

SACOSS

*South Australian Council
of Social Service*

National Consumer Roundtable on Energy Impact Statement

**September 2019
to August 2020**



Contents

Acronyms in this report	1
Executive summary.....	2
1. About SACOSS	3
2. The National Consumer Roundtable on Energy.....	3
3. Roundtable enabling groups	4
4. This impact statement.....	4
6. Identifying impacts for each outcome	7
Outcome 1 Embed consumer perspectives in national, state and territory energy forums and agencies	7
Outcome 2 Impact the regulatory framework for energy at the national, state and territory levels.....	10
Outcome 4 Achieve policy change on energy at the national, state and territory levels	17
Outcome 5 Develop integrated or holistic perspectives that take account of the social, economic and environmental impacts of energy and energy policy and regulation.....	20
Outcome 6 Enhance capacity of participants	24
Outcome 7 Develop innovation and lateral thinking to improve outcomes for energy consumers, particularly those who are vulnerable	27
Outcome 8 Sustainable participation	29

Acronyms in this report

ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Service
ACTCOSS	ACT Council of Social Service
AEC	Australian Energy Council
AEM	Australian Energy Market
AEMC	Australian Energy Market Commission
AEMO	Australia Energy market Operator
AER	Australian Energy Regulator
BSL	Brotherhood of St Laurence
CALC	Consumer Action Law Centre
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
COTA	Council on the Ageing
CPRC	Consumer Policy Research Centre
CVGA	Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance
DEIP	Distributed Energy Integration Program
DER	Distributed energy resources (and DER Enabling Group)
DNSPs	Distribution network service providers
DRSP	Demand response service provider
ECA	Energy Consumers Australia
ECCNSW	Ethnic Communities Council of NSW
ESB	Energy Services Board
NCOSS	NSW Council of Social Service
NEM	National Electricity Market
NER	National Electricity Rules
PD	Payment difficulties
AEC	Australian Energy Council
PIAC	Public Interest Advocacy Centre Ltd
QCOSS	Queensland Council of Social Service
SACOSS	South Australian Council of Social Service
SVdP	St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria
TasCOSS	Tasmanian Council of Social Service
TEC	Total Environment Centre
TSS	Tariff Structure Statements
VCOSS	Victorian Council of Social Service
WACOSS	Western Australian Council of Social Service

Executive summary

This impact statement concludes that the National Consumer Roundtable on Energy has achieved or partly achieved all its eight agreed outcomes.

Significantly, the evidence outlined here points to the Roundtable having a tangible and valuable impact on the capacity of consumer and community organisations in advocating for consumers within the energy market. This is particularly demonstrated by the Roundtable's success in:

- impacting the regulatory framework for energy at the national, state and territory levels (Outcome 2)
- leveraging influence on energy debates, policy and regulation through collaborative action (Outcome 3)
- achieving policy change on energy (Outcome 4)
- enhancing the capacity of participants (Outcome 6).

We also consider sufficient evidence exists to conclude the Roundtable has achieved or partially achieved all other agreed outcomes.

While we are confident of this conclusion, our evaluation has been challenged by the following limitations:

- the perennial difficulty in attributing national or state-level regulatory or policy change to the actions of a single group or activity
- a mismatch between the agreed success indicators and outcomes, with the link between the two often tenuous.

We therefore consider that both the Roundtable and its funding body, Energy Consumers Australia (ECA), would benefit from revising the outcomes and success indicators agreed in the 2018 funding agreement for future reporting.

Despite these limitations, on balance the available evidence strongly suggests the Roundtable has influenced policy and regulation, built community-sector collaboration, and advanced consumer perspectives within the energy market.

The survey results also clearly show participants value the Roundtable. They embrace the learning it provides and make use of the opportunities for collaboration and concerted advocacy it affords to drive change for consumers. Importantly, they look forward to the Roundtable's continued growth and improvement, with the desire to strengthen and leverage a clear, unified voice a key priority.

'The Roundtable is an important forum. It allows for the free flow of discussion for advocates. To take it to the next level, ask the question: what type of culture do we want to see in this sector and how do we as Roundtable participants bring this to life in the way we do things?' – Survey respondent

1. About SACOSS

The South Australian Council of Social Services (SACOSS) is the peak body for the non-government community and health services sector in South Australia. It has 170 members, including more than 100 organisational members representing non-government services across the state.

Seeking a future of justice, opportunity and shared wealth for all South Australians, SACOSS undertakes the following activities:

- represents and speaks on behalf of members across the sector
- undertakes research, policy development and advocacy to give voice to people experiencing disadvantage
- shares information across the sector to keep members up to date about changes and policies relevant to them
- provides community information and advocacy about poverty and disadvantage and the work of its members
- builds the capacity of the sector through training and other activities to strengthen advocacy and improve service delivery.

