

## Public engagement summary — Getting to fair: breaking down barriers to essential services

### Project background

Our 'Getting to fair' strategy intends to break down the barriers consumers can face when accessing and engaging with essential services. It provides a roadmap for the commission for the next three years to address the experience of vulnerability in our regulated and administered sectors.

The public engagement summary outlines what we asked, what we heard and what we have done in response to public feedback.

In 2019, the commission identified consumer vulnerability as a strategic priority for further examination. This is supported by our Act which requires us to consider vulnerable and low-income consumers in our decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

The unprecedented events of 2020 highlighted the importance of having a comprehensive and coherent strategy for the longer-term. The bushfires and coronavirus pandemic made it necessary for us to urgently adopt a comprehensive approach across our regulatory and administrative functions. And this experience also brought home that, working with others, we can, and must do more.

We embarked upon an 18-month research, engagement and capability building program which has guided the development of our 'Getting to fair' strategy. This program is outlined on the next page.

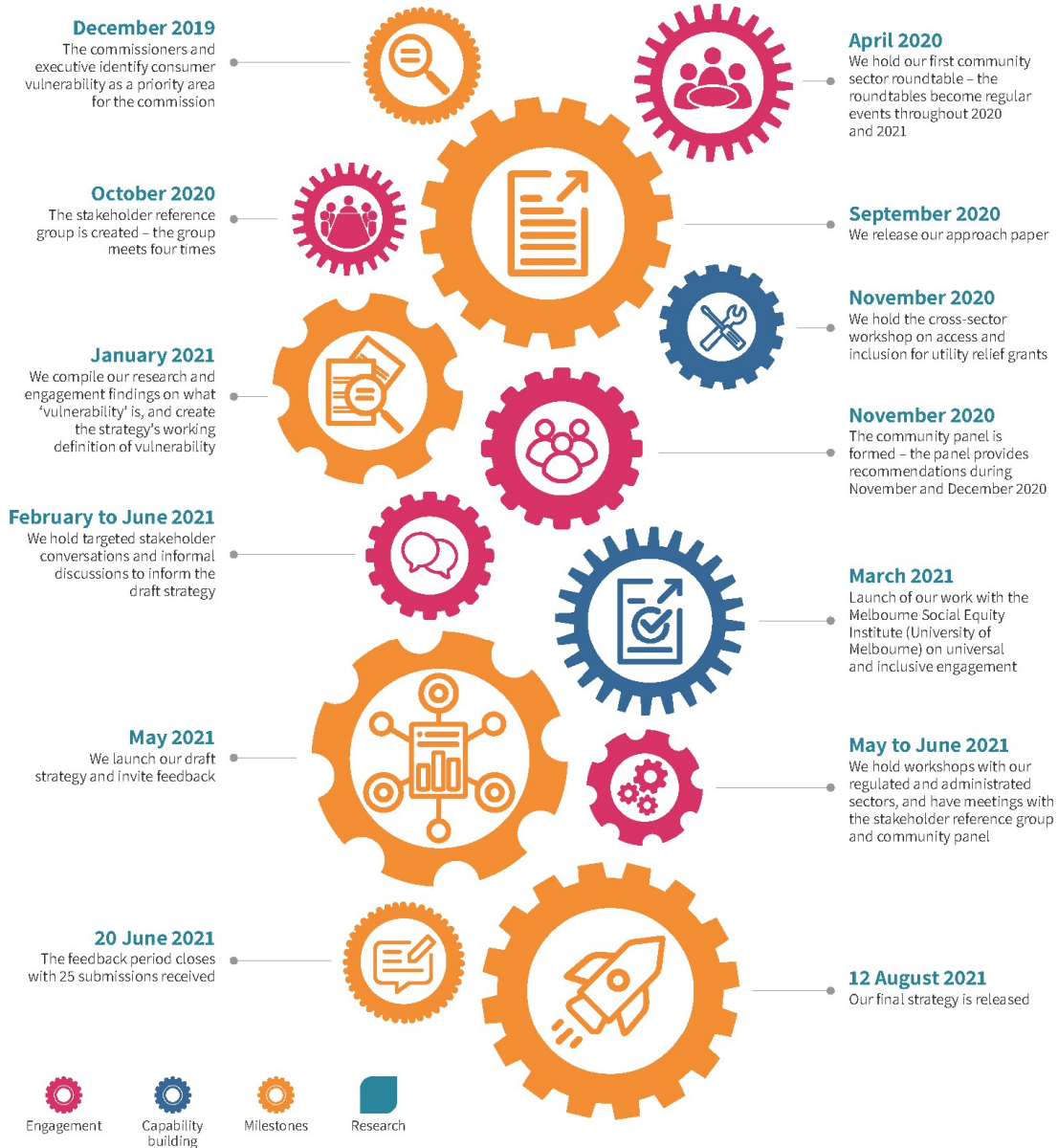
Throughout this process we received feedback and recommendations about how to facilitate equitable and inclusive access to essential services for all consumers. Key to this was the input from our community panel, who provided recommendations and a definition of wellbeing in the context of being able to access and pay for essential services. The panel report can be [found on our website](#). Our final strategy is grounded in what we heard during this 18-month program.

