

QCOSS

Queensland Council
of Social Service

Sunny Savers Regional Project Report

*Solar on Public Housing trial in
Cairns and Rockhampton*



September 2017 - April 2018

About QCOSS

The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) is the state-wide peak body representing the interests of individuals experiencing or at risk of experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and organisations working in the social and community service sector.

For almost 60 years, QCOSS has been a leading force for social change to build social and economic wellbeing for all. With members across the state, QCOSS supports a strong community service sector.

QCOSS, together with our members continues to play a crucial lobbying and advocacy role in a broad number of areas including:

- place-based activities
- citizen-led policy development
- cost-of-living advocacy
- sector capacity and capability building.

QCOSS is part of the national network of Councils of Social Service lending support and gaining essential insight to national and other state issues.

QCOSS is supported by the vice-regal patronage of His Excellency the Honourable Paul de Jersey AC, Governor of Queensland.

Lend your voice and your organisation's voice to this vision by joining QCOSS. To join visit [the QCOSS website](http://www.QCOSS.org.au) (www.QCOSS.org.au).

ISBN –

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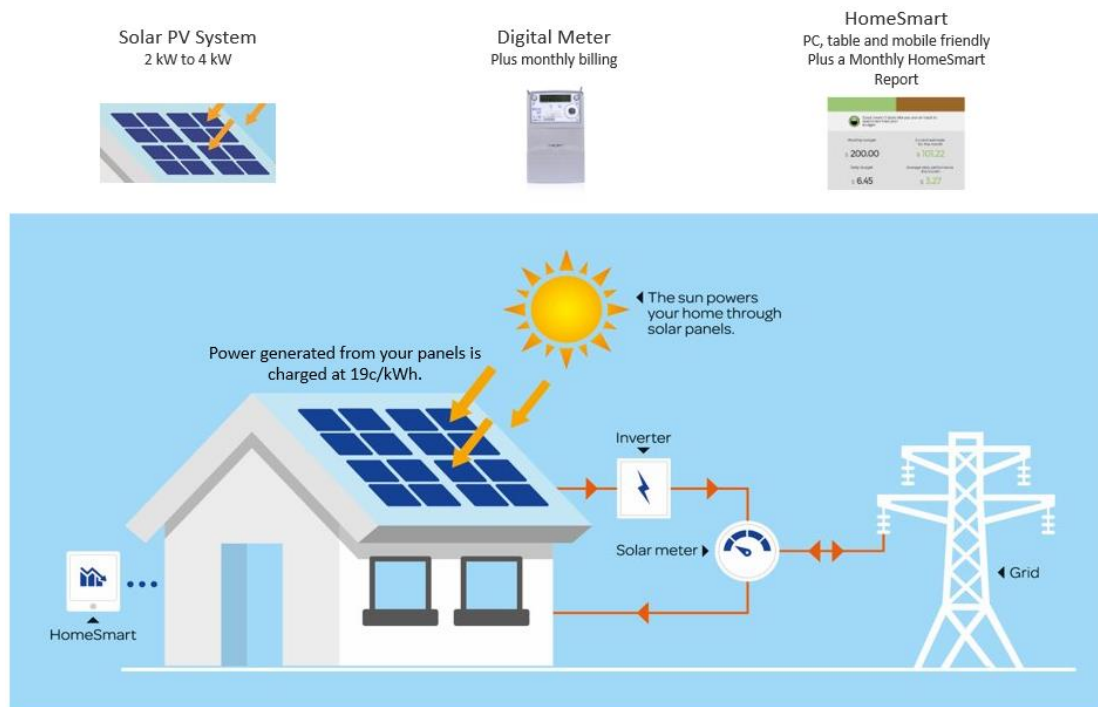
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Introduction

QCOSS worked with the Queensland Government and Ergon Energy to trial a model of accessing solar power for people in public housing properties in regional Queensland. Trial participants received a solar PV system at no upfront cost, an affordable rate on their electricity, access to HomeSmart to help manage their electricity usage and some budgeting assistance with the provision of monthly electricity bills.

