

Ombudsman's Note



Clare Petre

More than 30 per cent of all the energy complaints EWON receives are from consumers facing disconnection and/or having difficulty paying their electricity or gas bills. Our response to many of these customers includes referral to the community agencies that distribute Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA).

This assistance is invaluable to customers in difficult financial circumstances. EAPA vouchers help many people to avoid energy disconnection, and to manage their electricity and gas accounts in the longer term.

EAPA agencies are increasingly referring people in difficult financial circumstances to EWON. We can help to negotiate a reasonable payment arrangement with the supplier if the customer or the agency has not been able to do so. EWON can also independently investigate if a customer disputes the accuracy of their utility bill.

We are currently undertaking a program to improve information flow between EWON, EAPA agencies, utility providers and the Ministry of Energy and Utilities (MEU), which coordinates the EAPA program. We hope that this will result in greater shared information about EAPA shortages in particular areas, identification of unmet need for assistance to customers, and improved referral processes between organisations.

We are working closely with community, industry, and government stakeholders to identify the best ways of assisting low income consumers to stay connected to the essential services of electricity and gas.

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Your guide to water restrictions

FAQ's

Why are the restrictions in place?

The Sydney Catchment Authority has a Drought Management Plan that includes water storage levels, which are minimum triggers for the introduction of restrictions. Despite voluntary water restrictions, our water levels have fallen below 60%, and as a result the Minister for Energy and Utilities has introduced mandatory restrictions.

What can I do under the current restrictions?

You can:

- hand water your garden using a hose, bucket or watering can
- use drip irrigation, including weeping hoses
- sweep paths, floors and driveways with a broom
- wash and rinse vehicles and buildings with a bucket or watering can

How much rain do we need for restrictions to be eased or lifted?

The storage in dams is only one of the elements taken into consideration in deciding if water restrictions can be lifted. Other considerations are future weather projections, the potential for bushfires, usage patterns and other climatic conditions.

Can residential customers apply for an exemption to the restrictions?

Only in the most exceptional cases will Sydney Water consider an exemption for a residential customer. Exemptions are usually only available for some business water use. This is generally where there is no waterless alternative, there is a potential threat to public health and safety or the business will suffer serious financial hardship.

Who will enforce the \$220 fines?

Authorised Sydney Water personnel will enforce the fines. Some Council rangers are also able to issue fines. Payments can be made through the Infringement Processing Bureau – just like with parking tickets.

Further information is available at www.sydneywater.com.au.

On 1 October 2003 mandatory water restrictions came into force for all Sydney Water customers. The Sydney Water restrictions apply to all residents, businesses, local councils and government agencies.

Customers of EWON's other water provider members, Hunter Water and Australian Inland, do not face water restrictions at this time. However, Australian Inland has indicated that without rain, level 1 restrictions may soon be introduced.

At present the following restrictions apply:

- no sprinklers or watering systems at any time — use of drip irrigation, bore water, grey water and recycled water is allowed
- no hosing of hard services — hard surfaces include vehicles, paths, driveways, floors and buildings.

Fines of \$220 now apply for breaches of the water restrictions. Refer to the Sydney Water website www.sydneywater.com.au for the latest conditions.

Rainwater Tanks What rebates now apply?

The Sydney Water rainwater tank rebate has now been extended until 30 June 2005, in an effort to further encourage the widespread installation of rainwater tanks.

Rebates range from \$150 to \$650 depending on the size of the tank. You will receive an additional rebate if a licensed plumber connects your rainwater tank supply to your toilet and/or your washing machine. To be eligible for a rebate, the rainwater tank must be a new tank with a capacity of 2000 litres or more and purchased after 19 October 2002. Specific conditions are detailed on the rebate application form available from Sydney Water.

Water use from a tank not connected to the Sydney Water mains, is excluded from the current mandatory water restrictions.

Working with community agencies

EWON works with community agencies to provide customers and advocates with a range of referral options and information about available assistance, such as Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA), the water Payment Assistance Scheme (PAS) and other forms of assistance.

EWON referrals to community agencies

We provide customers with appropriate referrals to community agencies for EAPA, PAS and financial counselling. It is important to note that disconnections can be put on hold if customers have an appointment with an EAPA agency. EWON generally provides contact details for customers to contact agencies directly. Depending on a customer's particular circumstances, we may try to transfer a customer to an agency or speak with them on behalf of the customer.

