

CUSTOMER CONSULTATIVE GROUP

Meeting Communiqué – 31 August 2022

1. The Australian Energy Regulator's (AER) Customer Consultative Group (CCG) met on 31 August 2022 to discuss current issues affecting residential and small energy customers.
2. The CCG Chair, Elissa Freeman, provided a welcome and overview of the meeting.
3. AER Chair, Clare Savage covered a number of AER updates and issues including:
 - The wholesale electricity and gas market analysis including:
 - The very high, unprecedented prices in the electricity market
 - Underlying drivers
 - Market suspension
 - Retail market briefing including a discussion on Retailers of Last Resort (RoLR)
 - Default Market Offer (DMO) considerations
 - Update on the Consumer Vulnerability Strategy and Lived Experience Panel

The following topics were discussed during a Q&A response session with the AER Board:

- Access to maintenance scheduling and its occurrence
 - Comparison of the spot market price in the domestic and international market
 - Difference in DMO tariffs for some retailers
 - DMO prices not being calculated in the correct manner
 - RoLR events in embedded network retailers and how these incidences are handled
 - Whether the current cost of living crisis and lack of government concessions are being factored into the setting of DMO5.
4. In the Emerging issues session, CCG members discussed the following:
 - Increasing energy debt for small businesses
 - Consumers not having effective access to the DMO offer from a retailer
 - Customers experiencing vulnerability being affected by RoLR processes
 - Hardship policies
 - Introduction of Solar Export tariffs
 - Cost of living

5. AER Chair, Clare Savage provided an update on the AER's Consumer Vulnerability Strategy and Game Changer work, including the focus of the work, what needs to change, what the AER is trying to achieve and some possible solutions. CCG members discussed the issues, provided feedback on the potential solutions and observations from their own experiences of working with people experiencing vulnerability.
6. CCG members raised concerns about retailer communication practices with financial counsellors, application of concessions to accounts and account closure practices. Rowena Park, AER General Manager for Compliance and Enforcement provided an overview of the Consumer Intermediaries Engagement project, compliance and enforcement priorities for 2022-23 and the AER Annual Compliance and Enforcement report.
7. CCG member, David Harding (Business NSW), led a discussion around regulation in times of rapid change and uncertainty and provided a case study of the UK regulator's approach to the FinTech sector as an example. CCG members and the AER discussed and provided feedback on the issues raised in the discussion.
8. During the Items for noting discussion, an additional item was noted:
 - The upcoming 'Food Insecurity and the Cost of Living Crisis' webinar being hosted by Thriving Communities Partnership.
9. In Any other business, the AER advised they will be sending out a post-meeting survey to CCG members to gather feedback on the structure and format of CCG meetings, as well as a poll to determine meeting dates for 2023.
10. CCG members met for a Members Only discussion, asked questions about CCG governance items and nominated a topic to be prioritised for in-depth discussion in the next CCG meeting. CCG members also recommended that a future CCG meeting is focussed on the needs of First Nations communities in relation to energy issues.