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Our connections

One of our functions is to promote the Energy and Water Ombudsman scheme to those who may need our assistance. In 2019-2020, we assisted customers across Queensland and used a range of community outreach activities and information channels, including mainstream and social media, to build awareness of our services.

Our priorities this year have included connecting with older Queenslanders, consumers in regional areas, and customers in financial difficulty, who we reach through our relationships with financial counsellors and community services that help those in financial hardship. We continued to foster relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities too, with highlights including visits to Mt Isa and Yarrabah.

Community outreach

During 2019-2020, we attended financial literacy workshops and spoke to members of the public about their energy and water bills. We promoted our services through presentations at community events and attended 'bring your bills' events across the state.

During Seniors Week, we attended the Positive Ageing Fair in Cairns, and the Dickson Seniors Expo and Bonner Seniors Expo in the Brisbane region in October. We also attended the Brisbane Disability Expo in November.

We built and maintained strong connections with community workers and financial counsellors by attending the Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) and Financial Counsellors' Association of Queensland (FCAQ) conferences.

Supporting regional Queensland

Our three Regional Managers based in Cairns, Rockhampton and Brisbane oversee our connections in their regions. During 2019-2020, their teams travelled to Toowoomba, Scenic Rim, Mt Isa, Yarrabah and Yeppoon, connecting with community leaders and providing information to help customers understand their rights and responsibilities when making a complaint about an issue within our jurisdiction.

Our Mt Isa Bring Your Bills Day, co-hosted by Centacare North Queensland and the Office of Fair Trading, was a great success. We helped consumers with their energy bills and worked alongside Ergon Energy to help some attendees get their issues resolved on the spot.

Indigenous outreach

Our Indigenous outreach program aims to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to become confident and informed consumers, and ensure they are aware of their right to assistance with issues relating to their energy services, and water services for customers in South East Queensland.

During 2019-2020, we connected with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support networks and supported the annual National Aborigines and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week festivities in Cairns, Rockhampton and Brisbane in July. These events provided a great opportunity to showcase our services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customers. We also supported National Reconciliation Week events.

Connecting online

We continue to promote our services online through our website and social media. These channels have become even more important since community outreach events were put on hold in response to COVID-19.

Our social media reach has continued to grow during 2019-2020 by increased interaction with stakeholders and the community, informing Queenslanders about how we can help with their energy and water problems.

We also contributed to a series of webinars hosted by QCOSS focused on managing household energy efficiency, energy hardship and concessions and finding the best energy deals.

   #EWOQId

 www.ewoq.com.au

 Visit www.ewoq.com.au/community to learn more

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Our peer networks

We maintain strong links with the Ombudsman community as a member of the Australian and New Zealand Ombudsman Association (ANZOA) and the Australia and New Zealand Energy and Water Ombudsman Network (ANZEWON).

ANZOA

Committed to high standards of independence, impartiality and effectiveness, ANZOA members observe the six benchmarks for industry-based customer dispute resolution: accessibility, independence, fairness, accountability, efficiency and effectiveness.

In addition to regular informal contact with other Ombudsman offices, the Ombudsman attended three ANZOA meetings throughout the year.

Our team members are actively involved in ANZOA's eight interest groups, including:

- complaints management
- customer financial hardship
- indigenous engagement
- information technology for business
- people and development
- policy and research
- public relations and communications
- systemic issues and investigations.

ANZEWON

ANZEWON is a network of energy and water Ombudsmen and utilities complaints Commissioners from across Australia and New Zealand, who work together to explore and address industry and policy developments that affect Australian and New Zealand consumers.

The network supports collaboration and learning to avoid duplication of effort which ensures members can progress projects with greater efficiency and effectiveness.