A Solar Power Purchasing Agreement (SPPA) that augmented tenants' existing retail contract with Ergon Retail was provided. The SPPA consisted of all electricity generated from the panels charged at 19c/kWh with installation and ongoing maintenance costs to be covered by the retailer. The rate is locked in to enable a stable pricing system for participating households regardless of future pricing changes to tariffs. This model provided an opportunity for those on lower incomes to access a solar PV system that they could pay off over the life of the panels while accessing a lower energy rate. Central to the agreement was the collaboration of the Department of Housing and Public Works as the participating lessor and Ergon Energy as the owner of the systems. These components of the agreement laid the foundation to enable a large scale of tenants to participate in the trial.

Figure 1: The Sunny Savers solar package



As part of the Sunny Savers project, QCOSS agreed to provide the Department of Natural Resources, Mining, and Energy (DNRME) a summary of the activities, feedback and recommendations from QCOSS tenant engagement activities in Cairns and Rockhampton.

The QCOSS Sunny Savers team has been actively engaging with tenants, service providers, and stakeholders since completing their training in September 2017. Between this time and December 2017, five Tenant Engagement Officers (TEOs) visited the homes of people participating in the Sunny Savers Project and facilitated group information sessions in local community venues. Each TEO was able to complete at least four appointments per day. From January to April 2018, four TEOs were able to complete a higher rate of appointments and access more rural locations.

This report references the outcomes achieved by the QCOSS team to date, highlights the key findings, and provides recommendations for the continuation of the Sunny Savers trial.

“I have lived in my house for twenty years and I'm very excited. I know a bit about solar panels and how they work so can't wait to see the savings I will have on my energy bill.” Sunny Savers tenant

Project outcomes

The QCOSS team completed their first home visit appointment on 19 September 2017 and facilitated the first group session on 21 September 2017. The last individual appointment was on 4 April 2018. There were delays in project rollout due to caretaker mode during the State election and the negotiation of mailout locations which made it impossible for the team to maintain a consistent number of daily appointments across the project.

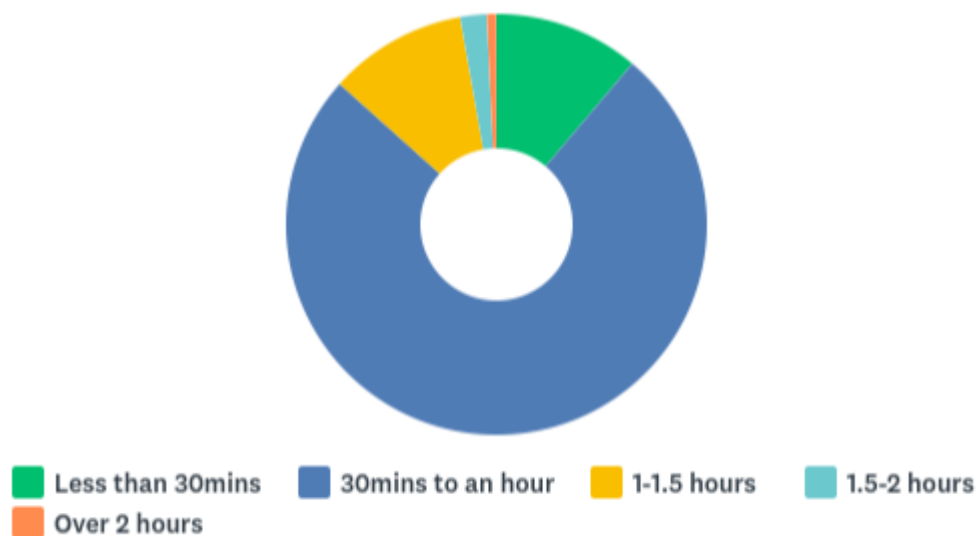
At the end of the regional trial:

- the team had completed 890 appointments
- the team provided information to tenants so that they could decide whether they wanted to participate
- 867 tenants, or 97 per cent of completed appointments, decided to sign a Solar Power Purchase Agreement (SPPA)
- all signed SPPAs were sent to the Sunny Savers email address and were then verified by the Ergon team.

Over the course of the project the TEOs refined their messaging and embedded operational processes into practice. As a result, they were able to deliver the same information in less time.

By the end of the project, TEOs completed 85 per cent of appointments within an hour, with longer appointments reflecting those tenants that required additional support and broader conversations. These charts do not reflect tenants that had more than one appointment or those that needed ongoing support.

