SECNewgate Australia

Stakeholder Reputation Research

Prepared for the Essential Services Commission | February 2026

The Victorian Essential Services Commission (the 'commission') has partnered with SEC Newgate since 2023 to conduct research to better understand its reputation among key stakeholders.

Research objectives included understanding:

Overall reputation including strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement

Performance on a set of 16 attributes that were developed in consultation with the commission

The **importance of specific factors in driving the commission's reputation**

Effectiveness of the commission's compliance and enforcement actions and how the commission **compares to others**

How attitudes and experiences differ amongst the commission's different sectors

Views about the commission's **new strategic plan**

Methodology

A total of 171 responses
- 30 in-depth interviews
- 141 online surveys
- 901 stakeholders invited to participate

19% response rate vs. 21% in 2024.

A link to the full methodology disclosure statement can be found **here**

Sample profile

	Total (n=)	Weighting
Energy	33	22.5%
Water	22	17.5%
Community & Consumer	19	15%
Government, Regulator, Agency	18	15%
Victorian Energy Upgrades	33	15%
Transport	8	5%
Local Government	38	10%
	171	**100%**

Key findings

Executive summary (1/2)

This report details the results from the 2025 Essential Services Commission (the commission) stakeholder reputation research among key stakeholders from across its various sectors. This year's research involved n=30 in-depth interviews and a 10-minute online survey with n=141 stakeholders.

The commission's reputation has continued to improve year on year

The commission's Reputation Score (the proportion who gave it a rating of 7 or more out of 10) has increased to 77%, up from 69% in 2024 and 63% in 2023. The commission has retained its strong standing amongst its Water and Community & Consumer stakeholders, and overall improvement been driven by Government, Regulator, Agency and Local Government.

The commission's strong reputation is further reflected in positive results achieved in other key indicators of reputation. For example, three quarters (75%) of stakeholders trust that the commission will do the right thing by Victorian consumers - largely due to its commitment to consumer protection, transparency in decision-making and willingness to engage.

Almost 9 in 10 (88%) also felt its reputation has either improved or stayed the same and around half (47%) think it is a leader among its peers, citing similar reasons regarding its proactive and collaborative engagement, and its renewed focus on enforcement activities.

Satisfaction continues to climb and is now at an historical high

Satisfaction with how the commission performs its function as a regulator has also continued to grow, with 72% of stakeholders reporting to be either 'somewhat' or 'very satisfied' this year.

Most segments reported higher levels of satisfaction, with the strongest increases among Local Government (from 44% last year to 73% this year), Government, Regulator, Agency (64% to 91%) and Energy (42% to 63%). Meanwhile, two sectors were less satisfied this year - Community & Consumer Groups (70% down from 90%) and VEU (56% down from 68%).

Top of mind strengths lie in its engagement and progressive thought leadership

The commission's performance against many of its key reputational metrics has risen; for example, 80% of stakeholders rated each of these metrics 7+ out of 10: the quality of its working relationships (up from 71% last year), protecting end consumers (up from 67%) and the quality of its people (up from 68%). These quantitative improvements reflect the unprompted qualitative strengths identified by stakeholders, including:

- **Improved quality of engagement:** Stakeholders observed the commission being more responsive and easier to engage with, facilitating one-on-one interactions with commissioners, and seeking feedback and collaboration.
- **Progressive thought leadership with consumers at the heart of decision-making:** The commission was seen to genuinely consider the community in all of its decision-making, particularly those experiencing vulnerability.
- **A predictable, reliable organisation:** The commission was generally seen to be delivering on promises and predictable in the way it operates and focuses on consumers.
- **Professional and highly respected staff:** Dealings with staff are generally regarded as positive and described as professional and courteous.
- **A trusted partner on regulatory matters:** Stakeholders appreciate its expertise and involvement; e.g. in discussing how policies can work in practice, and its regulatory model was also seen to be predictable and effective when applying for rate changes.

Executive summary (2/2)

This report details the results from the 2025 Essential Services Commission (the commission) stakeholder reputation research among key stakeholders from across its various sectors. This year's research involved n=30 in-depth interviews and a 10-minute online survey with n=141 stakeholders.

Criticisms are generally on its narrow focus and emphasis on enforcement

While stakeholders were generally positive about their dealings with the commission, there were four main themes identified as areas of dissatisfaction:

1. **A perception that the balance has tipped too far in favour of consumers,** with the commission not seen to be genuinely or adequately considering the views of industry stakeholders, and not fully appreciating the challenging operating environments they are in, nor the longer-term impacts of its decision-making.
2. **Penalties and enforcement,** specifically the focus on administrative compliance, its tone in publicly communicating breaches, and the size of its penalties were not felt to be commensurate with the level of harm experienced and may be contributing to an erosion of trust in their respective sectors. Further, some water businesses felt its use of robocalling was an unfair way of reporting on their performance due to its flawed methodology.
3. **Enforcement capabilities,** some felt the commission still needs to develop its enforcement and regulatory capabilities, and that it could be doing more in setting clearer expectations to avoid penalising businesses.
4. **Taking a punitive approach** rather than being constructive and collaborative. Some segments would like to see a more genuine willingness to work together to enhance outcomes for all parties rather than assume ill-intent from industry.