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<sup>1</sup> *Essential Services Commission Act 2001*, s 8A(e)(i).

## How we engaged

# Developing the strategy



## Research released as part of Getting to fair

Interviews with community workers (Consumer Policy Research Centre, quarterly during 2020–2021)

Guidance on universal engagement (University of Melbourne, February 2021)

Report on the deliberative community panel (Mendelson Communication, May 2021)

Understanding emerging and evolving consumer vulnerability in the coronavirus economy (ACIL Allen Consulting, July 2021)



### Number of participants

- 1,142 unique visitors accessed the Engage Victoria page between 17 September 2020 to 20 June 2021.
- Nine organisations were represented on the stakeholder reference group.
- 37 Victorian consumers participated in the community panel.
- Over 600 people attended the public forums and workshops to provide feedback on the development of the strategy, including
  - Water retailers
  - Energy retailers
  - Consumer representatives and advocates
  - Community members and community organisations
  - Victorian government departments



### Number of submissions received (written, verbal)

- 25 written submissions received on the draft 'Getting to fair' strategy from:
  - Australian Gas Infrastructure Group (AGIG)
  - AGL Energy
  - Alinta Energy
  - AMES Australia
  - Australian Energy Council
  - Brotherhood of St Laurence
  - CitiPower, Powercor and United Energy
  - Coliban Water
  - Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC)
  - Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC)
  - Economic Abuse Reference Group (EARG)
  - Energy Australia
  - Good Shepherd
  - Meridian Energy and Powershop Australia
  - Origin Energy
  - Red and Lumo Energy
  - Simply Energy
  - Tango Energy
  - Telstra
  - The Salvation Army

- Uniting
  - Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS)
  - Victorian Pride Lobby
  - West Justice
  - WSAA and VicWater
- One comment was received through the online feedback form.

# Summary of feedback – draft strategy

**We asked:** We invited feedback on the draft ‘Getting to fair’ strategy via Engage Victoria, two sector workshops, and targeted stakeholder conversations. We asked four consultation questions and accepted general feedback on the strategy.

**You said:** We received 25 submissions and one comment on the draft strategy. Some submissions specifically addressed the consultation questions and others provided general feedback on the draft strategy. The sector workshops were largely supportive of the proposed initiatives. We received some feedback on initiative scope and approaches to implementation of individual initiatives.

**We did:** Feedback provided in submissions and the sector workshops informed our final strategy. We carefully considered all submissions and feedback received throughout our final decision and strategy. These documents can be [viewed on our website](#).

