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Debt Raising Transaction Costs – Updated Report

Debt raising transaction costs – updated report

TransGrid

January, 2015

Table of Contents

1.	Executive Summary	1
1.1	Total debt-raising transaction costs.....	3
2.	Terms of Reference and outline of report	5
2.1	Terms of Reference.....	5
2.2	Outline of report.....	5
3.	Response to the AER’s draft decision.....	6
3.1	Introduction.....	6
3.2	Allowance for debt raising transaction costs relating to the debt component of the RAB	6
3.3	Allowance for costs associated with Standard & Poor’s liquidity requirement.....	7
3.4	Allowance for costs associated with Standard & Poor’s requirement to finance 3 months ahead	8
3.5	Other objections raised by the AER.....	9
3.6	Conclusion on the AER’s draft decision.....	10
4.	Estimating total debt raising costs	12
4.1	Benchmark debt-issuing transaction cost allowance.....	12
4.1.1	The PwC (2013) benchmarking report.....	12
4.1.2	Estimating TransGrid’s benchmark debt-issuing transaction cost allowance.....	13
4.1.3	Conclusion - TransGrid’s benchmark debt-issuing transaction cost allowance.....	14
4.2	Allowance for costs associated with the Standard & Poor’s liquidity requirement.....	14
4.2.1	Approach to estimating the cost of maintaining a liquidity reserve.....	14
4.2.2	Bottom-up estimate of the costs of establishing and maintaining a liquidity reserve ...	15
4.2.3	Benchmark cost of establishing and maintaining a liquidity reserve	19
4.3	Costs associated with re-financing 3 months ahead.....	20
4.3.1	Estimating the cost of 3 month ahead financing	20
4.4	Total debt-raising transaction costs.....	21

1. Executive Summary

Background

In November 2014, the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) published its draft decision on TransGrid’s transmission determination 2015-16 to 2017-18,¹ which rejected TransGrid’s proposed total debt raising cost forecast of \$31.8 million, and allowed \$13.4 million in its place (8.8 basis points relative to TransGrid’s forecast benchmark debt levels).

TransGrid has engaged Incenta Economic Consulting (Incenta) to undertake a review of the issues raised by the AER in its draft decision, and to respond to them. TransGrid has also requested that after reviewing the AER’s draft decision, and making any adjustments that we consider appropriate and justified, we should re-estimate the prudent and efficient total debt raising transaction costs that a benchmark electricity transmission network with TransGrid’s characteristics would be expected to incur.

Allowance for debt raising transaction costs relating to the debt component of the RAB

The AER broadly accepted the methodology that we had applied to estimate transaction costs relating to the debt raising component of the total debt raising transaction costs, as it is essentially the same methodology that it applies (i.e., based on the 2004 report by ACG). However, the AER’s arrangement fee component was 7.53 basis points per annum (bppa) rather than the 8.5 bppa that we applied (which in turn was taken from the most recent PwC (2013) study examining these fees).² Hence, the AER’s estimate of this debt raising transaction cost was approximately 8.9 bppa compared with the 9.9 bppa that we estimated. We expect that the main reason for this difference was the AER’s stated preference for using its estimated WACC of 7.24 per cent to levelise the arrangement fees that it observed empirically, rather than the generic 10 per cent rate that was applied by PwC. We agree with the AER that this is an appropriate adjustment, and we have adjusted our methodology accordingly.

Allowance for costs associated with Standard & Poor’s liquidity requirement

The AER has rejected accepting liquidity costs because it considers ‘the PTRM’s timing assumptions already provide adequate compensation for the timing of revenue compared to expenses.’³ However, the National Electricity Rules (NER, 6A.6.6(a)) state that a regulated electricity transmission business ‘must include the total forecast operating expenditure for the relevant regulatory control period which the Transmission Network Service Provider considers is required in order to achieve each of the following [operating expenditure objectives]’. Similarly, the NER (6A.6.6 (c)) require that the AER must assess ‘the costs that a prudent operator would require to achieve the operating expenditure objectives’. The Rules do not provide the AER with a choice about whether it should consider liquidity costs are already compensated through the formula that is used in the PTRM model. Instead they require the AER to accept the TNSP’s forecast of required operating expenditure if these are efficient costs that a prudent operator would incur.

¹ Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), *Draft decision. TransGrid’s transmission determination 2015-16 to 2017-18, Attachment 3: Rate of return*, p.3-327.

² See, PwC (June, 2013), p.19; and Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), p.3-326.

³ Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), p.3-327.

As evidence that liquidity costs are not prudent, the AER pointed to the fact that a number of service providers (Ausgrid, Endeavour, Essential and Transend) were aware of the additional cost categories submitted by TransGrid, but had chosen not to include them in their opex proposals. We are not privy to the basis used for some businesses not to include these costs in their revenue proposals, but in addition to TransGrid, both ActewAGL and Jemena have included these costs in their revenue proposals (which was not mentioned by the AER). The AER's objections are also contradicted by the evidence that was provided in our previous report, and to which the AER provided no response:

- An executive of Standard & Poor's told us that most regulated energy transmission and distribution businesses are likely to incur liquidity maintenance costs – the AER has not indicated whether it has conferred with Standard & Poor's on this point; and
- Research by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and CEG has shown that undrawn bank debt equated to between 8 per cent and 14 per cent of total drawn debt.⁴

We therefore consider that the AER has not provided a valid reason to conclude that liquidity costs are imprudent and/or inefficient.

Allowance for costs associated with Standard & Poor's requirement to finance 3 months ahead

As noted above for liquidity costs, the NER require the AER to decide whether three month ahead financing costs are 'costs that a prudent operator would require to achieve the operating expenditure objectives.' The AER has not provided any evidence that it has empirically investigated this matter, and has not indicated that it has conferred with Standard & Poor's on this matter. Instead, the AER has rejected this cost component on grounds that some other businesses had not asked for it.