Perceptions of the commission differ depending on the stakeholder sector

Stakeholders regulated by the commission, for example VEU, Transport and Energy, were generally more critical of the commission than its other stakeholder segments. For example, 91% of Government, Regulator, Agency were satisfied with how the commission performs its functions as a regulator, compared to just 56% of VEU and 63% of Energy stakeholders.

While Government and Community commended its progressive policies, increased focus on compliance and keeping industry to account, many regulated stakeholders felt the commission was overly prescriptive and burdensome in its regulation, and took a punitive, rather than consultative, approach to compliance.

Final advice and priorities over the next 12 months

The biggest priority identified by stakeholders is for the commission to better balance consumer protection with the realities faced by businesses, through avoiding excessive compliance costs and considering the impact of regulation on longer-term business viability.

Stakeholders are also looking for more transparent, proactive, and collaborative engagement across all sectors, with demonstration of how different perspectives are considered in its decision-making.

Finally, industry stakeholders want to see more consideration of ways compliance can be simplified, along with reduced duplication, more harmonisation of regulatory frameworks across the nation where relevant and making regulatory processes more efficient and less burdensome for businesses.

Performance dashboard

Reputation Score

The proportion who gave a rating of 7 or more out of 10 on the commission's reputation (0 = very poor, to 10 = excellent), based on personal interactions and what they've seen, read or heard about the commission.

Net Satisfaction

The proportion who are somewhat or very satisfied with how the commission performs its functions as a regulator. (NB: in 2023/2024 'somewhat satisfied' was labelled as 'satisfied')

Trust Score

Trust is an outcome of reputation, measured as how much stakeholders trust the commission to do the right thing by Victorian consumers, where 0 = 'don't trust it at all' and 10 = 'trust it completely'. The Trust Score is the proportion who gave a rating of 7 or more.

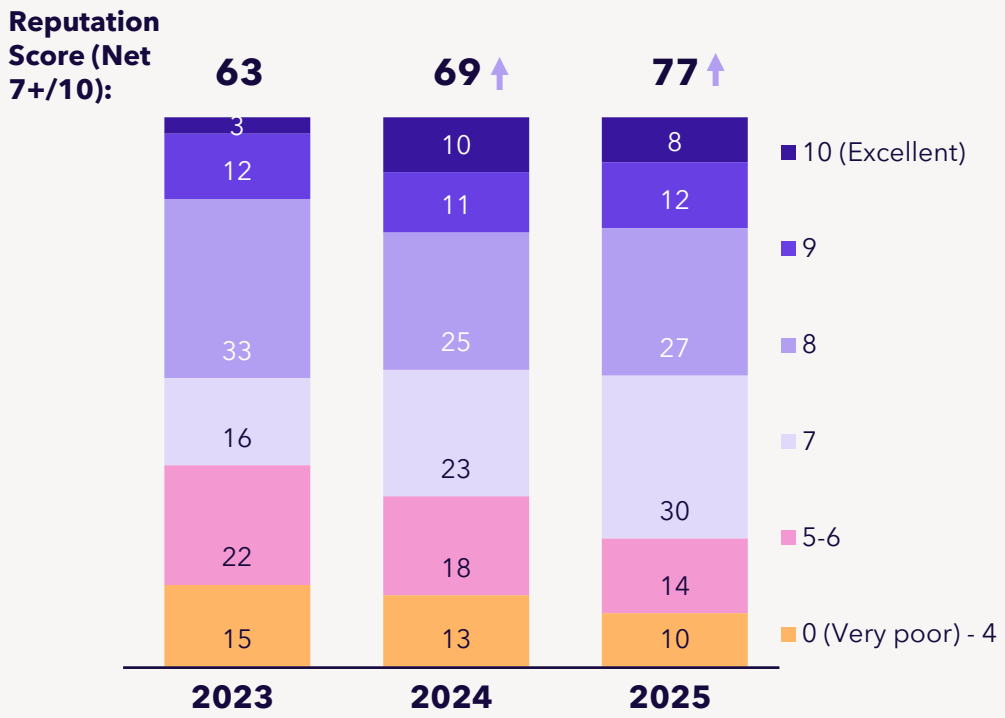
Base: All participants 2025 (n=171), 2024 (n=162) and 2023 (n=222)

= *Notable difference of at least +/-5% for percentages or +/-0.5 for averages. Please note, notable differences only shown at a sector level for averages throughout*

Overall reputation

The commission's reputation continues to strengthen, achieving a Reputation Score of 77%, up from 69% in 2024 and 63% in 2023. Ratings notably improved this year among the Government, Regulator, Agency; Water and Local Government sectors.

