



The Mackay Branch of the OLDER WOMEN'S NETWORK (Qld) Inc. has approximately 70 members and is part of a network for older women. Meetings are held weekly and the group offers a variety of health promotion, personal development, information, activities and fun. It guards against social isolation by offering mutual support, caring and friendship. Through O.W.N. Queensland and Australia the group has a voice in the policies and issues that affect older women nationally.

The AIMS of OWN Mackay are:-

- To improve and enrich the health and wellbeing of older women living in the Mackay region through education, information, encouragement, support, access, equity, choice and self-help.
- To maintain an older women's network within the Mackay region to encourage enrichment, mutual support and companionship amongst older women.
- To provide information and resources relevant to older women that will promote discussion and action about ageism and sexism.
- To lobby for a fairer deal on issues affecting older women.
- To enhance the image of older women in the wider community

Mackay has now emerged from a large mining boom and conditions in the town are not good. Employment opportunities are scarce and businesses appear to be struggling. Apart from a general air of pessimism this probably has limited effect on our members unless their incomes are involved, although there may be more pressure to help the younger generation.

The climate definitely has an effect on members. Although winters are mild the summer heat is very uncomfortable and it is difficult to sleep without air conditioning. There is however hearsay that many are afraid to use it due to cost. This is a concern when predictions are that temperatures are likely to climb in the coming years and heat can have a major effect on the health of older people.

The members of OWN Mackay are a diverse group with a wide range of age, (approximately 55 to 90 something) income, and life experiences. In recent months there has been strong concern expressed about electricity prices and the future affordability of these. Some members are very vocal, others less so, possibly because of pride, privacy and stoicism. Older women have a long history of coping with difficult situations.

Due to this concern, and lacking any consultation meeting in Mackay, it was decided to make this limited submission to the Issues Paper for Electricity Pricing Inquiry. We do not have the resources or time for a wider coverage but thought it worthwhile to voice our opinions on some topics.

Vulnerability

It is becoming widely recognised that older women, because they have different work and life experiences to men, are facing an increased risk of poverty. Single women living on the pension are struggling to survive financially, and those in rental accommodation are becoming desperate. Available concessions are not sufficient to make electricity affordable for this group and if concessions are under review they are a part of the population that requires special consideration.

Regional Queensland

As we are in this region the majority of us are Ergon customers. There have been rumours of a few other companies coming in but members appear to have been reluctant to use them. Being unable to return to Ergon if the new company does not perform is considered too big a risk. There is also some understanding among members of the difficulty of establishing competition under the present funding system in this large and widely spread region.

We have invited Ergon staff to speak to our members and information sessions have been held, but there is still little knowledge or understanding of future new developments. Advanced meters or possible tariff changes have not been addressed by these staff members. Community education on these possibilities seems to be lacking in Mackay. Trust in Ergon also appears to be very low.

At the same time it is recognised that natural disasters have taken a huge toll on Ergon resources and this is unlikely to change. The unknowns of climate change are an ongoing stress for people of this region.

Solar Power

Older people who invested in solar panels, often at considerable cost, did so in an effort to secure supply as they age, to care for the environment, and with the support and encouragement of government. However they are frequently made to feel as if they are a burden on all other consumers and the state. Those who were early enough to receive the 44 cents rebate will be secure as long as they can stay in their current homes, although much of this is being eroded by network costs. For everyone else it is important that a fair and reasonable price is set.

Technology and the Future Cost of Electricity

As costs have escalated in the last few years alarm has grown in the community and uncertainty about the future only adds to this. As demand has fallen electricity companies have increased network pricing, but consumers are questioning how far this can go. The Issues Paper discusses the technological developments that are evolving and likely to change the face of consumption in the next few years. The government still claims to support and promote the installation of solar panels, but this may be difficult to blend with the possibility of a large uptake of batteries for storage of solar power. Disconnecting from the grid will be easier and cheaper, and those who stay will use less power.

The likelihood that these changes will reduce demand even further coincides with the massive expenditure of electricity companies in recent years, to update and expand the network. When we factor in consumer cutbacks to save money we seem to be moving toward a crisis point with no solution being offered to the general public.

Consumer Education

Consumer education is definitely a very difficult task but we see little evidence of it being undertaken in our area. Electricity supply in Australia is complex and little understood by most consumers, but there can be no pressure for change when consumers have no knowledge or understanding. As the White Paper indicates we are about to see major change but we lack sufficient information to develop an opinion, or have any plan for the future. An experience that has been helpful for OWN Mackay was for two members to attend a QCOSS workshop on electricity pricing and report back to the wider group. Organisations such as QCOSS and COTA have the skills and motivation to distribute this information if adequately funded to do so. OWN Mackay also has representation on many community groups, such as Local Government and welfare agencies' interagency meetings.

The majority of our members live alone and have to deal with house maintenance and upkeep, often having taken over from deceased partners and with little knowledge of how to proceed. If they have to address major changes in power supply they will need advice and guidance to make informed choices. For many of our members this will be a minefield of little understood choices.

Conclusion

The members of OWN Mackay are probably fairly representative of older women everywhere, yet as diverse as the members of any other age group, and experiencing many of the same problems as any generation. Much of the issues covered here will also apply to the population in general.

As stated it is beyond the resources of our group to make a comprehensive response, but these ideas have been submitted in the hope that the Inquiry might provide some answers into the future of power supply, and some direction to manage what is threatening to be a very difficult and challenging future.