

ENERGY  
CONSUMERS  
AUSTRALIA

# Grants



Backing bright ideas

The national voice  
for residential and  
small business

**Grants Program  
Annual Report  
Supplementary  
Information**

**20  
24**

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Energy Consumers Australia respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia. We recognise their connection and continuous care for the lands and waters where we live, learn, and work.

## Introduction

**The purpose of the Energy Consumers Australia grants program is to support advocates, organisations, and ideas that will advance the interests of household and small business consumers in the National Energy Market.**

Our grants program is divided into the following categories:

- 1. Participation Grants** of up to \$15,000 to enable consumer engagement and advocacy in government, regulatory, or industry processes, or for small, targeted research projects.
- 2. Influence Grants** to support advocacy and research initiatives with a purpose of immediate influence on a specific and achievable goal on matters of material significance to residential and small business consumers.
- 3. Collaboration Grants** to support complex, multi-year advocacy projects, put forward by a group of organisations aiming to collaborate, with the aim to drive energy systems change.
- 4. Gill Owen Scholarship:** Dr Gill Owen was an inaugural ECA Board member and a tireless advocate for consumers. This scholarship is named in honour of her work and supports one individual each year to travel overseas to research innovative ideas and initiatives that are of relevance to the Australian energy market.

ECA also provides funding through our Network Resets Funding Program (formerly known as the Consumer Empowerment Funding Program) to support consumer advocates' understanding of, and engagement with, network expenditure issues.

In 2023-24, the Board approved 21 Influence/Collaboration grant applications for grants and deferred consideration on a further six applications. The total new funding approved over the year across all programs was \$2.04 million.

The projects ECA provides with grants funding continue to inform our own advocacy work on behalf of households and small businesses, with data and insights from the grants, combined with our own work, forming the basis of briefings, submissions, and presentations to industry and government.

A full list of our grants is available on our website, and we look forward to new applications and opportunities to collaborate in 2024-25.

## Grants Program 2023-24

In 2023-24, ECA's Grants Program attracted significant interest, with 58 applications across all our programs.

We received a mix of applications from existing recipients as well as new hopefuls, which is consistent with our bid to support emerging advocates to grow their impact. Successful new applicants included Coalition for Community Energy, Rewiring Australia, and Original Power.

We also saw some grant recipients from the past re-engage and submit applications. The Consumer Policy Research Centre successfully secured funding to conduct a comprehensive exploration of the quality of point-of-sale information available to consumers when purchasing major household appliances.

Analysis of previous successful grant applications has identified that the earlier an applicant engages with us, the higher their chance of success. The increase in both the number and quality of applications is a direct result of ECA's ongoing commitment to engage broadly across the community and research sectors and our policy team's commitment to help strengthen applications before their submission.

## Communicating the impact of grant projects

Recognising the importance of applicants being able to effectively communicate the impact of their projects to a broad audience and understanding that not all will have the internal capacity to achieve this, successful grantees now have access to help and advice from ECA's Communications and Stakeholder Engagement team during their project.

This has helped to build a mutual understanding of the timeframes for outputs, and assisted grantees in selecting the most appropriate channels for amplifying findings and outcomes.

### Having an impact

ECA's ongoing relationship with Sydney Community Forum's 'Voices for Power' project, now in its third year, continues to improve our understanding of the specific needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities.



Our latest partnership with Voices for Power included a Deep Dive Project with CALD communities in Western Sydney, which aimed to increase understanding of local energy needs and concerns while also building capacity for community advocacy.

This Deep Dive process was so successful that it will become a blueprint for our own community engagement forums on emerging issues in the energy system in the future.

Left: Deep Dive workshop participants

## First Nations organisations leading First Nations' research

Original Power successfully submitted two applications to conduct research that focused on issues of specific concern to First Nations communities.

These were the first applications our Grants Program has received from a First Nations-led organisation and we hope they will be the first of many.

In one of those projects, Original Power has partnered with Western Sydney University and Indigenous Research Partners to improve understanding of the lived experience of First Nations households and communities using prepayment arrangements for electricity. The result will be community-led proposals for reform to improve energy security and consumer protections for First Nations communities.

The second project will document the impacts of community-scale integration as part of the Marlinja Community Microgrid project, measuring changes in known energy insecurity associated with prepayment, for advocacy purposes.

Original Power's Clean Energy Project Lead Madison Sturgess was also awarded the 2024 Gill Owen Scholarship. She has visited the UK to investigate community energy initiatives, with the aim of applying learnings to projects in First Nations and regional communities in Australia. The output from this will be published in late 2024.



