

Victorian Energy and Water Ombudsman's Investigation of Consumer Experiences (VOICES)



In early 2020 the Energy and Water Ombudsman Victoria (EWOV) and the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) jointly commissioned social research by the Australian National University's (ANU) Battery, Storage and Grid Integration Program (BSGIP) to investigate the qualitative consumer experience of new energy products and services in Victoria.

At EWOV, we were motivated to deepen our understanding of the issues customers face with new energy products and services (such as home batteries, electric vehicles, home energy management systems, microgrids and virtual power plants), to prepare for the coming energy system transition and to understand our role in it.

Methodology

From June 2020 until February 2021 the ANU researchers spoke to 92 householders, businesses and industry experts about their experiences with new energy products and services.

Research methods included semi-structured interviews and technology tours; focus groups; content analysis of a popular online user forum and a secondary analysis of user data.

Findings

- **Consumer motivations, attitudes and expectations**

Consumers had a high degree of 'transition awareness' – i.e. a knowledge of and motivation to support the energy transition.

All households were motivated by pro-environmental attitudes to some extent. Other key motivations included - financial expectations; a desire for greater self-sufficiency and resilience; community mindedness; enthusiasm for technology, and comfort. These motivations, attitudes and expectations were held in varying combinations and interacted in complex and sometimes conflicting ways.

- **Information sources and preferences**

Consumers felt there is a lack of leadership from government and industry, with some technology providers failing to provide adequate information to users.

Many consumers turn to community groups and peers for experiential information, and this is highly valued.

- **Experiences with installation and use**

Providers (retailers, installers and dealers) have a central role in determining whether householders' experiences with new energy products and services are positive.

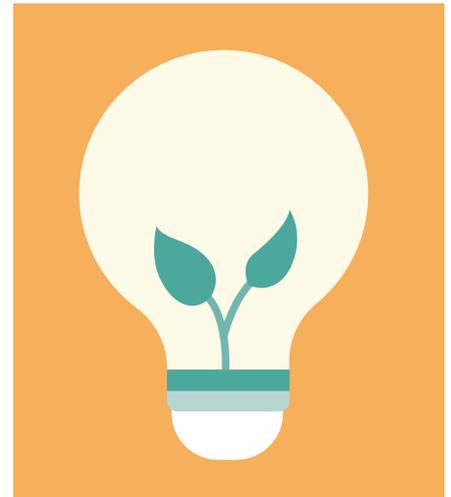
Good providers take the time to understand householders' needs, and help them to navigate complex technological choices. Post-installation roles such as handover and after sales support are also critical.

- **Householder views on emerging business models and reforms**

Householders have a range of concerns around new energy technology, generally driven by a feeling that the energy sector's motivations are not in line with their own.

Issues raised include data privacy, and scepticism that third-party control would be in their best interests. Householders felt a desire to control aspects of their energy use and technologies – which they saw as conflicting with third party automation and control.

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Implications and possible responses

1. Regardless of their degree of environmental concern, householders want an energy system that is:

- Affordable - both financially and environmentally.
- Allows them to achieve their particular priorities (e.g. comfort, convenience, self-sufficiency, entertainment or community care).
- Is fair – and does not penalise those who are unable or unwilling to engage.

2. The energy sector is not currently providing people with a system that reflects those values.

- Information is complex and confusing.
- Managing new energy technology for a positive outcome is hard work, and beyond the capacity of many Australians – including vulnerable groups. Key risk areas are quality, complexity, accessibility, timeframes and culture. These will affect more people over time if not addressed.

3. To address these failings, policy responses should seek to:

- Increase consumer protections for existing technology users*.
- Expand access to cheap, clean electricity (including for vulnerable groups) in a way that does not increase their risk and avoids unwelcome 'responsibilisation' of householders.
- Build trust and confidence in the energy sector*.

* Providing access to free and effective energy dispute resolution services such as EWOV would help meet these policy objectives.