The AER also expressed a concern that our original estimate of the cost of 3 month ahead financing would tend to provide an over-estimate of the actual cost, because we estimated the cost based on the difference between the return on the cost of BBB+ debt over the past 10 years (i.e. the trailing average), and the offsetting return that would be earned on a 3 month BBB+ corporate bond. This was expected to over-estimate the cost of 3 month ahead financing, because the trailing average cost of BBB+ rated debt is currently higher than the current cost of BBB+ rated debt (which is relevant to a refinancing). We agree with the AER that our approach over-estimated the cost of 3 month ahead financing to this extent, and we have amended our methodology.

Again we note that Standard & Poor's requires investment grade issuers to re-finance bonds 3 months ahead of expiry. There is a cost to this, and in this report we have estimated that cost using the approach suggested by the AER.

Other objections raised by the AER

A further objection of the AER to including an allowance for liquidity and 3 month ahead financing costs is the relative complexity of doing so.⁵ We do not agree with the AER's assessment. We observe that both of these costs can be estimated purely with reference to benchmark parameters, that very few

⁴ ENA (11 October, 2013), Response to the Draft Rate of Return Guideline of the Australian Energy Regulator, p.76. The businesses covered by the CEG estimate of undrawn debt facilities were the Cheung Kong Group (SA Power Networks, Citipower and Powercor), Envestra, ElectraNet, SP AusNet, DUET Group (MultiNet Gas and United Energy) and APA Group.

⁵ Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), p. 3-328.

additional inputs are required, and that these additional inputs are relatively straightforward to establish.⁶

The AER also stated that in a previous 2012 draft decision on Envestra, it had set out its reasons for the decision not to include liquidity costs, and that ‘neither TransGrid nor Incenta has engaged with the reasons set out in this decision’.⁷ We did address some of these reasons implicitly in our earlier report, and have addressed all explicitly in this report. In our view, none of the AER’s objections remain valid. The AER’s main argument was that the PTRM calculation contained offsetting biases elsewhere, which we have addressed already above. The AER’s two further arguments were that:⁸

- *The assumed dividend payout ratio (which is an input into the liquidity cost) was too high* – our earlier report (and this report) applied the payout ratio implicit in the AER’s ‘gamma’ assumption, and so applied the assumption the AER indicated that it would prefer in that earlier draft decision, and
- *Firms would reduce capital expenditure or withhold distributions if faced with a crisis* – we have confirmed with Standard & Poor’s staff that when Standard & Poor’s calculates the liquidity levels it expects in order for firms to maintain an investment grade credit rating that its modelling of cash flows assumes that the forecast capital expenditure and distributions continue in the event of a market collapse, which means that the AER’s assumption that firms would be expected to change their capital expenditure or distributions was incorrect.⁹

Finally, the AER proposed that if the working capital allowance implicit in the PTRM formula was to be included in the calculation of liquidity ratios, ‘then using Envestra’s calculation method, an allowance for liquidity would not be required.’ However, the Standard & Poor’s liquidity formula only includes net working capital as a source of liquidity; and furthermore, in the case of TransGrid we found that committed undrawn bank lines for TransGrid would need to be in the order of \$200 million. This is close to a quarter of the annual regulated revenue requirement, which is clearly much larger than any implicit working capital allowance.

1.1 Total debt-raising transaction costs

In summary, we consider that the NER require TransGrid to estimate all the efficient costs that would be incurred by a prudent TNSP. Our revised analysis, which includes the impact of corrections made

⁶ The additional inputs required are the return on 3-month BBB+ debt (an input into the early refinancing cost), the 3 year swap rate (an input into the liquidity cost) and the establishment fee and legal fees for bank debt (inputs into the liquidity cost). Only the last two of these inputs cannot be observed directly from market interest rates, and it would be straightforward to update these inputs periodically when the cost of issuing bonds is updated (and, in any event, the establishment fee and legal fees only make a small contribution to the liquidity cost).

⁷ Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), p. 3-329.

⁸ Australian Energy Regulator (September, 2012), p.201.

⁹ Firms may actually reduce capital expenditure or distributions in the event of a market collapse; however, the relevant issue for calculating the liquidity cost is what Standard and Poor’s assumes in the modelling that Standard and Poor’s undertakes to establish required liquidity levels.

by reference to points raised by the AER, estimates the benchmark, direct levelised debt raising costs (expressed in terms of basis points per annum on regulatory debt) as:¹⁰

- **4.2 basis points per annum** for the costs of issuing the bonds in an assumed debt portfolio of \$3,645.8 million (i.e. RAB debt);
- **4.4 basis points per annum** to establish and maintain bank facilities required to meet Standard & Poor's liquidity requirements condition for maintaining an investment grade credit rating; and
- **9.43 basis points per annum** to compensate for the requirement (again as a condition of maintaining an investment grade credit rating) that Standard & Poor's requires businesses to re-finance their debt 3 months ahead of the re-financing date.

Summing these components we have estimated a total levelised cost of debt raising transaction costs of **17.9 basis points per annum** on the regulatory debt.¹¹

¹⁰ That is, using a discount rate of 8.65 per cent, we calculated the NPV of these transaction costs over the regulatory period and divided by the NPV of the RAB values over the same period to obtain a levelised cost in basis points per annum.

¹¹ That is, using a discount rate of 8.65 per cent, we calculated the NPV of these transaction costs over the regulatory period and divided by the NPV of the RAB values over the same period to obtain a levelised cost in basis points per annum.

2. Terms of Reference and outline of report

2.1 Terms of Reference

In November 2014, the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) published its draft decision on TransGrid's transmission determination 2015-16 to 2017-18.¹² The AER's draft decision concluded that it was not satisfied with TransGrid's proposed total debt raising cost forecast of \$31.8 million, and allowed only \$13.4 million, reflecting an 8.8 basis point cost relative to TransGrid's forecast benchmark debt levels. The AER objected particularly to the liquidity cost and three month ahead financing cost components of the overall cost forecast, and provided a lower cost estimate for the costs of raising bonds in the market.

TransGrid has engaged Incenta Economic Consulting (Incenta) to undertake a review of the issues raised by the AER in its draft decision, and to respond to them. TransGrid has also requested that after reviewing the AER's draft decision, and making any adjustments that we consider appropriate and justified, we should re-estimate the total debt raising transaction costs that a benchmark electricity transmission network with TransGrid's characteristics (contained in its proposed updated PTRM model) would be expected to incur in the course of the upcoming regulatory period.

