



Energy & Water
Ombudsman NSW
Free, fair and independent

Annual Report 2019/2020

Responsive and resilient



About this Report

This Annual Report is published in accordance with the Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW (EWON) Charter and the Benchmarks for Industry-based Customer Dispute Resolution. The Benchmarks are Accessibility, Independence, Fairness, Accountability, Efficiency and Effectiveness.

About our data

The data in this Report is drawn from complaints received by EWON during the 2019/2020 financial year, unless otherwise specified. EWON's open complaint data varies in accordance with complaint progression, and figures in this Report reflect complaint status as at 7 July 2020.

About our case studies

Personal information about our customers has been changed to protect their privacy.

Overview

The Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW (EWON) is an industry-based Ombudsman scheme which provides independent, free, informal dispute resolution services to all NSW energy and some water customers. We seek to achieve a fair and reasonable outcome for all complaints and all parties – we are not a consumer advocate, nor do we represent industry.

We investigate a broad spectrum of complaints including:

- > Disputed accounts
- > High bills
- > Disconnection or restriction of supply
- > Payment difficulties
- > Reliability and quality of supply
- > Connection or transfer issues
- > Contract terms
- > Marketing practices
- > Digital meter issues
- > Poor customer service.

Our principal responsibilities as set out in the EWON Charter are to:

- > Handle energy and water complaints independently, fairly, informally, expeditiously and free of charge to the customer
- > Promote EWON to consumers and small business
- > Encourage and provide advice to members on good complaint-handling practices to assist in reducing and avoiding complaints.

We receive, investigate and resolve customer complaints and disputes and work with energy and water providers to help them improve their processes and deliver consistent, high quality customer service. We help raise industry standards, build customer confidence and reduce complaints by contributing to the development of energy and water policy through our submissions, reporting and analysis.



EWON acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands across New South Wales. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging and we offer our thanks to Aboriginal communities who welcome us on to their land.

ngara ngwiya yudi – listen, give, guide

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Chair's Report



During one of the most challenging periods for all Australians, EWON continued to deliver high quality services and advice to NSW consumers, energy and water companies, regulators and community advocates. I am immensely proud of how EWON has maintained business continuity during these times.

In the last financial year, the Board's governance focused on four key Business Plan projects:

- > The independent five-yearly Review of EWON's complaint-handling service and operations
- > Development of EWON's first Reconciliation Action Plan
- > Operationalising the expansion of EWON's jurisdiction
- > Implementing the IT transformation program.

The Board welcomed the approach taken by independent reviewers, Dr Gavin McBurnie and Jane Williams from Scotland's Queen Margaret University Consumer Dispute Resolution Centre. They considered member and stakeholder views and tested EWON's operations against the National Benchmarks for Industry-based Customer Dispute Resolution: Accessibility, Independence, Fairness, Accountability, Efficiency and Effectiveness.

The Review found that EWON is an effective, well-run consumer dispute resolution scheme which meets those Benchmarks. EWON's outreach and engagement program was found to be best practice; EWON's first Reconciliation Action Plan will further strengthen it.

The Review also recognised the need for EWON's jurisdiction to evolve with the changing external environment. EWON's 2018 jurisdiction expansion, to include embedded networks, led this year to 115 new members, including 109 exempt entities. Some of our newest members face

different constraints and challenges to traditional members. The effects of last summer's bushfires and COVID-19 have had a significant financial impact on residential parks – often small businesses providing housing for people who may otherwise experience homelessness. In recognition of this, the Board waived residential park membership fees for 2020/2021. EWON's Exempt Entity and WICA Operational Advisory Group will ensure we understand emerging issues from this expanding sector.

The Board focused on information technology and cyber security risk in the year under review. Just before COVID-19 struck, our IT transformation program met a critical milestone, which allowed staff to seamlessly transition to work from home. A detailed IT Business Plan and Advisory Panel ensured effective cloud migration of network infrastructure and the opportunity to outsource day-to-day desktop support and maintenance. We have achieved improved cyber security and well integrated and scalable IT services.

Our fourth key Business Plan project will see EWON's IT capability transition from an in-house IT function to an information management and data analytics platform. This will enable EWON to draw greater insights from complaints and business data to meet the needs of the changing energy and water environments.

EWON's 2019/2020 financial results are based on strong financial management of EWON's operations in unprecedented times. Budget deliberations required consideration of unknown short- and long-term impacts of COVID-19. A conservative approach recognises the financial pressures affecting EWON members and consumers, and a possible increase in the demands for EWON's service when stimulus support decreases. Acknowledgement of our charitable/community purpose by the Australian Charities and Not for

Profit Commission was welcome as it confirms EWON's status for Income and Payroll Tax exemptions.

In February 2020, I was pleased to participate in the Australian and New Zealand Energy & Water Ombudsman Network (ANZEWON) Chair and Ombudsman forum. The key discussion topic was how we navigate the emergence of new services and products across the sector. ANZEWON commissioned an independent research report exploring consumers' future expectations of energy and water ombudsman schemes. Some of the findings of this report reinforced EWON's Independent Review outcomes, including the need for our jurisdiction to evolve to ensure independent external dispute resolution services remain available to energy consumers.

In November 2019 we farewelled and thanked four members of our Board: Maria Good, Wayne Warburton, Max Bosotti and Jan Prichard, for their considerable service to EWON's good governance. We also welcomed four new directors to the Board: Craig Memery, Kate Temby, Rod Stowe and Rob Amphlett Lewis. I thank all Directors, past and present, for their support and commitment to the strong and effective governance of EWON's affairs.

In closing, I would like to thank the Ombudsman Janine Young, the Management Team and EWON's staff for their significant effort and commitment to deliver EWON's vision and purpose in the most challenging circumstances. Together they ensure that EWON continues to demonstrate the hallmarks of a strong and effective Ombudsman scheme.

Tony Crawford

**Chair
Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW**

Ombudsman's Report



Three distinct periods defined the year in review. From July to September was business as usual, then from October to February NSW experienced horrific bushfires and devastating storms and finally the COVID-19 pandemic in March.

Swiftly, we were challenged to find new ways to deliver a needed service to many NSW consumers and to meet EWON's strategic objectives in an environment none of us had contemplated. Put to the test, we quickly adapted and set about demonstrating the **responsiveness and resilience** we've developed in recent years.

Key achievements

In my fifth year as Ombudsman, it was pleasing to receive the results of **EWON's Independent Review**, conducted by Queen Margaret University's Consumer Dispute Resolution Centre. The review ensured that our operations, especially with respect to complaints management, were tested against international practice. Over the past five years, we have focused on embedding the principles and practices which sit behind each of the six Benchmarks for Industry-based Customer Dispute Resolution – Accessibility, Independence, Fairness, Accountability, Efficiency and Effectiveness – so receiving independent confirmation of the success of this work including best practice in outreach and engagement, was particularly rewarding for our Management Team and staff.

We have developed a Board-endorsed program of work, aligned with our immediate, mid and long-term strategic priorities, to action the Review's recommendations.

In 2019/2020, we developed two critical pieces of work of which I'm extremely proud. The first was our **Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)** which builds on several existing initiatives, including our successful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Community Outreach program. We submitted our draft RAP to Reconciliation Australia in June 2020 and are currently engaging with them to complete our Plan. The RAP documents our commitment to reconciliation and the ways in which we intend to contribute internally and in the broader community. Continuing to embed these actions into our day-to-day operations while expanding our culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a key 2020/2021 initiative.

The second is EWON's **Family Violence Position Statement** which outlines our approach to dealing with family violence particularly when it is revealed in our complaints work. High debt is often a consequence of economic abuse and research indicates it is common for an abusive partner to control utilities to manipulate or punish their family, including cutting off energy or water. In 2019, we engaged specialist family violence trainers to train our Leadership Team and frontline staff, and we established safety, privacy and referral protocols for staff to call upon when they are dealing with victims of family violence. We also highlighted the fact that family violence affects all communities, including work communities, with the aim that our staff members are empowered to seek support if needed.

Expanded awareness

The start of COVID-19 triggered job losses, combined with high winter energy bills as most of NSW began working and schooling from home. We responded by launching a major **COVID-19 digital awareness campaign** targeting seniors, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and CALD customers and casual workers encouraging them to contact retailers to seek financial support and avoid debt accrual. The campaign ran on social media and community radio for six weeks during May and June, reaching an audience of nearly one million consumers – a low-cost investment that increased our

social media presence and enabled us to stay in touch with consumers whilst our face-to-face events were postponed.

In 2019 EWON partnered with **Thriving Communities Partnership (TCP)** which drives cross-sector collaboration aiming to give all consumers fair access to essential services including utilities, financial services, telecommunications, and transport. I was pleased to join my Ombudsman peers in being a TCP ambassador as its work clearly aligns with EWON's ethos.

Valued membership

EWON's membership has more than doubled this year to 201 with six new authorised energy retailers and 109 embedded retailers/networks welcomed by 30 June 2020. Our membership will continue to grow in 2020/2021 as we reach out across NSW to embedded retailers/networks which hold Australian Energy Regulator exemptions.

We strive to deliver value to our members and in December 2019 we launched **EWONLink**, our new Member's Portal and one-stop-shop for information about complaints lodged with EWON. The secure portal contains members' weekly, monthly and quarterly EWON complaints reports; and provides an option for members to create customised reports drawn directly from our complaints data – within 24 hours of the information being recorded by our Investigations Team.

Agile in a dynamic environment

Our staff are skilled in a diverse range of areas including investigations, policy, outreach, communications, finance, HR, IT and administration. There is one common principle that brings us together – an underlying set of values centred on fairness and social justice. We have now developed

Ombudsman's report

a **Capability Framework** that identifies the requirements for different roles, and this will underpin our people processes including selection, career development and succession planning.

When NSW went into COVID-19 lockdown, the call for EWON's support from consumers experiencing vulnerability increased. Face-to-face events were off the agenda and instead we responded by introducing a **Virtual Outreach Program** enabling online and phone delivery of our signature Bring Your Bills Days so consumers could access affordability relief from their retailers as well as independent assistance from EWON.

The introduction of the AER's Customer Hardship Guideline followed by the COVID-19 Statement of Expectations meant disconnections, debt collection and default listings became less frequent, and this saw a **welcomed decrease in EWON complaints**. Complaint numbers fell from 26,215 in 2018/2019 to 19,370 in 2019/2020. Whilst this is positive, we expect that when stimulus support stops, accumulated debt will see complaints increase. Our top three complaint issues continue to be billing, customer service, and credit. Billing complaints increased by 3% from 2018/2019 as a percentage of total complaints, credit complaints remained steady, and customer service complaints decreased by 8% compared with 2018/2019.

Influential policy submissions

We responded to numerous industry, systemic and strategic issues throughout 2019/2020 by contributing high level submissions to regulatory, government and peak bodies. This included being asked by the AER to report on the implementation of its **Customer Hardship Guideline** which took effect in October 2019. This

required review of affordability-related complaints and establishment of a reporting regime.

Then COVID-19 began to affect households and small businesses. The AER introduced their **Statement of Expectations** which halted disconnections, debt collection, and credit reporting and directed retailers to establish payment arrangements for financially-impacted customers. Again, in response to the AER, we began providing regular reports detailing complaints where, based on both customer and retailer-provided information, requirements may not have been met.

Our February 2020 **Consumer Data Right (CDR)** submission to the ACCC focused on CDR implementation and the role of non-accredited third parties receiving data. We addressed privacy aspects and recommended that third parties be treated as agents of accredited persons for the purposes of dispute resolution, meaning the accredited person would be responsible for the complaint. Implementation of CDR continues, and our role will be influenced by ACCC decisions about holders and distributors of customer data.

In October 2019 we welcomed the release of the Sylvan Review into the coordination and funding of financial counselling services across Australia. EWON submitted a recommendation calling for the establishment of a body to oversee the sector and deliver stable funding arrangements. In March 2020 we wrote to the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction encouraging action on the review recommendations. The resilience of both consumers and financial counsellors will be tested throughout 2020/2021. The sector will need to be strengthened to address the ongoing impact of COVID-19.

In our ongoing collaboration with government departments and agencies on policy matters including remote reconnection and disconnection of customers by smart meters, power charges in residential parks, and water competition, we continue to influence the evolution of consumer protections.

Looking ahead

I was pleased to be appointed Chair of the Australian and New Zealand Ombudsman Association in November 2019 after serving on the Executive for several years. My two-year term will give me increased insights into how Ombudsman offices across Australia and New Zealand are evolving in today's changing environment.

The energy sector is currently experiencing its most significant transformation in 200 years. One of the challenges we face is how to innovatively provide fit-for-purpose external dispute resolution services to the consumers who are adopting new technologies, products and services, and to those who are at risk of being left behind.

The Australian and New Zealand Energy and Water Ombudsman Network commissioned a report from the University of Sydney Law School. Involving over 70 interviews, the report aimed to identify potential dispute resolution needs of consumers in the energy and water markets in the next five-ten years including: jurisdictional coverage, governance structures, membership, funding, operations, models and new methods of consumer access to the Schemes.

The report is one of several inputs that will inform our planning, to ensure we remain an integral part of the consumer protection framework across the energy and water markets.

There is no doubt that this has been a difficult year for the sector. What COVID-19 means for the retail energy market has featured heavily in the Australian Energy Market Commission's 2020 Retail Energy Competition Review, and for consumers, the fallout from the pandemic will be felt with even more intensity when current support measures end. At EWON, we're using this time to plan how to be even more responsive, resilient, and effective.

Our team

The EWON team has epitomised responsiveness and resilience this year. With little notice, in March, team members packed up their desks and, armed with their computer mouse, camera and perhaps a large screen monitor, headed home. The following day, they started work – including the front line, using their mobile phone to log into EWON's phone system. I am so proud of each and every one of the EWON team – they have continued their work with diligence, commitment, and good humour despite the challenges of the latter part of 2019/2020.

In April Kevin Marron, one of our Member Liaison Officers, passed away after a short and serious illness. Kevin, one of life's true gentlemen, had only been at EWON for just under a year, but it felt like he and his quirky humour had been part of EWON for much longer. Vale Kevin.

Towards the end of 2019/2020, we separately farewelled two staff members to new roles with our best wishes: Mia Lauze, Communications & Outreach Manager, and Adrian Borchok, General Manager Investigations – both played key roles at EWON in recent years.

I would especially like to highlight the work of Deputy Ombudsman, Helen Ford, and General Manager Finance

& Corporate Services, Bernadette Or – their teamwork, resilience, humour, and strong leadership has been a tremendous support for me and the EWON team during this challenging year.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to Chair, Tony Crawford and the Board, who have challenged our thinking whilst offering astute guidance and support as we navigated our way through a year of unprecedented circumstances.



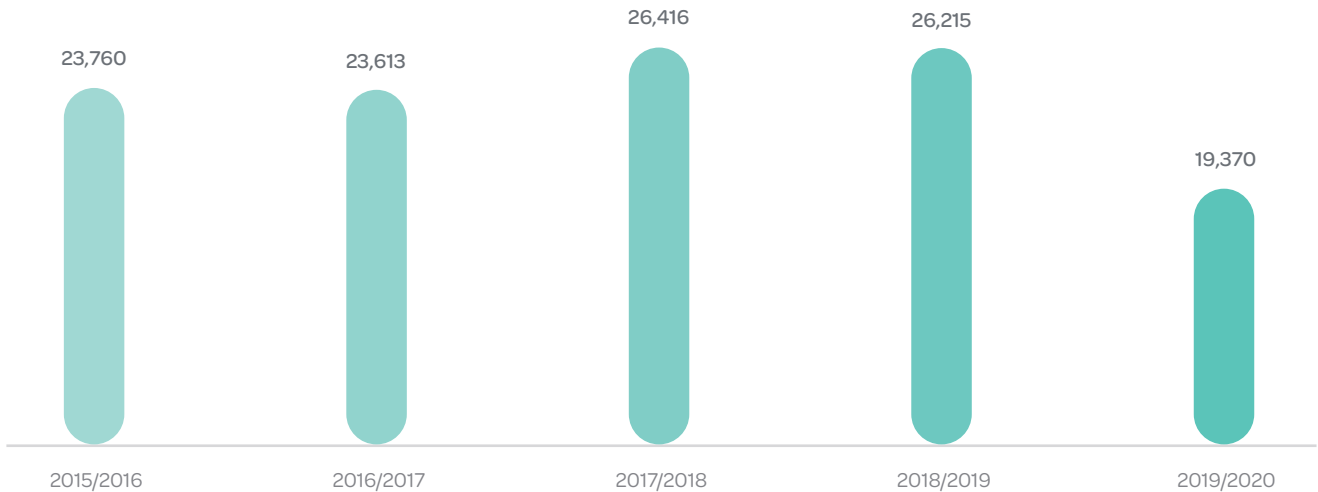
Janine Young

Ombudsman
Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW

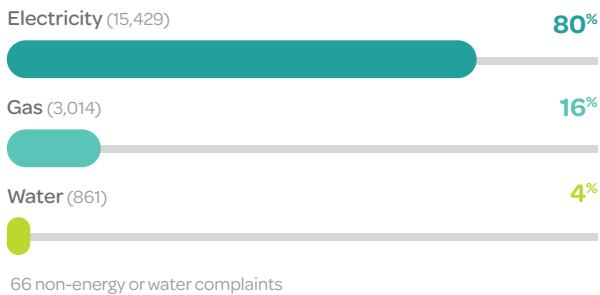
The big picture

Complaints received

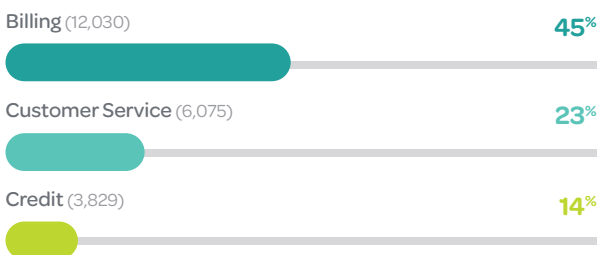
from 2015/2016 to 2019/2020



Complaints by electricity, gas and water

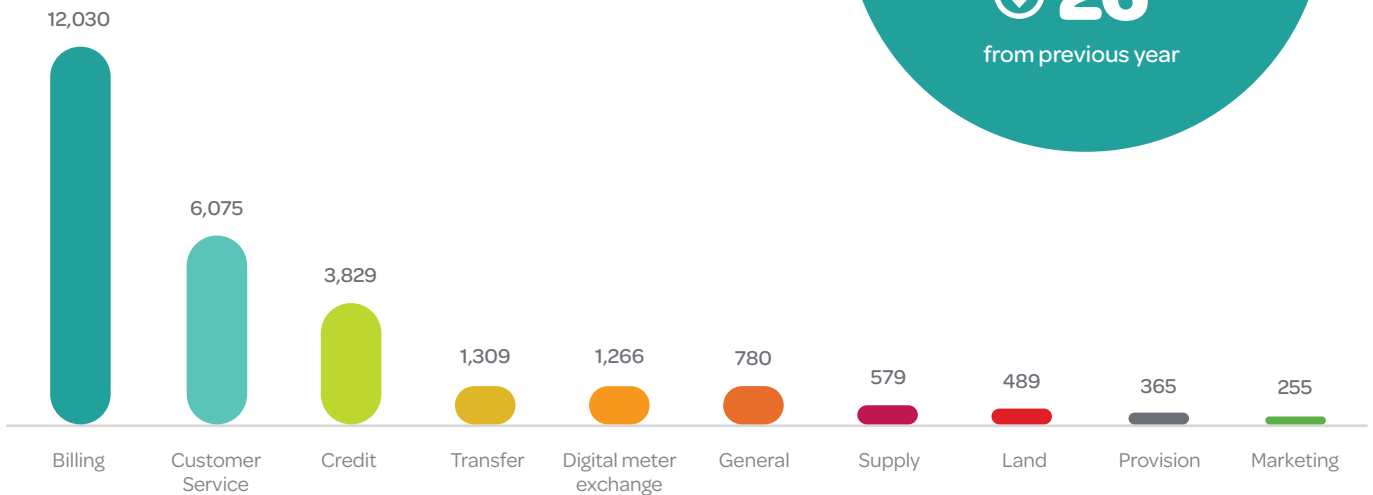


Top three primary issues



Complaints received by primary issue

Customers often raise more than one issue per complaint

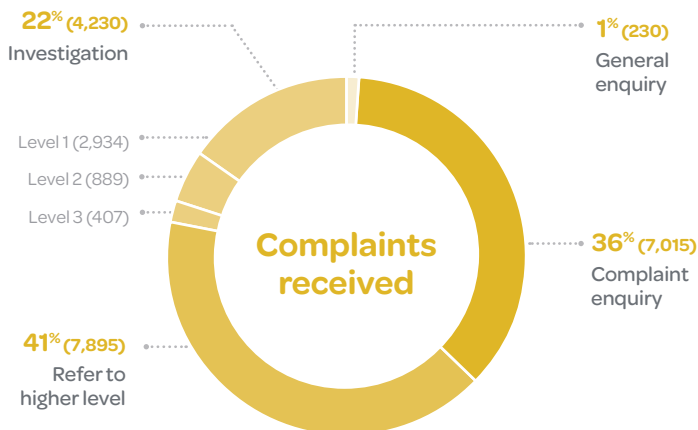


19,370

Complaints received

↓ 26%

from previous year



Explanation of terms

General enquiry

A customer contact that may be about an energy or water matter but is not a complaint. In some cases, it may be out of our jurisdiction.

Complaint enquiry

A request for information or assistance that can be settled or referred quickly to a provider's contact centre or a referral agency.

Refer to higher level (RHL)

A complaint referred to the energy/water provider's specialist dispute resolution team.

Investigation

A complaint which EWON investigates aiming to negotiate an agreed outcome because, via direct customer contact or via our RHL process, it could not be resolved by the energy/water provider.

About us

EWON Board



Tony Crawford
Chair

The EWON Board is responsible for corporate governance, budget approval and strategic direction. The Board comprises an independent chair, five industry directors and five community directors.

In 2019/2020, there were a number of changes to the Board. The terms of all five community directors came to an end. Maria Good, Wayne Warburton and Max Bosotti left the Board, and Iain Maitland and Robyn Evans renominated and were appointed for a further term. They were joined by Craig Memery, Kate Temby and Rod Stowe. Jan Prichard's term as an industry director ended and members elected Rob Amphlett Lewis at the AGM in November 2019.

Members also approved a number of changes to EWON's Constitution at the AGM, including the introduction of staggered terms for community directors to avoid all directors' terms ending at the same time, as well as clarification of voting procedures including electronic voting.



Robyn Evans
Community Director



Craig Memery
Community Director



Iain Maitland
Community Director



Kate Temby
Community Director



Rod Stowe
Community Director



Chris Ryan
Industry Director



Rob Amphlett Lewis
Industry Director



Iain Israelsohn
Industry Director



Jane Mills
Industry Director



David Stockler
Industry Director

EWON Consultative Council

Consultative Council Meetings are part of EWON's constitutional framework. They offer an open forum for consumer and small business representatives, our members and other stakeholders to meet, raise issues and put forward their views. The meetings allow us to update and consult with attendees, all of whom are key stakeholders, and the outcomes of these consultations contribute to our planning. In 2019/2020, our Consultative Council Meeting was held on 7 November 2019. We were unable to hold the second meeting planned for late March 2020 due to COVID-19 so have continued our engagement with our key stakeholders in other ways.

EWON Operational Advisory Group

The Exempt Entity and Water Industry Competition Act Operational Advisory Group provides embedded networks and small water providers with a voice within EWON. It was established in accordance with EWON constitutional changes made in June 2018 and meets on a quarterly basis.

The Benchmarks

EWON plans its activities and measures its performance against the Australian Government’s Benchmarks for Industry-based Customer Dispute Resolution (CDR Benchmarks). The CDR Benchmarks provide immutable standards and encourage best practice industry-based customer dispute resolution.

In 2019, the EWON Board and Ombudsman welcomed the comprehensive report of the Independent Review conducted by Dr Gavin McBurnie and Jane Williams from Queen Margaret University Consumer Dispute Resolution Centre in Scotland. The Centre assessed our performance against the CDR Benchmarks. Our full summary of the Review can be found on page 30.