2. The National Consumer Roundtable on Energy

The National Consumer Roundtable on Energy is an informal coalition of national and jurisdictional energy consumer advocates primarily focussed on policy dialogue and strategic collaboration. Established in 2004 with funding through ECA, it is currently convened and coordinated by SACOSS and governed by a steering committee.

The Roundtable's vision is:

Small energy consumers in Australia are well served when decisions are made which take account of consumer interests.

The Roundtable's mission is:

To better enable participant organisations to deliver outcomes at national and state levels that are in the long-term interests of small energy consumers, with a focus on the consumption and production of electricity and gas.

To this end, it meets twice a year in various capital cities, giving consumer advocates the opportunity to consider, collaborate and strategise on contemporary energy policy as it relates to consumers.

The Roundtable convened four times between September 2019 and August 2020: once in Adelaide in January and three times online (May, June and July 2020) due to the social distancing put in place in all states in March because of the COVID-19 pandemic. No communiqués were developed for the online sessions.

3. Roundtable enabling groups

Under the new Roundtable structure introduced in 2018-19, the Roundtable can establish up to six enabling groups each year to progress collective action.

Each enabling group consists of members of the Roundtable with an appointed lead. The lead is responsible for coordinating activity to advance the Roundtable outcomes and for reporting accordingly.

Three enabling groups were active during the reporting period:

- the Payment Difficulty/Hardship Enabling Group (PD), which aims to develop a common, coordinated understanding on support and assistance for people experiencing payment difficulty
- the Distributed Energy Resources (DER) Enabling Group, which aims to identify and discuss the opportunities and challenges facing consumers created by the DER transition, with a focus on inclusion and equity
- the Concessions Enabling Group, which was established in January 2020 to build cross-jurisdictional collaboration on energy concessions reform.

See Outcome 5 for organisational membership of these groups.

4. This impact statement

As convener of the Roundtable, SACOSS is required to submit an annual impact statement to ECA. This statement covers the period from September 2019 to September 2020. It details:

- the Roundtable's outcomes and success indicators as agreed by ECA for the reporting period
- the activities undertaken during the reporting period to advance these outcomes
- the impact of these activities in relation to each outcome and evidence of this impact.

It draws on the following:

- responses to a survey sent to all current Roundtable members and key external stakeholders identified by SACOSS (with a 40% return rate)
- Roundtable documents for the reporting period including:
 - Progress Report 4 – prepared for ECA on 31 March 2020
 - Progress Report 5 – prepared for ECA on 13 August 2020)
- further information provided on request by the Roundtable coordinating team in SACOSS.

4.1 About the survey

A short survey was sent to all current Roundtable members and key external stakeholders identified by SACOSS. Respondents were as follows:

SURVEY RESPONDENTS	
TOTAL NUMBER OF SURVEY RECIPIENTS	60
TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	24
RESPONSE RATE	40%
Members of the Roundtable (including 4 members of the Roundtable Steering Committee)	20
External stakeholders	4

LENGTH OF MEMBERSHIP – ROUNDTABLE MEMBERS	
Less than 1 year	6
1-2 years	0
2-3 years	4
More than 3 years	10

NUMBER OF MEETINGS ATTENDED BY MEMBERS IN REPORTING PERIOD	
One	4
Two	7
Three or more	8

5. Agreed outcomes and success measures

The following Roundtable outcomes and success indicators were agreed by SACOSS and ECA in their 2018 funding agreement. For each outcome, the success measures were achieved. This is detailed in section 6.

OUTCOMES	AGREED SUCCESS INDICATORS
Outcome 1: Embed consumer perspectives in national, state and territory energy forums and agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communique is circulated to 50% more senior stakeholders
Outcome 2: Impact the regulatory framework for energy at the national, state and territory levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least one recommendation from Roundtable is provided for in the regulatory framework
Outcome 3: Leverage influence on energy debates, policy and regulation through collaborative action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least three enabling groups are convened each year
Outcome 4: Achieve policy change on energy at the national, state and territory levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least two recommendations from two enabling groups are referenced by a decision-making body • At least one recommendation from an enabling group is adopted by a decision-making body
Outcome 5: Develop integrated or holistic perspectives that take account of the social, economic and environmental impacts of energy and energy policy and regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling groups consist of a mix of different sectoral interests • At least four Roundtable meeting sessions include speakers representing different sectoral interests
Outcome 6: Enhance capacity of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling groups have a minimum of four members each • At least one masterclass is conducted each year
Outcome 7: Develop innovation and lateral thinking to improve outcomes for energy consumers, particularly those who are vulnerable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least one proactive issue is taken up each year
Outcome 8: Sustainable participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 75% of participants remain stable • At least two new participants remain engaged

It is important to note that except for outcomes 2 and 4, the agreed success indicators measure outputs or procedural outcomes and do not indicate impact. Nevertheless, they are integral to the success of the Roundtable so progress against them is detailed in section 6. To meet the requirements of this report, Section 6 goes beyond these indicators and identifies impacts that are directly or indirectly linked to the work of the Roundtable and its members.

