Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

Inquiry: Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Hearing Date: 9 October 2024

Question[s] taken on notice

Directed to: Network Outage Review Panel

Received Date: 22 November 2024

1. **John BERGER, page 9**

   Question Asked:
   Thank you, both, for your appearance today. I am interested to find out whether during your review the network distribution businesses were able to give you an indication of how many people they were able to communicate with when an event happened. As we understand it and what we know is that when an event happens you get a mobile phone text message. I just wonder whether there is any statistical information that says how many of those people they were able to get in contact with, of their relevant customers.

   Rosemary SINCLAIR: I think that is a question we are going to have to take on notice.

   Response:

   Network Outage Review findings and recommendation relating to customer communication by distribution businesses
   For the purposes of our Review, information gathered from the distribution businesses was provided in different forms, and in no way represents a 'complete' picture of their communication with customers. Importantly, this this is information from the distribution businesses about how communication activities occurred, but does not reflect how effective this communication with customers was. Communication and customer receipt of information was also dependent on the mobile telecommunications network which was also the subject of outages throughout the event. So in responding to the Committee's question, we can advise of customer interactions and messaging from the distribution businesses, but we are unable to outline what proportion of this communication was effective and achieved its intended purpose. Should the Committee like further information regarding the distribution businesses communication with customers for the 13 February event, or more broadly, then this may be best directed towards these businesses.

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The Network Outage Review identified that failures to AusNet communication channels prevented community from obtaining information about their power outage. Further information on this is available below.

The Review also identified that there are limitations in the way energy retailers collect, validate, and update customer contact information and provide this to distribution businesses. As a result, this reduces the effectiveness in which distribution businesses can communicate with customers during events. During the 13 February event AusNet estimated that outbound SMS messages to customers reached around 60 percent of AusNet customers because of data quality issues with customer contact details. These customers then relied on other sources of information, including outage trackers and the customer contact centre.

To improve the distribution businesses communication with customers, we recommended to Government that customer and household contact information is more effectively collected, validated, and updated by retailers, and shared with distribution businesses to support more effective communication with customers during power outage events:

> *As part of its review of the Energy Retail Code of Practice, the ESC should include requirements for energy retailers to collect the phone and email contact details of customers and others in the household for the purpose of sharing with distributors to facilitate information about power outages. Retailers should be required to check data quality and share with distribution businesses regularly.*

Our recommendation would mean that energy retailers should proactively ask consumers to share their contact details (and where agreed those of household members) so that distribution businesses can quickly make contact when there is a risk of an event, and during a prolonged power outage

Information on communication with customers by distribution businesses before and during the 13 February storm event.

The Network Outage Review Panel received the following information regarding communication with customers by distribution businesses for the 13 February storm event, and associated prolonged power outages for some of these businesses. For context, each of the five distribution businesses had varied experiences during the event. CitiPower and Jemena experienced relatively lower outage numbers (excluding Jemena's requirement to load shed over which it had no control). Powercor had a higher volume of outages, which were responded to within the first 24 hours. United Energy experienced longer outages in pockets of its network, while AusNet experienced significant outage numbers, with some customers not restored until 12 days after the event.

Victoria's distribution businesses communicate with their customers through a number of different channels, including:

- Online Outage trackers – hosted on the distribution businesses websites where real-time outage information can be viewed by customers

- SMS or email messages notifying customers of outages impacting them, and providing restoration updates

- Customer contact centres for 24/7 fault related calls.

- Social media updates

- Traditional media and radio

- Community engagement in affected areas

In the lead up to the 13 February event, all Distribution Businesses monitored weather forecasting through their usual emergency readiness arrangements. Geotargeted SMS and social media posts were used by the businesses to warn customers of the upcoming weather and outage risks, reminding customers to prepare for potential outages.

