



Energy & Water
Ombudsman NSW

EWON Insights

Complaints Analysis

1 July 2019 - 30 September 2019



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Ombudsman NSW

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Introduction



5,606
COMPLAINTS RECEIVED
up from 5,551 last quarter

↑ 1%

increase in complaints
compared with last
quarter

↓ 22.4%

decrease in complaints
compared with the same
period in 2018/2019

Complaint environment

This quarter we received 5,606 complaints, up marginally from the 5,551 complaints received in the previous quarter and down 22% when compared to the same period last year.

This level of complaints occurred during a period of price stability where we saw improved customer service, due in part to the increased effectiveness of our referral to higher level process to energy retailers. Digital meter installation delay complaints decreased but other issues emerged, and water complaints slightly increased from 232 to 214.

NCOSS Report - Mapping Economic Disadvantage across NSW

The NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) has just released a report that provides an excellent overview of economic disadvantage. As well as informing our outreach and engagement program, we will link it to the demographic data we collect from consumers and our complaint issues. I encourage members to consider its findings.

Themes of this report

- Charging incorrect tariffs
- Problems with meter installations
- Challenges experienced by customers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

Incorrect electricity tariff assignment

Incorrectly allocated tariffs for new accounts result in small business and residential customers paying significantly higher electricity charges than they should.

A customer centric perspective would see network providers assigning correct tariffs on advice of an error by a retailer. Current legislation allows NSW network providers to delay tariff reassignment until they have collected a year's worth of consumption data for the new customer, which causes financial disadvantage for customers. This is a clear example of dissonance between legislation and fairness. Positively some networks take the latter approach and proactively reassign tariffs.

The digital meter rollout is now generating more complaints about tariffs. Retailer staff do not always fully explain new tariff options to customers; a complex task but if not done well, it leads to customers selecting a tariff misaligned with their energy use.

Meter installation issues

We are also seeing ongoing digital meter installation problems where installers are:

- not completing the installation because they do not have the correct meter
- not installing a meter due to meter structural concerns, then not returning for several weeks
- providing poor information to the customer which further delays completion.

Problems faced by CALD customers

I raised this topic with members over 12 months ago, but it is still a driver of complaints to EWON. Customers with limited English skills experience difficulty dealing with providers. Not all providers offer translation services, leaving customers to rely on advocates to speak to retailers on their behalf. Often advocates speak English as a second language, which leads to confusion when dealing with the complexities associated with energy.

Lack of customer engagement is often cited as the reason why retailers are unable to offer affordability programs or establish affordable payment plans. The NCOSS economic disadvantage report identifies that 250,000 CALD low-income NSW consumers speak only their language at home. When these customers contact their retailer and advise, explicitly or implicitly, that they require an interpreter, retailers should use translation services and not advise customers it is their responsibility to call back with an interpreter.

Compliance

The Australian Energy Regulator (AER) approached EWON and other Ombudsman schemes to initiate a regular compliance reporting regime. I will be writing to all members with information when we have an agreed approach.

Coming up

It is still too earlier to determine the impact of retailer affordability policies developed in response to the release of the AER's Hardship Guideline earlier this year, but we will be reporting the results we see in future reports.

Janine Young | Ombudsman
Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW





Complaint activity

July - September 2019



↓ 0.4%

decrease in electricity complaints compared with last quarter



↑ 7.7%

increase in gas complaints compared with last quarter



↑ 8.4%

increase in water complaints compared with last quarter

ELECTRICITY

The 4,105 electricity retail complaints represent a 0.5% decrease from last quarter's 4,127 complaints and a 24.7% fall when compared with the same quarter last year, when there were 5,449 complaints. The 202 network cases opened represents a slight decrease when compared with 222 in the previous quarter and 232 in the same quarter last year. Overall electricity complaints decreased by 0.4% compared to the previous quarter and by 29.5%, 4,416, compared to 5,820 in the corresponding 2018 quarter.

GAS

The number of gas retail complaints received this quarter (898) increased by 7.5% when compared with the previous quarter (835) and decreased by 16.5% in comparison to the corresponding period in 2018 (1,075). The numbers of gas network complaints (40) increased by one complaint since last quarter, but fell by 49.4% in comparison to the equivalent period last year (79). Overall, gas complaints (949) were 7.7% higher compared to 881 complaints last quarter and decreased by 18.8% compared to the same quarter last year (1,168).

WATER

The number of water complaints received this quarter (232) increased by 8.4% compared to last quarter (214) and by 3.6% compared to the corresponding period in 2018 (224). Water complaints remained relatively stable over the last 12 months.

EXEMPT ENTITIES

EWON received nine complaints from customers of exempt entities this quarter. This 80% decline is because a large number of exempt retailers have become members of EWON and complaints are now counted in the 'Retailer' category.