Assisting your clients

We also help customers referred to us from community agencies or advocates. We can assist in a range of ways, including negotiating payment arrangements or extensions, and investigating disputed bills. We are happy to

assist advocates calling on behalf of a client, friend or family member, after first obtaining the customer's permission.

Help with EAPA shortages

Through our work with customers and advocates we are often advised that there is a shortage of EAPA in a particular area or agency. Our Community Development Officer will usually call the agency to talk about the



Macedonian Seniors Group, Bankstown

services we provide to customers, and to suggest that the agency report any shortages to their head office or the Ministry of Energy and Utilities (MEU) as appropriate. We do this to ensure that all agencies know they may be eligible to receive more vouchers, if appropriate, and to assist the MEU and EAPA agencies to monitor areas of unmet need.

Community building

EWON works with community agencies and workers to raise awareness of EWON and ensure we are accessible to all sectors of the community. We regularly give presentations to community advocates and groups, and participate in and attend community festivals and events.

Through our community work we are able to consult with community stakeholders about their key utility issues and problems and develop strategies to address these. If you would like further information about these activities or would like us to participate in any of your training or events please contact Emma Keene, Community Development Officer on 8218 5225 or emmak@ewon.com.au.

Other EWON resources

Information resources available to community agencies include:

- brochures about our service in English and other community languages
- fact sheets on a range of utility specific issues
- information sessions and presentations.



Campbelltown NAIDOC week festival



Neighbourhood Centre Conference



Chinese Market Gardeners Fair Day

Out & About

Miscellaneous charges

Customers often contact EWON to query an unexpected fee on their electricity or gas account. In many cases customers are not aware that they can be charged these additional fees, known as miscellaneous charges.

The Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) regulates charges for electricity and gas, and determines the maximum amounts that can be charged to customers of energy suppliers. However, a customer who is supplied under a negotiated contract may be liable for different charges, depending on the terms of the contract they have signed.

'EWON can investigate whether a fee has been correctly charged'

Suppliers are required by IPART to give information about miscellaneous charges to customers before any fee is charged. This information should:

- be in plain language
- explain the amount of the fee and when it applies
- be accessible to customers (eg appear on bills or notices).

EWON can investigate whether a charge has been correctly applied based on IPART determinations and rules. EWON may also investigate whether there are special circumstances that could be raised with the company as a basis for waiving the charge.

Gas charges

Current miscellaneous charges for gas include:

- account establishment
- collector call
- disconnection/reconnection
- high bill field visit
- late payment
- dishonoured payment



EWON is not able to investigate the amount of these fees and charges, or the nature of the rules. These are regulated by IPART and are therefore outside EWON's jurisdiction.

Customers should first speak with their supplier to query any charges applied to their account. If they are not satisfied they should be informed by the supplier of dispute resolution options available to assist them.

One customer set up a direct debit with his supplier and told them that he was paid on Wednesdays and did not want the money to be withdrawn beforehand. His supplier attempted to withdraw a payment from his account on a Monday and as there was not enough money in his account, he was charged a \$70 dishonour fee by his bank. The customer was having trouble paying this amount and contacted his supplier to raise his concerns. Not satisfied with their response, he contacted EWON for assistance. Following EWON intervention the dishonour fee was refunded by the provider.

EWON has recently put forward a submission in response to IPART's draft recommendations for the Review into Guaranteed Customer Service Standards and Operating Statistics. Part of this review looks at the application of miscellaneous charges. A copy of EWON's submission is available in the 'what's happening' section of our website www.ewon.com.au.

Electricity charges

Currently miscellaneous charges for electricity include:

- services that are outside normal business hours
- special meter reading
- meter test
- account establishment
- off-peak conversion
- disconnection/reconnection
- rectifying an illegal disconnection
- provision of time of use metering data
- late payment
- dishonoured bank cheque

Focusing on transfer complaints

tales of confusion

When Mrs F and her 3-month old baby moved into rental accommodation, she rang a company that supplied both electricity and gas to organise connection. She followed automated prompts and selected the option to open 'electricity and gas accounts'. Mrs F then started receiving bills from the supplier, which she assumed were for both her electricity and gas.

