

Message from the Advisory Council Chair

At our last meeting for 2018-19, I posed the question to Advisory Council members, "How would you describe the year?" A number of themes were canvassed and the standout word was 'complexity.' Whilst this is less applicable to water, it has certainly characterised the energy environment over the past 12 months.



Energy consumers face a complex array of retail choices, and new technologies and products are on their way. For electricity retailers, there have been legislative changes aimed at protecting and empowering consumers. For both industry and consumers, the uncertainty in national energy directions remains an issue.

Advisory Council members remarked how busy they had been during the year. Consumer representatives noted it took a lot of effort to keep the impact on consumers front and centre as changes to the energy market are made. This is an increasing workload that is taking up a lot of their resources.

For the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland, there have been national and state-based policy reviews to respond to, as well as preparing for new entrants to the energy market in the form of embedded networks. More complex matters are also being referred to the Office of the Energy and Water Ombudsman: a positive sign for consumers.

Over the past 12 months, the Advisory Council has continued its key roles of monitoring the Ombudsman's independence and providing advice on policy and procedural issues relevant to the *Energy and Water Ombudsman Act 2006*.

Perusal of the year's minutes also highlighted that the Advisory Council talked about customer vulnerability and hardship at most meetings. This was in terms of the impact of Queensland's hot weather, drought and floods and concerns about high bills; on matters such as concealed leaks for water consumers and the protections available; on tenants' rights; and on improved Australian Energy Regulator Customer Hardship Policy Guidelines aimed at improving protections for customers experiencing hardship.

In February, I joined the Ombudsman, Jane Pires, at the third annual meeting of Ombudsman schemes from New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and New Zealand (Utility Disputes New Zealand). Our interesting agenda included the implications and timing associated with applying Consumer Data Rights in the energy sector; jurisdictions' progress in the incorporation of exempt sellers or embedded networks into their schemes; and the disruption of emerging technologies to Ombudsman schemes' current business models and footprint. On the latter issue, it was agreed that there were significant implications for consumer protections in a far more diversified and uncertain energy landscape.

The Office of the Energy and Water Ombudsman is planning for a changing operating environment and adjustments to its traditional business model. Nonetheless, day to day the team continues to provide a free, fair and independent dispute resolution service for unresolved complaints with electricity, gas or water suppliers. In 2018-19, a total of 8584 cases were received, a drop of 17 per cent from the previous year, yet eight per cent higher than cases received in 2016-17. Of the top five cases closed in the reporting year, billing issues represented 38 per cent, credit complaints 13 per cent, problems with provision nine per cent, customer service seven per cent and issues with transfers four per cent.

The percentage of cases managed as an investigation remained high, indicating that those matters being referred to the Office are becoming more complex and routine matters are being dealt

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with more effectively by scheme participants. This is a positive trend for consumers, and in part demonstrates the Office’s influence in promoting good dispute resolution practice.

Advisory Council members perform an important service. They provide valuable insights to the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland and are committed to the role they perform.

I would like to thank our Council members for their contribution and support this year: Andrew Bills (Origin Energy), Ian Jarratt (Queensland Consumers Association), Laura Barnes (Queensland Council of Social Service), Robyn Robinson (Council on the Ageing), Mary McLean (Financial Counselling Australia), Jennifer Gates, (Energy Queensland), Simone Bridge (Unitywater), Iain Graham (Red Energy and Lumo Energy), and Rosemarie Price (Ergon Energy).

Whilst Advisory Council membership has been quite stable during the past 12 months, there have been some changes. Industry representative Andrew Bills resigned from the Council in September following his resignation from Origin Energy and appointment to the position of Chief Executive Officer of CS Energy.

Since 2014, Andrew has been a significant contributor to the Advisory Council, always engaged, supportive and knowledgeable.

Also in September 2018, Laura Barnes, Senior Manager for Policy, Advocacy and Capacity at Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) was officially appointed to the Council as a consumer representative. Laura has brought a Queensland-wide and authoritative viewpoint, reflecting QCOSS’s long-standing involvement in consumer energy issues.

In April this year David Ackland, Executive Manager of Customer Relationship at EnergyAustralia, was appointed to the Advisory Council. He has significant customer experience credentials in a company with a large customer base.

It has been a pleasure to work with the Energy and Water Ombudsman Jane Pires and her team again over the past 12 months. Council members have observed efforts to improve the Office’s reporting capability, to contribute to policy submissions and reviews, and to best position the organisation in a dynamic energy environment. The Ombudsman and her team are very willing to have open discussions with the Advisory Council and this makes for a productive working partnership.

Anna Moynihan
Chair

④ **Advisory Council to the Energy and Water Ombudsman**

The Advisory Council provides expert advice to the Energy and Water Ombudsman and the Minister responsible for energy and water about the effective and efficient conduct and operation of the EWOQ scheme. This helps to ensure the scheme is fair and effective for consumers and suppliers.

The Advisory Council:

- monitors the Energy and Water Ombudsman's independence
- advises the Ombudsman on policy, procedural and operational issues relating to the *Energy and Water Ombudsman Act 2006*
- advises the Minister responsible for energy and water on the funding of the Ombudsman's functions
- at the end of the financial year, advises the Minister on the Ombudsman's independence and functions of the office during the financial year.

The Advisory Council meets every quarter and includes an independent chair and at least six other members appointed by the Minister. There must be an equal number of other members representing industry and consumer interests. Under the Act, at least two of the industry members must represent the interests of energy retailers, at least one must represent the interests of energy distributors, and at least one must represent the interests of the water entities. Members are appointed on the Chair's recommendation, after consultation with scheme participants, consumer groups and community welfare organisations. See Appendix 5 for more information.

2018-19 MEMBERS

Independent Chair

Anna Moynihan (from February 2016 to February 2021)

Industry representatives (distributors and retailers)

David Ackland – EnergyAustralia (from April 2019 – October 2020)

Simone Bridge – Unitywater (from October 2017 to October 2019)

Jennifer Gates – Energy Queensland (from May 2018 to October 2019)

Iain Graham – Red Energy and Lumo Energy (from October 2017 to October 2019)

Rosemarie Price – Ergon Energy (from August 2016 to October 2019)

Consumer representatives

Laura Barnes – Queensland Council of Social Service (from July 2018 to October 2019)

Ian Jarratt – Queensland Consumers Association (from September 2007 to October 2019)

Mary McLean – Financial Counselling Australia (from October 2017 to October 2019)

Robyn Robinson – Council on the Ageing Queensland (from August 2016 to October 2019)

Member appointments completed

Andrew Bills – Origin Energy (from September 2014 to April 2019)