



Determination

Application for authorisation AA1000459
lodged by
the Municipal Association of Victoria
in respect of establishing a joint renewable energy purchasing group
Authorisation number: AA1000459

Date 31 January 2020

Commissioners: Keogh
Rickard
Court
Ridgeway

Summary

The ACCC has decided to grant authorisation to enable 48 Victorian Councils to pool their electricity demand and collectively tender for the supply of retail electricity services and renewable energy certificates (i.e. Large Scale Generation Certificates) from an electricity retailer.

The ACCC grants authorisation for 11 years until 22 February 2031.

1. The application for authorisation

- 1.1. On 21 November 2019, the Municipal Association of Victoria (**MAV**) on behalf of itself and 48 Victorian Councils (the **Participating Councils**) (the **Applicants**) lodged application for authorisation AA1000459 with the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (the **ACCC**). The Applicants are seeking authorisation to enable them to conduct a joint tender process for the supply of retail electricity services and renewable energy certificates (i.e. Large Scale Generation Certificates) from an electricity retailer. The application was made under subsection 88(1) of the *Competition and Consumer Act 2010* (Cth) (the **Act**).
- 1.2. The ACCC may grant authorisation, which provides businesses with legal protection, for arrangements that may otherwise risk breaching the law but are not harmful to competition and/or are likely to result in overall public benefits.

The Applicants

- 1.3. The Applicants are:

- Municipal Association of Victoria
- Ararat Rural City Council
- Ballarat City Council
- Banyule City Council
- Bass Coast Shire Council
- Brimbank City Council
- Buloke Shire Council
- Campaspe Shire Council
- Central Goldfields Shire Council
- City of Boroondara
- City of Greater Bendigo
- City of Greater Dandenong
- City of Greater Geelong
- City of Whittlesea
- Darebin City Council
- East Gippsland Shire Council
- Glen Eira City Council
- Golden Plains Shire Council
- Greater Shepparton City Council
- Hepburn Shire Council
- Hobsons Bay City Council
- Horsham Rural City Council
- Hume City Council
- Indigo Shire Council
- Loddon Shire Council
- Macedon Ranges Shire Council
- Manningham City Council
- Maribyrnong City Council
- Maroondah City Council
- Melton City Council
- Mildura Rural City Council
- Mitchell Shire Council
- Moira Shire Council
- Monash City Council

- Moonee Valley City Council
- Mount Alexander Shire Council
- Murrindindi Shire Council
- Pyrenees Shire Council
- South Gippsland Shire Council
- Stonnington City Council
- Strathbogie Shire Council
- Surf Coast Shire Council
- Swan Hill Rural City Council
- Warrnambool City Council
- Wellington Shire Council
- Whitehorse City Council
- Wodonga City Council
- Wyndham City Council
- Yarra Ranges Shire Council

(the **Applicants**)

The Proposed Conduct

- 1.4. The Applicants are seeking authorisation to conduct a collective tender process to jointly negotiate the terms and conditions of electricity supply agreements. This involves establishing a joint electricity purchasing group, whereby the Participating Councils would pool their electricity demand and MAV will conduct a single tender calling for the supply of retail electricity services and renewable energy certificates (i.e. Large Scale Generation Certificates) (**LGCs**)¹ from an electricity retailer connected to the National Electricity Market (**NEM**).
- 1.5. The Applicants advise that the tenders will be evaluated by MAV, in conjunction with the project's energy advisors and a tender evaluation panel comprised of representatives of the Participating Councils. In its role as aggregator, MAV will enter into a contract with the successful tenderer. The successful tenderer would also enter into individual agreements with each Participating Council, on substantially similar terms and conditions, for the supply of retail electricity services and renewable energy certificates (i.e. LGCs) from the electricity retailer.
- 1.6. Specifically, the Applicants seek authorisation to:
 - (a) collectively investigate potential electricity supply options for the combined electricity loads and determine price parameters through which Participating Councils commit to purchasing a specified load amount of electricity from the preferred supplier(s)
 - (b) collectively conduct a tender process to select an electricity supplier(s) to supply the combined electricity loads of the Participating Councils
 - (c) establish a tender evaluation panel to make recommendations to MAV and the project steering committee based on the tender evaluation criteria
 - (d) consider tenders and negotiate an electricity supply agreement with the preferred electricity supplier(s) that enables the Participating Councils to access the price and other terms and conditions offered by the successful electricity supplier(s)

¹ LGCs are created annually based on the actual amount of electricity generated by a renewable energy generation system, registered with the Clean Energy Regulator under the Renewable energy (Electricity) Act 2000. LGCs are traded in an open market, and are generally bought and surrendered by RET-liable entities to fulfil their statutory surrender obligations.

