

## Contents

- 2 Case studies
- 3 Article: 'This bill can't be right'
- 4 Consumer news
- 5 Complaint statistics
- 6 Outreach report
- 7 Knockout at Woy Woy  
'Understanding Energy' Forums
- 8 Home Power Savings Program

### EWON Members as at 30 September 2010

#### Energy Distributors

ActewAGL Distribution  
 Albury Gas Company  
 APT Allgas Energy  
 Central Ranges Pipeline  
 Country Energy  
 EnergyAustralia  
 Integral Energy  
 Jemena  
 TransGrid

#### Energy Retailers

ActewAGL  
 AGL  
 AGL Victoria  
 Aurora Energy  
 Australian Power and Gas  
 Country Energy  
 EnergyAustralia  
 Independent Electricity Retail Solutions  
 Integral Energy  
 Jackgreen (suspended)  
 Momentum Energy  
 NSW Electricity  
 Origin Energy  
 Powerdirect  
 Red Energy  
 Sanctuary Energy  
 TRUenergy

#### Water Distributors & Retailers

Gosford City Council  
 Hunter Water  
 Shoalhaven Water  
 State Water  
 Sydney Water  
 Wyong Shire Council



Energy & Water  
Ombudsman NSW

[www.ewon.com.au](http://www.ewon.com.au)

## Ombudsman's report

### Annual Report 2009–2010

EWON recently released its Annual Report 2009–2010, which showed an unprecedented 43% increase in complaints from 10,520 the previous year to 15,048 this year.

The majority of customers (72%, 9893 customers) complained about electricity retail matters.

The primary complaint areas were disputed accounts, high bills and other billing problems, payment difficulties, disconnection, contracts and retail transfers.

There were 4103 customers who reported problems paying their bills, a 41% increase from the previous year. Of these, 689 customers had their supply disconnected and 1389 were facing disconnection.

In our report we highlighted the need for retailers to further improve their ability to identify households in hardship early on, to avoid these customers building large unmanageable arrears.

We also included a special report on the failure of Jackgreen as an electricity retailer. We noted that some former Jackgreen customers on low incomes were disadvantaged by the company's marketing, billing problems and record keeping.

### Review of EAPA scheme

EWON welcomes the NSW Government review of the Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) program announced in November and we look forward to contributing to the process. We encourage community agencies to contribute their experience also, to ensure this vital program is as accessible as possible to customers who are struggling to pay their energy bills.

### Working to make a freecall free

In September 2010, EWON wrote to the Australian Communications and Media Authority to support the push for a pricing review of calls to 1800, 13/1300 numbers from mobile phones.

At present, customers calling 1800, 13/1300 numbers from mobiles have to pay timed call charges. Many of the customers in financial hardship who contact EWON for help use pre-paid mobile phones rather than landlines.



CLARE PETRE, ENERGY & WATER OMBUDSMAN NSW

Customers often report having to make numerous phone calls to their retailer to sort out a problem and they complain about being on hold for extended periods of time.

For customers who are experiencing financial hardship, trying to sort out a utility problem can be costly if their pre-paid credit is consumed by the waiting period. The following quotes are from two customers who recently experienced payment difficulty:

I received a bill for \$729 some 2 weeks ago... I have been ringing them every day but am unable to get through to anyone. Instead I am told I am in a line to be served but am invariably cut off after some minutes. Alternatively a recording tells me there is no chance they can take my call as they are too busy and I should ring back later...

I have been living at my current address for [around] 8 months now and not once have I received an electricity bill... I have called them on several occasions resulting in around \$60 worth of phone calls asking them when I would get one... They keep telling me it will be here in a week and every week I call back and get the same answer from them. This has been so frustrating I am worried that when the bill comes it will be so big I won't be able to pay it as I am a pensioner...

EWON would like to see a situation where a call to a freecall number for an ombudsman or other essential service

[CONTINUED NEXT PAGE >>](#)

# 2

## Case studies

>> FROM PAGE 1

is for the consumer exactly that – free – whether the call is made from a landline or mobile phone. Equally we would also like to see a situation where a call to the 1300 number of a service provider such as an energy or water company is charged at a fixed rate and not on the basis of the length of the call.

We will continue to work with stakeholders to raise awareness of this issue and put forward our recommendations. In the interim, if a customer contacts EWON by mobile phone, we offer to call the customer back.



