

State's economic regulator stands up for consumers

Helping Victorian households and small businesses maintain access to essential services during the pandemic has been a key focus for the state's economic regulator over the past year.

The Essential Services Commission [annual report for 2020–21](#) has been tabled in state parliament by the responsible minister, Assistant Treasurer Danny Pearson.

Commission chairperson Kate Symons says it was a year when access to essential services became more important than ever.

“For many months of the year most of us were at home, either unable to work or working remotely and many also home schooling due to pandemic restrictions.

“This pushed energy bills up and for many, incomes and revenue down which is where we stepped in by working with energy businesses to increase safeguards against disconnection and debt collection,” she said.

The report shows the commission also required energy companies to help customers applying for relief grants and concessions, updated water customer codes to align with national principles and increased monitoring of the essential services to track the impact of the pandemic.

Commissioner Symons says energy companies were also held to account with the commission issuing 240 penalty notices for alleged breaches, totalling \$2.515 million in payments.

“The alleged breaches included failing to obtain explicit informed consent before switching customers and putting conditions on providing payment assistance as required under our payment difficulty framework,” she said.

The report also showed:

- more than six million certificates were registered from over 380,000 energy efficiency upgrades under the Victorian Energy Upgrades program in households and businesses across the state
- water prices were set to drop, with average Melbourne households bills set to drop by \$33 and \$7 in regional Victoria
- 18 new energy licences were issued including four renewable energy licences for wind, solar and battery farms, supporting an increase in the state's energy generating capacity.

The Essential Services Commission annual report 2020–21 is on our website at www.esc.vic.gov.au/annual-reports.

For further information call: David Jarwood, Senior Media Adviser, 0492 805 003

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