

Australian Council of Social Service and
National Consumers Electricity Advocacy Panel

NEM Advocacy – Low income and disadvantaged consumers

NCEAP project reference: Application 254 (an extension of Application 133)

Progress Report #3:

Period 01 January 2008 through 31 March 2008

Provided under the terms of the Agreement

Tony Westmore, Senior Policy Officer (Electricity)

Introduction:

ACOSS made application to the Panel for financial support of work to facilitate advocacy of consumer interests in the National Electricity Market. ACOSS and the project it proposed have a particular focus on consumers with low and fixed incomes and who are otherwise disadvantaged. ACOSS proposed a project with a focus on issues of regulation, retail codes and pricing. ACOSS proposed a project that involved the employment of a policy officer, work directed to consultation, information dissemination and advocacy.

The policy officer employed by ACOSS, Tony Westmore, commenced work on the project in February of 2006 on a two-day per week basis and has worked four-days per week since early May 2006. The national energy market reform program has been characterised over the duration of the project by changing agendas, shifting schedules, proposals of significance and substantial detail, short time frames for consideration and response. ACOSS has endeavoured to keep abreast of developments and to respond as appropriate.

Summary of progress: highlights

Retail policy – the new national regulatory framework: Further to previous reports, work on development of a national regulatory framework for retail (non-price) and distribution (non-economic) continued to be suspended while MCE SCO finalised a 'policy response'. The next stage of stakeholder work will follow the release this response for consultation.

Community service obligations: In April of 2007 COAG mandated a review of energy industry related Community Service Obligations (CSOs) for completion in June of 2008. The review is underway. The policy officer coordinated the distribution of and responses to draft versions of a compilation of jurisdictional policies, programs and concession arrangements.

Smart meters: In early February DRET sought advice regarding the constitution of a stakeholder technical group that would advance the roll-out subject to MCE guidance. Along with other consumer advocates, ACOSS provided some suggestions. In early March MCE SCO released for public consultation Phase 2 of the cost benefit analysis of smart metering and direct load control. The policy officer attended a public forum convened by SCO to consider the cost benefit analysis. The policy officer participated in a meeting between DRET staff and consumer advocates held in conjunction with a meeting of the Consumer Roundtable. The policy officer commenced work on a response to the analysis.

Information and coordination for COSS policy staff: Over the course of the three month reporting period the policy officer facilitated communication between COSS staff and associates particularly with regard to developments in the smart meter project and the review of Community Service Obligations. The policy officer coordinated a two day meeting of COSS staff and associates held in Melbourne in February. The policy officer worked to develop the program for a one day conference with a focus on essential energy services, climate change and low income households to be held in April in conjunction with the national ACOSS Social Inclusion conference.

Climate change, emissions trading, the national electricity market, energy efficiency, equity and related issues: ACOSS continued to work in partnership with Australian Conservation Foundation and Choice to produce a comprehensive assessment of these issues and potential responses (a draft of this document was provided with the previous report). A final version of the report was due for publication and distribution in early April. The policy officer was responsible for research, drafting and editing, liaison with partners. The policy officer, along with other consumer advocates, met with advisors to The Hon Penny Wong, Minister for Climate Change and Water to discuss issues relating to climate change and responses.

Productivity Commission Review of Australia's Consumer Policy Framework: In partnership with other consumer advocates the policy officer contributed to the drafting of a response to the draft report of the Review. This response addressed components of the Review that concerned energy specifically. The policy officer, along with other consumer advocates met with Assistant Commissioner Dr Ralph Lattimore, to discuss the Review and issues relating specifically to energy consumers.

Consumers' energy website: The policy officer continued to work with other advocates on a project to develop a publicly accessible website holding energy related content and links. The policy officer developed and lodged an application for funding from the Advocacy Panel for this project.

Consumers' energy conference: The policy officer responded to requests for further particulars from the Advocacy Panel regarding an application for funds for a national conference to be held second half 2008 and, pending a decision on the application, continued work to program the event.

Advocacy panel: The policy officer made written submissions to Panel processes including those regarding its funding requirement for 2008-09.

The policy officer took four days of accrued annual leave in the period ending 31 March; from 02 January.

Meetings and consultations:

Department of Resources, Energy & Tourism, Productivity Commission: meetings 23/01, Canberra
 Brotherhood of St Laurence: meeting 04/02, Melbourne
 COSS workers and others: meeting 05-06/02, Melbourne
 Department of Water & Energy: meeting re retail policy 08/02, Sydney
 National Consumers Electricity Advocacy Panel: meeting 11/02, Sydney
 Department of Water & Energy (Consumer Committee): meeting 13/02, Sydney
 Productivity Commission: public hearing re Review of Consumer Framework 18/02, Sydney
 Solar Cities Congress, conference 19-20/02, Adelaide
 Energy Australia: meeting with consumers re smart meters 26/02, Sydney
 Department of Climate Change: NGO Roundtable meeting 03/03, Canberra
 National Consumer Congress: conference 05-06/03, Perth
 National Energy Consumers Roundtable: meeting 17-19/03, Canberra
 Department of Resources, Energy & Tourism: meeting re smart meters 19/03, Canberra
 Minister for Resources, Energy & Tourism: meeting 19/03, Canberra
 Office of Minister for Climate Change & Water: meeting 19/03, Canberra
 Australian Energy Market Commission: meeting re consumer consultation 20/03, Sydney
 MCE SCO (Smart Meter Working Group): public forum 28/03, Sydney

ACOSS submissions and etc:

01/02 Advocacy Panel: Application on behalf of National Consumers' Roundtable on Energy for Masterclass on Climate Change

01/02 Advocacy Panel: Application on behalf of National Consumers' Roundtable on Energy for Development of Advocacy Website

11/02 Advocacy Panel: Submission regarding Panel Funding Requirement for 2008/2009 Financial Year

12/02 Department of Resources, Energy & Tourism and Smart Meter Working Group: Submission regarding Stakeholder Technical Working Group

18/02 Productivity Commission: Joint Submission National Energy Consumer Roundtable regarding Draft Report of Review of Australia's Consumer Policy Framework

13/03 Advocacy Panel: Application for Panel Funding (extension) of ACOSS NEM Advocate 2008/2009

Research and development:

Smart meters, advanced metering infrastructure and related matters
Price regulation, competition and regulation

Climate change, emissions pricing, energy efficiency and equity (low income and disadvantaged households), the Interim Report of the Garnaut Climate Change Review