Clare Petre  
Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW

### COMPLAINTS MADE TO EWON FROM CUSTOMERS REQUESTING CONTACT BY MOBILE PHONE

	07/08	08/09	09/10
Total complaints closed by EWON	8913	10520	15048
All customers who wanted to be contacted by mobile phone	921	1177	1695
Customers on benefits who wanted to be contacted by mobile phone	404	482	670
% customers on benefits requesting contact by mobile phone	19%	21%	21%

#### Customer facing disconnection who couldn't afford to be on hold

Lee lives in social housing and relies on a Centrelink benefit for her income. She owed \$2200 and was facing disconnection of her electricity supply so she called EWON for help.

Lee had received a call from a field officer who advised that he intended to disconnect her electricity the next day. The field officer didn't leave a message or his name, and every time she contacted the retailer to discuss the situation she received a message that they were experiencing a high number of calls and she would be placed on hold.

Lee told EWON she couldn't afford to be on hold for extended periods as she had a pre-paid mobile phone. She also commented it wasn't appropriate to use a public phone and be on hold for a long time, as other people may want to use the phone.

Lee had committed to a payment arrangement of \$60 per fortnight some time ago and thought she had made all the payments she agreed to. She had also approached a community agency for EAPA\* vouchers but they were unable to assist her.

EWON contacted the retailer to discuss Lee's complaint. The retailer found that Lee had been making payments, but towards a closed account at her previous address and this had not been picked up by their credit department. The retailer stopped the disconnection action and offered to contact the customer directly to provide the correct account number and to re-establish a payment arrangement.

We advised Lee of the retailer's offer and she was satisfied with the result. We also provided Lee with referrals to other EAPA distributors in her area.

\*Energy Accounts Payment Assistance

#### Customer questions accuracy of delayed bills

Daniel contacted EWON when he couldn't afford an upfront payment of \$3000 to prevent disconnection of his electricity supply.

Daniel said he had been with his current retailer for two years and the company was always late sending bills. The bills varied greatly, from \$300 to \$500, and \$1000 to \$1700, and he was concerned that they weren't accurate. He had recently gained employment but prior to that he had a Centrepay arrangement of \$30 per fortnight towards his electricity account.

Daniel said he lived at the property with his wife and six children, and they only had basic appliances including a small fan heater and a dryer, which they rarely used.

We discussed with Daniel the impact of his large family on electricity usage and the likelihood that his previous payments of \$30 per fortnight were not sufficient to cover his consumption. Daniel said he had received EAPA vouchers in the past but as his bills continued to be high he was struggling to reduce his arrears.

EWON contacted the retailer who put a hold on the disconnection. The retailer checked the billing history and advised that Daniel's usage was consistent, however he had accumulated arrears due to a transfer of debt from his previous property. As Daniel had made regular payments in the past, the retailer proposed a payment arrangement of \$110 per fortnight to cover current usage and arrears. They also offered Daniel participation in their hardship program, and to match his payments if he kept to the plan.

We explained to Daniel that the hardship program would protect him from disconnection action and would help him to manage his electricity account. Daniel accepted this and the retailer's payment plan offer.

In 2009–2010 EWON received 8363 billing complaints. Of these, 3581 customers disputed their account or considered their bill was high. A common complaint was:

“...this bill can't be right”

**IDENTIFYING THE CAUSE** of an unusually high bill can be a challenge, as the customer receives the bill some time after they have used the energy or water. It can be difficult for some customers to accurately recall to what extent they used their appliances, particularly their air conditioner or heater. Summer and winter bills are typically the highest for households, and EWON receives a greater number of complaints following these seasons.

As no two households are identical in terms of their appliances, energy consumption or usage patterns, EWON investigates each billing complaint on a case-by-case basis. Each complaint is unique, which makes it difficult to generalise about the outcome of high bill investigations.

At the outset of the investigation, we recommend that the customer pay what they consider to be a reasonable amount towards the bill, to avoid arrears building on their account.

Many customers who receive high bills suspect a technical fault with the meter as the cause. In EWON's experience, a meter fault is rarely the cause of a high bill and we would only recommend a meter test if all other possible causes have been eliminated.

Where it appears the customer's high bill has been caused by increased usage, we can help to negotiate a payment plan with the retailer if needed, or refer the customer to a community agency for assistance.

