impact on consumers
   3. Hardship Guideline and associated AER outreach materials
   4. AER’s distribution determination for Essential Energy for the 2019-24 regulatory control period, with reference to staffing levels and future reliability
   5. Coordination of generation and transmission investment review, AEMO’s Integrated System Plan, Regulatory investment test for transmission, their interrelationships and AER’s role in each process.
5. Members also thanked Paula Conboy for her leadership of the AER and particularly for her support for stronger consumer focus in all aspects of the regulatory process.

# **Attendees**

**CCG members**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CCG Chair | Jim Cox, AER Board Member |
| ACT Council of Social Service | Susan Helyar |
| Brotherhood of St Laurence | David Bryant |
| Country Women’s Association Australia | Tanya Cameron OAM (by telephone) |
| Council on the Ageing Australia | Robyn Robinson |
| Public Interest Advocacy Centre | Craig Memery |
| Queensland Council of Social Services | Rose McGrath |
| Renew | Dean Lombard |
| St Vincent de Paul Society | Gavin Dufty |
| Tasmania Council of Social Service | Bernadette Jago |
| Uniting Communities | Mark Henley |

**Observers**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal  Australian Energy Market Commission  Australian Energy Market Operator | Graeme Neate AM  Kate Wild  Antara Mascarenhas |
| Energy Consumers Australia | Jacqueline Crawshaw |

**AER Representatives**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Chair | Paula Conboy |
| A/g General Manager, Policy and Performance | Kami Kaur |
| A/g Director, Consumer Engagement and Insights | Simone Tyson |
| Consumer Engagement and Insights team | Carly Weate, Pablo Albornoz |
| Director, Consumer Policy | Bronwen Jennings |

**Apologies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ethnic Communities’ Council NSW | Iain Maitland |
| National Retail Association | Ian Winterburn |
| AER (General Manager, Consumers and Markets Branch) | Sarah Proudfoot |



**CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP**

### Meeting Communique – 19 March 2019

1. The Australian Energy Regulator’s (AER) Customer Consultative Group (CCG) met on 19 March 2019 (see membership list below) to discuss current issues affecting residential and small energy customers.
2. CCG Chair, Jim Cox, noted key areas of work for the AER since December 2018, including:
   1. the development of the Default Market Offer
   2. Electricity Retailer of Last Resort event for Flow Systems Pty Ltd
   3. Rate of Return guidelines, with NSW distribution business adopting the guidelines
   4. progress on network regulatory determinations and tariff structure statements noting final decisions are required by 30 April 2019
   5. recent reviews including: rate of return, tax and opex productivity review.
3. Staff presented on a range of topical issues and current projects. These included:
   1. Compliance and Enforcement: Strategic review project, Statement of approach and priorities
   2. development of the inaugural Customer Hardship Policy Guideline
   3. Embedded networks framework review
   4. New Reg initiative and AusNet Services trial.
4. During Members’ time, CCG Chair and members discussed a number of key issues including:
   1. The AER’s approach to consumer engagement and its upcoming review of key consumer engagement mechanisms
   2. funding to support consumer engagement
   3. Energy Charter.

# **Attendees**

**CCG members**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CCG Chair | Jim Cox, AER Board Member |
| Brotherhood of St Laurence | David Bryant |
| Country Women’s Association Australia | Tanya Cameron |
| Council on the Ageing Australia | Robyn Robinson |
| Ethnic Communities Council NSW | Iain Maitland |
| National Retail Association | Ian Winterburn |
| Public Interest Advocacy Centre | Douglas McCloskey |
| Queensland Council of Social Services | Rose McGrath |
| Renew | Dean Lombard |
| St Vincent de Paul Society | Gavin Dufty |
| Tasmania Council of Social Service | Bernadette Jago |
| Uniting Communities | Mark Henley |

**Observers**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Australian Energy Market Commission | Ben Davis |
| Energy and Water Ombudsman NSW | Janine Young |

**AER Representatives**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AER Chair | Paula Conboy |
| AER Consumer and Markets Ag General Manager | Angela Bourke |
| AER Consumer and Markets – Ag Directors | Graziella Campana/Emma McQuilkin |
| AER Consumer and Markets – team members | Carly Weate, Pablo Albornoz |