Figure 2: Length of one-to-one appointments throughout the trial



The team was trained to engage with tenants and acquired the knowledge and resources to attend all booked appointments, deliver the Sunny Savers information, and provide education in energy literacy. Beyond accessing the trial, the TEOs were highly experienced in completing holistic, psychosocial assessments and provided a wide range of support to a considerable proportion of tenants.

“This is a fantastic idea, all DHPW homes should be fitted with solar panels when they are being built.”
Sunny Savers tenant

The benefit of the QCOSS engagement extended well beyond tenants being able to reduce their energy costs.

Throughout the project QCOSS maintained regular and effective engagement with DNRME and the other project partners through regular teleconferences and Engagement Working Group meetings. QCOSS shared emerging issues and insights, and worked collaboratively to resolve issues as they came up.

Key Findings

Tenant experience

Following each appointment, a survey was completed by the TEOs to capture the experience, impact, and feedback from tenants. Analysis of these qualitative surveys demonstrates that a majority of tenants provided very positive feedback relating to the trial. Tenants were generally enthusiastic and welcomed the opportunity to be able to access a resource that would enable them to reduce their energy costs and increase control of their energy use.

Across the households there was a wide range of questions and perceptions about the trial, however QCOSS identified consistent themes relating to:

- upfront and ongoing costs
- uncertainty about who is responsible for the asset including the cost of repairs relating to any accidental damage to the solar panels, and
- concerns about rental increases.

QCOSS, as a neutral third party, was able to build trust and confidence which could generally alleviate tenants’ concerns and create an environment that supported the high rate of signed SPPAs.

The data collected highlights the immense impact that this opportunity has on the lives of individuals and their families beyond the installation of solar panels. The response from the

“This is a great initiative by the government for low income earners. I can't wait to see what kind of savings it will make with the panels.” Sunny Savers tenant

community revealed that this program provided an opportunity for a sense of inclusion, belonging, and participation in an exciting new program. The rising cost of energy for low income households has a disproportionately high impact on day to day living, community participation, family cohesion, and mental health and wellbeing. Many participants shared a feeling that disadvantaged communities are often

overlooked by policy makers and that projects such as Sunny Savers had a positive influence on tenants well beyond the financial savings that they would access.

QCOSS noted the diversity of people, backgrounds, circumstances, and stories across the populations that they encountered. Throughout the trial, the TEOs supported households that experienced barriers to accessing mainstream supports due to physical and cognitive disabilities, communication challenges, social isolation, and fear relating to debts or barriers to contacting agencies such as fear of being cut off.