### Common causes of high bills

#### Increased usage

- **Seasonal variations** – Did the customer use a heater or air conditioner for extended periods? Were there unusual weather patterns in the billing period which may have resulted in this?
- **New appliances** – Have items been added or replaced?
- **Faulty appliances** – Leaking hot water systems, faulty seals on fridges or freezers, or faulty thermostats on heaters or coolers can cause unusually high consumption until the fault is fixed.
- **Extra people in the house** – Additional people showering and washing can have an impact.
- **A new baby** – This can result in the heavier use of a washing machine and dryer, and result in more power being used throughout the day and night than previously.
- **Cross wiring of the premises or the meter** – Occasionally in new units or units where renovations have recently occurred, a customer's meter may have been cross-wired with a neighbour's.

#### Billing issues

- **Tariff increase** – Typically these come into effect after 1 July. Customers on a negotiated contract may find their rate changes when their contract is rolled over.
- **Change in tariff type** – This can result if the meter is replaced with a time of use meter.

- **Different billing period** – If there was a billing delay the period the bill covers may be longer than before.
- **First bill at new address** – Check that the customer hasn't been billed for the previous occupant's usage.
- **Other charges** – Bills sometimes contain charges for things other than current consumption, such as a transferred balance from a previous account, arrears from previous bills, miscellaneous fees or charges for other services.
- **Estimated bills and catch-up bills** – If the previous bill was estimated, the high bill may be a catch-up bill.
- **Billing errors** – Sometimes manual data entry or computer system errors can result in billing errors.

#### Meter reading issues

- **Meter reading error** – Has the meter been over-read or under-read? A special meter read can be arranged or the customer can do a self-read.
- **Testing for a faulty meter** – The retailer is entitled to charge for this and they can ask for this fee to be paid upfront. If the meter proves to be faulty, this fee will be refunded.

#### Unexpected high bill?

If you receive an unexpected high bill contact your retailer to discuss the possible causes. If you need more time to pay the bill, ask them about a payment arrangement.

If you are not satisfied with the company's response or you cannot agree on an affordable payment plan, phone EWON on 1800 246 545 or visit [www.ewon.com.au](http://www.ewon.com.au) to lodge a complaint.

## Beware of energy scams

Over the past few months customers and energy retailers have identified various scams targeting energy customers. Sometimes the scammer misleads the customer into believing they represent their energy provider in order to collect personal information or credit card details. Reported scams have included:

- **Direct marketing scams** – Customers have been contacted by companies offering rebates on energy efficient devices or selling power saving devices.
- **Hoax email/phishing scams** – One retailer has reported that a fake email was circulating with their company branding, stating that the person's account was overpaid and in order to receive a refund, they needed to visit a website and provide their credit card details.

If you receive an unexpected or suspicious call, email or visit, don't provide any personal details and contact your energy retailer to verify the offer. For more information visit [www.scamwatch.gov.au](http://www.scamwatch.gov.au) or check your retailer's website for scam alerts.

## Changes to door to door energy marketing

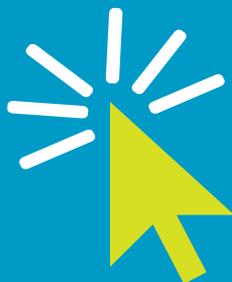
In October 2010, the Energy Retailers Association of Australia (ERAA) announced that it intended to establish a self regulatory scheme covering door to door sales in energy retailing.

The ERAA proposed that a new company, Energy Assured Ltd, will oversee the scheme whose participants will include energy retailers and companies providing door to door sales forces to the energy sector. Not all ERAA members use door to door sales, so participation will be voluntary.

The ERAA said the industry's proposed self regulatory measures will involve standardised training and recruitment practices, the tracking and registering of door knockers, an independent complaints process, compliance auditing and potential sanctions against members whose sales practices generate concerns in the community. For more information visit [www.eraa.com.au](http://www.eraa.com.au)

Thinking of switching retailers?  
Compare prices online at:  
[www.myenergyoffers.nsw.gov.au](http://www.myenergyoffers.nsw.gov.au)

A free electricity and gas online price comparison website for NSW customers, managed by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal. For more information or help using the site phone the Energy Information Line on 1300 136 888.



## Overview of complaints

From April to September 2010, EWON finalised 8195 cases, a 13% increase from the previous period.

While the majority of complaints (67%) related to electricity retailers, complaints about gas and dual fuel also increased.