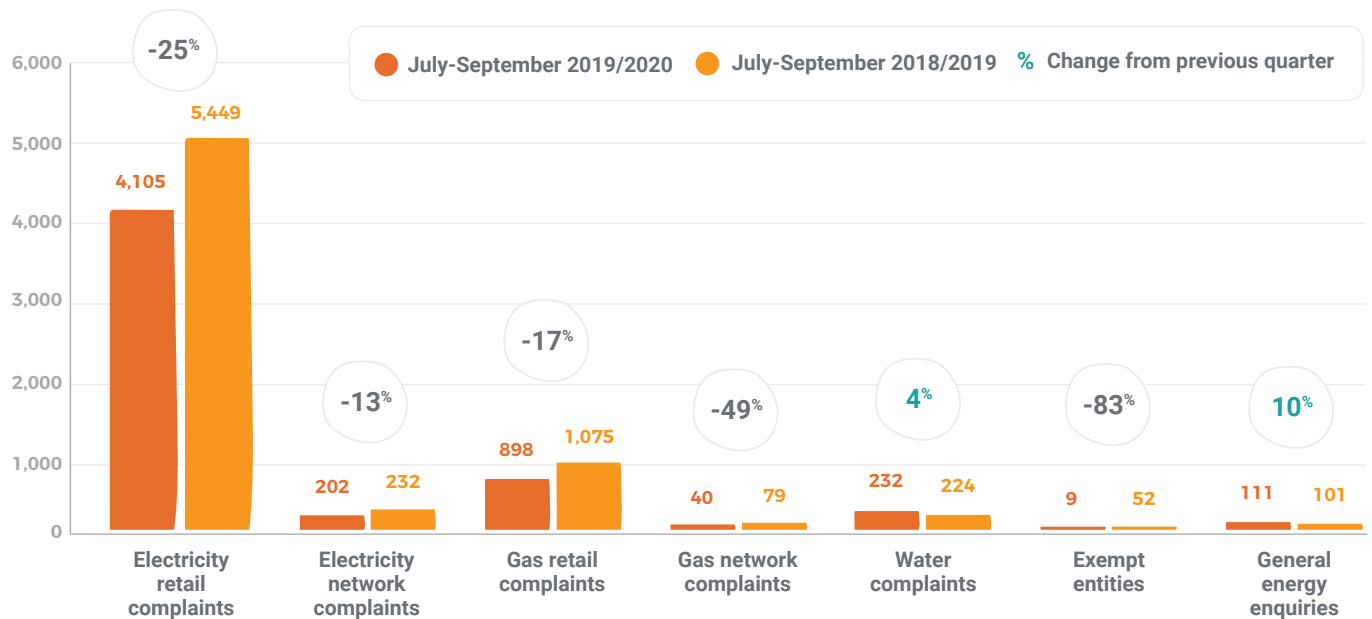
Complaint activity

Complaints received

Complaint activity overview

Complaints received by EWON this quarter increased by 1.0% (5,551 up to 5,606), owing to slight increases in gas retail complaints and general electricity enquiries not related to a specific retailer. They decreased by 22.4% in comparison to the same period in 2018 (7,225 down to 5,606). This lower level of complaints compared to the same quarter last year follows a period of price stability and a greater level of customer service from the industry, combined with a significant drop in complaints related to digital meter delays following the implementation of mandatory installation timeframes.

Figure 1: Complaint activity



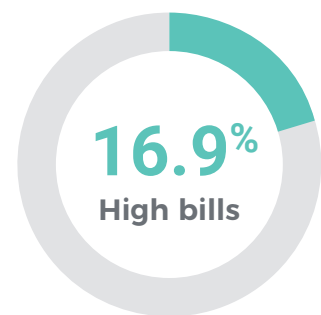
Customer complaint issues

High bill complaints numbered 1,731, up from 1,587 last quarter, and continue to be the largest issue, representing 16.9% of all issues raised this quarter. This increase reflects the arrival of winter bills. This number was down significantly from the same quarter last year where this issue drew 2,274 complaints. This higher level of complaint reflected the impact of price rises last year.

Complaints where customer service was identified as an issue continued to decline this quarter. Poor customer service declined by 40.1%, incorrect advice or information by 22.1% and failure to consult by 48.1% compared to the same quarter in 2018. The customer service issue, failure to respond, declined by 60.3% from 1,018 in 2018 to just 404 this quarter. EWON has been working closely with retailers to improve the referral to higher level process and this is reflected in the considerable drop for this issue.

Customers coming to EWON after being disconnected (240) dropped by 47 compared to the April/June quarter and by 12 compared to the July/September quarter in 2018.

The introduction of new rules setting strict timetables for the installation of digital meters has significantly reduced the number of complaints about meter installation delays. The number of complaints about this issue decreased by 158 to just 172 complaints from 330 in the previous quarter.



This issue accounted for 1,731 complaints, up from 1,587 last quarter.









Complaint activity

Complaints received

Figure 2: Complaints received July - September 2019, including previous quarters

Figure 2 provides more detailed information about the number of complaints received from April to June 2019, in comparison to the previous four quarters.

Provider type	Jul-Sep 2019	Apr-Jun 2019	Jan-Mar 2019	Oct-Dec 2018	Jul-Sep 2018
 Retailer	4,105	4,127	4,879	5,230	5,449
Network	202	222	257	248	232
 Exempt retailer	9	28	35	34	47
Not allocated	100	56	89	82	92
Total	4,416	4,433	5,260	5,594	5,820
 Retailer	898	835	1,052	986	1,075
Network	40	39	47	44	79
 Exempt retailer	0	1	2	3	5
Not allocated	11	6	7	7	9
Total	949	881	1,108	1,040	1,168
 Retailer	65	73	84	54	6
Network	142	116	124	131	146
Not allocated	25	25	15	19	14
Total	232	214	223	204	224
 Non-energy/Non-water	9	23	6	23	13
Grand total	5,606	5,551	6,597	6,861	7,225

● Electricity
 ● Gas
 ● Water
 ● Non energy / water



Top 10 issues

July - September 2019

Figure 3: Top 10 issues for this quarter and previous quarters

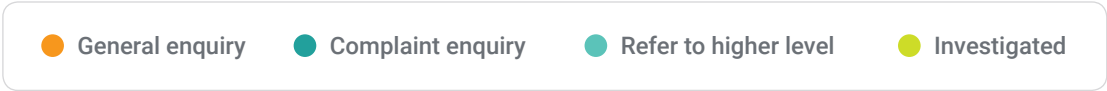
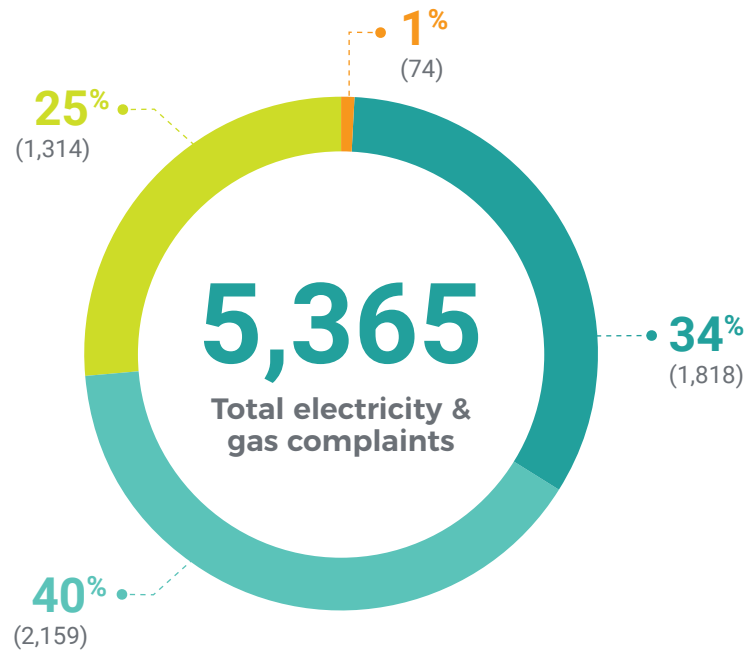
Primary and secondary issue	Jul-Sep 2019	Apr-Jun 2019	Jan-Mar 2019	Oct-Dec 2018	Jul-Sep 2018
1 High, disputed	1,731	1,587	1,875	2,343	2,274
2 Poor service	1,113	1,130	1,494	1,770	1,857
3 Opening/closing account	513	449	574	598	680
4 Payment difficulties, current/ arrears	451	548	470	404	599
5 Estimation, meter access/not read	412	443	555	558	561
6 Failure to respond	404	530	800	975	1,018
7 Incorrect advice/information	388	343	433	480	518
8 Collection, credit rating	307	245	246	266	325
9 Failure to consult/inform	270	262	289	392	520
10 Disconnection/restriction	240	287	223	179	252
Total number of issues per quarter	10,217	10,799	12,727	13,932	15,551

● Billing
 ● Customer service
 ● Credit



Energy

Figure 4: Electricity and gas complaints by case category





Energy issues

Charging incorrect tariffs

Power of choice vs cost reflective tariffs

As more digital meters are installed, EWON is beginning to see complaints related to the tariffs customers are subsequently put on.

