

Vulnerability Strategy 20/21 - Stakeholder Reference Group

Invitation for expressions of interest

September 2020

Key information

We are developing a consumer vulnerability strategy, to be published mid-2021. To do this, we are embarking on a year long program of research and engagement to ensure our problem definition and outcomes design is robust and fit-for-purpose, adequately representing the interests of consumers experiencing vulnerability in our regulated sectors. As part of this program of work, we are convening a stakeholder reference group on a voluntary basis to help us understand consumer vulnerability and develop our strategy.

The purpose of the reference group is to:

- help the commission better understand consumer vulnerability, both entrenched and emerging
- ensure the commission maintains a contemporary understanding of the evolution of consumer vulnerability over the course of the year, addressing relevant issues as they arise
- gather insights and knowledge to inform the nature and the extent of the vulnerability strategy, including problem definition and outcomes
- develop alternatives and identify solutions regarding preferred approaches to addressing issues relating to consumer vulnerability and market access in our regulated sectors
- advocate for consumer interests and ensure that the needs of diverse consumers are included in the development of the strategy
- provide feedback on the early stages of drafting of the strategy

The terms of reference for the reference group are attached.

Please note that the reference group will only be one component of our engagement program. Unsuccessful applicants to the reference group may still participate in informing and developing our vulnerability strategy through:

- Cross-sector workshops and webinars with our community sector, government, industry and cross-sector stakeholders to be held at intervals over the course of the year.
- Community sector roundtable series, to be held every 4-6 weeks in 2020 (this frequency will be reviewed for 2021), focusing on acute issues presenting for consumers in the coronavirus pandemic.
- Contributing to our formal consultation process following the release of a draft strategy in mid-2021.

Expressions of interest

We are seeking reference group members that represent the Victorian community sector, including consumer organisations, peak bodies and smaller representative organisations, to represent a broad, inclusive and diverse range of consumers.

We have asked Dr Yvette Maker from the Melbourne Social Equity Institute at the University of Melbourne to assist with the selection process. Dr Maker is currently developing a guidance for sensitive and appropriate engagement for the commission, including a roadmap for engagement to aid in the development of our vulnerability strategy. Dr Maker will make recommendations for group membership from expressions of interest received. The commission will make the final decision on group membership.

Successful candidates will be informed via email by 2 October 2020.

Key skills and experience sought

The topics discussed will be wide ranging so group members should have specific experience or knowledge of:

- the needs and concerns of consumers experiencing vulnerability broadly
- the barriers to equitable consumer participation in essential services markets
- the interdependencies of different systems and processes that create or exacerbate consumer vulnerability
- assistance currently available to consumers experiencing vulnerability in essential services markets
- behavioural insights as they relate to essential services markets and regulatory reform

Other knowledge and experience that is useful, but not required, includes:

- the role of the Essential Services Commission, and/or the role of economic and competition regulators in protecting the interests of consumers
- the sectors regulated by the Essential Services Commission, especially energy and water, and/or knowledge of other regulated essential services sectors.

How to express interest in becoming a member of the working group

You are invited to send an expression of interest to either Kat George at kat.george@esc.vic.gov.au or Jess Gregory at Jessica.Gregory@esc.vic.gov.au by COB 25 September 2020. Please also contact either Kat or Jess if you have any questions or would like to have a confidential discussion about the reference group.

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Terms of Reference

Purpose

Along with our ongoing research and engagement program, this reference group will:

- help the commission better understand consumer vulnerability, both entrenched and emerging
- ensure the commission maintains a contemporary understanding of the evolution of consumer vulnerability over the course of the year, addressing relevant issues as they arise
- gather insights and knowledge to inform the nature and the extent of the vulnerability strategy, including problem definition and outcomes
- develop alternatives and identify solutions regarding preferred approaches to consumer vulnerability
- advocate for consumer interests and ensure that the needs of diverse consumers are included in the development of the strategy
- provide feedback on the early stages of drafting of the strategy.

Scope

The reference group will consider issues relevant to the development of the commission's vulnerability strategy, including making recommendations and responding to prompts put forward by the commission. This includes all issues relating to consumers experiencing vulnerability and barriers to market participation, both entrenched and emerging.

Authority

The reference group is an important forum through which the sector can help us shape our vulnerability strategy. The commission will consider views put forward by the reference group, along with those of all our stakeholders, in relation to understanding and responding to consumer vulnerability. Any decisions relating to the final form and content of the vulnerability strategy will be made by the commission.

Membership

The reference group will be made up of representatives from the community sector, acting in a voluntary capacity. We will keep numbers reasonably low to help run the group in an efficient manner. We will circulate the names of group members so that you can contact one another outside of set meeting times if necessary.

Frequency and duration

We propose to hold 90-minute meetings once every 6 to 8 weeks between October 2020 and May 2021. Further meetings or an extension of this period may be required as the work program develops.

Meetings will be held via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. There may be opportunities for in-person meetings in the future, however we will always offer an option for remote attendance.

Chair and Secretariat

The Essential Services Commission will chair and fill the role of secretariat for the group. The secretariat will:

- distribute a meeting agenda and papers in preparation of the meetings
- record and distribute meeting minutes and forward meeting schedule
- record items that require further consideration

The commission aims to distribute agendas one week prior to each meeting, and to distribute minutes within one week following. The outcomes of each meeting will be shared at our other consultation sessions.

Quorum

We will need at least one third of the members for the meeting to go ahead. This way any input will be representative of the sector.

Confidentiality

We encourage members to contribute honestly. To support this, we will distribute the minutes to group members for approval before those involved share the outcomes with other interested parties.