| We asked  | You said  | We did   |
|---|---|--|
| How well does our definition of vulnerability align with contemporary understandings of consumer vulnerability and its causes and impacts?                                | <p>Overall feedback was supportive of the draft definition, and its focus on barriers to access and engagement, rather than the individual.</p> <p>Other feedback included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• specify what barriers are</li> <li>• language of ‘participating’ could be improved</li> <li>• include ‘at risk of vulnerability’ in the definition.</li> </ul> | <p>We refined the definition to reflect this feedback.</p> <p>Our definition of consumer vulnerability is:<br/>                     “A person experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, vulnerability is someone who experiences barriers to accessing or engaging in the essential services we regulate or administer. As a result of those barriers that person experiences economic and/or social exclusion or harm. Barriers can include event-based circumstances, systemic factors, and market-based factors.”</p> |
| Given that ‘vulnerability’ is widely used and easily recognised by businesses, is the hybrid approach (where we are using our legislative language where needed, but more | Overall feedback was largely supportive of the hybrid approach to terminology.  | We will continue to use the hybrid approach when communicating with stakeholders.  |

| We asked  | You said   | We did   |
|---|--|--|
| <p>inclusive language in general) the best approach for the commission to take when communicating with stakeholders?</p>  |  |  |
| <p>Do the themes, goals and initiatives we have identified and proposed provide an appropriate pathway for the commission to respond to the barriers currently being faced in the market?</p> | <p>Submissions were generally supportive of the themes, goals and initiatives in the draft. Specific feedback included:</p>  | <p><b>Strategic framework</b><br/>There was a request for greater clarity on how the elements of the strategy fit together.</p> <p>We have articulated the strategic goal and developed a framework that shows how the components of the strategy will operate to achieve the goal of the strategy.</p>  |
|   | <p><b>Goals</b><br/>There were some suggestions to alter the wording or emphasis of some goals.</p>  | <p>We have consolidated the eight goals from the draft into three objectives and identified two commission-wide capability builders that relate to all objectives and most actions. The actions sit under the objectives. This change has ensured our objectives are clear and measurable.</p>   |
|   | <p><b>Actions (Initiatives)</b><br/>The feedback from the online workshops and targeted stakeholder conversations focused on the likely impact and difficulty of implementing key initiatives.</p> <p>No feedback suggested removing any initiatives from the strategy. Specific feedback was received on the scope and implementation of some initiatives, most notably the review of the Payment Difficulty Framework. Some additional initiatives were recommended.</p> | <p>We consolidated the 34 initiatives from the draft strategy into 10 groups of actions to better reflect how they will contribute to the overall goal of the strategy. This approach also highlights opportunities for sharing and learning between sectors.</p> <p>Suggested additional actions were reviewed in light of the objectives of the strategy, the existing actions and the resourcing required.</p> <p>We changed the wording of some actions to improve measurability.</p> <p>We replaced the actions that focused on First Nations consumers with five</p> |

| We asked   | You said  | We did   |
|--|---|--|
|  | <p>Feedback highlighted the need to continue to specifically address the experience of First Nations consumers.</p> <p><b>Measures of success</b><br/>There was some concern that the measures of success were not appropriate.</p>   | <p>actions to guide our work with First Nations consumers and communities.</p> <p>Feedback on individual actions will be used to inform the scoping and implementation of these actions.</p> <p>We have removed the measures of success from the final strategy. This will allow us to develop these further as part of the strategy’s monitoring and evaluation framework.</p> <p>We will be working closely with our stakeholders to develop high-level aggregate measures of impact for the strategy. Each action will have its own measure that is specific, measurable and timebound.</p> |
| <p>Are there other considerations we should include in our strategy?</p> | <p>Other considerations to be included in our strategy covered topics including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First Nations consumers</li> <li>• frontline staff training</li> <li>• communications</li> <li>• community awareness</li> <li>• customer experience</li> <li>• compliance and enforcement</li> <li>• energy</li> <li>• local government.</li> </ul>   | <p>Some information was added to the discussion of themes to reflect this feedback, for example in the discussion around theme one.</p> <p>We changed the actions that related to First Nations consumers. See Actions section above.</p> <p>Feedback that is relevant to specific actions will be used to inform the scoping and implementation of these actions.</p>   |
| <p>General feedback</p>  | <p><b>Consultation process</b><br/>We received some feedback about the consultation process to develop the draft strategy. Some industry stakeholders raised concerns with the process, noting their perception that the strategy was developed with insufficient industry involvement. Some community sector stakeholders expressed support for the process and acknowledged the considered and constructive process undertaken to develop the strategy.</p> | <p>We are committed to ongoing engagement with our stakeholders as we implement this strategy. We will continue to engage with regulated and administered businesses, consumers and community advocates while this strategy is implemented. This will take the form of informal and formal consultation processes, events and actively building partnerships with government, businesses, and the community sector.</p>  |
| <p>General feedback</p>  | <p><b>Accessible communication</b><br/>We received feedback that related to accessible communication – by the commission, by retailers and by government. We heard about the importance of using a variety of</p>   | <p>The importance of appropriate, consistent, and accessible communication was highlighted in our research as being vital to consumers participating in essential services. This is outlined in the discussion of</p>  |

