



EWON Appoints New Chair

Following the end of the term of our first chairperson, Ms Gae Pincus, Mr Lionel Bowen has been appointed as the independent chair of the Council of EWON.

Lionel Bowen has a long history of public service having been a cabinet minister in both the Whitlam and Hawke Labor Governments and deputy Prime Minister. Mr Bowen served as the Member for Kingsford-Smith for 21 years.

The new chairman has also held posts on the Institute of Independent Complaints Council and the Advertising Standards Council.

Mr Bowen is a highly respected member of the community and will help us raise the profile of EWON in the wider community.

Ombudsman's Note

There was an increase of over 33% in customer contacts with EWON during 1999-2000, and this trend looks likely to continue, particularly as EWON's role in independent dispute resolution has been strengthened through legislation introduced recently into the NSW Parliament.

On November 16, the Minister for Energy announced that he had introduced legislation for the contestable electricity market in New South Wales, through the *Electricity Supply Amendment Bill 2000*. This legislation effectively increases the jurisdiction of EWON.

The Minister's announcement said that "the NSW Government has now laid the necessary foundations for our electricity generators, suppliers and customers to join a national electricity market. Firstly we have provided enhanced protection for the 2.7 million customers that become contestable from Jan 2002".

Included in the consumer protection measures is a statutory right for customers less than 160 megawatts (bills of about \$16,000 per year) to complain to the approved electricity ombudsman (EWON is the approved scheme for NSW).

The legislation will require all electricity retailers, as a condition of their licence to trade in NSW, to join an approved ombudsman scheme. This will ensure that EWON can assist all customers of electricity providers throughout New South Wales, as well as customers of Sydney Water and AGL.

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EWON helps Vietnamese community

Language and cultural barriers can be major impediments to seeking and receiving help with problems relating to essential services such as electricity and water.

EWON's role in dispute resolution has made a vital difference to many of the thousands of customers who have contacted us since the scheme's introduction in 1998, especially those on lower incomes. But there are still many customers who are not aware of our service, particularly customers whose first language is not English.

In March this year, we commenced a campaign to raise awareness of EWON among targeted ethnic communities in NSW. The campaign started with the Chinese community first, as it is the largest and most diverse ethnic community in NSW.



The Minister shares tea with community leaders and the Most Venerable Thich Phuoc Hue

Building on our successful Chinese language marketing campaign, we have continued our outreach efforts with the Vietnamese community in NSW.

The Minister for Fair Trading, John Watkins MP launched our campaign at the Phuoc Hue Buddhist Temple in Wetherill Park on 25 August. This was followed by a marketing and advertising campaign in the Vietnamese press and on SBS radio. In-language brochures and Vietnamese information on our website were also made available.

The marketing campaign proved to be very effective, with many Vietnamese speaking customers contacting us since the launch. We look forward to repeating this experience in the Arabic-speaking launch and awareness campaign during November and December 2000.



Vietnamese community leaders meet with Ombudsman and members of the EWON council at the launch

EWON on SBS

Following our Vietnamese launch and awareness campaign, many people experiencing problems relating to electricity and water have contacted EWON.

One Vietnamese speaking customer had been incorrectly billed by his electricity provider. The customer had been asked to pay \$120 more than he should have.

The customer contacted EWON through the Translating

and Interpreting Service. We were able to contact the electricity company and have the \$120 refunded to the customer.

So impressed with the accessibility of EWON to Vietnamese-speaking customers that he appeared on the daily Vietnamese program on SBS radio. The customer complimented EWON on the professionalism and the speed in which his matter was resolved.

Multicultural Advertising Awards

After the initial success of our multi-lingual access campaign for the Chinese community, EWON has entered the 2000 Ethnic Affairs Commission Multicultural Marketing Awards in conjunction with our marketing agency, T&L Advertising.

The winner of this respected Award will be announced by the NSW Premier on 27 November 2000



The Ombudsman and Mr Bowen welcome AGL to the scheme



Electricity, water and gas consumers can take complaints to a single dispute resolution scheme with the expansion of EWON to include gas.

NSW is the first State to bring all three utilities under a single scheme, with Victoria expected to do the same early next year. EWON took on responsibility for handling Sydney Water issues in December last year.

EWON began to take complaints from AGL customers from 1 July this year after AGL chose to join

the scheme. AGL has comprehensive coverage of the NSW market, bringing most gas customers in the State into the scheme. The Energy & Water Ombudsman, Clare Petre said "I congratulate AGL for recognising the valuable role EWON can play in ensuring that its customers' concerns are fully addressed."