2.2 Outline of report

The current report is organised as follows:

- In section 3 we respond to the points raised by the AER in its draft decision on TransGrid's transmission determination; and
- In section 4 we provide an estimate of the levelised total benchmark debt raising transaction cost that is incurred by a benchmark business with the characteristics of TransGrid.

¹² Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), *Draft decision. TransGrid's transmission determination 2015-16 to 2017-18, Attachment 3: Rate of return*, p.3-327.

3. Response to the AER's draft decision

3.1 Introduction

In this section we consider the AER's response to our original report on total debt raising transaction costs. Our responses are organised according to the three components of debt raising transaction costs:

- Debt raising transaction costs relating to the debt component of the RAB;
- Allowance for costs associated with Standard & Poor's liquidity requirement; and
- Allowance for costs associated with Standard & Poor's requirement to finance three months ahead.

3.2 Allowance for debt raising transaction costs relating to the debt component of the RAB

Based on the market research results of the recent PwC study of debt raising transaction costs relating to the RAB debt,¹³ which was consistent with the ACG (2004) study that largely informs the AER's approach, in our original report we estimated a 9.89 basis points per annum (bppa), allowance for TransGrid based on an opening RAB debt of \$3,688 million.

The AER updated TransGrid's projected RAB, and from this estimated a projected benchmark debt level, which was multiplied by the benchmark rate for debt raising transaction cost to estimate the debt raising cost allowance. The AER stated that it:¹⁴

...updated the individual transaction cost line items (including the arrangement fee) for the draft decision's opening RAB and rate of return. We have done these calculations in line with Incenta and PwC's descriptions of the basis on which the costs are allocated per program, per issue or per annum.

However, the AER applied an arrangement fee of 7.53 bppa rather than the 8.5 bppa that was estimated by the most recent PwC study examining these fees.¹⁵ We expect that this is due to the AER having applied its estimated WACC of 7.24 per cent rather than the generic 10 per cent rate that was applied by PwC. We agree that this is an appropriate adjustment, and we have adjusted our approach accordingly.

¹³ PwC (June, 2013), *Energy Networks Association: Debt financing costs*.

¹⁴ Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), p.3-327.

¹⁵ See, PwC (June, 2013), p.19; and Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), p.3-326.

3.3 Allowance for costs associated with Standard & Poor’s liquidity requirement

Validity of including liquidity costs as part of the service provider’s forecast operating costs

One reason that the AER has rejected accepting liquidity costs is that it considers that ‘the PTRM’s timing assumptions already provide adequate compensation for the timing of revenue compared to expenses.’¹⁶ However, under the National Electricity Rules (NER), a regulated electricity transmission business ‘must include the total forecast operating expenditure for the relevant regulatory control period which the Transmission Network Service Provider considers is required in order to achieve each of the following [operating expenditure objectives]’. The list of objectives includes maintaining the quality, reliability and security of supply of the *prescribed transmission services*.⁷

Similarly, under the NER (6A.6.6 (c)):

*Subject to paragraph (c1), the AER must accept the forecast of required operating expenditure of a **Transmission Network Service Provider** that is included in a **Revenue Proposal** if the AER is satisfied that the total of the forecast operating expenditure for the **regulatory control period** reasonably reflects each of the following (the **operating expenditure criteria**):*

- (1) the efficient costs of achieving the **operating expenditure objectives**;*
- (2) the costs that a prudent operator would require to achieve the **operating expenditure objectives**; and*
- (3) a realistic expectation of the demand forecast and cost inputs required to achieve the **operating expenditure objectives**.*

The Rules do not provide the AER with a choice about whether to deem that liquidity costs are already compensated by the revenue implications of the PTRM model. Instead the Rules are clear in requiring the AER to accept the forecast of required operating expenditure if these are efficient costs, and the costs that a prudent operator would require to achieve the operating expenditure objectives. Since 2001 Australian regulators have accepted that debt raising transaction costs are a valid cost component, and have provided allowances varying between 5 bppa and 25 bppa. The AER has done so since its inception.

Liquidity costs are the costs incurred by a regulated business due to a requirement imposed by credit rating agencies that require a buffer of either cash, or committed but unused bank lines to be held so that debt re-financing can take place even in the event that there is a temporary closure of credit markets. As noted in our previous report, liquidity costs are direct costs, since they involve an explicit cash outlay by businesses in the form of additional bank fees (which are not included in the bond issuance costs that are recognised as an explicit operating cost), and bank commitment fees. Standard & Poor’s considers that almost all regulated energy businesses are likely to require a liquidity reserve,

¹⁶ Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), p.3-327.

and that this is a direct cost of operations. This fact was not commented upon in the AER's draft decision.

The AER's draft decision maintains that it is 'not satisfied that a prudent operator requires this additional expenditure [to satisfy liquidity requirements].'¹⁷ In support of this proposition the AER pointed to the fact that a number of service providers (Ausgrid, Endeavour, Essential and Transend) were aware of the additional cost categories submitted by TransGrid, but had chosen not to include them in their opex proposals, and Directlink had used the AER's normal approach on debt raising transaction costs. We are not privy to the basis used by some businesses to not include these costs in their revenue proposals. However, we note that in addition to TransGrid, both ActewAGL and Jemena have included these costs in their revenue proposals (which was not mentioned by the AER).

The AER's scepticism that regulated businesses actually incur costs due to liquidity requirements is contradicted by the evidence that was provided in our previous report:

- The statement made to us by an executive of Standard & Poor's, that it is highly likely that regulated energy transmission and distribution businesses will incur liquidity maintenance costs – the AER has not stated that it has conferred with Standard & Poors' to confirm whether this is in fact the case; and
- We cited research by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and CEG, where it was respectively shown that undrawn bank debt (which is considered to be the most efficient way of providing a liquidity buffer) accounts for between 8 per cent and 14 per cent of total drawn debt.

