

9 September 2016

Geoff Willis
Chair
Tasmanian Energy Security Taskforce

Sent by email: energysecuritytaskforce@stategrowth.tas.gov.au

Dear Mr Willis

The Tasmanian Council of Social Service (TasCOSS) is the peak body for the community services sector in Tasmania. Its membership includes organisations that provide community services and support to disadvantaged, low-income and vulnerable Tasmanians. TasCOSS represents the interests of both the community services sector and the Tasmanians the sector supports.

TasCOSS has a keen interest in energy as an essential service, fundamental to sustaining the health and well-being of the Tasmanian community, and while much of our work focuses on ensuring ongoing access to household energy supply for those living on low incomes, the security of Tasmania's energy supply is also of critical interest to TasCOSS.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and, while it is outside of our area of expertise to comment on many of the issues raised in your consultation paper, we would like to comment on Question 4: *How well are Tasmania's energy security risks understood and communicated to the community?*

Like other Tasmanians, TasCOSS and its members were concerned with the publicised shortage of electricity generation in the State earlier this year, and the possibility of this affecting electricity supply to homes, public services and businesses. We read with both interest and concern the weekly Government media releases detailing falling 'Hydro water levels' and plans to augment Tasmanian energy supplies with diesel generation, as well as other public statements regarding the situation.

We became concerned with the nature and quality of the information provided to the public about the shortage, its possible or likely consequences, and the Government's contingency plans. In particular we thought that the information provided was poorly communicated and difficult for Tasmanians to understand and to make sense of (for instance, highlighting rapidly diminishing water levels without linking that to generation capacity or to electricity demand).

We were also concerned that it appeared that no plans were in place to assist or to specifically inform vulnerable population groups.

In April 2016 TasCOSS sought a meeting with the Tasmanian Minister for Energy's staff to express our concern about what we saw as the absence of relevant information being provided to the community, and in a format that was easily understood across the community. We also sought information on whether the Government had developed any contingency plans for vulnerable groups in the community.

At this meeting we expressed our concern that the lack of information and appropriate communication from the Government regarding the energy supply crisis was having unintended consequences in the

Tasmanian community. For many people, the lack of information had caused a high level of anxiety and speculation. Indeed many called our office seeking information.

TasCOSS provided the following advice and recommendations to the Energy Minister's staff:

- There is a need to assure the community that while power shortages and/or planned cuts are unlikely, the Government has planned for those possibilities, and that:
 - Tasmanians who rely on electrical equipment for life support are already identified and will be looked after in the event of planned power restrictions, cuts and/or shortages;
 - Tasmanians living with disability or illness who rely on electrical devices to assist with mobility and daily tasks will be informed prior to any planned power restriction (ask that they identify themselves to Aurora Energy);
 - In the unlikely event of needing to reduce power to Tasmanian households ... [then state the actual plan, for instance, to cut power to geographical areas for two hour periods only on a rotating basis that will be announced prior to any power cuts – explain in detail, that is, that two hours power restrictions at a time would limit damage to frozen goods, and would limit disruption to activities]
 - Major critical public services, such as hospitals, police, and emergency services will operate normally throughout.
- We recommend establishing, as a matter of urgency, a free-call phone information service for the public, to provide information about the energy situation and to answer questions and address speculation about possible blackouts / brownouts and other issues of concern to Tasmanians.
- We recommend publishing and distributing (to all households by letterbox drop, through the media, in doctors' surgeries, pharmacies and community organisations to target vulnerable individuals & communities) a list of answers to frequently asked questions in written form (and making this available in audio format through free call number, including after hours).
- We recommend that the Government organise formal briefings from Hydro Tasmania and government personnel for significant sectors in the community that may be affected and that may also act as conduits for information to their stakeholders. Relevant sectors include the community services, business, health, education, sport and recreation, aged care sectors.

TasCOSS observed the Government could have managed the situation in a more pro-active way in particular by providing clear and comprehensive information to the public through a variety of channels.

We hope that our contribution to your inquiry is useful, and will inform and improve future similar situations, should they occur.

Yours sincerely



Kym Goodes
Chief Executive