

# Community sector shares insights at third roundtable

**21 May 2020**

*Electricity and gas*

*Thursday 21 May, 3-4:30pm (via Zoom)*

Essential Services Commission chairperson Kate Symons hosted a third community roundtable with 52 participants from community sector organisations and government. Participants shared insights into how coronavirus is impacting on the Victorian community and what trends are emerging.

Representatives from the sector heard from the Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio, Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change and Minister for Solar Homes. There were also presentations from Consumer Policy Research Centre chief executive Lauren Solomon and Terry Williamson, an energy mentor trained by Community Information Services Victoria.

Senior regulatory manager at the commission Aaron Yuen gave an update on the commission's data collection work over the last three weeks, while commissioner Sitesh Bhojani guided a discussion on providing information to support enforcement investigations.

Key learnings from the roundtable:

- Fewer Victorians are seeking assistance from community services since the pandemic commenced, but this is likely to change when coronavirus support measures end.
- Community organisations are finding new ways to inform people experiencing vulnerability about available assistance, particularly people with low digital literacy and language barriers.

- Organisations are concerned about medium to long term impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, observing some Victorians are seeking support following accessing the superannuation.

# **Transcript**

## **Acknowledgement of country**

To start, I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners on all of the lands we're meeting on today and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

I would like to acknowledge the connection that Indigenous Australians hold to country and culture.

## **Welcome**

As with our last two community sector roundtables, today is an opportunity for you to share your insights and experiences into what is happening for residential and business consumers during this time of ongoing uncertainty. I think that as restrictions begin to wind back, we might see the circumstances of consumers shift considerably, so it's essential that we continue to hear from you so we can stay abreast of what's happening on the ground.

## **Attendees**

### **Community legal services**

Chris Povey, CEO of Justice Connect and

Stephanie Tonkin, Head of Community Programs at Justice Connect

Tania Clarke, Manager Policy and Campaigns, Women's Legal Services Victoria

Tess Mathews, WestJustice

Laura Burke, Senior Legal Policy Adviser, Federation of Community Legal Centres

## **Community and consumer organisations**

Cynthia Gebert, Janine Rayner and Zac Gillam from EWOV

Lauren Solomon and Emma O'Neill from Consumer Policy Research Centre

Gavin Dufty, St Vincent de Paul

Ciara Sterling and Gabby Sundstrom from Thriving Communities Partnership

Sandy Ross and Lyn Dundon from Financial Counselling Victoria

Carolyn Bond from the Economic Abuse Reference Group

Jill Wilson from Community Information and Support Victoria

Gerard Brody and Jake Lilley from Consumer Action Law Centre

## **Representing small business**

Dominic Schipano, Board member of the Council of Small Business Organisations of Australia.

Hugh Horsfall from the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry

## **Observers**

Rachel Thomas from the Australian Energy Regulator

Nathan Crombie, Rod Curtis, Maurice Hanratty and Emma Whalan from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning

Alicia Kalus, Mel Mangolini and Sophia O'Callaghan from the Department of Treasury and Finance

Gordon Caris from the Department of Health and Human Services

## **Commissioners and commission staff**

Commissioners: Sitesh Bhojani - Simon Corden - Rebecca Billings

CEO, John Hamill

Director of Energy – Sarah McDowell

Director of Price, Monitoring and Regulation – Marcus Crudden

## **Remarks from Minister D'Ambrosio**

- Minister D'Ambrosio spoke to the roundtable about the Victorian Government's work to support the community sector help Victorians experiencing hardship can get immediate support to manage electricity and gas bills.
- The Minister also spoke about existing protections for Victorian energy consumers, and the importance of monitoring the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on consumers and the market.

## **Commission update**

A brief update on the commission's work in the past few weeks.

- On Thursday 7 May we hosted a webinar on family violence during the coronavirus, and were joined by speakers Alison Macdonald, the Acting CEO of Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic) and Julie Kun, the CEO of Women's Information and Referral Exchange Inc (WIRE). The purpose of this webinar was to share insights from family violence experts on how the coronavirus pandemic has created new challenges for family violence victim survivors and provide an opportunity for utility service providers and community support services to seek advice.
- We have recently completed the latest phase of the It's Your Energy consumer rights campaign. This phase focused on promoting payment difficulty options, and perhaps due to the current environment received an incredibly high level of reach and engagement across all channels. The third phase of the campaign which focuses on the Victorian Default Offer is currently underway, along with planning for activities in 2020-21 that will return to the topic of payment difficulty for newly affected Victorians.

- Can I take a moment to thank you again for your time and reflections during these roundtables that helps us to further understand issues, which may not always require regulatory intervention but allows us to engage with the sector and bring attention to pressing issues that can lead to better outcomes for consumers. An example is our data collection exercise with the energy sector – where we have started to receive data that allows us to be cautiously optimistic that the sector has responded positively to concerns regarding disconnections at this time.

## **Community sector updates**

Representatives from 14 community sector organisations gave updates on what they have been seeing in work with consumers and small businesses and the impact on Victoria's community.

Some issues raised by community sector:

- Demand for services from people who are new to navigating legal or financial counselling sectors.
- There is a need for information for people who have issues with literacy and technology.
- Mental health – stress experienced by people maintaining a business.
- Future energy bills are the main source of anxiety for culturally and linguistically diverse families.

## **Remarks from Consumer Policy Research Centre CEO Lauren Solomon**

Lauren Solomon spoke about a national survey on the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on consumers. The survey will consider:

- To what extent consumers businesses are proactively offering support or demonstrating poor practice.
- What behaviours consumers are doing to manage bills – borrowing money, dipping into savings, early access to super.
- What might happen when supports are withdrawn and what's happening now in anticipation.

# Remarks from Community Information Services Victoria's Energy Mentor, Terry Williamson

Terry Williamson spoke about:

- Being a volunteer community support worker in Heidelberg West
- Energy training was valuable for capability building and providing a systemic approach for dealing with clients facing financial hardship

## Closing

Can I take the opportunity to thank everyone for making the time today, and for your valued contribution and insights into the effect of the pandemic on Victoria's community. Once again, this has been a valued exercise to more fully understand the experiences of consumers at this time.

Stay well and take care.

## For general enquiries

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