A few months later, the local electricity supplier came out to disconnect Mrs F's electricity supply. They informed Mrs F that they had no record of her holding an account with another company. Upon calling the supplier that was billing her, she was given her account reference number to prove that she had an electricity account with them. The local electricity supplier kept sending Mrs F letters requesting that she immediately establish an account, or she would be disconnected.

After five separate attempts to resolve the issue, the local electricity supplier told Mrs F that the electricity account reference number she had been given was wrong, and she would have been requested to sign a contract to have her electricity supplied by the other company. When she told them that no contract had been discussed, the electricity company told her that she would have to pay \$683 owing for the electricity used over the last 11 months.

Worried about the size of her electricity account and her financial situation, Mrs F contacted EWON. Mrs F's gas supplier cleared \$193 owing on her gas account, credited \$150, waived her security deposit fee and late payment fees. This left her gas account \$100 in credit, and they agreed to issue her a cheque for this amount. Her electricity supplier established a payment plan to assist her in managing and paying off her arrears.

Investigator's Tip

Changing your supplier



Katie Parks

Since the introduction of full retail competition in 2002 you can now choose your electricity or gas retailer by signing a negotiated contract.

Before your new contract starts, your account must be transferred to your new retailer by your previous retailer. In most cases the transfer will not occur until the next regular meter reading takes place. You can determine when the transfer is likely to take place by checking your bill for the date of the previous meter reading. Your meter will still be read by your previous supplier, however they will send the information to your new retailer for billing.

Once the transfer has occurred, you will receive a bill marked 'final' from your old retailer. The end date of the bill should be the date you were transferred. You can then expect that your next bill will be issued by your new retailer. Your energy supply won't be billed at the contracted rate until the transfer occurs.

Although some retailers are offering one contract for both gas and electricity, you will continue to receive two separate bills. If you don't receive a bill at the expected time from the new retailer, ring them and ask the reason for the delay. Your new retailer can also answer any questions you may have about the transfer process.



If your new retailer can't help you, or you are not satisfied with their response, EWON might be able to assist you.

Remember that you are only changing your retailer, which is the company that sends your bill. You are not changing your network provider, which is the company that owns and maintains the poles, wires and pipes that deliver electricity and gas to you.

Ministry of Energy and Utilities update

From 1 July 2003 responsibility for the administration, policy and funding of the Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) scheme has been transferred from the Department of Community Services to the Ministry of Energy and Utilities (MEU). The MEU manages the EAPA scheme as well as other social programs such as Pensioner Energy Rebates and Life Support Rebates, which are delivered through energy retailers.

In the year ahead the MEU plans to review the EAPA scheme in association with key stakeholders to improve its effectiveness. The MEU will keep agencies informed about the planned review.

EAPA vouchers are distributed to agencies in early June, August, October, December, February and April.

EAPA vouchers can only be issued during the financial year they relate to and expire after this. The expiry year is printed on the voucher itself and vouchers are colour coded (green in 2003-04). At the end of June each year all unused EAPA vouchers must be returned to the MEU at **Reply Paid 536, St Leonards NSW 1590**. If you find you have unused vouchers during the year you could return the vouchers to either your head office or the MEU to be distributed to other agencies in need.

If you run out of vouchers, contact your organisation's nominated EAPA contact person. Your EAPA contact is the best placed person to know whether vouchers might be available for you elsewhere in your organisation. If your organisation does not have an EAPA contact person please call the EAPA Coordinator at the MEU on 9901 8850.

If you are interested in finding out how your agency can apply to become a registered EAPA voucher distributor please contact the MEU on 9901 8850 for an application form and copy of the guidelines.

Hunter Water's new assistance program

On 1 July 2003, Hunter Water introduced their new Payment Assistance Scheme (PAS). As with EAPA, this voucher system has been provided to assist customers experiencing financial hardship.

Customers experiencing difficulty paying their Hunter Water account can seek assistance from the following community agencies to source vouchers in their area:

- St Vincent de Paul
- The Smith Family
- Migrant Resource Centre
- The Salvation Army
- The Samaritans



Hunter Water's recent brochures include information about EWON and PAS

A similar Payment Assistance Scheme is provided by Sydney Water, and is also administered by community agencies.

Australian Inland does not operate a voucher system, however all requests for payment extensions are considered on their merits.

leaky pipes

Ten years ago, water mains were replaced in about half of Mr M's street, stopping short of his house. The supplier's field staff indicated that they would return to replace the mains in the rest of the street, but this did not happen.

