

Consumer Vulnerability Strategy Workshops

'What was said' report

May 2021

Produced for the Australian Energy Regulator

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1. INTRODUCTION

Energy is an essential service. It is critical to people's daily lives, their economic participation, and their health and wellbeing. It is important that the energy market is inclusive of all customers, does not create or compound barriers to participation, and that energy is accessible and fairly priced.

The Australian Energy Regulator recognises the need to enhance consideration of consumer vulnerability in their work, and to ensure efforts are transparent, support collaboration and benefit consumers in the transitioning energy market.



The development of a Consumer Vulnerability Strategy will work towards delivering comprehensive market change leading to better outcomes for consumers experiencing vulnerability. A series of three stakeholder workshops were held in April and May to inform the actions that will support the Consumer Vulnerability Strategy.

This report captures what was said in the three workshops.

WORKSHOP PURPOSE

The purpose of this workshop was:

- to identify opportunities for the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) and the energy stakeholders to work together to support vulnerable consumers.
- a secondary purpose was to support connection and relationships with energy stakeholders.
- the workshop participants were provided a copy of the Consumer Vulnerability Strategy Framework.

WORKSHOP PARTICIPATION

There were three workshops held across April and May including participants from:

- Energy businesses / retailers
- Consumer advocates
- Government and market bodies
- Australian Energy Regulator (staff and Board Members)



The AER staff and Board participated in the workshops to open and close each session and to share their lived experiences and insights alongside the participants.

The facilitation team comprised MosaicLab facilitators, Keith Greaves and Lyndal Mackintosh.

ATTENDANCE

The following energy stakeholders participated across the three workshops:

- ACT Civil & Administrative Tribunal
- ACT Council of Social Service
- AEMC
- AEMO
- AGL
- Alinta
- Aurora Energy
- Ausgrid
- Australian Council of Social Service
- Australian Energy Council
- Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA)
- Brotherhood of St Laurence
- Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association
- Consumer Action Law Centre
- Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC)
- Council of the Aging (COTA)
- Country Women's Association of Australia
- CS Energy
- Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (BETA)
- Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources
- Energy Australia
- Energy Consumers Australia
- Energy Locals
- Energy Networks Australia
- Energy Q
- Enova Energy
- ESB
- Essential Energy
- Essential Services Commission VIC (ESCV)
- Ethnic Communities Council of NSW
- EWON
- EWOQ
- EWOSA
- EWOV
- Intergen
- Jemena
- Kildonan Uniting Care
- Locality Energy
- Meridian Energy
- Metered energy
- Momentum
- Next Business Energy
- NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE)
- Origin Energy
- People with Disability Australia
- Powerclub
- Public Interest Advocacy Centre
- QLD Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy (DNRME)
- SA Department for Energy and Mining
- SA Power Networks
- SACOSS
- Shell Energy
- Simply Energy
- St Vincent De Paul Society
- Sydney Alliance
- TAS Council of Social Service
- The Energy Charter
- Thriving Communities Partnership
- United Energy Distribution / Citipower/ Powercor
- Uniting Communities
- VIC Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP)
- Youth Action
- 1st Energy

2. WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

The workshop was facilitated over Zoom for a duration of three hours. Below is an overview of the session agenda.

30 Mins	WELCOME Acknowledgement of Country Purpose of the workshop and the agenda Connection, experiences and hopes for the workshop. CONTEXT SETTING PRESENTATION FROM THE AUSTRALIAN ENERGY REGULATOR AER Chair and Board members discussed the importance of the Consumer Vulnerability Strategy
45 mins	Lived experience - insights Explore a range of perspectives and experiences to guide and inform ideas for moving forward.
25 mins	Setting ourselves up for success Understand what success looks like over the short and long term from the perspectives of the consumer
20 mins	Break
45 mins	Action development Identify actions to support the outcomes of the Consumer Vulnerability Strategy. Discuss who is best placed to lead and support these actions
15 mins	Final reflections Final thoughts on what we will personally be actioning as a result of the workshop and any closing remarks. Next steps Next steps and a final word from AER CLOSE

3. WORKSHOP HOPES

Participants were asked about their hopes for the workshop. They registered their responses using the online tool GroupMap, which was used throughout the workshop. Some responses are captured below:









4. THE LIVED EXPERIENCE - INSIGHTS

It was important to draw from real life experiences of consumer vulnerability and AER worked closely with their energy stakeholders to bring vignettes into the workshop. Some vignettes were based on case studies of consumers and others were from the perspective of the business or service providers.

There were 13 vignettes in total and the same vignettes were used in each workshop.

Participants were split into groups of 3-4 people and asked to read, discuss and document their insights from 3 of the vignettes. They were given 20 minutes and each group documented their insights into GroupMap.

The groups were then mixed up and everybody was asked to spend a few minutes discussing the vignettes they had read and to share their insights.

We have selected some insights from the 3 workshops below. A full list of insights is in Appendix A:

1 Good engagement and understanding consumer situations are important

"We need to be informed by the lived/real life experience of consumers"

"It may be that most of us need some tools for understanding and identifying different vulnerabilities e.g. a toolkit, and/or using existing tools and guidance available"

"Examples of great engagement from customer, customer was capable of working through issues and developing a strategy"

"Getting the support can require effort and strong customer engagement including having to navigate a complex environment, with repeat attempts being required to access support"

"A flexible approach - action and engagement on both sides"

"What we have is effective split between passive and active relationship regarding vulnerability. Passive requires consumer to do everything - everything has to go well. But it would be much simpler for people who are in dire straits for it to happen without their active involvement"

"Stigma attached to reaching out is real, try to have relationship with the customer from the beginning, try to nurture this through the whole journey by demonstrating that we care about customers, trying to do the right thing".

2 Building trust between consumers and retailers

"Communication is critical as is building trust - which should not be assumed but should be earned"

"If we made it easier for people to access support and just believed them it's better for customers and better for businesses as it builds loyalty"

"A real dilemma in how to build trust for essential services"

"We need to get more good news stories out there to illustrate how engagement works - helping to offset the distrust"

"We train agents to hear key words, assist customers going through difficulty, but customers aren't always forthcoming with info, but need to gain trust".

3 Look at energy consumption to reduce consumer vulnerability

"Helping customers manage their debt also requires advice on how they manage their usage"

"Need to connect customers whose bills continue to exceed capacity to pay with supports to review and manage energy use"

"Need to be looking at energy efficiency and income support. As a sector, need to acknowledge this and talk about it, otherwise we won't get the change we need"

4 Consumer literacy and understanding

"People who are not traditionally 'vulnerable' may not know where to turn for assistance"

"Consumer understanding of energy bills, and the support available is critical. Sharing this information and educating customers"

"Critical for consumers to be able to readily understand how they are charged for energy as well as what their rights are and the systems and supports to protect/enact these rights"

"Why does the consumer have to understand the system? Why should I get a bad outcome if I don't?"

"Don't always understand the impact our actions have on remote customers. The way we communicate, lose the jargon, a great website and info can make all the difference".

5 Working with a third party advocate

“How do we share more information around what support is available and the worry is the people who can't advocate for themselves get an advocate to help navigate the complexity”

“Key to arriving at manageable payment plan was having a third party help”

“Wouldn't it be great if a third party was not needed. For that to be possible- more would need to be done at that initial point of contact”

“Without the consumer advocate, it is unlikely the customer would have achieved a good outcome - this is a daunting process, there should be an easier way to get through this”

“We need to get advocates for people who can help with the cumulative impacts (e.g. not just energy)”

“A need for a conduit between customer and retailer to ensure outcomes - particularly where the customer is not well equipped to seek support”.