- (e) enter into a standing deed of offer with the preferred electricity supplier(s) to supply electricity to each of the Participating Councils, and
- (f) following entry into the individual supply agreements, undertake contract management services throughout the term of the standing deed of offer. MAV will also participate in decisions regarding the administration and operation of certain aspects of the electricity supply agreements, including performance and/or pricing reviews, the exercise of contract options, or any changes to terms and conditions.

(the **Proposed Conduct**)

- 1.7. The tender will seek agreements between electricity suppliers for both power and green benefits in the form of LGCs at a minimum 1:1 basis. This equates to the supply of one LGC for every MWh electricity consumed. The LGCs must be sourced from a nominated renewable energy facility that is exporting electricity to the NEM, accredited to register LGCs under the RET scheme, and generating electricity from wind, solar or any other renewable energy source approved by the Participating Councils in writing. The Applicants advise that this reflects the Participating Councils' commitment to promoting investment in renewable energy sources, and supporting the achievements of renewable energy targets of some of the Participating Councils.
- 1.8. The Applicants seek authorisation for 11 years.
- 1.9. A copy of the application is available on the ACCC's public register for this matter.²

Interim authorisation

- 1.10. On 18 December 2019, interim authorisation was granted under subsection 91(2) of the Act.³ Interim authorisation was granted to enable the Applicants to commence the tender process, but not to enter into contracts, while the ACCC considered the substantive application. Interim authorisation will remain in place until the date the ACCC's final determination comes into effect or until the ACCC decides to revoke interim authorisation.

2. Background

- 2.1. The NEM is comprised of five interconnected regions of Queensland, New South Wales (which includes the ACT), Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia. The Applicants currently account for less than 0.135% of total electricity consumption in the NEM and less than 0.6% of Victorian consumption.
- 2.2. The ACCC has previously granted authorisation for five collective bargaining or joint purchasing arrangements for electricity:
 - Melbourne City Council & Ors – Melbourne Renewable Energy Project 1 (2016)
 - South Australian Chamber of Mines and Energy (SACOME) (2017)
 - Eastern Energy Buyers Group (2017)
 - Large Format Retail Association (2019), and

² www.accc.gov.au/authorisationsregister.

³ See ACCC decision of 18 December 2019 available at [Municipal Association of Victoria](#).

- RMIT – Melbourne Renewable Energy Project 2 (2019).

2.3. In each of these cases, the ACCC found that the joint buying of electricity would be likely to result in public benefits including transaction cost savings and promoting increased competition for the supply of energy to the applicants. Little, or no, public detriment was considered likely to result.

3. Consultation

- 3.1. A public consultation process informs the ACCC's assessment of the likely public benefits and detriments from the Proposed Conduct.
- 3.2. On 18 December 2019, the ACCC issued a draft determination proposing to grant authorisation for 11 years. A pre-decision conference was not requested following the draft determination.
- 3.3. The ACCC invited submissions from a range of potentially interested parties including major electricity suppliers, relevant industry associations, consumer groups, state and federal government and relevant regulatory bodies.⁴ No submissions were received.

4. ACCC assessment

- 4.1. The ACCC's assessment of the Proposed Conduct is carried out in accordance with the relevant authorisation test contained in the Act.
- 4.2. The Applicants have sought authorisation for Proposed Conduct that would or might constitute a cartel provision within the meaning of Division 1 of Part IV of the Act and may substantially lessen competition within the meaning of section 45 of the Act. Consistent with subsection 90(7) and 90(8) of the Act, the ACCC must not grant authorisation unless it is satisfied, in all the circumstances, that the conduct would result or be likely to result in a benefit to the public, and the benefit would outweigh the detriment to the public that would be likely to result (authorisation test).
- 4.3. In making its assessment of the Proposed Conduct, the ACCC considers that:
 - The relevant areas of competition are likely to be the wholesale and retail supply of electricity. In this respect, the ACCC considers that precise identification of the geographic scope of these areas of competition (Victoria or the broader NEM) is not required for the purpose of assessing this application.
 - Absent the Proposed Conduct, it is likely that Participating Councils will individually tender, enter into, and administer, contracts for the supply of electricity on a stand-alone basis.

Public benefits

- 4.4. The Act does not define what constitutes a public benefit. The ACCC adopts a broad approach. This is consistent with the Australian Competition Tribunal (the **Tribunal**) which has stated that the term should be given its widest possible meaning, and includes:

⁴ A list of the parties consulted is available from the ACCC's public register www.accc.gov.au/authorisationsregister.

