

Reference Group Partnership Approach : Operating Procedures

Objective

The objective of the Reference Group Partnership Approach is to improve outcomes for Victorian energy and water consumers through developing research projects and other collaborative efforts that assist this outcome. The Reference Group's broad representation and expertise are key factors in the successful development of research, capacity building and advocacy on behalf of consumers.

Issues based Partnership Groups

Two separate Partnership Groups have been established to cater to Reference Group members' diverse interests and areas of expertise. The first group is the "Domestic Issues Group" which will have a particular focus on low-income, vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers. The second group is the "Market Issues Group" which will address market and competition issues and have a strong rural and regional focus. All Reference Group members have been assigned to a Partnership Group.

At its first meeting of the beginning of the financial year, each Partnership Group will discuss and develop priority issues for the next twelve months. Members will agree upon an annual workplan to address those priority issues. At the same meeting CUAC will inform members about the budget available for CUAC commissioned projects that can support the workplan. The workplan may include items such as discussion seminars, advocacy strategies and research or capacity building projects.

An annual meeting for all members to discuss current and emerging consumer utilities issues and to advise on CUAC's workplan will also be convened. Reference Group members can therefore expect to attend a total of five meetings per annum (four with their Partnership Group and one plenary discussion forum).

Partnership Group participants are subject to CUAC's current Reference Group Terms of Reference, which has not changed except in relation to the meeting procedures of the group.

Terms of Reference

Mandate

As set out in Section 8 of the Constitution of the Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre (CUAC), the responsibilities of the Reference Group shall be

1. To provide advice to the CUAC Board on emerging consumer issues;
2. To provide advice to the CUAC Board on the development of CUAC's work program; and
3. To share grass roots consumer feedback and research.

Membership

Members from the Reference Group shall be representatives of consumer organisations and/or representative of a group of Victorian utility consumers. Members are appointed by the Board of CUAC, with a maximum of twenty and minimum of twelve consumer representatives at any one time.

Proposed tenure

Reference Group members shall not be appointed for any particular term. CUAC Reference Group Members may be removed by the Board at any time, for example when the CUAC Board decides that the organisation no longer represents a group of Victorian utility consumers within CUAC's workplan, or

should the organisation or its representative cease to participate in the Reference Group for three consecutive meetings.

Confidentiality

Members are expected to protect and maintain as confidential information where a member of the Reference Group requests that information be treated as confidential and all Reference Group members agree.

Compensation

Reference Group Members shall be entitled to sitting fees of \$85 per hour (including GST). Members outside Melbourne will be compensated for the cost of their travel to Melbourne from rural/regional areas at a rate to be negotiated with the Executive Officer.

Administration

CUAC will provide secretariat services to the Partnership Groups, including scheduling and organising meetings, minute taking and circulation of other relevant information. CUAC's Executive Officer chairs the meetings.

The CUAC website will serve as the primary communication tool for the group. Meeting schedules, agendas, minutes, work plans and action tables will all be posted on the website. In line with the Terms of Reference, members will be paid sitting fees.

Funding

CUAC will allocate a maximum annual budget to the Partnership Groups. The monies may be spent on recommended projects as approved by the CUAC Board. Unspent funds will be retained by CUAC. The CUAC Board will evaluate the Partnership model on an annual basis and, in line with its authority as defined in the CUAC Constitution, will retain the right to change funding allocations as it deems appropriate.

Guidelines for Project Recommendations

- 1) Reference Group members can recommend that CUAC commission research and/or capacity building projects as deemed necessary by the Partnership Group.
- 2) Recommendations must be accompanied by a statement demonstrating the need for the project and the value to Victorian consumers.
- 3) All projects are subject to CUAC's Grants Program principles and procedures. In determining whether or not to approve a Partnership Group's recommendations, the CUAC Board will have regard to these guidelines.

Projects will be assessed according to the following criteria

- Projects are in accordance with CUAC's constitutional objectives.
- Projects add value to the ability of Victorian utility consumers to influence the policy and regulatory debate.
- Projects address areas of shortcomings of knowledge or expertise among consumers in the debate.
- Projects are well managed and financially viable, with feasible and clear estimations of required resources.

- 4) If CUAC agrees with the needs assessment and project recommendation, it will produce a project proposal in consultation with the Partnership group, and invite tenders.
- 5) Reference Group members can compete for tender but, if they have an interest in a proposal, they must notify CUAC about their intentions and refrain from participating in the development of the project proposal and tender documentation. An interest in a proposal exists if a member or their organisation plans to tender for the project or the organisation would receive funding under the proposal or if the member would in any way benefit financially from the grant.
- 6) Upon receiving tenders, CUAC shall circulate the applications for Reference Group members information and/or general feedback.
- 7) The CUAC Board will decide upon the successful tender at its next meeting.
- 8) The contractual arrangements are between CUAC and the tender organisation.

Intellectual Property

Commissioned projects will acknowledge the involvement of the Partnership group's identification and development of project, CUAC funding and the author of any report(s).

All documents produced under the Partnership model will be subject to CUAC's publication policy.

Publications Policy

As the CUAC Grants Program is available through Victorian Government funding, the Board strongly believes that all publications funded by a CUAC grant should be made available to all Victorians. As such, CUAC reserves the right to publish on its website and distribute publicly any publications or reports funded, wholly or in part, by CUAC.

Authorship of a piece of work or project management by an organisation will always be acknowledged and the author will retain copyright over the publication.

All documents funded by CUAC should also contain the following disclaimer:

The views and interpretations expressed in this paper are those of *author (or organisation)* and do not represent the views of the Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre Ltd.

Should CUAC wish to endorse the views expressed within a publication, a separate letter of support may be produced.

Reviews

CUAC will conduct a review of the Partnership groups at the end of each financial year. Reference Group members will feed into this review. The Secretariat will report on the review to the CUAC Board. The CUAC Board can make changes and/or abolish the structure of the Partnership groups at its discretion at any time.