The rollout of digital meters is coinciding with cost reflective tariffs introduced by the networks. All three network providers have a different set of default tariffs with differing opt-in and opt-out provisions. Retailers aren't always communicating these options clearly, leaving customers confused and frustrated. Some customers are not being fully informed

Tariff assignment

When a customer opens an account, the retailer should check if the customer is opening a residential account and if the site has the correct classification. If a residential customer finds out they are on a business tariff, the retailer should address this as quickly as possible. Retailers should be familiar with the range of new tariffs available and provide these as options for customers. This is complex, given the differing tariffs in each network area, but essential.

For business customers, tariffs are allocated according to consumption levels, making it even more complex. For small business, information about different network tariffs is hard to find and difficult to understand. Incorrect classification can

lead to bills which may put the viability of a business at risk. This has serious consequences for small business customers. For some customers the change of meter has reduced their choice and left them on a disadvantageous tariff.

Some retailers do not reflect network tariffs in their retail offerings, adding to the complexity. While this is an option in a competitive market, it adds to customer confusion and negates the purpose of cost reflective tariffs.

One network provider has a strict procedure that only allows reclassification after 12 months of consumption. The network provider requires the business to accept the tariff of the previous occupant for 12 months, regardless of consumption patterns and the nature of the two businesses. This inflexibility causes problems for both customers and retailers. EWON's position is that when a small business moves into a new site, a tariff should be allocated on projected consumption using the same process that applies to a new connection.

Meter exchange and business tariffs



CASE STUDY

BILLING

No opt-out option offered to customer

The customer had solar panels installed at his office premises. His meter was exchanged, and his tariff was changed. He was not informed of these changes and only identified the tariff change when a bill arrived with a daily supply charge of \$6.50. He said he contacted his retailer which told him it did not have to inform him as it was a network charge being passed through. The customer also indicated he was unhappy with the level of customer service the retailer had provided.

EWON reviewed MSATS and identified that the network did allow an opt-out of the time of use tariff he had been placed on. Equipped with this information, the customer agreed his complaint could be referred back to the retailer for the resolution at a higher level, knowing he could return to EWON if an agreed outcome could not be negotiated.

[VIEW MORE CASE STUDIES](#)



Energy issues

Charging incorrect tariffs

Meter exchange and residential tariffs



CASE STUDY

BILLING

Customer not informed of tariff change associated with meter exchange

A customer received a letter advising him of a change to a time of use tariff from a flat tariff. He said that when he recently changed his meter, he had specifically asked if prices would change and was told that nothing would change. The customer was annoyed that correct information had not been provided to him before the meter change.

EWON explained to the customer that the network tariff he was changed to was mandatory, with no opt-out provision. The customer thought he could change his consumption patterns and would not be worse off but that this should have been his choice. This complaint was closed as an enquiry as the customer accepted EWON's explanation.

Tariff assignment and tariff change request: residential



CASE STUDY

BILLING

Business tariff applied to residential customer

A customer installed solar and had the associated meter upgrade. He was then moved to a time of use tariff. He discussed this with his retailer. It informed him that it was a network decision and that it had no say in what tariff applied. He then contacted the network provider which informed him he should contact the retailer to have the tariff adjusted. The customer said that he had also requested information from his retailer about the impact of a time of use tariff, but it could not assist him. EWON referred this

matter to the retailer for resolution at a higher level.

The retailer told EWON that the complaint was satisfactorily resolved. The retailer said that it had reviewed the customer's last bill and confirmed that the customer was better off on a time of use tariff. It also advised the customer that he could revert to a general tariff rate if he wanted. It said that the customer would wait until he received his next bill before making a final decision.

[VIEW MORE CASE STUDIES](#)



Energy issues

Opening and closing accounts

Tariff assignment and tariff change requests: business



CASE STUDY

BILLING

Inappropriate tariff applied

A customer who ran a small fastening business recently moved the business from his home to a workspace in a new building. He received his first bill for \$675, of which \$58 was for consumption and \$617 was supply charges. He contacted his retailer and it indicated it would request a tariff change. He was then contacted and informed that the network had refused the request. The customer indicated that, due

to the nature of his business, there was only minimal usage and this was unlikely to change. He came to EWON seeking assistance to ensure he was on the correct tariff.

This complaint was referred to the retailer at a higher level for resolution, knowing he could return to EWON if an agreed outcome could not be negotiated.



CASE STUDY

BILLING

Retailer provides a solution to 12 month limit on tariff reclassification

A customer completed renovations at his supply address in late 2018, arranged a new meter to be installed and set up an electricity account. His first bill was higher than expected with supply charges of \$739.39. The previous meter's supply charges were around \$70. His retailer told him that it could not change the rate for 12 months as per their contract. The customer said there was no such clause in their contract and the network had advised him that the business should be on a cheaper tariff. The customer was dissatisfied with the incorrect billing, the lack of assistance from the retailer in resolving the issue

and the misleading contract advice, and approached EWON.

This complaint was referred to the retailer at a higher level for resolution. The retailer advised EWON that it had resolved the customer's complaint. It said that the tariff could not be revised until there was 12 months data but that it would accept payment on the cheaper tariff rate. It also said that the customer had agreed to pay arrears based on the more expensive tariff if the demand threshold is exceeded. The customer said this was extremely unlikely and was happy with this solution.

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Energy issues

Metering installation issues

While we are seeing a reduced number of customer complaints about digital meter installation delays, we are still seeing ongoing complaints about delays due to inadequate or incorrect information relating to work that needs to be performed before a digital meter can be installed. Customers in this situation are often left with no credit for exported generation.



CASE STUDY

BILLING / DIGITAL METER EXCHANGE

Confusion with meter responsibility led to installation delays

A customer requested a new meter from her retailer after she installed a new solar system. Following initial discussions between her retailer and distributor, the retailer advised that she was responsible for fixing a meter relay with hazardous materials in it, before it could update the meter.

The customer contacted EWON in mid-May 2019 to clarify what was required to have her new meter installed.

An EWON investigation established that the customer's retailer now considered the electricity distributor was responsible for removal of the hazardous material from the meter. However, the

distributor maintained that the metering provider engaged by the retailer could remove the material at the same time it installed the meter. Throughout the investigation there was confusion about the nature of the hazardous material.

The work to install the new meter was completed by the metering provider on 19 July 2019. The customer accepted a \$250 credit from her retailer as a customer service gesture for the delay. EWON advised the customer she could contact her retailer directly to request a review of the missed solar generation revenue due to the delay and that she could return to EWON if she was not satisfied.



CASE STUDY

CUSTOMER SERVICE / DIGITAL METER EXCHANGE

Delayed meter installation for new connection

A customer requested a new meter installation for a new connection in January 2019.

When the customer contacted EWON in late August, her new property remained un-energised and she told EWON she was using her neighbour's electricity. The customer also told EWON she had contacted her retailer several times but still had no meter or an installation date.