6. Identifying impacts for each outcome

Outcome 1 Embed consumer perspectives in national, state and territory energy forums and agencies

Agreed success indicators

Communique is circulated to 50% more senior stakeholders

Progress against success indicator

The communique arising from the January 2020 Roundtable and accompanying presentations were:

- circulated to the Energy Charter, the Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC), the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) and the Australian Energy Regulator (AER)
- shared with Roundtable participants and members via NEMchat
- shared on SACOSS social media
- emailed by Roundtable members to more than 100 energy market stakeholders.

The communique was also circulated internally at AEMC and by the Energy Charter to all industry working group members.

As noted previously, the final Roundtable was conducted online over three sessions in May, June and July 2020. A communique was not developed for this Roundtable.

NEMchat continues to be a vehicle of communication and information dissemination for community advocates.

Impact

Joint statement

Consumer perspectives were embedded in a joint statement of Roundtable participant organisations released in March 2020. The statement called for an energy hardship relief package for customers in response to the unprecedented financial hardship wrought by the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic.

It advocated for the needs of employees and business owners directly affected by the shutdown. It also advocated for all households experiencing increased energy costs through government-imposed work-from-home and stay-at-home measures at a time when household income was reduced through government-directed shutdowns and consequent job losses.

While recognising measures already in place, it called for the Australian Government to:

- work with energy retailers and consumer advocates to deliver temporary, targeted energy hardship support to minimise the accumulation of energy debt
- subsidise an increase in Australia-based call-centre capacity to help energy businesses increase or recover capacity for customer support and create local jobs
- support measures to improve energy efficiency among stay-at-home consumers and increase the capacity of advice services helping people adopt energy-efficient decisions and behaviours.

The statement asked energy businesses to:

- work with community and government on a specific COVID-19 response
- promote additional measures to support their customers and the community
- announce a moratorium on disconnections and debt collection for all consumers
- provide universal access to payment support and hardship assistance measures and take proactive steps to ensure consumers accessed this support.

It also called on state governments to intensify existing state-based energy relief efforts through measures such as temporary increases to existing state-based energy rebates and concessions.

NEMchat

NEMchat was created in 2004 to enable community advocates representing consumers of energy to communicate about issues relating to the National Electricity Market (NEM). Participants in NEMchat are encouraged to share information, concerns, ideas and advocacy proposals relating to the NEM, particularly in the areas of governance and institutions, economic and retail regulation and user participation.

NEMchat is used as a vehicle of communication for Roundtable information and activities. It currently has a community of 59 members across Australia.

Survey responses

Significantly, 78% of respondents to the survey said they considered this outcome had been achieved or partly achieved. They cited the following evidence:

- increased requests for specific consumer input on key policy and regulatory processes

- requests by energy bodies for input from Roundtable members on COVID-related impacts and effective cross-jurisdiction coordination on COVID-related challenges, relief and advocacy
- increased recognition of the importance of consumer perspectives in formal policy language and communication
- feedback from speakers at the Roundtable, such as those from the Energy Charter and the AEMC, saying the Roundtable helped agencies gain more knowledge of consumer perspectives
- direct conversations with policymakers at regulatory bodies and references in policy or regulatory determinations
- establishment of a new jurisdictional energy consumer forum
- ongoing development of the Energy Charter
- the focus of some market bodies and businesses on culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) perspectives
- the joint letter to the Energy Security Board (ESB) on the need to include consumer perspectives in the two-sided market consultation process two (see Outcome 3).

On balance we consider this outcome has been achieved for the reporting period.

For future work and reporting, it would be useful to develop a revised success indicator with a more direct link to the desired outcome and impact.

Outcome 2 Impact the regulatory framework for energy at the national, state and territory levels

Agreed success indicators

At least one recommendation from the Roundtable is provided for in the regulatory framework

Progress against success indicator

Roundtable members and other consumer organisations and businesses collaborated on a joint submission to the AEMC Wholesale Demand Response Mechanism Draft Determination.

This input was reflected in the AEMC final determination to implement a wholesale demand response mechanism released on 11 June 2020.

Advocacy in this area has continued with three Roundtable participant organisations submitting additional rule change requests to the AEMC.

Impact

New provider category rule change

The joint submission to the AEMC Wholesale Demand Response Mechanism Draft Determination called for the introduction of a demand response service provider category into the NEM. This change would allow large energy consumers to provide a service to the market in the form of demand response. For example, a large manufacturer could be rewarded by reducing demand at peak times to help the AEMO manage the grid in high demand periods.

This request was adopted by the AEMC, with the final rule:

- introducing a new market participant category, a demand response service provider (DRSP)
- placing obligations on DRSPs that replicate those on other scheduled participants
- setting out a process for having baseline methodologies determined and applied to wholesale demand response units
- providing for DRSPs to be settled in the wholesale market for the wholesale demand response they provided at the prevailing spot price
- setting out implementation timeframes for the mechanism, commencing 24 October 2021

Economic regulatory framework submissions

The AEMC 2019 Economic Regulatory Framework Review identified there was a significant risk that the framework would not continue to promote efficient investment in, and operation and use of, energy services. The AEMC called for reforms so that regulations would support the transition to a fully integrated electricity system that leveraged opportunities presented by a high distributed energy

resources (DER) future and delivered benefits to all electricity system users.