**Above:** 2024 Gill Owen Scholar, Madison Sturgess (Original Power), with Energy Consumers Australia CEO, Brendan French

## Key Themes 2023-24

This report is a supplement to our Annual Report and highlights the Grants Program outcomes in 2023-24. A full list of successful applicants – as well as grant outputs including reports, submissions, presentations, and other resources – is available on our website at [energyconsumersaustralia.com.au/grants](https://energyconsumersaustralia.com.au/grants)

The following is a summary of the key themes of program funding this year and over the life of the scheme.

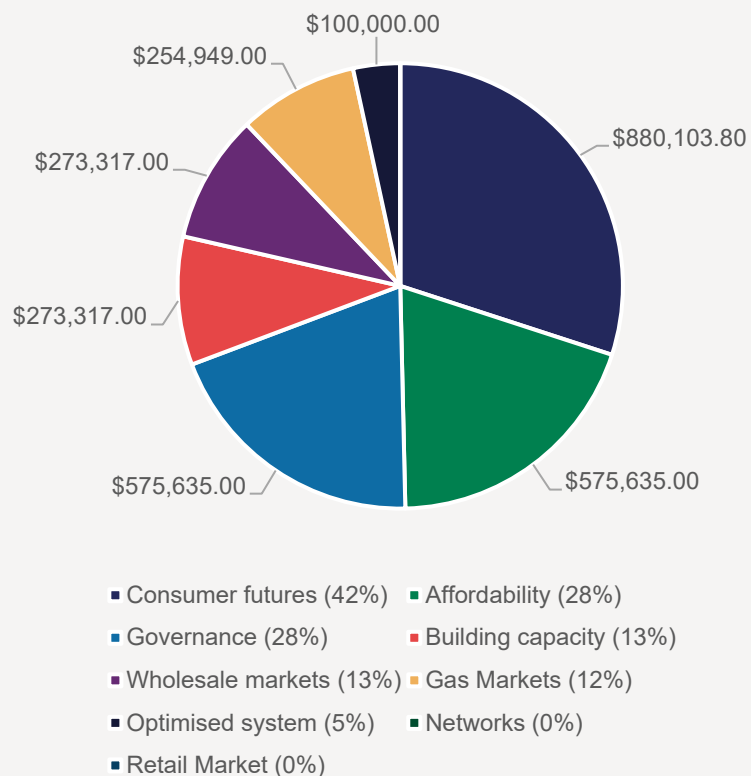
Projects focused on energy affordability continued to be a priority for ECA funding in 2023-24, particularly in the October round of grants (see Figure 1), while projects that empower communities to better understand and deal with challenges and opportunities in the energy system was an emerging theme of applications.

Several grants addressed issues experienced by both households and small businesses, although project applications focused solely on the effects of the energy transition on small businesses were in the minority. A notable exception was the successful application from the Council for Small Business Associations (COSBOA). We are considering how we can increase our small business outreach to garner broader interest in our Grants Program from the small business community.

Many of the grants approved by ECA during the period reflected an increasing urgency to assist vulnerable consumers as they navigate the energy transition.

Grant funding totalling \$1.3 million – or 63 per cent of total grant approvals – was provided for projects with a specific focus on consumers facing vulnerability.

**Figure 1: Grant funding by major theme (FY23-24)**





### Lessons from the ACT in supporting vulnerable Australians

Ensuring a just transition to zero net greenhouse gas emissions, supporting relationships between stakeholders, and building energy literacy and advocacy is the subject of ongoing research by the ACT Council of Social Service.

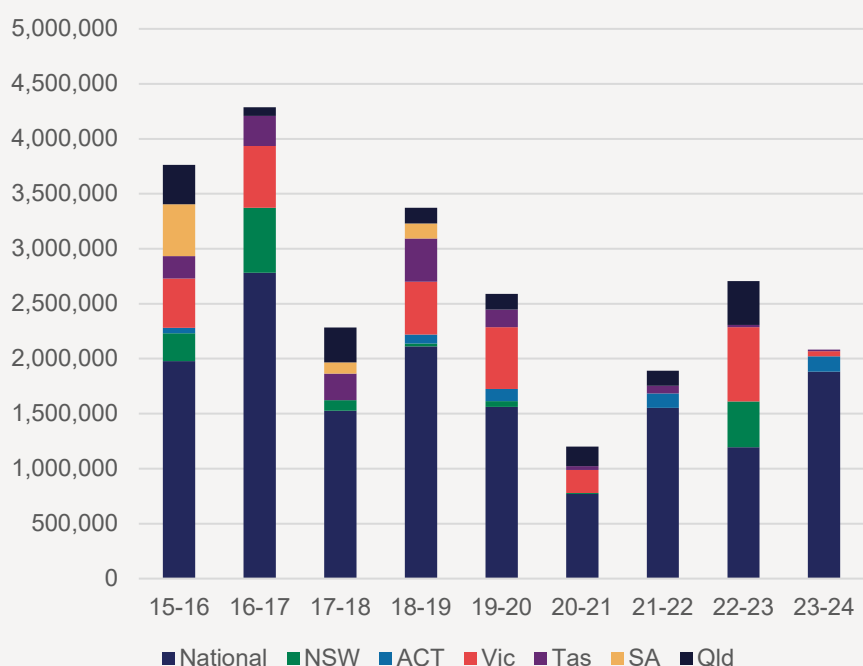
This was ACTCOSS’s third application to ECA’s Grants Program to continue its work representing consumers as the ACT navigates the energy transition.