An EWON investigation established that the customer's meter installation did not proceed in

January as the site was not ready, however no further contact occurred until August 2019.

Following EWON's engagement with the retailer, the customer's property was energised on 21 August in preparation for the meter installation. The new meter was installed on 20 September 2019, following delays as the retailer had trouble locating the customer's property. It offered a \$350 credit to the customer's account as a goodwill gesture for the inconvenience caused.

[VIEW MORE CASE STUDIES](#)



Energy issues

Challenges experienced by customers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds

Customers from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds can experience unique difficulties when attempting to raise concerns with their energy or water providers, either through frontline staff or internal dispute resolution processes. Language barriers often mean these customers require the assistance of interpreter services and, while some providers offer these services through in-house specialists or the Translating and Interpreter Service (TIS), this practice does not occur industry-wide. This can mean CALD customers are forced to rely on personal advocates to assist with their complaints which can create additional issues where authority to act needs to be established.



CASE STUDY

CREDIT / CUSTOMER SERVICE

Retailer refused to organise interpreter services at both call centre and senior dispute resolution team levels

A customer contacted EWON using an Arabic interpreter after a retailer he had never held an account with sent him an electricity bill for \$900 and was threatening to record a default listing on his credit file. The retailer insisted that it had phone recordings demonstrating he agreed to an account, but the customer advised he could not speak English so considered this couldn't be true. EWON referred the complaint to the retailer at a higher level with instructions for it to contact the customer via an Arabic interpreter, informing the customer he could return to EWON if an agreed outcome could not be negotiated.

EWON was again contacted by the customer who said that while the retailer had called him, it had not used an interpreter. When he requested an Arabic interpreter, the retailer refused and terminated the call. EWON contacted the retailer to escalate the complaint, again instructing that an Arabic interpreter was required.

The customer returned to EWON and advised that the retailer had contacted him again without an

Arabic interpreter and said it would not organise an interpreter and he would need to take steps to do this himself. EWON phoned an Arabic interpreter through TIS then conferenced the call to the retailer's dispute resolution team with the customer and interpreter on the line.

When the customer next contacted EWON, he advised that initial discussions with the retailer via the interpreter had been successful and the retailer confirmed he had not consented to the electricity account and that all charges would be waived with further updates to come. Three weeks passed and the customer had not received an update from the retailer and it also failed to respond to the messages he had left requesting a call back.

EWON contacted the retailer and confirmed that the debt had been recalled from the retailer's debt recovery agents and had been waived. The retailer also confirmed that the customer had not been default listed. The customer was satisfied that this resolved his complaint.

[VIEW MORE CASE STUDIES](#)



Energy issues

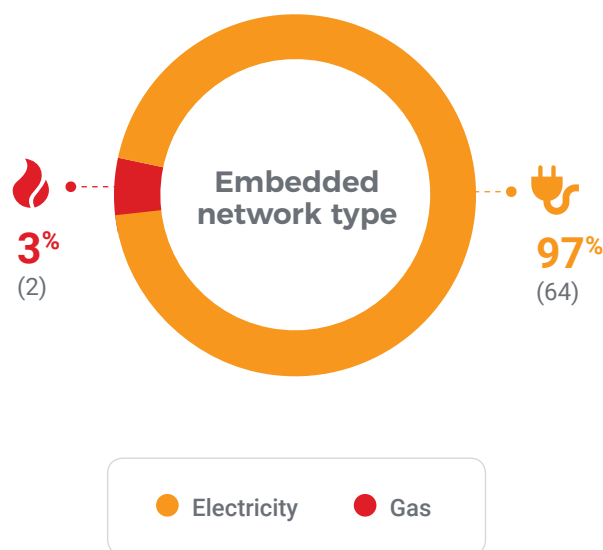
Embedded networks

This quarter EWON opened 66 cases and closed 64 cases from customers whose electricity or gas is supplied through an embedded network.

Figure 5: Cases opened and closed

Embedded network identity	Complaints received
Residential park operator - non member	2
Residential park operator - member	1
Exempt seller - non member	6
Authorised retailer – EWON member	54
Not allocated	3
Total	66

Figure 6: Embedded network type complaint





Energy issues

Embedded networks

Figure 7: Top 12 issues for this quarter

Primary and secondary issue		Cases
1	High, disputed	21
2	Poor service	8
3	Opening/closing account	8
4	Error/other	7
5	Failure to respond	7
6	Energy/water	7
7	Other	5
8	Tariff/price increases	4
9	Incorrect advice/information	3
10	Delay	3
11	Disconnection/restriction, impending	3
12	Payment difficulties, current/arrears	3
Total number of complaints		79

● Billing ● Customer service ● Credit ● General



Energy issues

Embedded networks



CASE STUDY

BILLING

A high bill complaint from a small business owner identified multiple billing errors

A small business operator who owned a business within an embedded network complained to her retailer about a monthly electricity bill of \$4,070. The retailer explained that the bill was based on an actual reading of her electricity meter. The customer then contacted EWON and complained that her bill for the same period the previous year was only \$1,770. Additionally, she had undertaken a number of energy saving measures since then, such as installing more efficient lights and appliances. EWON referred the matter to the retailer at a higher level.

Four weeks later the customer returned to EWON to complain that she hadn't received an outcome for her complaint. EWON contacted the retailer and requested the customer's meter data and billing information. The retailer explained that although the customer's meter digitally recorded usage in 15

minute intervals, 24 hours a day, the retailer programs meters to display cumulative readings for the peak, shoulder and off-peak time bands. The displayed cumulative readings are then read manually by a meter reader.

EWON's review of the customer's meter data and billing indicated that the customer was billed accurately by the retailer from 31 January 2017 to 7 August 2018. The retailer's investigation identified some discrepancies in the billing for the period 8 August to 12 December 2018 which resulted in adjustments to the customer's account for \$800. EWON also arranged for the retailer to attend the premises and check the meter to ensure that the customer was only being billed for electricity used by the business and not for common areas.

[VIEW MORE CASE STUDIES](#)



Water

The number of water complaints received this quarter (232) increased by 4.0% compared to the corresponding period in 2018 (223) and compared to last quarter (223).

High bills continue to be the most complained about issue

for water customers contacting EWON. Other complaints to EWON about water providers relate to customer service issues and maintenance of network assets, as seen in Table 4 below.

