

Board Communique: April 2020

The Energy Consumers Australia Board met via video conference on 23 April 2020.

RESPONDING TO COVID-19

The Board discussed the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on households and small business energy consumers and the evolving response by governments and the energy sector.

The Board acknowledged the moves by energy companies to strengthen their assistance for households and small businesses that may be struggling to pay their bills at this time. The Board also noted that some retailers have committed to no disconnections for non-payment - though the performance of the retail sector appears variable. The Board also discussed the important relief package announced by Energy Networks Australia on 2 April 2020 and the need for industry leadership and cooperation to implement it as quickly as possible.

The Board reiterated the need for the energy sector to adopt a more proactive posture in its engagement with consumers to ensure that support is not just available for those who seek it out, but also reaches those households and small businesses who may not have sought help before or have difficulties navigating the usual hardship processes.

The Board observed that for many people the specific challenges around paying quarterly energy bills may not emerge for weeks or months as they struggle to meet housing and other essential costs. It is critical that the energy sector has a plan that extends into winter and beyond to meet the need.

The Board also received a briefing on how Energy Consumers Australia's research agenda is being adapted to gather evidence and insights about the lived experience of household and small business energy consumers in the crisis.

The Board was updated on the health and wellbeing of Energy Consumers Australia's people who, like many Australians, have been working remotely for more than a month, and reviewed the work practices and new processes designed to both ensure safety and enable productivity at home.

REFERENCE COMMITTEE

The Reference Committee met for the first time in 2020 and were joined by Ms Janine Young, Energy and Water Ombudsman NSW, as an observer. Members discussed the following matters relating to the impacts of COVID-19 on households and small businesses:

- Demand for some assistance services, such as dispute resolution and legal advice has currently decreased as consumers prioritise other more urgent household matters and working from home. However, these services are likely to be in higher demand in the medium term as consumers increase consumption in the home and are faced with winter bills.
- There are opportunities for the energy businesses to take proactive action to help their consumers, beyond the requirements mandated by governments and regulators. Critical to this is the Australian Energy Regulator's (AER) Statement of Expectations [available here](#) and the similar actions taken by the Essential Services Commission in Victoria.
- The Reference Committee advised that there were examples of consumers still receiving disconnection warnings from retailers, despite the expectation from the AER that businesses do

not disconnect any residential or small business consumer who may be in financial stress. The members considered that there was a need to engage with the community on consumer protection regulations.

The Board wishes to thank the outgoing member, Ms Susan Helyar for her valued contribution to the Reference Committee and wishes her all the best in her new role.

GRANTS

The Board discussed the potential impact of COVID-19 on advocates and noted the potential impact on current grant-funded projects. The Board also approved funding for the following new grants:

- AP 1042 – Tasmanian Council of Social Service, *Tasmanian Affordable Energy Project* (\$160,600).
- AP 1061 – University of Sydney – *Supporting CALD Australians to be responsible energy consumers* (\$102,714).
- AP 1062 - St Vincent de Paul Society - *Tariff-Tracking, energy price and market analysis in 2020, 2021 and 2022* (\$296,184).

These are timely grants in focusing on the direct challenges for small consumers managing bills and affordability following decisions by energy businesses and regulators. The Board thanks all applicants for the effort in preparing their applications.

Applications for the next grants round **close on 14 May 2020**.

More information and guidance on the requirements for grant applications is [available here](#).