In July 2016, as a result of work by the DER enabling group and the Distributed Energy Integration Program (DEIP), three Roundtable participant organisations submitted rule change requests to the AEMC: The Total Environment Centre (TEC), the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVdP).

These submissions sought to amend the National Electricity Rules (NER) applying to the economic regulation of distribution network service providers (DNSPs) in the NEM to facilitate the efficient integration of DER for the grid of the future.

They focussed on:

- updating the regulatory framework to reflect the community expectation for DNSPs to efficiently provide export services to support DER
- promoting incentives for efficient investment in, and operation and use of, export services
- enabling export charges as a pricing tool to send efficient signals for future expenditure associated with export services, reward customers for actions that make better use of the network or improve network operations and allocate costs in a fair and efficient way.

The AEMC has put these proposed changes out for consultation, with written submissions closing on 10 September 2020.

Survey responses

Just over 70% of survey respondents said they considered this outcome had been achieved or partly achieved. As well as noting the rule changes already detailed here, they cited as evidence:

- responses to COVID-19 demonstrating that consumer perspectives are increasingly being incorporated into regulatory responses, particularly around debt, hardship and disconnection
- reviews, such as a review of the hardship guidelines, and COVID-19 support achieving better outcomes for households specifically because of well-informed and coordinated engagement by consumer advocates.

Two state-based achievements were also mentioned:

- ACT: 'Our engagement with the Roundtable has informed our input into the review of the Consumer Protection Code for utilities in the ACT. We have also benefited from being part of a network that has engaged in developing rule change

proposals from a consumer perspective around the integration of distributed energy resources.’

- Queensland: ‘We’ve had some wins in the TSS [Tariff Structure Statements] in Queensland, recognition by retailers and networks that consumer protections are needed in the face of COVID, some changes in energy regulations.’

Several respondents stressed the difficulty of attributing impact to the Roundtable with one noting: ‘Not sure if due to Roundtable but certainly consumer perspective was embedded in the RESET and TSS regulatory processes.’

On balance, we consider this outcome has been achieved for the reporting period.

We recognise the difficulty in directly attributing changes to state and national regulatory regimes directly to – or solely to – the work of the Roundtable. However, this outcome does not require that such a high threshold be met. It simply requires that at least one recommendation from the Roundtable is provided for in the regulatory framework.

For future work and reporting, it would be useful to introduce or refine mechanisms to trace and track the Roundtable’s advocacy work so internal and external stakeholders have access to the evidence for this outcome.

Outcome 3 Leverage influence on energy debates, policy and regulation through collaborative action

Agreed success indicators

At least three enabling groups are convened each year

Progress against success indicator

Three enabling groups were active during the year.

The Distributed Energy Resources (DER) and Payment Difficulty/Hardship (PD) enabling groups continued from the previous year and a Concessions Enabling Group was established.

The PD and Concessions enabling groups met online and through teleconferencing during the reporting period to comply with COVID-19 restrictions. The enabling groups also engaged via email during this time to draft policy principles, documents and a research proposal.

The DER enabling group did not formally convene over the reporting period, with most participants in this group collaborating in and contributing to the DEIP program and the recently submitted rule change request (see Outcome 2), as well as ongoing meetings with the ESB.

Impact

Leveraging influence is a key goal of the Roundtable and activities are ongoing. In addition to the collaborative projects referenced in outcomes 2 and 3, other collaborations in the reporting period include:

- a joint letter to the ESB requesting a consumer reference group to provide input into the two-sided market process
- regular meetings with consumer advocates and the ESB since 25 June 2020
- a range of consultative actions around a best-practice response to COVID-19.

Joint letter and regular meetings

The joint letter to the ESB (26 May 2020) expressed concern about the lack of substantial consumer input into a major reform on the two-sided market process that would have significant impacts on all energy consumers.

It argued that a representative consumer reference group would add real value to the process and result in superior market design that delivered for consumers. It suggested this group be modelled on the DEIP access and pricing working group which achieved significant stakeholder engagement and consensus around regulatory reform.

This approach has led to regular online meetings between representatives from the Roundtable and enabling groups and the ESB and AEMC.

A best-practice response to COVID-19

The PD Enabling Group created and circulated the first draft of a best-practice response to COVID-19 for energy retailers.