On five occasions over the last ten years, Mr M has noticed water puddles and dampness on his nature strip, and believed that this was due to a leaky pipe. Twice this year, his water supplier tested and made repairs to the water pipes outside his house, but they did not respond to his frequent requests to replace the section of pipe under his driveway.

According to tests conducted by his supplier, the pipes under the nature strip were not leaking. They offered to excavate Mr M's driveway to determine if there were any leaks in the pipe under his driveway. Although this pipe is owned by Mr M the supplier maintains this as a free service to customers. Mr M did not initially wish to allow them to excavate underneath his driveway to inspect the pipes because he had a stencilled driveway surface.

Mr M went to his local member of parliament for assistance and they referred his matter to EWON for investigation. Following EWON's involvement, the local water supplier agreed to visit Mr M's house with EWON and inspect the pipe. The supplier excavated Mr M's driveway and found a small crack at the base of the mains. The supplier replaced approximately three meters of pipe, resurfaced Mr M's driveway with asphalt, and agreed to pay the additional costs to have the driveway re-stencilled.

Comparing supplier complaints

Understanding these graphs

The graphs on the right can be used to compare the relative complaint levels of our provider members, based on their total customer numbers.

The comparative information is calculated using publicly available customer numbers from the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal and other sources. The figures for the July–September 2003 quarter have been annualised to enable direct comparison with our annual report statistics.

Categories used

Enquiry

A request for information or assistance that can be settled relatively quickly (including matters referred back to the provider for resolution at a higher level).

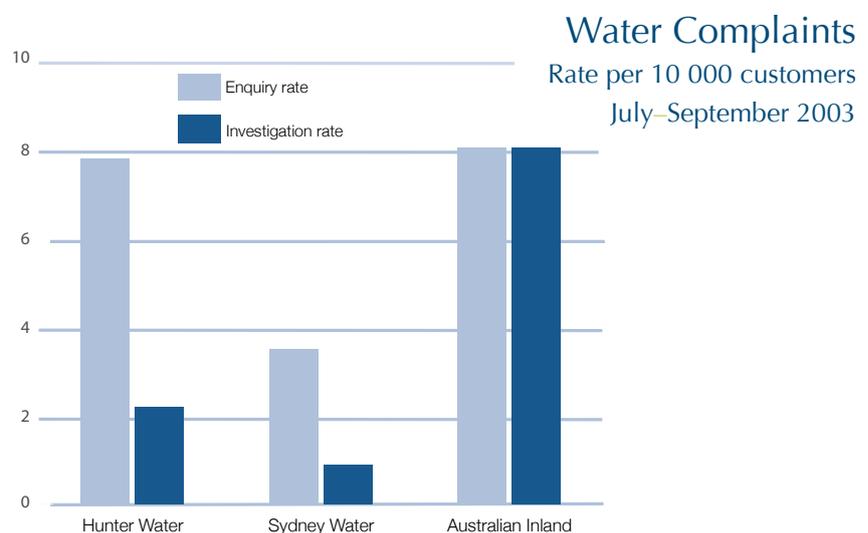
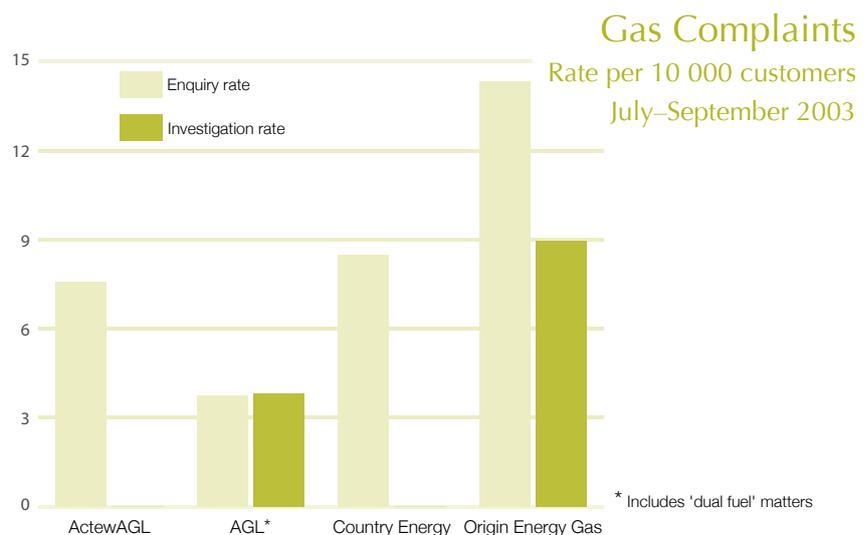
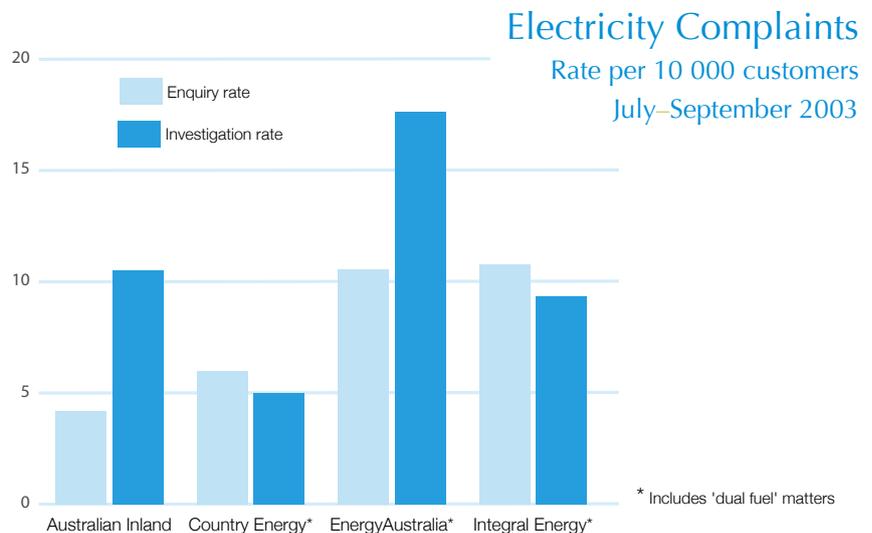
Investigation