In terms of customer issues, high bill and disputed account complaints continue to dominate. Of greater concern however, is the increasing trend in customers who are having difficulty paying their bills and dealing with debt collection and credit default issues.

### SNAPSHOT OF CUSTOMER ISSUES 1 APRIL 2010 – 30 SEPTEMBER 2010

	Oct 2009– Mar 2010	April 2010– Sept 2010	% increase
<b>Billing</b>			
High bill or disputed account	1860	1850	-1%
Estimated account	388	443	+14%
Delay in billing or bill not received	196	276	+41%
Backbilling	199	241	+21%
<b>Credit</b>			
Arrears or utility debt	920	1104	+20%
Facing disconnection for non-payment	710	716	+1%
Debt collection or credit listing	348	532	+53%
Disconnected due to non-payment	298	401	+35%
Denied an extension or payment plan	226	212	-6%
<b>Marketing</b>			
Misled by marketers	281	320	+14%
Pressured into signing or agreeing to a contract	83	96	+16%
Non-account holder approached for consent	35	49	+40%
<b>Transfer</b>			
Problems with the contract terms (variation in price, termination fee)	484	600	+24%
Did not consent to the transfer	219	256	+17%
Site ownership or disconnected in error due to transfer	168	189	+13%
Transferred in error	142	131	-8%

# Complaint statistics



## SNAPSHOT OF COMPLAINTS

1 APRIL 2010 – 30 SEPTEMBER 2010

Overall	Total complaints closed	8195
Customers	Residential customers	7767 (95%)
	Small business customers	366 (4%)
	Living in social housing*	297 (4%)
	Receiving pension/benefits*	1663 (20%)
	Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander customers*	38 (<1%)
	Culturally and linguistically diverse customers*	182 (2%)

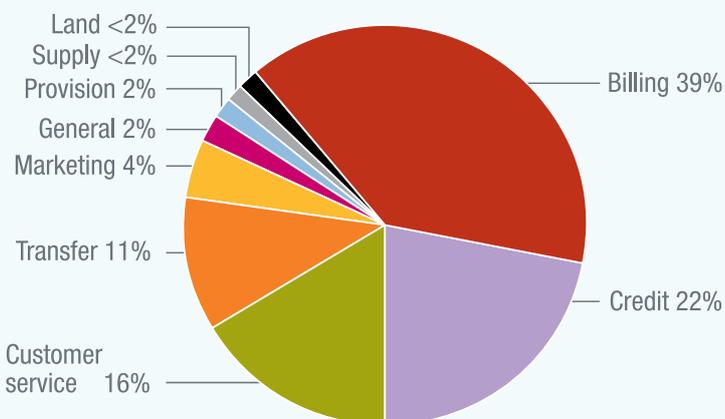
\*EWON does not routinely collect demographic information however it is recorded if offered by the customer.

## COMPLAINTS BY INDUSTRY

Industry	Provider type	Oct 2009- March 2010	April 2010- Sept 2010	% change
Electricity	Retailer	4788	5520	+15%
	Distributor	391	424	+8%
	Exempt Retailer	32	24	-25%
	Other*	55	69	+25%
Gas	Retailer	1284	1358	+6%
	Distributor	28	52	+86%
	Other*	13	23	+77%
Dual Fuel	Retailer	182	260	+43%
	Other*	1	2	+100%
Non-energy/non-water	Other*	49	44	-10%
Water	Retailer	242	261	+8%
	Distributor	162	136	-16%
	Exempt Retailer	0	1	+100%
	Other*	23	21	-9%
<b>Total</b>		<b>7250</b>	<b>8195</b>	<b>+13%</b>

\*Non member specific, out of jurisdiction

## ALL ISSUES RAISED BY CUSTOMERS



## HOW WE CATEGORISE COMPLAINT ISSUES

**Note: there may be more than one issue raised per complaint**

- Billing – high and disputed bills, fees and charges, responsibility for accounts
- Credit – disconnection, arrears, difficulty in payment, payment arrangement declined, debt collection
- Customer service – failure to respond, incorrect advice, poor attitude/service
- Marketing – conduct by marketers, misleading information, pressure, non-account holder signed up
- Provision – problems with new or existing connections
- Supply – quality, damage/loss, outages
- Transfer – error in billing or account transfer due to switching retailers, contract terms, transfer delay, site ownership
- Land – impact of network assets, maintenance, environment
- General – non-energy/non-water related, contractors

