

# Board Communique: October 2018

## The Energy Consumers Australia Board met in Hobart on 10 & 11 October 2018

### Board Stakeholder Forum

The discussions at the Forum focused on the unique energy affordability challenges households and small businesses in Tasmania are facing, and the new engagement approaches the local electricity distribution business is trialing to empower consumers and reduce the cost of the network.

The Forum was attended by consumer advocates representing households and small businesses, as well as officials from the Tasmanian Government and energy service providers.

Kim Goodes, the CEO of the Tasmanian Council of Social Services (TASCROSS) provided an overview of the energy affordability situation in Tasmania, placing it in the context of the significant income and housing quality challenges in the state. Ms Goodes explained how the long-term, entrenched nature of disadvantage in Tasmania left many people – 36 per cent of consumers in Tasmania receive an energy concession – vulnerable to even small changes in the price of energy. The Board heard from Ms Goodes and from other Forum participants about the need to better target concessions and develop comprehensive responses to housing affordability and quality issues.

Kirsten Wilding from Tasnetworks outlined a trial the company is running with residents of the Bridgewater, Brighton and surrounding areas to better understand their needs and test new ways to help them manage their energy use. Linn Purdon, a local resident participating in the trial, spoke to her positive experience, leaving Forum participants with a very clear sense of what is possible when an energy service provider is sensitive to individual needs and provides the right information and tools to help people manage their use.

### Board Reference Committee

The Reference Committee met for the fourth time in 2018, discussing major developments in the energy sector, focusing on energy prices which remains the number one issue for the households and small businesses they represent. The Committee emphasised the importance of a fast, effective and coordinated response to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Retail Electricity Pricing Inquiry package of recommendations.

The Reference Committee also considered the development of the Energy Charter for energy providers, noting the need for strong and independent governance and accountability structures and processes to drive real cultural change and rebuild community trust and confidence in the sector.

### Board Meeting, 11 October 2018

The Board commenced the meeting by reflecting on the feedback and insights from the Stakeholder Forum and Reference Committee, noting:

- The unique energy affordability challenges in Tasmania, and the need for national responses to be tailored to local needs.
- The strong reminder that energy affordability cannot be addressed without improving the energy performance of Australian homes.
- The importance of the consumer voice and genuine engagement in setting network business strategy and driving cultural change across the sector.
- How independent and robust accountability and governance arrangements are essential for the success of the Energy Charter given the low level of trust in the energy sector.

## Grants

The Board was pleased to consider another strong round of grant applications. In total, 16 applications were received with requests for funding of almost \$2.4 million, compared to a total annual budget of \$2.2 million. The Board approved eight grants in the October 2018 meeting.

The Board was particularly pleased to approve further funding for the National Consumer Roundtable on Energy. In its fourteen-year history, the Roundtable has supported a range of residential consumer advocates to strengthen their voice on behalf of consumers. The new three-year grant will give the Roundtable more certainty in its future activities and enable a strategic work program over the longer-term.

The Board also reviewed the outputs of a number of previously approved grant programs and noted the strong achievements of a number of advocates and researchers with the support of the grants program. In particular, the Board was very pleased by the benefits delivered to consumers from grants to the Tasmanian Council of Social Service (*Energy Consumer Advocacy Project*) and Sydney Alliance (*Voices for Power*).

The Board wishes to thank all applicants for the effort in preparing their applications in a highly competitive grants program.

### Grants approved:

- South Australian Council of Social Service –*National Consumer Roundtable on Energy – organisation of meetings* (\$419,214)
- Tasmanian Council of Social Service –*Energy Consumer Advocacy Project* (\$109,506)
- Uniting Communities – *Resourcing for optimal consumer engagement with energy network businesses* (\$65,140)
- St Vincent de Paul Society –*Mapping Electricity Disconnections II* (\$82,400)
- ACT Council of Social Service –*Energised Consumers: Supporting ACT Low-Income Domestic, Non-government organisations and Small Business Consumers to participate fully in consultations* (\$60,996)
- Total Environment Centre – *The role of distributed energy resources (DER) in the equitable decarbonisation of the NEM* (\$125,933)
- Australian Council of Social Service – *Equitable, Affordable, Inclusive Energy Transition Advocacy Project* (\$184,000)
- Ethnic Communities Council NSW –*Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of CALD engagement strategies* (\$32,490)

### Next meeting

The next Board meeting and AGM will be held on 8 November 2018 in Adelaide.