**Apologies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Energy Consumers Australia | Jacqueline Crawshaw |



**CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP**

### Meeting Communique – 11 December 2018

1. The Australian Energy Regulator’s (AER) Customer Consultative Group (CCG) met on 11 December 2018 (see membership list below) to discuss current issues affecting residential and small energy customers.
2. CCG Chair, Jim Cox, noted the key areas of work for the AER since July 2018, including:
   1. the Energy Made Easy (EME) redevelopment project;
   2. the Hardship Guideline;
   3. consultation on the draft standardised statements for use in customer hardship polices;
   4. work on the ‘Exempt Selling – access to dispute resolution, embedded networks’ review with the Australian Energy Market Commission(AEMC) and a number of other stakeholders;
   5. work around metering contestability; and
   6. the release of the AER’s Black System Event report which will be published on 14 December 2018.
3. Staff presented on a range of topical issues and current projects. These included:
   1. Consumer Data Right
   2. Value of Customer Reliability
   3. AER draft decisions: network determinations and tariff structure proposals
   4. Default Market Offer
4. During Members’ time, CCG Chair and members discussed a number of key issues including:
   1. the process to make submissions to consultation processes in alternative formats;
   2. consumer representation and engagement and the AER’s approach; and
   3. customer accounts and the impact of pay-on-time discounts for low income households.

# **Attendees**

**CCG members**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CCG Chair | Jim Cox, AER Board Member |
| Brotherhood of St Laurence  Council on the Ageing  Country Women’s Association of Australia  Ethnic Communities Council NSW | David Bryant  Robyn Robinson  Tanya Cameron  Iain Maitland |
| National Retail Association | Ian Winterburn |
| Public Interest Advocacy Centre  Queensland Council of Social Service  Renew | Craig Memery  Fiona Hawthorne  Dean Lombard |
| St Vincent de Paul Society | Gavin Dufty |
| Tasmania Council of Social Service | Bernadette Jago |
| Uniting Communities | Mark Henley |

**Observers**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AEMC  Energy and Water Ombudsman QLD | Shari Boyd  Jane Pires |
| AER Representatives  AER Consumers and Markets, General Manager  AER Consumers and Markets | Sarah Proudfoot  Graziella Campana |
| AER Consumers and Markets | Emma McQuilkin |
| AER Consumers and Markets | Pablo Albornoz |

**Apologies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AEMC | Michael Bradley |
| AER, Chair | Paula Conboy |
| Brotherhood of St Laurence | Damian Sullivan |
| Care Inc. | Eileen Newmarch |
| Energy Consumers Australia | Sabiene Heindl |
| Energy Consumers Australia | Chris Alexander |
| Queensland Council of Social Service | Rose McGrath |



**CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP**

### Meeting Communique – 17 July 2018

1. The Australian Energy Regulator’s (AER) Customer Consultative Group (CCG) met on 17 July 2018 (see membership list at below) to discuss current issues affecting residential and small energy customers.
2. CCG Chair, Jim Cox, noted the key areas of work for the AER since March 2018, including:
   1. a focus on retailers’ compliance with hardship and disconnection obligations
   2. enforcement action in relation to life support obligations
   3. work to address ongoing challenges and poor customer experiences arising from the new metering contestability framework, including engagement with the sector to address delays in meter services
   4. findings and observations in relation to wholesale electricity prices since the Hazelwood closure
   5. the domestic gas market
   6. customer and stakeholder engagement in relation to network decisions and by network businesses, including the trial of the New Regulatory Process (New Reg) by AusNet
   7. reviews of the regulatory tax approach and into measures of profitability that could be applied to the electricity and gas businesses the AER regulates.
3. Members acknowledged the AER’s approach to engage customer groups on a broad range of work and identified some potential areas for further consideration in relation to the AER’s work on the value of customer reliability (VCR) and metering.
4. Staff from the AER’s Retail Markets Branch presented on the new design of Energy Made Easy (EME) and members suggested some additional features the AER could consider as part of the EME redevelopment project.
5. AER staff presented on the ‘New Reg’ trial project and consumer engagement in the new AER structure.
6. During Members’ time, AER Chair Paula Conboy and members discussed a number of key issues including:
   1. the Integrated System Plan and regulatory investment tests (RIT-T & RIT-D)
   2. the importance of including a consumer perspective in the AER’s decision making processes
   3. ways to facilitate consumer engagement with EME for consumers who cannot engage online, including the AER Inquiries function.
7. AER staff presented on the review of the Rate of Return guideline.

