



A message from the Ombudsman

There's no doubt we're living in a time where Ombudsman schemes are being challenged to step up and make a difference. EWON staff are now in their fifth month of working from home and our Investigations Team is beginning to see an increase in the number of customers who are experiencing extreme stress.

Almost five months after COVID-19 completely altered the way we work and live, many customers are now facing higher bills and possibly accrued debt. However, reflecting the additional support provided to customers by governments, regulators and providers, we have seen an overall 23.4% decrease in complaints to EWON this quarter.

While we welcomed the extension of the AER's Statement of Expectations until the 31 October 2020, which will continue to protect customers experiencing vulnerability, we expect complaints to increase as government stimulus support is reduced – although it is difficult to know when that will occur. Uncertainty is the current norm. For that reason, I strongly encourage all community workers to advise their clients to set up an affordable payment plan to prevent debt accrual and potentially, disconnection.

EWON's virtual community engagement and social media is focused on reminding customers to contact their energy/water provider to ask for assistance now – before debt levels become unmanageable. You can watch my video message on how EWON can assist with increased energy bills resulting from the winter months and COVID-19 [here](#) and catch up on our COVID-19 digital campaign that reached over 985,000 customers on Facebook and Instagram throughout May and June below.

Janine Young

Janine Young

Ombudsman | Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW

CASES RECEIVED:

April - June 2020

3,747

714

Complaint investigations

3,033

Enquiries, complaints and referrals

COMPLAINTS BY QUARTER



KEY ISSUES

BILLING	2,475
CUSTOMER SERVICE	1,173
CREDIT	555
DIGITAL METER EXCHANGE	276
TRANSFER	209
GENERAL	154

There may be more than 1 issue per complaint.

COMPLAINTS BY INDUSTRY



There were 15 non energy or non water related cases

2,988
Electricity

554
Gas

190
Water

EWON's case data varies in accordance with case progression and figures in this newsletter reflect case status as at 19 August 2020.

CASE STUDY

Café owner queries bill after COVID-19 shutdown

Before COVID-19 struck, Rob owned a café and paid monthly energy bills of between \$1,000 and \$1,500. When NSW went into lockdown Rob reduced his opening hours to seven hours a day, down from his usual eleven and used less appliances. But even these reductions weren't enough to keep his small business operating so in late April he closed his café doors and ended the lease a month later.

When Rob received his final May to June bill he was shocked to see it was \$1,077.94. The invoice also included arrears from the previous month, making the total bill \$2,116.11. Rob was surprised the bill was so high considering the café had been open for fewer hours so he contacted his provider to review the bill. His provider said a smart meter at the premises had recorded actual energy usage and the bill needed to be paid in full. Stressed and not able to afford the bill, Rob got in touch with us after not being able to resolve the issue with his provider.

We talked to Rob about his complaint and after further investigation with the provider confirmed that Rob's previous bills from March to June were actually based on estimated meter readings, not smart meter readings. Because there was a smart meter at the café, the provider obtained the correct data and adjusted the account in-line with the actual energy usage during that period.

Because of EWON's investigation, the total balance on Rob's account was reduced from \$2,116.11 to \$1,076.19. We also liaised with the provider on Rob's behalf, and it agreed to apply a missed pay-on-time discount of \$109.94, as well as a customer service gesture of \$150.00 to make up for the inconvenience caused.

After all the adjustments Rob's final balance was \$816.25 and he accepted the provider's offer of an extra three months to pay. Rob was impressed with our assistance and grateful for the positive outcome.

EWON's COVID-19 Awareness Campaign

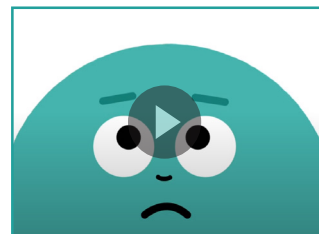
In May, we launched a digital awareness campaign to help energy customers understand the affordability options available to them during COVID-19. Targeting CALD and ATSI customers and seniors and Jobseeker recipients the campaign ran for six weeks between May and June, reaching 985,233 consumers on Facebook and Instagram.

To complement our digital campaign and reach ATSI consumers we also ran community radio ads across NSW in May. Voiced by EWON's Aboriginal Ambassador and well-known comedian Sean Choolburra, the ads used humour to encourage listeners to access EWON services if they required additional assistance during COVID-19. The campaign reached over five million listeners across the month and the ads were broadcast on 163 community radio stations.

To find out more about energy and water support click [here](#).



[Click to view](#)



[Click to view](#)



[Click to listen to Sean's radio ad](#)

Making energy switching easier for life support customers

The National Energy Retail Rules (NERR) require customers to provide medical confirmation to register for life support and the first entity they contact, either their retailer or distributor, becomes the customer's 'life support registration process owner'.