Overall reputation rating and score – Total (%)



Average reputation ratings by sector	2023	2024	2025
Total	**6.7**	**6.9**	**7.2**
Regulated businesses	**6.2**	**6.6**	**6.9**
Non-regulated businesses	**7.8**	**7.6**	**7.9**
Energy	5.8	6.7	6.5
Community & Consumer Groups	7.9	8.6	8.2
Government, Regulator, Agency	7.6	6.6	7.6 ↑
Water	6.9	6.8	7.3 ↑
Victorian Energy Upgrades (VEU)	5.1	6.7	6.6
Local Government	6.9	6.9	7.7 ↑
Transport *	6.7	6.0	6.2

** Very small base size, interpret with caution*

↑↓ *= Notable difference of at least +/-5% for percentages or +/-0.5 for averages. Please note, notable differences only shown at a sector level for averages throughout*

Q1. How would you rate the overall reputation of the Essential Services Commission on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you think it has a very poor reputation and 10 means an excellent reputation? Please base this on experiences you've had with Essential Services Commission and anything else you've seen, heard or read about it. // Base: All participants 2025 (n=171), 2024 (n=162) and 2023 (n=222), Refer to sample profile page for sector sample sizes

Reputational strengths and positives (unprompted)

Key reasons for positive sentiment about the commission, in broadly descending order of mention

1

Improvements in quality of engagement and working relationships

2

Progressive thought leadership with consumers at the heart of its decision making

3

A predictable, reliable entity

4

Professional staff

5

A trusted partner on regulatory matters

Reputational weaknesses and concerns (unprompted)

Key reasons for negative sentiment about the commission, in broadly descending order of mention