| We asked                | You said   | We did   |
|-------------------------|--|--|
|                         | <p>channels to communicate, and not solely relying on digital communications. We heard it is important to take a consistent approach to messaging across different communication tools, that language should be simple and accessible, and ways to communicate beyond written communication.</p>   | <p>theme one: consumers require appropriate, consistent and accessible communications.</p> <p>The information received through submissions has contributed to our understanding of accessible communication and will be used to inform the scoping and implementation of relevant actions.</p>               |
| <p>General feedback</p> | <p><b>Partnerships and relationships</b><br/> We heard that the social issue of vulnerability requires a broad approach that extends beyond regulation. We received feedback about opportunities for greater coordination and partnerships to support, coordinate and fund services to consumers experiencing vulnerability. This relates to government departments, industry, the community sector, and other regulators.</p> | <p>The consolidation of the eight goals into objectives and commission capability development identifies 'partnerships and coordination' as one of the capability development priorities that is necessary to implement the strategy.</p>  |
| <p>General feedback</p> | <p><b>Payment Difficulty Framework Review</b><br/> We received specific feedback on the initiative to review the effectiveness of the payment difficulty framework.</p>  | <p>We acknowledge the strong interest many of our stakeholders have this initiative. We intend to continue our engagement with stakeholders as part of the payment difficulty review. This information will be used to inform the scoping and implementation of the payment difficulty framework review.</p> |

