

21 December 2020

Sian Sutton
GM Customer and Engagement
Aurora Energy Limited
(By email only)

Dear Sian

Aurora CPP – feedback on public meetings

1. Thank you for your letter of 7 December 2020, providing feedback to the Commission on its second round of public meetings held in late November and early December in Central Otago, Queenstown Lakes and Dunedin, in relation to the Aurora CPP draft decision. We appreciate you taking the time to provide your thoughts to us.
2. We also want to thank you and your colleagues for participating in the public meetings and stakeholder sessions, in what were, at times, challenging circumstances.
3. Your letter contains some useful insights. We acknowledge that there were areas where as a learning organisation we could improve our engagement processes following the experience gained through this project. We do however have a different perspective on several issues that you have raised and in the interests of an open dialogue on this topic, I respond to some of these below.
4. We believe there were many positive aspects to the series of public meetings. This included positive feedback from attendees who were grateful for the opportunity to be heard and ask questions. There was valuable feedback on issues that are within the Commission's remit, including on the nature and regularity of Aurora's future reporting to consumers. Commentary on issues not relevant to the Aurora CPP will not contribute to our decisions in relation to it.
5. Our approach to promoting the public sessions was created with input from Aurora, local council communications managers and mayors, the chambers of commerce, and other stakeholders. We promoted the sessions through a range of channels (including social media, newspapers, local apps and radio stations).
6. I acknowledge that the effectiveness of some of the public meetings were affected by the behaviour of some attendees. I also acknowledge the impact that some attendees' behaviour at the earlier meetings had on Aurora staff. I acknowledged this verbally to you and your colleagues in Cromwell and again in Dunedin.

7. As you allude to in your letter, the level and nature of engagement at later meetings was better than at the earlier ones. Commission staff received positive feedback from attendees who appreciated the opportunity to hear and discuss our views as well as engage with Aurora.
8. As you note in your letter, an important purpose of the meetings was to gather feedback on the draft decision. There is an expectation on us as a public body to increase our consumer engagement and we took the opportunity to do so through this process. An important purpose of the public meetings was to allow local communities to be heard on their views about the regulation of their electricity lines company.
9. The scale of proposed price increases and the state of Aurora's network has a major impact on consumers and businesses. It is important affected consumers had an opportunity to express their views. While we accept that some control needs to be exercised over the topics that attendees could cover in their contributions to the public meetings, we did not want to unnecessarily circumscribe what people might raise. Not all consumers and businesses are able to readily direct their comments only to the matters of most significance to the draft decision. The openness of these sessions was intended to allow a greater range of consumer participation and expression of views than the Commission would otherwise receive.
10. However, as I mentioned to you in Cromwell, and want to reiterate here, not all of what was said in the sessions will be taken into account in the Commission's decision-making process. It is incumbent upon the Commission to take into account only those matters relevant to the Aurora CPP and to disregard those that are irrelevant. Commissioners, as decision-makers, were not at the public meetings or stakeholder sessions relating to the draft decision. Instead, Commissioners will receive a publicly available summary of the information relevant to the CPP process that was gathered at the meetings. This will also be posted on the Commission's website.
11. You have raised concerns about "mistruths" and "misinformation" shared by some attendees at the meetings. We did not see it as productive to engage in a heated debate with individual attendees as to the merits (or otherwise) of their personal views. We made it clear at these meetings and the earlier round of meetings, what was outside scope for us and we sought to clarify at points when we thought it was possible and useful to do so.
12. To the extent that Aurora representatives present had concerns about the accuracy of views relating to Aurora, then it was open to you to respond or provide correction. Aurora attendees were asked whether they wished to respond on several occasions. In some meetings you stated that you were there to be an observer and to listen and chose not to comment. While acknowledging your intention to be present to observe and listen, similar to your feedback on our performance improving over the meetings, we feel that your more active involvement in the later meetings was helpful. It meant some points could be addressed on the spot and helped keep things more focused and on-track.

13. Your letter raises concerns about the “selection mechanism” for participants at stakeholder sessions. As a public body, holding these meetings as part of a transparent process, we were keen to provide several options for stakeholders to attend. The approach taken was based on an open invitation to all stakeholders from all areas. We took this approach because we thought some invitees may not be able to attend the meeting closer to them but may be able to attend in another area. I understand your perspective that the stakeholder sessions (as distinct from the public sessions) could have been of a different nature and with more limited attendees who were there in a representative capacity. This is something we will think about for future stakeholder sessions.
14. Your letter can be read to make some strong adverse inferences about the value for money of the meetings based on some assumptions that are not correct. It infers the cost of the public meetings can be estimated by taking the difference between the Commission’s costs of assessing the Powerco CPP proposal in 2018 and the projected costs of the Commission’s assessment of Aurora’s CPP proposal. A calculation of the cost of the public meetings using this method is highly inaccurate.
15. The actual direct cost of this and the earlier set of public meetings that the Commission staged on the Aurora CPP in locations across Otago – first in June, and then in November and December – was around 10% of the figure cited in your letter.
16. You mention the possibility of the Commission and Aurora staging joint public meetings once the final CPP decision has been issued. We have not yet taken a decision on whether we will be holding further direct community engagement sessions on the final decision. We are still considering all mechanisms for sharing the outcome of the final decision. We will let you know after a decision has been taken.
17. Whether we go out to the community directly and in person or not, we would expect Aurora to actively engage with the community.
18. In the interests of transparency, the Commission intends to publish your letter of 7 December 2020 and this reply on the Aurora CPP webpage on the Commission’s website, as has been done with previous correspondence with Aurora during the draft decision consultation period.
19. Please let Dane Gunnell know as a matter of urgency if Aurora has any concerns with this course of action.

Yours sincerely



Adrienne Meikle
Chief Executive