1

Too much (short-sighted) focus on consumers over industry

2

Compliance and penalties eroding trust and increasing costs

3

Concerns with strength of enforcement and regulatory strength

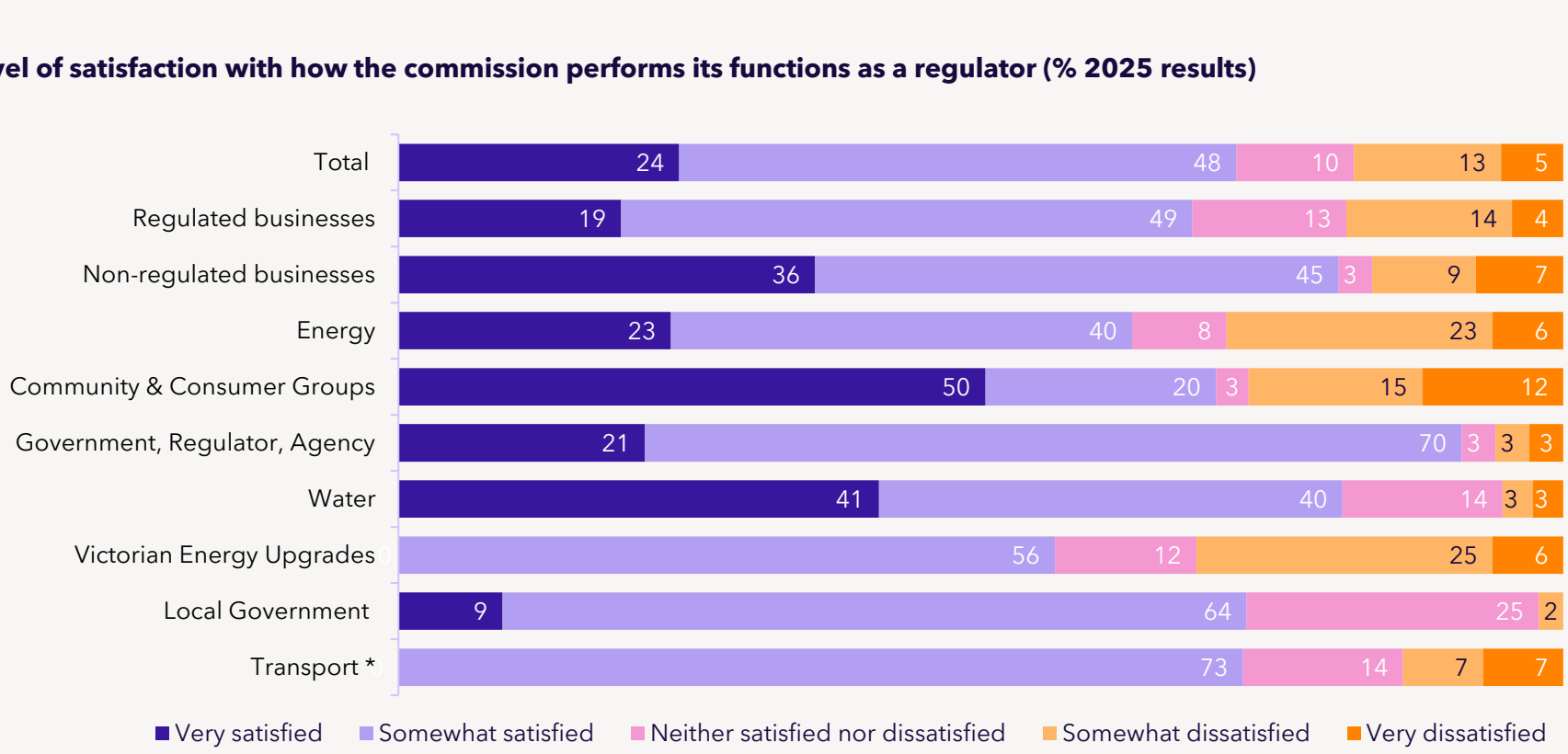
4

Collaboration & engagement – punitive approach, staff turnover, late consultations, bureaucratic

Satisfaction with the commission

Nearly three in four stakeholders were satisfied with how the commission performs its functions as a regulator (72% up from 62% in 2024 and 59% in 2023). Government, Regulator, Agency and Water stakeholders were most highly satisfied. Community & Consumer Groups stakeholders experienced marked declines in satisfaction this year (70% down from 90% in 2024 and 87% in 2023).

Level of satisfaction with how the commission performs its functions as a regulator (% 2025 results)



NET: Very satisfied + somewhat satisfied (%)

	2025
Total	72 ↑
Regulated businesses	68 ↑
Non-regulated businesses	81
Energy	63
Community & Consumer Groups	70
Government, Regulator, Agency	91
Water	81
Victorian Energy Upgrades	56
Local Government	73
Transport *	73*

** Very small base size, interpret with caution*

Q4. Satisfaction: Overall, how satisfied are you with how the Essential Services Commission performs its functions as a regulator? Are you: Very satisfied, Somewhat satisfied, Neither satisfied or dissatisfied, Somewhat dissatisfied or Very dissatisfied? Base: All participants 2025 (n=171), 2024 (n=162) and 2023 (n=222), Refer to sample profile page for sector sample sizes

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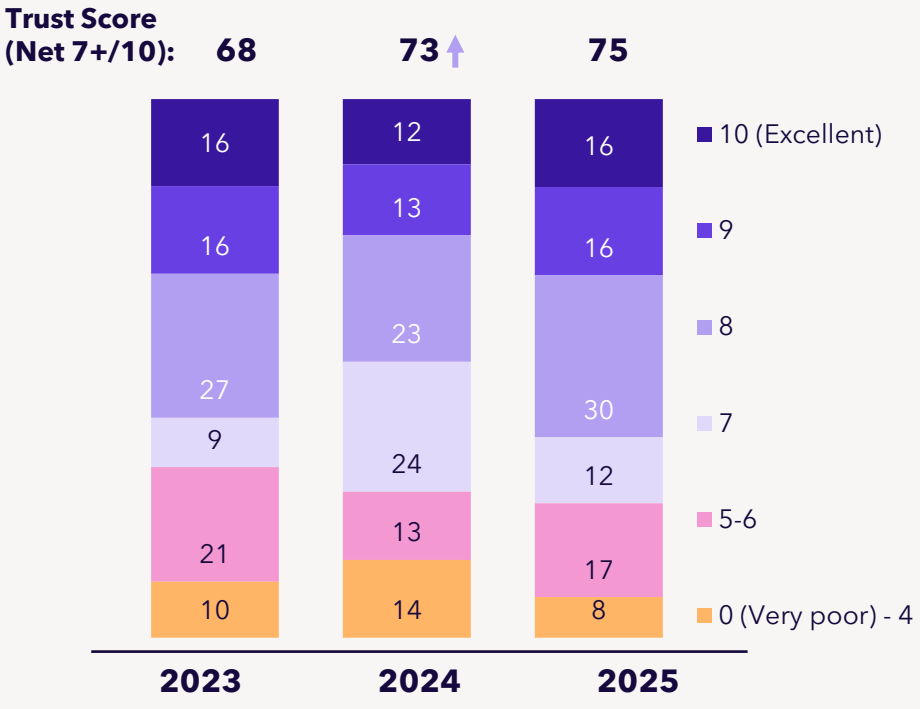
Trust to do the right thing by Victorian consumers

Trust in the commission remains high, with three in four (75%) trusting it to do the right thing by Victorian consumers. The highest trust levels were recorded for Community & Consumer Groups and Government, Regulator, Agency stakeholders, whereas Transport ad Energy sector stakeholders were notably less trusting.