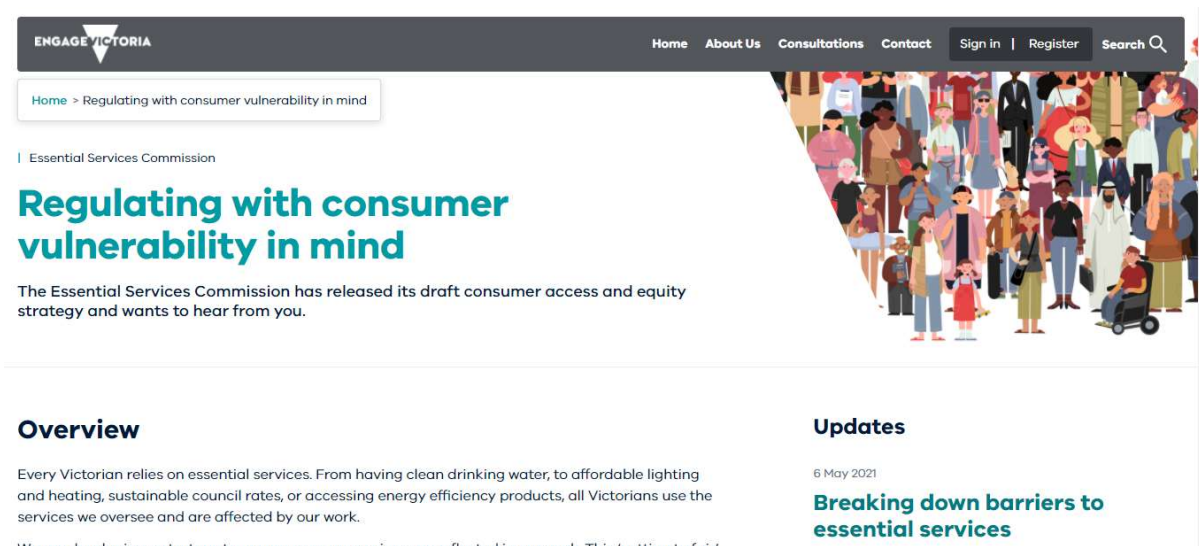


## Our engagement events

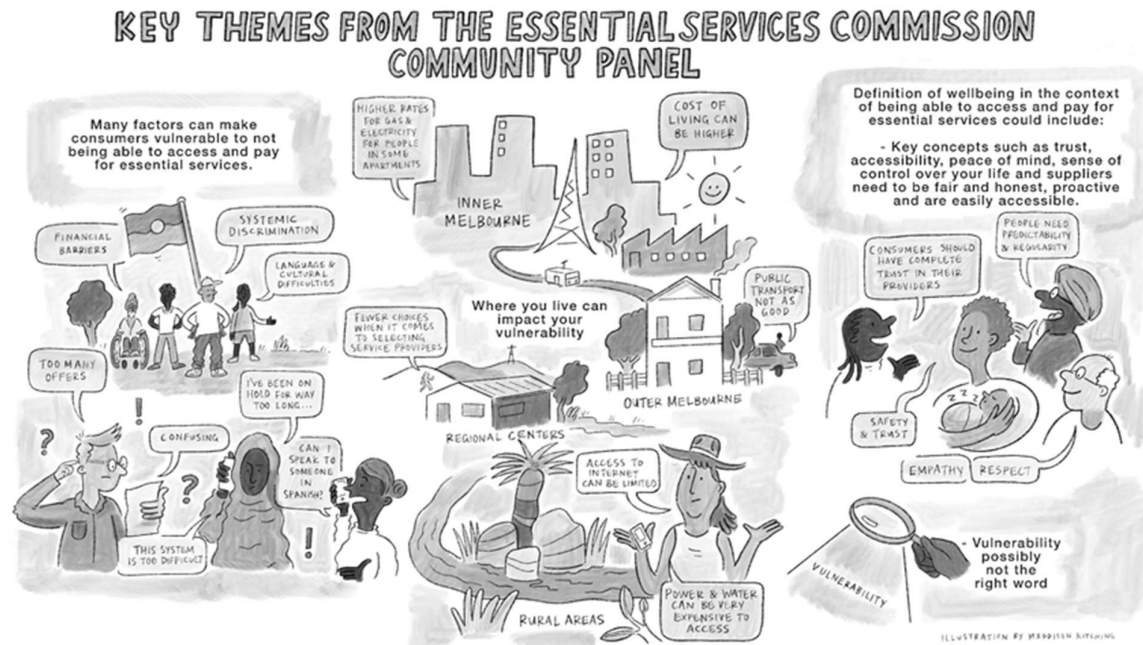
[Launch of the draft getting to fair strategy – Tuesday 11 May 2021.](#)



[Screenshot of Engage Victoria page after consultation closed \(29 June 2021\)](#)



A graphic designer was engaged to create a visual record of the community panel process for sharing with the broader community.



We promoted opportunities to provide feedback on the draft strategy on social media.



Today we released our draft strategy 'Getting to fair', aimed at breaking down the barriers many Victorians face in accessing essential services and ensuring consumer voices are reflected in our work.

Hear from chair [Kate Symons](#) as she introduces the draft strategy, shares her reflections and talks about some of the things we learnt:

Find out more about the 'Getting to fair' draft strategy and how you can share your feedback > <https://lnkd.in/gVKYvtd>

[John Hamill](#), [Rebecca Billings](#), [Simon Corden](#), [Sitesh Bhojani](#), [Michelle Bryne](#), [Marcus Crudden](#), [Lucy Weston](#), [Jess Gregory](#), [Kat George](#), [Pallavi Yagnik](#), [Alexandra Syrjanen](#)

[#essentialservices](#) [#Victoria](#) [#engagement](#) [#coronaviruspandemic](#) [#consumervulnerability](#)



55 · 5 comments

Essential Services Commission **Public submissions: Getting to Fair: Breaking down barriers to essential services.**



**Essential Services Commission** @EssentialVic · May 25



We're running a series of workshops on 'Getting to fair', our draft strategy aimed at breaking down barriers to essential services. Yesterday we heard from 14 Vic water businesses about their thoughts on water-specific proposals.

Read the draft strategy: [go.vic.gov.au/1EX3Uv](https://go.vic.gov.au/1EX3Uv)



North East Water and 9 others