The best-practice response calls for additional consumer support that effectively supplements existing payment difficulty and hardship supports. This includes:

- inclusive COVID-19 specific messaging encouraging all impacted consumers to seek help
- direct messaging to all consumers with direct links to making a support application
- simple, non-exclusionary 'eligibility' criteria that allow consumers to self-assess, with all applications accepted in good faith
- unrestricted access to no-disconnection or debt-recovery action and deferral of debt and other payments
- clear messaging that this assistance is unrestricted, but with ongoing or additional support conditional on individual assessments
- a guarantee that all consumers receiving unrestricted assistance would be contacted and 'triaged' by their retailer within three months
- proactive processes to identify other customers who may benefit from assistance to avoid ongoing or future payment challenges.

The enabling group has used insights gained through this work to provide informed and evidence-based input into several other forums – see Outcome 5.

Cross-jurisdictional collaboration on energy concessions

The Concessions Enabling Group was established in January 2020 to build cross-jurisdictional collaboration on energy concessions. It has broad jurisdictional membership.

Progress on collaboration has presented a long-term challenge due to the variations in concessions regimes across jurisdictions and the diverse range of population groups represented across the community sector.

Teleconference meetings during the reporting period:

- drafted shared principles and common views on collaboration
- provided input into the development of a successful collaborative research proposal to support a nationally coordinated campaign to improve energy concessions and better meet the needs of people on low incomes.

The enabling group will comprise part of the project advisory group for the research project, entitled 'Modelling impacts of changes to the electricity concession'.

Survey responses

More than 85% of survey respondents said they considered this outcome had been achieved or partly achieved. In affirming the COVID-19 best practice work already detailed, one respondent noted:

'Responses to COVID impacts have been coordinated nationally through National Roundtable Networks and enabling group work in payment difficulty responses is increasingly gaining traction with regulatory bodies. This work, and this progress would not be possible without the collaborative network provided by the roundtable.'

Others stated:

'Particularly in the experience of COVID, consumer groups have come together well to discuss issues around payment difficulties and no disconnections.'

'I think that this has been one of the most significant achievements and has been critically important during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of collaborative action aimed at ensuring consumers are protected and their interests are promoted.'

Other examples where respondents considered the Roundtable had exerted influence through collaborative action were:

- Energy Charter Disclosure Statements – for the second round, these will be shorter and more customer centric
- customer protections during the pandemic – the final 'Statement of Expectations' reflects feedback from Roundtable members
- the regulator calling on input from members for policy statements
- work between energy advocates on energy hardship guidelines and continued work in this area.

Two respondents who considered the outcome had been achieved or partly achieved offered the following advice:

'Still more could be done by coordinated engagement on processes by compromising on some points between advocates in order to present a unified front to industry and regulators.'

'I don't think that the Roundtable acts in collaborative action per se. The positions of individual advocates still appear disparate and sometimes conflicting, which makes it difficult for industry and policy makers to respond.'

We consider this outcome has been achieved for the reporting period.

For future work and reporting, it would be useful to develop a revised success indicator with a more direct link to the desired outcome and impact.

Engaging with the concerns raised by respondents to explore new ways of reaching consensus or agreeing on a clear and unified voice for key reforms that would improve outcomes for consumers would also be valuable.

Outcome 4 Achieve policy change on energy at the national, state and territory levels

Agreed success indicators

At least two recommendations from two enabling groups are referenced by a decision-making body

At least one recommendation from an enabling group is adopted by a decision-making body

Progress against success indicators

The PD Enabling Group is collecting data to develop longitudinal evidence of systemic gaps and monitor the performance of both the Victorian and national payment support frameworks.

This data will strengthen its input into upcoming reviews including the AER review of the Customer Hardship Policy Guideline and the Victorian Essential Services Commission review of the Payment Difficulty Framework (expected in 2021).

The Concessions Enabling Group will be engaging further through the recently funded ECA project on concession reform.

Impacts

The successful joint submission to the AEMC Wholesale Demand Response Mechanism Draft Determination referenced in Outcome 2 reflects or is consistent with recommendations made through the Roundtable.

Payment difficulties

As noted in Outcome 3, the PD Enabling Group has created and circulated the first draft of a best-practice response to COVID-19 for energy retailers.

The PD Enabling Group has used the insights gained through this work to:

- identify potential opportunities for joint advocacy with retailers on government support for consumer energy debt mitigation
- respond to the AEC discussion paper on COVID-19 impacts, retailer responses and next steps
- provide input to the AER, ESC Victoria, Energy Charter, AEC and state and Australian governments and agencies on COVID-19 support and assistance measures.

Concessions

The Concessions Enabling Group has:

- drafted a collaborative research proposal to examine the shift from flat to percentage-based energy concessions and submitted a successful grant proposal to ECA
- formed the backbone of a project advisory group for this project that identifies potential industry partners such as the Energy Charter signatories.

Survey responses

Interestingly, 47% of respondents said they considered this outcome had been partly achieved and almost 53% said they did not know whether it had been achieved or not.

This result in part reflects the difficulties inherent in measuring the impact of individual players and actions in the complexity of national and state-based policymaking.