Level of trust for the commission to do the right thing by Victorian consumers (%)



Average trust ratings by sector	2025
Total	**7.5**
Regulated businesses	**7.3**
Non-regulated businesses	**8.2** ↑
Energy	7.0
Community & Consumer Groups	8.2
Government, Regulator, Agency	8.2 ↑
Water	7.5
Victorian Energy Upgrades (VEU)	7.3
Local Government	7.8 ↑
Transport *	6.6 ↑

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Q5. Trust: My next question is about trust. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely', how much do you trust the Essential Services Commission to do the right thing by Victorian consumers? // // Base: All participants 2025 excl. DKs (n=168), 2024 (n=158) and 2023 (n=215), Refer to sample profile page for sector sample sizes

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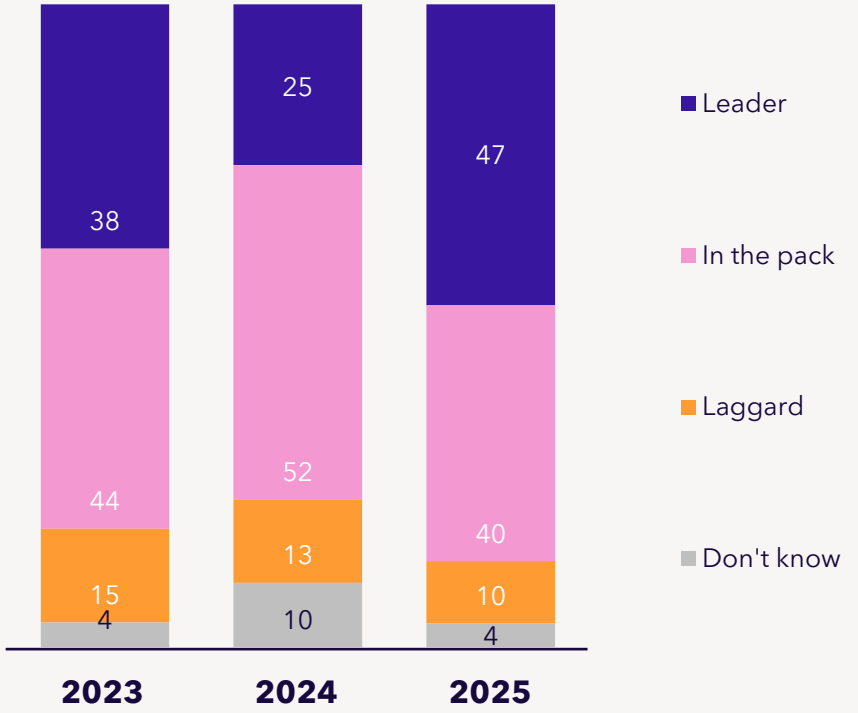
Performance compared to peers

At a total level, nearly half felt the commission was a leader compared to other regulators or government agencies; a substantial increase from last year. Those most likely to say it was leading or in the pack were in the Water sector, Community & Consumer Groups, and the Government, Regulator, Agency segment.

Performance vs other regulators or government agencies (%)



Performance	NET: Leader + In the pack % 2025
Total	**87**
Regulated businesses	**85**
Non-regulated businesses	**91**
Energy	84
Community & Consumer Groups	92
Government, Regulator, Agency	91
Water	95
Victorian Energy Upgrades (VEU)	82
Local Government	81
Transport *	61*

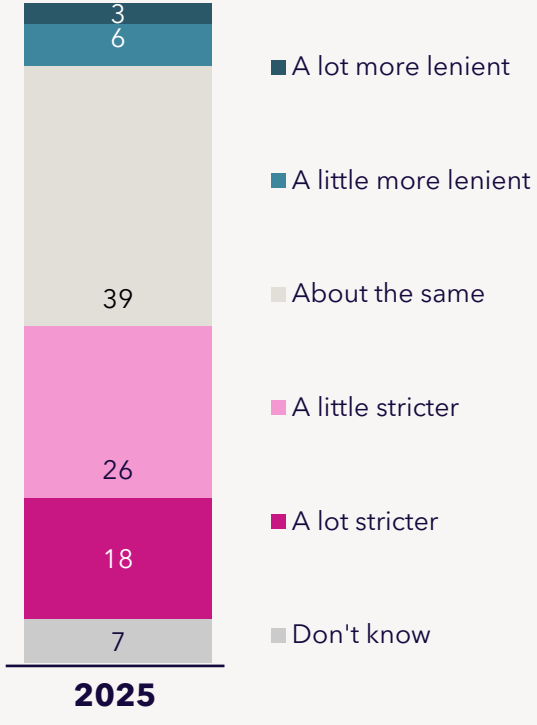
Q8. Benchmarking: Compared to other regulators or government agencies would you say the Essential Services Commission is a leader, laggard or in the pack? // Base: All participants 2025 (n=170., Refer to sample profile page for sector sample sizes

** Very small base size, interpret with caution*

Decision-making compared to other regulators

In a new question for 2025, the commission's decision-making was seen as either stricter or about the same as other regulators. All segments except Water felt the commission was more strict than lenient, particularly VEU, Government, Regulator and Agency and Energy stakeholders.