Our Strategic Objectives

EWON strives to achieve the best possible outcomes for its members and their customers.

Our strategic objectives set out our direction, ensuring we continue to provide high quality, independent advice, information and dispute resolution to NSW energy and some water consumers. They ensure we identify and address systemic issues, expand our reach across NSW, work with members and contribute high quality policy submissions. Our strategic objectives are:

- Expanded awareness**
- Valued membership**
- Agile in a dynamic environment**
- Influential policy contribution**

Our team

EWON has three core teams working under the leadership of the Ombudsman, which enable us to meet each of our Charter responsibilities and continue to be effective and adaptable in an ever-changing climate.

Structural changes made in 2019/2020 include:

1. Appointment of a Data and Information Manager to plan, lead and deliver our IT transformation project – a key strategic priority.
2. Restructure of our IT Team and the appointment of Business Analysts for delivering IT transformation projects associated with establishing a data analytics and reporting platform.
3. Reallocation of Investigation staffing to our Rapid Response Team to support efficient and effective complaint resolution.

Our Teams

Finance and Corporate Services

Investigations

Governance, Awareness and Policy

Helen Ford

Deputy Ombudsman

Janine Young

Ombudsman

Bernadette Or

General Manager Finance and Corporate Services

Adrian Borchok

General Manager Investigations



Organisational chart



EWON: Responsive & resilient

In an unprecedented year of natural disasters followed by a global pandemic, EWON's responsiveness and resilience ensured our high-quality service to energy and water consumers continued without interruption.



COVID-19 response

When NSW went into COVID-19 lockdown, we responded by launching a major digital awareness campaign targeting seniors, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD consumers and casual workers. Using Facebook and Instagram we encouraged resilience in consumers by letting them know additional support was available from their energy retailer. The campaign, featuring our new EWON mascot Ombuddy, ran on social media for six weeks during May and June, reaching an audience of more than 985,000 consumers. The campaign successfully raised awareness of our service, and helped us stay in touch with consumers during a period when face-to-face community outreach events were impossible.

To assist Aboriginal communities, often at greater risk of experiencing billing and affordability problems, we ran an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-focused community radio campaign to complement our digital campaign. Voiced by Sean Choolburra, Indigenous comedian and EWON Ambassador, the campaign used humour to encourage Indigenous listeners to access EWON's services if they required extra support during COVID-19. The ads were broadcast NSW-wide reaching five million listeners.



Sean Choolburra - Comedian and EWON's mascot Ombuddy





Bushfire response

As bushfires tore through NSW in December and a state of emergency was declared, EWON responded by providing timely information and targeted community outreach to consumers and small businesses whose homes and livelihoods had been affected.

We also promoted EWON's services through the Bushfire Recovery Centres in the Snowy Monaro, Shoalhaven, Eurobodalla and Sapphire Coast regions. Finally, to support small business, we reduced our membership fees for residential parks for 2020/2021 recognising the financial impact they experienced during the bushfires and as a result of COVID-19.



Responsive outreach

Vulnerable communities needed EWON's support even more during COVID-19, when face-to-face outreach events were no longer possible. We responded quickly by adapting our Outreach program to a virtual model, and continued to deliver our signature Bring Your Bills Days online and by phone. Services provided at the virtual events include help with outstanding fines, rebates and Energy Accounts Payments Assistant vouchers. Our Community Outreach Team also developed an online presentation which was promoted across NSW community organisations engaging with low income and vulnerable consumers.



Responsive to members

EWON's membership has more than doubled since 2018/2019 after welcoming 6 new authorised energy retailers and 109 embedded network members, bringing our total membership to 201 this financial year. We continued to respond to our members' needs by launching EWONLink, our online, one-stop-shop for information about customer complaints. The confidential portal allows members to create customised reports drawn directly from our complaints management data – within 24 hours of the information being recorded by our Investigations Team. We also continued supporting our new embedded network members via quarterly Operational Working Group meetings – face-to-face in 2019 and virtually in 2020.



Resilient staff

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March illustrated our ability to rapidly respond to unexpected circumstances, as well as step up our agility in a dynamic environment. With a fit-for-future IT transformation and cloud migration, combined with support from our IT Team, EWON staff transitioned smoothly from the CBD office to working from our homes across Sydney. Our Investigations Team continued delivering quality customer service, our Policy Team made influential submissions to government and regulators, and our HR Team kept us feeling connected and well supported.

Reconciliation

Action Plan

EWON's draft Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) was developed in January 2020 to document our commitment to reconciliation. It provides a roadmap to drive our contribution to reconciliation internally and in the communities we engage with.

With guidance from the RAP Working Group and the support of our Management Team and Ombudsman, the RAP will be implemented through changes to policies and embedded into our day-to-day operations.

The Reflect RAP Framework is an evaluation of the work we have done so far and how we can progress our existing support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Our RAP Working Group consisted of EWON staff, as well as Amanda Cameron (Aboriginal Service Coordinator with the Financial Right Legal Centre) and Charles Turner (Assistant Director Social Services, Indigenous and Accessibility, Commonwealth Ombudsman).

We submitted our draft RAP to Reconciliation Australia in June 2020 and are currently engaging with them to finalise the Plan.

Our Reconciliation Action Plan aims to:



Increase and enhance access to, and outcomes for, our service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people



Ensure the services we offer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are provided in the most effective and appropriate manner, based on a clear understanding of their needs and cultural practices



Increase our staff awareness and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and the issues they face, in order to improve the services we provide to consumers



Enhance our work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders by expanding our stakeholder networks, building partnerships and collaborating with organisations that work with communities.



What we are already doing:

- > Cultural awareness training for staff
- > In-house NAIDOC celebrations and recognition of other significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander events through staff emails and social media activity
- > Development of culturally-appropriate EWON resources, including Aboriginal artwork commissioned for that purpose
- > Designated Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer position in place for over 10 years
- > Implementation of an extensive Aboriginal Community Outreach Program, covering communities across NSW
- > Ombudsman and staff share an Acknowledgement of Country at internal meetings and outside events. During COVID-19 staff personalised their Acknowledgement messages by linking them to the land they were living and working on.
- > Development of systems and processes for identifying and prioritising people experiencing financial difficulty who contact EWON, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customers.

Our response to family violence

EWON has developed a Family Violence position statement which outlines how we respond to family violence when it is revealed in our complaints management.

Family violence exacerbates vulnerability and creates a barrier to engagement with energy and water providers. It is important that we respond to consumers experiencing family violence in an appropriate way. An empathetic and knowledgeable voice over the phone can alleviate stress and open up a conversation that leads to achievable short-term and sometimes, long-term solutions, including referrals to support organisations.

The Council of Australian Governments announced its fourth National Action Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022. It states that the prevention of violence against women should become a core priority for all industries and government areas.

This response to family violence is relatively new, and along with other energy and water ombudsman schemes, we have expressed a commitment to learn from each other's experiences and share our understanding of best practice.

Economic abuse and utilities

High debt is often a consequence of economic abuse, with research indicating it is common for an abusive partner to use utilities as a way to manipulate or control their family, including by cutting off energy or water.

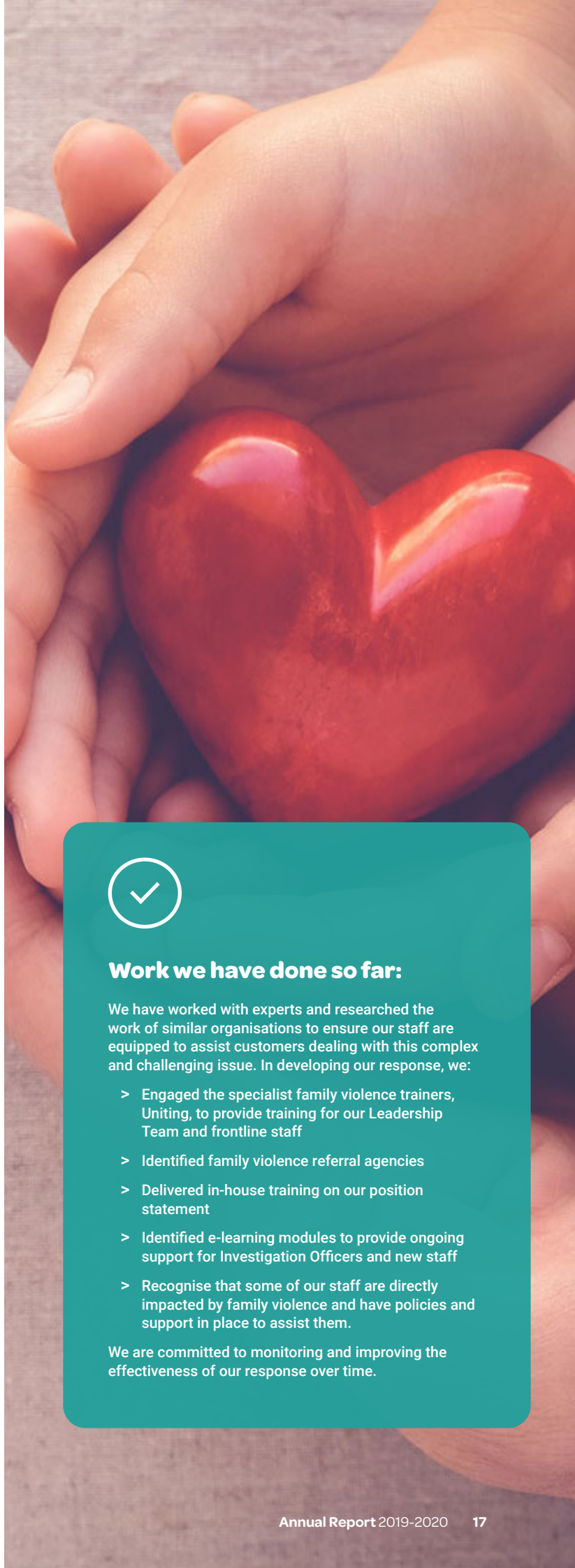
Those living in a violent situation may also incur debt because they have limited capacity to contact their energy or water provider. Others who have escaped by relocating may be overwhelmed by needing to pay utility bills for the first time or be afraid their partner will discover their new address. By the time the victim has found the courage to reach out to their energy or water provider, it is usually at the point of disconnection or debt collection.

Safety and privacy

When dealing with customers who indicate, explicitly or implicitly, that family violence could be a factor, we seek to identify the best and safest method to communicate with them - for example by phone, voicemail message or email.

We also ensure we:

- > Do not disclose the customer's contact details
- > Handle contact information securely
- > Allocate a dedicated Investigations Officer to minimise the need for customers to repeat information
- > Protect the safety and wellbeing of our staff.



Work we have done so far:

We have worked with experts and researched the work of similar organisations to ensure our staff are equipped to assist customers dealing with this complex and challenging issue. In developing our response, we:

- > Engaged the specialist family violence trainers, Uniting, to provide training for our Leadership Team and frontline staff
- > Identified family violence referral agencies
- > Delivered in-house training on our position statement
- > Identified e-learning modules to provide ongoing support for Investigation Officers and new staff
- > Recognise that some of our staff are directly impacted by family violence and have policies and support in place to assist them.

We are committed to monitoring and improving the effectiveness of our response over time.

Complaints and enquiries

General enquiry

A customer seeking information or assistance that may be about an energy or water matter which is out of our jurisdiction or is not a complaint.

Sometimes customers contact us with an energy or water enquiry, but they don't have a specific complaint. They may also call about something outside our jurisdiction such as a problem with a solar installer or their phone provider. When this occurs, we note their call and refer them to the organisation that can respond to their enquiry or resolve their complaint. We finalise these complaints as general enquiries.

Complaint enquiry

A request for information or assistance that can be quickly settled or referred to a provider's contact centre or other agency.

Customers may contact us with questions that we can address immediately, such as a request for referral to an agency that distributes Energy Account Payment Assistance vouchers. Another example is a query about an approved fee or charge on their energy or water account.

A customer may also contact us with a complaint about their energy or water provider which they have not yet raised with their provider. When this happens, we provide general advice including information about their rights and responsibilities. We then refer customers to their provider, empowering them to resolve the problem without our further involvement. We let them know they can contact us again if they are not satisfied with their provider's response. These complaints are resolved as complaint enquiries.

Refer to higher level

A complaint referred to the energy or water provider's specialist dispute resolution team.

Often customers contact us about complaints that they tried, unsuccessfully, to resolve with their providers, usually at a contact centre level. We offer to refer them to their provider's specialist dispute resolution team. If the customer agrees to this, we provide advice and information about their rights and responsibilities and categorise these complaints as refer to higher level (RHL).

The provider's specialist team is required to contact the customer directly, within five days, to resolve the complaint. We inform the customer they can return to us if they are not satisfied with the outcome or haven't been contacted by the provider within five days.

This approach gives the provider a further opportunity to resolve the customer's problem directly. It also gives the customer a chance to have their complaint reviewed by senior staff working in the provider's specialist complaints area.

Investigations

EWON investigates complaints that cannot be resolved between the customer and the provider. These are categorised as Level 1, 2 and 3, based on the time taken to resolve the complaint.

We investigate complaints when customers have tried unsuccessfully to resolve their complaint with their provider, including when they return to us after their complaint has been referred to their provider's specialist dispute resolution team (RHL) because they are not satisfied with the response they received.

An investigation involves speaking to both parties to determine the facts and circumstances from each point of view. We analyse information from the provider, for example metering data, telephone calls between the customer and the contact centre and energy contracts. We also review relevant legislative provisions, conduct research, and in some cases, make site visits and consult with independent experts. If appropriate, as part of our investigation, we also offer to refer the customer to other services such as welfare agencies, financial counselling and tenant advisory services.

Investigated complaints are categorised by level. Level 1 complaints are most often resolved in up to 240 minutes or four active hours of investigation. They usually involve collecting information related to the investigation and talking with the customer and provider several times.

When a complaint cannot be resolved at Level 1 and further investigation is needed, we upgrade it to Level 2. Level 2 complaints normally involve more in-depth research, investigation and analysis (they may also require a detailed complaint assessment to be prepared for the customer). These most often take up to 90 days to resolve.

Complaint investigations are upgraded to Level 3 if they are not resolved after 480 minutes of investigation time and need further investigation. These complaints can also involve unsuccessful requests for information from the provider or the customer and may require expert advice to reach an outcome. Usually, Level 3 complaints are resolved within seven months. Very complex complaints can take up to or more than 12 months to resolve.

At 30 June 2020 we had 4,523 investigations open; 2,962 at Level 1, 950 at Level 2 and 611 at Level 3.



228

General Enquiries



7,001

Complaint Enquiries



7,898

Refer to Higher Level



2,962

Level 1 Investigations



950

Level 2 Investigations



611

Level 3 Investigations

Outcomes

Facilitated resolutions

Most facilitated resolution complaints are a result of energy/water providers not responding to their customers within the Refer to Higher Level (RHL) complaint timeframe, so we then facilitate contact. Facilitated resolution outcomes as a percentage of investigated complaints decreased from 14% in 2018/2019 to 3% in 2019/2020 for two reasons.

In late 2018, in response to a rise in cases relating to failed RHL contact, we started working closely with energy/water providers to improve their responses to RHLs. Following this, in March 2019, we increased the RHL response timeframe from 3 to 5 business days and advised customers involved in RHL cases that once they are initially contacted, they should allow at least 28 days for the provider to investigate the issue.

Negotiated resolutions

Negotiated resolutions involve conducting a full investigation when we are actively involved in negotiating a fair and reasonable outcome for both parties.

No further investigation

When our investigation finds that the energy/water provider's resolution offer is fair and reasonable, if a customer withdraws their complaint, does not stay in contact with us or does not accept a provider's fair and reasonable resolution, the complaint is closed on the grounds of 'no further investigation'.

When a complaint is finalised under 'no further investigation', we send the customer a complaint assessment detailing the outcome of our investigation and the rationale for our decision. They can request a review of that decision within 28 days of receiving our assessment.

Binding decisions

Investigations are escalated to the Ombudsman for a binding decision when an investigation remains unresolved and the energy/water provider's final resolution offer does not meet the merits of the complaint. The Ombudsman then makes a decision to resolve the complaint. This may occur at any stage of an investigation. **In 2019/2020, no binding decisions were made by the Ombudsman.**



Case study

Solar installation causes unexplained battery failure and high bills

Ms Maddison bought an electric car in November 2017. She had a new meter installed for her new car plan in February 2018, which was connected to her existing solar system. She believed that the meter had been wired incorrectly to her solar system as her bills were higher than expected and she thought one of the current (CT) clamps behind the solar battery had been removed, which caused her solar battery to stop working.

She got in touch with her energy provider and submitted a claim for \$13,000 to replace the solar battery. Her provider rejected the claim and advised the CT clamps would not have been touched during the installation as they were too far away from the meter and provided photographs as evidence.

As Ms Maddison could not come to an agreement with her provider, she came to EWON for further assistance. We assessed the documentation from both the customer and energy provider and found nothing to suggest that the meter installer would have any reason to access the CT clamps. We also identified that Ms Maddison was not paying her energy bills and we advised her that payment of energy accounts was required during our investigation.

Ms Maddison was dissatisfied with our assessment so we arranged for an independent technician to inspect the meter at the property in October 2019. The technician confirmed that the new meter had been connected correctly but identified a number of wiring issues with the solar installation undertaken by Ms Maddison's husband, who was an electrician, so we recommended that she contact a qualified solar technician. We also informed her that we needed additional documentation from her in order to progress the investigation.

While we continued to investigate Ms Maddison's complaint pending receipt of information from her, we also again reminded her of the need to pay her energy bills, including informing her that ongoing non-payment would lead us to finalise the complaint investigation.

Ms Maddison told us she would not be making any payments towards the account, so we advised her to seek independent technical advice about the solar installation from Fair Trading NSW.

On the basis of non-payment of her energy account and lack of provision of requested documentation to support her claim for retailer compensation, we finalised the complaint investigation on a no further investigation basis. Ms Maddison was also advised that provision of further supporting documentation would be considered by her retailer if provided.

Category: Level 3 investigation

Issues: High bills, poor customer service, solar installation fault

Outcome: No further investigation



Complaints this year

We saw a 26% reduction in the number of complaints down to 19,370 in 2019/2020 compared with 26,215 in 2018/2019.

The drop in complaints can be partly attributed to the introduction of the AER's Customer Hardship Guideline in October 2019 and the COVID-19 related AER Statement of Expectations in March 2020, which prevented disconnection, debt collection and credit default listing for financially impacted consumers.

We resolved 19,650 complaints in 2019/2020, down from 26,543 in 2018/2019. When the number of incoming complaints falls, we allocate more time to resolving existing complaints.

Electricity accounted for 80% of our total complaints in 2019/2020, remaining steady from 2018/2019. Gas complaints also remained steady at 16% of total

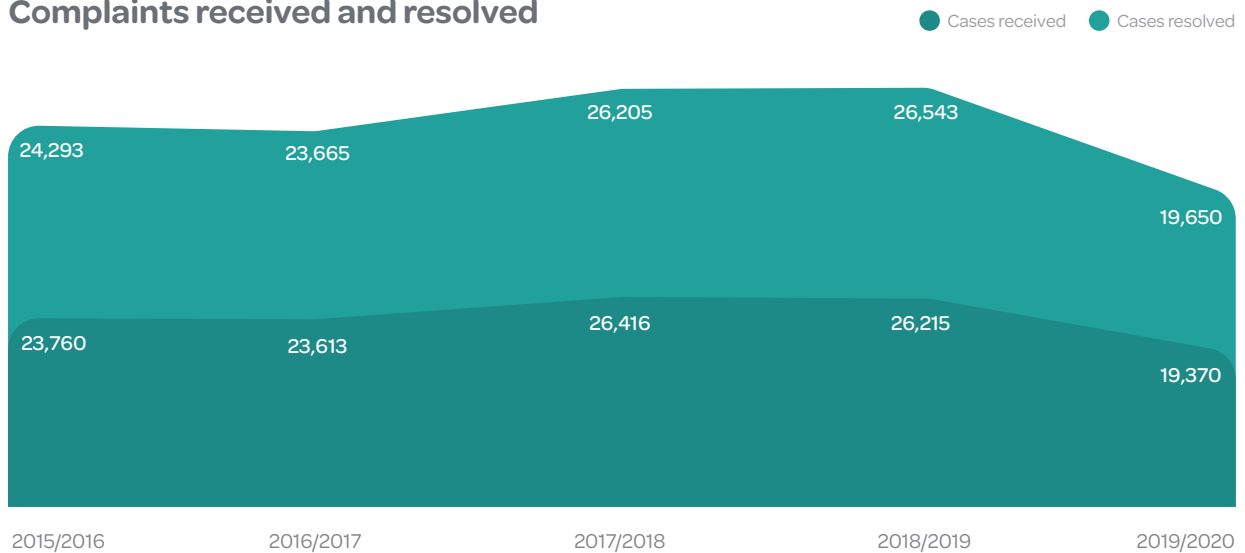
complaints in both 2018/2019 and 2019/2020, and water complaints rose from 3% in 2018/2019 to 4% in 2019/2020.

Complaints about exempt electricity entities decreased by 63% from 2018/2019, while complaints about authorised electricity retailers decreased by 29%, and complaints about electricity distributors increased by 11%. The number of complaints recorded against exempt entities has declined significantly in the last 12 months, one contributing factor being the increased number of authorised retailers that now service embedded networks.

Complaints about exempt gas entities fell by 91%, by 28% for gas retailers, and by 36% for gas distributors.

Complaints related to water retailers decreased by 5%, and increased by 4% for water distributors.