Figure 8: Water complaints

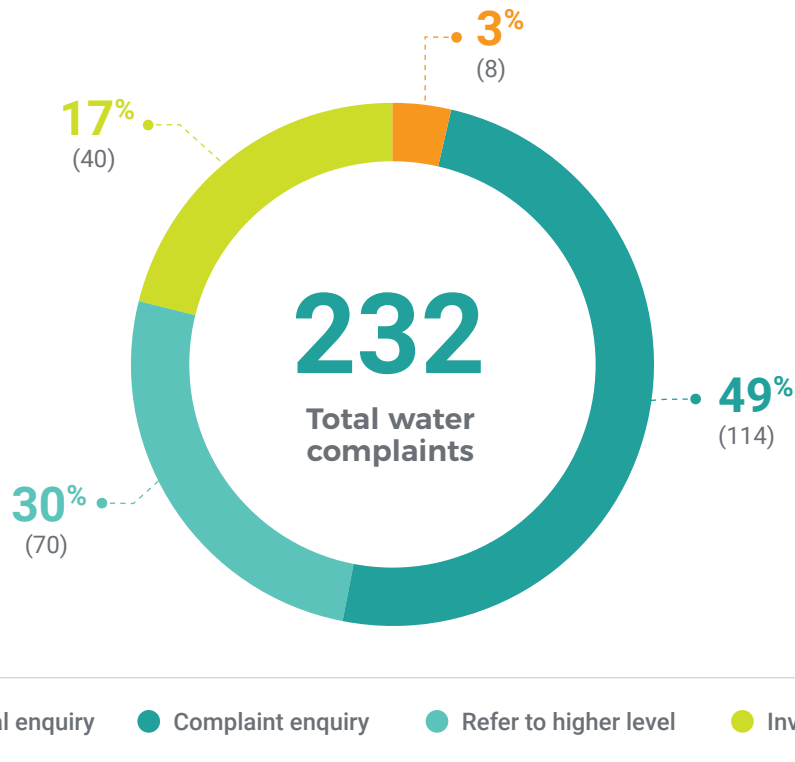


Figure 9: Top 6 water issues

Primary and secondary issue	Jul-Sep 2019	Apr-Jun 2019	Jan-Mar 2019	Oct-Dec 2018	Jul-Sep 2018
1 High, disputed	50	38	40	40	45
2 Poor service	34	29	35	31	43
3 Energy/water	31	28	26	28	26
4 Failure to respond	29	33	29	29	29
5 Network assets/maintenance	18	14	17	13	17
Total number of issues per quarter	162	142	147	141	160

● Billing
 ● Customer service
 ● General
 ● Land



Water issues



CASE STUDY

CREDIT

Water restricted for non-payment

An advocate contacted EWON in August 2019 as a customer's water had been restricted due to arrears of \$1,256. The customer recently lost his job and was experiencing significant financial difficulties, he was still waiting for a response about his application for Centrelink benefits. The customer also had a two-year old daughter and was using a neighbour's water supply to care for her.

The retailer informed EWON that the customer had previously been threatened with restriction in 2018. While the customer agreed to a payment arrangement of \$50 per week at that time, only four payments were received, the last of which was in December 2018. In March 2019, the retailer referred the customer to a community centre to apply for the Payment Assistance Scheme (PAS) and \$300 in assistance was granted on the basis that the customer agreed to and meet a payment arrangement of \$60 per fortnight. As the agreed payments were not made, the \$300 PAS assistance was not applied.

Due to the length of time since the last payment and the failed payment plans, the retailer advised that it would lift the restriction if the customer was able to provide an upfront payment of 50% of the current arrears, or agree to a payment plan and meet the payments over a period. Alternatively, the customer could contact a community agency to obtain PAS assistance or a financial counsellor's report.

Given the customer's inability to make payments towards the arrears, EWON encouraged the advocate to have the customer seek assistance through a community agency and a financial counsellor. EWON kept the case open for three weeks while it followed up with the advocate on their efforts to seek assistance. Ultimately, the advocate and customer did not engage with EWON's recommendations and we closed the complaint. At the time the complaint was closed, the customer's water supply was still restricted.



CASE STUDY

BILLING

Alleged breach of water restrictions

A customer contacted EWON to advise he received a warning letter about violating water restrictions, indicating he had used a sprinkler on the morning of 27 September 2019. He disputed the warning on the basis no one was home that day and the water was not in use. He spoke with the water provider and was told his complaint would be reviewed and someone would call him back within three to five business days.

EWON advised the customer that as he had only raised his complaint with the retailer that day, it was reasonable to allow the retailer the noted time to respond and that he could return to EWON if an agreed outcome could not be negotiated. The case was closed as a complaint enquiry.

[VIEW MORE CASE STUDIES](#)



Stakeholder meetings

Meetings	Attendees
1st Energy	Ombudsman
AEMC	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Policy & Research
AEMC	Manager Policy & Research, Policy Officer
AEMC / NSW distribution businesses	Manager Policy & Research
AEMC/AER/IPART	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Governance
AEMO	Manager Policy & Research, Investigations Officer
AEMO	Manager Policy & Research
AER	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Policy & Research, Policy & Research Officer
AGL	Ombudsman
Alinta Energy	Ombudsman, GM Investigations
ANZEWON and Treasury Workshop	Ombudsman
ANZOA Hardship Interest Group	Senior Policy Officer
ANZOA Policy and Research Interest Group	Manager Policy & Research
Arc Energy	Ombudsman
Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, Energy, Environment and Science Group	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Policy & Research, Policy & Research Officer
Endeavour Energy	Manager Policy & Research
EWON – Fair Trading	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Policy & Research, Manager Governance, Investigations Manager.
EWON Member Induction	Ombudsman, Deputy Ombudsman, GM Investigations, GAP Member Liaison Officer
EWON Operational Advisory Group meeting	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Governance
Financial Counsellors Association NSW	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Communications & Outreach



Stakeholder meetings

Meetings	Attendees
Financial Rights Legal Centre	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Communications and Outreach, Manager Policy & Research
Jemena	Manager Policy & Research
Momentum Energy	Ombudsman
NSW Department of Customer Service	Manager Policy & Research, Manager Governance
NSW Department of Planning Industry and Environment	Manager Policy & Research, Senior Policy Officer
NSW Department of Planning Industry and Environment	Manager Policy & Research
NSW Department of Planning Industry and Environment	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Policy & Research
NSW Department of Planning Industry and Environment	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Policy & Research, Manager Governance, Policy Officer
NSW Department of Planning Industry and Environment	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Policy & Research, Manager Governance, Policy Officer
NSW Department of Planning Industry and Environment	Deputy Ombudsman, Community Engagement Officer, Policy & Research Officer
NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Communications & Outreach
NSW distributors	Manager Policy & Research
NSW Environment and Heritage	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Communications & Outreach, Community Engagement Officer
NSW Ombudsman	Deputy Ombudsman, Policy & Research Officer
Office of the Australian Information Commissioner	Ombudsman, Deputy Ombudsman
Origin Energy	General Manager Investigations
Powershop	Ombudsman
Red Energy	Ombudsman
Regulators Quarterly Meeting	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Governance, Policy & Research Officer