Decision-making vs other regulators or government agencies (% 2025 results)



Lenience by sector	More lenient	About the same	More strict
	NET %		
Total	**10**	**39**	**44**
Regulated businesses	8	45	42
Non-regulated businesses	15	22	52
Energy	4	36	61
Community & Consumer Groups	14	29	50
Government, Regulator, Agency	15	15	54
Water	29	47	24
Victorian Energy Upgrades (VEU)	4	29	57
Local Government	0	80	14
Transport *	0*	33*	33*

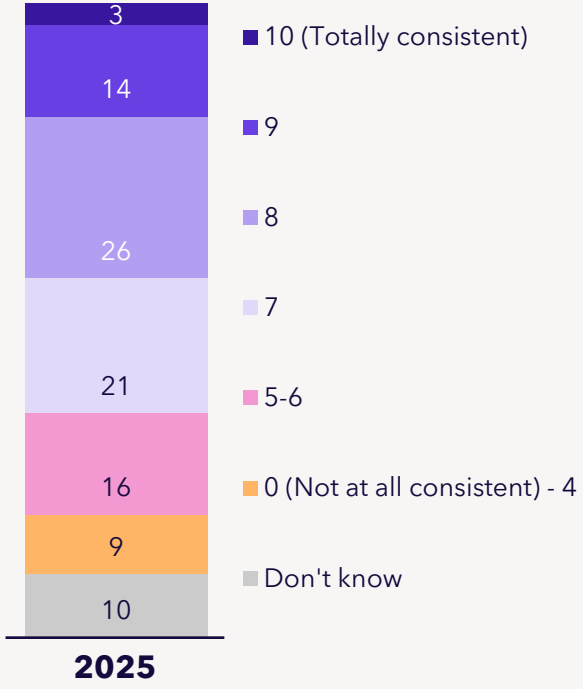
** Very small base size, interpret with caution*

Q17. Would you say the commission is more lenient or stricter compared to other regulators? Or are they similar? Which ones are they more lenient/tougher than? Base: All survey participants 2025 (n=141), Refer to sample profile page for sector sample sizes

Consistency and predictability with other regulators

In another new metric, around two in three felt the commission's regulatory decision-making is highly consistent and predictable compared with other regulators, and only around one in ten feel it is not consistent. VEU and Transport stakeholders were far less likely to feel the commission is consistent and predictable.

Consistency and predictability with other regulators (% 2025 results)



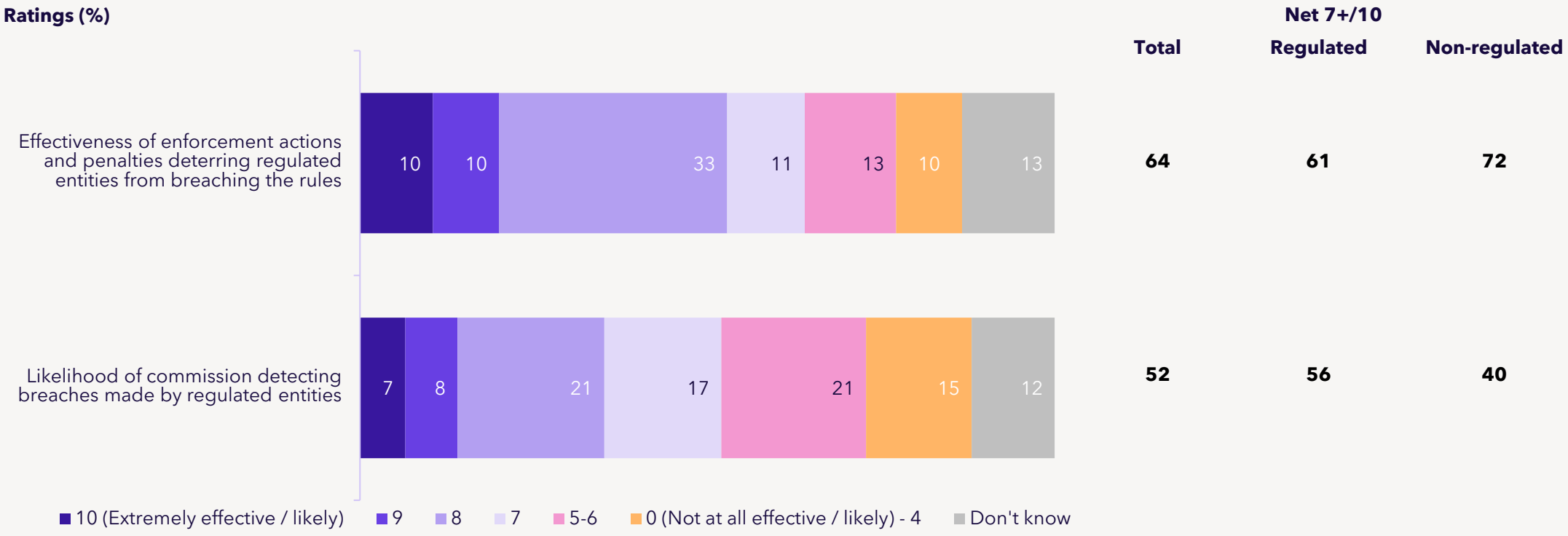
Consistency and predictability	Consistency score (NET % 7+/10)
Total	**65**
Regulated businesses	**62**
Non-regulated businesses	**71**
Energy	70
Community & Consumer Groups	73
Government, Regulator, Agency	69
Water	79
Victorian Energy Upgrades (VEU)	30
Local Government	64
Transport *	29*

