

CUAC ANNUAL WORK PLAN 2014-15

STRATEGIC PLANNING PERIOD 2012-2015

Endorsed on 28 July 2014



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 2014-15

CUAC undertook an ambitious action plan in 2013-14 focused on proactive research and advocacy projects. In setting the strategic priorities for this financial year CUAC is mindful of the need to extend the advocacy phase on some of these projects in order to maximise their outcomes and value. To acknowledge the resource implications of this work, these continuing projects have been identified in the 2014-15 annual plan.

The Reference Group is a major contributor to the research and advocacy direction of CUAC. We would like to acknowledge their contributions to a workshop session on 15 April 2014. CUAC staff included these ideas in an internal workshop and the CUAC Board conducted its own strategic planning workshop and twice considered this plan prior to its adoption on 28 July 2014.

ANNUAL WORK PLAN 2014-15

Action item 1: Represent Victorian consumers in the energy network price reset

Efficient network pricing	Proactively participate in the Australian Energy Regulators distribution price review for the period by undertaking research to inform submissions and the consultation process with industry and regulators.	High priority
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Action item 2: Improve the effectiveness of competition in the Victorian retail electricity and gas markets

Market behaviour	Undertake research into the consumer experience of electricity and gas markets to identify any barriers to effective consumer participation and potential regulatory gaps or compliance issues.	High priority
Commercial switching and comparator sites	Continue work with industry consumers and regulators towards the development of a voluntary code of conduct.	Continuing project

Action item 3: Support disadvantaged and vulnerable consumers to participate equitably in the Victorian energy market

Energy Information Fund: Energy Education Network Program	<p>The Energy Information Fund supports community organisations to develop and deliver participatory energy education targeted at low-income and disadvantaged consumers. CUAC will conduct the Energy Education Network Program which has two components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> visiting with community organisations to discuss their energy information needs and connecting them to resources on the energyinfohub.org.au/ website and partner with community organisations to run consumer outreach events: and support the sharing of resources and tools through the energyinfohub website and the use of My Power Planner. 	High priority
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Action item 4: Advocate for best practice policy/regulatory settings to underpin Victorian energy and water markets

Network tariffs	Review the justifications which support different electricity tariff shapes and their likely impact on consumer outcomes.	High priority
Gas price impacts on consumers	Launch Victorian gas market research and advocate policy recommendations to key stakeholders.	Continuing project
Economic regulation of water	Advocate for best practice economic regulation in the long term interests of consumers.	Continuing project
Advanced Metering Infrastructure Ministerial Advisory Council	Provide advice to the Victorian Government through the AMI Ministerial Advisory Council to support policies towards the final implementation of the AMI.	Continuing project

Action item 5: Advocate for consumers with particular needs or specific circumstances

Women in domestic violence	Launch the research report and advocate to key stakeholders towards implementation of these recommendations.	Continuing project
Aboriginal energy and water project	Continue to support the needs of Aboriginal Victorians through a partnership with Kildonan UnitingCare and Aboriginal agencies to deliver the Koori Energy Efficiency Project.	Continuing partnership project
	Continue to support industry in developing Reconciliation Action Plans with a focus on energy distribution businesses.	Continuing project

Action item 6: Support consumers experiencing payment difficulty to maintain access to supply

Energy industry performance	Work with key stakeholders to improve energy industry performance in the key areas of customer service; front line service provision; the effectiveness of pathways to hardship teams and the effectiveness of hardship programs and maintaining access to supply.	High priority
Concessions	Work with key stakeholders to advocate for maintenance of energy and water concessions in the light of further funding constraints.	High priority
	Advocate for structural improvements to processes that reduce access to concessions for eligible cardholders. Advocate for increased information to eligible concession card holders and vulnerable communities regarding energy and water concessions and assistance.	High priority
Water Hardship Best Practice Code	Build on work with the water industry towards adoption of best practice hardship code through joint industry CUAC forum.	Continuing project

Action item 7: Best practice consumer protection for Victorian energy and water customers

Regulatory review	Review the Energy Retail Code and suite of consumer protections enshrined in legislation and orders in council to address gaps arising by industry advances or issues arising from market behaviour project.	High priority
Fair retail contracts	Maintain advocacy towards fair retail contracts by supporting Fixed Term, Fixed Price Rule Change application, and documenting the rule change project outcomes.	Continuing project

Potential projects for collaborative research

		Subject to additional funding sources
Tariff reform	Examine the impacts of change to reduced consumer dependence on networks and the underlying issues of equity and cross subsidy.	Medium priority

Single parents	Research the utility access issues of single parents.	Medium priority
Caravan residents	Examine the experiences of caravan residents in maintaining access to utilities.	Medium/low priority
Fuel poverty	Examine the changing demographics of groups in <i>Fuel Poverty</i> – and their access to assistance.	Medium priority
Water late fees	Examine the use and impact of water late fees on consumers in hardship.	Medium priority