At a community outreach event involving a physical disabilities group in Blacktown, customers told EWON they were reluctant to change energy providers because of the expense involved with making an extra visit to their medical practitioner solely to provide confirmation of life support to a new provider.

This was seen as a barrier to switching retailers, and a cause of stress. After hearing this feedback we submitted a rule change request to the Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC) to amend the NERR to remove barriers to changing retailers for people who need life support equipment.

The AEMC has started consulting on the rule change request. Stakeholders are invited to provide feedback on the consultation paper by 3 September 2020.

Read more on the proposed rule change and have your say [here](#).



Fee reduction for residential parks

We recognise that in the last year residential parks have been significantly impacted by bushfires, drought and the COVID-19 pandemic. To try and reduce the financial burden residential parks are experiencing and support local businesses, we have changed our membership fees for 2020/2021 to support these members. Changes include:

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

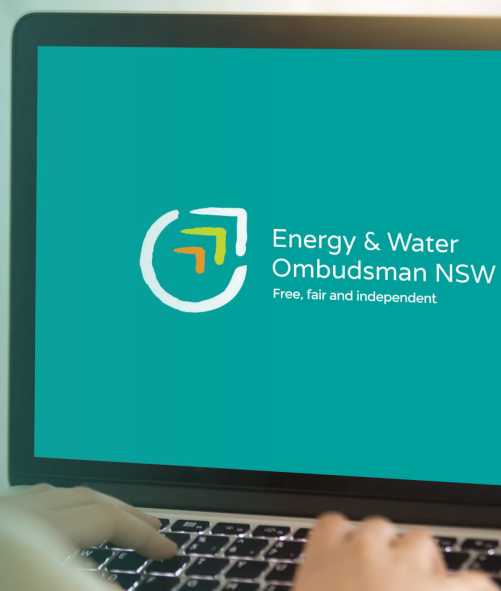
A big thank you to St Vincent de Paul

St Vincent de Paul agencies in NSW have announced they will no longer be participating in the Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) scheme this year. The scheme delivers vouchers to low income and vulnerable consumers. We want to take this opportunity to thank St Vincent de Paul staff, members and volunteers who have delivered the EAPA program for over 20 years. St Vincent de Paul liaised with our staff, attended EWON Bring Your Bills days and assisted the community to keep vulnerable consumers connected to their energy and water.

We look forward to continuing our work with St Vincent de Paul as they advocate for consumers and deliver alternate programs.

Presentation for Service NSW

When COVID-19 stopped our face-to-face community outreach, we developed an online presentation which was promoted across NSW. Aimed at community workers engaging with low income and vulnerable consumers, the presentations promote key messages about assistance during COVID-19. Service NSW asked us to present to staff who deliver the Cost of Living Program and the newly formed team delivering the Energy Accounts Payments Assistance program.



Energy saving tips that won't cost you your comfort

Spending more time indoors during the winter months as a result of COVID-19 means many consumers are likely to face bill shock when their next energy bill comes through.

We have a number of energy and water saving tips available on our website which can help consumers adopt a more energy efficient lifestyle. A few small changes can help everyone to save energy and money.

Find out more [here](#).



Business as usual at EWON during COVID-19

We have adapted our community outreach program to a number of virtual formats so that we continue to engage with community workers and provide support to customers. We have transformed our Bring Your Bills days to online sessions, where we partner with other organisations and community workers across NSW.

Customers can call in and receive free advice about their bills, rebates and other legal and financial advice. We also offer online information sessions on energy and water issues. If you would like to organise a session for your organisation, staff or interagency meeting please contact community@ewon.com.au.

Find more information [here](#).

Virtual Dungog Community Assistance Day

EWON and Hunter Water are partnering in a virtual support day for the Dungog community along with a number of other stakeholders including energy retailers and community and government organisations.

When: 9 September 2020

Cost: Free

Find more information [here](#).

Other events

Sydney Virtual Disability Expo

The Sydney Virtual Disability Expo links people with disabilities to products and service providers as well as leisure, lifestyle and technology options. Hear the Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW, Janine Young, speak at the Expo on Saturday 5 September 2020 at 11am.

When: 4 to 5 September 2020, 10am-3pm

[Register here](#)

Cost: Free

Legal Aid NSW webinar - Energy and water issues - help during difficult times

The Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW, Janine Young will present a webinar for Legal Aid NSW on energy and water issues. The webinar is for community workers and others who support people in NSW.

It will cover practical information to help your clients resolve problems with their energy and water providers—including help available for people experiencing financial hardship due to COVID-19. Join us on your computer or other device from anywhere in NSW.

When: Wednesday 9 September 2020, 11am–12pm (AEST).

[Register here](#)

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