**Attendees**

**CCG members**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CCG Chair | Jim Cox, AER Board Member |
| Care FCA | Eileen Newmarch |
| Country Women’s Association Australia | Dorothy Coombe |
| COTA Australia | Robyn Robinson |
| Public Interest Advocacy Centre | Tim Harrison |
| St Vincent de Paul Society | Gavin Dufty |
| Tasmania Council of Social Service | Bernadette Jago |
| Uniting Communities | Mark Henley |

**Observers**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Australian Energy Market Commission | Michael Bradley |
| Energy and Water Ombudsman VIC | Cynthia Gebert |

**AER Representatives**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AER Chair | Paula Conboy |
| AER Retail Markets General Manager | Sarah Proudfoot |
| AER Retail Markets | Trang Nguyen |
| AER Retail Markets | Meg Zerafa |

**Apologies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Alternative Technology Association | Dean Lombard |
| Ethnic Communities Council NSW | Iain Maitland |
| National Retail Association | Ian Winterburn |
| Queensland Council of Social Service | Rose McGrath |
| Energy Consumers Australia |  |



# **CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP**

### Meeting Communique – 13 March 2018

1. The Australian Energy Regulator’s (AER) Customer Consultative Group (CCG) met on 13 March 2018 (see membership list below) to discuss current issues affecting residential and small energy customers.
2. CCG Chair, Jim Cox, noted the key areas of work for the AER since November 2017, including:
   1. Review of various guidelines under the National Energy Retail Law and National Energy Retail Rules (Retail Rules) and development of new Benefit Change Notice Guideline.
   2. Infringement notices issued to AGL and Energex for failing to comply with certain provisions of the Retail Rules.
   3. The first steps in the AER’s redevelopment of Energy Made Easy (EME) which includes user experience enhancements to the search and results aspects of EME.
   4. Observations on the electricity high price events in South Australia and Victoria in early 2018 and the AER’s observations from monitoring the domestic gas market
   5. The proposed rule change that will allow the AER to apply its new demand management incentive scheme.
   6. Publication of the inflation review and rate of return guideline position paper.
3. The Alternative Technology Association presented on the findings of its 2017 research on the economics of fuel choice when replacing household appliances across the National Electricity Market. Arising from the presentation, there was discussion about:
   1. The types of appliances and fuel types for different climates
   2. The upfront costs of energy efficient appliances and the savings over the lifetime of the appliance.
4. Staff from the AER’s Retail Markets Branch presented on the changes to the Retail Exempt Selling Guideline including expanding access to ombudsmen services to exempt customers. There was also a discussion of the trends in energy sales in embedded networks such retrofits, authorisations and agency arrangements.
5. Staff from the AER’s Networks Branch discussed the rule changes on the role of embedded network managers.
6. During Member’s time, Jim Cox, Sarah Proudfoot (Retail Markets General Manager), Peter Adams (Wholesale Market General Manager) and members discussed:
   1. Resourcing of consumer advocates to ensure a consumer perspective is considered in the decision making processes relating to energy policy.
   2. The AER’s role in ensuring participants effected by reforms to tariff structure statements understand their obligations and rights.
   3. The National Energy Guarantee, including the role of the AER with respect to compliance with the guarantee.
   4. The AER’s approach to compliance
   5. The importance of educating network operators and exempt sellers on their responsibilities in relation to embedded network policy changes.
7. Jim Cox facilitated a panel discussion on competition in metering with panel members from the Energy Water Ombudsman South Australia (EWOSA), the St Vincent de Paul Society and AER’s Retail Markets Branch. There was discussion of the complexity and implementation challenges arising from the rules in this new market. Members agreed it will take time to bed down the policy and allow innovation in the market to develop.
8. The AER’s Retail Markets Compliance Team presented on the outcomes of the AER’s review of retailer’s hardship policies and upcoming work related to hardship, including a rule change proposal, audits and investigations.

**Attendees**

**CCG members**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CCG Chair | Jim Cox, AER Board Member |
| Alternative Technology Association | Kieran Price |
| Ethnic Communities Council NSW | Iain Maitland |
| Care FCA | Eileen Newmarch |
| Country Women’s Association Australia | Elizabeth Nash |
| COTA Australia | Robyn Robinson |
| National Retail Association | Ian Winterburn |
| Public Interest Advocacy Centre | Craig Memery |
| Queensland Council of Social Service | Rose McGrath |
| St Vincent de Paul Society | Gavin Dufty |
| Tasmania Council of Social Service | Cynthia Townley |
| Uniting Communities | Mark Henley |