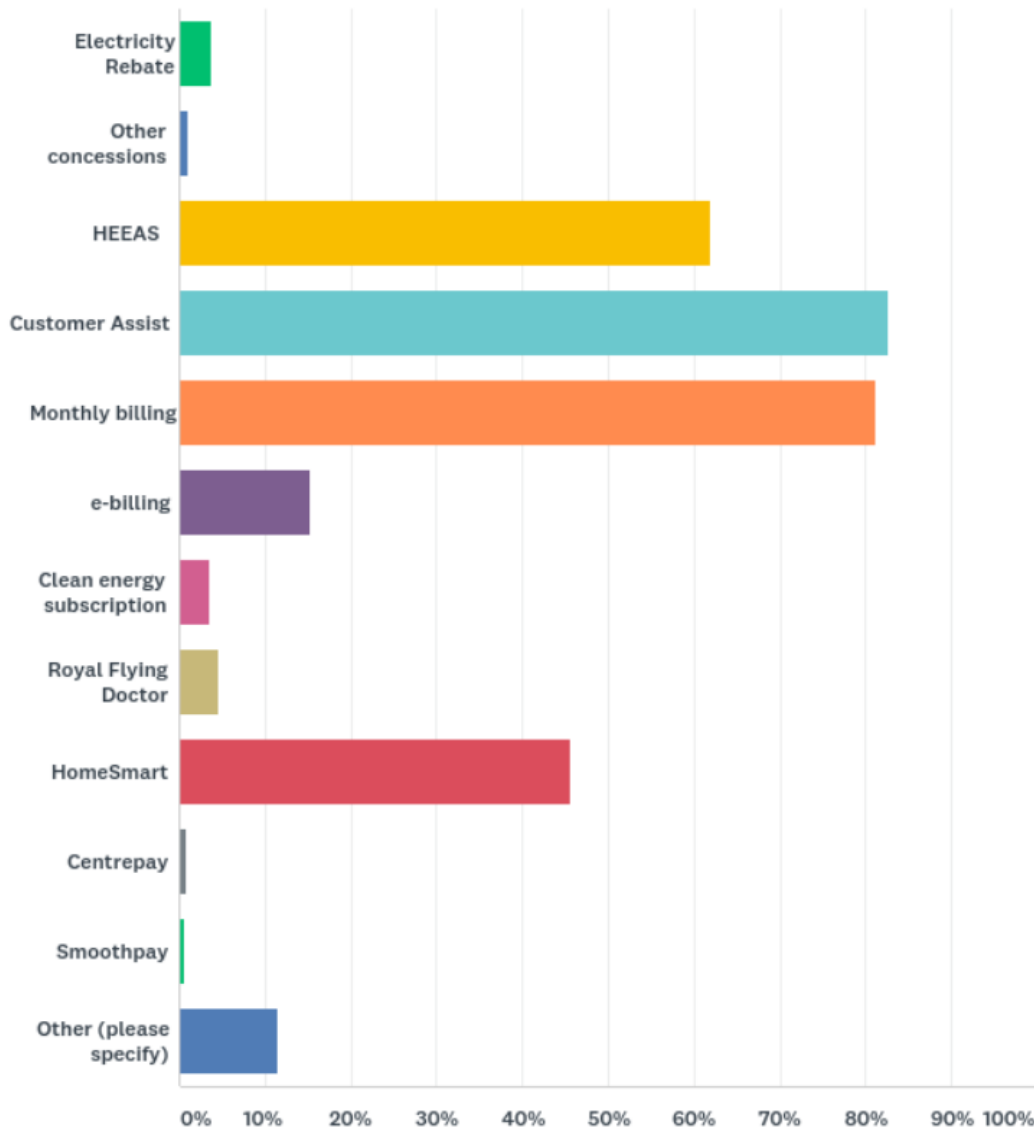
“We struggle with bills and regularly find it hard to afford food after bills.” Sunny Savers tenant

The support provided ranged from direct advocacy, information provision, and referral pathways to organisations such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the Public Trustee of Queensland, and the Department of Housing and Public Works. The importance of this support cannot be overstated as many of the tenants in these households were either unaware of available supports or felt unable to access services and would continue to remain isolated from the sector without outreach based intervention.

Over the course of the trial this issue of engaging with the system (Ergon and Government) was reflected in a low rate of knowledge relating to concessions and rebates available to households. There were many tenants that were unaware of the changes to the electricity rebate eligibility and the impact that this could have on their energy costs. Furthermore, there were many households with significant medical issues that were unaware of the range of concessions available. Ergon have indicated that there has been an increased uptake of concessions from people who participated in the Sunny Savers program.

“Our power debt is impacting on our mental health. Being able to reduce the stress through smaller bills will help our anxiety.” Sunny Savers tenant

Figure 3: Tenants interest in accessing services and supports



The TEOs provided information on Ergon’s Customer Assist program, the range of payment methods, and opting into monthly billing to manage their budget. There was a mixed response to these options. Participants were generally positive about monthly billing but many continued to demonstrate a reluctance to engage with Ergon’s Customer Assist program.

“We have really high bills and cannot understand how. We’re looking forward to HomeSmart to potentially assist with this.”
Sunny Savers tenant

Approximately 45 per cent of households indicated that they intended to access HomeSmart and 15 per cent planned to use e-Billing. Programs which use additional technology were received differently depending on a tenant’s financial literacy and digital inclusion. This was particularly so for tenants that do not regularly engage with technology-based home innovations outside of the trial such as older tenants.

Issues identified

Tenant cancellations and non-attendance

The predominant issue encountered by the team was tenant cancellations or non-attendance to both appointments and group sessions. Based on our records of engagement, 82 per cent of booked appointments were attended and completed. In response to this, the team implemented strategies to increase the rate of signed SPPAs.

QCOSS strategies to increase the rate of signed SPPAs included:

- sending an SMS to tenants 24 hours prior to bookings to remind and encourage tenants to attend their appointment or group session, and
- making a courtesy phone call(s) to the tenant on the morning of the appointment to find a suitable time and negotiate any last-minute issues.

These steps enabled the tenants to indicate if unexpected changes had come up and reschedule an appointment directly with the TEO to avoid additional calls via SSQ.