## COMPLAINTS BY COMPANY

1 APRIL 2010 – 30 SEPTEMBER 2010

### LEGEND: NSW RETAIL CUSTOMER BANDWIDTH

- Above 1 million customers
- 500,001 to 1 million customers
- 100,000 to 500,000 customers
- under 100,000 customers

### Energy Retailers

### No. complaints

● ActewAGL Gas	84
● AGL	2298
● Australian Power and Gas	49
● Country Energy	342
● EnergyAustralia	998
● Integral Energy	753
● Jackgreen (suspended from market)	462
● Lumo Energy	58
● Origin Energy	1580
● Powerdirect	55
● Red Energy	40
● Sanctuary Energy	21
● TRUenergy	308

### Energy Distributors

### No. complaints

ActewAGL Gas Distribution	2
Country Energy	104
EnergyAustralia	232
Integral Energy	86
Jemena	43
Origin Energy	3
TransGrid	1

### Water Distributors/Retailers

### No. complaints

● ActewAGL*	2
● Country Energy**	1
● Gosford City Council	6
● Hunter Water	54
● Shoalhaven Water	8
● State Water	3
● Sydney Water	295
● Wyong Shire Council	3

There were no complaints received about Albury Gas Company, APT Allgas, Aurora Energy, Central Ranges Pipeline, Independent Electricity Retail Solutions, Momentum Energy.

\* These complaints were out of jurisdiction.

\*\* Country Energy is a water provider for Broken Hill customers only.

# 6

## For community workers

### Outreach report

BY NARELLE BROWN, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

Outreach work is an essential part of EWON's services. The aim of outreach is to increase the awareness of energy and water issues. We do this by holding forums for community workers, hosting stalls at festivals, visiting community agencies, presenting at interagency groups and at staff meetings, providing training for financial counsellors and presenting to seniors and CALD groups.

During outreach, community advocates tell our staff what is happening in their area. Complex welfare issues and the need to assist people with growing energy and water bills are daily challenges faced by community advocates.

Our experience shows that early identification of issues avoids systemic problems and EWON encourages community advocates to let us know if they have any concerns about energy or water issues or a retailer's processes.

Changes in legislation, establishment of energy retailers' hardship programs, increases in funding for the Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) program and better access to emergency vouchers have changed the way community advocates respond to the needs of their clients. The Energy Branch of Industry & Investment NSW manages the guidelines on EAPA provision and applications for additional vouchers.

The EAPA program encourages community workers to provide sufficient help to people in the first instance, to avoid long-term dependency on EAPA vouchers, where possible. One community worker commented, 'Now we can access emergency vouchers we no longer have to provide a "little" to all, we can assess the client's ongoing affordability and provide the help with the bill to assist in providing a fresh start. The change has helped enormously.'

Community workers report an increase in clients working full-time who are experiencing difficulties with large unexpected bills. Workers have found that these clients may only require one-off EAPA assistance to get them back on track.

Community workers help clients establish Centrepay arrangements, they refer clients to the Home Power Savings Program (see back page for more information) and also to retailers' websites for energy saving hints and tips.

### Helpful telephone contacts

Energy Information Line

☎ 1300 136 888

Home Power Savings Program

☎ 1300 662 416

No Interest Loans Scheme Hotline

☎ 1800 509 994

EWON ☎ 1800 246 545

To organise an EWON outreach presentation please phone Narelle on 8218 5241.

### TRAINING FOR FINANCIAL COUNSELLORS



EWON ANTI-POVERTY WEEK 2010 FORUM IN COFFS HARBOUR



## Knockout in Woy Woy

Rose Gordon, EWON's Aboriginal Project Officer, attended the 40th Annual Rugby League Knockout Carnival held in Woy Woy during the October long weekend.

EWON shared a stall with other complaint-handling agencies that collaborate as part of the Good Service Mob. Knockout is recognised as the biggest social, cultural and sporting event for Aboriginal people in NSW, and this year reportedly drew a crowd of over 18,000 people.

Despite the rain, collaborating agencies agreed their joint stall had been a success and an invaluable opportunity to meet with community members from across the state.

To organise an EWON outreach presentation for Aboriginal community groups, contact Rose on (02) 8218 5225 or [roseg@ewon.com.au](mailto:roseg@ewon.com.au)

GOOD SERVICE FORUMS IN THE HUNTER REGION



*Understanding energy*  
 How it works. How to save. How to get help  
**FREE Community Sector Education Forums**

Over the past year EnergyAustralia's Hardship Prevention and Intervention Program supported 68 workshops and forums which provided energy efficiency tips and assistance options for customers experiencing hardship. Almost 1900 community workers, volunteers and community members attended the various workshops or forums.

