
Once restrictions lift, challenges will still remain: community sector roundtable

22 October 2020

Corporate

Victoria's community support and consumer advocacy groups are concerned that inconsistent outcomes and ongoing challenges will remain once restrictions have lifted.

Essential Services Commission chairperson Kate Symons hosted the sixth community sector roundtable with 38 participants from 15 of Victoria's community sector and government organisations.

Key issues raised included:

- Inconsistent outcomes for consumers are an ongoing issue - particularly in relation to payment difficulty support, affordable payment options and authorisation.
- There are still some challenges around the utility relief grant scheme and opportunities exist to collaborate and streamline the system.
- Concerns continue about the digital divide, especially household access and ability to use technology.
- There has been an increase in people accessing food assistance, an indicator that as government support measures drop off, people may find themselves in increasingly difficult financial circumstances.
- Once the restrictions lift, there will be a clearer picture of the ongoing impacts for households and small businesses (and some impacts will only become apparent as things open up).

Chairperson Symon's introductory notes

Please note, this is a summary – not a full transcript.

Good afternoon everyone and welcome to today's community sector roundtable. I am Kate Symons, the chairperson of the Essential Services Commission.

Acknowledgement of country?

To start, I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners on all 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.

Summary of last roundtable

At our last meeting on 3 September we heard from you that:

- consumers are experiencing challenges in trying to access concessions
- financial counsellors are experiencing challenges when acting on behalf of their clients
- the reduction in JobSeeker and JobKeeper continues to be a concern
- there are ongoing concerns about those who are not eligible for government assistance
- and young people, in particular, appear to be at higher risk of accumulating debt due to job and income loss related to the economic impact of the pandemic.

For example, the exclusion of international students, people on temporary or bridging visas and people seeking asylum has been highlighted from the beginning as an issue of concern.

We have also heard concerns about issues with matching concession details with account holder information, concessions not being applied properly or ending unexpectedly, and eligible concession holders not receiving entitlements.

We know from our own campaigns that young people are less likely to seek help. They have also been hardest hit by job losses since the pandemic began, and they have less savings to fall back on.

As we start to look forward to coming out of this extended period of lockdown we are keen to understand from your perspectives what the road ahead looks like.

Welcome attendees and commission staff

I would like to introduce my fellow commissioners, senior leaders and commission staff members who are here today and who, like me, are keen to hear from you:

- my fellow commissioners Simon Corden and Rebecca Billings
- CEO – John Hamill
- executive director of energy – Sarah McDowell
- executive director of price monitoring and regulation – Marcus Crudden
- director of Victorian Energy Upgrades – Jeff Cefai
- customer engagement project manager – Lucy Weston
- project leads on consumer vulnerability – Jess Gregory and Kat George.

Attendees

I'd also like to welcome our attendees for today:

Community and consumer organisations

- Emma O'Neill and Karl Barratt – Consumer Policy Research Centre
- David Bryant and Emma de Campo – Brotherhood of Saint Laurence
- Jarrod Lenne – Victorian Council of Social Service
- Ciara Sterling – Thriving Communities Partnership
- Gerard Brody, Patrick Sloyan and Luke Lovell – Consumer Action Law Centre
- Lyn Dundon and Sandy Ross – Financial Counselling Victoria
- Cynthia Gebert and Janine Rayner – Energy and Water Ombudsman Victoria
- Dominic Shipano – Council of Small Business Organisations Australia
- Katie Ho – Justice Connect

Observers

- Australian Energy Regulator
- Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
- Department of Treasury and Finance
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Australian Energy Regulator

Sector update

- Representatives from community service organisations then provided short updates on what they're seeing in their work with consumers and small businesses and the impact on Victoria's community.

Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning presentation from Ting Yuan and delivery partners

Ting Yuan provided an update on the Victorian Government's \$3.7 million energy assistance package announced earlier this year by Minister D'Ambrosio.

The package included funding for an energy brokerage program, new financial counsellors and online training for more than 1,100 frontline community workers - being delivered by the Consumer Policy Research Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence and Financial Counselling Victoria.

Energy assistance package update

The department is working with its delivery partners to understand the impact coronavirus has had on people's ability to pay their energy bills, and provide information and support for consumers:

- [Consumer Policy Research Centre](#) – provide webinars to help clients with paying their bills

- [Brotherhood of St Laurence](#) – provide a free, independent, over the phone program until end of August 2021
- [Financial Counselling Victoria](#) and [Consumer Action Law Centre](#) – provide capability building for financial counsellors and policy advocacy.

Remarks from Justice Connect senior project lawyer Katie Ho

Katie Ho from Justice Connect presented on the [Dear Landlord digital tool](#), an app to help the emerging cohort of renters facing financial hardship and insecurity.

Commission update

As you know, we have been collecting data and holding forums with the water and energy sectors to stay in touch with what is happening on the ground.

In water, the data shows an ongoing, relatively steady increase in customers accessing the hardship programs of the water businesses.

There are around 2,000 more customers on water hardship programs now, than at the end of April.

There has been a big increase in applications for utility relief grants with weekly applications anywhere between five- and eight-times pre-pandemic.

A couple of weeks ago, we held a forum with the managing directors of the state's water businesses.

What we heard was that the pandemic is being felt differently across the state – with areas that rely on hospitality and tourism being more affected than others - rural areas by contrast are doing relatively well.

In energy, we have seen an increase in customers receiving assistance who can pay for ongoing usage, but fewer customers receiving assistance who can't pay their on-going usage.

Our most recent September data shows fewer customers are contacting their retailer for assistance, which peaked in May.

As restrictions ease, we're focused on helping ensure customers get the assistance they are entitled to.

We are releasing new guidance for retailers on ways to effectively engage with customers with a focus on ensuring customers get the support they are entitled to under the payment difficulty framework.

There have been no disconnections since April, but we are monitoring this as restrictions ease and people and businesses come back to life.

Closing remarks

Thank you to everyone here today – can I just say a big thank you for again making the time to be a part of our sixth community sector roundtable.

Stay well and take care.

For general enquiries

Phone: [\(+61 3\) 9032 1300](tel:+61390321300) or [1300 664 969](tel:1300664969)

Email: reception@esc.vic.gov.au

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For VEU enquiries

Phone: [\(+61 3\) 9032 1310](tel:+61390321310) or submit a [contact form](#).

For media enquiries

If you have a media enquiry, please contact:

Email: media@esc.vic.gov.au

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