

03 November 2017

The COAG Energy Council Secretariat  
COAG Energy Council Secretariat  
GPO Box 9839  
Canberra ACT 2601

**Re: Submission to the COAG Energy Council Consultation on  
Resourcing Energy Consumer Advocacy**

To The Secretariat

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) is the peak policy advocacy body for Victorian ethnic and multicultural organisations. ECCV are also one of the community groups mentioned in your paper who are not properly resourced to effectively advocate for vulnerable consumers. The limited work on energy ECCV has completed, however, has been forward-thinking and successful. I am summarizing them, with attachments, in the belief that they may assist the Council to use our learnings to add value to an energy debate that is often reduced to technicalities.

Culturally diverse energy consumers want to participate in important energy sector decisions that affect their lives and, like the broader community, are concerned that up to 50% of their energy bills may be used by energy network businesses (energy networks) for infrastructure spending that they have not been consulted on. Communities do not understand the complex pricing mechanisms agreed to by the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) and ECCV has struggled to engage with the complexity while also delivering small and effective projects to educate diverse energy consumers.

In 2014-15 ECCV received a small grant to complete an innovative energy education project and we later wrote two government submissions to represent culturally diverse energy consumers on complex pricing mechanisms. Funded by the Victorian Government's Energy Information Fund, the 'ECCV Multicultural Communities' Energy Education Project' was a twelve months project to educate and empower groups that may not be reached by mainstream information campaigns, to enable them to make informed decisions about their electricity usage.

About 1220 culturally diverse participants attended 48 community education workshops delivered by six bilingual energy educators across six different communities. Although focused on the retail energy experience, the engagement model was unique and successfully evaluated (**Attachment 1**). With the renewed interest in energy networks and consumer consultation and participation, the ECCV share this with the Council to demonstrate that a positive model for vulnerable community engagement is possible if funded.

Outside of energy networks in Victoria, the ECCV recognize the introduction of new minimum standards for energy retailers by the Victorian Government to avoid energy disconnections for vulnerable consumers, including multicultural communities in Victoria. Multicultural communities are struggling to meet their energy bills while also facing barriers to employment and career pathways, social cohesion pressures, housing stress and community safety concerns. While Victoria's move to scrap capacity-to-pay hardship assessments is certainly relevant to many cases, we hope that it does not lessen efforts by retailers, networks and governments to appreciate the barriers

faced by culturally diverse energy consumers. We hope that energy networks will try harder to follow ECCV's previous recommendations to engage with culturally diverse communities.

In our *ECCV Submissions to the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) Victoria Electricity Pricing Review July 2015 (Attachment 2)* the ECCV recommended that the AER consider the impact on culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) energy consumers when assessing the efficiency of investment in energy networks. The ECCV noted the lack of community engagement by the sector and the need for a more balanced relationship between energy networks and CALD customers. We also observed that regional migrant settlement communities might be further disadvantaged by energy networks planning significant infrastructure upgrades and that the AER had a role to include vulnerable and isolated communities when reviewing the cost of investment in efficiency and reliability.

In our *ECCV Submission To The Victorian Essential Services Commission's (ESC) Supporting Customers, Avoiding Labels: Energy Hardship Inquiry Draft Report September 2015 (Attachment 3)* ECCV argued that Victorian reforms to replace energy hardship provisions with early payment plans could disadvantage vulnerable CALD consumers and are relieved that two years later it has introduced a range of additional, flexible options for consumers in financial hardship.

The ECCV's time-limited experience in energy advocacy for culturally diverse consumers confirms the importance of the Council's paper to properly resourcing consumer participation in revenue determination and other regulatory processes.

To support energy network engagement with culturally diverse energy consumers, the ECCV recommend the following:

- To develop the ECCV's bilingual and bicultural energy educators (BEEs) model into a grant accessible to small and medium ethno-specific organisations.
- To apply the findings of ECCV's BEE's energy education model to develop the cultural responsiveness of energy networks, with the aim of improving awareness, communication skills and how to use interpreters.
- Develop formal mechanisms to support the building of partnerships and links between the energy network sector and ethno-specific organisations to develop ownership of funded projects within communities and their organisations.
- To consult more with ethno-specific organisations to develop tools to measure the impact of consumer engagement with culturally diverse energy consumers.

For more information, please contact ECCV senior policy officer, Carl Gopalkrishnan on telephone 9354 9555 and via email [cgopalkrishnan@eccv.org.au](mailto:cgopalkrishnan@eccv.org.au) or Executive Officer Dr Irene Bouzo via email [ibouzo@eccv.org.au](mailto:ibouzo@eccv.org.au).

Yours Faithfully,



Eddie Micallef  
Chairperson