Hence, it has been shown empirically that an efficient benchmark entity would have to incur these costs. On the other hand, without undertaking an empirical investigation of the matter, and relying solely on the observation that some businesses have not requested compensation for these costs, the AER has concluded that it is 'not satisfied that a prudent operator requires this additional expenditure'. We conclude that there is no valid reason for the AER not to accept liquidity costs as prudent costs that the benchmark entity would need to incur in order to achieve its operating expenditure objectives.

3.4 Allowance for costs associated with Standard & Poor's requirement to finance 3 months ahead

The AER's concerns about recognising 3 month ahead financing costs

Regarding liquidity costs, the AER considered that the low materiality of the three month ahead financing costs mean that these costs can be considered to be covered by the favourable revenue impact of timing assumptions in the PTRM. As noted above for liquidity costs, the NER do not provide the AER with such discretion, but require it to decide whether these are 'costs that a prudent operator would require to achieve the operating expenditure objectives.'

The AER has not provided evidence that it has empirically investigated this matter. For example, it has not indicated that it has conferred with Standard & Poors', whose staff told us that these costs are being incurred by credit rated, regulated energy transmission and distribution businesses (i.e. the businesses that are reflective of the characteristics of the benchmark entity).

¹⁷ Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), p.3-328.

The AER also expressed doubts that the estimate of the cost of 3 month ahead financing contained in our previous report will tend to provide an over-estimate of the actual cost incurred by the benchmark firm. This is because we estimated the cost based on the difference between the return on the cost of BBB+ debt over the past 10 years (i.e. the trailing average), and the return that would be earned on a 3 month BBB+ corporate bond. However, as noted by the AER, this would tend to over-estimate the cost of 3 month ahead financing, because the trailing average cost of BBB+ rated debt is currently higher than the spot cost of BBB+ rated debt. We agree that our approach over-estimated the cost of 3 month ahead financing, and we have rectified it (see below).

In conclusion, we reiterate that Standard & Poor's requires investment grade issuers to re-finance bonds 3 months ahead of expiry. There is a cost to this, and we have estimated that cost below, taking account of the criticisms outlined by the AER.

3.5 Other objections raised by the AER

The relative complexity of including liquidity and three month ahead financing costs

The AER's final objection to including liquidity and 3 month ahead financing costs is the relative complexity of doing so:¹⁸

These proposed allowances result in a more complex regulatory approach to estimate debt raising costs given the modelling and data requirements to estimate these two additional categories.

We do not agree with the AER's assessment. From its inception the AER has assessed debt raising transaction costs associated with bond issues. Since the time of the original ACG (2004) report, there have been several updates of the parameters that are used in this analysis. The latest update was the one undertaken by PwC in 2013. The application of the ACG methodology required PwC to:

- Assess the average size of bond issue made by Australian infrastructure business;
- Search Bloomberg to find examples of Australian companies that had issued bonds in the US, and for the arrangement fees paid for those services to be revealed in a Prospectus.
- Survey a number of banks about the charges that they would apply to facilitate bond issues;
- Survey credit rating agencies about the fees that they charge for bond issues and bond programs; and
- Survey law firms about the charges that they would apply to facilitate bond issues.

There are relatively few additional information requirements necessary to estimate the costs of maintaining liquidity and 3 month ahead financing: the return on 3-month BBB+ debt (an input into the early refinancing cost); the 3 year swap rate (an input into the liquidity cost); and the establishment fee and legal fees that are an input into the liquidity cost. Bank establishment fees (to estimate the cost of the establishing a bank facility) and legal fees are currently available (PwC, 2013). At the next iteration it would be a very small incremental cost to estimate bank fees and legal fees alongside bond issuance fees, as the same parties would need to be surveyed (i.e. banks and legal firms).

¹⁸ Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), p. 3-328.

Reasons set out in the AER's 2012 Envestra decision

In its TransGrid draft decision the AER noted that in a previous 2012 draft decision on Envestra, it had set out its reasons for the decision not to include liquidity costs, and that ‘neither TransGrid nor Incenta has engaged with the reasons set out in this decision’.¹⁹ One of the reasons set out in the AER’s 2012 draft decision was that recognising liquidity costs was not appropriate given that the favourable timing assumptions in the AER’s PTRM formula. This issue has already been considered separately above.

Other matters raised in the Envestra decision related to assumptions that had been applied by Envestra’s adviser. We consider that none of these objections is valid in relation to our approach. The AER stated that:²⁰

- The imputation payout ratio should be applied rather than the dividend payout ratio – we have applied the payout ratio based on the AER’s assumption about the payout of imputation credits;
- The expected capital expenditure may significantly reduce under an adverse market scenario – we tested this proposition with staff at Standard & Poor’s, who told us that in its own calculations it assumes the stated capital expenditure program will be maintained;²¹
- Distributions would be reduced/removed under an adverse market scenario – however, in its own estimates Standard & Poor’s assumes that the consistent dividend policy is maintained.²²

In summary, the AER proposed that if the working capital allowance implicit in the PTRM formula was to be included in the calculation of liquidity ratios, ‘then using Envestra’s calculation method, an allowance for liquidity would not be required.’ The problems with this approach are that:

- Standard & Poor’s formula only includes *net* working capital as a source of liquidity; and
- We find that committed undrawn bank lines for TransGrid would need to be in the order of \$200 million, which is around one quarter of the annual regulated revenue requirement, and is clearly much larger than any implicit net working capital allowance might be.

3.6 Conclusion on the AER’s draft decision

In conclusion, whilst we agree with some technical issues raised by the AER, and have adjusted our methodology to accommodate these changes, we do not agree with the AER’s rejection of liquidity costs and three month ahead financing costs. All three cost components are part of the benchmark costs that would be incurred by a benchmark regulated business. The fact that some of these costs have not been identified or requested by some businesses does not change the fact that they are benchmark efficient costs. Furthermore, under the NER, the businesses are obliged to forecast the prudently incurred efficient costs of a benchmark business, and the AER is obliged to assess whether

¹⁹ Australian Energy Regulator (November, 2014), p. 3-329.

²⁰ Australian Energy Regulator (September, 2012), p.201.