6 Early intervention is critical

“There are a lot of small business owners who are carrying deferred debt - we know they're going to run into problems, what can we do now to help them?”

“Considering preventative actions for those who dip into vulnerability”

“Great strength in having a retailer committed to supporting and working with customers to avoid and address issues - early intervention plus long-term support (duration of support based on customers' need/ circumstances - e.g. crisis versus chronic issues)”

“Collecting sufficient information is finely balanced with the consequences of cognitive overload, and customers disengaging with an onboarding process that takes too long”

“Getting upfront engagement is most effective, because it lowers the onus on the consumer to engage with their retailer when they do face challenging circumstances”.

7 Systemic issues beyond energy

“Broader socio-economic issues than just energy affordability. Systemic hardship”

“Can't just look at energy in isolation from broader poverty that people are experiencing - often concerned about food, housing etc too”

“Co-dependencies - how do you get people out of supports? Hardship is a much broader public policy issue”

“Complexity is bigger picture - energy is not the only area where vulnerability exists”

“Energy bills are just one expense people will be managing amid multiple expenses and stressors”

“Demonstrates need for cross-sector approach not just within an energy silo”.

8 Individual circumstances that vary and require different approaches

“Considering remote customers - isn't the typical financial vulnerability, but interesting and important to consider”

“Judgment and bias needs to be removed – why do we need to know all the inner most details of someone's life to find them worthy of support”

“Recognising different cohorts of customers (i.e.. those on life support) and how they should be supported (which may be different to other consumers)”

“Complexity of people's situation and having the head space of sorting that out - extremely overwhelming”

“Every individual circumstance is different, need to take the time to talk to the individual and create bespoke responses. Perhaps challenging in larger retailers, but need space to speak to customers to foster that relationship”

“Good outcomes are heavily contingent upon both retailer and consumer doing all the things that we want them to do - this is unrealistic, and represents a significant burden that is likely to impact upon the consumers vulnerability - effective energy frameworks and supports must not be so contingent upon 'best case' scenarios, but capable to adapt to the messy reality not only of consumers lives but likely inability of retailers to do the best all the time”

“The process is far too complicated and involved.... apart from the issues around never having enough to afford the energy being used. CALD consumers are generally reticent to seek assistance and are underrepresented in payment assistance programs financial counsellors”.

9 Reflection on the energy system, standards and structures in place

“Systems and standards of retailers are still crucial”

“Need to bring the whole supply chain into having responsibility for vulnerable customers”

“Balancing the commercial impacts with consumer support (i.e.. debt waivers can be beneficial for the consumer, but not always possible in a commercial enterprise and when considering equitable treatment of all consumers)”

“Social tariff is very unpopular, but no doubt that we have to focus on bringing down price for vulnerable people. A lot of angst would disappear”

“Hasn't changed much over the years; things are the way that they have always been. Immediate reaction is that it is the same as it has always been”

“State's need to work together to provide consistent programs so that complexity is reduced and systems to assist vulnerable people can be made more user friendly”


“We need to concentrate on what an energy support framework can do. Don't let vulnerability be so big that we can't do anything about it. Energy system should have a neutral or positive impact on someone's vulnerability”.



5. SUCCESS IN THE SHORT AND LONG TERM




Building on from the lived experience discussion, participants looked at what success might look like through the eyes of the consumer.





In small groups, participants were asked to draw on the insights and consider *who and what they saying about our progress in the short and long term?* It involved a 15 minute discussion and the responses were captured in Group Map.




The responses below are all of the participants' inputs from the 3 workshops:




Perspective	What do they say in the short term (12 months)?	What do they say in the long term (3 years)?
<p>First time experiencing hardship and payment difficulty</p> 	Now aware of available supports	Easy to reach out to my retailer and seek assistance before difficulties arise. Retailer had useful prompts to avoid accruing significant arrears
	My retailer understands my circumstances from the start of our relationship and supports me from the beginning.	I trust my retailer enough to continue to engage. My retailer continues to support me through vulnerable circumstances. Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.
	<p>Payments are covering ongoing usage - not building up debt. Positive experience with retailer, with no stigma. Understand the range of supports available. Other elements of hardship policy have been applied - tips to reduce consumption, government grants, best tariff. Getting third-party financial advice (i.e. financial counsellor)</p>	<p>Customer is debt free, or at minimum has paid off a significant portion of debt. Pays bills on time. Usage matches ability to pay. Feeling confident and empowered to reach out for help if they need it in future - and reach out earlier. Retailer having a better understanding of this customer and reaching out proactively. Better trust between retailers and customers. Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.</p>
	I alerted my retailer, and they were sympathetic and didn't cut off my electricity while I worked with them to reduce my energy consumption/ costs, and looked for a new job.	I am energy debt free, happy to share my experience working through this period of challenges.




Perspective	What do they say in the short term (12 months)?	What do they say in the long term (3 years)?
<p>Customers in ongoing or longer term hardship</p> 	<p>Increase in competitive offers in the market. Understanding utilities and how they differ from normal retail customers.</p>	<p>Access to the same retail services. Education around usage and consumption - understanding the seasonal factors and the bill shock this causes.</p>
	<p>Household supports are coordinated and managed in a way that assist the customer effectively.</p> <p>My retailer understands my circumstances and works with me to manage my energy bills.</p> <p>Jobseeker's at a liveable level so I can pay my bills.</p>	
	<p>I can afford my electricity bill and don't need to think about it as the payment method suits me.</p>	<p>I can still afford my electricity bill and can access technology that suits my needs and reduces my bills. I can navigate the energy market to get different products (information and tools) to suit my evolving needs.</p>
	<p>Financial counselling support to help get customers on payment plans.</p> <p>More government funding for social/community support services.</p> <p>Retailers directing people to third parties who can help coordinate broader types of assistance.</p> <p>Customer can meet payments.</p> <p>Customer has a smooth process to access the supports they need.</p>	<p>Customer and retailers have mutual trust and can communicate regularly with each other.</p> <p>Customers are supported to transition off hardship programs - underlying affordability challenges are addressed through provision of financial counselling and support.</p> <p>Government programs in place that make energy affordable for those who will always have limited income and affordability challenges.</p> <p>Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.</p>
<p>People facing mental health circumstances</p> 	<p>I know where to access help and I feel comfortable to do so. Information is provided in a way that is accessible to me.</p>	<p>I am confident that when I contact my energy company they will be understanding and supportive.</p>




Perspective	What do they say in the short term (12 months)?	What do they say in the long term (3 years)?
<p>Customers get into financial strife - but put off calling to get support until the disconnection notice</p> 	<p>I should have called earlier.... I was eligible for programs I didn't know about and could have avoided some of my debt building up.</p>	<p>I got into debt again - but this time I called earlier and they put me on a better plan...it really helped.</p>
<p>Low Single Income Family</p> 	<p>They trust their retailer - and if they contact them they feel supported. I can afford my energy and have a payment plan that supports my life and what I can afford. It is a seamless, low touch experience but I know that they are there if I need them. They have informed me of all of the ways that I can be financial supported and what help exists. I no longer worry about being disconnected. Thanks for that new efficient appliance. Thanks for helping us access low cost solar/renewables. I don't stress about energy supply - not getting disconnected. I don't have to think about my energy bills.</p>	<p>They no longer worry about their energy. My landlord has installed solar panels and I enjoy consuming what we produce. I trust my retailer - and therefore I am comfortable about not engaging with my usage - I know I am being looked after. I know my retailer really listens to me - and trusts me. My retailer has helped me understand my usage and how I can make changes to reduce my consumption and bill. I haven't had to sacrifice other essentials to meet the needs of my energy cost. The stress of being disconnected is not something we live with anymore. I share my experience with friends and family to ensure we are all experiencing the same outcomes as I am. Customers don't have to choose and navigate to drive outcomes. The processes are designed so that customers identified as in need have all the right subsidies applied without having to build a case to do so.</p>
<p>Family with unexpected expenses</p> 	<p>The channels for contact with the retailer suited my needs.</p>	<p>Long term - about education; making them aware of the supports available to them. Put them in a better position to be able to manage unexpected expenses in the future. Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.</p>





