

Board Communique: April 2022

The Energy Consumers Australia Board met via video conference on 14 April 2022.

Grants Meeting

Australian households and small businesses have faced many challenges in recent years, including the economic impact of COVID. New pressures on the cost of living are now emerging, and with electricity and gas essential to our lives and livelihoods, it has never been more critical to investigate the lived experience of consumers in all their diversity.

Energy Consumers Australia's Energy Consumer Sentiment Survey released in December 2021 told us that a significant proportion of consumers are still reporting energy bill stress, with 34% of consumers more concerned about their ability to pay electricity bills. Customers under financial pressure are less confident in their ability to make energy decisions, have worse experiences in energy markets and are more likely to struggle participating in them.

As these challenges continue, Energy Consumers Australia ECA is emphasising work that ensures consumers and their voices are well represented. The energy system is in a state of transition, with new technologies emerging, a focus on electrification and in some ways becoming more complex, ECA is looking to find ways to create a more inclusive and equitable system to support consumers.

We are pleased to approve funding for six high-impact projects under the Energy Consumers Australia Grants Program. These exciting projects shine a light on how we navigate this state of transition in the long-term interest of consumers. Each contributes to understanding the way in which the energy system responds to the motivations, capabilities, opportunities and barriers of consumers, and households and small businesses desire for agency, autonomy, control and for delivering energy costs they can afford.

Managing the adoption of new technologies in a way that is fair to consumers, ensuring the consumer voice is heard during the gas transition, and safeguarding consumers in a decentralised grid are but a few of the goals to be explored by these important projects.

Projects approved for funding included:

- ACT Council of Social Service – *Energised consumers project* (\$128,880 ex GST)
- Australian National University – *Bringing to light regulatory disparities for electricity access and services across Australia* (\$95,591 ex GST)
- Better Renting – *Renter Researchers (Winter)* (\$41,541 ex GST)

- Energetic Communities Association – *Livable homes for all – effective advocacy to shift power and increase access to energy efficiency for renters* (\$80,000 ex GST).
- Tasmanian Small Business Council – *Small business advocacy on Tasmanian Draft Future Gas Strategy* (\$39,500 ex GST)
- University of Queensland – *Reclaimed PV panels market assessment* (\$42,869 ex GST).

We offer our thanks to the successful and unsuccessful applicants. The next opportunity to apply for funding for *Influence Grants* (previously advocacy and research) is now open, and we are also encouraging applications for smaller grants (up to \$15,000) under our *Participation Grants* sub-program.

As we embark on a journey with these seven new recipients, we are pleased to reflect on the great work achieved by other alumni of our Grants Program.

Consumer Action Law Centre (\$264,654 funding, over 2 years). Vulnerable consumers deserve a champion who can advocate for stronger protections. This project aimed to ensure consumers experiencing payment difficulties received more tailored support and could access products and services that work for them. CALC has been an effective advocate protecting vulnerable customers particularly during COVID. Among their achievements, CALC filed complaints that led to Victoria’s Emergency Services Commission issuing a \$1.125 million fine against a retailer for breaching the Payment Difficulty Framework by placing conditions on customers accessing hardship assistance.

St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria (\$296,184 funding, over 3 years). More than a decade ago, the St Vincent De Paul Society - a charity dedicated to supporting disadvantaged Australians, began investigating ways to make the market more transparent, particularly for consumers who could least afford to be locked into expensive energy deals. With the support of Energy Consumers Australia, it has is now expanded beyond Victoria to most other states. It is the first and only open source of data on energy prices. This grant has resulted in reports – both national and state-specific – being released at least annually, giving consumers, consumer advocates, policy makers and regulators previously inaccessible insights into electricity, gas and solar price movements, market developments, such as new entrants and products, as well as policy changes.

Renew (Formerly Alternative Technology Association) (\$74,500 over 2 years). Bringing Australian homes up to standards of comfort and energy efficiency that consumers have a right to expect in the 21st century requires strong consumer advocacy and Renew’s goal is to drive the introduction of a better standard. This grant has afforded Renew opportunities to represent consumer interests in fora where change can occur, including the [National Construction Code 2022](#) update and further work on the national plan that aims to deliver net zero energy homes. Renew has mobilised support for higher energy standards and measures such as mandatory disclosure of energy ratings. It released a [report](#) which found that building net zero, 7 Star homes with solar and efficient appliances will significantly cut bills for households.