**Observers**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Australian Energy Market Commission | Kate Wild |
| Australian Energy Market Commission | Michael Bradley |
| Energy Consumers Australia | Oliver Derum |
| Energy and Water Ombudsman SA | Sandy Canale |

**AER Representatives**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AER Retail Markets General Manager | Sarah Proudfoot |
| AER Wholesale Markets General Manager | Peter Adams |

**Apologies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Brotherhood of Saint Laurence | Damian Sullivan |



**CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP**

### Meeting Communique – 21 November 2017

**A. CCG members meeting**

1. The Australian Energy Regulator’s (AER) Customer Consultative Group (CCG) met on 21 November 2017 (see membership list at p. 3) to discuss with the AER current issues affecting residential and small business energy customers.
2. CCG Chair, Jim Cox, noted some recent key areas of work for the AER, including:

* The *Annual Report on Compliance and Performance of the Retail Energy Markets* that will be published 22 November 2017.
* Work on retailer commitments to the Prime Minister including review of customer price information and the Retail Pricing Information Guidelines and the new benefit change rule.
* Infringement notices paid by Origin Energy for alleged failure to provide hardship assistance to a residential customer and its alleged wrongful disconnection of the customer’s premises in NSW in 2015.
* Collaboration with the Australian New Zealand Energy and Water Ombudsman Network to improve exempt customer access to ombudsmen schemes.
* Electricity high prices and market events in Queensland on 12 February 2017 and reductions in generator availability.
* The removal of the limited merits review regime and the AERs commitment to promote the long term interests of consumers and provide predictability, transparency, and stability for all stakeholders throughout this process.

1. During Members’ time, AER Chair Paula Conboy and members discussed a number of key issues including:

* The value of reliability in the context of current reviews and the AER’s role on the Energy Security Board (ESB)
* The role of the AER with respect to the National Energy Guarantee (the Guarantee)
* The impact of metering contestability from 1 December 2017
* Funding of consumer advocates for participation in consultation processes
* ACCC Retail Electricity Pricing Inquiry (REPI) insights.

**B. Combined CCG – CCC meeting**

1. In the afternoon, there was a combined meeting of the CCG and ACCC’s Consumer Consultative Committee (CCC) chaired by Jim Cox, ACCC Deputy Chair Delia Richard and CCC Independent Chair Catriona Rowe.
2. The ACCC’s REPI team provided an update on the inquiry and next steps for delivery of its final report. Members suggested the team may wish to have regard to:

* the need to ensure engagement and participation in the market by all types of consumers
* early termination fees preventing customers from switching
* the retail margin for vertically integrated businesses
* the low control renters have over their dwellings, as well the need for carefully messaging around changing usage behaviour for older consumers’ who often need to use energy for unavoidable reasons.

1. Staff from the AER’s Retail Markets and Wholesale Markets branches presented on the metering contestability rules and how data is dealt with under the rules. As part of the Power of Choice reforms, metering contestability will provide customers with more choice on how they use and manage their electricity usage. The new rules come into effect 1 December 2017.

* Members raised a number of concerns about perceived complexities under the new rules, the experience of the Victorian government led roll out of smart meters, the cost to consumers, and the opt out arrangements.

1. Staff from the AER’s Retail Branch presented on work the AER is doing on making energy plans easier to understand and compare following commitments made by retailers to the Prime Minister.

* Members provided feedback that the project should take into consideration consumers who are not digitally engaged. Members also said the units of measurements presented should be relatable in the comparison price, such as presenting customers’ yearly costs or energy efficiencies.

# **Attendees**

**CCG members**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CCG Chair | Jim Cox, AER Board Member |
| Alternative Technology Association | Dean Lombard |
| Brotherhood of St Lawrence | Damian Sullivan |
| Ethnic Communities Council NSW | Iain Maitland |
| Care FCS | Eileen Newmarch |
| Public Interest Advocacy Centre | Craig Memery |
| Queensland Council of Social Service | Rose McGrath |
| St Vincent de Paul Society | Gavin Dufty |
| Tasmania Council of Social Service | Cynthia Townley |
| Uniting Communities | Mark Henley |

**CCC members**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CCC Independent Chair | Catriona Lowe |
| PIAC | Deirdre Moor |
| CHOICE | Erin Turner |
| FCA | Fiona Guthrie |
| CALC | Gerard Brody |
| CHF | Robert Pask |
| COTA | Sue McGrath |
| BSL | Tony Robinson |
| ACCAN | Una Lawrence |
| ICAN | Unaisi Buli |