Events & conferences

Event/Conference name	Attendees
AICD - Boardroom Effectiveness for Women	Ombudsman
AICD NFP Breakfast seminar	Deputy Ombudsman
Anglicare Food and Financial Assistance Conference	Deputy Ombudsman
ASIC Towards a new understanding of vulnerability	Deputy Ombudsman, Quality Assurance Officer
Behavioural Insights Breakfast	Deputy Ombudsman, Executive Officer, HR Manager
Energy Consumers Australia Board Stakeholder Forum	Deputy Ombudsman, Manager Communications & Outreach
Financial Counsellors Association of NSW 2019 Conference	Ombudsman
IPAA 2019 Annual Women's Executive Luncheon	Ombudsman, General Manager Finance & Corporate Services, Manager Quality Assurance
IPAA Masterclass: The alchemy of change	General Manager Finance & Corporate Services, Executive Officer
IPPA On the Couch with Rodd Staples, Secretary NSW Transport	Deputy Ombudsman
NSW Farmers Federation Conference	Deputy Ombudsman

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Charging incorrect tariffs

Meter exchange and residential tariffs

Customer not informed of choices or benefits of time of use tariff

A customer installed solar and had the associated meter upgrade. He was then moved to a time of use tariff. He discussed this with his retailer. It informed him that it was a network decision and that it had no say in what tariff applied. He then contacted the network provider which informed him he should contact the retailer to have the tariff adjusted. The customer said that he had also requested information from his retailer about the impact of a time of use tariff, but it could not assist him. EWON referred this matter to the retailer for resolution at a higher level.

The retailer told EWON that the complaint was satisfactorily resolved. The retailer said that it had reviewed the customer's last bill and confirmed that the customer was better off on a time of use tariff. It also advised the customer that he could revert to a general tariff rate if he wanted. It said that the customer would wait until he received his next bill before making a final decision.

Retailer not providing time of use tariff

A customer had requested a time of use tariff from her retailer but was told that she would need a new digital meter. When the customer's meter was installed, she contacted her retailer and was told she would be put on a time of use tariff. She was later contacted by the retailer and informed she could not be put on a time of use tariff, despite its earlier advice. This matter was referred to the retailer for resolution at a higher level, however the customer returned to EWON as she was dissatisfied. The retailer had contacted her and confirmed that she could not have a time of use tariff and suggested she change retailer.

EWON contacted the retailer. It explained that the network had recently changed its time of use tariff and that it did not currently have a retail product to match this change. It confirmed that the customer's only option was to change retailer. The retailer also acknowledged that the customer had been provided with conflicting information and provided a \$300 credit in recognition of poor customer service.

Change of tariff despite existing contract

A customer advised EWON that after he changed his meter, he was charged a time of use tariff on his next bill. He considered that he had a contract for a flat tariff that ran until 31 August 2019. A week after the bill, he received a letter from his retailer stating that it would respect his flat rate tariff by charging him the same rate for each time band. This contradicted the bill that he had received so he emailed the retailer but received no response.

The customer was referred back to the retailer for resolution at a higher level, knowing he could return to EWON if an agreed outcome could not be negotiated.

Retailer not offering seasonal time of use tariffs

A customer received a bill that he thought was high. He checked his time of use rates and then checked with his network provider. He called EWON to complain that his retailer was not charging the network's seasonal pricing.

EWON explained that the retailer was free to set whatever tariff it chose and that, if he wanted a seasonal time of use tariff, his only option was to change retailers. This complaint was treated as a complaint enquiry.



Charging incorrect tariffs

Meter exchange and business tariffs

Customers preferred tariff not provided

After a customer had installed solar and had a new meter, her tariff was changed from a small business anytime tariff to a small business time of use tariff. She contacted her retailer but found its explanations confusing. The customer wanted to return to her old tariff as the daily supply charge had increased from \$0.81 to \$5.65 a day.

This complaint was referred back to the retailer at a higher level for resolution. The retailer subsequently contacted EWON and informed us that the customer had been put back on their preferred tariff and that it had also credited the customer's account with the difference between the two tariffs for the period prior to the reversion.

Tariff assignment and tariff change requests: residential

Business tariff applied to residential customer

A customer had moved into a new property in November 2018 and opened an electricity account. However, the residential site had been registered as a business, and a business tariff had been applied to her account in error. She had twice been advised by her retailer that the tariff would be changed from business to residential but this did not occur. She considered the repeated delays and lack of action to address the billing issue poor customer service.

This complaint was referred to the retailer at a higher level for resolution. The retailer informed EWON that it had resolved the complaint by updating the tariff to residential and providing a manual credit to the account for the difference between the business and residential tariff.

Business tariff applied to residential customer

A customer purchased a property and arranged for a new electricity connection and account with his retailer. He then discovered that the site was classed commercial even though it had never been a commercial site and the certificate of compliance for the connection clearly stated residential. The customer also applied for the Low Income Household Rebate and was denied this because the site wasn't residential.

He reported this problem to his retailer but did not receive any response. He recontacted the retailer which indicated it had allocated a case manager who would contact him. He was then told that the case manager was away and would contact him upon their return. The customer then received another bill. He approached EWON for assistance in getting his account classified correctly, for the billing to be adjusted and the rebate to be applied from the time he opened the account.

This customer was referred to the retailer at a higher level for resolution, knowing he could return to EWON if an agreed outcome could not be negotiated.

Retailer not providing adequate information about tariff options

A customer had read about a new opt-in demand tariff and requested it from his retailer, but was told it was not available. He said that he had an interval meter and should be eligible for this tariff but the retailer could not give him an explanation.

This complaint was referred to the retailer at a higher level for resolution. The retailer advised EWON that it had resolved the customer's complaint. It confirmed that the demand tariff was available for customers with digital meters but the customer only had a basic time of use meter. It offered to install a digital meter for the customer. It also provided information to the customer on how to view interval data and thus determine if the new demand tariff was beneficial. The customer had agreed to this process and was satisfied with the outcome.



Charging incorrect tariffs

Tariff assignment and tariff change requests: business

Retailer changes tariff to more appropriate level

An advocate contacted EWON and said they ran a small coffee kiosk. He said that the daily supply charge is currently \$6.42 and when he called his retailer, he was promised on a number of occasions that it would be reduced to \$1.42 and that the bills would be reissued based on this figure. He was then told by his retailer that the bills and supply charge could not be changed.

This complaint was referred to the retailer at a higher level for resolution. The retailer told EWON that it had resolved the customer's complaint by changing the customer's tariff, recalculating the bill and applying a credit of \$269.

Wrong tariff threatens business viability

A customer moved her small business to the supply address and opened an account with her preferred retailer. Her first quarterly bill arrived for \$956. Of this amount \$900 was the supply charge and \$56 was for usage. She said that she was only at the premises for four hours a day and only used lights and occasional air conditioning.

She contacted her retailer and it told her that it would only change the tariff after 12 months of consumption, and that she needed to speak to the network provider. When she contacted the network, it referred her back to the retailer. She said that other occupants of the building experienced the same problem and were able to change their tariff. The customer could not afford the bill and said she would not be able to pay such bills for 12 months before a tariff reduction.

This customer's complaint was referred to the retailer at a higher level for resolution, knowing she could return to EWON if an agreed outcome could not be negotiated.

