

Board Communique: September 2021

The Energy Consumers Australia Board met via video conference on 16 September 2021.

Strategic Plan

The Board received a briefing about the successful launch of ECA's Strategic Plan 2021-24 and was pleased to note the widespread positive reaction to the Strategy, the story it tells and the priorities and activities it sets out. The Strategy has been greeted enthusiastically by the consumer advocacy and research communities and the response from other system stakeholders, including senior market body officials, has been extremely encouraging.

Board members stressed the value of having a clear and accessible document that unites ECA's Board and staff behind a shared vision, mission and purpose and explains these things clearly for the organisation's many stakeholders. The fact that the strategy is resonating more broadly reflects the rigorous process of its creation and suggests a strong foundation for the next three years of evidence-backed advocacy on behalf of household and small business consumers.

The Board noted that it is important to be transparent in communicating ECA's objectives and intent because community understanding of the organisation's complex role is still developing. As an organisation, ECA exists to be a voice for consumers. This does not mean that it should be expected to publicly advocate for every position held by a cohort of consumers, nor that it will never advocate for a position that some consumers find problematic. Instead, ECA owes a duty to stay closely engaged with consumers and constantly cognisant of their values, needs and expectations. It must then carry that positioning, and the evidence base that supports it, into the processes and forums where the energy system is shaped and formed.

Mapping the Transition

In 2021, ECA's advocacy has necessarily involved deep work in and around the energy transition and the rule and policy framing that will help shape what the future energy system looks like. This has taken place in the context of the Energy Security Board (ESB) Post 2025 Options Paper, which the ECA board was pleased to see made public by Energy Ministers this month. In this context, the Board welcomed the recent appointment of ECA's first Director, Energy System Transition as part of the restructuring of the organisation's Directorates and Executive Management Team.

Board members received an update on the successful launch of the *Australia's Energy Transition* report, which seeks to give a system-level overview of energy policies across Australia's jurisdictions. This report is a positive contribution to mitigating a risk that the Board has been closely tracking – that the potential benefits of a national approach to energy

challenges could be fragmented by the proliferation of jurisdictional responses and interventions. The report has been well received and shows signs of being a valued resource for those who seek to create, influence and understand energy policy across Australia.

A wider focus

While this work on influencing energy system transition is important and continuing, it is also worth foregrounding other areas of activity that the Board wishes to stress are critical. The past two years have been a difficult period for small business energy consumers – an important part of ECA'S constituency. The Board was pleased to hear ECA staff are redoubling their efforts to advocate on behalf of SME consumers and notes with concern that recent figures from the Australian Energy Regulator show debts and disconnections are again on the rise.

Another critical area of activity and influence relates to energy inclusion. The Strategic Plan, and accompanying changes to ECA's organisation structure, have created an opportunity to rethink ECA's approach to energy inclusion, moving beyond a focus on economic hardship to a broader notion of inclusion incorporating cultural and linguistic identity, housing status, technological competency and more. The Board noted that Energy Inclusion is now a standalone Directorate within ECA's organisational structure and was pleased to hear about continuing and planned advocacy initiatives in this space.

Both of these areas – small business outreach and energy inclusion – are well represented in ECA's Grants Program, which will soon relaunch with a new structure, designed to support applicants via a more streamlined and transparent application process and to deliver more impactful projects. The Board underlined that it would like to see more Grants awarded in these areas and encouraged eligible applicants to come forward with innovative and impactful project proposals.