Complaints received and resolved

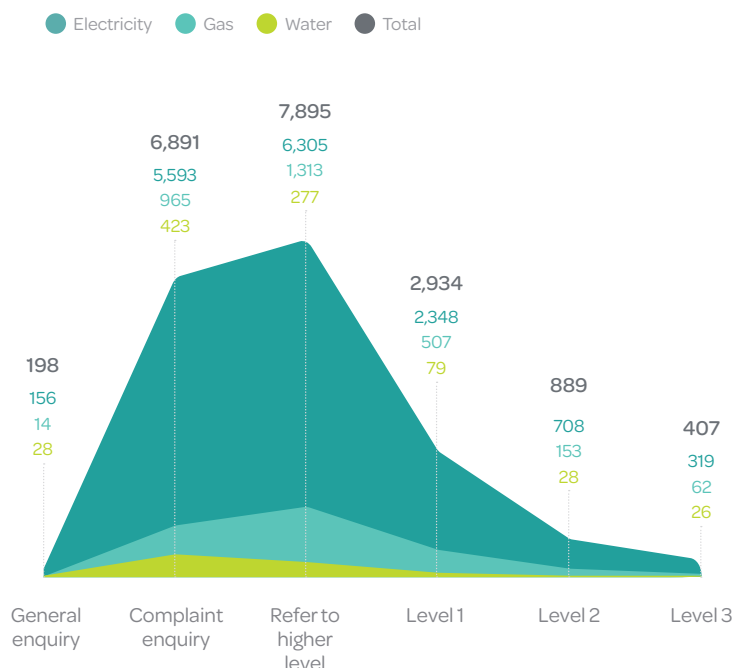


Industry sector comparison

Provider service	2019/2020	% change from 2018/2019
Electricity		
Retail	13,971	-29%
Network	1,061	+11%
Not allocated*	344	+8%
Exempt entity	53	-63%
Gas		
Retail	2,839	-28%
Network	133	-36%
Not allocated*	41	+41%
Exempt entity	1	-91%
Water		
Retail	487	-5%
Network	290	+4%
Not allocated*	84	+15%
Non-energy/water		
Not allocated*	66	+2%
Total	19,370	-26%

* Not allocated = Provider name not stated by customer / general enquiry or issue out of jurisdiction

Complaint level by industry



Complaints by Local Government Areas

per 1,000 people



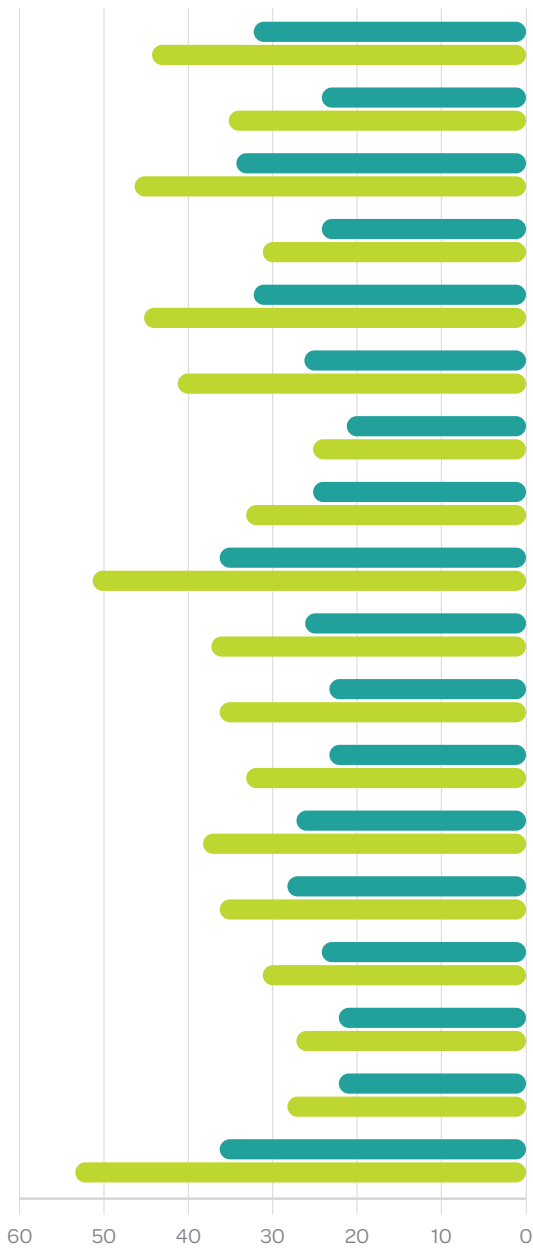
Complaints in Sydney

Bayside	3 ●	Fairfield	2 ●	Mosman	2 ●	Sutherland Shire	2 ●
Blacktown	2 ●	Georges River	2 ●	North Sydney	3 ●	Sydney	7 ●
Burwood	3 ●	Hornsby	2 ●	Northern Beaches	2 ●	The Hills Shire	2 ●
Camden	3 ●	Hunters Hill	2 ●	Parramatta	3 ●	Waverley	2 ●
Campbelltown	3 ●	Inner West	3 ●	Penrith	2 ●	Willoughby	3 ●
Canada Bay	2 ●	Ku-ring-gai	2 ●	Randwick	2 ●	Woollahra	3 ●
Canterbury-Bankstown	3 ●	Lane Cove	3 ●	Ryde	2 ●		
Cumberland	2 ●	Liverpool	2 ●	Strathfield	2 ●		

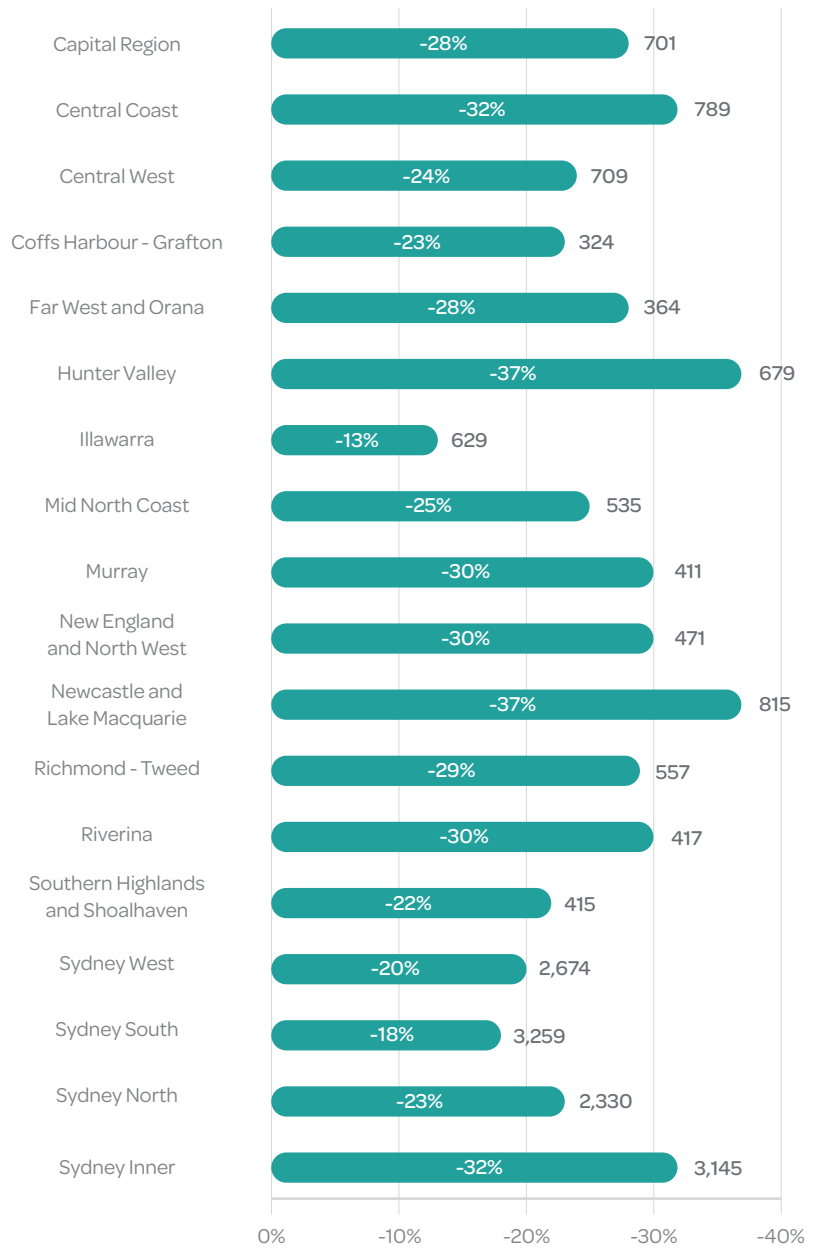
Complaints may be higher in some regional areas due to our community outreach initiatives.

Complaints per 10,000 people by NSW region

2019/2020 2018/2019

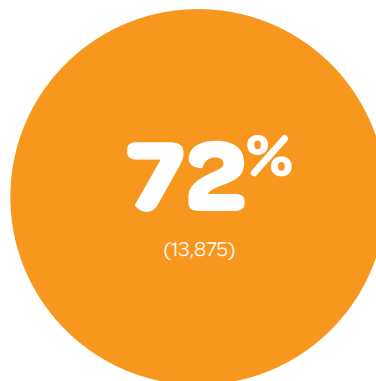


Total complaint and percentage change by NSW region



Location of customers lodging a complaint

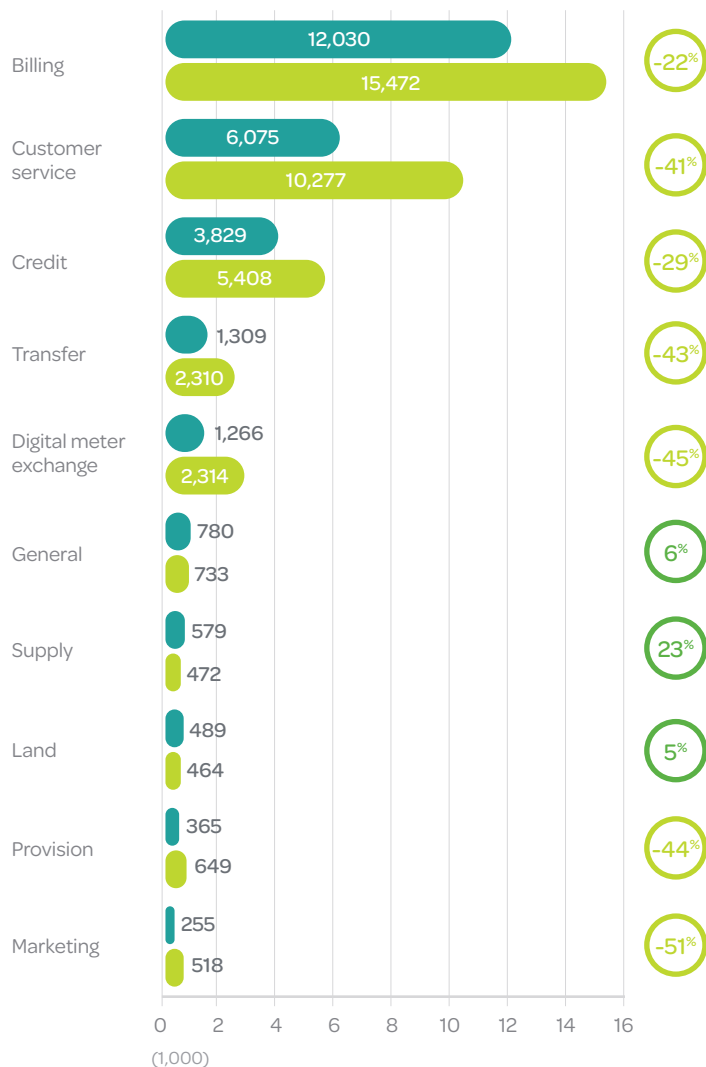
- Major cities
- Inner regional
- Outer regional
- Non-NSW
- Remote/very remote



Complaint issues

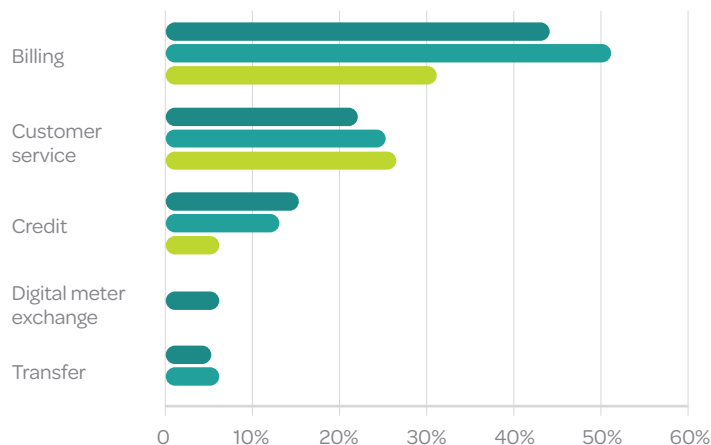
Complaints by primary issue

● 2019/2020 ● 2018/2019 ● % change from previous year



Top five complaint issues by industry

● Electricity ● Gas ● Water



How we categorise complaint issues

Billing

High and disputed bills, fees and charges, opening/closing accounts.

Credit

Disconnection, arrears, payment difficulty, payment arrangement declined, debt collection.

Customer service

Failure to respond, incorrect advice, poor attitude/service.

Transfer

Error in billing or transfer of account due to switching energy providers, contract terms, delay in transfer, site ownership.

Digital meter exchange

Delay, meter not installed, incorrect advice, failure to respond/notify, billing, terms and conditions.

General

Non-energy/water related, contractors.

Provision

Problems with new or existing connections.

Marketing

Conduct by marketers, misleading information, pressure, non-account holder signed up.

Land

Impact of network assets, maintenance, environment.

Supply

Quality, damage/loss, outages.

We open one complaint when a customer contacts us but they often experience more than one complaint issue, such as a high bill and poor customer service. Therefore the number of complaint issues is greater than the number of complaints we receive.

Billing

12,030 complaints involved billing issues

Issue	No. Complaints
High	6,244
Estimation	2,180
Opening/closing account	1,745
Error	1,344
Tariff	1,143
Backbill	710
Fees and charges	601
Rebate/concession	567
Meter	531
Delay	453
Refund or credit	405
Period	392
Other	360
Format	96
Debt transfer	23

Credit

3,829 complaints involved credit issues

Issue	No. Complaints
Payment difficulties	1,933
Disconnection/restriction	1,468
Collection	1,295

Customer service

6,075 complaints involved customer service issues

Issue	No. Complaints
Poor service	3,409
Failure to respond	1,449
Incorrect advice/information	1,323
Failure to consult/inform	774
B2B	135
Privacy	95
Unprofessional attitude	90
Online	50

Digital meter exchange

1,266 complaints involved digital meter exchange issues

Issue	No. Complaints
Delay	540
Billing	266
Not installed	164
Fault	162
Incorrect advice/information	122
Other	85
Opt in/opt out	84
Damage	34
Failure to respond	34
Terms and conditions	31
Failure to notify	23
Transfer	15

Transfer

1,309 complaints involved transfer issues

Issue	No. Complaints
In error	350
Site ownership	330
Without consent	273
Delay	217
Contract terms	109
Billing	66
Cooling off rights	63
Rejected by retailer	45

General

780 complaints involved general issues

Issue	No. Complaints
Energy/water	714
Non-energy/non-water	66

Supply

579 complaints involved supply issues

Issue	No. Complaints
Off supply (unplanned)	311
Off supply (planned)	158
Variation	53
Quality	36
Sewer overflow/blockage	27
Water restriction	9

Land

489 complaints involved land issues

Issue	No. Complaints
Network assets	298
Property damage/restoration	129
Street lighting	37
Vegetation management	36
Easement	27
Other	16

Provision

365 complaints involved provision issues

Issue	No. Complaints
Existing connection	199
New connection	110
Disconnection/restriction	63

Marketing

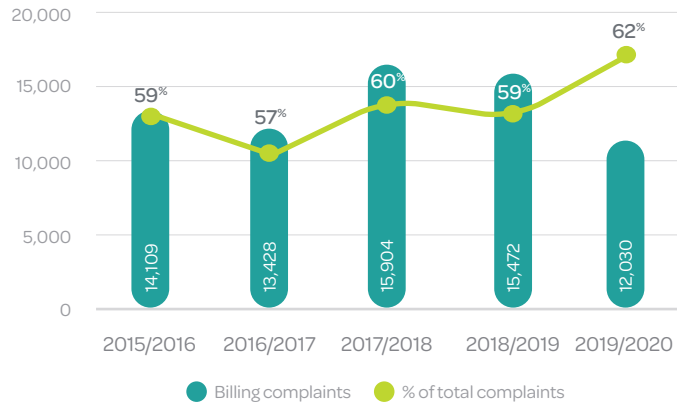
255 complaints involved marketing issues

Issue	No. Complaints
Misleading	143
Information	55
Other	37
Pressure	24
Non account holder	12

Focusing on the top three issues

Billing

Billing continued to be our biggest issue, present in 62% of all complaints. Billing issues include high or disputed accounts, estimated bills, opening and closing accounts and fees and charges.



Credit

Credit-related issues were present in 20% of complaints. Credit issues underpin energy affordability issues, which are a key focus of EWON.



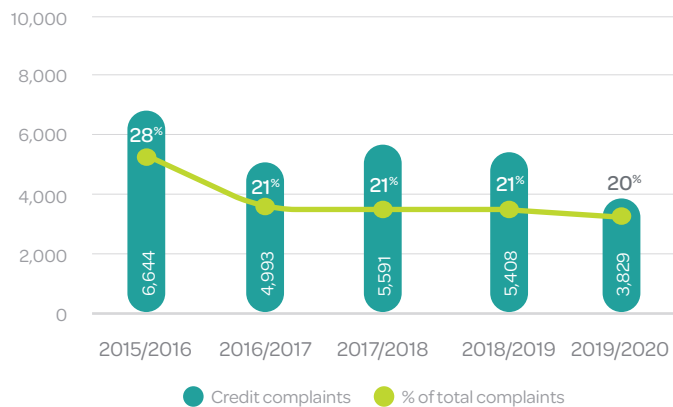
742

actual disconnection complaints



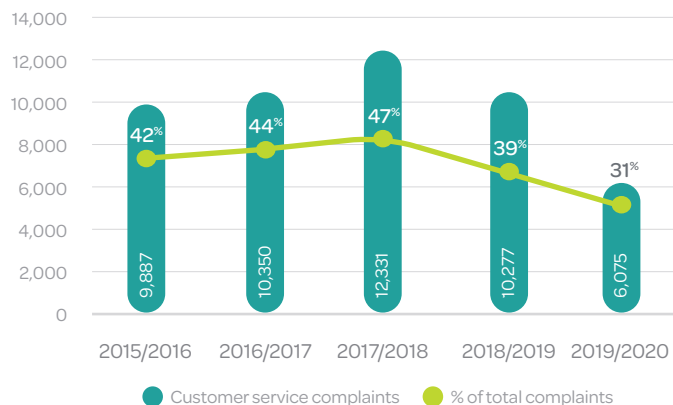
726

impending disconnection complaints

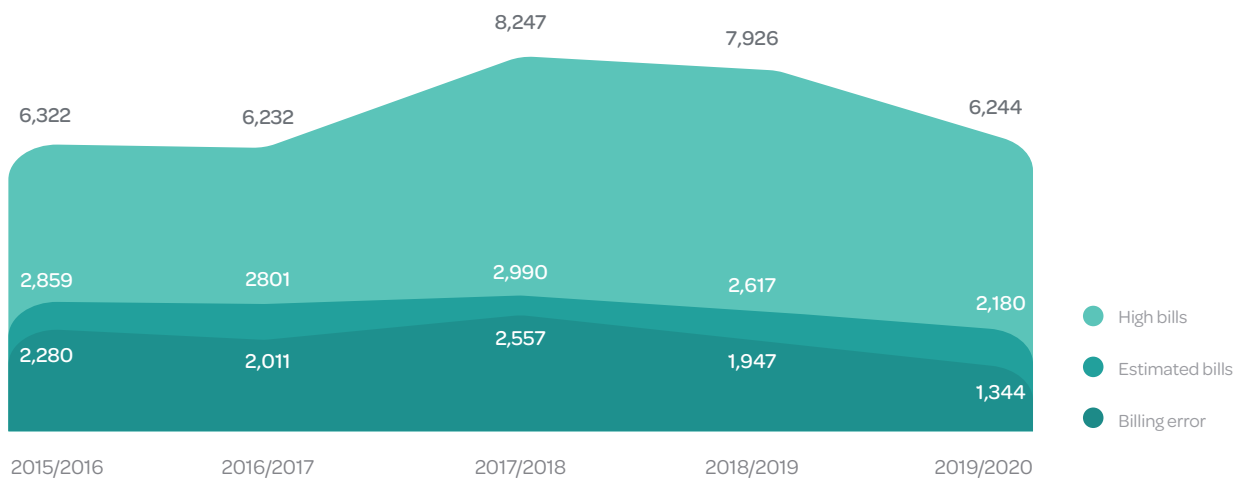


Customer service

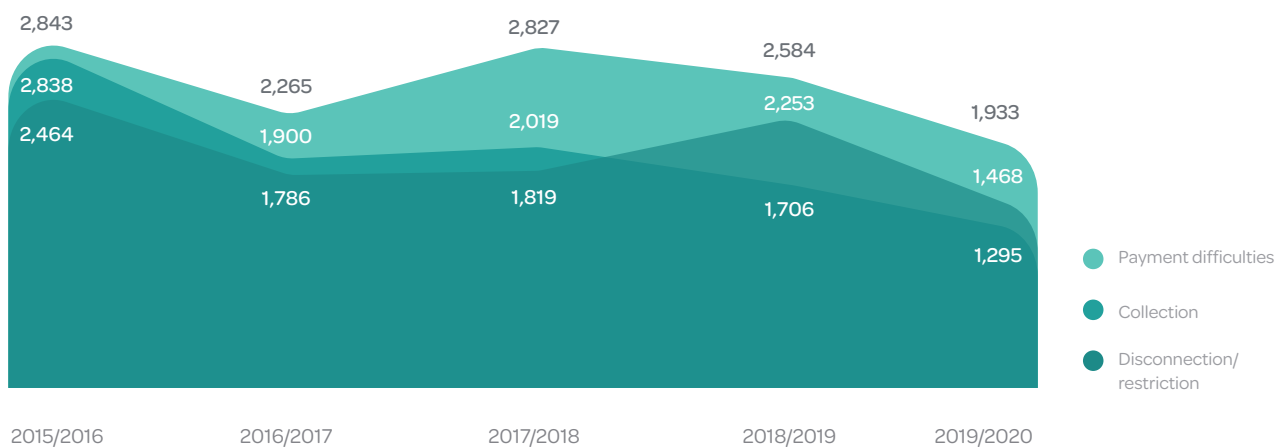
Customer service issues were present in 31% of complaints received. Customer service is often an underlying factor for customers contacting EWON, but for these complaints customer service was a driving factor.



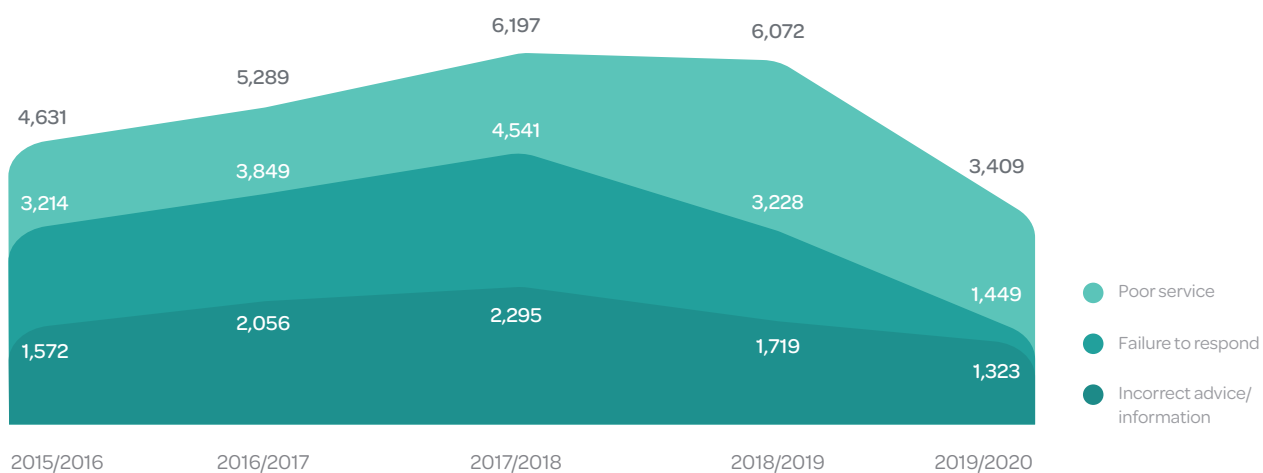
Trends in billing complaints



Trends in credit complaints



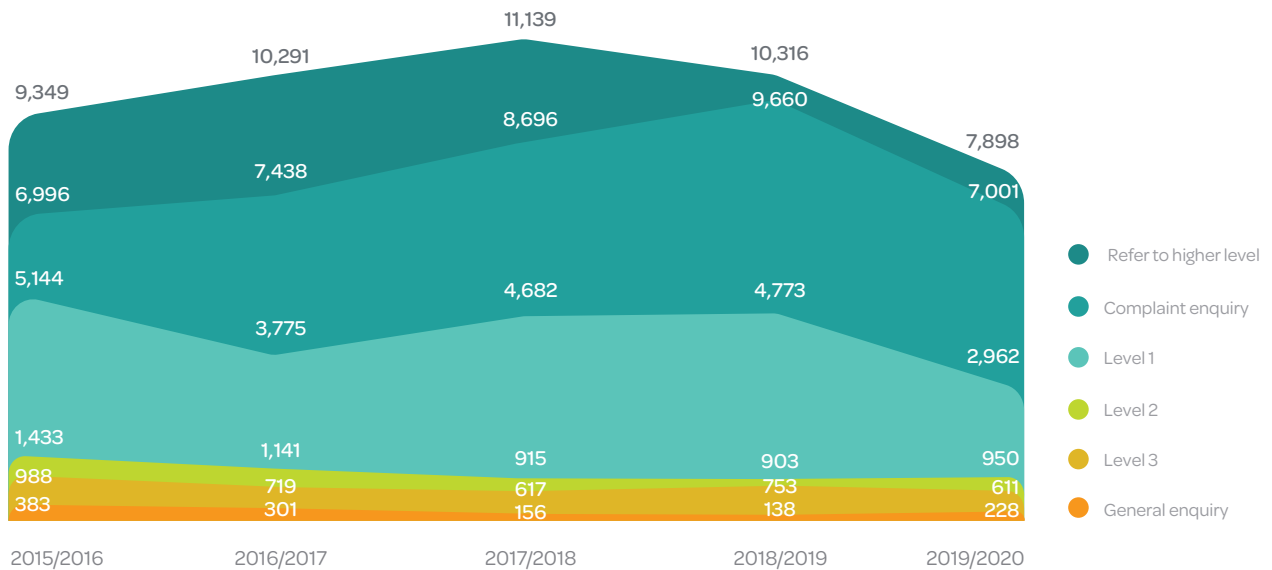
Trends in customer service complaints



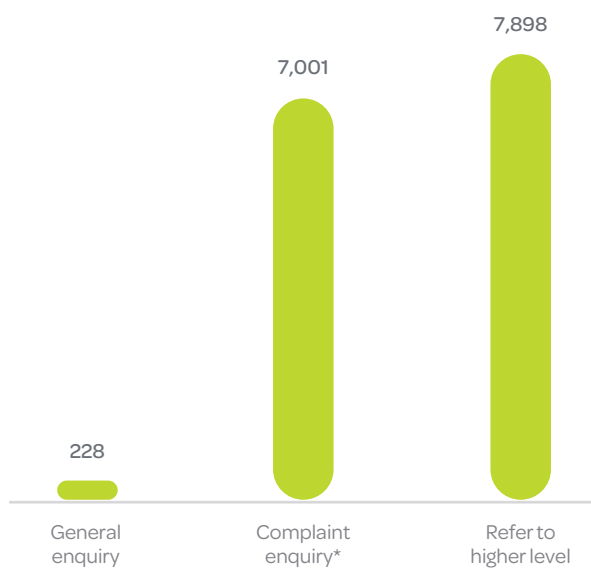
Resolutions and outcomes

Complaint closures

from 2015/2016 to 2019/2020



Non investigated complaints



* includes referrals to provider contact centres and affordability teams

Procedural fairness

When a customer contacts us before they speak to their energy/water provider, we register their complaint as a complaint enquiry, inform them about their rights and responsibilities and then refer them to speak directly with their provider.