²¹ Capex programs can rarely be instantly curtailed, and such action would usually incur significant cancellation penalties, along with longer term reputation penalties that could hamper future contracting.

²² Firms are reluctant to cut dividends due to the share price signal that this implies. Regulated utilities are even less likely to cut dividends as their shareholder clientele purchases their shares specifically for their relatively high and stable dividend yield.

these costs are prudent and efficient. As we have estimated these costs based on benchmark evidence and principles, we consider that they are both prudent and efficient.

4. Estimating total debt raising costs

In this section we set out our estimates for each of the three components of total debt raising costs. We begin with the costs associated with raising bonds in the market place, and follow this with analyses of the Standard & Poor’s liquidity requirement costs, and the 3 month ahead financing costs.

4.1 Benchmark debt-issuing transaction cost allowance

4.1.1 The PwC (2013) benchmarking report

As noted in our previous report, the benchmark assumption implicit in all Australian regulatory decisions is that 100 per cent of RAB debt portfolio is comprised of bonds. To estimate transaction costs associated with bond issues we again rely on the PwC (2013) analysis, which is based on recent observations of market practice, and has been accepted by the AER.

These estimates are based on interviews with legal firms, banks and credit rating agencies that facilitate the bond raising process, and charge fees for doing so. PwC’s list of bond issuance transaction costs for a benchmark bond issuance program is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Other bond issuance transaction costs (2013)

Cost item	Unit	Estimated value	Source
Legal counsel – Master program	Per 10 years	\$56,250	Legal firms
Legal counsel – issuer’s	Per issue	\$15,625	Legal firms
Credit rating agency – Initial credit rating	Per issue	\$77,500	Rating agencies
Credit rating agency – Annual surveillance	Per annum in total	\$35,500	Rating agencies
Credit rating agency – Up front bond issue	Per issue	5.2bps of issue size	Rating agencies
Registrar – Up front	Per 10 years	\$20,850	Banks
Registrar – Annual	Per annum per issue	\$7,825	Banks
Investment bank’s out-of-pocket expenses	Per issue	\$3,000	Estimated

Source: PwC (2013), p.19.

The individual components are:

- *Legal counsel – Master program* – legal costs for preparing a Master Program (the base document for multiple issuances over the next 10 years);
- *Legal counsel – issuer’s* – legal fees for preparing documents under the Master Program;
- *Credit rating agency – Initial credit rating* – fee to establish a credit rating;
- *Credit rating agency – Annual surveillance* – annual rating agency fee for maintaining the credit rating;
- *Credit rating agency – Up front bond issue* – fee charged by the rating agency when a new bond is issued;
- *Registrar – Up front* – initial set-up fee charged by the bond registry;

- *Registrar – Annual* – annual fee charged by the registry service; and
- *Investment bank’s out-of-pocket expenses* – fees charged by the agents of a bank for travel, accommodation, venue hire, printing etc.

PwC’s survey of recent debt issuance by infrastructure businesses found that the standard bond issuance size is now \$250 million, which is also agreed by the AER. TransGrid’s Regulated Asset Base (RAB) is \$6,076 million, and with benchmark gearing at 60 per cent, its benchmark debt level is \$3,645.8 million. This implies that the benchmark firm would need 15 bond issues of \$250 million to refinance its debt.

4.1.2 Estimating TransGrid’s benchmark debt-issuing transaction cost allowance

PwC estimated that Australian businesses issuing bonds in the US incur an arrangement fee of approximately 8.5 basis points per annum (bppa).²³ As noted in section 3 above, the AER adopted a slightly lower levelised benchmark of 7.53 bppa due to applying its estimated vanilla WACC of 7.24 per cent, rather than the generic 10 per cent that PwC applied in its study. We agree with the AER’s approach, but consider that 7.53 bppa is too low for a WACC of 7.24 per cent, and that a value of 7.68 bppa would be more appropriate when applying that WACC. Applying TransGrid’s estimated WACC of 8.65 per cent, we estimate that the arrangement fee component is 8.1 bppa on a levelised basis.

In Table 2 we find that by applying PwC’s benchmark cost estimates, the benchmark debt-raising transaction cost estimate is 10.3 bppa for one bond issue of \$250 million, and a cost of **9.43 basis points per annum** (bppa) for TransGrid’s estimated 15 benchmark bond issues.

Table 2: TransGrid – benchmark debt-raising transaction costs (bppa)²⁴

Number of bonds	Value	1 bond issued	15 bonds issued
Amount raised		\$250 million	3,750 million
Arrangement fee		8.10	8.10
Bond Master Program (per program)	\$56,250	0.32	0.02
Issuer’s legal counsel	\$15,625	0.09	0.09
Company credit rating	\$77,500	0.44	0.03
Annual surveillance fee	\$35,500	0.14	0.01
Up-front issuance fee	5.20 bp	0.73	0.73
Registration up-front (per program)	\$20,850	0.12	0.12
Registration - annual	\$7,825	0.31	0.31
Agents’ out-of-pockets	\$3,000	0.02	0.02
Total (bppa)		10.3	9.43

Source: Based on PwC (2013), p.19.

²³ PwC, (June, 2013), p.77.

²⁴ Since the costs are expressed in basis points per annum (bppa), each year they will vary in proportion to the benchmark debt that is forecast for the regulated business.

4.1.3 Conclusion - TransGrid's benchmark debt-issuing transaction cost allowance

Based on PwC's benchmark estimates of costs associated with bond issues, we estimate that a benchmark firm with TransGrid's characteristics would incur a levelised cost of 9.43 bppa to issue bonds.

4.2 Allowance for costs associated with the Standard & Poor's liquidity requirement

As discussed in section 3 above, the NER require the AER to assess whether identified costs are 'the costs that a prudent operator would require to achieve the operating expenditure objectives'. In our previous report we reported that we had discussed the matter of liquidity costs with Standard & Poor's, and that its staff had confirmed to us that Standard & Poor's considers liquidity costs to be direct costs that are no different from other direct costs associated with debt raising, and considers that most regulated energy transmission and distribution businesses will incur these costs. The AER has recognised other costs associated with debt raising, and liquidity costs are similarly a cost that is borne by the benchmark firm.