Perspective	What do they say in the short term (12 months)?	What do they say in the long term (3 years)?
<p>General outcomes</p> 	<p>Generally - people should have the perspective that they may have a range of issues they face in their lives, but that energy is not one of them.</p>	<p>I am getting on with my life, getting the energy I need in a way that I can afford - I have time to think about and deal with other issues in my life, without the concerns of affording the daily needs and the energy use required for them.</p>
<p>Multi-generational family living together</p> 	<p>Better understanding of energy efficiency - understanding of what steps they can take that will make a big difference (not just simplistic messages): insulation, solar, appliances.</p> <p>Do big things during the day, then solar could be beneficial, would make a big difference. Knowing that peak/off peak are changing.</p> <p>Know power of usage, help make better decisions about how to become more energy efficient.</p> <p>Finding out if they are on the best plan.</p>	<p>(If they have the money upfront...) they have picked up the understanding and have installed solar. Depends highly on their income status.</p>
<p>My retailer worked with me on a payment plan that suited me and my circumstances</p> 	<p>Works well for now.</p>	<p>In 3 years, I'm back on my feet</p>
<p>Reduce the complexity of the market</p> 	<p>Thanks for educating me on the changing make up of my builds.</p>	<p>Thanks for explaining to me how demand charges work and impact my bill.</p>

Perspective	What do they say in the short term (12 months)?	What do they say in the long term (3 years)?
Private sector renters 	<p>Minimum standards for energy efficiency have lowered my bills.</p> <p>I'm about to get PV panels on my rooftop, engaged in community battery.</p> <p>Thanks for helping me engage with my landlord to get solar panels on the roof, and my hot water unit costing less to run.</p> <p>They are able to stay connected and are not blacklisted as a result of debt. That strong support processes are in place as we transition through COVID more visibility of the supports are available. Greater awareness that energy debt can derail your life - longer term policy creation.</p>	<p>I do have PV panels on my rental property, energy efficiency standards are reducing my energy use.</p> <p>Thanks for making energy efficiency something landlords can claim on tax. Thanks for making energy efficiency standards in rental accommodation mandatory.</p> <p>Expansion of programs suitable for renters. Better advocacy for renters in accessing new innovations in the emerging marketplace. That renters are put front and centre of policy design. Requirements of landlords on more efficient housing. Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.</p>
Customers with limited ability to engage in energy markets 	<p>I'm not being left behind. I'm going to be part of the future of energy markets.</p>	<p>I can access products that help me reduce my energy consumption and costs.</p>
Social housing 	<p>How can you access solar and battery, need to understand how it works and how it benefits me. How does it work with broader housing upgrades?</p>	<p>My bills are down, my kids are healthy and safe, my home environment is improved. Fear of energy disconnection is removed. (South Australia has a good project - housing trust tenants.)</p>

Perspective	What do they say in the short term (12 months)?	What do they say in the long term (3 years)?
Rural and remote customers - poor reliability and energy cards 	Conversations about a more comparable reliability standard have commenced.	Greater support for Stand Alone Power Systems or alternative back up support for customers (wind, battery). Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.
	Energy is much cheaper to purchase through the energy cards (e.g. \$30 would last a few days).	Do away with energy cards completely, have proper electricity (electricity stations?).
Someone who doesn't identify as vulnerable, but who would benefit from support 	Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.	
Insecure workers 	The conversation was non-judgmental.	The retail market effectively manages the risk of income variability as part of Business as Usual, by providing flexible and effective customer plans and agreements. Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.
Older consumers 	Better understanding of bills.	How to shop around for a better deal. Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.
	Energy suppliers understand and accommodate their needs i.e. technology barriers, and they get the best deal in spite of these limitations.	Energy is not an issue of concern anymore; I feel in control.

Perspective	What do they say in the short term (12 months)?	What do they say in the long term (3 years)?
<p>Life support customers</p> 	<p>Regular proactive contact from the provider to confirm circumstances, and 24hr a day phone line for “if in doubt” e.g. raise the alarm or put to rest a worry.</p> <p>Good communication - clear, efficient, timely and in the method that suits them.</p> <p>In instances of a supply disruption, work with them on how to manage through the disruption.</p> <p>Clarity on rebates and entitlements</p> <p>Identify customers who transition to life support or other rebates after joining an energy retailer (e.g. after the point of sale).</p> <p>A good experience with their retailers - who genuinely understands their needs.</p> <p>Better conversations and processes between distributor and retailer.</p> <p>Being able to better serve the actual life support customers who need it, not those who are on the register but don't actually need it for medical reasons.</p> <p>Improve registration and deregistration processes for Life Support Customers</p>	<p>No unknown supply issues.</p> <p>Education piece - working with customers on back-up systems (making sure they have them, testing them - helping people remember to do those checks, e.g. could be simply connecting people to the experts to do this).</p> <p>Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.</p> <p>People saying they feel safe and confident in their set up (supply). Able to sleep at night without worrying about things that are outside their control.</p> <p>Life support customers in bush fire or flood affected areas fully understand options and have a solid plan in place. Industry has done the work to encourage people to think about this issue - to have a Plan B.</p> <p>Rule change in place to tighten the life support customer guidelines to be able to better manage genuine life support customers. Definition should be based on medical confirmation of life support status.</p> <p>Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.</p>
<p>Indigenous Australians</p> 	<p>Me and my community uniformly have the information and links to support services that we need.</p>	<p>We always get the help we need to reduce our vulnerability because the industry understands our needs.</p> <p>Retailer understands circumstance's and meets my needs.</p>
<p>Culturally and linguistically diverse consumers.</p> 	<p>I know there is support out there and I am more comfortable engaging with the energy system.</p>	<p>Be able to participate in the energy system as informed consumers, understanding the different offers out there and choosing how to engage when it suits them.</p>

Perspective	What do they say in the short term (12 months)?	What do they say in the long term (3 years)?
<p>Someone experiencing family violence</p> 	<p>Contacted retailer, retailer was able to set up the arrangements without causing distress to the customer, ability for retailer to recognise and assist and keeping all information confidential. Accounts were confidential, adequate controls were in place.</p> <p>Digital literacy very important here.</p> <p>Account/financial empowerment that retailers enabled, instigated some personal empowerment as well. Position of vulnerability to a position of self-determination / empowerment / independence.</p> <p>Telling the story once and no obligation to go over the past.</p> <p>Like to see commitment to maintaining the connection.</p> <p>Provide confidence to safety being the most important focus - account security is locked down in some way.</p> <p>Staff are trained to be aware and address the support needed.</p>	<p>Don't need to talk to someone to arrange these arrangements, they have full access to my account and can manage it themselves, don't have to talk to someone who may not understand my circumstances.</p> <p>Norm is a payment plan, or is accepted on terms of customer, not dictated by agent.</p> <p>They were connected into other support service across other essential services.</p> <p>They are receiving wrap around support across multiple sectors including corporate and community.</p> <p>They are receiving wrap around support with supported housing to be in an environment to get back on track.</p> <p>That the things we have learnt are enhanced - more training and greater understanding, better engagement with the community sector and support services.</p> <p>People experiencing family violence trust retailers enough to reach out and seek support.</p>
<p>Beyond blame</p> 	<p>Culture shift from energy industry beyond blaming customers for not engaging.</p>	<p>Talk of 'disengaged customers has disappeared from energy sector.</p>
<p>Community energy</p> 	<p>Strategies to ramp up community-based Distributor Energy Resources (e.g. community battery trials) taking place</p>	<p>Lower income households gain benefit community-based Distributor Energy Resources.</p>