Referrals to energy/water providers



2,413

Referrals to provider contact centres



584

Referrals to provider affordability teams

Investigated complaints



Investigation outcomes

Facilitated resolution: 3%

When the customer and provider work with us to conciliate resolution of less complex complaints.

Negotiated resolution: 89%

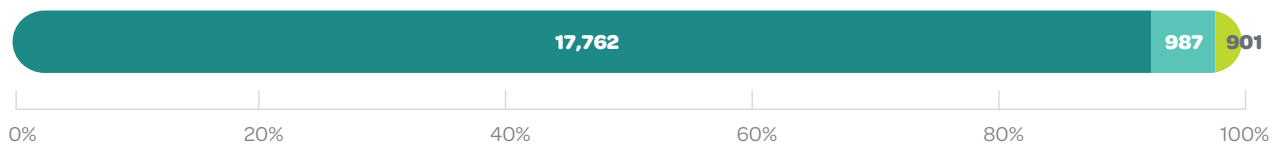
A full investigation when we are actively involved in negotiating a fair and reasonable outcome for both parties.

No further investigation: 8%

When our investigation finds that the provider's position is fair and reasonable, when the customer withdraws a complaint, or where the customer does not keep in contact with us.

Time taken to resolve complaints

● 0 < 30 days ● 30 < 90 days ● > 90 days



No wrong door

When a customer requires assistance that is outside EWON's jurisdiction, we refer them to the organisation that can assist with their enquiry/complaint.



4,523

Investigations resolved



93%

Investigations resolved in under 30 days

No wrong door referrals	No.
Energy or water payment assistance scheme/community agency	1,218
Financial counsellor	889
Fair Trading/NCAT	427
Other government agency	310
AER/energymadeeasy.com.au	306
Legal/tenancy advisor	258
Another Ombudsman	244
Private contractor	221
Department of Planning and Environment/Minister	28
IPART	19
Total	3,920

Independent Review

Our Constitution requires we conduct an Independent Review of our complaint-handling service and the operations of the office at least once every five years. The Board selected Queen Margaret University's Consumer Dispute Resolution Centre to conduct our Review in 2019. The Review focused on how well we comply with the Australian Government's Benchmarks for Industry-based Customer Dispute Resolution (CDR Benchmarks).

- > Accessibility
- > Independence
- > Fairness
- > Accountability
- > Efficiency
- > Effectiveness.

The Review found that EWON is an effective and well-run consumer dispute resolution scheme and operates in a manner that meets the CDR Benchmarks. The Board and Ombudsman were particularly pleased that a large number of the recommendations are to continue the work we are already doing, including our Outreach and Community Engagement Program, which was found to be best practice.

The Review included a combination of desktop research, assessment of our complaint-handling procedures, audits of documentation and complaint files, and interviews with community and industry stakeholders.

The primary areas examined were our complaint-handling service and related operations, including systemic issue identification, complaints reduction and our policy work.

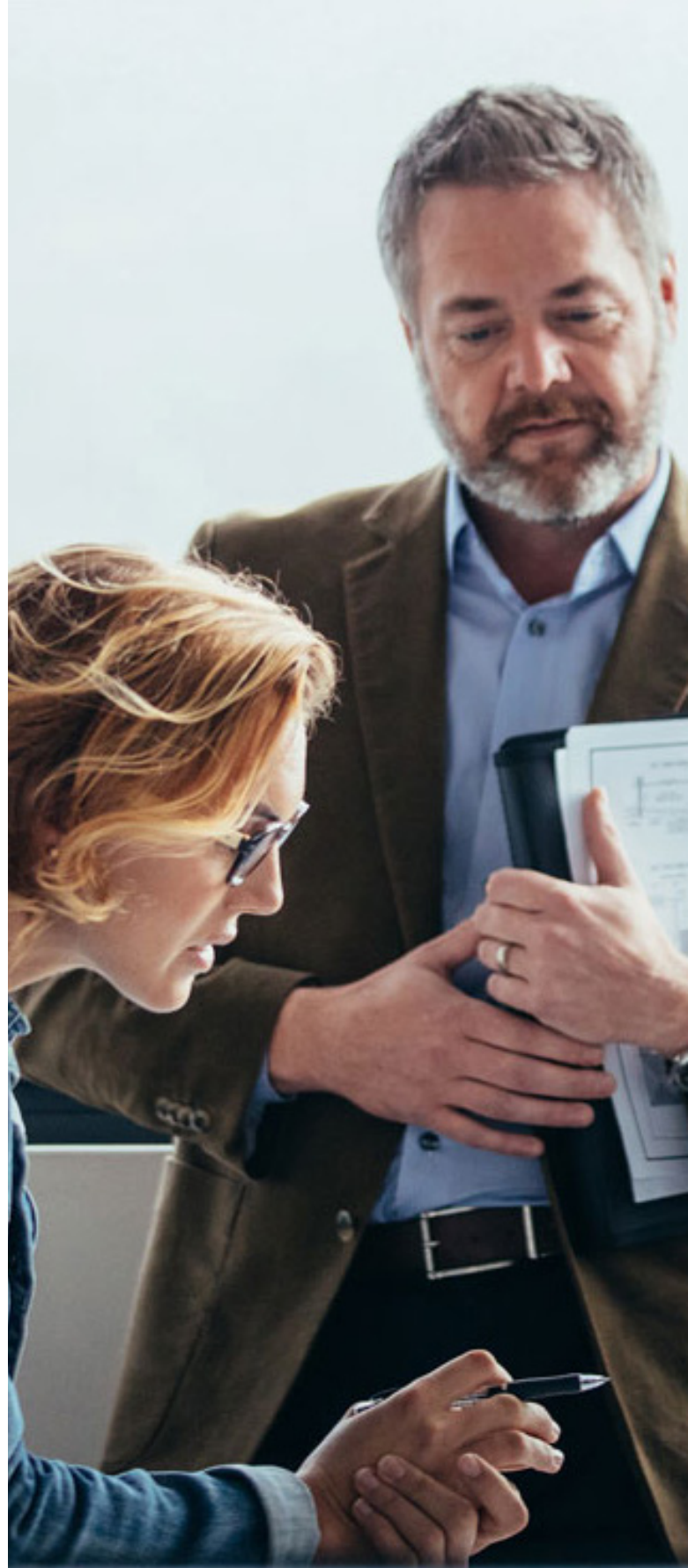
We also requested assessment of:

- > Our member and stakeholder engagement
- > Promotion of our services
- > Complainant satisfaction
- > The effectiveness of EWON's Constitution and Charter - the key documents which underpin our jurisdiction, functions, rules and procedures.

The review team also considered the evolving energy and water sectors in order to identify future developments for the organisation.

The review's 47 recommendations, aimed at consolidation and ongoing improvement of our effectiveness, were discussed at the Board's Strategic Planning Day in February 2020. As a result, we have incorporated review outcomes into our immediate, mid and long-term strategic priorities.

The full report of the Independent Review and the Board's response can be found at ewon.com.au.





Accessibility

The review found that our range of public awareness activities were well-recognised, as was our work towards making our services accessible. We were commended for our significant efforts in reaching vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, including our focus on working with local organisations and members to maximise the impact of initiatives.

The review recommended we monitor the socio-demographic and geographical locations of users of our services and, where possible, further expand our awareness-raising and engagement activities.



Independence

Those interviewed as part of the review were consistent in stating that our complaint-handling and decision-making were both independent and impartial. It was also recommended we review our Charter to more clearly set out the range of EWON's roles and responsibilities and assess the Board's composition and size to ensure it reflects contemporary governance best practice.



Fairness

All members who were interviewed spoke positively about EWON's procedural fairness and reasonable decision-making practices. EWON's complaints work is subject to rigorous quality assurance, and it was suggested that this could be extended to the quality of oral communications. It was also recommended that we consider publishing outcomes of our quality assurance activities. We have responded to this recommendation in the Spotlight on Quality section on page 38.



Effectiveness

Our systemic activities were considered effective, and the review identified we should publish themed reports to increase awareness of EWON, and consumer trust in the energy and water sectors and to promote the fact that complaints can lead to system improvement.

The review team also recommended that we work with regulators, other Ombudsman schemes and industry to ensure we are part of the discussion on new developments in energy and water, particularly with respect to the evolving need for broader consumer protection and widening of EWON's jurisdiction.



Efficiency

The review team identified that EWON's Charter does not specify how long a member has to resolve a complaint, with the potential for delay in members' internal dispute resolution processes delaying customers coming to EWON. It was therefore recommended that we take action, in consultation with members, to address this.

EWON members identified timeliness of EWON investigations as a matter of concern, and the review highlighted the need for us to continue to focus on reducing the time taken to complete investigations and resolve complaints.



Accountability

The review confirmed that we fulfil the CDR benchmarks for public reporting and that the information we publish is comprehensive, detailed and informative. However, it was noted that we could publish more material in different languages and formats. Our process for accepting complaints about EWON was found to be sufficient and fair.



Case study

Retailer breaches contract terms for electric vehicle energy plan

Ms Connor signed up for an electric car plan with her energy provider, capped at \$1 per day. She received a bill that was higher than expected and realised that she was not on her chosen plan. She called her energy provider to complain and was told, without a proper explanation, that if she wanted to change plans, she would need a new meter. Unhappy that she hadn't been advised of this earlier, she felt she could have saved money during that period by using petrol instead of electricity. The provider replaced Ms Connor's meter and said it would credit her the difference between the high bill and her usual bill, but she never received the refund.

Ms Connor contacted EWON to complain about the poor level of communication from her energy provider. She told us she had called her provider numerous times but received no response. She still couldn't confirm whether she had been moved onto a new energy plan and was still waiting for her refund. She accepted our offer to escalate her complaint to a dispute resolution specialist at her provider.

Our investigation found that Ms Connor had initially signed a 12-month contract which had expired, and she was automatically rolled over to another electric car plan without notice. Her energy provider also advised it was no longer offering the \$1 a day deal even though she was told at the time this would continue for a further 12 months even after the contract expired.

Our investigation found that the energy provider had breached the terms of the contract and this was neither recognised nor addressed despite Ms Connor's multiple attempts to contact her provider.

We calculated the estimated daily usage of her electric car, and the provider agreed to credit Ms Connor's account with \$3,000 to cover the overbilling. Ms Connor confirmed that she was happy with the outcome and thanked us for our help.

Category: Level 2 investigation

Issues: Digital meter fault, high/disputed bill

Outcome: Facilitated resolution – refer to higher level



The big issues

EWON is committed to increasing consumer protections and addressing issues that negatively impact consumers.

We identify consumer issues through our complaint management and community engagement activities. We use this valuable information to influence policy development through our submissions and advice to regulators and government. We also work with providers to encourage them to adopt best industry practice in complaints management.

New technology

Australia has the highest uptake of solar power globally, with more than 2.4 million rooftop solar power systems installed. Rooftop solar and battery systems were involved in around 14% of electricity complaints in the last two years, including 1,995 complaints in 2019/2020. EWON receives complaints involving a range of behind-the-meter products, including:

- > Rooftop solar pv systems
- > Solar hot water heaters (including pumps and rooftop systems)
- > Home storage batteries
- > Electric vehicles.

Complaints about behind-the-meter products can be difficult to resolve, and involve a broad range of issues.

Affordability

Consumers often invest in rooftop solar and battery systems with high expectations of the long-term benefits. Consumers may turn to loans and other financial products to finance their initial investment in behind-the-meter products, often in conjunction with government subsidies.

The underlying issue behind many of the solar and battery complaints we receive is that the actual benefits of these products do not live up to the customer's expectations. If a solar or battery system does not deliver the expected benefits, and the systems have been purchased with finance, affordability can become a critical issue for consumers.

Difficulties engaging with the retail market

Customers invest in a behind-the-meter product based on the expected outcomes of energy generation and storage. However, the types of contracts available from the retail energy market are also critical in delivering many of the benefits from these systems. Customers often express dissatisfaction to EWON when the available energy prices and electricity tariff structures are not delivering the outcomes they expected.

Conduct of installers

Rooftop solar and battery systems are complex products. In order to avoid problems with their investment, customers need to clearly understand:

- > How the systems work
- > Finance options
- > Government subsidies
- > Consumer rights relating to products and services
- > Electricity metering requirements
- > Available offers from the retail energy market.

Some customers feel misled by the advice they received from solar companies, and others are frustrated that they cannot compare or verify information provided by installers. Apart from faulty products and poorly completed installations, customers also tell us about customer service issues from solar and battery companies, such as failure to respond to complaints, or follow up on uncompleted work.

Gaps in dispute resolution

Complaints to EWON about behind-the-meter products often involve issues on both sides of the electricity meter. When we receive a complaint about high bills from a customer with a newly installed rooftop solar system, the problem may relate to the conduct of the solar installer as well as billing by the energy retailer.

A current systemic issue, evident in our complaints, involves solar companies installing rooftop solar and battery systems which are connected to electricity meters. The meters are often not designed to capture information about electricity generated and exported to the grid. This issue is caused either by solar installers who do not understand the metering requirements for their product, or companies rushing to complete the work before a compliant digital meter is installed.

This situation has three significant impacts on customers: they will not receive credits for the energy their system exports to the grid; they will receive unexpectedly high electricity bills based on estimated meter readings; and there is the possibility the customer will receive a defect notice from the distributor for a non-compliant meter installation.

EWON raised this issue with NSW Fair Trading, which responded by developing additional online information for solar installers and consumers. Our ability to appropriately address this issue is limited by our jurisdiction, which only extends to the retail energy market.

The big issues

Affordability and financial hardship

In March 2018, the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) requested a rule change to strengthen protections for customers experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, financial vulnerability. We contributed to the discussions and debates throughout this process. In March 2019, the AER published its Customer Hardship Guideline, and energy retailers had until 1 October 2019 to submit their new hardship policies for AER approval.

The AER identified the implementation of the Guideline as one of its key compliance priorities for 2019/2020. It requested EWON and energy ombudsman schemes in South Australia and Queensland to report on several key issues following implementation of the Guideline by energy retailers.

We developed internal information gathering procedures to meet the AER request. Through this process we identified three areas where some retailers needed to improve practices:

- > Retailers failing to proactively refer eligible customers to their hardship programs
- > Retailers placing barriers to customers accessing hardship programs, including requesting large upfront payments or unrealistic and unsustainable payment plans
- > Retailers ending payment plans and/or participation in hardship programs through automated processes that do not consider variations such as where a customer pays less one fortnight and then extra when the next payment is due.

We have also identified some shortfalls in the current protections. Customers, especially those experiencing affordability challenges, are strongly encouraged to seek the best offer in a contestable market. However, customers who change providers may not receive further financial assistance if they have not finalised their bill with their previous provider. They may also be at risk of debt collection and credit listing as a consequence of their understandable need to seek an affordable energy deal.

Complaints to EWON indicate that retailer practices which are at odds with the Hardship Guideline often relate to customers with poor payment histories and significant arrears. The reality is some customers with accumulated arrears and high consumption also have low incomes and are not able to meet the requirements of even generous affordability support, nor can they afford to install energy-efficient appliances.

We will continue to participate in state and national conversations and policy debates about addressing energy poverty in Australia; until this is systemically addressed, even the very best affordability programs will not make energy affordable for financially vulnerable consumers.

Response to COVID-19

The energy affordability issue has been exacerbated by COVID-19. At the end of March 2020, the AER issued a Statement of Expectations aimed at ensuring financially impacted consumers stay connected to electricity and gas. Disconnections, debt collection and credit default listings were halted until at least 31 July 2020 and providers were required to offer payment arrangements to all impacted customers. The NSW Government increased emergency funding through its Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) program and made it available through Service NSW centres. These measures provided initial relief and, combined with increased Federal Government income support through JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments, have deferred serious affordability problems for consumers and small businesses.

With the economy slowing significantly, there is likely to be a rapid growth in consumer debt. Casual and low paid workers are most likely to be affected, especially when government income support is reduced. This will result in many people who previously had secure incomes being in a tenuous financial position. Additionally, a large number of people working from home will receive significantly increased winter energy bills.

The current mechanisms for delivering essential energy to customers experiencing financial vulnerability have the potential to be overwhelmed, placing further pressure on consumers and providers. New approaches may need to be considered and established to ensure that consumers and industry can recover from the ongoing impacts of COVID-19.

Some possible initiatives to respond to the current crisis include:

- > Increased resources which support retailers' hardship programs, including network and government contributions
- > An urgent review of government concessions for more effective and targeted support
- > Additional financial counselling resources, potentially aligned with the recommendations made in the 2019 Sylvan Review
- > Extending home energy efficiency programs including solar installation targeted at vulnerable consumers.

A cross-sector roundtable including retailers, distributors, government agencies, regulators and community organisations could be tasked with identifying energy hardship initiatives which are carefully coordinated and properly implemented. Such a structure could provide real insight into the issues that ordinary people in crisis experience and could ensure programs are relevant and make a real difference.

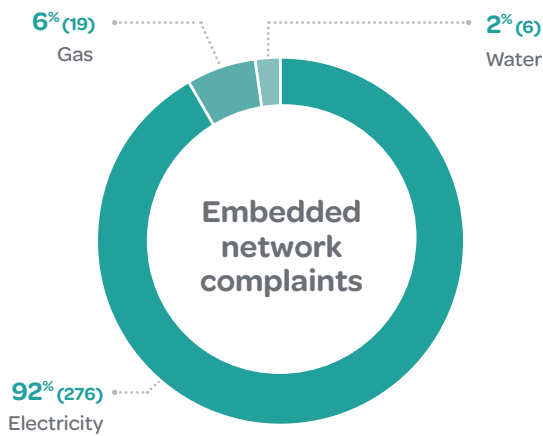
Embedded networks

The total number of complaints received from customers in embedded networks has increased this year compared to last year. We have closely monitored a number of systemic issues related to the services provided by embedded network operators and providers, such as problems with provider billing systems, metering issues within a major hot water network, and complaints about authorised energy retailers on-selling within residential land lease communities (residential parks).

We also saw a continued increase in embedded network complaints about authorised energy retailers (rather than exempt sellers). This trend includes authorised energy retailers which have operated in the National Electricity Market for many years and are now extending their services to embedded network customers, as well as specialist embedded network providers which have obtained an authorisation from the AER.

Recent complaints to EWON about authorised retailers from customers living in residential parks have highlighted the need to address significant gaps in the current regulatory framework for embedded networks including lack of:

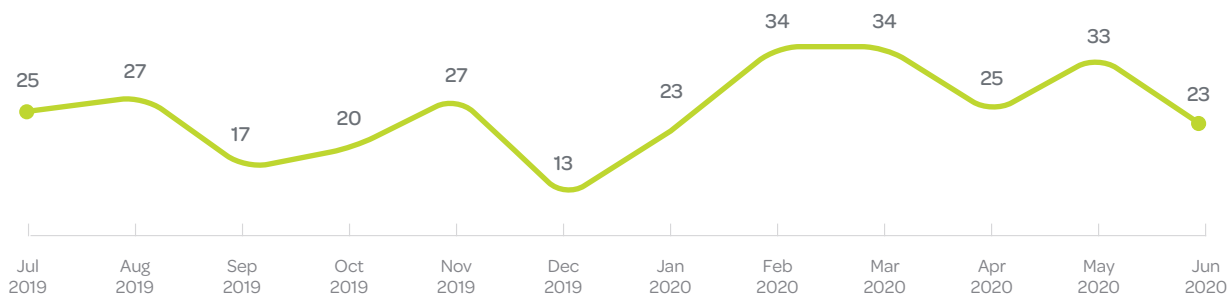
- > Electricity price protections, including regulations which ensure that service availability charges reflect the quality of electricity supply, and no longer apply when an authorised retailer becomes the on-seller
- > Protections of standing offers and guaranteed designated providers, which aren't available in embedded networks serviced by an authorised retailer
- > A default market offer, which provides a price cap for most energy consumers, but does not extend to embedded network customers of an authorised retailer.



The big issues

Embedded network complaints

From July 2019 to June 2020



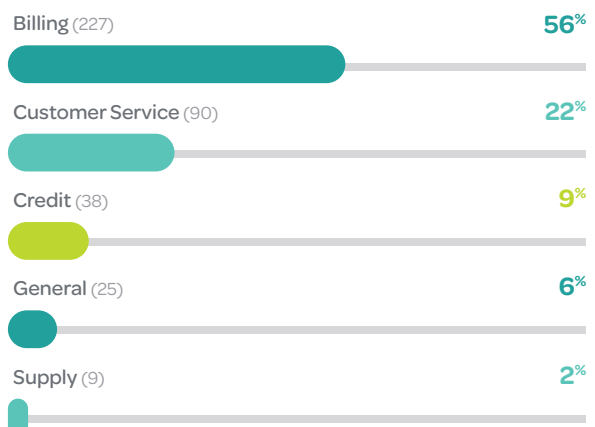
Updating the regulatory frameworks for embedded networks

In its 2017 review of regulatory arrangements for embedded networks, the Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC) identified gaps in consumer protections relating to standing offers, designated providers and the guarantee of supply within embedded networks. In June 2019, the Commission's final report, *Updating the Regulatory Frameworks for Embedded Networks*, proposed a package of reforms to address these regulatory gaps. The report recommended updating the definition of designated provider within the National Energy Retail Law (NERL) to ensure that standing offers and the guarantee of supply extend to all embedded network customers. The Commission's report was provided to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the proposed reforms are now with COAG to decide the next steps.

We also recently pointed out in a submission to the ACCC that key consumer provisions cease to operate when an embedded network customer is on-sold energy by an authorised retailer; these provisions are outlined in the *Retail Electricity Code (the Code)*, the AER (Retail) Exempt Selling Guideline, and the provisions of the NERL and the National Energy Retail Rules relating to standing offers. This is because section 6(3)(c) of the *Competition and Consumer (Industry Code - Electricity Retail) Regulations 2019* explicitly excludes these customers. We recommended a further amendment to the *Regulations* so that its protections apply to all embedded network customers.