It may also reflect concerns raised by one respondent that, while the Roundtable 'definitely improves our relationships and ability to collaborate, share knowledge, develop positions and evolve strategies, any policy improvements are from a combination of the Roundtable and our ongoing work' and therefore not solely attributable to the Roundtable.

Another respondent offered a more critical view, saying:

'Change requires concerted collaborative action. While I have little doubt that the discussions at the Roundtable are working towards this, there is still a perception that advocates hold different positions and take different approaches – some are collaborative and others are more demanding.'

Respondents still noted some achievements, including the implementation of the wholesale demand response mechanism (detailed in Outcome 2). This was described by one respondent as representing 'a significant national policy change that took ongoing co-operation between roundtable participants over a number of years, with closely coordinated advocacy over the past 12 months to finalise the reform'.

Other examples cited were:

- access to dispute resolution services which has been made available for customers in embedded networks in some jurisdictions, but not all
- changes to hardship programs
- COVID-19 support mechanisms
- renewable energy zones
- climate resilience in AEMO's Integrated System Plan.

One respondent stated:

'Our engagement with the Roundtable informed our advocacy in the ACT on the ACT Climate Change Strategy 2019-25 and the forthcoming ACT Sustainable Energy Policy 2020-25 which address key consumer concerns, particularly around a just transition to net zero emissions in the ACT.'

On balance, given the examples cited here and in Outcome 2, we consider this outcome has been achieved for the reporting period.

We note respondents' concerns about the challenges of agreeing on a clear and unified voice and consider specific attention to this issue could generate meaningful improvement.

We recognise the difficulty in directly attributing changes to state and national regulatory regimes directly to – or solely to – the work of the Roundtable. However, this outcome does not require measurement against such a high threshold.

Outcome 5 **Develop integrated or holistic perspectives that take account of the social, economic and environmental impacts of energy and energy policy and regulation**

Agreed success indicators

Enabling groups consist of mix of different sectoral interests

At least four Roundtable meeting sessions include speakers representing different sectoral interests

Progress against success indicators

Membership

The Roundtable has members from the following 21 agencies across Australia:

ROUNDTABLE MEMBERSHIP	
ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS)	New South Wales Council of Social Service (NCOSS)
Anglicare Tasmania	Public Interest Advocacy Centre Ltd (PIAC)
Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS)	Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS)
Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL)	Renew (formerly Alternative Technology Association)
Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance (CVGA)	South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS)
Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC)	St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria (SVdP)
Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC)	Tasmanian Council of Social Service (TasCOSS)
Council on the Ageing COTA)	Total Environment Centre (TEC)
Energy Consumers Australia (as an observer)	Uniting Communities
Ethnic Communities Council of NSW (ECCNSW)	Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS)
Kildonan UnitingCare	Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS)

This broad representation is reflected in all three enabling groups.

PAYMENT DIFFICULTY / HARDSHIP ENABLING GROUP	
PIAC, Lead	ECCNSW
COTA	CALC
Uniting Communities	TasCOSS
QCOSS	ACOSS
SACOSS	

DISTRIBUTED ENERGY RESOURCES (DER) ENABLING GROUP	
TEC, Co-lead	ATA
ACOSS, Co-lead	CVGA
QCOSS	SVdP
PIAC	Uniting Communities
SACOSS	

CONCESSIONS ENABLING GROUP	
ACOSS, Co-lead	PIAC
SACOSS, Co-lead	QCOSS
COTA	TasCOSS
VCOSS	ACTCOSS
NCOSS	WACOSS
SVdP	

Presentations

Roundtable meetings included speakers from ECA, AER and the Australian Energy Council (AEC). Participants were also able to share their understanding of consumer perspectives through COVID-19 on NEMchat.

The January 2020 Roundtable had several presentations and discussions including:

- AEMC on climate and energy policy
- ESB and AEMO on future market design.

Other presenters throughout the year included:

- ECA on their Power Shift report – June 2020
- AEC on consumer engagement and support for customers affected by COVID-19 – July 2020
- AER on AER’s new regulation process – July 2020.

Impact

Integrated or holistic perspectives that take account of the social, economic and environmental impacts of energy and energy policy and regulation can be seen in:

- meeting agendas and discussions
- enabling group agendas
- the January Energy Concessions Workshop.

January 2020 Roundtable

The January Roundtable considered key issues comprising regulatory, social, economic and environmental issues including future market design, climate and energy policy, bushfires, the Energy Charter, distributed energy resources, payment difficulties and energy concessions reform.

Integrated and holistic views on energy policy are demonstrated within these items. For example:

- Climate and energy policy: The Roundtable heard from the AEMC about responding to climate risks and challenges in the energy system.
- Bushfires: Members reflected on the substantial impact of recent bushfires and appreciated the prompt response by networks, retailers and government to both the needs of people impacted and to restoration of electricity supply.

Enabling groups

The DER Enabling Group looked at:

- the development of a new energy compact
- the setting of a user-centred vision and principles to guide energy reform.