4.2.1 Approach to estimating the cost of maintaining a liquidity reserve

In order to create and maintain a liquidity reserve, it is most efficient to secure and retain bank debt facilities that are committed (meaning that they can be drawn upon immediately as needed) but undrawn. As noted in our previous report, Standard & Poor's (2014) report titled, *Methodology and Assumptions: Liquidity Descriptors for Global Corporate Issuers*, describes how it assigns liquidity ratings to corporate issuers, and states that a minimum rating of 'adequate' is required in order to support an investment grade credit rating.²⁵ Standard & Poor's applies a forward looking estimate of the ratio of 'sources' of cash flow (designated as 'A') to the 'uses' of that cash flow (designated as 'B'), including debt re-financing to assess liquidity, with an 'adequate' level of liquidity being indicated if:

- A/B is at least 1.2x for firms generally, but must be at least 1.1x for utilities;²⁶ and
- If the firm's EBITDA is assumed to decline by 15 per cent compared with the base case forecast, A-B would still be positive.

Standard & Poor's assesses the cash flow forecasts for the business for the period 6 months ahead, and estimates the base case sources and uses of funds over that timeframe. To the extent that the liquidity requirements are not met from the cash flows, then the business would be required to supplement the 'sources' of cash until the liquidity requirements are met.

²⁵ Standard & Poor's (2 January, 2014), *Methodology and Assumptions: Liquidity Descriptors For Global Corporate Issuers*, which updates Standard & Poor's earlier (28 September, 2011) report of the same title.

²⁶ The requirement that for utilities the sources/uses ratio is 1.1x was confirmed by email from Standard & Poor's to Incenta on 25 March 2014.

Its primary concern is a scenario in which capital markets are temporarily closed, so that re-financing of debt must be undertaken based on existing cash flow sources, taking account of other uses of cash.

In its analysis, Standard & Poor's defines the sources and uses of funds as follows:

- *Sources of funds* - The major source of cash flow of a business is its Funds Flow from Operations (FFO), which may be supplemented by working capital inflows (if positive), the proceeds of asset sales, an expected cash injection from a Government shareholder or parent company, or undrawn committed bank lines. During our meeting, Standard & Poor's stated that as a general rule it would not assume that a cash injection from a Government or major private shareholder would be forthcoming. Standard & Poor's would also expect that no proceeds are available from new debt issues or dividend reinvestment plans, since what is being modelled is a situation in which capital markets have shut down.
- *Uses of funds* – A major use of funds that is modelled is the forecast expected capital expenditure, which is derived from TransGrid's PTRM. Standard & Poor's told us that it takes the view that the capital expenditure that is expected to be undertaken is actually undertaken. Other significant cash uses are debt repayments, and dividend payments. The financial health of the business pivots around the need to repay debt when it falls due. The position of Standard & Poor's is that it would be difficult for the business to cut its dividend significantly in order to find the cash to repay a maturing debt.^{27,28}

4.2.2 Bottom-up estimate of the costs of establishing and maintaining a liquidity reserve

Our application of the bottom-up methodology

Our approach is a bottom-up methodology that applies the formula Standard & Poor's uses to determine the minimum liquidity requirement. To estimate the benchmark level of committed undrawn bank lines for TransGrid, we have undertaken a forward cash flow analysis in the same way that Standard & Poor's does. The core inputs into the forward cash flow analysis should be the benchmark outputs of the AER's PTRM model. Using TransGrid's PTRM values we have estimated sources and uses as:

- *Sources of funds* – The base case Funds Flow from Operations (FFO) for each year / 6 monthly period is established by reference to the benchmark revenues, operating costs, cash taxes paid, and interest paid, all based on the benchmark gearing, weighted average cost of capital (WACC) and regulated asset base (RAB) assumptions.

²⁷ We agree with this approach, as academic research has shown that when a regulated utility cuts its dividend, there is a disproportionately large negative share price reaction relative to industrial firms that do so (owing to fact that utilities tend to attract clienteles of shareholders who expect stable income flows).

²⁸ The Standard & Poor's document on liquidity requirements also includes peak negative working capital in the list of cash flow uses, which reflects a concern to take account of the seasonality of cash flow. As we are calculating annual average liquidity reserves, seasonality is less of a concern (i.e., we will understate the required reserve when revenue is seasonally low and overstate it when revenue is seasonally high, but these effects will cancel out).

- *Uses of funds* – Forecasted capital expenditure is derived using TransGrid’s PTRM, with dividend payments determined by the AER’s intention to apply an assumed payout ratio of 70 per cent.

In order to estimate the level of new debt financing required in any regulatory year we have taken the level of capital expenditure plus the net change in the RAB due to depreciation and inflation indexation²⁹ – the level of refinancing of existing debt requires assumptions about the timing of historical debt issuances. The higher the level of debt financing assumed, the lower the ratio of sources to uses of funds, and the higher the amount of committed undrawn bank lines that is required (and hence, the higher the costs associated with Standard & Poor’s liquidity requirement). We have assumed that the quantum of debt to be refinanced in regulatory year t is equal to the average of the following two proxies:

- the sum of the new debt raising in year $t-10$ (that is, the capital expenditure and net change in the RAB in that year) and 10 per cent of the opening RAB for that year, and
- 10 per cent of the closing RAB for year $t-10$.

Our specific rationale for this assumption was demonstrated in our previous report.³⁰ In order to estimate the cost of a liquidity reserve, it is necessary to calculate:

- The quantum of the liquidity reserve (i.e. commitments of bank debt) implied. That is, the committed but unused bank debt required in the event of a liquidity crisis;
- The commitment fee that is charged by banks to hold the bank debt that is available in the event of a liquidity crisis; and
- Finally, the upfront fee charged by banks and associated costs to establish the liquidity reserve bank debt facility (i.e. the ‘establishment fee’ and other transaction costs).