AUSNET

The Network Outage Review found that for the 13 February event, failures of AusNet communication channels prevented community from obtaining information about their power outage. Impacted communities told us that communication of accurate and timely information about their power outage is essential for them to make the best decisions for themselves and those they care for.

In this event AusNet's outage tracker failed, and its SMS systems and call centre had significant limitations. These factors resulted in inconsistent delivery of, accurate, timely and accessible customer information. There was also no backup plan for the outage tracker failure, and the rapid solution deployed by AusNet did not provide adequate accessible information to customers. Information about restoration times changed multiple times, undermining customer and community confidence and their ability to make good decisions about how best to manage their circumstances. The Review also found that AusNet's community engagement was improvised and inconsistent across communities and could have provided better communication and support to communities, particularly in the absence of functional telecommunication services.

The Essential Services Commission noted that because of its failure, up to 255,000 AusNet customers were not provided with the required information on

13 February and the Outage Tracker was not fully restored until 21 February 2024. As a result of this failure to provide adequate power outage information and customer communication, the Essential Services Commission accepted a court enforceable undertaking from AusNet to directly contribute $12 million to provide remediation to its affected customers and to improve community energy resilience to extreme weather events.

Information we received relating to AusNet's communication with customers across the 13 February event is outlined below, noting that the effectiveness of this communication was reduced due to AusNet Outage Tracker and SMS system limitations:

• Outage tracker and SMS system failures – see above.

• As a result of this failure and the size of the event, the AusNet call centre was unable to effectively meet customer demand for the customer contact centre for the first two days of the event.
  ▢ 43,000 inbound calls were made to the AusNet customer contact centre on 13 February. 89% of these calls were abandoned due to average wait times of approximately 22 minutes.

  ▢ 16,000 calls were received, either by the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) which managed half the calls received in the first three days, or by direct agent.

• 3.7 million SMS messages were sent out by AusNet to customers
  ▢ 622,200 automated SMS messages sent out 13-14 February, before the automated system was switched off and manual messaging used. This was undertaken to avoid confusing customers, as the information coming from the field was fluid and frequently changing, and combined with the Outage Tracker failure meant customers were not receiving accurate information about their outage.

  ▢ 46,900 manual SMS messages sent out on 15 February to those with valid mobile number on record

  ▢ SMS messages would have gone to all customers who were off supply and for whom AusNet had a valid mobile number on record. AusNet estimates it has up-to-date information for around 60% of customers due to the lack of accuracy and currency of this information which it should be noted, is collected by retailers.

• There was regular indirect customer communication via social media updates.

POWERCOR AND CITIPOWER

• Had approximately 85% of customer mobile phone details and 78% of customer email addresses details – but we did not receive information about the currency and accuracy of these details. This is not a comparison to the information above describing AusNet's estimated communication effectiveness with customers.

• During and after the event Power and CitiPower:

  ⬜ Sent 525,000 text messages informing customers of power outages and restoration updates

  ⬜ Received 23,504 calls to its contact centre from Powercor and CitiPower customers

• Provided regular social media updates, and worked with ABC as the emergency broadcaster to provide updates.

UNITED ENERGY

• Had approximately 86% of customer mobile phone details and 71% of customer email addresses details - but we did not receive information about the currency and accuracy of these details .

•During and after the event Power and CitiPower:

  ⬜ Sent529,000 text messages informing customers of power outages and restoration updates

  ⬜ Received 24,526 calls to its contact centre from Powercor and CitiPower customers

•Provided regular social media updates

JEMENA

•Had approximately 80% of customer contact number/s-but we did not receive information about the currency and accuracy of these details

•During and after the event, Jemena:

  ⬜ Sent 100,000 SMS or email messages to customers about outage notifications, updates, and restoration notifications

Received 2,053 calls to its customer contact centre on 13 February, of which 1399 elected not to speak to a customer service agent after receiving automated outage messaging.

•Provided regular social media updates

•Received 28,000 views of its outage information/tracker, and website banner information about the load shedding event that impacted its network.