Perspective	What do they say in the short term (12 months)?	What do they say in the long term (3 years)?
<p>Customers with a smart meter</p> 	<p>Educated and have an understanding their tariff. A payment arrangement they can meet.</p>	<p>Use smart meters to full potential. Understanding how usage impacts on bills. A house with good thermal performance. How to make the benefit of what he's now got.</p>
<p>Incarcerated person - noting unlikely to be employed or have stable housing.</p> 	<p>A payment arrangement they can meet.</p>	<p>A house with good thermal performance. how to make the benefit of what they've now got.</p>
<p>Customers experiencing temporary and unexpected circumstances</p> 	<p>Access to assistance and it is tailored to their needs. That they have been given the right support to help them in the short term.</p>	<p>They have been able to deal/ manage to deal with debt repayments in a manner that works for them. Customers know where to go if circumstances occur again and the trust has been built.</p>
<p>Someone experiencing financial hardship, health and wellbeing, couldn't afford hot water system</p> 	<p>May have a debt there, but they are able to speak to someone to manage this.</p>	<p>Can afford the energy bill, and a functioning hot water system. Constant connection to electricity and gas.</p>

6. ACTION DEVELOPMENT

The final activity provided an opportunity for the energy stakeholders to put forward some action ideas to deliver on the outcomes for the Consumer Vulnerability Strategy. The four outcomes identified by AER are:

1

Barriers to consumers engaging in the energy market are reduced and consumers can access products and services

2

Consumers facing payment difficulty receive effective, tailored assistance

3

The transitioning and future energy market meets the needs of consumers

4

Energy affordability is improved, including by reducing the cost to serve where possible

The process undertaken to illicit the actions was **Think - Pair - Share**.

Think - Participants were asked to individually think about the possible actions they would like to see delivered across the four outcomes

Pair - they were placed into pairs in breakout rooms and asked to test their ideas

Share - they were joined by another pair (4 in each group) and asked to capture the actions in GroupMap against the 4 outcomes.

Each action included a section where participants were able to capture the intent of the action; timing of delivery and who should lead and support the action.

The responses below are direct inputs collated from the workshop participants, and have been grouped under the four Outcomes. Gaps or omissions are gaps left by the participants.

It is intended that the actions and ideas set out in this chapter will form inputs to assist the AER in developing its draft Vulnerability Strategy.

1

Barriers to consumers engaging in the energy market are reduced and consumers can access products and services

Action:	Require Ombudsman contact details on energy bills
Intent:	<i>To reduce barriers to access help.</i>
Delivered in:	12 Months
Lead and support:	AER billing guideline

Action:	Inclusive design	
Intents:	<i>Designing for edge users improves the experience for all.</i>	<i>Designing a solution to a problem that you don't know exists. involve consumers in the process. Using customer centric design processes.</i>
Delivered in:	2 years	--
Lead and support:	AER - in partnership with design experts, along with key groups affected through UX workshops	--

Action:	Obviate the need to engage to ensure you are on the best deal
Intent:	<i>There should be no expectation that customers experiencing vulnerability should have to, or have the means to engage, to remove the risk of being on the wrong plan through wrong choice or loyalty.</i>
Delivered in:	12 Months
Lead and support:	Retailer led and support by AER compliance / monitoring

Action:	Ease and simplicity for customers. - less complex network tariffs
Intent:	--
Delivered in:	12 Months
Lead and support:	AER / Distributors

Action:	Clarity on how we segment vulnerability and look after these customers across the whole industry
Intent:	<i>To gain consistency in approach across all parts of the energy chain.</i>
Delivered in:	12 Months
Lead and support:	AER define and drive with input from retailers, Distribution Network, Energy Regulator

Action:	Common understanding of the “problem” across the energy system	
Intents:	<p><i>Common understanding of drivers of the various forms of vulnerability.</i></p> <p><i>A coordinated approach to the interactions with various organisations</i></p>	<p><i>To be able to design targeted interventions from different actors in the energy system to the root cause of the problem.</i></p> <p><i>Include what is consumer vulnerability, the impacts of this on how consumers engage in the energy system (with retailers, consumer organisations), then what is the role of each player of the energy system to address the cause of the problem.</i></p>
Delivered in:	12 months	--
Lead and support:	AER to facilitate community and energy sector to support delivery	AER to convene a meeting with energy companies and consumer representatives.

Action:	Create affordable access to Distributed Energy Resources and new technologies	
Intent:	<i>Equality of access to benefits and affordability of the new technology. Includes benefits to landlords to incentivise upgrades of rental properties.</i>	
Delivered in:	2 years	
Lead and support:	Government-led, support from industry.	

Action:	Engaging customers better through exciting energy efficiency programs	
Intent:	<i>Customers will want to be involved in new technology and apps to support/track their energy savings. Spend more time on avoiding debt accrual rather than primarily focusing on debt repayment.</i>	
Delivered in:	--	
Lead and support:	--	

Action:	Enhancing online platforms	
Intent:	<i>Makes it easier for people to reach out - provides a range of outreach channels that customers are comfortable with. Phone conversations can be a barrier.</i>	
Delivered in:	12 months	
Lead and support:	Industry led; also a role for consumer groups to create platforms.	

Action:	Starting the conversation with customers needing help is the largest barrier, and start a conversation with the retailer rather than let it build up.	
Intent:	<i>Once there is engagement, things can be put in place. The earlier the better. Language is really important. Different stakeholders to share best practice and experience as there's a common public good.</i>	
Delivered in:	2 years	
Lead and support:	Different stakeholders	

Action:	Co-design programs and services with people to fully understand implications and needs for consumers
Intent:	<i>To make sure we're not inadvertently making people's lives harder - more complex, less accessible. Example of impact of cost-reflective network pricing leading to more complex bills.</i>
Delivered in:	12 months
Lead and support:	Led by AER, supported at all levels.