The quantum of the required liquidity reserve

In Table 3, we estimate the value of committed but undrawn bank lines required to meet the liquidity ratios ranges from \$199.6 million to \$252.4 million over the next regulatory period. This equates to between 5.5 per cent and 6.1 per cent of benchmark debt. We find that the second limb of Standard & Poor’s liquidity requirements is satisfied in all years.

²⁹ This net change will be positive if the indexation component exceeds the depreciation allowance, and will be negative if the indexation component is less than the depreciation allowance (it would be expected to be negative provided that inflation rates remain modest).

³⁰ Incenta (May, 2014), pp. 12-13.

Table 3: TransGrid – bank lines required to satisfy S&P’s liquidity requirement (sources/uses test) forecasting 6 months ahead (\$million)

PTRM model outputs:	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Revenue (Smoothed)	422.7	465.2	479.2	494.1
Operating costs	88.7	95.8	100.0	98.6
EBITDA	334.0	369.4	379.2	395.5
Sources:				
EBITDA	334.0	369.4	379.2	395.5
Less, Cash taxes	30.4	37.3	44.2	49.9
Less, Interest paid	135.0	140.4	146.5	147.3
Funds From Operations	168.5	191.8	188.5	198.3
Plus, Proceeds of asset sales	1.5	1.4	1.4	1.5
Total Sources (not incl. committed but unused bank lines):	170.0	193.2	189.9	199.7
Total Sources (not incl. committed but unused bank lines) EBITDA falls 15%:	129.7	148.5	143.4	148.6
Uses:				
Expected capital spending	175.5	205.9	166.9	167.0
Plus, Debt repayments	104.1	111.9	122.2	152.5
Plus, Dividend payments	49.7	60.9	72.1	81.5
Total Uses:	329.3	378.6	361.3	401.0
Committed undrawn bank lines for A/B = 1.1x*	192.3	223.3	207.5	241.4
Undrawn bank lines as % of debt	5.3%	5.9%	5.2%	5.8%
Undrawn committed bank lines for A-B = 0 when EBITDA falls 15%	199.6	230.1	217.9	252.4
Undrawn committed bank lines as % of regulatory debt	5.5%	6.0%	5.5%	6.1%

Source: TransGrid data and Incenta analysis

We have assumed that both the revenue (smoothed), and the operating costs include the value of debt raising costs, however these cancel out at the EBITDA line. Hence, there is no circularity from using revenue and operating cost forecasts that are inclusive of debt raising costs.

The commitment fee

In order to establish a line of credit from banks it is necessary to pay a ‘commitment fee’, and according to the PwC (2013) report, the current market practice is for banks to charge at a rate of 50 per cent of the margin over the swap rate that the bank would charge for lending the funds. We have estimated the cost of the commitment fee to be 61 basis points, which is half of the spread between the 3 year Bloomberg BBB yield (as a proxy for the cost of bank debt) and the 3 year swap rate.

Table 4: TransGrid – Calculation of commitment fee (20 days to 31 March 2014)

	Fee per annum
Bloomberg 3 year BBB yield	4.34%
AUD 3 year swap rate	3.12%
Bloomberg 3 year implied margin (proxy for bank debt margin)	1.22%
Commitment fee (50 per cent of margin)	0.61%

Source: Bloomberg and Incenta analysis

The annualised commitment fees for a firm with TransGrid’s benchmark characteristics are shown in Table 5. The bank facility required each year to support committed but unused bank lines in order to satisfy Standard & Poor’s liquidity requirements (as calculated in Table 3 above) convert to a commitment fee (in dollars based on the 0.61 per cent per annum calculated in Table 4), which in turn convert to a basis points per annum fee (based on the outstanding debt component of the RAB). The commitment fee is found to range from \$ 1.2 million to \$1.5 million per annum, or 3.3 to 3.7 basis points, and 3.5 basis points on a levelised basis.

Table 5: TransGrid – benchmark bank facility commitment fees (basis points per annum)

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Debt (60% of RAB) (\$m)	3,645.8	3,806.0	3,995.1	4,127.1
Bank facility required (\$m)	199.6	230.1	217.9	252.4
Commitment fee (\$m)	1.2	1.4	1.3	1.5
Commitment fee (bppa on regulatory debt)	3.3	3.7	3.3	3.7
Levelised cost (bppa)	3.5			

Source: PwC (2013) and Incenta analysis

Establishment fee and other transaction costs associated with establishing the bank debt facility

The third input required to calculate the cost to maintain a liquidity reserve is the upfront cost of establishing the bank debt facility. We have again adopted the benchmark values estimated by PwC, which come to an annualised amount of \$233,742 for 2014-15, or approximately 0.64 of a basis point.³¹ The derivation of these amounts is shown in Table 6.

³¹ PwC (June, 2013), p.iv.

Table 6: TransGrid – establishment fee and other transaction costs associated with establishing a committed but unused bank debt facility for a debt portfolio of \$3,646 million (2014-15)

	Basis	Cost	Annual	Bppa	Source:
Establishment fee	Up-front	339,297.97	\$133,206	0.37	PwC (2013): 0.17% x quantum of bank debt (\$199.6 million), annualised with 8.65% discount rate
Other bank transaction costs:					
-legal counsel – borrower	Up-front	\$86,667	\$34,025	0.09	PwC (2013): annualised with 8.65% discount rate
-legal counsel – bank	Up-front	\$90,000	\$35,333	0.10	PwC (2013): annualised with 8.65% discount rate
-Syndication fee	Per annum	\$30,000	\$30,000	0.08	PwC (2013): annual syndication fee
-Bank’s out-of-pockets	Up-front	\$3,000	\$1,178	0.00	PwC (2013): annualised with 8.65% discount rate
Total Annual Equivalent			\$233,742	0.64	Basis points per annum

Source: PwC benchmark values and Incenta analysis

Table 7 shows how the establishment fee and other transaction costs vary with the bank facility required during each year of the regulatory period. The maximum annualised cost is \$269,008 in 2017-18 (coinciding with the highest liquidity requirement of \$252.4 million in that year), implying a 0.65 basis points per annum cost based on regulatory debt. On a levelised basis, using a 8.65 per cent discount rate, we estimated an establishment fee and other costs component of 0.64 basis points per annum.

