TasCOSS National Electricity Market Consumer Advocacy Project
First Progress Report
28 April 2005

The project, involving the facilitation and coordination of Tasmanian domestic end user consumers and advocates, commenced with funding from the Panel in late January 2005. This report is the first of four quarterly progress reports required by the funding agreement.

Participation in the national NEM consumer advocacy network

I have been and continue to be an active participant (and the sole Tasmanian participant) in the national network of electricity consumer advocates coordinated by the Consumer Law Centre Victoria. This involves participation in regular (bimonthly) national telephone link-ups at which national consumer issues are discussed, information is shared and plans are made for cooperative action on issues of common interest. It also involves participation in an e-mail group, NEMCHAT, established to enable community advocates to communicate about issues relating to the Ministerial Council on Energy's (MCE) reform of the National Electricity Market. The e-group focuses on communication on the MCE's reforms in the areas of governance and institutions, economic regulation and user participation.

The network has focused its attention in this period largely on the MCE's paper on consumer advocacy model options – *Review of Consumer Advocacy Requirements – Report for User Participation Working Group* – and a number of network participants have agreed to prepare a joint submission to the MCE on the options. Detailed discussions on the relative merits (and otherwise) of the options examined in the MCE paper have proved very useful in informing the TasCOSS response to the paper.

Submission to the Ministerial Council on Energy

TasCOSS has prepared a submission to the MCE on the paper mentioned above – *Review of Consumer Advocacy Requirements – Report for User Participation Working Group*. The TasCOSS submission emphasises the need for strong and well-resourced consumer advocacy in the NEM, and especially for low income, disadvantaged and vulnerable consumers and those from small jurisdictions. It presents the case for Tasmanian domestic consumers who have the highest electricity costs in the nation matched by some of the lowest incomes.

The submission supports a national advocacy model that includes a representative consumer consultative committee meeting quarterly to provide consumer perspectives to a small board and full-time executive officer.

I attach a copy of the submission for your information.

Advice on vulnerable consumer policy

I met with the Executive Director of the Electricity Retailers Association of Australia (ERAA) and with the Retail Regulatory Manager of Aurora Energy to assist with the development by ERAA of a national policy to guide its member organisations in dealing with vulnerable consumers. The ERAA expressed its desire to lead the retail industry nationally with a well-informed policy on vulnerable consumers and was seeking input from community

sector organisations with experience and expertise in this area. TasCOSS has recently been involved in lengthy and constructive discussions with Aurora Energy on the development of their company 'hardship policy'.

Consultations in North and North-West Tasmania

I have been planning and preparing to carry out consultations with community sector staff and consumer advocates in the North and North West of the state in mid-May. I will be holding information and consultation sessions in Launceston and Devonport on electricity consumer issues at which I will provide information about the TasCOSS NEM Consumer Advocacy Project, the progress of Tasmania's move to join the NEM and the implications for domestic consumers, as well as discussing general electricity issues. I will also be seeking feedback from participants about issues of concern for consumers in relation to electricity supply and the changes likely once Tasmania has joined the NEM.

I will include a full report of the consultation outcomes in my next progress report.

Attachments:

- TasCOSS submission to the MCE on future consumer advocacy arrangements in the NEM as detailed in issues paper – *Review of Consumer Advocacy Requirements – Report for User Participation Working Group* – April 2005.

28 April 2005

Kath McLean
Project / Policy Officer
Tasmanian Council of Social Service

PO Box 1126
Sandy Bay TAS 7006
Phone (03) 6231 0755 Fax (03) 6223 6136
kath@tascoss.org.au