Action:	Consumers without access to technology
Intent:	<i>To allow all consumers to get the best deal.</i>
Delivered in:	2 years
Lead and support:	Ombudsmen and government. With support of community groups

Action:	Training is important across various suppliers & advisors. Look at Train the trainer.
Intent:	<i>If first point of contact can deal with the customer it is more effective. Reaching to customers to ensure they are equipped. Broad capture of first point of contact delivers adequate information</i>
Delivered in:	2 years
Lead and support:	Across public / private sector and consider funding for this collectively/ pool resources

Action:	Moving beyond 'engagement'
Intent:	<i>Retailers understanding from their own customers what works in terms of engagement with difficult customers. A culture change within the industry, so retailers actively seek to learn disaffected customers who have re-engaged. Need to understand what builds trust.</i>
Delivered in:	12 months
Lead and support:	Retailer-led

Action:	Not defining vulnerability but accepting that it exists
Intent:	<i>To acknowledge that everyone can be vulnerable - what we need to understand is that customers will have barriers to accessing energy goods or service, and so the strategy to support people with those barriers must be robust.</i>
Delivered in:	2 years
Lead and support:	AER to lead and supported by retailers and advocates to inform and guide actions. Let's remember that retailers comprise customers

Action:	Improve integration of solar and battery ownership
Intent:	<i>To meet peak demand periods and smooth demand on the system.</i>
Delivered in:	--
Lead and support:	--



Action:	Strategy for people who can't afford to pay for ongoing usage
Intent:	<i>There is a cohort of customers who can't afford to pay for ongoing usage (this may be 3%). Need to work out a way to assist these customers, without being a net drain on retailers.</i>
Delivered in:	3 years
Lead and support:	Government and regulators to lead

The following actions were provided with no further detail:

- Ensuring life support registration remains up to date
- Ensuring media and messaging from government doesn't bolster distrust in the industry further
- Simpler products for consumers
- Financial literacy education / training / courses
- Implement Australian Competition and Consumer recommendation to fund community organisations and to provide education and support to targeted groups/vulnerable groups
- Implement Australian Energy Market Commission recommendations for embedded networks
- Improved accessibility to enable vulnerable customers to access renewable energy options
- Improving accessibility of communications with customers
- Promise to provide customer with your cheapest deal based on their usage pattern
- Reviewing the use of prepaid meters where people pay more due to other issues impacting costs of electricity
- Designing systems with particular consumer groups throughout workshops.

2

Consumers facing payment difficulty receive effective, tailored assistance

Action:	Establish a centralised service for concessions	
Intents:	<i>Leveraging Application Programming through Services Australia - to link concessions together.</i>	<i>Establishment of a centralised concessions and rebate concierge for retailers, financial counsellors and community workers to contact for access to all commonwealth and state based concessions.</i> <i>Ensure customers are receiving all concessions and rebates which they are eligible for.</i>
Delivered in:	--	12 Months
Lead and support:	--	Commonwealth / State Governments - Service Australia / Service NSW etc

Action:	Sharing of hardship support along the supply chain	
Intent:	<i>It will enable improved affordability for customers facing hardship whether chronic or temporary (e.g. network hardship tariff).</i>	
Delivered in:	--	
Lead and support:	--	

Action:	A strategic review of energy consumer and support frameworks to audit consumer outcomes against the intent	
Intent:	<i>Evaluate cumulative impact of consumer and support frameworks against their intended outcomes. Where the intents are not reflected in outcomes - reconsideration of frameworks and supports against intent.</i>	
Delivered in:	12 Months	
Lead and support:	AER, Essential Services Commission and community and industry stakeholder reference group	

Action:	Help people that find themselves vulnerable to access services and overcome stigma		
Intents:	<i>Make sure partnerships are established early on. Train staff.</i>	<i>Ensuring that any retailer can offer effective support. Collaboration on developing some shared support portals. Shouldn't just be big retailers who are able to offer support.</i>	<i>For those people who wouldn't reach out for help on their bills, because typically not in need to reach out (COVID, natural disaster), via mechanisms and messages that will appeal.</i>
Delivered in:	--	2 years	2 years
Lead and support:	Energy providers	Industry collaborating with community sector, with government support where required.	AER to consider what can helpfully to put on bills via their research and evidence following the billing rule change.

Action:	Develop standardised training on payment difficulty		
Intents:	<i>Customers receive proactive assistance from retailers. Always a cohort of customers who don't engage. Building stronger relationships between customers, community sector and industry to ensure people get support. Connecting hardship programs - Thriving Communities One Stop One Story platform.</i>	<i>Improving training but also further vetting that hardship workers are empathetic.</i>	
Delivered in:	--	--	
Lead and support:	Retailers, government and community sector need to partner to address this issue. Is there a role for government to support retailers who have customers with high debt? Other parts of the supply chain should take on some of the burden - a mutually accountable support system.	--	

Action:	To equip retailer staff to have an appropriate conversation		
Intent:	<i>The right people with the right skills are communicating with consumers. Develop program collectively and implement individually.</i>		
Delivered in:	12 months		
Lead and support:	Retailer groups to lead and supported by community groups.		

Action:	Making hardship assistance easier to access		
Intent:	<i>Customers often receive inconsistent hardship assistance from retailers, both in type of assistance offered and how they are communicated with. This needs to improve to build trust in retailers, and to increase assistance people are receiving. Case to be made for external training, so that there can be consistency in practice across retailers and jurisdictions.</i>		
Delivered in:	2 years		
Lead and support:	AER to lead, with support from community sector		



Action:	Billing options that suit people's needs
Intent:	<i>Non-conditionality to apply for hardship assistance</i>
Delivered in:	12 months
Lead and support:	Retailers, made clear in rules and regulations

Action:	Higher energy concessions for customers in chronic difficulty/ hardship
Intent:	<i>To give staff the tools to be authentic and proactive (2 years to develop, and then work on embedding behaviours and practices).</i>
Delivered in:	2 years
Lead and support:	AER to lead, with retailers embracing. Community sector to support.

Action:	Retailers using technology to predict hardship and ensure there is an early intervention strategy, where this can be done
Intent:	<i>To encourage broader range of billing options - to allow people to pay what they can afford when they can afford it - and to let people choose the means of communication and engagement.</i> <i>Learning from other sectors, and collecting stories from consumer perspectives.</i>
Delivered in:	12 months
Lead and support:	AER but equal responsibility with retailers.

The following actions were provided with no further detail:

- Work with industry to enhance the pre-disconnection process
- Collaboration on the hardest to help customers - various industry bodies, local networks,
- On entry to payment plans/hardship programs, recalculate past bills according to the cheapest plan available and reapply as credit to the customer's account
- Retailer promises to provide customer with their best deal
- Training for staff within energy provider companies around inclusivity.
- Ensure concessions and government support are set at an appropriate level to support consumers experiencing financial difficulty
- Reduce onus on customers to reach out
- A single point of assistance to help the customer
- Providing opportunities for consumers to identify early on their accessibility needs, and energy providers providing options for support services. e.g. interpreter lines

3

The transitioning and future energy market meets the needs of consumers

Action:	Collaboration across organisations to ensure all can offer effective support
Intent:	<i>All government housing should be constructed and / or modified with energy efficient fittings to reduce energy costs.</i>
Delivered in:	long term
Lead and support:	Government, retail sector

Action:	Education on tariff changes
Intent:	<i>Education of customer on the changes to time of use metering, demand metering, increasing daily charges - and the impact that it is having on bill structure. Funding should come from Government and Distributors to lead this education.</i>
Delivered in:	12 Months
Lead and support:	Government, AER and Distributors

Action:	Provision of very simple offers for those who lack the interest, technology or capacity for increasing complexity
Intent:	--
Delivered in:	long term
Lead and support:	Market bodies

Action:	Ensure that the regulatory framework supports consumer protections, as well as innovation.
Intent:	<i>Ensures customer vulnerability considerations are captured as part of the network tariff regulatory processes. Can consider stranded assets.</i>
Delivered in:	12 months
Lead and support:	AER-led; requirements on industry to do the impact assessment.