Table 7: TransGrid – establishment fee and other transaction costs (basis points per annum)

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Establishment fee (annual equivalent)	133,206	153,556	145,448	168,472
Other bank transaction costs	100,536	100,536	100,536	100,536
Total annual equivalent costs (\$)	233,742	254,092	245,984	269,008
Total annual equivalent cost (bppa)	0.64	0.67	0.62	0.65
Levelised cost (bppa) on regulatory debt	0.64			

Source: PwC (2013) and Incenta analysis

4.2.3 Benchmark cost of establishing and maintaining a liquidity reserve

In Table 8 we estimate the benchmark cost of establishing and maintaining the liquidity reserve needed to meet Standard & Poor’s liquidity requirements. This cost is estimated to be between \$1.45 million and \$1.81 million, which converts to a levelised cost of **4.2 basis points per annum** on the regulatory debt.

Table 8: TransGrid – Total establishment fee and other transaction costs associated with establishing a committed but unused bank debt facility

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Commitment fee (annual equivalent)	1.22	1.41	1.33	1.54
Establishment fee & other costs	0.23	0.25	0.25	0.27
Total annual equivalent costs (\$)	1.45	1.66	1.58	1.81
Total annual equivalent cost (bppa)	4.0	4.4	4.0	4.4
Levelised cost (bppa) on regulatory debt	4.2			

Source: PwC (2013) and Incenta analysis

4.3 Costs associated with re-financing 3 months ahead

4.3.1 Estimating the cost of 3 month ahead financing

As noted in our previous report, we consider that the methodology applied by PwC to estimate the cost of re-financing bonds 3 months ahead of their maturity is fundamentally sound. PwC (2013) had argued that:³²

While the entity may actually invest in BBSW or Commonwealth Government bonds, and that will create a cash shortfall, on the other hand the entity gains from adding a lower risk asset to its portfolio. This offsetting economic effect can be neutralised by assuming that the business receives the 3 month BBB+ yield.

PwC (2013) found that the annual net cost of re-financing one-tenth of this portfolio three months ahead was 4.7 basis points, which was the net outcome of:³³

- A three month interest cost borne on the newly issued bond, of 16.6 basis points; less
- The three month interest that could be earned on BBB rated debt, which was 11.9 basis points.

In section 3.4 above, we agreed with the AER that it is not consistent to apply a trailing average cost of debt to estimate the cost of 3 month ahead financing, since it is the rate of return on the new debt that is issued that is the cost that is partly offset by investment in short term bonds.

In Table 9 we have used a spot cost of debt assumption of 6.67 per cent, which is sourced from TransGrid,³⁴ and have assumed re-investment for 3 months in a BBB rated bond at 4.34 per cent (based on the Bloomberg FVC). This results in an early re-financing cost of 4.7 basis points per annum for a debt portfolio of \$250 million.³⁵

³² PwC (June 2013), p. 11.

³³ PwC (June, 2013), p. 25.

³⁴ TransGrid advised us to apply the draft 6.67 per cent cost of debt derived by the AER for the first regulatory year (see, AER (November, 2014), Attachment 3, p.3-9).

³⁵ This compares with 6.8 bppa that was calculated in our earlier report.

Table 9: Bond re-financing cost summary for \$250 million of maturing debt (20 days to 26 May, 2014)

Calculation element	Upfront cash cost for \$250m (\$m)	Cost for \$250m debt portfolio (bppa)
3 month interest cost on new bond	4,168,750	
3 month BBB credit rated interest income	-2,443,010	
Total cost if invested in BBB credit risk and no redemption/buy back	1,725,740	4.7

Source: Bloomberg, and Incenta analysis applying PwC (2013) methodology to TransGrid’s cost of debt assumption

In Table 10 we find that the establishment fee and other costs range from \$1.44 million to \$1.54 million, which convert to a range of 3.9 to 5.1 basis points per annum, or a levelised **4.4 basis points per annum** on regulatory debt over the period.

Table 10: TransGrid – Total cost of 3 month ahead re-financing

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Maturing component of debt portfolio (\$m)	208.1	223.7	244.4	305.1
Establishment fee & other costs (\$m)	1.44	1.54	1.69	2.11
Total annual equivalent cost (bppa)	3.9	4.1	4.2	5.1
Levelised cost (bppa) on regulatory debt	4.4			

Source: PwC (2013) and Incenta analysis

4.4 Total debt-raising transaction costs

In this section we sum the three sources of debt-raising transaction costs, and combine them to calculate the levelised cost (in basis points per annum) relative to benchmark forecast debt values taken from TransGrid’s PTRM. In Table 11 below we show the estimated total dollar value of debt raising transaction costs (ranging from \$6.3 million to \$7.8 million) and the equivalent values in terms of basis points per annum, based on the regulatory debt (which ranges from 17.4 bppa to 18.9 bppa). The total levelised debt raising transaction cost of **17.91 basis points per annum** has been derived by taking the estimated \$24.6 million net present value (NPV) of the benchmark total debt transaction costs relative to the NPV of outstanding benchmark debt over the regulatory period (\$13,750.8 million) using TransGrid’s WACC proposal of 8.65 per cent as the discount rate.

Table 11: TransGrid – total debt raising transaction costs (basis points per annum)

	2014 - 2015	2015- 2016	2016- 2017	2017 - 2018
Debt raising transaction costs (\$m)	3.4	3.6	3.8	3.9
Liquidity - commitment fee (\$m)	1.5	1.7	1.6	1.8
3 month ahead financing costs (\$m)	1.4	1.5	1.7	2.1
Total debt raising transaction costs (\$m)	6.3	6.8	7.0	7.8
Debt raising transaction costs (bppa)	9.4	9.4	9.4	9.4
Liquidity - commitment fee (bppa)	4.0	4.4	4.0	4.4
3 month ahead financing costs (bppa)	3.9	4.1	4.2	5.1
Total debt raising transaction costs (bppa)	17.4	17.9	17.6	18.9
Levelised debt raising transaction costs (bppa)	17.91			

Source: TransGrid data and Incenta analysis