In our submission to the Commission's review of Consumer Protections in an Evolving Market (February 2020), we noted that the delivery of energy is becoming increasingly fragmented. This is particularly true in new residential developments built with embedded networks. We continue to receive complaints from customers in residential buildings who are required to open multiple utility accounts, and receive separate billing for services such as air conditioning, hot water and/or recycled water. Complaints about these fragmented utility services cover the same issues as traditional energy complaints, but these services are not necessarily covered by the same energy-specific consumer protections contained in the NECF. The Australian Consumer Law does not appear to provide these customers with an appropriate level of protection to resolve complaints about these essential services.

Top 5 embedded network issues



Complaint numbers for all embedded network providers

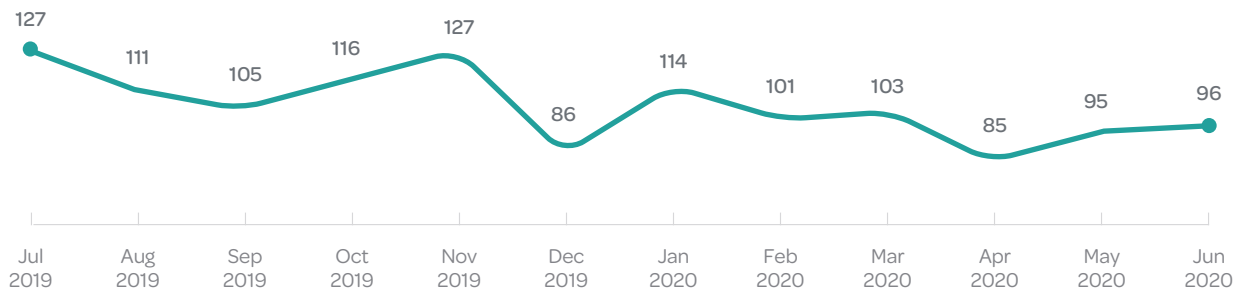
● Electricity ● Gas ● Water ● Non-energy/non-water

	Complaints
Authorised (EWON member)	214
Exempt seller (EWON member)	9
Exempt seller (non-member)	45
Authorised (EWON member)	18
WICA member	2
Not allocated*	13
Total	301

* Not allocated = provider not stated/out of jurisdiction

Digital meter complaints

From July 2019 to June 2020



Digital meters

EWON monitored digital meter complaints and provided relevant and timely information about digital meter issues to the AER to support its compliance and enforcement priorities for 2019/2020, including reporting complaints where the timeframe for installation fell outside the regulations.

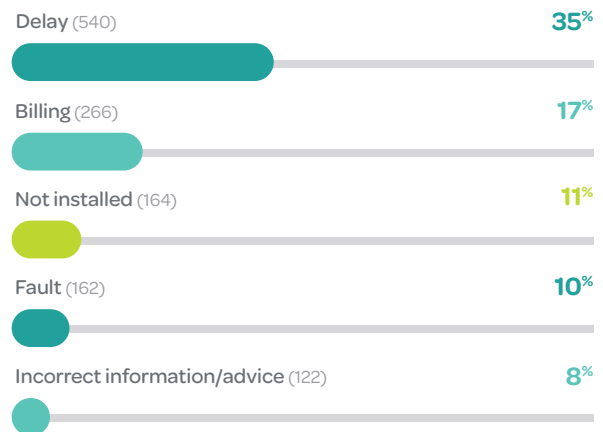
At the beginning of 2019/2020, digital meter complaints began to decrease following new rules introduced in February 2019 by the AEMC. The new rules established clear timeframes for meter installations by retailers, giving customers greater certainty. Following these changes, complaints relating to digital meters decreased by almost half for 2019/2020, with the most significant drop occurring in the April to June quarter.

Despite the reduction in digital meter complaints, digital meter installations continue to be a significant issue for customers. Customers experiencing delays in meter installations represented 35% of all digital meter complaints in 2019/2020. Some digital meter installations required a meter board upgrade before a new meter could be installed, and further complications occurred where asbestos was present. These customers experienced lengthy delays along with significant additional costs associated with meter board upgrades. Customers with registered life support equipment also raised issues over unacceptable delays to meter installations. 60% of digital meter complaints were from customers who didn't see the expected cost benefits of reduced consumption.

Customers with multiple meters within a property experienced unintended complexities when they installed a solar system, and many customers were advised that their multiple metering arrangements were non-compliant with installation rules. These customers were told a digital meter could not be installed until they corrected the multiple meter issue, and experienced additional costs and lengthy delays when having their new meter installed.

We also received complaints related to tariff changes following the installation of a digital meter, including a reduction in the choice of tariffs available. Some customers were not fully informed about tariff changes when upgrading their meter, leaving them confused and frustrated.

Top 5 digital meter issues



Consumer Data Right

The Energy Consumer Data Right (CDR) is being developed by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) at the request of the Federal Government. Its purpose is to give consumers greater control over their data, empowering them to choose when to share their data and for which purposes. The CDR was due to be introduced to the energy sector in 2020 but is now more likely to commence in 2021, due to delays developing the CDR for the banking sector, the initial priority.

EWON made a submission to the ACCC on the CDR implementation, in particular the role of non-accredited third parties receiving data. We addressed privacy aspects and recommended that third parties be treated as agents of accredited persons for the purposes of dispute resolution, meaning the accredited person would be responsible for the complaint.

EWON's role in CDR-related dispute resolution will be dependent on which body is selected to be the holder and distributor of consumer data. We will continue to engage with the ACCC as the mechanisms for the CDR are further developed.

Spotlight on quality

Over the last five years, we have developed a comprehensive internal Quality Assurance Framework, and our approach was highly commended in this year's Independent Review. Separate from the Investigations Team, our Quality Team undertakes in-depth, fair assessments of our complaint work including adherence to our complaint-handling and investigations procedures and policies.

Our focus is on continuous improvement and we understand and accept that from time to time we will receive complaints about our service. These complaints provide us with valuable feedback and an opportunity to review and improve our systems, communication and processes.



Step 1

Investigations Team

The quality assurance process begins well before complaints are finalised. During investigation, progress of the complaint may be:



Peer reviewed

Investigations Officers review complaints with their trained and experienced peers, Senior Investigations Officers and Case Specialists to ensure each complaint is handled appropriately.



Reviewed by an Investigations Manager



Presented to a Significant Matters Meeting for consideration by the Ombudsman



Subject to a No further Investigation assessment



Step 2

Quality Team

Continuous improvement is the remit of the Quality Team. EWON's quality assessments ensure that complaint-handling processes are reviewed to make sure they are fair, efficient and up-to-date with the ever-changing industry.

The Quality Team is responsible for analysing the quality of complaint management once a complaint has been closed. Having a Quality Team that is at arms length from the Investigations Team allows us to provide independent assessment of our complaint-handling via:

Data Audits

Every month, the Quality Team undertakes a thorough integrity check of the data captured during our complaints management.

Complaint Management Reviews

The Quality Team also undertakes monthly reviews of a sample of randomly selected complaints to make sure we adhere to our complaints management policies and procedures.

Internal Reviews and complaints about EWON

Customers can request a review of the outcome of an investigation if they believe that EWON was biased or made an error, or if they provide relevant new information that was not available to them during the investigation. Customers can also make complaints about the quality of EWON's service. The Quality Team carries out internal reviews. Complaints about EWON are dealt with by the relevant manager with support and assistance from the Manager Quality. We take action to address any deficiencies or areas for improvement identified. This can include a change in a system, development of a new process or additional guidance to staff.



Step 3

Customer satisfaction surveys of referred and investigated complaints

The final step in our quality work is to ask customers about their experience of using our services. In 2019/2020, we began conducting customer satisfaction surveys in-house for both investigated and non-investigated complaints in order to survey customers closer to when their complaint was finalised. We conduct a survey each quarter, targeting particular groups of customers.

In October 2019 and April 2020, we surveyed all customers whose complaints we investigated between July-September 2019 and January-March 2020.

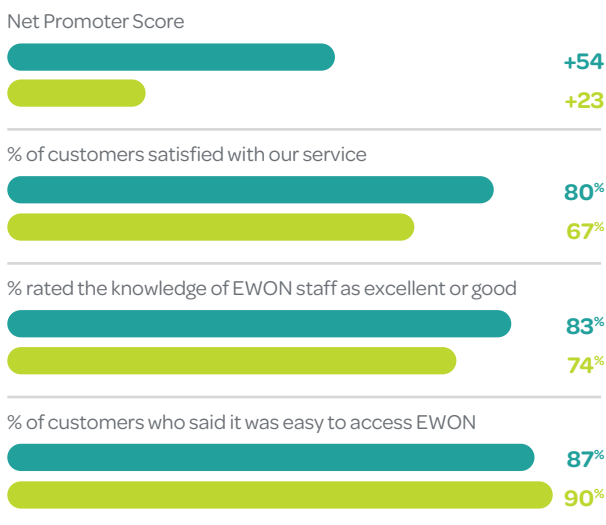
In January and July 2020, we surveyed a sample of customers whose complaints we referred to their provider's specialist complaints team between October-December 2019 and April-June 2020.

Results of these surveys indicated a high satisfaction with EWON and our processes throughout 2019/2020. We use the results, including free text comments included in the survey, to monitor our performance and to inform our continuous improvement.

We will continue to undertake independent customer satisfaction surveys of investigated complaints every two years.

Survey results

- Referred complaints survey results
- Investigated complaints survey results



Annual average results for 2019/2020



Data Integrity Audits

3,922

Targeted monthly exception reports

1,422

Monthly 20% sample of closed complaints



Case Management Reviews

279

Non-investigated complaints (Enquiry, RHLs)

527

Investigated complaints (Level 1-3)



Internal Reviews

14

Internal reviews undertaken

1

Review upheld

13 reviews identified that the investigation was undertaken in accordance with our complaints management policies and procedures. While most internal reviews do not result in investigations being reopened, many identify opportunities for improving how EWON communicates investigation outcomes to customers.

One review was upheld, the complaint further investigated and as a result, a customer claim for significant appliance damage was identified and addressed. See the related case study on page 40.



Case study

Further investigation - new meter catches fire causing appliance damage

Mr Wong had an electricity meter installed by his energy provider and was told he could resume energy usage as usual, but when he turned on his household appliances, a fire broke out in his meter box. He called a private electrician who told him to contact his energy provider to replace the meter and this occurred.

Mr Wong then realised that some of his appliances including his fridge and air conditioning system had been damaged after the fire, and he submitted a claim of \$14,500 to his provider to cover the damages. The energy provider said there wasn't enough evidence to prove it was responsible but agreed to apply a \$200 customer service credit as a goodwill gesture. Mr Wong wasn't satisfied with this and contacted EWON.

We liaised with the energy provider on Mr Wong's behalf and based on information we received, we could not substantiate Mr Wong's view that the original meter had been installed incorrectly and noted that the provider had sent an electrician to test everything was in working order.

We also noted the property's power boards were in poor condition, and we could not confirm from the available information that the damage to the appliances was related to the meter exchange. For these reasons, we closed the complaint investigation on a No Further Investigation (NFI) basis and advised Mr Wong that he should make a claim with his insurers. The NFI letter included advice about our Internal Review Process which customers can request if dissatisfied with the outcome.

Mr Wong disputed the outcome and requested an internal review – he believed we had missed some information. The Quality Team reviewed the request and identified gaps in EWON's investigation, including advice Mr Wong received from two private electricians who said the damage was probably caused by a misconnection of the active and neutral wiring which would have caused a surge of 415 volts instead of 240 volts.

We sought advice from the energy distributor responsible for original metering at the property. The distributor agreed that the damage was consistent with incorrect wiring connection resulting in a high voltage surge. This advice was supported by Fair Trading's NSW Electrical Meters Unit.

We presented the energy provider with this information and, after initially challenging our decision to re-open the investigation, it agreed to further investigate the issue with its metering contractor. As a result, the energy provider proposed a settlement of \$14,389 without admitting liability. Mr Wong accepted this outcome and on signing a deed of release, thanked us for our help.

Category: Level 2 investigation

Issues: High bills, customer service, meter fault

Outcome: Negotiated resolution



Our Internal Review Process is a critical part of quality assurance. Although we have review procedures in place, we accept that we sometimes miss information during an investigation. This case study is an example of how we learn from these experiences to improve our future complaints management.

Ombudsman

engagement highlights

The Ombudsman's direct engagement with stakeholders and communities across NSW expands our strong networks, increases awareness of our services and builds community and industry knowledge and trust in what we do. It also allows the Ombudsman to hear first-hand about issues that impact consumers.

Below are some of the highlights of the Ombudsman's engagement in 2019/2020.

Conferences, speeches and events

- > EWON's Anti-Poverty Week Forum (Cabramatta)
- > Energy Consumers Australia (ECA) Foresighting Forum 2020
- > Australian Energy Regulator's Dr Gill Owen Forum: Fairness for consumers in the energy transition
- > Public Interest Advocacy Centre's Social Justice Dinner
- > The Australian Institute of Company Director's 2020 Australian Governance Summit
- > Jan Pentland Dinner (Financial Counselling Australia Conference)
- > Launch of Thriving Communities Partnership NSW Chapter (opening speech and panellist)
- > The Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals Australia 29th Annual International Symposium (panellist)

Working with government and regulators

- > ACCC and the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner – working on the Consumer Data Right for energy
- > NSW Treasury – Consumer Data Right for energy
- > IPART – meeting with CEO and Chair

Aboriginal community projects and engagement

- > Remote Aboriginal Communities – community/supermarket stores and pricing, with Financial Counselling Australia
- > EWON Bring Your Bills event (Tamworth)
- > Mulabugilmah Street Lights Project

Peak/consumer body engagement

- > Financial Counselling Australia NSW (FCAN) 2019 conference (Tamworth)
- > FCAN Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Connection dinner
- > Australian Dispute Resolution Advisory Council
- > Council of the Aging NSW

Collaboration and partnerships

- > Voltage Variation Working Group – with NSW energy networks
- > Essential Energy Customer Advocacy Group (observer)
- > Endeavour Energy Peak Customer and Stakeholder Committee (observer)
- > Jemena Consultative Council (observer)
- > Ausgrid Consultative Council (observer)
- > Energy Consumers Australian Board Reference Committee
- > Thriving Communities Partnership

High level committees

AS/NZS 10002 Standards Australia: 2014 Review Committee

QR15 – Review of the AS/NZS 10002 'Guideline for Complaint management in Organizations'

Collaborating with our peers

ANZOA

The Ombudsman, Janine Young, was elected Chair of the Australian and New Zealand Ombudsman Association (ANZOA) at its AGM in Melbourne in November 2019, having previously been a member of the ANZOA Executive since 2011. ANZOA provides a valuable peer forum for members, all of whom meet accepted high standards of independence, impartiality and effectiveness, and observe the Benchmarks for Industry-based Customer Dispute Resolution (the CDR Benchmarks).

In the absence of face-to-face meetings due to COVID-19, ANZOA has continued to engage online, providing valuable opportunities for Industry and Parliamentary Ombudsman across Australia and New Zealand. This includes sharing information about their pandemic responses.

ANZOA has eight interest groups. Staff working in similar roles across the offices of ANZOA's members meet regularly to discuss the successes and challenges of their work; these discussions also offer opportunities to collaborate. EWON staff participate in the following interest groups:

Complaints Management:

Focuses on complaint-handling best practice, approaches to consumer vulnerability, ideal caseloads, managing and motivating staff when they are under pressure and setting targets and KPIs.

Public Relations & Communications:

Shares information about communication strategies and new ways of engaging, as well as discussing communication-related issues any of the offices may be facing.

Customer Financial Hardship:

Discusses Ombudsman approaches and initiatives for dealing with emerging affordability issues.

Indigenous Engagement:

Collaborates on improving complaint-handling practices and procedures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Information Technology for Business:

Discusses digital delivery for Ombudsman offices from a customer service point of view.

People & Development:

Provides a forum for sharing information and support on all people processes from induction, recruitment, learning and development, performance and engagement.

Policy & Research:

Shares information about Ombudsman office policy and research work.

Systemic Issues & Investigations:

Discusses identification and investigation of systemic issues generally, with a focus on issues impacting customers experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, vulnerability.

ANZEWON

The Ombudsman is also part of the Australia & New Zealand Energy and Water Ombudsman Network (ANZEWON). This valuable network provides energy and water Ombudsman services and Commissioners across Australia and New Zealand opportunities to work together to explore and address industry and policy developments that affect consumers.

ANZEWON continues to actively consider the implications of emerging energy and water products and services on consumers and Ombudsman schemes. Working together, we are shining a spotlight on a future that could see many energy consumers fall outside of the current consumer protection framework unless steps are taken. Accordingly, ANZEWON commissioned the University of Sydney Law School to undertake independent research in order for us to better understand customer expectations of our offices over the next 5-10 years. The research report, finalised in October 2019, presented us with a range of actions to consider which will assist us in determining what changes, if any, are required to ensure that energy and water ombudsman schemes are fit-for-purpose in the future.

We have also engaged with key regulators on this topic and are beginning to see steps towards better protection of energy consumers.

ANZEWON's joint submission to the Clean Energy Council's consultation in 2019 on the Behind the Meter Distributed Energy Resource Provider Code also links to this ongoing work.

Chair and Ombudsman annual forums

The Chairs and Ombudsmen from EWON, EWOSA, EWOQ, EWOV and Utilities Disputes met in 2020 for the fourth year in Brisbane. The main topic of discussion focused on effective expansion of jurisdiction to include new energy and water products and services. It was agreed that for this to occur, Ombudsman offices require strong regulatory support and that ongoing work of ANZEWON should continue to focus on gaining this support in order to effectively respond to the needs of energy and water consumers. Each Ombudsman also shared their current status of jurisdiction/membership with respect to embedded networks, policy work and complaints volumes.

Expanded jurisdiction staff working group

The ANZEWON staff working group meets regularly to share best practice and collaborate on jurisdiction issues and challenges so that we can learn from one another and continue to enhance our service to Australian consumers. The expansion of our jurisdiction to include exempt entities providing energy through embedded networks is a key example of the work we do together. The working group was established in 2017 and is a valuable forum particularly for staff from EWON, EWOV and EWOSA who are continuing to implement expanded jurisdiction.

Throughout 2019/2020, the working group held monthly teleconferences at which each scheme provided an update and shared issues, initiatives and challenges. The group continued to be an important forum for collaboration and support.

Our work with government and regulators

In 2019/2020, EWON continued to work with regulators and government agencies to inform them about the latest industry trends and issues identified through our complaint-handling, outreach and stakeholder engagement activities. We developed a number of reports and submissions to inform energy and water policy decisions.

Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC)

As well as our ongoing interaction with the ACCC on the Consumer Data Right, we made submissions to two other ACCC reviews.

In the ACCC's consultation on prohibited conduct in the energy market, we supported the proposed guideline that provided clear direction defining inappropriate market behaviour.

The ACCC also consulted EWON on its Guide to the Electricity Retail Code. This code limits the standing offer prices that are charged to residential and small business customers, allows consumers to more easily compare market offers and prohibits conditional headline discounting.

Consumer Data Right

Ombudsman Janine Young and senior EWON staff continued to engage with Commonwealth Treasury and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission on the development of the energy CDR. This included providing consolidated feedback from energy and water schemes about likely consumer complaint issues and working with Treasury to develop effective external dispute resolution models for responding to energy complaints associated with the CDR.

Australian Energy Regulator (AER)

As well as executive liaison, we provide quarterly complaint insights reports to the AER and meet with its staff regularly, both individually and with other state Ombudsman schemes. Our complaints insights reports include quarterly statistics about complaint numbers, information about complaint trends and case studies illustrating key complaint themes and identifying associated regulations and rules.

When the COVID-19 crisis began, the AER sought our input on its Statement of Expectations, which sets out how retailers should interact with customers experiencing financial difficulties arising from the pandemic. We supported the initial draft, but suggested it go further and impose a moratorium on disconnecting large businesses which on-sell energy to residents, such as residential parks and retirement villages. We were pleased the AER adopted our recommendation.

In 2019/2020, our work with the AER increased following its request that we provide it with quarterly reports about complaints, which based on both customer and member information provision, identified actions by EWON members that were at odds with relevant laws, rules and regulations. We had completed two of these reports, covering the October-December 2019 and January-March 2020 quarters, when the AER requested we instead begin weekly reporting on potential breaches of the COVID-19 Statement of Expectations.

Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART)

In 2019/2020, we provided quarterly complaints insight reports to IPART and contributed to its reviews of:

- > Distribution reliability standards in NSW
- > Prices for Sydney Water from 1 July 2020.

The Ombudsman and Deputy Ombudsman met with IPART's CEO and Chair in February 2020 to discuss our organisations' respective roles, including EWON case studies about water issues.

Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC)

Our engagement with the AEMC included:

- > Quarterly complaint insights reporting
- > Provision of statistics and case studies which informed AEMC rule changes and reviews, including The Annual Retail Competition Review
- > Regular meetings individually, or with other state Ombudsman schemes, often including other regulators and government
- > Attendance at its Consumer Priorities Forum and workshops on rule changes or reviews
- > Bilateral discussions on reviews and rule change proposals.

We made a submission to the AEMC's review on Consumer Protections in an Evolving Market, which explored the interaction between the National Energy Consumer Framework, Australian Consumer Law and voluntary industry codes.

We also made submissions to the AEMC in response to:

- > A review of the regulatory frameworks for stand-alone power systems
- > A rule change request aimed at reducing customers' switching times (two submissions)
- > A rule change request on regulating conditional discounting (two submissions)
- > A rule change request on introduction of metering coordinator planned interruptions (two submissions)
- > A rule change on deferral of retailer payments of network charges for customers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our work with government and regulators

EWON Quarterly Regulators' Meeting

We continued our quarterly meetings with the AER, the AEMC, the ACCC, DPIE and IPART. These meetings provide a valuable opportunity to share updates on systemic issues, complaint trends and shared projects.

Government

We provided complaint insight reports and met quarterly with the energy division of the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE).

We also held targeted discussions with DPIE on changes to regulations for the use of digital meters for remote disconnection and reconnection, and on changes to the Energy Accounts Payment Assistance Guidelines.

In 2019/2020, we made submissions to:

- > DPIE's consultation on improving the service delivery of digital meters in NSW
- > The NSW Department of Customer Service's Regulatory Impact Statement on the Residential Tenancies Regulation
- > The NSW Department of Customer Service Reform of Community Schemes in NSW.

We met quarterly with NSW Fair Trading, discussing:

- > Complaint referrals between EWON and NSW Fair Trading to ensure arrangements are as seamless as possible for customers
- > Energy issues in residential parks
- > Electrical safety issues
- > Opportunities to collaborate and cross-promote community engagement and outreach initiatives.

Commonwealth Department of Social Services

We followed up our submission to the 2019 Sylvan Review of the Coordination and Funding of Financial Counselling Services across Australia with a letter to the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction in March 2020. The letter encouraged action on the Review's recommendations, including a consideration that the business sectors which drive the demand for counselling services should fund them on a user-pays basis.

Office of Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC)

As an approved External Dispute Resolution Scheme under the Privacy Act, EWON reports on complaints relating to privacy and credit reporting to the OAIC. In 2019/2020, we reported 852 complaints related to customers' concerns about credit reporting, and 90 potential privacy breaches by providers.



Case study

EWON detects error in Time of Use energy plans affecting over 100,000 customers

Our Investigations and Policy Teams identified a systemic issue after investigating a series of complaints about disputed high electricity bills. We identified that an energy provider was billing customers on Time of Use energy plans without adjusting for daylight-saving time. These energy plans charge different rates depending on the time of day electricity is used.

We raised the systemic issue with the provider for further investigation, and our analysis enabled the provider to identify the problem. It advised that the implementation of a new meter data system in December 2018 caused a mapping issue between the alignment of Time of Use bands and daylight saving. As a result of our investigation, the retailer resolved the alignment issue in January 2020.