** Very small base size, interpret with caution*

Q16. How would you rate the consistency and predictability of the Essential Services Commission's regulatory decision-making compared with the decision-making of other relevant regulators? Base: All participants 2025 (n=163), Refer to sample profile page for sector sample sizes

Compliance and enforcement

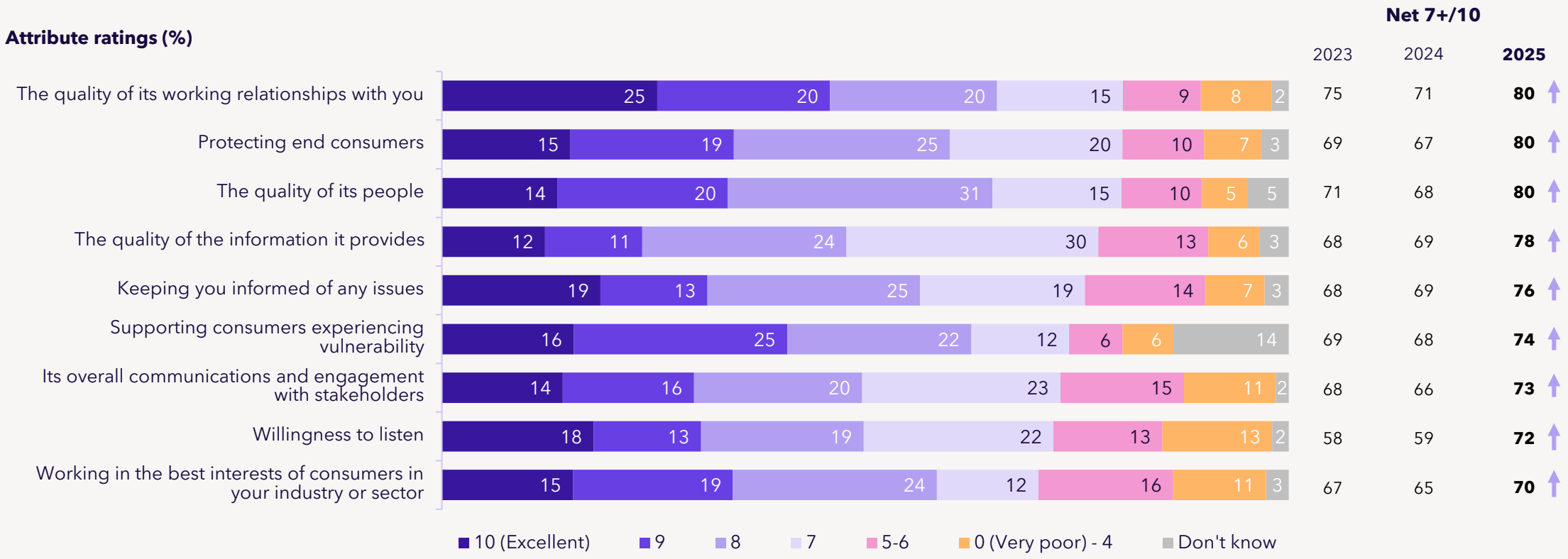
New KPI metrics were added this year to measure perceptions of the commission's enforcement actions and penalties – in which the majority see it as highly effective at deterring and identifying breaches, though just over half thought it was highly likely to detect breaches (52% rated the likelihood of this at 7+/10), largely due to the need for regulated entities to self report breaches.



