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New study to improve fairness for customers of energy and water utilities

A new project that will identify examples of consumer experience best practice to ensure Victorian consumers receive fair treatment from energy and water retailers was announced today by the Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre (CUAC).

CUAC Chair, Ronda Held said the *Principles For A Fair Consumer Experience* initiative would produce an industry best practice benchmark to guide retailers in their dealings with consumers.

Ms Held said the project involved the three main Victorian metropolitan water retailers – City West Water, South East and Yarra Valley Water – and the top tier energy retailers nationwide – Origin Energy, AGL and EnergyAustralia.

“For the first time, water and energy retailers will open up their operations and work together to identify the operating principles that work well in providing a fair service to customers and share that information with others in the sector,” she said.

“Energy and water retailers have given the project team access to their processes, enabling the tracking of interactions with customers who call frontline sales staff, credit and collections personnel as well as those dealing with people experiencing payment difficulties and complaints.

“By working with leading retailers, we will gain an understanding of the practices that work well to ensure consumers are dealt with fairly and equitably while accessing these vital services.”

Ms Held said it was important to establish industry-wide guidelines to improve access and fairness for all consumers but particularly those experiencing payment difficulties.

“In an environment where contracts can be complex and prices are rising, it is even more important to ensure that principles of fairness are consistently followed,” she said.

“Fairness is vital not only to low income households, but also customers with more complex social issues such as victims of domestic violence who may be left with high debt levels or new migrants, who may not understand water is safe to drink but it is a finite resource and must be paid for according to the level of usage.

“The project aims to ensure that retailers share existing best practices to ensure all customers have fair access to water and power for their homes, offices and other activities.”

Over the next six months, the CUAC will conduct a consultation process with the energy and water retailers to identify examples of best practice in the handling of consumer issues.

A Discussion Paper will be released late in 2016 to coincide with Roundtable Discussions with industry, government, welfare, community and business organisations.

For more information on the Principles For A Fair Consumer Experience visit:
<http://cuac.org.au/contact-us/whats-new-at-cuac>

Contact for media enquiries: Luisa Saccotelli 0400 149 901

**The Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre was established in 2002 to advocate on behalf of Victorian energy and water consumers.*