Retailer changes tariff to more appropriate level

An advocate advised EWON that a business was having trouble with the tariff charged for one of their sites. The site was receiving a daily supply charge of over \$6.00 despite having the least usage of all their sites. Other sites with greater usage were only charged around \$1.70. She contacted the retailer and which agreed to change the tariff, but no action was taken. When she called to follow up, she was advised that there was no record of her inquiry. She then made an email complaint requesting an investigation but received no response.

The advocate was frustrated with the lack of action and delays and said that retailer has shown poor customer service. This complaint was referred back to the retailer at a higher level for resolution. The advocate received an email saying the tariff change request was being processed but she had not received any further information, so she returned to EWON.

EWON contacted the retailer and it explained that it had requested the tariff adjustment. It had also found that the tariff had been incorrectly allocated when the customer's meter was changed. It placed a hold on the account and said that it would manually adjust the billing back to the meter exchange date once the tariff adjustment was finalised. When this was finalised the retailer recontacted EWON and confirmed that it had provided the customer with a \$925 credit to reflect the cheaper tariff backdated to the meter installation date.



Charging incorrect tariffs

Tariff assignment and tariff change requests: business

Business tariff only option

A customer and two family members purchased a townhouse with three residences and common lights for the driveway. After receiving a disconnection notice from a retailer, the customer contacted it to create an electricity account for the common lights. The retailer later said the meter was configured for a business tariff, but this wouldn't make a difference to the billing. The customer received a backbill and noticed the supply charges were high due to the business tariff.

He called the retailer to resolve the billing issue and was directed to the network provider. The network told him to have his retailer apply to reconfigure the meter and change the tariff. He submitted the application, but the retailer rejected it before submitting it to the network. The customer was dissatisfied with the incorrect information provided and the incorrect tariff, and wanted a residential tariff. This complaint was referred to the retailer at a higher level for resolution.

The customer returned to EWON as he was dissatisfied with the retailer's response. It had advised that the billing would not be adjusted because the lights were common area lights and therefore required a business tariff. EWON confirmed that in this network area, strata common area electricity accounts are classified as business accounts and charged at business rates. The customer was referred to the AER to enquire about additional network tariffs and the process involved.



Metering installation issues

Solar installation complete but meter installation delayed

A customer, who had just installed solar generation, contacted EWON in July 2019 to clarify the work required before a meter installation, including who was responsible for the work.

Upon investigation, the customer's retailer confirmed that it had received a request from the customer for the digital meter to be installed on 11 June 2019. The metering provider visited the customer's premises on 27 June 2019 but did not complete the installation for safety reasons due to a missing relay in the meter. The retailer told the customer to engage a Level 2 Accredited Service Provider electrician to install the required external relay. The electrician advised the customer there was already an external relay that could be used if required.

The retailer also said that the metering provider did not proceed with the work due to a hot water label on the meter switchboard. The retailer advised the customer that he would be required to install an external relay for a hot water system at the premises. The customer was confused why this was required when he had received advice the hot water system had an internal relay.

The retailer offered to reimburse the customer 50% of the relay installation cost, after which its metering provider could proceed with the meter installation. This installation was completed on 21 August 2019. The retailer also agreed to contact the customer to discuss a suitable credit for the metering installation delays.

Tenant received estimated bills because of non-functioning meter and landlord not prepared to repair switchboard

A tenant noticed that the meter was not functioning and reported this to his retailer. It sent a metering provider to replace the meter. This could not occur because the technician identified that a new mains switch was needed. The landlord was delaying the repair and the tenant was receiving estimated bills.

EWON advised the tenant to contact NSW Fair Trading about the issue with his landlord. He expressed concern about this as he felt his tenancy could be jeopardised. EWON reassured him that seeking advice was not making a complaint. We also pointed out that if the switchboard was not upgraded then he would continue to receive estimated bills. EWON also provided him with a referral to his retailer to discuss how the estimated bills were calculated and how they related to his actual usage. We encouraged him to return to EWON if the retailer did not provide an adequate explanation.

Customer could not afford cost of switchboard upgrade

EWON was contacted by an advocate concerning a customer who had been informed that his meter needed to be upgraded. After the metering provider attended the site, the customer was informed that the meter board had asbestos and that the wiring needed replacing. The advocate was concerned because the customer was in financial hardship and could not cover these costs. Unfortunately, EWON could only advise that the cost of bringing the meter box up to standard was the responsibility of the customer and currently there is no specific program to assist with these costs.



Problems with meter installations

Customer given wrong information about required changes to switchboard

A customer approached EWON as he had been told that he needed to make changes to his meter box before a digital meter could be installed, however he did not know the specific requirements. He was seeking a report from his retailer which he could give his electrician. This matter was referred to the retailer at a higher level for resolution. The customer returned to EWON as the retailer had not provided a written report but had informed him that he needed an isolation switch or otherwise supply would be cut for all of the units in the block. He had employed an electrician who had told him that there was already an isolation switch. He even provided a diagram of the existing wiring to the retailer.

When EWON investigated, initially the retailer indicated that it had received the diagram and was waiting for a response from the metering provider. Then the retailer indicated that it was not a problem with isolation of supply, but it was the positioning of the meter board. EWON contacted the customer to inform him of this and he was able to arrange for the work to be done. The customer then informed EWON that the installer had contacted him and was due to install the meter the next day and later confirmed that this had been done successfully. The customer indicated that he would be following up with the retailer seeking compensation for the delay in installation and the unnecessary electrician's time.



Customers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Customer told she will need to pay for an interpreter

A customer contacted EWON via a French interpreter to advise she had a payment plan to pay \$70 per week for her electricity account from a balance of over \$900. She had paid the balance off in late 2018 but was still getting phone calls and letters every week from the retailer to pay the bill. EWON referred the complaint to the retailer at a higher level with instructions to contact the customer via a French interpreter. EWON informed the customer she could return to us if an agreed outcome could not be negotiated.

The customer returned to EWON to advise that although the retailer contacted her, it was by someone who did not speak French and told her that she would need to pay for an interpreter herself. She did not consider this reasonable. The retailer advised it would call her again but this did not happen.

EWON investigated and determined that the original balance for the payment plan had been paid in full. However, additional bills had since been issued which had not been paid. As a goodwill gesture in recognition of the poor customer service, the retailer offered to apply the missed pay on time discounts, leaving a balance of \$900. The customer was satisfied with the resolution.

Difficulties for a refugee with limited English skills

A customer, who had just installed solar generation, contacted EWON in July 2019 to clarify the work required before a meter installation, including who was responsible for the work.

Upon investigation, the customer's retailer confirmed that it had received a request from the customer for the digital meter to be installed on 11 June 2019. The metering provider visited the customer's premises on 27 June 2019 but did not complete the installation for safety reasons due to a missing relay in the meter. The retailer told the customer to engage a Level 2 Accredited Service Provider electrician to install the required external relay. The electrician advised the customer there was already an external relay that could be used if required.