Previous research conducted by the organisation, and funded by ECA, highlighted the need for governments to prioritise equity when planning for the energy transition. That work found that low-income households faced a ‘poverty premium’ that prevented them from accessing significant long-term energy savings, while higher-income households disproportionately benefited from ACT Government clean energy incentive schemes.

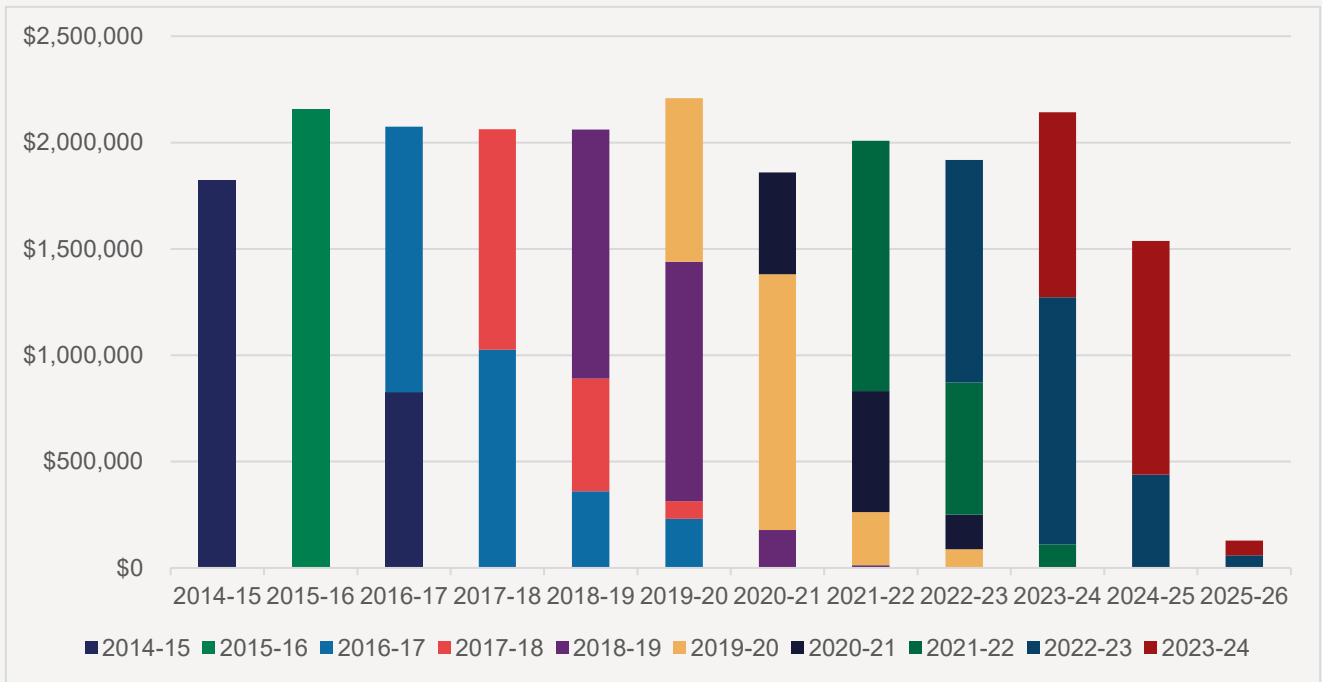
The ACT is uniquely positioned as a jurisdiction at the forefront of electrification and the energy transition. However, although this is an ACT-focused project, there is an opportunity for ACTCOSS to advocate for a just transition within the Territory while also sharing lessons with other NEM jurisdictions to affect positive changes and a just energy transition.

This year, 90 per cent of grant funding was awarded to projects with a national theme, consistent with our focus on issues that impact consumers across all jurisdictions (see Figure 2). Although, we are mindful that individual states and territories face specific and unique energy-related challenges, we intend to focus on national initiatives or projects that provide multi-jurisdictional insights.

