



## A message from the Ombudsman

I am very proud to release EWON's *Approach to Dealing with Family Violence*, our first formal step to ensure we support consumers who are, or have been affected, directly or indirectly, by family violence. Through our complaints handling work over many years, we have been conscious of the impacts of family violence. Our focus now is to build support into the fabric of our day-to-day work and to work with members and stakeholders to drive sustainable outcomes. Read more about EWON's family violence initiatives in my [blog](#).

### AER retail markets report

The Australian Energy Regulator released its (AER) *Annual retail markets report 2018-19* on 27 November. For the first time it includes information about credit listing of customers by energy retailers and identifies that most credit listings are for debts of \$500 or less – a fact we see too often in our complaint management.

A customer's inability to pay a debt of \$500 or less is very often an energy affordability indicator. These customers need additional support from retailers such as a payment plan to pay a final bill; not a default listing. The AER's new Hardship Guideline obligations require retailers to improve their work with customers including by offering them affordable payment plans. Another driver of default listings, in our experience, is that final bills are not forwarded to new addresses provided by customers - home or email – an easy fix for retailers.

Importantly, customers who are default listed should avoid engaging credit repair agents – many charge significant fees for work EWON undertakes at no cost to the consumer.

### 2018/2019 Annual Report

*21 years of EWON – then and now*, was released in October. It provides comprehensive information about EWON's 2018/2019 activities and also highlights from our rich history. If you haven't seen it yet, download it from our website or watch a [short video](#) overview – we'd love your feedback!

### Energy retailer assistance for people affected by bushfires

As bushfires continue to burn across NSW, our thoughts are with those who have been affected. In addition to drought assistance, energy retailers are offering consumers affected by bushfires a range of assistance including bill credits, waiving debt and providing advice about accessing government assistance. This assistance is just a phone call away – so ring your retailer.

Best wishes for the festive season.

Janine Young

Ombudsman | Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW

### CASES RECEIVED: July - September 2019

5,603

1,353

Complaint investigations

4,250

Enquiries, complaints and referrals

### COMPLAINTS BY QUARTER



### KEY ISSUES

BILLING	3,372
CUSTOMER SERVICE	1,731
CREDIT	1,300
TRANSFER	391
DIGITAL METER EXCHANGE	338
MARKETING	72

There may be more than 1 issue per complaint.

### COMPLAINTS BY INDUSTRY



EWON's case data varies in accordance with case progression and figures in this newsletter reflect case status as at 16 October 2019.

## Welcome to our new Board Directors



**Craig Memery**  
Community Director



**Rod Stowe**  
Community Director



**Kate Temby**  
Community Director



**Rob Amphlett-Lewis**  
Industry Director

EWON's Board is responsible for our corporate governance, budget approval and strategic direction. Our Board comprises an independent Chair, five Industry Directors from our electricity, gas and water provider members and five Community Directors who represent consumer interests.

Appointed from a large and high calibre cohort of applicants, our three new Community Directors bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience, representing the interests of consumers from different perspectives:

- Craig Memery, Policy Team Leader Energy and Water, Public Interest Advocacy Centre
- Rod Stowe, former NSW Fair Trading Commissioner

- Kate Temby, Executive Director, Strategy and Governance, St Vincent de Paul Society.

They fill roles vacated by retiring Community Directors Maria Good, Wayne Warburton and Max Bosotti. We thank them for their contribution to EWON over the years.

Iain Maitland from Ethnic Communities Council and Robyn Evans from the Salvation Army are continuing in their role as Community Directors.

Rob Amphlett Lewis from energy distribution company, Ausgrid, was elected by members as a new Industry Director at EWON's Annual General Meeting in November. He fills the position vacated by Jan Prichard from Origin Energy – thanks Jan for your contribution since 2012.

## Holiday opening hours

We will be closed for our Christmas celebration from midday on Friday 13 December. During this time, we'll only respond to messages relating to imminent or actual disconnections.

We reopen at 9:00am on Monday 16 December. If you wish to make a complaint, please use our online form [ewon.com.au/complaints](http://ewon.com.au/complaints).

We will close for the holiday period from 2pm on Tuesday 24 December 2019 and reopen for business as usual at 9:00am on Thursday 2 January 2020.

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## More help for embedded networks customers

In the past EWON's jurisdiction allowed us to receive and investigate complaints from embedded network customers, but our decisions were not binding on exempt entities because they were not our members. This has changed.

The AER's revised exempt selling and network guidelines require exempt entities servicing residential customers to become members of EWON. We now have 68 exempt entity members, covering 91 sites with 9,638 residential customers. Another 115 member applications are in progress covering 41,400 customers. If we receive a complaint from a residential embedded network customer whose energy provider is not yet a member, we will contact them to start the membership application process.

See our list of [current members](#).