We informed the provider that during the period of misalignment, some customers were disadvantaged as they had been charged for electricity used during cheaper time periods at higher-priced time period rates. Following our correspondence, the provider identified that over 114,000 residential customers and over 2,500 business customers had been overcharged as a result of the issue, requiring an approximate total of \$2.2 million in billing adjustments.

The provider wrote to each of the customers affected and outlined arrangements to credit the accounts by the overbilled amounts and also advised that it would not recover any money from customers who were undercharged. This systemic investigation is still ongoing and will not be finalised until all affected customers are refunded.

Multiple complaints - billing adjustments and refunds

Outcome: Identified systemic issue



#MOBMATTERS

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community are particularly vulnerable when it comes to energy and water issues and can often be at greater risk of billing and affordability problems. They experience high electricity disconnection levels and can remain disconnected for long periods of time.

In 2020 we launched Mob Matters, a new awareness campaign featuring well-known Indigenous comedian Sean Choolburra, EWON's Aboriginal Ambassador, to increase awareness of the options available to communities dealing with high energy and water bills.

Sean has been a supporter of our work since he took part in the NSW Aboriginal Housing Office-funded Tenant Support and Education Project, which EWON was involved in for over two years from 2016.

Incorporating Sean's trademark humour, the summer and winter campaigns focused on how to manage water and energy use during the peak seasons and provided tips on energy savings, minimising debt and how to access support.

To ensure the message reached Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences in regional and remote NSW, we broadcast community service announcements across 51 radio stations reaching 564,000 listeners per week at the height of the campaign.

We also distributed a range of postcards and posters at our outreach events and through community organisations, and shared campaign messages on social media using the hashtag #mobmatters.

The campaign was received well, shared widely and successfully raised awareness of EWON's services in Aboriginal communities.

**Cheap cooling?
I'm a fan!**

Think about using a fan before you turn on the air conditioning. They cost 3 to 5 cents per hour to run, making them the cheapest cooling option!

For more information, tips and tricks visit: ewon.com.au/mobmatters

Energy & Water
Ombudsman NSW

Avoid Bill Shock

Make regular payments on your accounts and monitor your use to avoid a visit from Bill Shock.

For more information, tips and tricks visit: ewon.com.au/mobmatters

Energy & Water
Ombudsman NSW

This bill is outstanding!

Big bills aren't something to celebrate. Stay on top of them by making small, regular payments to avoid debt or disconnection.

For more information, tips and tricks visit: ewon.com.au/mobmatters

Energy & Water
Ombudsman NSW

**Sean Choolburra
One Light Only**

Switch to an energy saving light bulb and turn lights off when you leave the room to save money on your energy bills.

For more information, tips and tricks visit: ewon.com.au/mobmatters

Energy & Water
Ombudsman NSW

Our members

NSW electricity and gas networks and retailers are required to be members of EWON. Water providers such as Sydney Water, Hunter Water and Water NSW and those licensed under the Water Industry Competition Act are also required to join EWON. Councils that provide water to their residents can join voluntarily. A list of all EWON members can be found at ewon.com.au/members.

We work independently and closely with our members, providing advice about their customer service and complaint-handling processes. We provide information about issues in the industry and the problems which customers struggle with and provide advice on how to handle complaints quickly and effectively.



Member induction training

Member inductions are designed for new members of EWON, and new staff of existing members. These sessions are an effective way to demonstrate efficient complaint resolution.

The sessions include an overview of our structure, our member portal, investigation processes, report generation and working together on outreach events. Inductions were held in-house and online in September 2019 and March 2020 with 71 participants from 27 member organisations.



Member webinars

Webinars are a popular and interactive resource for members to stay informed about EWON. These sessions offer a mix of presentations by senior EWON staff and participant input. In 2019/2020, we held two member webinars; the final episode in our series on 'Staying in Front of Complaints' and a webinar introducing our new member portal.

July 2019: 'How we Investigate Complex Complaints – the Devil's in the Detail'. This focused on how we resolve complex complaints. The webinar provided an overview of our Investigations Team and its functions, what we are doing to improve and streamline our processes and explored what we expect from our members and customers during an investigation.

January 2020: 'Exploring EWONLink' introduced our new member portal, showcased its features and enhancements and provided a practical guide on how to get the most out of it. The webinar provided a hands-on demonstration on accessing reports and customising them to meet individual member needs.



Member presentations and visits

We welcomed two EWON members to present to our Investigations Team on their current operations including any potential impact on complaints. Ausgrid presented to the team in October 2019 and Flow Systems in November 2019.

On occasion, EWON Investigation Officers facilitate and attend site visits to progress the investigation of a complaint. In 2019/2020, EWON attended two site visits, both within the Sydney region. The customers and a desired support person, and the EWON member and any requested staff attended these meetings.

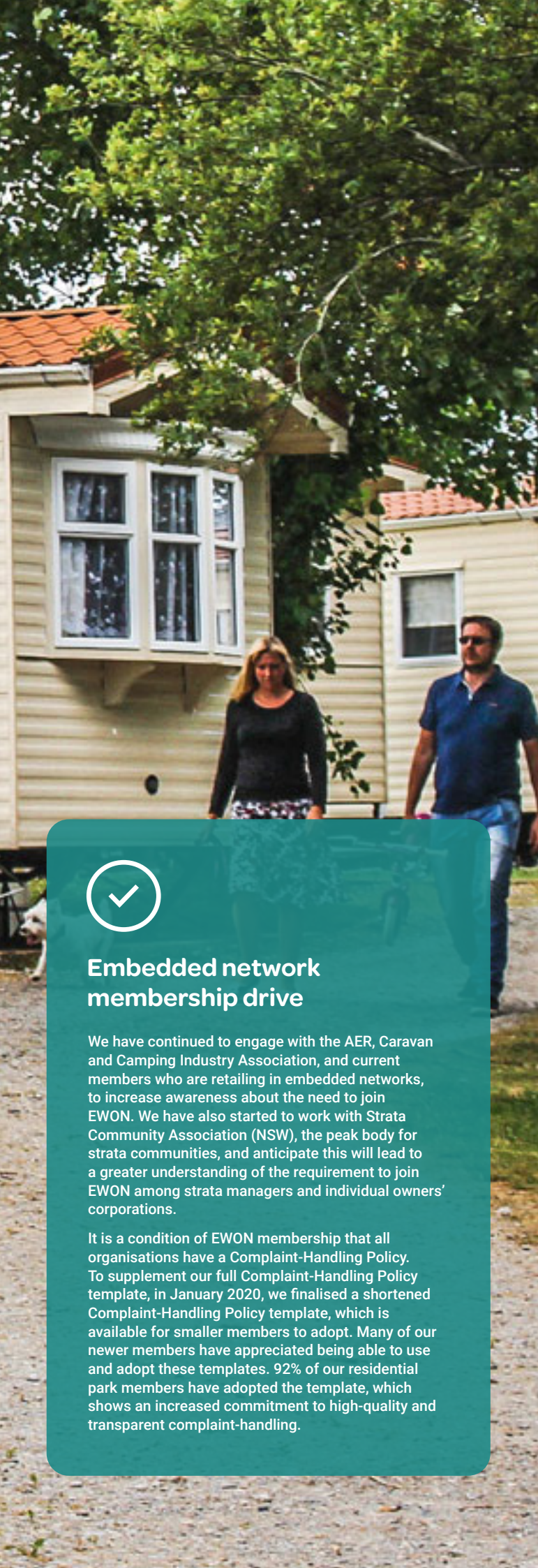


EWONLink launched

We launched our enhanced member portal, EWONLink, in December 2019. The portal was upgraded to meet the needs of our growing membership and is a one-stop-shop for all member communications. As well as our current weekly, monthly and quarterly reports, our members are now able to customise data queries based on a specified time period. Reports and queries draw data from our complaints management system, 24 hours after it has been entered by our staff. This has provided our members with timely access to EWON complaint data.

The portal also features the following new additions:

- > An event calendar with upcoming outreach and member events
- > News and updates about industry and regulatory changes and EWON initiatives
- > Single login access to provider complaint data for companies operating with different trading names
- > Access to invoices and member fee projections.



Case study

Change of energy provider in residential park causes bill increase

EWON was contacted by 32 individual residents from five separate residential parks across a five-month period. The residents lived in residential parks established as embedded networks and had traditionally purchased their electricity from each of the individual park operators. The residents complained to us that they had recently received notification that the park operator was no longer billing them for their electricity usage, and that they would have to open an account with an energy provider contracted by the park operator.

The residents said that they did not consent to this energy retailer taking over their accounts and were dismayed when they learned the price for energy usage and supply would increase significantly. Historically, the park residents benefited from additional price protections through the *Residential (Land Lease) Communities Act 2013* and *Residential (Land Lease) Communities Regulation 2015*. The complainants said their new energy provider had refused to apply these price protections when billing their electricity.

We contacted the energy provider and obtained copies of its written agreements with the residential park operators. We also notified the provider that fees being charged for issuing paper bills were prohibited in NSW due to an amendment to the National Energy Retail Rules. In response, the provider gave us the requested documents and agreed to refund all fees for paper bills.

EWON's assessment was that the provider was purchasing the energy independently at the parent connection point for each residential park, and on-selling the electricity directly to residents; a business model which is currently approved by the Australian Energy Regulator.

The price protections contained in the *Residential (Land Lease) Communities Act* and regulations only apply if the site agreement requires the resident to pay utility charges to the park operator. After consulting with NSW Fair Trading, we advised the residents that the rules contained in the *Residential (Land Lease) Communities Act* unfortunately didn't apply to the contracts with their new provider.

We noted that this was problematic for many of the residents at the park and as a result of our investigation, the NSW Government Department of Customer Service, responsible for this legislation, is now looking at changing the legislation to better protect residential park residents. EWON will continue to monitor progress of legislation involvement.

Issues: High bills, change of provider



Embedded network membership drive

We have continued to engage with the AER, Caravan and Camping Industry Association, and current members who are retailing in embedded networks, to increase awareness about the need to join EWON. We have also started to work with Strata Community Association (NSW), the peak body for strata communities, and anticipate this will lead to a greater understanding of the requirement to join EWON among strata managers and individual owners' corporations.

It is a condition of EWON membership that all organisations have a Complaint-Handling Policy. To supplement our full Complaint-Handling Policy template, in January 2020, we finalised a shortened Complaint-Handling Policy template, which is available for smaller members to adopt. Many of our newer members have appreciated being able to use and adopt these templates. 92% of our residential park members have adopted the template, which shows an increased commitment to high-quality and transparent complaint-handling.

Our members

EWON Operational Advisory Group

The Exempt Entity and WICA Operational Advisory Group was established in accordance with EWON's constitutional changes in June 2018. The Group gives exempt entities and small water providers a voice and will operate for up to three years.

In 2019/2020, the Group's focus grew to include current issues impacting embedded networks and the proposed changes to the regulatory framework. The Group plays an important role in EWON's expanded jurisdiction.

In 2019/2020, we invited the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment to attend the meetings. The Department updated the Group on their work in relation to embedded networks and the Group had an opportunity to contribute their ideas and experiences to inform this work. We have also welcomed the Australian Energy Regulator and Australian Energy Market Commission on two occasions to discuss their respective work programs in relation to embedded networks.

EWON's response to impact of COVID-19 on small members

EWON recognises the devastating impact of the bushfires, drought and the restrictions placed on residential parks during the COVID-19 pandemic. We know many will continue to deal with the impacts of these events for a considerable time.

EWON therefore decided to make changes to membership fees for 2020/2021 to support our residential park members. Changes include:

- > Waiving annual fixed fees for current residential park members
- > Placing a cap of \$125 on the joining fee and waiving annual fixed fees for new residential park members who join between 1 July 2020 and 30 June 2021.

Residential park member fees are an important part of our funding. We will use the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 'cash boost' to off-set the resulting reduction in budgeted income for 2020/2021. This allows us to extend the benefit of the government assistance package to a particularly vulnerable segment of our membership and recognises the important role residential parks play in providing affordable housing to residents, many of whom are elderly, on fixed incomes and financially vulnerable.

Group members include representatives from:

- > Caravan and Camping Industry Association NSW
- > Strata Community Association NSW
- > Flow Systems
- > Narara Eco Village
- > Ingenia Communities
- > Arc Energy
- > Living Utilities
- > seene
- > Energy Trade
- > WINconnect
- > Origin Energy
- > Real Utilities
- > Austin Tourist Park

EWON Consultative Council

Consultative Council Meetings are a requirement of EWON's constitutional framework. They offer an open forum for consumer and small business representatives, our members and other stakeholders to meet, raise issues and put forward their views. We usually convene Consultative Council Meetings twice a year; however, the meeting planned for March 2020 was cancelled due to COVID-19.

Consultative Council Meeting 7 November 2019

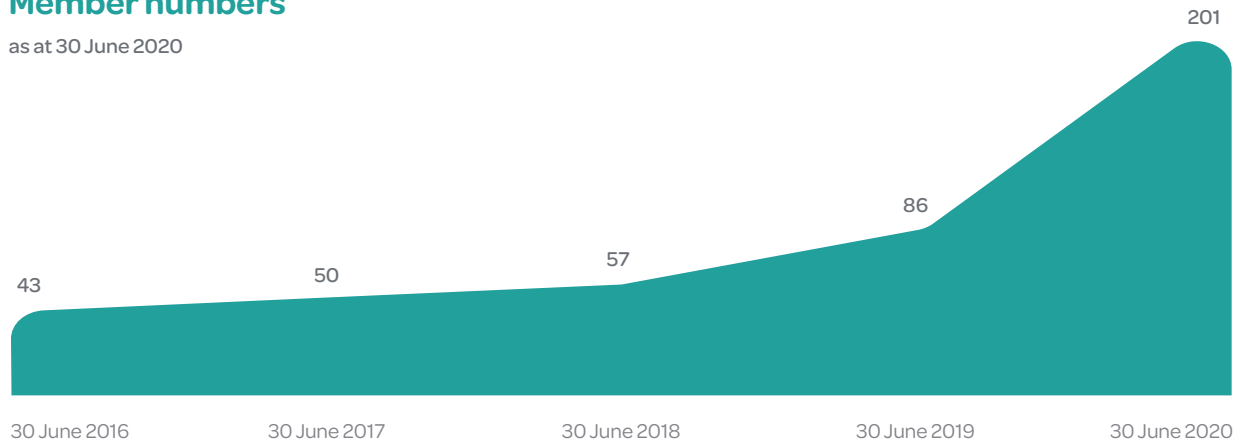
The meeting in November 2019 explored practical responses to affordability issues. A panel of consumer representatives and energy and water retailers discussed initiatives to address affordability issues. The panel focused on the current climate for dealing with affordability, the practical changes customers will experience following recent initiatives, and what programs and initiatives they hoped to see in future to support customers experiencing affordability issues.

Panel speakers included:

- > Karen Cox, Chief Executive Officer, Financial Rights Legal Centre
- > David McNeil, General Manager, Alinta Energy
- > Dimitri Georgacopoulos, Affordability Manager, AGL
- > Vedah Panuccio, Team Manager Customer Care, Sydney Water
- > Debbie Magyar, Program Manager Food & Financial Assistance, Anglicare.

Member numbers

as at 30 June 2020



Current members

as at 30 June 2020

Retailer type	Total
Authorised retailers	55
Licensed networks	10
Water	13*
Exempt entities	128**
Residential complex	43
Retirement villages	22
Residential park	63
Total	201

* includes Flow Systems which is also an authorised retailer, and Essential Energy which is also a licensed network

** includes OC Energy and Arc Energy which are also authorised retailers, and Narara Eco Village which is also a water provider

Members that joined EWON

in 2019/2020

Retailer type	Total
Authorised retailers	6
Hanwha Energy Retail	
Humenergy	
OVO Energy	
Electricity in a Box	
Bright Spark Power	
Energy Services Management	
Exempt entities	109
Residential complex	35
Retirement villages	19
Residential park	55

Member applications



187

applications/
enquiries
received



88

exempt entity
applications/
enquiries pending



1

authorised
retailer application
pending

In September 2019 CleanPeak Energy acquired ReNu Energy Retail, which has since changed its name to CleanPeak Energy Retail.



Case study

Help for bushfire victim after delays over new meter

Mr Bruce's house burnt down during the bushfires in October 2019 and he and his partner moved into a shed at the back of his property. He contacted his energy provider numerous times to establish a site connection to the shed, but this was rejected because the supply address was not found. After submitting his rates notice he was advised that he would be connected to the network, so that a meter could be installed within six business days.

By late December 2019 Mr Bruce had been without power for over a month including Christmas, as well as dealing with the loss of his home, so in late January he called EWON to advise that the site had still not been connected as promised.

We put in an urgent request for a meter installation and confirmed with Mr Bruce that meters must be installed within six business days once a property is connected to the network. The meter was installed within four days.

We found the energy provider did not prioritise the meter installation in accordance with its highly publicised bushfire assistance program. Our escalation of this critical oversight to an energy retailer executive resulted in the delay being investigated which identified that some postcodes affected by the October and November 2019 bushfires were inadvertently overlooked when the provider prepared its bushfire assistance program documentation. Following our request, the provider agreed to increase its initial offer of a \$50 customer service gesture to \$700 and waived the meter installation costs, placing Mr Bruce's account into credit by \$1,400.

Category: Level 2 investigation

Issues: Provision issues, new connection delay

Outcome: Negotiated resolution



Complaints by provider

Top three primary issues by provider

Provider	First issue	%	Second issue	%	Third issue	%
1st Energy	Transfer	29%	Billing	26%	Credit	25%
ActewAGL Retail	Billing	41%	Credit	31%	Customer service	19%
AGL	Billing	55%	Customer service	22%	Credit	14%
Alinta Energy	Billing	47%	Credit	20%	Customer service	18%
amaysim Energy (includes Click Energy)	Billing	59%	Customer service	19%	Credit	11%
Arc Energy	Billing	74%	Customer service	17%	Credit	8%
Ausgrid	Supply	43%	Customer service	22%	Land	21%
Australian Gas Networks (Albury)	Customer service	100%	-	-	-	-
BlueNRG	Billing	59%	Credit	21%	Customer service	13%
Colonial Holiday Park & Leisure Village	General	100%	-	-	-	-
M2Energy	Billing	56%	Customer service	23%	Credit	10%
CovaU	Billing	49%	Customer service	18%	Credit	18%
Diamond Energy	Billing	52%	Customer service	22%	Credit	15%
Discovery Holiday Parks	Customer service	50%	Provision	50%	-	-
Ecoserv Australia Pty Ltd	Billing	100%	-	-	-	-
Eleebana Shores Retirement Village	General	100%	-	-	-	-
Elysian Energy	Billing	78%	Customer service	11%	Transfer	11%
Endeavour Energy	Supply	42%	Customer service	26%	Land	24%
Energy Locals (includes Energy Trade)	Billing	44%	Credit	26%	Customer service	20%
EnergyAustralia	Billing	60%	Customer service	23%	Credit	10%
Enova Energy	Billing	56%	Customer service	28%	Transfer	17%
Enwave Mascot	Customer service	67%	Billing	33%	-	-
ERM Power Retail	Billing	100%	-	-	-	-
Essential Energy	Supply	30%	Land	27%	Customer service	20%
Evergy	Billing	62%	Customer service	22%	Credit	14%
Flow Systems	Billing	79%	Customer service	21%	-	-
GloBird Energy	Billing	60%	Customer service	20%	Transfer	20%
Humenergy	Billing	66%	Transfer	19%	Customer service	9%
Hunter Water	Billing	33%	Customer service	25%	Land	17%
Ingenia Communities	Billing	100%	-	-	-	-
Jemena	Customer service	42%	Provision	32%	Land	18%
Locality Planning Energy	Billing	33%	Customer service	22%	Marketing	22%
Lumo Energy	Customer service	37%	Billing	30%	Credit	30%
Mojo Power	Billing	57%	Credit	30%	Customer service	13%
Momentum Energy	Billing	57%	Customer service	16%	Credit	14%
Nectr	Customer service	100%	-	-	-	-
Next Business Energy	Billing	60%	Credit	15%	Customer service	13%
OC Energy	Billing	71%	Customer service	25%	Credit	4%
Origin Energy	Billing	46%	Credit	22%	Customer service	20%
Palm Lake Resort Pty Ltd	Billing	100%	-	-	-	-
People Energy	Billing	63%	Customer service	32%	Credit	3%
Pooled Energy	Customer service	50%	Billing	31%	Credit	13%
Power Club	Billing	83%	Customer service	17%	-	-
Powerdirect	Billing	50%	Customer service	20%	Credit	19%
Powershop	Billing	69%	Credit	9%	Customer service	8%
QEnergy	Billing	63%	Customer service	14%	Transfer	11%
Real Utilities	Billing	67%	Customer service	33%	-	-
ReAmped Energy	Billing	64%	Customer service	14%	Credit	12%
Red Energy	Billing	51%	Customer service	20%	Credit	16%
Sanctuary Energy	Billing	50%	General	50%	-	-
Savant Energy	Billing	100%	-	-	-	-
seene	Billing	100%	-	-	-	-
Shoalhaven Water	Billing	41%	Credit	18%	Customer service	18%
Simply Energy	Billing	52%	Customer service	21%	Credit	13%
Solo Water	Billing	75%	Customer service	25%	-	-
Strata Plan 93836	Credit	60%	Billing	20%	Customer service	20%
Sumo	Billing	53%	Transfer	22%	Customer service	11%
Sydney Desalination Plant	General	100%	-	-	-	-
Sydney Water	Billing	33%	Customer service	30%	Land	16%
TransGrid	Land	100%	-	-	-	-
Veolia Water Solutions & Technologies	Billing	29%	Credit	29%	Customer service	29%
Water NSW	Customer service	41%	Billing	35%	Land	10%
WINconnect	Billing	60%	Customer service	26%	Credit	9%

Electricity

Customer numbers key:

- <3,000
- 3,001 - 10,000
- 10,001 - 100,000
- 100,001 - 500,000
- 500,001 - 1,000,000
- >1,000,000

Electricity providers with no complaints

Apex Energy
Bright Spark Power
CleanPeak Energy
Discover Energy
Electricity in a Box
Energy Services Management
Future X Power
OVO Energy
Tango Energy

Electricity providers with fewer than 50 complaints

Arc Energy
BlueNRG
Diamond Energy
Elysian Energy
Enova Energy
Enwave Mascot
ERM Power Retail
Energy
Flow Systems
GloBird Energy
Humenergy
Locality Planning Energy
Lumo Energy
Mojo Power

Nectr
Next Business Energy
OC Energy
People Energy
Pooled Energy
Power Club
QEnergy
Real Utilities
ReAmped Energy
Sanctuary Energy
Savant Energy
seene
TransGrid

Provider	Electricity customer numbers*	Cases received per 10,000 customers	Cases received 2019/2020	Cases received 2018/2019	Variance	General enquiry	Complaint enquiry	RHL	Investigation level			
									1	2	3	
First tier retailer												
AGL	●	30	2,464	3,936	-1,472	15	835	1,088	406	92	28	
EnergyAustralia	●	29	2,822	4,900	-2,078	15	965	1,238	373	158	73	
Origin Energy	●	44	4,907	5,437	-530	30	1,497	2,052	900	271	157	
Second tier retailer												
1st Energy	●	166	165	304	-139	2	57	62	40	3	1	
ActewAGL Retail	●	37	103	191	-88	1	47	29	15	6	5	
Alinta Energy	●	64	680	925	-245	2	232	314	107	22	3	
amaysim Energy (includes Click Energy)	●	93	491	847	-356	3	170	224	79	12	3	
CovaU	●	64	58	76	-18	0	24	21	11	2	0	
Energy Locals (includes Energy Trade)	●	36	59	41	18	0	26	18	11	1	3	
M2Energy	●	80	260	235	25	1	80	125	29	16	9	
Momentum Energy	●	53	146	126	20	1	59	64	14	4	4	
Powerdirect	●	50	111	222	-111	0	30	54	23	4	0	
Powershop	●	20	77	140	-63	0	50	18	8	1	0	
Red Energy	●	29	733	1,257	-524	7	227	343	124	23	9	
Simply Energy	●	87	313	256	57	0	103	144	47	16	3	
Sumo Power	●	97	69	117	-48	1	33	21	8	5	1	
WINconnect	●	440	83	51	32	0	35	35	10	3	0	
Distributor												
Ausgrid	●	3	522	402	120	5	304	144	45	19	5	
Endeavour Energy	●	2	210	214	-4	1	100	66	27	11	5	
Essential Energy	●	3	299	320	-21	0	139	111	26	19	4	

Only providers with over 50 complaints have been included in this table.