The PD/Hardship Group considered:

- best practice for payment support
- an advocacy guide for community organisations to assist people experiencing energy debt
- the link between energy affordability and sustaining household health and wellbeing.

Energy Concessions Workshop

The January Energy Concessions workshop made progress on how members of the Roundtable could jointly improve the equity and effectiveness of energy concessions across all jurisdictions.

Survey responses

Seventy per cent of respondents said they thought this outcome had been achieved or partly achieved. As specific evidence they noted:

‘Work has been started to integrate climate resilience, energy policy and household support into coherent policy.’

‘There has been good response from Govt, AER and some retailers due to COVID-19. However, some retailers still not following expectations. Needs to have better and stronger compliance on no disconnections and no gatekeeping on hardship programs. So cannot

say this outcome has been achieved as the customers are not getting the outcomes every time. It is ad hoc and depends on the retailer.'

Others commended the participation and discussions at the Roundtable saying:

'I believe among roundtable participants that a holistic perspective has been developed to take account of these aspects of energy policy and regulation.'

'The Roundtable includes a good range of perspectives based on members' expertise across social, economic and environmental impacts.'

'Roundtable participants continually develop and enhance their understanding of the intersecting nature of social, economic and environmental impacts, which can be seen in the submissions they publish.'

'Having regular opportunity to share information/insights and nurturing relationships creates the conditions of more integrated and holistic perspective.'

'Again the working groups have provided the opportunity to explore more wholistic approaches to issues and not just focus on the often very narrow parameters of a rule change etc.'

Survey responses also suggest there is room for further action to ensure this outcome is achieved in an impactful way. Importantly, some respondents encouraged more work in this area:

'Most of us do this anyway, but we help and challenge each other to get there. There are now more opportunities to achieve social, economic and environmental outcomes more readily than even a few years ago, but still need to challenge the profit motive of many utilities for an essential service.'

'Discussion at the Roundtable allows for different perspectives and impacts to be raised. However there does not appear to be an integrated or holistic perspective adopted by Roundtable members in their external dealings and engagements.'

We consider this outcome has been achieved for the reporting period. For future work and reporting, it would be useful to develop a revised success indicator with a more direct link to the desired outcome and impact.

This could also prompt further consideration of how Roundtable members might bring integrated or holistic perspectives to their external dealings and help address concerns raised in outcomes 3 and 4.

Outcome 6 Enhance capacity of participants

Agreed success indicators

Enabling groups have minimum of four members each

At least one masterclass is conducted each year

Progress against success indicators

As can be seen in Outcome 5, all enabling groups have more than four members.

A masterclass on wholesale market fundamentals was held in Adelaide in January 2020 and received positive feedback. Responses to the survey show that the Roundtable has absolutely enhanced the capacity of many participants who responded.

Impact

The masterclass aimed to build participants' understanding of issues such as pricing and fees, security and reliability of supply, the impact of renewables, the wholesale demand response mechanism, a consumer-focussed energy market, and future market design. Presentations were provided by energy advocates.

Survey responses

As the following tables show, survey respondents overwhelming indicated their knowledge and skills had increased through their participation in and engagement with the Roundtable. Many also indicated they had undertaken valuable activities as a direct result of this association.

Building knowledge Through the roundtable, I have increased my knowledge in the following areas:	% saying knowledge has increased	% saying knowledge has increased significantly
New & emerging technologies	94	22
Energy reform	89	61
The wholesale energy market	89	50
Other consumer perspectives	83	61
Impact of energy market on consumers	83	56
Payment difficulties & barriers seeking assistance	83	67
Consumer advocacy	83	50
Climate & renewable energy policy	83	33
The Energy Charter	72	33

Building skills Through the roundtable, I have increased my skills in the following areas:	% saying skill has increased	% saying skill has increased significantly
Consumer advocacy	89	39
Collaboration with others on energy issues	89	72
Development of policy, submissions and advocacy documents	50	33
Communication such as public speaking, liaison and negotiation	50	0
Consumer and community engagement and consultation	78	17
Writing effective grants	28	5

Facilitating behaviours As a direct result of my participation in (or engagement with) the roundtable, I have undertaken the following activities:	% saying they have undertaken the behaviour	% saying they have undertaken the behaviour regularly
Provided feedback on the roundtable to members, leadership or staff of my organisation	90	35
Provided more informed input and advocacy in forums on energy, including at the national, state and territory levels	90	50
Liaised with policymakers and regulators on energy issues	75	40
Developed submissions or other advocacy documents on energy	75	30
Developed or revised policy on energy issues within my organisation	65	20
Established or convened consumer engagement energy forums or processes	35	10

Two respondents indicated they had developed other skills:

- networking and building relationships through the Roundtable which aids effective advocacy
- building inter-organisational coordination and planning skills.

Two respondents indicated they had practised additional behaviours:

- linking individuals with others from the Roundtable where appropriate (e.g. if others had deeper knowledge of an issue)
- sharing with industry the insights of customer advocates.