**Figure 2: National and jurisdictional grant funding 2015 – 2024**



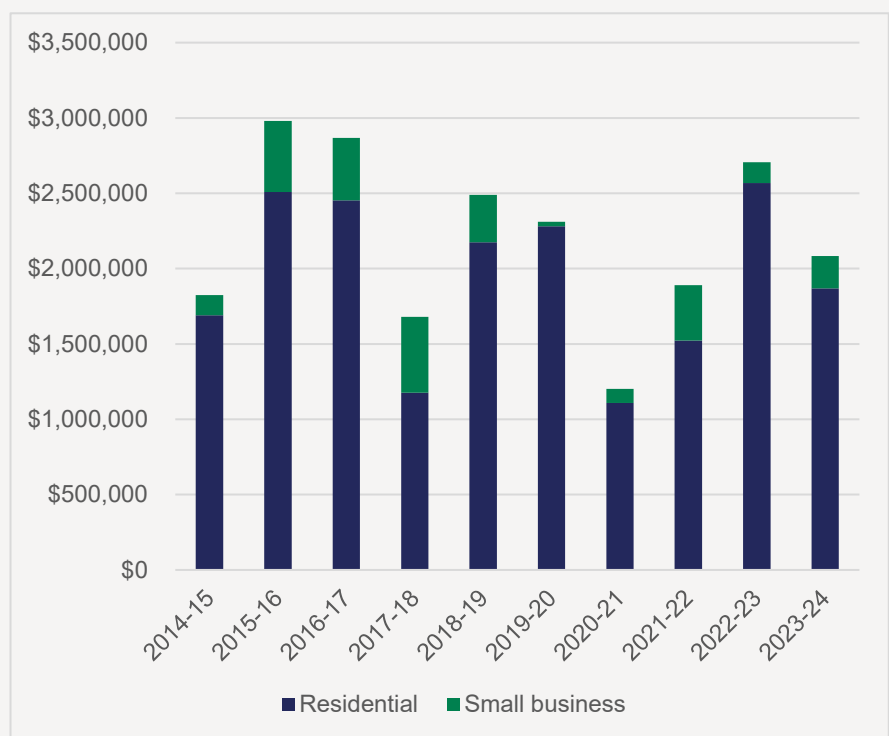
**Figure 3: Annual Financial Commitments 2014-2026**



Our grants program continued to support multi-year engagements in recognition that many of our partners require flexible funding and certainty in order to commit resources to their work.

We continue to work with small business advocacy groups to ensure that the unique interests and circumstances of small businesses are reflected in the grants program. We are committed to attracting more applications from small business advocacy organisations for future grants rounds.

**Figure 4: Trends – households and small businesses 2014 – 2024**







### Understanding small business and big risks

Small business owners, just like householders, can be prone to energy hardship – often for reasons outside their control. Small business owners have also been known to mesh business finances with personal finances, increasing the risk of personal financial hardship and stress in the event a business should fail.

The research project, ‘Small Steps Bright Future: Supporting small business toward net zero and beyond’, spearheaded by the Council of Small Business Organisations Australia, with the involvement of research consultancy 89Degrees East, sought to identify the risk-factors for small businesses facing energy hardship and develop tailored supports and early intervention to improve small business energy efficiency and lower energy costs.

The project identified potential triggers for hardship and what tools will best support small businesses to navigate energy risks and the energy transition. The project also identified, for the first time which types of small business are most at risk of experiencing energy hardship and of being left behind in the energy transition, filling an important gap in the available research in Australia.

This research has potential for significant impact. It will provide COSBOA and ECA with an important evidence base to support both organisations’ advocacy for the needs of small business in the design of the energy market.

Research projects have made up a larger share of grants funding in recent years.

**Figure 5: Trends – advocacy and research grants 2014-2024**



Our Grants Program also continues to support projects aimed at building greater capability, expertise, and coalitions for advocacy on consumer energy issues.

In 2023-24, we approved a grant application from the University of Melbourne entitled 'Consumer advocacy for a least-cost energy transition: capacity building with a consumer-first lens'. The main aim of this grant is for the University to design and deliver a capacity building course to upskill new and existing consumer energy advocates.

Our support of advocacy is reflected in the number of projects approved; 66% of grants-funded projects in 2023-24 had an advocacy focus, up from 54% in 2022-23.



### **Analysis of future climate impacts on home energy standards**

The Nationwide House Energy Rating Scheme (NatHERS) updated national energy efficient standards in 2022. Unfortunately, the update was based on climate data that was at least seven years old and already out-of-date.

As Australia's climate becomes warmer, with forecasts for even hotter summers in the future, current standards may not be fit for purpose, leading consumers to require extra cooling measures, thereby increasing bills and potential environmental impacts.

In addition, heating load is being over-estimated and cooling load underestimated.

Sweltering Cities, in partnership with Renew, have embarked on a research project to explore these issues. Using CSIRO FirstRate5 software, the project will undertake modelling of home energy performance to test whether current and future predicted climate scenarios will impact the ratings system. The dataset will include three time zones.

The outcome of this Participation Grant will be a new tool, used as input to a larger advocacy agenda, helping to explain the problem clearly, understand the extent of the problem, and highlight examples where the use of current data is negatively impacting consumers and the energy system.

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