* Retailer customer number data reported by the AER as at 30 December 2019. Distributor customer number data provided by IPART as at 30 June 2019.

Total electricity complaints

Level	2018/2019	2019/2020	% change
General enquiry	86	156	+81%
Complaint enquiry	7,707	5,593	-27%
Refer to higher level	8,274	6,305	-24%
Level 1	4,056	2,348	-42%
Level 2	640	708	+11%
Level 3	310	319	+3%
Total	21,073	15,429	-27%



15,429

electricity complaints received in 2019/2020



14,311

residential



1,065

small business



53

other

(including educational, institution, government, not-for-profit, primary producer and strata schemes)



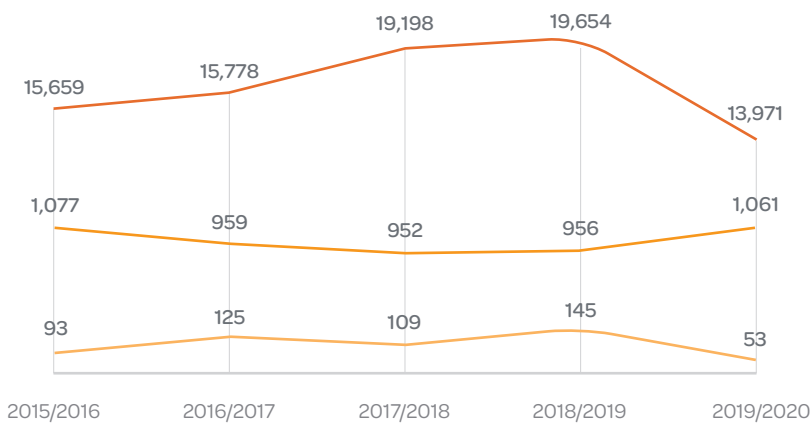
54

exempt entity

(including residential parks, residential complexes and retirement villages)

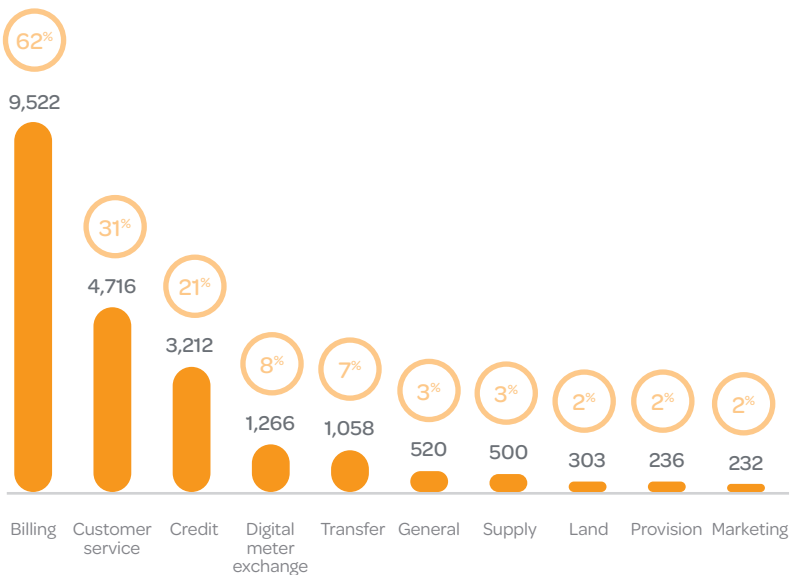
Electricity trends

● Retailer ● Distributor ● Exempt entity



Electricity complaints by primary issue

○ % of overall complaints



344

non-provider specific or out of jurisdiction cases



-27%

decrease in complaints from 2018/2019



21,565

primary complaint issues

Gas

Customer numbers key:

- <3,000
- 3,001 - 10,000
- 10,001 - 100,000
- 100,001 - 500,000
- 500,001 - 1,000,000
- >1,000,000

Gas providers with no complaints

Allgas Energy
 Australian Gas Networks (NSW)
 Central Ranges Pipeline
 Discover Energy
 ERM Power Retail
 Evoenergy
 Lumo Energy
 Powerdirect
 Real Utilities
 Savant Energy

Gas providers with fewer than 50 complaints

ActewAGL Retail
 Australian Gas Networks (Albury)
 CovaU
 GloBird Energy
 M2Energy
 Momentum Energy
 Simply Energy
 Sumo
 WINconnect

Provider	Gas customer numbers*	Cases received per 10,000 customers	Cases received 2019/2020	Cases received 2018/2019	Variance	General enquiry	Complaint enquiry	RHL	Investigation level			
									1	2	3	
First tier retailer												
AGL	●	16	1,034	1,553	-519	4	301	486	169	57	17	
EnergyAustralia	●	18	698	1,111	-413	1	217	306	111	48	15	
Origin Energy	●	21	658	756	-98	3	181	276	139	34	25	
Second tier retailer												
Alinta Energy	●	26	78	93	-15	1	20	38	18	0	1	
amaysim Energy (includes Click Energy)	●	59	133	103	30	0	46	62	20	4	1	
Red Energy	●	13	83	142	-59	0	24	46	11	2	0	
Distributor												
Jemena	●	1	129	204	-75	1	64	45	18	1	0	

Only providers with over 50 complaints have been included in this table

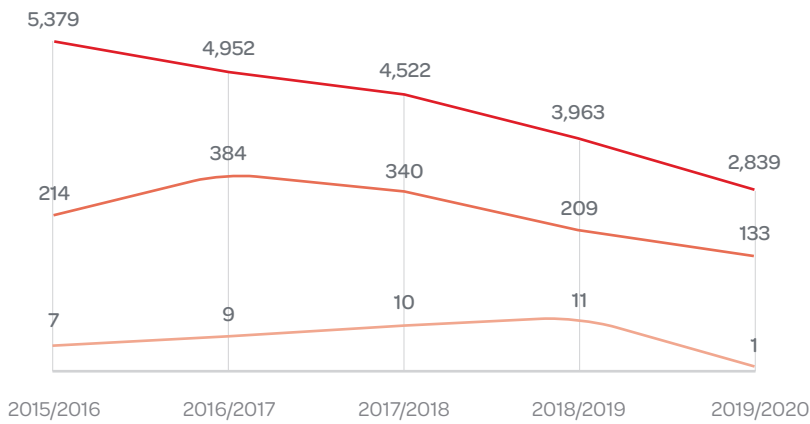
* Retailer customer number data reported by the AER as at 30 December 2019. Distributor customer number data provided by IPART as at 30 June 2019.

Total gas complaints

Level	2018/2019	2019/2020	% change
General enquiry	13	14	+8%
Complaint enquiry	1,436	965	-33%
Refer to higher level	1,811	1,313	-27%
Level 1	764	507	-34%
Level 2	124	153	+23%
Level 3	64	62	-3%
Total	4,212	3,014	-28%

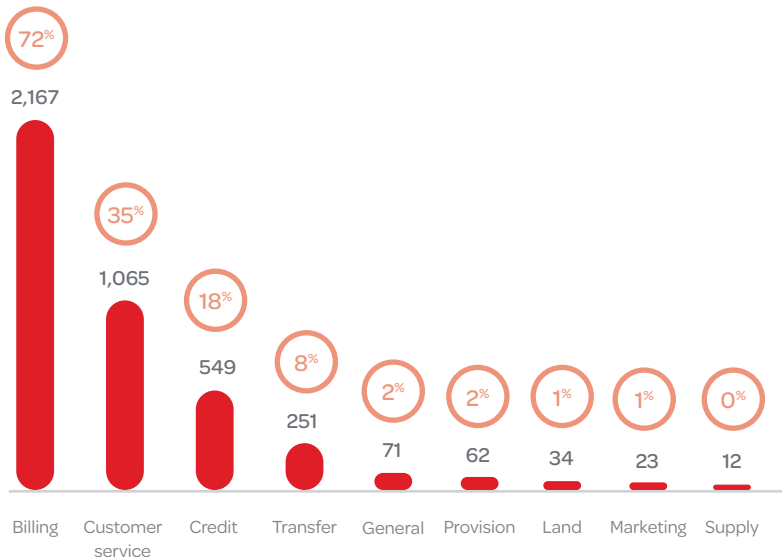
Gas trends

● Retailer ● Distributor ● Exempt entity



Gas complaints by primary issue

○ % of overall complaints



3,014

gas complaints received in 2019/2020



2,917

residential



94

small business



3

other

(including educational, institution, government, not-for-profit, primary producer and strata schemes)



0

exempt entity

(including residential parks, residential complexes and retirement villages)



41

non-provider specific or out of jurisdiction cases



-28%

decrease in complaints from 2018/2019



4,234

primary complaint issues

Water

Customer numbers key:

- <3,000
- 3,001 - 10,000
- 10,001 - 100,000
- 100,001 - 500,000
- 500,001 - 1,000,000
- >1,000,000

Water providers with no complaints

Aquacell
AquaNet
Living Utilities
Narara Ecovillage

Water providers with fewer than 50 complaints

Essential Energy
Flow Systems
Shoalhaven Water
Solo Water
Sydney Desalination Plant
Veolia Water Solutions & Technologies
Water NSW

Provider	Water customer numbers*	Cases received per 10,000 customers	Cases received 2019/2020	Cases received 2018/2019	Variance	General enquiry	Complaint enquiry	RHL	Investigation level			
									1	2	3	
Network/Retail												
Sydney Water	●	2	588	554	34	13	235	233	63	23	21	
Hunter Water	●	2	76	92	-16	0	37	25	8	3	3	

Only providers with over 50 complaints have been included in this table.

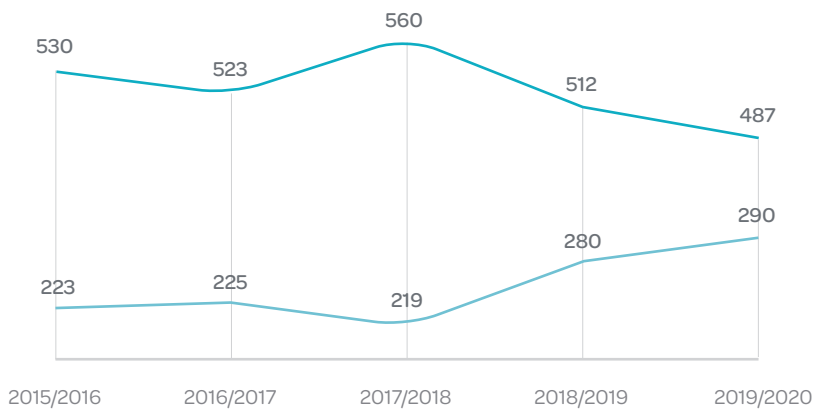
* Water provider customer number data provided by IPART as at 30 June 2019.

Total water complaints

Level	2018/2019	2019/2020	% change
General enquiry	11	28	+155%
Complaint enquiry	480	423	-12%
Refer to higher level	225	277	+23%
Level 1	123	79	-36%
Level 2	14	28	+100%
Level 3	12	26	+117%
Total	865	861	0%

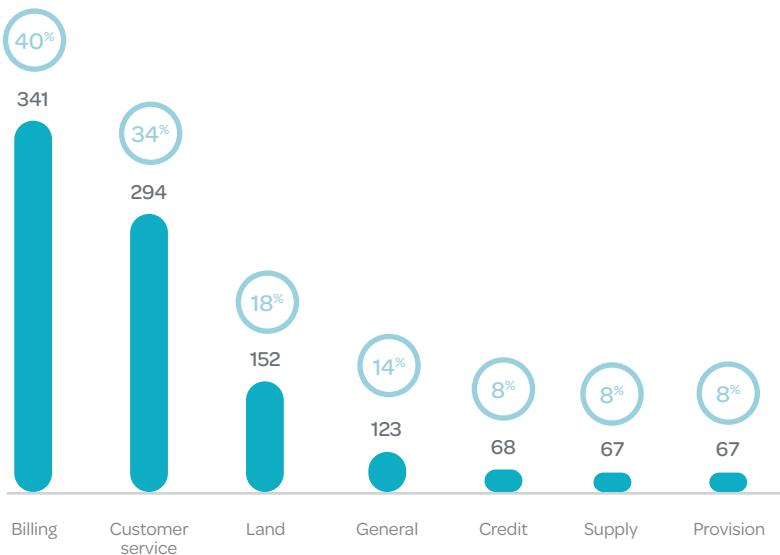
Water trends

● Retailer ● Distributor



Water complaints by primary issue

○ % of overall complaints



861

water complaints received in 2019/2020



787

residential



47

small business



27

other

(including educational, institution, government, not-for-profit, primary producer and strata schemes)



0

exempt entity

(including residential parks, residential complexes and retirement villages)



84

non-provider specific or out of jurisdiction cases



0%

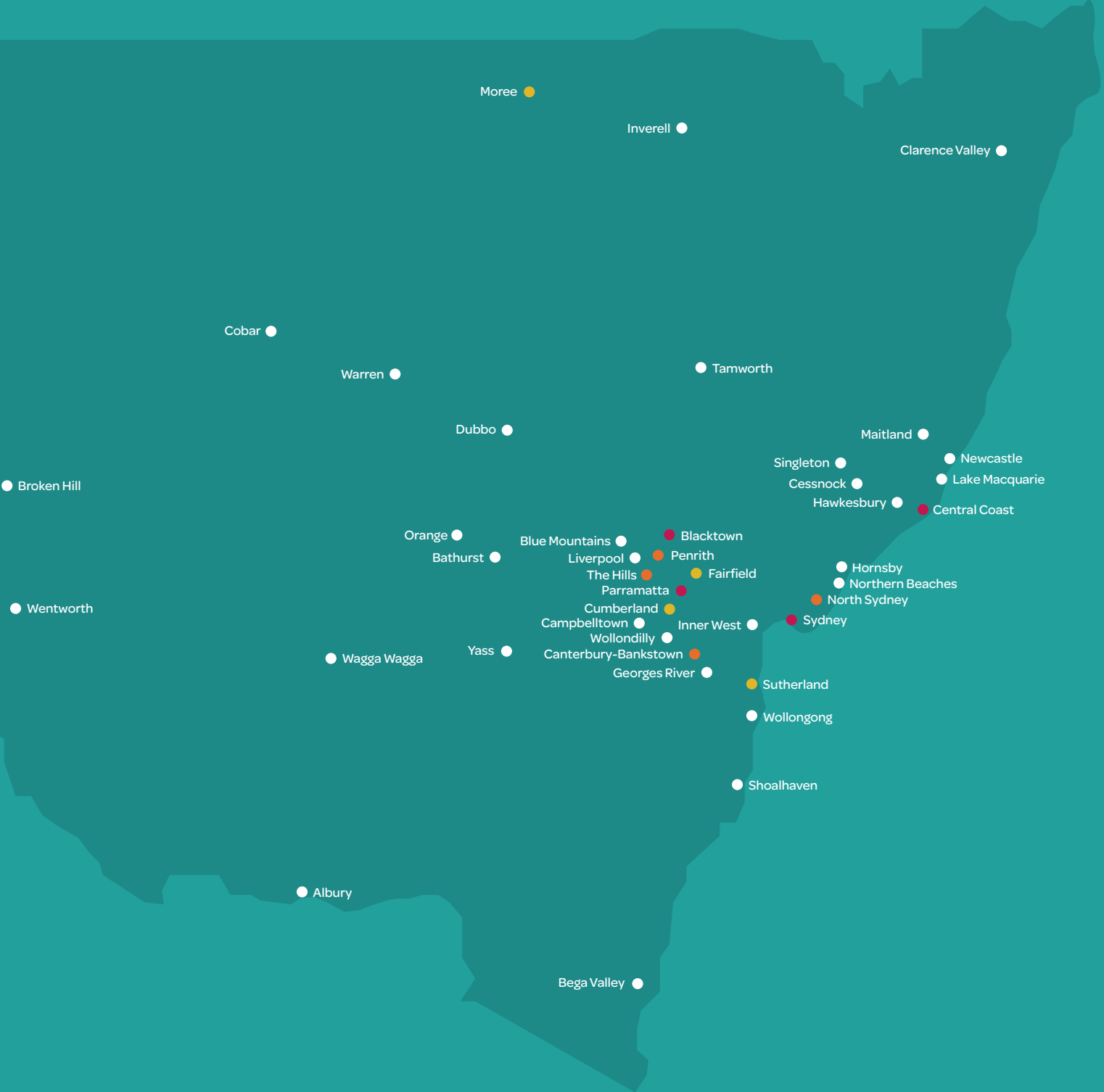
decrease in complaints from 2018/2019



1,112

primary complaint issues

Engaging across NSW



Key

*map not to scale

- 1-3
- 4-6
- 7-9
- 10+ engagements

Awareness and community engagement

EWON's community engagement program promotes our services and reduces complaints coming to us and our members, by educating consumers, small businesses and community workers about energy and water issues. We also use our program to raise community awareness about complaint-handling processes and financial affordability programs offered by our member energy and water providers.

Importantly, the program provides an opportunity for us to learn about issues affecting consumers first-hand. We often become aware of emerging issues in the community before they are identified through our complaint-handling work. We share this information with our Policy & Research Team and other EWON staff to ensure these concerns are raised in our submissions and stakeholder engagement. We were proud that our community outreach and awareness work was found to be best practice in the Independent Review of EWON conducted this year.

Despite the challenges of not being able to connect physically with communities during COVID-19, our engagement with community workers and advocates was maintained as we quickly adapted to presenting online rather than face-to-face.

Our work in the community

In 2019/2020, our goal was to engage with communities across NSW, to hold or attend events targeting a variety of different groups including:

- > Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- > Community workers
- > People living in remote and regional areas
- > People living on low and/or fixed incomes
- > Financial counsellors
- > Small business owners
- > Public and private housing tenants
- > Seniors
- > People with disabilities
- > People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

248

Outreach events

46

Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander events

39

Online information sessions

24

Events for people from culturally and
linguistically diverse backgrounds

12

Events aimed at tenants

11

Events tailored to the needs of seniors

3

Events aimed at people with a disability

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement enables us to build and strengthen links with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, their leaders and the agencies and services that work with them. We make sure our services are accessible to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities throughout NSW.

Cultural protocols

We developed cultural protocols to give our staff a better understanding and appreciation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, and how to interact and work with people in communities respectfully and effectively.

Cultural protocols include:

- > Information about Aboriginal identity including significant dates, events and ceremonies
- > The importance of community, elders and traditional owners and custodians
- > Culturally-appropriate language and how to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- > Communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including building rapport and trust, listening, avoiding direct questions, using appropriate language, understanding Sorry Business and tips for communicating over the phone and face-to-face.

NAIDOC 2019

In 2019, we attended NAIDOC events in Nowra, Redfern, Sawyers Gully, Emerton, Wyong, Maitland, Cronulla, and Dubbo. NAIDOC celebrations are held across Australia each July to celebrate the history, culture, and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. NAIDOC week is the busiest week in the EWON Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outreach calendar.

Every year we host our own in-house NAIDOC celebration event. EWON staff were invited to a special bush tucker morning tea catered by NCIE Indigenous Catering Group. Peter Cooley, CEO of Firsthand Solutions, was our guest speaker.

Awareness and community engagement

Yabun Festival 2020

The Yabun Festival in January kickstarts our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement each year. It is an annual celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, with live music, panel discussions and cultural performances. This year over 15,000 people attended the event in Victoria Park, Camperdown, and we handed out more than 500 EWON resources.

Aboriginal Inter-agency meetings

Our Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer leads our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island engagement program and attends Aboriginal Inter-agency meetings throughout the year. The Inter-agency groups continue to play a significant role in sharing and distributing information about EWON to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in NSW. We also receive customer referrals from community workers attending these meetings.

Good Service Mob

We are part of the Good Service Mob, a collaboration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff from complaint-handling agencies that help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers in NSW. Established in 2005, the Good Service Mob aims to ensure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are aware of their rights as consumers, and the free services available to help them.

In 2019/2020, we took part in the Good Service Mob community information days in Bega, Moruya, Batemans Bay and Bathurst.

We were heavily involved in rebranding and updating the Good Service Mob website, goodservicemob.org and associated collateral to achieve a fresh and vibrant new look and help raise awareness of the group's work.

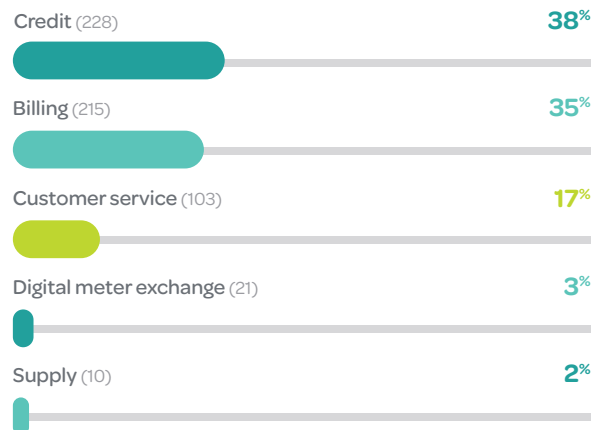
NSW Koori Rugby League Knockout Carnival 2019

This four-day event in Tuggerah showcased the best Indigenous rugby league talent in NSW. One of the biggest Indigenous gatherings in the state, the Carnival provided a perfect opportunity to raise awareness of our services among over 25,000 people.

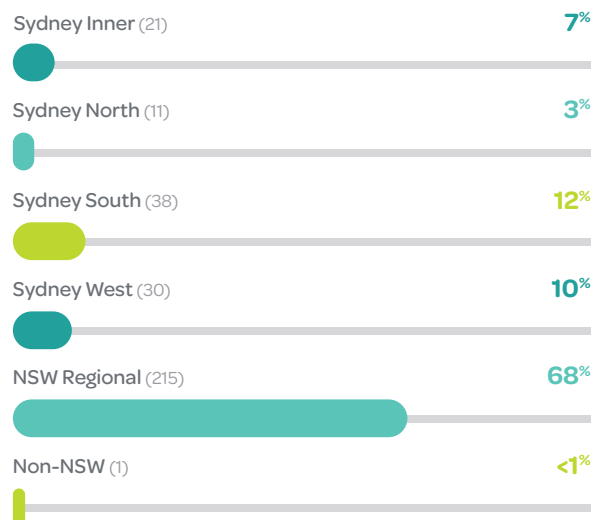
Waterloo community outreach

In November 2019, we extended our outreach to Waterloo in Sydney's inner city, where we joined other services at a weekly event at the local Neighbourhood Centre to reach economically and socially vulnerable residents of Waterloo estate. Services attending each event included Housing NSW, Centrelink and the Redfern Legal Centre.

Top issues raised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customers



Complaints from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customers



People living on low and/or fixed incomes

Energy affordability is an issue that has persisted since EWON's inception in 1998. It still underpins many complaints to EWON, and a large part of what we do includes working with people living on low and fixed incomes.

By holding and attending community events tailored to people experiencing affordability challenges, we can offer a range of assistance including providing information about energy and water bills and tips on energy saving, checking customers are receiving rebates they are entitled to, and referring them to agencies to apply for Energy Account Payment Assistance, financial counselling and broader assistance.

Customers at risk of homelessness

In 2019/2020, we attended Homeless Connect days in Sydney, Western Sydney, Broadmeadow, Orange and the Central Coast. We met customers with affordability issues who are at risk of homelessness or who had been disconnected. These customers, who are often managing mental health and family relationship issues, are assisted to stay connected to their energy supply while we assist with re-establishing payment plans. We also work closely with community agencies and financial counsellors at these events to provide holistic support for the customer.

