

CUAC ANNUAL WORK PLAN 2013-14

STRATEGIC PLANNING PERIOD 2012-2015

Approved 22 July 2013



ACN 100 188 752

CONTEXT

Mission

CUAC is an independent consumer advocacy organisation which seeks to ensure the interests of Victorian electricity, gas and water consumers—especially low income, disadvantaged, rural and regional, and Indigenous consumers—are effectively represented in the policy and regulatory debate.

Approach

CUAC provides a voice for, and strengthens the input of Victorian utility consumers—particularly low income, disadvantaged, and rural and regional consumers—in the policy and regulatory debate.

It initiates and supports research into issues of concern to Victorian utility consumers, through in-house research and building the capacity of consumers through its Grants program

CUAC investigates and responds to systemic issues affecting Victorian consumers in the competitive electricity and gas markets and with regard to water.

Values

CUAC believes all Victorians have a right to:

- affordable and sustainable electricity, gas and water
- have their interests heard in policy and regulatory decisions on electricity, gas and water
- not be disconnected from electricity, gas and/or water due solely to an inability to pay

Principles

The policy positions of CUAC are informed by the United Nations Consumer Rights Principles.

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS 2012-2015

CUAC has developed a Strategic Directions 2012-2015 to guide its overall directions for the next three year period. These are detailed in full in the CUAC Strategic Directions 2012-2015 paper. The key areas identified in that document are:

- Build research excellence and reputation
- Further consolidate research impact and effectiveness
- Increase CUAC's advocacy impact
- Further develop key organisational relationships
- Support consumer benefits in the rollout of metering technology in Victoria
- Maintain and enhance consumer protections for energy and water consumers in Victoria
- Remain a key influencing voice in major policy reforms on energy and water
- Influence improvement in industry performance standards
- Maximise benefits of two way engagement between CUAC and community sector agencies
- Expand CUAC's role in community education through sector networks
- Excellent governance
- Maintain professional team

Major work and activities: CUAC Work Plan 2013-14

CUAC begins this financial year with an exciting new project aimed at assisting non-government agencies and their clients and members with information and education resources specifically designed to ensure that low income and vulnerable consumers are not excluded from participation in flexible pricing market activity in the last half of 2013. This work and the development of national consumer protections to accompany the implementation will be a major component of our effort in the coming year.

CUAC is also keen to further develop its collaboration with its newly appointed Reference Group members. Indeed CUAC will also be building on its collaborative relationships with industry and regulatory bodies in order to maximise the value of its work.

In addition to the research and advocacy priorities identified in the work plan, we also undertake a considerable amount of work in responding to government and regulatory consultation processes, including formal and informal submissions, and participate in a wide range of government, regulatory, industry, and consumer committees and forums.

Because of the significant policy work being undertaken at the national and state level, particularly in energy, CUAC anticipates the need for a flexible approach to the priorities outlined in plan, in consultation with the Board and other stakeholders.

ANNUAL WORK PLAN 2013-14

Action item 1: Advancing the consumer interest in the implementation of flexible pricing in Victoria

Energy Information Fund project	Deliver a project to complement the DSDBI Energy Information Fund. The Fund supports community organisations to develop and deliver energy education (with a focus on flexible pricing) targeted at low-income and disadvantaged consumers. CUAC will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · develop and support a network of not-for-profit organisations engaged in energy consumer education, including Fund applicants; · build a coordinating website and resource hub for these organisations (which houses, among other things, outputs of funded projects); · develop baseline energy education materials that other community organisations can adapt and deliver to their clients; · keep the community sector abreast of energy sector developments that are relevant to consumer education activities; and · help DSDBI to implement the fund with advice, promotion, and assistance to applicants.
Advanced Metering Infrastructure Ministerial Advisory Council	Considering the consumer impacts of smart-meter related reform, advance CUAC's evidence-based policy positions to the Victorian Government through the AMI Ministerial Advisory Council. Engage with government, regulators, industry and consumer agencies to influence development of policy and regulatory settings.
National Rules on smart meter and flexible pricing	Based on CUAC's research and our knowledge of the Victorian smart meter and flexible pricing implementation, advocate for best practice protections in the development of the national rules on smart meter and flexible pricing.
Monitoring	Monitor and investigate the consumer experience of the implementation of flexible pricing, including low income, vulnerable and rural and regional consumers.

Action item 2: Improving the effectiveness of competition in the Victorian retail electricity and gas markets

Gas competition effectiveness	Undertake research examining the economic regulation of gas networks, gas retail markets, competition and consumer protection and issues affecting vulnerable consumers, including access to, affordability of and alternatives to gas. Develop an overview of the market and potential causes of gas price increases and build national and Victorian consumer advocacy capacity and understanding of the gas market.
Accurate and effective price comparison services	Based on previous CUAC research, work directly with industry and regulators to improve the accuracy and accountability of commercial switching sites, and to raise awareness about independent services to non-government agencies and consumers.
Retail market concentration	Based on CUAC's research framework, produce a policy issues paper on annual movements in market concentration in the Victorian retail electricity and gas markets.
Fair retail contracts	Develop evidence supporting a rule change application to the Australian Energy Market Commission to amend the National Energy Retail Rules, in line with CUAC's previous research on fixed-term retail market contracts -a partnership project with Consumer Action.
Consumer engagement	Develop a resource on consumer engagement and capacity building based on international literature and qualitative interviews with consumer advocates. Promote the guide for use by industry, regulatory bodies and government.

Action item 3: Advocating for consumers with particular needs or specific circumstances

Aboriginal energy and water project	Based on CUAC research, work directly with the energy and water industries to facilitate proactive programs to improve Aboriginal consumers' experiences with energy and water. Continue CUAC's engagement with Aboriginal community in order to monitor needs. Provide strategic advice to the Koori Energy Efficiency Project Partnership Group.
Women in domestic violence	In partnership with members of the CUAC Reference Group, examine the experiences of women experiencing domestic violence, including economic abuse, in maintaining access to energy and water. Work with advocates and industry to identify system and procedure changes to reduce risks and improve outcomes.
Demand side water technologies	In partnership with CUAC Reference Group member, the Alternative Technology Association, disseminate information to policy makers and stakeholders on demand side water technologies.

Action item 4: Supporting consumers experiencing payment difficulty to maintain access to supply

Water Price Increases	Anticipating water price increases from 1 July 2013, work with water businesses to see best practice communications, customer service systems and hardship programs put in place in order to prevent more consumers slipping into payment difficulty.
Water Hardship Best Practice Code	Work with the Victorian water industry to develop a best practice code on payment difficulty and hardship.
Disconnection and hardship	Examine and compare industry disconnection, restriction and hardship approaches across the energy and water industries and advocate for improved performance.
Energy Concessions	In partnership with CUAC Reference Group members Consumer Action and VCOSS and industry representatives, examine the impact of Victorian concession changes.

Action item 5: Best practice consumer protection for Victorian energy and water customers

Harmonisation with NECF	Ensure key consumer protections are maintained in the development of legislation and regulation intended to harmonise our current codes and guidelines with the National Energy Customer Framework (NECF).
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Action item 6: Ensure sound governance principles are embodied in our internal structures and processes