Action:	Development of principles/standards to protect vulnerable customers
Intent:	<i>Ensure that new areas of customer detriment don't emerge as we chase new products and services with the need to retrospectively apply consumer protections.</i>
Delivered in:	2 years
Lead and support:	Australian Energy Market Commission and AER informed by the lived experience of early adopters

Action:	PV (Solar) for renters
Intent:	<i>As regulatory and other changes are considered, these could be tested against the principles or standards to ensure customers in vulnerable circumstances are protected and supported.</i>
Delivered in:	12 months
Lead and support:	Australian Energy Market Commission and AER to lead with industry support

Action:	Reducing the complexity of the market for consumers and participants
Intent:	<i>Strategy that enables low-income renters to get benefits from Distributed Energy Resources</i>
Delivered in:	3 years
Lead and support:	State governments to lead, industry to support

Action:	Using inclusive design for consumer protections
Intent:	<i>Ensure customers can easily interact with the market and compare offers.</i>
Delivered in:	2 years
Lead and support:	Regulators to lead engagement of industry to develop simplicity and understanding for customers.

Action:	Ensuring customers have access to independent dispute resolution for new products and services and providers
Intent:	<i>Working with people to make sure customer protections are fit-for-purpose and adequate and robust, especially with the energy market transformation.</i>
Delivered in:	2 years
Lead and support:	AER-led, but backed by others

Action:	State based independent advice on best energy deal for customer
Intent:	<i>Not a website but other ways to communicate effectively.</i>
Delivered in:	--
Lead and support:	--

The following actions were provided with no further detail:

- Advocate to amend the National Energy Objectives to include social equity as an objective
- Consider including 'consumer vulnerability impact assessment' as a requirement under access arrangement resets for both gas and electricity networks.



4

Energy affordability is improved, including by reducing the cost to serve where possible

Action: Development of low-cost hardship tariffs by network businesses

Intent: *Share the cost of hardship and vulnerability across the supply chain.*

Delivered in: 2 years

Lead and support: AER and Distributors

Action: Incentives for landlords to make buildings more energy efficient to enable lower consumption

Intent: *To provide incentives for improving the energy efficiency of rental stocks.*

Require landlords to provide information on the cost of energy for their properties prior to leasing.

Delivered in: 2 years

Lead and support: State Governments

Action: Greater government assistance for low income earners

Intent: *If there are no changes in supply costs or infrastructure developments to reduce usage costs for vulnerable (low income) customers, there should be more robust government supports to avoid consumers from having to prioritise energy costs over other essential expenses such as housing, food, healthcare.*

Delivered in: 2 years

Lead and support: Government, supported by consumer advocacy and retail energy services.

Action: Streamlining initiatives across state boundaries

Intent: *Universal access to information for consumers (such as requirements to tell all customers about better offers available from the retailer). It will reduce costs for retailers in implementing different schemes (i.e. best offer initiative in ACT is different to the Victorian system)*

Delivered in: 12 Months

Lead and support: AER led and supported by each State Government and other regulators i.e. Essential Services Commission

Action: Best default offers are automatically applied to customers' accounts without them requesting change

Intent: *The customers' needs are put first and they are put onto a plan that is manageable from the outset.*

Delivered in: 2 years

Lead and support: Retailers

Action:	Change energy market rules, so that new technologies (such as standalone power systems) can be implemented in remote areas, instead of poles and wires
Intent:	<i>This enables cheaper technologies to be implemented which provides better system reliability and is more cost effective.</i>
Delivered in:	12 months
Lead and support:	Australian Energy Market Commission AER and Energy Networks Australia

Action:	More open requirements on organisations throughout the supply chain to support vulnerable customers
Intent:	<i>Engage whole of supply chain in equal-accountability model to support customers who are struggling with affordability.</i>
Delivered in:	12 months
Lead and support:	AER-led, with community advocacy support. Government may need to make regulatory changes.

Action:	Consumers get the right assistance in the first place
Intent:	<i>By having staff appropriately trained costs can be saved by accessing all the available assistance and not reengaging multiple times down the track.</i>
Delivered in:	2 years
Lead and support:	National led initiative with linking to various State government support initiatives

Action:	Investigate the technologies rollouts needed to support customers
Intent:	<i>Look at accelerating smart metres and other customer supporting technologies which allow more information availability and flexible payment options.</i>
Delivered in:	12 months
Lead and support:	AER with industry and Australian Energy Market Commission

Action:	Shared cost of hardship programs/teams
Intent:	<i>Spread the cost of hardship programs across the energy industry (retailers, generators, distributors), even potential community fund.</i>
Delivered in:	3 years
Lead and support:	AER (need body that can work across all aspects of industry)

Action:	Steering customers to energy efficiency programs
Intent:	<i>Reduce bill costs could lead to less hardship program engagement.</i>
Delivered in:	12 months
Lead and support:	Retailers lead customers to State Government initiatives



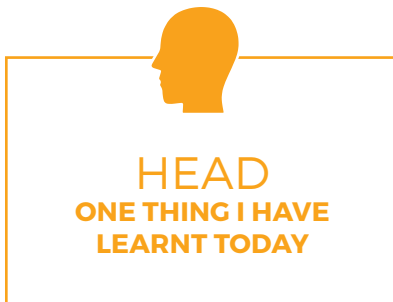
Action:	Identify where gaps remain with respect to persistent vulnerability
Intent:	<i>This might include size of the bill, access to technology, products and services and capacity to pay.</i> <i>This should inform energy market and government policy.</i>
Delivered in:	--
Lead and support:	AER

The following actions were provided with no further detail:

- Earlier intervention is key to avoiding debt accrual - e.g. the first interaction being Sales, and offering energy efficiency advice and offering payment assistance at that time
- Local government can provide energy education and can facilitate peer to peer
- People made more aware of their energy usage and how to be more energy efficient.

7. FINAL REFLECTION

The final activity of the workshop captured participants' reflections on their workshop experience.



Covid hardship measures preventing disconnections dramatically reduced calls to ombudsman. Shows a way to dramatically reduce hardship in a measurable way

Information asymmetry across the energy supply chain about vulnerability needs to be addressed - a whole of sector solution approach is required

Meaningful responses will not involve small/immediate actions, but significant reform of the way we provide energy services and support peoples access to them.

Non-financial vulnerability is still not often discussed

That the avenue to support vulnerable customers is complex. All parties: retail, supply, government, advocacy, etc. Need to stop passing the buck and collaborate to get things done.

That there is a real willingness across the sector to address the issues discussed today

The complexity of the process

There is a fair degree of will to move on sharing action across the supply chain on vulnerable customers

Use of API to better manage concessions

Different perspectives and ideas from across the industry on supporting vulnerable customers

Groupmap is a great as a tool for brain storming

Importance of support/need/ vulnerability being identified early and putting in place measures for the right duration to address the specific vulnerability

Support offered varies greatly depending on organisation

That retailers try to reach out to customers but customer engagement can be a barrier to providing effective assistance

That there is some work underway on improving culture within retailers toward customers

That we don't as yet have a resilient way of supporting vulnerable customers that is built into the way our energy system works

The breadth of organisations participating in this space

The different approaches by various energy retailers and other regulators in other jurisdictions towards consumer vulnerability. Sparked imagination about how we can redesign the system

There are lots of challenges that affect suppliers as well as customers

There are opportunities for improvement across the supply chain

Trust issues on both sides

We are all aligned to wanting to solve the affordability issues.

We are facing common challenges across the industry

How diverse the variety of vulnerable customers and circumstances are

The use of a 3rd party/advocate can be a useful to engaging with a customer

Valuable reminder about how variable vulnerability is and how it can be multiple forms compounded as well as without warning



HEART ONE THING THAT HAS INSPIRED ME

Across the industry there is passion to do more

Appetite to make a difference is tangible

Interest in universal solutions that make interest in engaging with the energy market unnecessary. no bad plans.