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The retailer offered to reimburse the customer 50% of the relay installation cost, after which its metering provider could proceed with the meter installation. This installation was completed on 21 August 2019. The retailer also agreed to contact the customer to discuss a suitable credit for the metering installation delays.

Engaging with CALD customers at EWON outreach events

A Turkish-speaking advocate attended an EWON community outreach event to dispute her husband's electricity bills as he had received a high bill of \$990 which was causing financial difficulty. The customer was overseas at the time and the advocate spoke very limited English. Due to the advocate's language difficulties, EWON worked with her to nominate someone she was comfortable with as a translator. EWON rang the advocate's daughter on the spot and she provided translation assistance during the face-to-face discussion with the advocate.

EWON reviewed the bills the advocate had brought and confirmed that the customer was receiving Government rebates. However, the customer was not on a market contract and so was not receiving any discounts.

EWON was not able to investigate the billing without authority from the customer but provided the advocate with information factsheets in Turkish. EWON told the advocate that if she could obtain authority from the customer, we would be able to investigate her complaint and that we would be able to organise phone interpreter services if she called us.

EWON also introduced the advocate to Anglicare staff at the event who explained to her she could apply for financial aid through the NSW Government Energy Accounts Payment Assistance scheme.



Embedded networks

EWON helps a small business owner operating in an embedded network transfer to an on-market energy offer to take advantage of a solar feed-in tariff

The owner of a small business operating within an embedded network contacted an authorised energy retailer to obtain an on-market energy offer so he could take advantage of the solar PV system he had installed at the premises. The energy retailer advised the customer that he would need to obtain a National Meter Identifier (NMI) for his site before he could open an account with it and the customer provided the retailer with the details of the Embedded Network Manager, whose role is to facilitate retail competition within an embedded network. The customer then contacted EWON in November 2018 to complain that he had waited for eight to nine weeks without a response from the retailer. The matter was initially referred to the retailer at a higher level.

The customer returned to EWON in April 2019 to advise that the Embedded Network Manager had provided him with an NMI as requested by the retailer. The customer was told that the existing electricity meter needed to be removed and that a new meter would be installed so he could transfer to an on-market contract with a solar feed-in tariff. The customer complained that his business could not operate effectively without power for the time it takes to replace the existing meter. EWON contacted the retailer to negotiate the transfer of the new NMI to the retailer and for a new meter to be installed. The new meter was installed for the customer's premises on 3 July 2019 and the account was transferred to the new retailer. The retailer also offered to provide the customer with a \$1,000 credit to his new account because of the delay.

A residential move-in customer was confused about whether they are living in an embedded network

EWON was contacted by a customer soon after he moved into a new rental property. The customer had trouble opening an energy account and it was unclear whether the building was an embedded network. The customer advised EWON that he had contacted his real estate agent who was unable to provide him with clear information on how to open an energy account. The customer had been unable to contact the building manager or strata committee.

The customer provided EWON with the property's address and EWON made enquiries to determine what company was providing retail energy services to the address. EWON confirmed that the residential complex was an embedded network and emailed the customer with the details of the energy retailer providing retail services to the premises.

A residential park customer complains to EWON about being disconnected

EWON received a complaint from a customer after the electricity supply to his home was disconnected on 3 September 2019. He had moved into the residential park two months earlier and had not received a bill for his electricity usage. His calls to the park management about the issue were unanswered.

EWON contacted the residential park operator to help the customer get reconnected. The park operator investigated the issue and later advised that power to the site was reconnected on 4 September 2019 and that the disconnection had been caused after a circuit breaker tripped. The operator also advised EWON that the park's phones and internet were down from the afternoon of 3 September 2019 to the morning of 4 September 2019 which was why the customer was unable to reach the park operator. The park operator offered to waive two weeks of energy charges for the customer as a gesture of goodwill for the unplanned outage.



Water

Sewerage overflow

A customer contacted EWON and advised that in July 2018 sewerage overflowed in her front yard. She contacted the water provider which investigated the issue and advised that the problem was within the customer's property. Based on the provider's advice, she arranged for a plumber to inspect the site. After initial attempts to unblock the sewer failed, the plumber excavated the yard around the piping to investigate further. The plumber identified that the water provider failed to re-connect the sewer pipe to the mains after recent work on the sewerage main, resulting in a blockage. The provider arranged to rectify the error but additional excavation work was required, including demolishing part of the customer's retaining wall. In addition, the excavation work damaged the cables for the customer's electrical supply. The customer also advised that the provider's contractor told her that they would back-fill the excavation, however this had not occurred.

Following completion of the plumbing work, the customer submitted a claim to the provider for a \$14,000 invoice for the plumber, repairing the retaining wall, and repairs to the electricity supply. The customer did not claim for the time she had taken off work. The customer also requested that the excavated ground be filled in and re-turfed. When she was unable to come to an agreement with the provider, she approached EWON.

The provider advised EWON that it had initially agreed to negotiate costs for the plumbing work with the customer's plumber, but only offered to pay \$2,000 toward the costs of the new retaining wall as goodwill because it considered the existing retaining wall was already damaged prior to when the plumbing works began. It denied the claim for the electrical repairs as it argued this was the result of the plumber's actions. The provider also declined to cover costs for further restoration of the site, arguing that no soil had been removed and it had been restored to a safe state. It noted that the customer's new retaining wall was higher than the old one and it was that created the appearance of an unfilled state.

As a result of EWON's investigation, the provider agreed to cover electrical repair costs of nearly \$4,000 in recognition of the issue occurring as a result of work to rectify the initial failure to connect the customer's private service to the mains. In the interest of resolution, the provider also agreed to cover the full cost to replace the retaining wall on the basis that it was fair and reasonable that the customer be restored to the same financial position she was in before the event. The provider 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. The customer was satisfied with this resolution.

Subsidence of stormwater channel causes ponding of water following wet weather

A customer contacted EWON to advise that after rainfall an open stormwater channel in her area often fails to drain away and forms ponds. There are no fences or safety railings cordoning the area off which she believed to be a safety risk. The provider refused to provide her with a senior contact with whom she could discuss her concerns.

EWON referred the complaint to the retailer at a higher level, informing the customer she could return to us if an agreed outcome could not be negotiated. The customer returned from the referral dissatisfied with the provider's response and requested that EWON investigate her complaint.

The provider advised EWON that subsidence had caused a sag in the storm water drain causing occasional ponding in a small section following wet weather. Rectification works had occurred 20 years prior to raise the base of the stormwater channel and install a valve to drain ponded water but a small sag remained. The retailer explained this had no impact on flooding in the catchment or the operation of the drain. The provider's current procedures were to drain any ponded water after wet weather and it was satisfied this approach was appropriate. Due to priorities in capital funding, the provider advised that this current management approach would continue, subject to review.

EWON concluded that the provider's current management and maintenance approach to the storm water channel was reasonable and closed the complaint.