Seniors

Seniors often tell us they have difficulty understanding the complex nature of the energy and water industries. Many seniors we speak to are concerned about energy affordability, with some saying they avoid using heating, cooling and cooking appliances because they are worried about future bills. In our information sessions we ensure these customers know about the rebates they may be entitled to, how to find the best energy deal and how to access discounts. We also provide information about managing bills, saving energy and dealing with providers.

In 2019/2020, we presented to groups including Probus, a club for retired and semi-retired professionals, and met with seniors face-to-face at forums and expos to discuss energy and water issues.

People with disabilities

We presented to members of the Physical Disabilities Council of NSW and attended the Sydney Seniors Disability Expo held over two days at the Sydney Showground. These events enabled us to reach many people with a disability, their carers and families, and seniors. Attendees were able to collect information and engage with our staff.

Outreach initiates life support rule change request

At a physical disabilities group meeting in Blacktown, customers reliant on life support equipment told EWON they were reluctant to change energy providers because of the time, money and stress it took to visit their doctor solely to provide confirmation of life support to a new provider.

In response, we submitted our first rule change request to the AEMC to amend the National Energy Retail Rules (NERR) to remove barriers to changing retailers for consumers reliant on life support. The NERR requires customers to provide medical confirmation to register for life support, with the first entity they contact, either their retailer or distributor, becoming the customer's 'life support registration process owner'. The AEMC has started consultation on the rule change request, which illustrates how our outreach work, and speaking directly with consumers, has the potential to initiate real policy change.

Community workers

Community workers are an important link between EWON and vulnerable consumers, and they often take on the role of advocating for consumers who are in debt or facing disconnection. In 2019/2020, we took part in a range of community events, meetings, expos and forums, and presented to the staff of many community organisations.

Anti-Poverty Week Forum

One of the key ways we engage with community workers is through our annual Anti-Poverty Week forums, which give us the opportunity to meet local communities and inform them about current and upcoming issues. In 2019/2020, EWON held Anti-Poverty Week forums for the 15th year in a row.

We held a metropolitan event in Cabramatta, which was opened by local Member and former Mayor of Fairfield Nick Lalich, and attracted around 80 participants. Exhibitors at the event included energy providers, Sydney Water, Endeavour Energy, Legal Aid, NSW Fair Trading, and the NSW Council of Social Services. Representatives from energy providers and Sydney Water also took part in a panel discussion about the affordability support they offer. The feedback we received from attendees was overwhelmingly positive.

Unfortunately, due to the NSW bushfire emergency, we had to defer our planned November Anti-Poverty Forum for community workers and Bring Your Bills Day for consumers in Orange. We aim to reschedule both events during 2020/2021.

Awareness and community engagement

People from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds

Raising awareness of our service among culturally diverse communities is an important part of our community outreach program. CALD communities face potential vulnerabilities when dealing with energy and water issues. We work with community workers, interpreters, and bilingual staff, and use translated factsheets and plain English presentations to break down the barriers associated with language and low literacy.

We received complaints from customers in a variety of preferred languages including:

- > Mandarin
- > Vietnamese
- > French
- > Arabic
- > Greek
- > Thai
- > Cantonese
- > Farsi
- > Indonesian
- > Korean
- > Spanish
- > Nepalese

Multicultural day in Earlwood

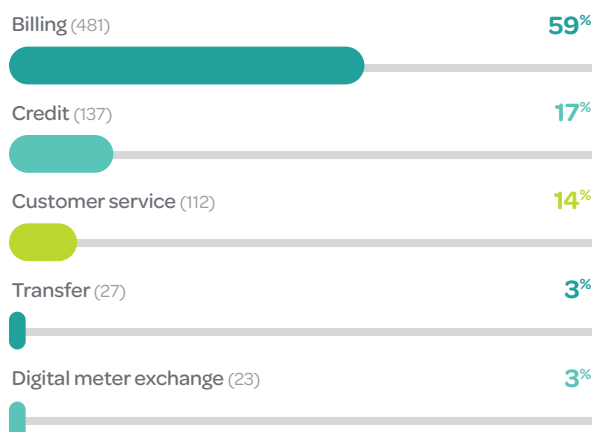
We held an event at the Canterbury-Earlwood Caring Association with the local Member for Canterbury, Sophie Cotsis. We invited 11 members, government and community stakeholders including Centrelink, MetroAssist, Service NSW, Legal Aid, Sydney Water and Revenue NSW to provide assistance and resolution services. We organised on-site interpreters for the key languages of Chinese and Greek and used telephone interpreters in other languages. The flyer for this event was delivered in English, Greek, Korean, Vietnamese and Chinese, and promoted in multicultural newspapers.

Cultural Connections Project

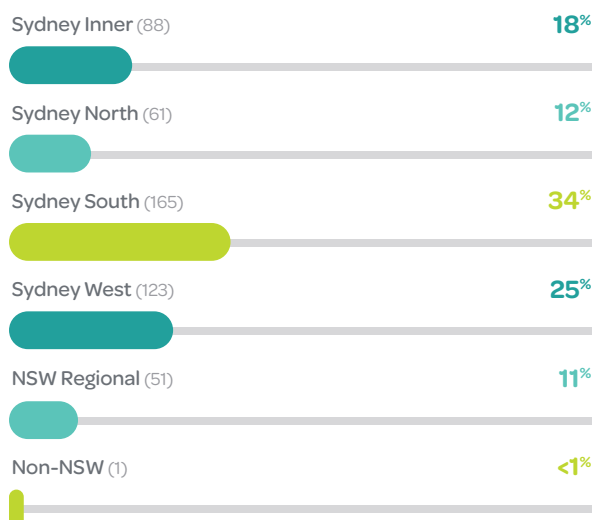
EWON was pleased to be an early participant in the Ethnic Communities Council NSW's (ECCNSW) Cultural Connections Project Ongoing Monitoring and Evaluation of CALD Strategies.

The ECCNSW's Cultural Connections Guidelines have been available to energy businesses and agencies from 2016. The ECCNSW considered it important to evaluate the effectiveness of the Guidelines and improve CALD consumer engagement consultation with, and access to, the energy market.

Top issues raised by CALD customers



Complaints from CALD customers



Housing tenants

Tenants can be particularly vulnerable as their limited control over the energy and water efficiency of their homes can lead to high bills. Both public and private rental properties may have poor insulation or be poorly maintained, which can also lead to higher electricity costs. In addition, tenants often complain about problems with common hot water systems.

In 2019/2020, we engaged with tenants at a Bring Your Bills Day and two community expos specifically for social housing tenants in Bega, Berala, Dundas, Ermington, Maryong, Waterloo and Wentworthville. We also presented to housing tenants in Ryde. Due to COVID-19 we were unable to attend events in Gunnedah, East Maitland and Tumby Umbi; however, we provided the organisers with EWON information packs.

People living in regional or remote areas

In 2019/2020, we continued our focus on visiting regional areas to meet the complex needs of clients living remotely and dealing with extreme weather events.

We connected with consumers in Bega, Cobar, Dubbo, Inverell, Tamworth and Wagga Wagga, and farmers in Warren, Goondiwindi, Cobar and Inverell whose livelihoods had been severely affected by drought, fires, floods and loss of livestock. This included an EWON 'pop up shop' on the main street of Dubbo in partnership with Catholicare and taking part in the annual agricultural event, Australian National Field Days in Orange, along with 600 other exhibitors.

Small business

We assist small businesses with a range of issues including billing and contract disputes, and their retail classification as large or small energy users. Incorrect classification can result in significantly higher energy costs. Only a small number of small business customers currently access our services. To increase awareness of EWON among small businesses, we attend targeted events and send resources to organisations with strong links to the sector.

We attended workshops for small businesses in Wagga Wagga and Blacktown and provided resources to attendees at a small business event in Ryde.

Bring Your Bills Days

EWON's Bring Your Bills Days started in 2013 and have continued to grow, with an increasing number of services and consumers attending.

These events offer face-to-face support for consumers, as well as access to a range of other government and community services. They act as a 'one-stop-shop', targeting consumers experiencing affordability issues.

At our Bring Your Bills Days, our Investigations Officers, sometimes with the help of interpreters, listen to customers' concerns, review their energy and water bills, and liaise with providers to resolve issues. We often find that customers are often more willing to engage with their providers directly after EWON has brought them together for the first time at these events.

In 2019/2020 we delivered 45 Bring Your Bills Days in areas where we identified a need through our complaint-handling work, at the request of community agencies, and as part of the expansion of our work in regional areas. This year we held events in various regions including:

- > Auburn
- > Bega
- > Bankstown
- > Blacktown
- > Dubbo (2)
- > Earlwood
- > Miranda
- > Parramatta
- > Penrith (2)
- > Tamworth
- > Wagga Wagga
- > Warrarong
- > Woy Woy (7)

Member involvement in outreach

EWON started inviting members to our Bring Your Bills Days in 2016/2017. Their involvement has continued to grow since then, because of the benefits it brings to them and their customers. We find the member staff who attend these events gain a deeper understanding of the challenges customers face and the impacts of some of their processes. Customers have the advantage of resolving issues on the spot with their retailers, knowing that we are there to assist if they are not satisfied with the outcome. Retailers can also refer customers to other services at events, including Centrelink and Energy Account Payment Assistance providers, so that issues can be resolved at the event. Retailers also work together to resolve problems on the day, such as those related to customers transferring their account from one provider to another.

Awareness and community engagement

Online outreach during COVID-19

While a core part of our work usually involves travelling around NSW and meeting customers face to face, this year we had to adapt our engagement in response to COVID-19. In March we transitioned to delivering virtual Bring Your Bills Days, including delivering a pilot session in Kurri Kurri, partnering with Hunter Water. Services provided at these virtual events include help with outstanding fines, rebates, Energy Accounts Payments Assistance and other legal and financial advice.

We developed an online presentation which was promoted across NSW. This was aimed at community workers engaging with low income and vulnerable consumers to promote key messages about help available during COVID-19. Service NSW requested that EWON present to their staff who deliver the Cost of Living Program and the newly formed team delivering the EAPA program.

Virtual Town Hall meeting

To assist the Canterbury community which was heavily impacted by COVID-19, the Ombudsman and the Member for Canterbury, Sophie Cotsis, delivered a virtual Town Hall meeting for local constituents. The Ombudsman addressed the energy and water concerns raised by Canterbury residents in a pre-released survey and made them aware of the support available through their energy and water providers during the pandemic. The virtual Town Hall meeting received over 500 Facebook views.

EWON awareness

It is critical that energy and water consumers are aware of their right to access EWON's service if something goes wrong, particularly when they cannot get assistance through their provider or other channels.

We commissioned a report from Astrolabe on the NSW operating environment, with a focus on population and its characteristics that influence demand on our services. The report provided valuable information which informs both our community engagement activities across NSW and our longer term business planning.

Energy Consumers Australia Survey

Since 2016/2017, Energy Consumers Australia has included two questions in its half-yearly consumer sentiment survey, designed to measure the level of unprompted and prompted awareness of energy Ombudsman services. In 2019/2020, 585 people responded.

The first question in the survey measures unprompted awareness by asking "If you had a complaint about your electricity or gas services, which you could not resolve by talking to your retailer or network company, who would you contact?" The percentage of respondents who gave an Ombudsman-related answer fell from 39% in 2018/2019 to 32% in 2019/2020. The percentage of respondents who specifically mentioned Energy/Industry Ombudsman fell slightly from 9% in 2018/2019 to 8% in 2019/2020.

Question two measures prompted awareness, and asks "How familiar are you with an organisation called the Energy Ombudsman in NSW, which assists with complaints about energy?" This figure increased from 31% in 2018/2019 to 32% in 2019/2020.

We continue to develop our outreach and communication strategies to build NSW consumer awareness of our service.





Case study

Embedded network customer disputes hot water bill

Ms Lo moved into a building with an embedded electricity and gas network and opened a new account. Four months after moving in, her hot water service was disconnected without notice. She contacted the embedded network retailer which advised that she had not opened an account for gas and hot water when she opened her electricity account, and therefore no bills had been issued and the account was closed. She then opened a gas and hot water account and was reconnected, but 11 months later she received a bill for hot water usage for \$1,230 which back billed the usage for the full 15 months she had lived there.

Ms Lo was told that the whole bill needed to be paid within two weeks. Stressed by the amount she had to pay at such short notice, she told us that she felt unable to explain the situation clearly to the retailer, so she came to EWON to negotiate on her behalf.

We contacted the embedded network retailer and explained that the customer had not opened a hot water account when she first moved in and had not been receiving any bills for the first four months of her residency. The retailer acknowledged all of our submitted information and agreed to amend the bill to represent the usage after the account had been opened.

We also noted that there is no regulation to limit the length of time a customer can be back billed for hot water, unlike electricity which is limited to nine months. As a goodwill gesture, the retailer offered to provide the customer with a \$464 credit to the account, which meant the account represented nine months of hot water usage, and reduced the balance owed to \$766. The customer accepted the outcome and thanked us for our help.

Category: Level 3 investigation

Issues: High/disputed bills, disconnection, payment difficulties

Outcome: Negotiated resolution



Case study

Sewerage overflow ruins customer's front yard

Ms Currie noticed sewerage was overflowing into her front yard after work had been done on the sewer mains outside the front of her house. She contacted her water provider which investigated the issue and advised that the problem was her responsibility because it was within her property, so she arranged for a plumber to inspect the site.

The plumber identified that the water provider had failed to re-connect the sewer pipe to the mains after recent work, which had resulted in a blockage. The provider agreed to rectify the error but this required additional excavation, and part of her retaining wall had to be demolished which damaged some of her electricity wiring. The provider's contractor told her that they would back-fill the excavation, however this did not happen. Following the completion of the plumbing work, Ms Currie submitted a claim to her provider for \$14,000 for the plumber, the damage to the retaining wall, and repairs to the electricity supply.

She was unable to come to an agreement with her water provider, and so approached EWON. We liaised with her provider which advised us that it had agreed to negotiate costs for the plumbing work with the customer's plumber, but only offered to pay \$2,000 toward the new retaining wall because the existing retaining wall was damaged before the work on the sewer main began.

We investigated further and provided additional evidence from the plumber. In response, the provider agreed to cover the electrical repair costs of nearly \$4,000 in recognition of the damages which occurred as a result of the work on the sewerage mains.

In the interest of resolution, the water provider also agreed to cover the full cost of replacing the retaining wall on the basis that it was fair and reasonable that Ms Currie be restored to the same financial position she was in before the event. Having further liaised with her provider, it also offered an ex-gratia payment of \$450 as a contribution toward further landscaping costs. This amounted to a final payment of over \$10,000 in addition to the plumbing costs negotiated between the provider and plumber directly. Ms Currie was very satisfied with this resolution.

Category: Level 1 investigation

Issues: Poor customer service, property damage

Outcome: Negotiated resolution



Customer perspectives

Please offer my thanks to [Investigations Officer] for her wonderful customer service. So many people are happy to make a complaint but very rarely take the time when they have had what I would describe as a great customer experience. With 10 years of call centre experience I most definitely can tell you the difference between the best and the worst...

Ahmed - Wollongong

Thanks again, I appreciate all your endless work getting it sorted out. I definitely couldn't have done any of it without you.

Lynne - Newcastle

Thank you kindly for your assistance and your very professional kind manner you calmed me down and made me feel like something will be done.

Jean - Bathurst

I am writing to inform you that I received the call from [my provider] yesterday and came to the agreement to pay \$50 to close the account. This all happened only after I made a complaint to Energy and Water Ombudsman. I am really grateful towards the Ombudsman Team because this issue has been going on for five months. I should have made a complaint a month ago. Anyway, thank you once again for the support. I feel relieved now.

Charlie - Nowra

Thank you for your support and for pursuing my complaint. We can put this case to rest! Yay!

Sophie - Orange

I got a call from [my provider] tonight and we were able to agree on a revised usage estimate. I have now paid the agreed outstanding amount and have been assured that my account is now closed with a zero balance. I very much appreciate how you have handled this matter to help find a speedy and reasonable resolution of the problem.

Joseph - Sydney

Let me take this opportunity to offer my most grateful thanks to [Investigations Officer] for her excellent advice and professional presentation. In a former life I was a servant of the public for over 25 years and met a lot of top performers. It is comforting for this 70-plus-year-old to know that we have experts to call on when the old brain is just wandering around. [Investigations Officer] rates a gold star in that field. Please pass on to her my most grateful thanks and best wishes for a growing career.

Eric - Wagga Wagga

Thank you so much for looking into this. [My provider] yesterday adjusted my bill down to \$253 from \$953 so I am happy with the outcome. This was undoubtedly due to your investigation so thank you.

Leon - Bateman's Bay

Engaging our people

We are committed to ensuring staff feel valued and well-supported. Our values are embedded in our policies, systems and processes to support staff to deliver effective and positive outcomes in their unique roles. Our organisational values are fundamental to unifying and motivating our workforce as we continue to make system and process improvements.

Our values

Our values express the approach we take to our work as an organisation and as individuals. The keywords for each value describe our understanding of how our actions bring these values to life every day.



Independence

We are impartial; we approach our work transparently and openly.



Respect

We are courteous; we build trust by listening and following through on our commitments.



Integrity

We are open and honest; we stand by our actions.



Service Excellence

We are proactive; we are committed to delivering high quality services to our customers and stakeholders.



One Team

We work together; we are flexible, helpful and take personal responsibility.



Social Justice

We are accessible and fair; we take a holistic approach to addressing customer circumstances.

EWON Masterclass Program

The EWON Masterclass Program focuses on four streams: Dispute resolution, technical knowledge, personal effectiveness and leadership.

Dispute resolution for frontline staff

We continued to engage Monique Richardson, an external consultant specialising in customer service, to train and coach our frontline staff on high-quality and efficient call management. Staff were also trained in specific strategies to manage difficult calls while working from home during COVID-19.

Technical knowledge

The Independent Review identified some areas for improvement in the technical knowledge stream. In response, the Ombudsman facilitated three technical training sessions:

- > **EWON Jurisdiction** – a refreshed approach
- > **Achieving fair and reasonable outcomes** – how to assess resolution offers and customer expectations
- > **Substantiation** – testing the veracity of information provided by both parties for completeness, validity and accuracy.

Personal and professional effectiveness

Through our analysis of staff development plans, we identified areas for our staff to enhance and increase their personal development. This year we offered Microsoft Excel training workshops and rolled out e-learning focused on how to become more effective at work. We also offer a broad range of e-learning courses that staff can enrol into on an ad hoc basis, and we encourage all staff to undertake courses which suit their interests and job roles.

Leadership

We engaged executive coach, Yolanda Beattie to work with the Management Team to collectively develop EWON's annual business plan and three-year strategic plan.

Yolanda is currently working with our Investigations Team leaders who are focused on building high-performing and cohesive teams. Coaching and development support was also provided to staff throughout the year.

EWON Speaker Series

Every year we invite speakers with inspiring stories to take part in our in-house Speaker Series. In 2019/2020 we featured the following themes and speakers:



NAIDOC Week – Voice. Treaty. Truth – Peter Cooley, Chief Executive Officer, First Hand Solutions



EWON's Independent Review – Dr Gavin McBurnie, Queen Margaret University, Customer Dispute Resolution Centre

EWONlearning and First Principles courses

Staff and Board members are required to complete the First Principles online training as part of their induction, with refreshers completed every second year. The courses cover health and safety, workplace behaviour expectations and privacy. We reviewed our Code of Conduct this year and added this to the suite of courses to share the behaviours expected of staff across the organisation. These courses were completed through EWONlearning, our online management system, to ensure staff were set up to work safely from home.

Be Safe and Well@EWON

Ongoing initiatives have been driven by the staff Health and Safety Committee and senior leaders, to ensure we continue to prioritise the happiness and wellbeing of our people.

Be you... be well!

We offer staff a diverse program of activities to encourage team building and good health and wellbeing. Staff opt into activities including:

- > Healthy breakfast@work
- > Massage@work
- > Yoga@lunch
- > Tai Chi@lunch
- > Walking@lunch

Purchased leave initiative

EWON acknowledges the value of providing flexible working arrangements to help staff achieve a good balance between work responsibilities and personal commitments. The Purchased Leave Scheme was rolled out in October 2019 as a new employment benefit to allow staff to purchase additional leave which is paid via a reduction in salary.

COVID-19 initiatives

In response to COVID-19, we moved to a home-based working model at the end of March. With staff wellbeing as our top priority, we started our Wellness Wednesday campaign which encouraged staff to complete short exercises to reduce the risk of injury. Following a positive response, we also set up virtual yoga and Tai Chi sessions with supporting videos. In May we rolled out a step challenge 'Move Forward in May' to encourage cross-team interaction and promote physical exercise.

Physical distancing meant we needed to increase virtual social interaction, which we achieved by introducing Microsoft Teams channels allowing staff to share news, hobbies and projects.

Capability Framework

We partnered with Development Dimensions International (DDI) to develop EWON's Capability Framework. The framework underpins our people processes including selection, development, career development and succession management practices. Through consultation with EWON staff, DDI defined capability levels to be embedded into our people processes in the next financial year.

Always On

Always On is our anonymous staff survey tool supported by an external provider. Staff are encouraged to submit feedback on what we are doing well and what we could improve on, and it provides them with an opportunity to suggest innovative ideas. The survey results allow us to continuously get a pulse check of staff engagement. From this feedback we have been able to:

- > Review the office layout
- > Review the duration and frequency of our staff meetings
- > Introduce mental health awareness training for our leaders
- > Gain insights into the success of our response to managing COVID-19.

Financials

Balance Sheet	2020 \$	2019 \$
Total Current Assets	10,891,607	9,888,154
Total Non-current Assets*	5,872,989	1,416,043
Total Assets	16,764,596	11,304,197
Total Current Liabilities	9,398,408	8,208,589
Total Non-current Liabilities*	4,512,035	362,455
Total Liabilities	13,910,443	8,571,044
Net Assets	2,854,153	2,733,153
FUNDS		
Unrestricted funds	2,854,153	2,733,153
Total Funds	2,854,153	2,733,153
CASH FLOW STATEMENT		
Cash flows from operating activities		
Funding received (Members)	14,837,961	14,727,493
Payment to suppliers, employees and other	-12,453,479	-13,185,821
Net cash inflow from operating activities	2,384,482	1,541,672
Cash flows from investing activities		
Interest Received	67,878	114,994
Payment for plant, equipment and intangibles	-165,949	-1,222,450
Net cash flow used in investing activities	-98,071	-1,107,456
Cash flows used in financing activities		
Interest paid on lease liabilities AASB16*	-150,924	-
Principal paid on lease liabilities AASB16*	-697,111	-
Net cash flow used in financing activities	-848,035	-
Net increase in cash held	1,438,376	434,216
Cash at the beginning of year	5,111,994	4,677,778
Cash at the end of the year	6,550,370	5,111,994
Statement of income and operating expenditure		
FUNDING RECEIVED		
Annual case fees	10,742,195	10,360,875
Annual fixed fees	2,170,175	1,973,619
Joining fees	130,175	79,775
Interest received and sundry income	119,003	123,318
Gross Income	13,161,548	12,537,587
Less Expenditure		
Salaries and on-costs	8,978,943	9,002,604
Communications	179,796	143,247
Information Technology	1,380,011	790,938
Occupancy costs*	166,938	972,530
Depreciation and Amortisation*	1,269,022	408,592
Interest expense - Lease Liabilities*	150,924	-
General and Administration	914,914	1,134,572
Total Expenditure	13,040,548	12,452,483
Net Surplus	121,000	85,104

* Impact of AASB16 implementation from 1 July 2019



Top: Narelle Brown, EWON Community Engagement Officer with Khal Asfour, Mayor Canterbury-Bankstown and Sophie Cotsis MP, Member for Canterbury at Earlwood Bring Your Bills Day
 Middle: David Gross, Senior Investigations Officer at Wagga Wagga Bring Your Bills Day
 Bottom: Julie Bye, EWON Community Engagement Officer in Nyngan

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Keep in touch