The goodwill

Thinking broadly about how to get a better deal for consumers rather than just "what's our problem" that can be fixed - good wrap around ideas

Willingness by sector to want to do more

Alignment of interests across the energy system to solve this problem

Awareness that these problems are sticky but not intractable

Collaboration and partnerships between different sectors (government /regulator /network /retailer /community)

Collective commitment to work together

Collective willingness to action

Genuine desire from industry to address vulnerability, recognising the broader social obligations involved in providing essential services

Everyone is wanting to do better

The deep experience and knowledge of this group

This collaborative approach



HANDS MY FIRST ACTION AFTER THIS WORKSHOP IS...

I am going to write a detailed response to the Vulnerability Strategic Framework

Share feedback with my team, renew their focus on taking a fresh approach to sharing facts / thoughts about vulnerability and the solutions customers are seeking

To take the learnings from this back to my organisation

I'd love to have a copy of the notes to discuss with my team

Be very open to any solutions

Encourage lived experience engagement in AER's strategy development

Follow up on great conversations about how we can support this process to get the right outcomes

I'm going to check out the Thriving Community resources on thriving.org.au

Look into ways to share more information about energy bills, support available etc.

Remind myself about social tariffs and their potential application

Search for ways to detect hardship at the point of sale and solve for it there

Share AER's website with our networks and share what we have done with this workshop.

Share insights with my team and use this to inform our policy work

Share more examples of the experiences of individuals when things don't work for the individual in the market - accessibility informed by real life not theory

Start conversations regarding earlier intervention such as offering support during the sales process

Take this framework back to the Voices for Power team to provide further insights about how the consumer vulnerability strategy can inform our activities.

Understanding how the needs of customers in embedded networks are recognised in the framework

Write down my key reflections

Do more to empower everyone in any role to feel they can be an identifier of vulnerable circumstances

Raise these issues within my organisation to see what we can do from an innovation space

Researching what additional services may be available to promote to customers

8. APPENDIX A

FULL LIST OF INSIGHTS COLLECTED FROM VIGNETTES

There are a lot of small business owners who are carrying deferred debt - we know they're going to run into problems, what can we do now to help them?	Critical for consumers to be able to readily understand how they are charged for energy as well as what their rights are and the systems and supports to protect/enact these rights	Getting the support can require effort and strong customer engagement including having to navigate a complex environment, with repeat attempts being required to access support.
People who are not traditionally 'vulnerable' may not know where to turn for assistance.	Early intervention is critical	Helping customers manage their debt also requires advice on how they manage their usage.
Difficulty of someone navigating through debt collection without much financial literacy	Great strength in having a retailer committed to supporting and working with customers to avoid and address issues - early intervention plus long-term support (duration of support based on customers' need/circumstances - e.g. crisis versus chronic issues)	There is support out there but it is not always easy to access. Expert assistance is incredibly valuable.
Discussion around speed at which retailers refer to debt collectors (e.g. 2 weeks)	If we made it easier for people to access support and just believed them it's better for customers and better for businesses as it builds loyalty	Great engagement from customer, customer was capable of engagement to work through issues and develop a strategy
Customers who do not necessarily view themselves as vulnerable may not be aware of support mechanisms or the need to engage early	Importance of identifying problems early to provide support and avoid bigger problems developing and exacerbating vulnerability	A flexible approach - action and engagement on both sides.
We don't really have a way to recognise good retailer behaviour	Importance of working with independent, local community organisations to create a "safe place" for consumers to engage	Wouldn't it be great if a third party was not needed. For that to be possible - more would need to be done at that initial point of contact
Systems and standards of retailers (e.g. around credit referral and reporting are still crucial)	Issues around automation (e.g. disconnection notice for life support customer) and need for human oversight to avoid distress	As follow up is challenging in a perfect world - and this is not a perfect world.
Systems and standards of retailers are still a crucial	Judgment and bias needs to be removed - why do we need to know all the inner most details of someone's life to find them worthy or support	It is obvious that good engagement with customers can result in positive outcomes for both the retailer and the customer
Challenge for industry to just not allow payment to go on	Need to be looking at energy efficiency and income support. As a sector, need to acknowledge this and talk about it, otherwise won't get the change we need	The hardship teams in retailers could be better trained and empathetic to deal with vulnerable customers
Strategic framework highlighted well just how complex the system is. It's unlikely to call an organisation that they don't understand the industry. Increased education needed.	Recognising different cohorts of customers (i.e.. those on life support) and how they should be supported (which may be different to other consumers).	Customers could do with support on how they manage their consumption so their usage is not higher than their ability to pay
We need to be informed by the lived/real life experience of consumers	Respecting customers' privacy and awareness of sensitivity around people's vulnerability/circumstances (e.g. criminal record/prison sentence)	Automatically generated notices potentially cause issues and concern for consumers

There are tools available to help identify and understand e.g. dealing sensitively and appropriately with consumers experiencing vulnerability	social tariff is very unpopular, but no doubt that we have to focus on bringing down price for vulnerable people. A lot of angst would disappear	Distrust of retailers is definitely an issue
It may be that most of us need some tools for understanding and identifying different vulnerabilities e.g. a toolkit, and/or using existing tools and guidance available	This is a whole of supply chain issue not just a retailer issue or responsibility	Current processes for life support customers make it difficult to deal with sensitively.
Identification of vulnerability is so important	A lack of knowledge of customers' circumstances can be challenging	Complicated systems can be hard to navigate
The strategy needs to be wide and broad to accommodate the range of areas the AER covers	Collecting information early when onboarding new customers (balancing privacy concerns) e.g. remote locations, medical needs, applicable concessions	Retailers could do with incentives/ funding to better focus on vulnerable customers
With customers in extreme financial situations (e.g. cannot pay, or need to pay something quite quickly), do retailers need to reach out to who can assist / someone who is accessible to customer, how can we make this transition better (less isolated issue)?	Collecting sufficient information is finely balanced with the consequences of cognitive overload, and customers disengaging with an onboarding process that takes too long	Need to bring the whole supply chain into having responsibility for vulnerable customers
Seems like depending on your level of debt / vulnerability, you are put on hardship program, or otherwise if short-term, you are dealt with in another way (e.g. customer service team) so experience is quite different - lack of understanding of vulnerability amongst retailers	Early engagement is beneficial financially	Need to connect customers whose bills continue to exceed capacity to pay with supports to review and manage energy use
Different frontline staff deal with customers differently.	Early engagement when bills are missed	Balancing the commercial impacts with consumer support (i.e.. debt waivers can be beneficial for the consumer, but not always possible in a commercial enterprise and when considering equitable treatment of all consumers).
Different types of financial vulnerability - some short term, some long term and more extreme financial vulnerability	Early support might lead to applicable supports	Communication is critical as is building trust - which should not be assumed but should be earned
Considering preventative actions for those who dip into vulnerability	Early warning systems could help	complexity of the processes that organisations have.
Examples of great engagement from customer, customer was capable of working through issues and developing a strategy	Engaging any customer with an overdue bill above a particular threshold is effective; but it is expensive	Consumer understanding of energy bills, and the support available is critical. Sharing this information and educating customers.
Key to arriving at manageable payment plan was having a third party help.	Getting upfront engagement is most effective, because it lowers the onus on the consumer to engage with their retailer when they do face challenging circumstances	Any person can experience vulnerability at any time
Engagement from customer is key but not everyone has capacity to engage	Hasn't changed much over the years; things are the way that they have always been. Immediate reaction is that it is the same as it has always been.	We need a tiered support system
Customers may not have mental capacity to deal with rising energy bills, even opening mail. Assistance should not require customers to proactively reach out	loss of energy nearly always at same time of other moments of high stress for the customer	Getting help when you need it most is not easy

