



**ENERGY
CONSUMERS
AUSTRALIA**

A Suite 2, Level 14, 1 Castlereagh Street
Sydney NSW 2000

T 02 9220 5500

W energyconsumersaustralia.com.au

T @energyvoiceau

in /energyconsumersaustralia

f /energyconsumersaustralia

ABN 96 603 931 326

Media Release

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Energy companies' response to COVID-19 must be rapid, coordinated and ambitious to protect consumers

Commenting after the COAG Energy Council meeting today, Energy Consumers Australia CEO Lynne Gallagher welcomed the call for the energy sector to implement measures to relieve pressures on energy consumers.

"It is critical the energy sector moves rapidly and in a coordinated way to implement measures to ensure all households and small businesses can continue to access the essential energy services they need," Ms Gallagher said.

"The National Energy Coordination Mechanism announced today can play a critical role in not just securing continuity of energy supplies, but also ensuring that consumers are getting the bill relief they need.

"We will support the response by engaging with consumers and the community to monitor outcomes and bring issues to the attention of governments and industry.

"We have seen some positive early announcements by companies to pause on disconnections and provide other relief for energy consumers.

"This is not business as usual. All energy companies must now rapidly scale-up their hardship support to meet the huge increase in demand by people and businesses in crisis.

"The energy sector must prioritise removing barriers for customers to get into hardship programs. Energy companies cannot rely on welfare and emergency relief agencies, who are facing their own workforce and resourcing challenges.

"We will also have to work together through The Energy Charter and other forums to go beyond traditional hardship measures and to take economic pressure off customers. Income contingent loan schemes and other mechanisms to defer bills must be on the table."

Ms Gallagher also emphasised the importance of energy for public health.

"To support social distancing in line with government advice, people need to be living comfortably in their own homes, particularly if they are unwell. This is critical for mental as well as physical well-being – particularly as we move into winter."

Ms Gallagher said she was particularly concerned about the economic impact of the virus on small businesses.

"Some small businesses are seeing dramatic reductions in their cash flow, and many will be struggling to remain viable. Flexibility around the timing of bill payments is critical.

"We need to work together to protect the community and build a foundation for recovery."

Media Contact: Tim O'Halloran 0409 059 617