

Australian Energy Regulator

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**Response to Issues Paper – “Standardised statements for use in customer hardship policies”**

The ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal (ACAT) has the statutory role of jurisdictional energy ombudsman for the ACT. In this capacity, the ACAT has an important role in ensuring the effective operation of the energy market in the ACT. The ACAT also has a statutory remit to ensure that the rights of customers who make complaints against utilities are protected (*Utilities Act 2000*, s 171).

In addition, for more than 25 years, ACAT and its predecessor agencies (the Energy and Water Consumer Council and the Essential Services Review Committee) have exercised legislative power (under the *Utilities Act 2000* and the *Essential Services (Continuity of Supply) Act 1992*) to protect energy and water consumers in the ACT from disconnection for utility debt, including by directly case managing the accounts of more than 10,000 utility customers who were unable to meet their payment commitments.

The comments which follow in this submission are made in the context of the responsibilities and experience of ACAT as described above.

**Comment**

The ACAT supports the use of standardised statements in utility customer hardship policies, as an appropriate measure to address the three areas of concern identified by the AER at 4.1 of the Issues Paper.

The ACAT agrees that statements should use objective language where possible (4.2) and that the statements should be consistent and action-based (4.3 and 4.4).

The ACAT notes that the standardised statements reflect only the minimum level of assistance (5.4) and that utilities should be encouraged to go well beyond this minimum level, offering a diverse and flexible range of assistance. In this respect, the ACAT commends ActewAGL Retail for the very significant enhancements that that utility has made to its hardship assistance programs since the significant increase in electricity and gas prices in the ACT on 1 July 2018.

The ACAT generally agrees with the draft Standardised Statements in Appendix B of the Issues Paper. The language of the statements is direct and appropriate for the broad base of energy customers.

The ACAT recommends two changes to the draft Standard Statements.

Standard Statement 4

The ACAT suggests that this Statement be rewritten to draw a distinction between Government assistance programs (which the utility should be obliged to facilitate) and other programs where referral may have some discretionary basis.

Depending on which state or territory you live in, you may have access to Government schemes, concessions and rebates that are designed to help with your energy bills. We will explain these schemes to you so you can understand how they can help you, and we will help you access the assistance.

We will also tell you about other programs, such as financial counselling services and emergency relief, which may assist you.

If you find out you are eligible for any of these programs, please let us know immediately so that we can help you access the assistance.

Standard Statement 7

Please include “or territory” after “state”

Yours sincerely



Graeme Neate AM  
President