*...anything of value to the community generally, any contribution to the aims pursued by society including as one of its principal elements ... the achievement of the economic goals of efficiency and progress.*⁵

4.5. The ACCC has considered the following public benefits:

- transaction cost savings
- greater competition and investment in the supply of electricity
- environmental benefits through a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

4.6. The ACCC's assessment of the likely public benefits from the Proposed Conduct follows.

Transaction cost savings

4.7. The ACCC accepts that collective tendering for, and administration of contracts regarding, the supply of electricity is likely to result in public benefits from transaction cost savings compared to the situation where individual negotiations and contract administration is conducted by each the Participating Council.

4.8. These savings can arise from reducing the total time of negotiation and creating the ability to share costs in obtaining legal and technical advice to inform the negotiation.

Greater competition and investment in the supply of electricity

4.9. The ACCC considers that the combined electricity demand of the Participating Councils, as well as the length of the supply agreements the Applicants are seeking (approximately 11 years), are likely to encourage increased competition amongst electricity suppliers in responding to the tender requests and may encourage a new supplier to enter or underwrite investment in an innovative electricity supply project.

Environmental benefits

4.10. The ACCC notes that the Applicants claim the project will promote environmental benefits by reducing greenhouse gas emissions via the purchase of LGCs. The ACCC accepts that any reduction in greenhouse gas emissions over and above what would be achieved in the absence of the Proposed Conduct and or the same reduction in emissions but at a lower cost will be a public benefit.

Public detriments

4.11. The Act does not define what constitutes a public detriment. The ACCC adopts a broad approach. This is consistent with the Tribunal which has defined it as:

*...any impairment to the community generally, any harm or damage to the aims pursued by the society including as one of its principal elements the achievement of the goal of economic efficiency.*⁶

4.12. The Participating Councils may be considered to be each other's competitors for the acquisition of electricity. By conducting their procurement jointly rather than

5 Queensland Co-operative Milling Association Ltd (1976) ATPR 40-012 at 17,242; cited with approval in Re 7-Eleven Stores (1994) ATPR 41-357 at 42,677.

6 Re 7-Eleven Stores (1994) ATPR 41-357 at 42,683.

individually, the Participating Councils are agreeing to no longer compete. The Proposed Conduct therefore will lessen competition in the acquisition of electricity.

- 4.13. The Applicants submit that the risk of any public detriment arising from the Proposed Conduct is minimal since the Proposed Conduct involves a relatively small proportion of electricity demand compared to that of Victoria (0.6%) or the NEM as a whole (0.13%).
- 4.14. The ACCC considers that the aggregate demand of the Participating Councils is unlikely to be large enough to create competition concerns.
- 4.15. Taking this into account, the ACCC considers that any likely detriment arising from the Proposed Conduct will be minimal.

Balance of public benefit and detriment

- 4.16. The ACCC is satisfied that the Proposed Conduct is likely to result in public benefits from transaction cost savings, increased competition for the supply of electricity and environmental benefits; and that these public benefits would outweigh the minimal, if any, likely detriment to the public from the Proposed Conduct.

5. Determination

The application

- 5.1. On 21 November 2019, the Applicants lodged application AA1000459 with the ACCC, seeking authorisation under subsection 88(1) of the Act.

The authorisation test

- 5.2. Under subsections 90(7) and 90(8) of the Act, the ACCC must not grant authorisation unless it is satisfied in all the circumstances that the Proposed Conduct is likely to result in a benefit to the public and the benefit would outweigh the detriment to the public that would be likely to result from the Proposed Conduct.
- 5.3. For the reasons outlined in this determination, the ACCC is satisfied, in all the circumstances, that the Proposed Conduct would be likely to result in a benefit to the public and the benefit to the public would outweigh the detriment to the public that would result or be likely to result from the Proposed Conduct, including any lessening of competition.
- 5.4. Accordingly, the ACCC has decided to grant authorisation.

Conduct which the ACCC has decided to authorise

- 5.5. The ACCC has decided to grant authorisation AA1000459 to enable members of the proposed joint renewable energy purchasing group to pool their demand and collectively tender for an electricity supply arrangement as described in paragraph 1.6, and defined as the Proposed Conduct.
- 5.6. The Proposed Conduct may involve a cartel provision within the meaning of Division 1 of Part IV of the Act or may have the purpose or effect of substantially lessening competition within the meaning of section 45 of the Act.
- 5.7. The ACCC has decided to grant authorisation AA1000459 for 11 years.

6. Date authorisation comes into effect

- 6.1. This determination is made on 31 January 2020. If no application for review of the determination is made to the Australian Competition Tribunal it will come into force on 22 February 2020.