EnergyAustralia's "Understanding Energy" forums held across Sydney, the Hunter and Central Coast during June were very successful with over 50 speakers and exhibitors and 500 community sector workers and volunteers attending.

Feedback for all activities and events was positive and participants said they valued the energy saving tips. One participant said, 'The information on assistance options was very useful and I'll be better able to support clients in crisis/emergency situations'.

In 2010/11 workshops will be run for a range of frontline agencies including: neighbourhood centres, Aboriginal and multicultural services, seniors and Centrelink. Kerry Edgecombe, National Program Manager Customer Hardship Prevention, says 'The aim of the initiative is to provide EnergyAustralia and community agencies with the opportunity to assist key community sector staff help their clients in relation to their energy bills. There are plans in the new year to incorporate the workshops into the core training calendars for community agencies'.

Having the correct information on how to reduce costs and where to go to seek assistance is vital in helping people manage their energy costs and payments. EnergyAustralia's focus is on early intervention and identification of customers who are experiencing payment difficulties.

For further information on EnergyAustralia's workshops and training opportunities contact Leonie Ligertwood, Education Training Specialist, phone 9269 2456.

UNDERSTANDING ENERGY FORUM



# IN ONE HOUR AN ENERGY EXPERT WILL SHOW YOU HOW TO **SAVE UP TO 20% OFF** YOUR POWER USE



## Eligible customers include:

Centrelink Pensioner Concession, Centrelink Low Income Health Care, Department of Veterans' Affairs Repatriation Health (Gold card and White card) and Department of Veterans' Affairs Pensioner Concession card holders and recognised energy utility hardship customers. NSW residents only.

\*Savings based on a typical three person eligible household and use of all kit items.



**CALL THE HOME POWER SAVINGS PROGRAM 1300 662 416**



The NSW Government's free Home Power Savings Program is helping eligible low income households save up to 20 per cent off their power use. The free program is available to anyone who has a nominated Centrelink or Veterans' Affairs concession card, or who is a hardship customer with an energy company.

The program offers free in-home advice from an energy expert and a Power Savings Kit that includes a stand-by saver power board, energy efficient light globes, draught-proofing strips for around the door, door snakes, a low flow showerhead, shower timer and tap aerators.

Households also get a tailored Power Savings Action Plan that shows how much more money and carbon pollution they can save by being energy efficient.

Households who have joined the program are already noticing the savings. Susan from Western Sydney said, "By using the free energy savings devices, I found out that I will save at least \$200 a year. It's great that the program costs you nothing but you get the free kit and an hour with an expert to find out how to reduce your bills. I'll try and do the tips on my Action Plan so that I can save even more."

Home Power Savings Program is available to all eligible households across NSW until 30 June 2013.

The program is managed by the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW.

Eligible households are encouraged to **call 1300 662 416** now to book a free Home Power Assessment.

For more information about the program go to [savepower.nsw.gov.au/freehelp](http://savepower.nsw.gov.au/freehelp) or call 1300 662 416.

## About EWON

The Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW (EWON) provides an independent way of resolving customer complaints about all electricity and gas suppliers in NSW and some water suppliers. Our service is free, fair and independent. Our aim is to keep essential services within reach of everyone.

We can help customers with a range of problems including:

- high bills, disputed accounts
- debts, arrears
- negotiating affordable payment plans
- problems getting reconnected
- disconnection/restriction of supply
- opening/closing accounts
- energy marketing practices
- negotiated contracts or switching retailers
- reliability or quality of supply

## Contact EWON

**Freecall 1800 246 545\***

Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm

\*Calls from mobile phones may attract a fee, which will vary depending on your service provider. If you are calling from a mobile phone, let us know and EWON will call you back.

Freefax 1800 812 291  
Freepost Reply Paid K1343  
Haymarket NSW 1239  
Email [omb@ewon.com.au](mailto:omb@ewon.com.au)  
Website [www.ewon.com.au](http://www.ewon.com.au)  
Interpreter 131 450  
TTY/Voice 133 677 (National Relay Service)

## About EWONews

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Energy & Water  
Ombudsman NSW

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