Privacy concerns if retailers were to reach out and ask if people needed help	Many difficulties for a retailer or distributor contacting this customer	How do we make getting support less complicated and not leave people feeling stigmatised.
Very small debt level for electricity to be cut off	More frequent billing can help identify challenging circumstances early. But budget will always be a concern, particularly for smaller retailers	Shocked that it was a low debt and the customer was disconnected
Disconnection impacts particularly bad for life support customers	Early identification could have helped the customer	Should there be the equivalent of a universal energy subsidy?
Importance of good systems and record-keeping to protect life support customers	There may be a trust issue; customers do not often want to own up to their circumstances	Stigma attached to reaching out is real, try to have relationship w/ customer from the beginning, try to nurture this through whole journey by demonstrating that we care about customers, trying to do the right thing
Can't just look at energy in isolation from broader poverty that people are experiencing - often concerned about food, housing etc too	Onus is always on the customer to identify issues and seek help. Retailers could be more proactive in this	Social isolation, mental health issues
Co-dependencies - how do you get people out of supports? Hardship is a much broader public policy issue	Earlier intervention would have made it easier down the track for the customer	Good outcomes are heavily contingent upon both retailer and consumer doing all the things that we want them to do - this is unrealistic, and represents a significant burden that is likely to impact upon the consumers vulnerability - effective energy frameworks and supports must not be so contingent upon 'best case' scenarios, but capable to adapt to the messy reality not only of consumers lives but likely inability of retailers to do the best all the time.
Could social workers be involved at this stage, not police	Complexity of people's situation and having the head space of sorting that out. Extremely overwhelming. not seeing all debts! some companies not understanding the situation and taking people at their word of not be able to pay. Because of her circumstances the normal contact dept may not have been able to contact her.	Demonstrates it is rational to distrust retailers where the competitive market requires all consumers to surveil the market, compare their deal against others, and ensure that the deal and essential service they are being offered, is fair and at a fair price. If I am paying more than I should if I do NOT do this, it is rational for me not to trust the retailer offering this service. The fact that people must continually inform themselves, compare, etc. means that trust is constantly eroded in a retail electricity market that does not guarantee a fair default for all customers, and requires market surveillance and discipline from consumers of retailers
Different consequences of not paying different bills - debt collection etc	Some may not know what rebates are available for themselves and this includes carers. in QLD 1 in 5 people are not aware of rebates. Quick turnaround for a resolution.	Work needs to be done on preparing for the situation of customers having less control of their energy costs - increasing use of demand on residential bills, higher and higher daily charges and off peak pricing (hot water) moving away from being a cheap option for heating water.

Disconnection could be seen as effective on one level as it brings things to a head/ crisis point - but the customer impacts are dire, particularly the longer the disconnection lasts for	The onus is always on the customer to advise of their vulnerabilities or issues rather than services being proactive especially with customers who have been identified as vulnerable.	A real dilemma in how to build trust for essential services
Every individual circumstance is different, need to take the time to talk to the individual and create bespoke responses. Perhaps challenging in larger retailers, but need space to speak to customers to foster that relationship	Elements of judging customer based on police involvement	There is increasing complexity in the electricity system. It is very difficult for customers to understand what they are paying for.
If complete non engagement though, and sticking head in the sand and not taking up opportunities, then what else is there to do?	Within the rules of privacy, it can be hard to advocate on the customer's behalf	We need to get more good news stories out there to illustrate how engagement works - helping to offset the distrust
Need to educate consumers about what support is out there, what can a retailer offer?	Broader socio-economic issues than just energy affordability. Systemic hardship	Build trust by doing the right thing
There is a gulf between the capabilities of real people and those sometimes assumed by those running the market	The process is far too complicated and involved.... apart from the issues around never having enough to afford the energy being used. CALD consumers are generally reticent to seek assistance and are underrepresented in payment assistance programs financial counsellors etc	Without the consumer advocate, it is unlikely the customer would have achieved a good outcome - this is a daunting process, there should be an easier way to get through this.
Demonstrates how many things need to go right in order for the plan to work	Very complex process that would be difficult to navigate.	Communication is a key need for customers and we need to co-ordinate those messages between groups.
There is a lot required for the customer to be able to successfully navigate the situation. Without the consumer advocate pushing and driving this it wouldn't happen.	Very complex and highlights the root of the issue around supply of energy to people on low incomes.	It shows customers at risk of disconnection who required a third party to intercede or advocate on their behalf with their retailer in order to obtain a better outcome (but quite different parties). What would happen if they contacted the company directly?
The processes are too rigid - they have been designed inside out (business first) as opposed to being designed to get a good customer outcome.	Lack of trust is inherent	Energy bills are just one expense people will be managing amid multiple expenses and stressors.
Active process of not engaging is very real. All consumers are engaged because they use energy. Perhaps not engaging in the way you want them to	Not enough support for consumers from government - where is there support for the process	Had a conversation about white label energy providers and the confusion of customers as to who their retailer is (and who will help them if they have trouble with payments).
Why does the consumer have to understand the system? Why should I get a bad outcome if I don't?	A need for a conduit between customer and retailer to ensure outcomes - particularly where the customer is not well equipped to seek support	The complexity of getting help makes you understand why customers simply disengage
How do we get solar on the roof of vulnerable customers so they can have lower cost overall	Don't always understand the impact our actions have on remote customers. Way we communicate, lose the jargon, a great website and info can make all the difference.	How do we share more information around what support is available and the worry is the people who can't advocate for themselves get an advocate to help navigate the complexity
State's need to work together to provide consistent programs so that complexity is reduced and systems to assist vulnerable people can be made more user friendly.	We train agents to hear key words, assist customers going through difficulty, but customers aren't always forthcoming with info, but need to gain trust	Demonstrates need for cross-sector approach not just within an energy silo

How do we deliver an essential service	Considering remote customers - isn't the typical financial vulnerability, but interesting and important to consider	Very difficult for call centre staff to pick up on signals
We need to concentrate on what an energy support framework can do. Don't let vulnerability be so big that we can't do anything about it. Energy system should have a neutral or positive impact on someone's vulnerability.	It took a lot of support to get to the right outcome	We only see the energy part of the issue - but presumably they have stressors building up in many aspects of their life - tip of the iceberg
We need to get advocates for people who can help with the cumulative impacts (e.g. not just energy)	What we have is effective split between passive and active relationship regarding vulnerability. Passive requires consumer to do everything - everything has to go well. But it would be much simpler for people who are in dire straits for it to happen without their active involvement.	Unless you have a dogged financial counsellor, it is hard to get assistance
Complexity is bigger picture - energy is not the only area where vulnerability exists.		





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PLEASE NOTE: While every effort has been made to transcribe participants comments accurately, a small number may not have been included in this summary due to the legibility of the content. Please contact Lyndal Mackintosh lyndal@mosaiclab.com.au for any suggested additions.

This report has been prepared by MosaicLab on behalf of and for the exclusive use Australian Energy Regulator (AER). The sole purpose of this report is to provide a summary of participant input provided during the three workshops in April and May 2021.

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MosaicLab is a Victorian-based consultancy that specialises in community & stakeholder engagement, facilitation, negotiation, strategic planning and coaching.