Where a customer has tried to resolve their issue with the provider but has not received a response, or is not satisfied with the outcome, EWON may conduct an investigation.

Other member providers

The raw complaint numbers of member providers without a franchise area have been included below:

<i>ENERGEX</i>	4
<i>EnergyOne</i>	7
<i>Origin Energy Electricity</i>	5
<i>TransGrid</i>	0





Indigenous Project

Since EWON commenced in 1998, we have worked with some Aboriginal communities in New South Wales and attended community events and forums. We are committed to developing closer relationships with Aboriginal communities.

Carla Ware (above) has started working at EWON as our Indigenous Project Officer on secondment from the NSW Department for Women. During her time at EWON Carla will undertake consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocates and organisations to identify the utility issues facing indigenous people in NSW and to develop some strategies to address these issues and to raise awareness of EWON.

For more information on this project please contact Carla Ware, Indigenous Project Officer on 02 8218 5252 or carlaw@ewon.com.au.



2002-03 Annual Report

Celebrating 5 years of achievement, the latest EWON annual report looks at the people we have helped since our establishment in 1998.

Releasing the report on 11 November, Clare Petre reported a 26 per cent rise in complaints over the year, the fifth successive annual increase.

The 2002-03 Annual Report is available in the 'publications' section of our website, or contact us for a copy on the number below.

Helping resolve complaints

In conjunction with the complaint schemes for the finance, insurance, telecommunications and banking industries, EWON organised a free information session to explain our services to advocates, consumers and community organisations. The forum, held at the Powerhouse Museum on 26 November, attracted over eighty participants.



Community workers at the forum

EAPA in the competitive market...

Recently, a number of community agencies have contacted EWON after experiencing problems adjusting their systems to cater for Full Retail Competition (FRC). They have asked us whether or not they can provide EAPA to a customer who has a bill from a retailer other than the standard provider for the area. Although a customer's bill may look different to what you are used to seeing, you can still determine if the customer lives in an area serviced by your organisation by looking at the customer's billing address.

For more information about the implications of FRC for your organisation, please contact the Ministry of Energy and Utilities, or our Policy Officer, Amanda Hamilton-Foster on 8218 5266 or amandah@ewon.com.au.

Contact us...

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