## A new energy affordability regime – what to expect

Stronger protections are now available to customers who experience energy affordability challenges.

The AER introduced an enforceable *Customer Hardship Policy Guideline* in March 2019, aimed at helping consumers pay their energy bills. The Guideline requires energy retailers to provide consistent minimum standards of assistance, ensure affordability programs are easily accessible and put processes in place to identify customers who need assistance.

Specifically, the new Guideline requires retailers to:

- consider expanded hardship indicators, such as disconnection
- not impose unreasonable barriers to entry
- train all contact centre staff about affordability support obligations
- refer customers to the Energy Ombudsman in their state if the customer is being denied affordability support
- use non-stigmatising language such as 'affordability' instead of 'hardship'.

Customers offered affordability programs receive different payment options, better energy plans, tips on energy efficiency, and information about government concessions, assistance schemes, energy rebates and financial counselling



## Community workers

If you're a community worker and identify instances where retailers are not meeting the new *Customer Hardship Policy Guideline* requirements, please let us know by emailing [policy@ewon.com.au](mailto:policy@ewon.com.au). This will help us identify and report teething problems with the rollout of the Guideline. You can also submit a complaint on behalf of your client at [ewon.com.au](http://ewon.com.au) or by calling us on 1800 246 545.

services. It is critical these programs are equitably available to consumers who would benefit from them.

All energy retailers have now updated their affordability programs in response to the Guideline. Customers can find the policy on their retailer's website or ask for a copy to be posted to them.

For more information, visit the AER's website, [aer.gov.au/consumers/my-energy-bill/help-for-customers-in-hardship](http://aer.gov.au/consumers/my-energy-bill/help-for-customers-in-hardship).

## Community outreach update

### Earlwood and Woy Woy

We held two very successful Bring Your Bills Day in October – one in the inner western Sydney suburb of Earlwood and the other in Woy Woy on the Central Coast.

Around 150 people attended the Bring Your Bills Day in Earlwood. We collaborated with NSW State Member for Canterbury, Sophie Cotsis MP, to reach local culturally and linguistically diverse communities - specifically Greek, Korean, Vietnamese and Arab speaking residents.

Like the Bring Your Bills Day in Woy Woy held in April this year, the event on 24 October attracted around 200 residents. Special thanks to Coast Community Connections for hosting the day and helping make it such a success. We'd also like to thank the community and government services and members that attended.

### Orange Anti-Poverty Forum and Bring Your Bills Day

EWON planned to travel west to Orange to hold our annual regional Anti-Poverty Forum on 13 November and a Bring Your Bills Day on 14 November. We had to postpone the events due to the bushfires, to ensure that residents, participating organisations and our staff were safe. We have rescheduled these events for 24 and 25 March 2020 respectively and look forward to meeting community workers and assisting residents in the Central West. More information will be available soon at [ewon.com.au/events](http://ewon.com.au/events).

### Anti-Poverty Week Forum

Every year we hold a forum for community workers in a metropolitan area during Anti-Poverty Week in October. The Forum raises awareness of the link between energy and water affordability and poverty, and the assistance available for customers. This year we held it in Cabramatta, one of the most disadvantaged areas of Sydney. It was a great success, with over 80 community workers, energy and water providers and government and community services coming together to discuss current and emerging issues.

### Supporting drought-affected communities

The Drought Communities One Stop Shop organised by the Rural Financial Counselling Service visits towns in NSW to support farmers, small businesses and residents in drought affected areas.

EWON looks forward to joining some of the trips planned over the coming months. Organisations interested in taking part can contact Jennifer Jeffrey, Farm Liaison Officer Northern and Central Regions, on 0428 265 024 or via email at [flo@rfcsnr.org.au](mailto:flo@rfcsnr.org.au).



## Consultative Council Meeting

Our Constitution requires we hold two Consultative Council meetings (CCM) each year to provide an opportunity for community workers to speak directly to energy and water providers and raise issues that impact on their clients.

In November we held our first CCM for 2019/2020, with over 100 attendees. The Ombudsman and a panel of community and industry representatives discussed the ongoing problem of energy affordability. Community workers outlined the gaps they see in affordability support from energy retailers, and retailers detailed what their companies are doing to assist customers who experience affordability issues.

### Feedback from the day

#### What has the best part of the day?

- The video highlights of the Annual Report were fantastic. The topics covered by the panel were very interesting. Very informative.
- The opportunity to meet so many people from different organisations. The intro session is worthwhile as it gives you an idea of the good range in attendance. The presentation and panel session were also great.
- Loved it being so interactive, I feel like it was a positive step towards open communication.
- Well presented, well organised, strong engagement and goodwill.

Please subscribe to our newsletter at [ewon.com.au/subscribe](http://ewon.com.au/subscribe) to continue receiving it electronically



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