Group session times and locations were strategically selected to provide a range of suitable options to tenants, including times outside of office hours. There were not any significant indicators that a specific time or day were more accessible to the tenants, with similar rates of non-attendance in group sessions conducted outside of business hours. Unexpected changes such as family or medical issues were the predominant reason for being unable to attend.

One possible factor influencing the rate of non-attendance may be the time lag between when an appointment is booked and when it is attended. The shorter this timeframe, the greater the likelihood that a tenant will remember the appointment and avoid other schedule clashes. This reinforces the importance of the timing of mail outs to ensure that appointment times are available to be scheduled within a reasonable timeframe from when invitations are sent.

People that require care and support around financial decision making

QCOSS met with a number of households that required assistance to access Sunny Savers as well as other supports for their energy needs. Tenants with disabilities or medical needs can have increased energy consumption through medical needs that require air conditioning to maintain consistent temperatures, as well as air conditioning units for in home carers.

Many of these tenants were unaware of the medical rebates available or experienced conditions that needed higher energy use but were ineligible for the concessions. Managing the increased costs of these needs is very difficult for these households, especially when combined with other medical expenses.

“Everyone is looking for ways that could help them save money around their power bill, and it seems to be getting harder for families to be able to afford everyday things for their household basics.” Sunny Savers tenant

Some tenants experienced further barriers to accessing rebates if financial decision making was managed by a parent or family member listed as the account holder. These practical differences created issues in accessing the system designed to support these vulnerable households.

QCOSS supported tenants who required an enduring power of attorney or the Public Trustee of Queensland to complete the process to access Sunny Savers. This created process issues through the trial in bringing all parties together to overcome the barriers. In some instances, TEOs supported families in this process over several meetings and weeks. Had the TEOs not

supported these tenants to navigate the pathways of the program, they would not have been able to access the trial.

Delays in mail outs and caretaker mode

Timing of mail outs and appointment bookings were essential for the QCOSS team to maintain a consistent flow of appointments and achieve the initial capacity targets of 100 appointments per week. Over the course of the trial there were external challenges that impacted on the number and regularity of appointments.

The Queensland State election was announced as tranche 2B of the program was scheduled to be sent to tenants which required all mail outs to be paused. As a result, the flow of appointments rapidly reduced and within one week the team was no longer booked at full capacity. During this time the team followed up on a small number of cancelled appointments and addressed any issues with existing SPPAs that required follow up appointments. Caretaker mode impacted the capacity of the team to maintain their outcomes and resulted in a significant drop in the rate of tenant sign up.

Further delays in 2018 due to negotiations of tranche 3 mailouts impacted the number of appointments in both Cairns and Rockhampton and disrupted the regularity of appointments across this tranche. The impact of this was a reduction in the consistency of appointments booked and therefore total SPPAs signed.

Documentation verification

A photo of the SPPA and Acknowledgement Form is taken at the end of each appointment and automatically sent to a central inbox for quality screening prior to being sent to Ergon. Issues in this process were identified during early mail outs regarding the automatic system, form errors, image quality, and the overall verification process.

With each TEO travelling to multiple locations each day, a hotspot was used to upload each photo in real time. Due to telecommunications issues, there were barriers which resulted in a group of SPPAs that needed to be accessed manually which delayed the process. Across the project a small number of SPPAs were delayed due to this issue with a minority taking as long as four weeks to be processed. The significant majority of SPPAs were delivered within 72 hours of the appointment.

In a small number of cases, form completion created inefficiencies for the QCOSS and Ergon teams. These issues were primarily small inconsistencies in forms such as ensuring all boxes were ticked or that email addresses were legible. The team reviewed internal processes and created additional steps for the TEOs to review these issues and avoid delays through the verification process. Over the course of the project, this impacted a small number of SPPAs.

Image quality was another issue; however this was estimated to impact only a few SPPAs. QCOSS liaised with Ergon regarding SPPAs that could not be verified by Ergon due to image quality and resolved these as a priority. The quality screening processes implemented by QCOSS throughout the project ensured that this figure was maintained at a very low level.