Q20. How would you rate the effectiveness of the commission's enforcement actions and penalties in deterring regulated entities from breaching the rules? / Q22. How likely do you think it is that the commission will detect breaches made by regulated entities? Base: All participants 2025 (n=171)

Highest performing attributes

The commission performed best on the quality of its working relationships, protecting end consumers, and the quality of its people. Of note is that results for all attributes have improved over the last two years.



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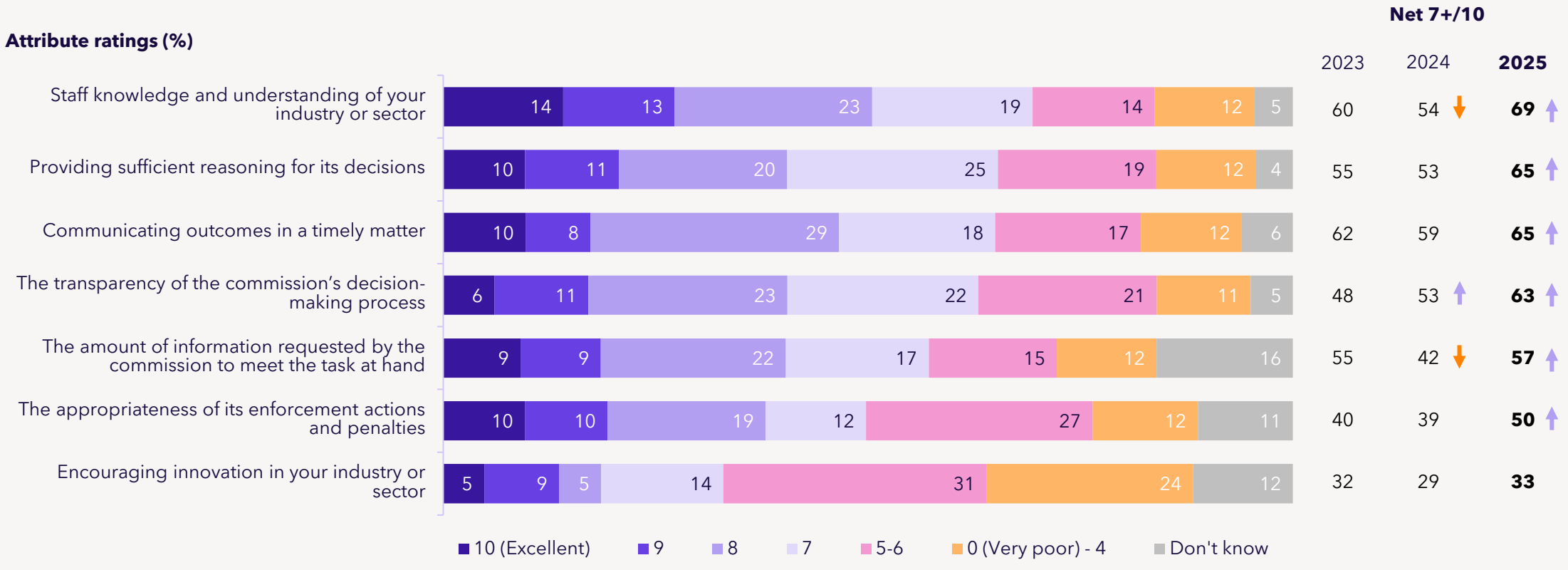
Q9. I'd now like you to rate the Essential Services Commission's performance on several broad attributes using a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 means you think they're doing a 'very poor' job and 10 means they are doing an 'excellent' job. There's also a 'don't know' option if you are not sure. // Base: All participants 2025 (n=171), 2024 (n=162), 2023 (n=222).

Lower performing attributes

Ratings on the lowest-rated attributes have improved over the last two years, particularly for the transparency of the commission's decision-making process. The commission has continued to receive the lowest ratings for encouraging innovation, the appropriateness of its enforcement and penalties, and the amount of information requested by the commission.

Attribute ratings (%)



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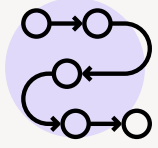
Perceived priorities for the commission over the next year

Over the next 12 months many stakeholders would like the commission to prioritise fair pricing for consumers, whilst also better considering the challenges faced by businesses - working towards more balanced regulation with streamlined processes. Many stakeholders also want to see improved engagement and communication, and greater transparency.

Balanced regulation between consumer protection and business realities

Improved stakeholder engagement and communication



Streamlining processes internally and with national frameworks

Greater transparency in regulatory decisions, performance reporting and standards

Review and reform of the rate cap methodology

Support innovation and competition in the market

Stable and predictable implementation of programs like the VEU

Support the transition to net zero, ensure environmental reforms are balanced

Q13. And finally, in summing up your feedback today, what would you like to see the commission prioritise most over the next 12 months? // Base: Total participants (n=171)

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