**Observers**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Australian Energy Market Commission | Kate Wild |
| Australian Energy Market Commission | Kate Reid |
| Energy Consumers Australia | Oliver Derum |
| EWON | Janine Young |

**AER Representatives**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AER Retail Markets General Manager | Sarah Proudfoot |
| AER Wholesale Markets General Manager | Peter Adams |

**Apologies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CWAA | Dorothy Coombe |
| National Retail Association | Ian Winterburn |
| Youth Action & Policy Association NSW | Katie Acheson |
| AMES Australia | Maria Tsopanis |
| COTA | Robyn Robinson |



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### CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP

### Meeting Communique – 18 July 2017

1. The newly constituted membership of the Australian Energy Regulator’s (AER) Customer Consultative Group (CCG) met for the first time on 18 July 2017 (see membership list at p. 3) to discuss with the AER current issues affecting residential and small business energy customers.
2. CCG Chair, Jim Cox, noted some recent key areas of work for the AER, including:

* the publication of the State of the Energy Market report in May 2017 and the pending report on the review of competition in the wholesale electricity market which will be published in September 2018
* an increased focus on embedded networks
* the AEMC’s consultation on the AER’s life support rule change proposal
* the AER’s position on the outcome of the Federal Court’s decision in relation to network costs in NSW and ACT and the impact on the upcoming decisions in the South Australian Federal Court and Victorian Tribunal.

1. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission’s Retail Electricity Pricing Inquiry staff (REPI team) presented on the inquiry’s focus areas and key issues arising in the review. Members suggested the REPI team may wish to have regard to:

* benchmarking against international markets
* concession harmonisation
* inclusion of generation business in the wholesale market assessment
* experience of customers in jurisdictions with limited competition such as regional Queensland and Tasmania
* the impact of retailers’ movements in and out of the market
* the lack of consistency in accountability and responsibility of market participants across states.

1. The AER’s Retail Market Performance Team provided an overview of the Retail Pricing Information Guidelines (RPIG) and retailer energy price fact sheets. The AER conducts quarterly reviews of retailer compliance with the RPIG. The team also updated on the AER’s review of the Sustainable Payments Plan Framework and noted the AER will fully assess the framework 12 months after it commenced (November 2017).
2. The AER’s Retail Consumer Engagement and Policy Team presented on the outcomes of a feasibility study and research piece it commissioned on Energy Made Easy (EME) including EME’s target audience, priority focus and potential enhancements. The study proposed enhancements to EME to make the website more engaging and easily navigable to give users confidence in their searches, balancing the simplicity and the need for accuracy. Members made a number of additional suggestions for possible enhancements to EME.
3. During Member’s time, AER Chair Paula Conboy and members discussed a number of key issues including:

* the role of the proposed Energy Security Board and its relationship to the COAG Energy Council
* AER considerations in implementing any recommendations from the Finkel report including any cost impacts for customers
* the abolition of limited merits review announced recently by the COAG Energy Council, noting that the timing of this is not yet known
* the importance of EME not only as a price comparator tool but also an educative tool, providing information on consumer protections and energy literacy. The AER will be taking a holistic approach to promoting EME with emphasis placed on increasing customer engagement and awareness.
* the regulation of commercial energy comparator websites which is currently being considered as part of the ACCC’s REPI.
* the increased prevalence of embedded networks which is an area currently being looked at by AER, AEMC and COAG.

1. The AER’s Retail Compliance and Enforcement team presented on its proposed hardship review and members provided their views on the proposed assessment criteria to be used in reviewing retailers’ hardship policies. Members suggested a number of quantitative measures the AER could rely on for its assessment.

**Attendees**

**CCG Members**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CCG Chair | Jim Cox, AER Board Member |
| Alternative Technology Association | Dean Lombard |
| Brotherhood of St Laurence | Damian Sullivan |
| CARE FCS | Eileen Newmarch |
| COTA Australia | Robyn Robinson |
| National Retail Association | Ian Winterburn |
| Public Interest Advocacy Centre | Craig Memery |
| Queensland Council of Social Service | Rose McGrath |
| St Vincent de Paul Society | Gavin Dufty |
| TasCOSS | Cynthia Townley |
| Uniting Communities | Mark Henley |

**Observers**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AEMC | Alan Rai |
| Energy Consumers Australia | Sabiene Heindl |
| Energy Ombudsman Tasmania | Ray McKendrick |

**Apologies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Country Women’s Association Australia | Dorothy Coombe |
| Ethnic Communities Council NSW | Iain Maitland |