Since AGL joined the scheme in July, we have handled a number of contacts from AGL consumers. The enquiries have often been similar to the issues raised by customers of our electricity and water members. The issues have included disconnection, billing problems, high bills and meter errors.

AGL is the first privately-owned company to join the EWON scheme. We are encouraged by their enthusiasm for the scheme and value the importance they have placed on establishing cooperative working relationship with the EWON investigation team.

What type of issues can EWON investigate?

EWON can investigate matters that specifically relate to decisions or actions by an electricity provider, AGL or Sydney Water with particular reference to:

- disputed accounts;
- disconnection or restriction of supply;
- actions of a service provider which affect your property;
- the supply of electricity, gas or water services such as delays in connection, quality of supply.

What other agencies can provide assistance?

The NSW Department of Fair Trading

EWON cannot investigate issues relating to electrical, plumbing or gas contractors, including the contracting arm of an EWON member company or matters that are the subject of a contract or are contestable (open to competitive quotation).

Complaints about these matters are handled by The NSW Department of Fair Trading, who can be contacted on: 133 220

The Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal

The Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal of New South Wales (IPART) is the body which sets maximum prices and reviews pricing of monopoly services within NSW including electricity, water, gas and public transport. EWON is not involved in the setting of tariffs and charges, and IPART is best placed to provide advice and information in relation to tariffs or price increases. IPART can be contacted on (02) 9290-8400

Community Agencies

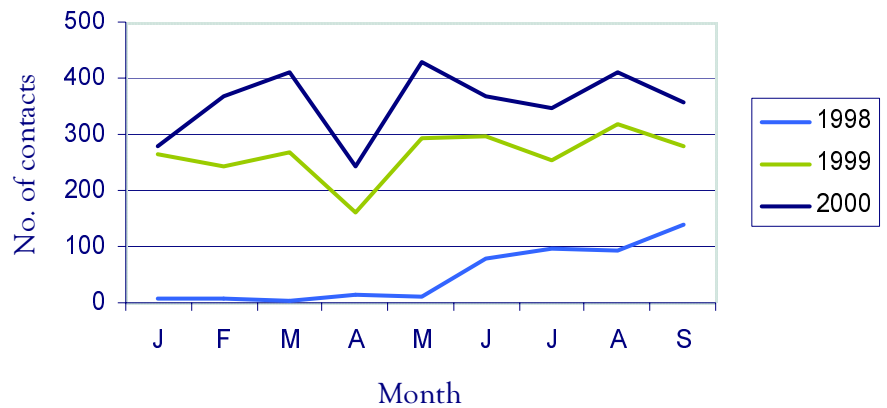
Many local community organisations can help with the payment of electricity accounts by the provision of Electricity Accounts Payments Assistance (EAPA) scheme vouchers. Organisations include St Vincent de Paul, The Smith Family and the Salvation Army.

Tenants Advocacy Services

Disputes between landlords and tenants cannot be investigated by EWON, e.g. high bills caused by a landlord's failure to maintain fixed appliances or damage to an appliance caused by a fault within the landlord's property. Advice about these matters is best obtained from the Department of Fair Trading Tenancy Services Branch on 1800 451 301 or by contacting a tenants advocacy service.

Stats

Comparison of customer contacts 1998 - 2000



1999-2000 Annual Report

Those wanting further information on EWON may be interested to hear that our latest annual report is due to be released. Containing information on all our activities, our structure, people and future directions, this document will be available from early December.

Of particular interest are the case studies that highlight the work EWON has done in the past 12 months. These real-life stories include what we achieved in cases of electricity disconnection, water restriction, billing, quality of supply and customer service.

EWON Website 2000

After months of planning, we are launching our new website in December. The new site centres on the needs of consumers and other stakeholders by delivering information as well as interactivity.

A feature of our website is the EWON electricity audit. This interactive application allows consumers to enter information on how they use electricity at home. The audit then estimates the bill so that they can compare it to their actual account. Not only does it highlight possible account errors, but more importantly it lets customers adjust their usage patterns. We plan to include gas and water audits in the near future.

Our focus on community languages has been reflected in the design of the new site. Information in Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, Italian, Spanish and Greek are all easily accessible from the EWON home page.

Automatic mailing of media releases and an electronic newsletter has been made possible to EWON website subscribers. Subscribers will thus get important news on our activities - as it happens.

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