

Board Communique: September 2019

The Energy Consumers Australia Board met in Hobart on 11 & 12 September 2019

Board Stakeholder Forum, 11 September 2019

The Board met with consumer advocates, researchers, energy company representatives, regulators, and officials from the Tasmanian Government for an open discussion on priority matters for household and small business energy consumers.

Lynne Gallagher, Director of Research Energy Consumers Australia, opened discussions with a brief update on current issues and ECA's priorities around affordable, individualised and optimised energy services

A diverse panel then had an illuminating discussion on the theme *Putting the consumer first – rethinking energy opportunities and issues*.

- Dr Phillipa Watson, University of Tasmania
The value of putting consumers at the centre of energy research – How and why capturing the lived experience is as important as technical success
- Robert Mallet, Tasmanian Small Business Council (TSBC)
What are the challenges in engaging in energy advocacy? – How do you become an effective energy advocate, evidence base, building support.
- Grant Russell, Aurora Energy
What did Aurora learn about customers from its PAYG research?
- Rosalind Herbert, Council of the Ageing Tasmania (COTA Tasmania)
What are the issues facing COTA members in Tasmania? – How are their needs different to other customers?
- Thuy Linh Nguyen, Sydney Alliance
A new model of engaging customers in energy decisions.

The key theme that emerged from the discussion was the need to meet consumers where they are, understanding and respecting their circumstances and needs and tailoring energy services accordingly. Listening to consumers and developing trust with them – whether that is in relation to support, services or issues around a changing energy system – was agreed to be key.

Rosalind Herbert explained what its 'active ageing' strategy meant for energy services – the role energy plays in not only the safety and comfort of people in the home, but also in allowing them to fully participate in the community. In making the link between active ageing and energy, COTA Tasmania talked about the need to overcome ageism and incorrect and damaging assumptions about the capability of older people to take charge of their energy provided they were given the right tools, information and support.

Robert Mallet talked about big issues for Tasmania's 37,000 small businesses, as well as general business conditions in the state. While price remains an ongoing issue in terms of competitiveness, TSBC also discussed the specific challenges different businesses faced balancing energy and other costs – an example being the challenge of balancing energy and water costs in irrigation schemes where the water isn't available at the time of the day when the electricity is cheapest. How the state's plans to grow energy generation and increase the physical links to the National Electricity Market can benefit local businesses was also raised as a key issue.

Grant Russell reflected on the feedback it was getting from its customers that had moved onto the new 'PAYG +' arrangement, who have been very clear that its much more important to them to know about how much they're paying and how many days' worth of credit they have than the traditional 'cents per kilowatt hour' metrics. What this said about the need for retailers to leverage real-time data and other developments to radically adapt their services and give people the confidence and control they need was a key discussion point.

Phillipa Watson reflected on what projects like Get Bill Smart and the Bruny Island Battery Trial (CONSORT) were teaching us about how new services, support and technology can work for people in different circumstances, with different values and with different needs.

Thuy Linh Nguyen reflected on the way the Sydney Alliance was working with community leaders on their own behalf about core issues around energy services and about big picture policy and regulatory issues affecting them. The extent to which the Sydney Alliance's work relied on long-term and trusted relationships was emphasised – meeting people in their communities on their terms.

There was also a strong focus on the future in the Q&A with the audience, with strong interest in how the sector was thinking about electric vehicles at a local and state level, and how to bring consumers and the community into the planning process.

Board Meeting, 12 September 2019

The Board commenced the meeting by reflecting on the key themes that emerged at the [Stakeholder Forum](#), noting:

- Recognition by participants of the benefits of involving consumers in partnership
- Local experience was showing that empowering consumers was good for business.
- Momentum is building around providing new consumer choices to meet diverse preferences and needs.
- People are looking to the future and not just thinking about now, an example in Tasmania is the potential for a largescale rollout of electric vehicles.

The Board also considered a number of governance matters including the 2018/19 Annual Report, the 2019 Audit and Financial Statements, 2020/21 Business Plan and Budget, the Advocacy & Communications Strategy and the Power Shift program outcomes, impact and future work.