The findings from the survey clearly demonstrate this outcome has been achieved.

For future work and reporting, it would be useful to develop a revised success indicator with a more direct link to the desired outcome and impact.

This could prompt increased input from members on the skills and knowledge they would like to develop through participation in the Roundtable and encourage members to take, record and report on actions they take as a direct result of their participation or interaction with the Roundtable.

Outcome 7 Develop innovation and lateral thinking to improve outcomes for energy consumers, particularly those who are vulnerable

Agreed success indicators

At least one proactive issue is taken up each year

Progress against success indicator

Since March 2020, COVID-19 has been the focus of much attention, with Roundtable members having input into a range of initiatives designed to better support consumers.

For example, as noted in Outcome 3, the PD Enabling Group has created and circulated a first draft of a best practice response to COVID-19 for energy retailers. The group has used the insights gained through this work to:

- respond to the AEC discussion paper on COVID-19 impacts, retailer responses and next steps
- provide input to the AER, ESC, Energy Charter, AEC and state and Australian governments and agencies on COVID-19 support and assistance measures.

Impact

As noted in Outcome 3, the joint letter to the Energy Security Board (ESB) advocating for a representative consumer reference group in the two-sided market design process has led to regular online meetings between representatives from the Roundtable and enabling groups and the ESB and AEMC.

Survey responses

Slightly more than 47% of survey respondents said they considered this outcome had been achieved or partly achieved. Nearly 24% considered it had not at all been achieved and 30% said they didn't know.

As evidence that the outcome had been partly achieved, respondents cited the following:

'Within the Roundtable participants there are innovative and lateral thinkers, so I believe this outcome is partially achieved due to the people who are involved, more so than the Roundtable itself.'

'Working with various Energy Charter signatories to develop options for improving arrangements for vulnerable customers.'

'Members communicate new ideas across numerous forums related to influence change for consumers.'

'One of the things we value most is the attention the Roundtable gives to improving outcomes for vulnerable

energy consumers. We particularly valued the work done through the Enabling Groups in relation to payment difficulty and concessions.'

However, other respondents noted:

'I think the outcomes are limited in scope, may not be a lot of hard evidence, but the forum consistently provides a platform to share perspectives, observations and learnings from a number of jurisdictions that benefits thinking overall.'

'To achieve real innovation, we'd encourage genuine human centred co-design with industry and other stakeholders. It's not just the outcomes that need to be innovative, but the journey to design them. Culture change for the sector means the way we "do" things needs to change just as much as the innovation in the proposed outcomes.'

'We need as many people involved as possible to foster innovation and lateral thinking...funding constraints, especially the lack of general advocacy funding mechanisms inhibits this.'

'The Roundtable is an important forum. It allows for the free flow of discussion for advocates. To take it to the next level, ask the question: what type of culture do we want to see in this sector and how do we as Roundtable participants bring this to life in the way we do things?'

While the success indicator has been achieved for the reporting period, the framing of this outcome makes it difficult to ascertain whether the outcome has been achieved. The comments from survey respondents appear to sum this up well. These suggest that while the Roundtable provides a platform to share diverse perspectives, real innovation could be encouraged by co-design and closer collaboration with industry and other stakeholders.

For future work and reporting, it would be useful to develop a revised outcome that captures the desire for new and innovative approaches and can be more readily measured.

Outcome 8 Sustainable participation

Agreed success indicators

At least 75% of participants remain stable

At least two new participants remain engaged

Progress against success indicators

Membership of the Roundtable was stable across the reporting period and meeting participation rates were also high.

The Roundtable welcomed seven new participants and several new observers and meeting attendance was as follows:

- January – 27 participants and four observers
- May – 17 participants
- June – 20 participants
- July – 19 participants.

Survey responses

Survey responses show that 10 out of 20 respondents have been members of the Roundtable for more than three years and a further four have been members for two to three years.

They also show that 15 out of 19 respondents attended two or more meetings for the year.

SURVEY RESPONSES – LENGTH OF MEMBERSHIP OF ROUNDTABLE MEMBERS	
Less than 1 year	6
1-2 years	0
2-3 years	4
More than 3 years	10

SURVEY RESPONSES – NUMBER OF MEETINGS ATTENDED BY MEMBERS IN REPORTING PERIOD	
One	4
Two	7
Three or more	8

Impact

Participation and engagement through the Roundtable have offered networking and collaboration opportunities for community sector advocates, although these opportunities have been somewhat curtailed due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The high rate of membership stability has enabled collaboration on longer term projects and has been beneficial to the learning process of participants. The entry of new participants has broadened the scope and influence of the Roundtable.

This outcome has been met. Without the consistent and engaged participation by Roundtable members, the achievements outlined in this report would not have occurred.

This outcome may be of more value though if it were reconceived as a success indicator for a capacity-building outcome, such as Outcome 6.



byrnekelley.com.au
hello@byrnekelley.com.au