The verification process and systems integration between SharePoint and Ergon created additional follow up work for QCOSS and tenants. TEOs confirmed the account holder name with each tenant to determine the authority required for the SPPA and Acknowledgment Form. QCOSS was advised on numerous occasions to contact and schedule a second appointment with tenants to facilitate a phone call to Ergon due to incompatibilities. These issues were due to systemic incompatibility and were resolved over the phone with an Ergon representative, however each appointment created additional time and resources for the TEOs, essentially doubling the resources required for these tenants.

Shared data platform

Other issues included a lack of systems integration and low knowledge of Sharepoint among some project staff in Ergon and Department of Housing and Public Works. This shared platform provided live shared data to all staff involved in the Sunny Savers project. This platform was co-designed and staff were provided with a number of opportunities to provide input and advice about the data that needed to be collected. Unfortunately, some suggested changes were unable to be implemented once the shared platform went live. QCOSS conducted training with users at the initial stages of the project however, training was not provided to staff that came on board at a later stage. This was compounded by confusion over who was responsible for data accuracy, updates or changes. QCOSS spent a considerable amount of time responding to issues experienced by some staff and supporting them to resolve these issues.

“I won't get too excited until I receive the first bill then I will have a dance around the house on behalf of being considered for the project.”
Sunny Savers tenant

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Evaluation

QCOSS recommends a post-implementation evaluation of the pilot outcomes. The evaluation should include tenants overall experience with the program, feedback from any staff involved in the project, actual use of the panels, changes in energy consumption and behaviours, use of Home Smart, and actual changes to bills. The evaluation should involve and be shared with all relevant stakeholders.

Recommendation 2: Continued expansion of the trial

Based on the overall outcomes achieved QCOSS concludes that the trial was a resounding success for participating tenants. QCOSS supports further roll out of the project into SEQ to increase the number of low income households that can benefit from participating in this program. Furthermore, QCOSS supports the expansion of this trial to include community housing providers and low income private rental households in other regions of Queensland. There is a strong appetite for this opportunity amongst the wider community and all community groups that liaised with QCOSS registered their interest in finding successful models to access alternative energy.

Recommendation 3: Community participation and leadership

QCOSS has been involved in a range of projects in the energy sector including Sunny Savers, Energy Savvy Families, Switched On Communities, and workshops targeting the community sector and general public. Through the experiences of these activities it has been identified that an independent third party from the community is vital in energy literacy and community engagement. This aspect was reinforced throughout the trial, enabling participants to seek clarification, discuss challenges, and overcome barriers to engagement. This approach also builds the capacity of the sector to deliver education, support, and opportunities to low income households and creates sustainable change among those involved. QCOSS recommends that this approach to community engagement is continued across future projects and in policy development.

Recommendation 4: Genuine engagement

Genuine community engagement relies on trust, relationships, and time. Active participation in projects such as Sunny Savers requires more than notification from stakeholders. Locally based champions are the most effective means of mobilising participants due to their trusted expertise and relationships across the community. The delays in Sunny Savers across caretaker mode created issues for the project, however the extended timeframe enabled locals to discuss the trial and witness the benefits for early adopters. To ensure that future projects achieve the desired outcomes for participants, a realistic timeframe is needed to enable community connections and relationships to be built.

Recommendation 5: Shared data platform

This project involved QCOSS, Ergon (and SPARQ/Energy Queensland), Department of Housing and Public Works, Smart Service Queensland and the Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy with access to a central shared secure data platform (SharePoint). This benefited all stakeholders across the project by providing access to real time data, a mechanism to share information and centralised reporting. Some staff experienced some challenges in using the platform due to a number of factors including staff changes, limited ongoing training and support, inability to make changes to the data collection post going live, and some confusion around work processes and structures.

To address these issues, QCOSS recommends that for future Sunny Saver projects:

- Continue to use a shared platform to collect and share data.
- Invest more time in the design of the platform to ensure it meets the needs of all stakeholders, and avoids requests for changes after it goes live.
- Ongoing training and support for staff, especially if new staff come on board.
- More established work processes and structures to ensure roles and responsibilities are clear.

Recommendation 6: Improved efficiency through direct communication

In many cases, QCOSS became the conduit between Ergon and their customers to resolve any issues with the authentication process. This created reverse workflow, confusion and frustration for participants and time delays. This issue would be resolved more effectively directly between Ergon and the participant. QCOSS recommends that future projects include a direct line of communication between energy retailers and customers to increase efficiency, improve understanding, and better communicate and explain changes or delays.