



Energy & Water
Ombudsman NSW
Free, fair and independent

ECA Foresighting Forum

Panel discussion: Retail Outcomes for Consumers

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➤ Access to Ombudsman services

All consumers need access to free, fair and independent dispute resolution

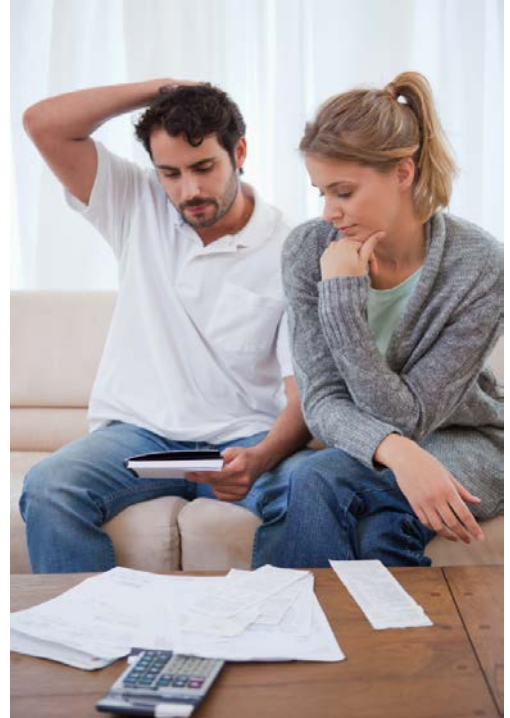
- Customers of energy providers operating as exempt entities need access to the same consumer protections customers of authorised retailers have.
- The AER is proposing expanding EWON's jurisdiction and that of energy Ombudsman offices in other states, to include exempt entities that service residential customers.
- This is likely to come into effect in NSW on 1 July this year.
- This is the result of sustained work over several years by individual Ombudsman offices and the ANZEWON network.
- We will continue to monitor the situation and may see small business exempt entity customers included over time.



➤ Clear pricing information

- Inconsistent language, discounts and charges make it very hard for customers to compare energy offers.
- EWON has called for clear guidelines on this in submissions to the ACCC and the AER.
- The AER's work in improving the Energy Price Fact Sheets retailers make available should make direct comparisons between competing offers easier.

Faced with the difficult decision of choosing the right energy offer, customers make no decision and stick with their current provider.



➤ Managing customers in hardship

We need a more proactive and informed approach to managing hardship.

Identifying issues early

- Billing is the single biggest issue customers complain to EWON about – it featured in 57% of our complaints in 2016/2017 and high bills are consistently the top billing issue.
- Credit issues factored in 21% of all complaints in 2016/2017.
- Yet the response to hardship continues to be reactive and one size fits all.
- Technology is available to help customers manage their electricity use – why not help them access it?

Tailoring responses

- Not all customers are the same and the issues underpinning their hardship are different.
- Retailers need to try to understand the issues impacting on their customers.
- We've seen how successful proactive hardship management can be through our collaboration with Origin Energy in remote Aboriginal communities.

Proactive approaches

“EWON’s ‘Bring your bill’ days, where customers present their bills to the Ombudsman and participating retailers, to get an understanding of their energy costs, obtain hardship assistance and find better offers, has proven to be a useful community outreach program and is a good way of engaging customers without access to the internet”.

Edited excerpt from Origin Energy’s submission to the AER’s Customer Price Information Review

EWON would like to see more retailers leveraging their Reconciliation Action Plans, Domestic Violence Plans etc. to proactively identify and address issues, rather than waiting for customers to self-identify once their debt has reached unmanageable proportions.

➤ Increasing confidence in the energy sector

The energy sector is under intense scrutiny government and media scrutiny

- Complaints to EWON have been increasing since July 2016.
- In the October to December 2017 quarter, our electricity complaints were 32.8% higher than they were in that period the previous year.
- It's great to see customers reaching out for help, but it is concerning that so many people need it.
- Energy providers – especially retailers – need to win back confidence of policy makers and consumers.
- If this doesn't happen, we are likely to see greater government intervention in the energy market.





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