During 2019-2020, ANZEWON members commissioned a joint research paper by the University of New South Wales titled *What will energy consumers expect of an energy and water ombudsman scheme in 2020, 2025 and 2030?*

We attended regular ANZEWON meetings throughout the year, including hosting the ANZEWON Chairs and Ombudsman meeting in Brisbane in February 2020, where we discussed complaint trends, governance issues and the impact of summer bushfires.

Since COVID-19, we've continued to connect via video conference discussing responses to COVID-19 and how we can continue to work with industry to support consumers. This has included talking with scheme participants about their COVID-19 recovery plans so we can assist where possible in the future.

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Our contribution to public policy

Working with government and regulators

We regularly contribute to policy and legislative reviews undertaken by government, regulators, not-for-profit organisations and other bodies. We draw on our experiences and insights with customers and suppliers to inform energy and water policy decisions.

In 2019-2020, we contributed to public policy in the following ways:

Queensland Government

Review of Queensland's energy legislation

Following consultations on an issues paper released by the Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy in 2018, a regulatory impact statement was published in October 2019 for the review of Queensland's energy legislation. We contributed to this review, which included proposals to modernise Queensland's state energy laws by creating a future focused framework.

Review of Queensland's dispute resolution for residential embedded network customers

We supported the Department's consultation on dispute resolution for residential embedded network customers. This examined options to provide residential customers who are supplied electricity through embedded networks access to the free dispute resolution service provided by EWOQ.

Following this consultation, the Mineral and Energy Resources and other Legislation Amendment Bill passed through Queensland Parliament in May and amended the *Energy and Water Ombudsman Act 2006*. These amendments allowed for changes to be made in the future to the kinds of energy providers and customers EWOQ can assist, and it is anticipated that changes of this nature will happen in the near future when a new regulation under the *Energy and Water Ombudsman Act 2006* is created.

Once this regulation is in force, it will expand our jurisdiction to include complaints about embedded network operators (exempt sellers) and provide Queenslanders who live in embedded networks – like apartment buildings, caravan parks and retirement villages – access to our free, fair and independent dispute resolution service.

ACCC

We made a submission to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's Guideline on Prohibiting Energy Market Misconduct Bill and contributed to their consultation on the New Energy Tech Consumer Code.

AEMC

We made submissions to the Australian Energy Market Commission about:

- regulating conditional discounting
- introducing metering coordinator planned interruptions
- consumer protections in an evolving market: New energy products and services.

AER

We wrote a letter of endorsement to the Australian Energy Regulator supporting the customer service incentive scheme.

Our Reconciliation Action Plan



One of our greatest achievements in 2019-2020 was launching our second Reconciliation Action Plan — our Innovate RAP — which outlines our commitments towards reconciliation for the next two years.

Our reconciliation journey

As a free, fair and independent dispute resolution service, we're passionate about creating equal opportunities for all, and a culture of respect and understanding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Our first reconciliation action plan—our Reflect RAP—launched in October 2018. This 12-month plan outlined how we would engage, strengthen and maintain our relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The Reflect RAP gave us amazing opportunities to turn our good intentions into real actions. We helped Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers understand that it's okay to complain if they have a problem with their electricity, gas or water providers – and that their complaints should be treated respectfully.

We expanded our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outreach program and learned more about the needs and challenges of electricity supply in remote communities and energy and water issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers broadly.

Continuing the conversation

The aim of our Innovate RAP is to continue the conversation started by our Reflect RAP to create positive change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples both within EWOQ and in the communities we assist across Queensland.

As part of our commitment to reconciliation over the next two years, we'll:

- continue our community outreach to strengthen and grow our networks and partnerships
- develop and maintain relationships within the communities we serve to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples become confident and informed consumers
- provide a service with manners, respect and courtesy by observing cultural protocols and participating in cultural learning.

 Visit www.ewoq.com.au/rap to learn more

Our connections

Through our reconciliation journey, we are fostering professional and community partnerships to strengthen our connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and stakeholders across Queensland.

Our partnerships include:

- Australian and New Zealand Ombudsman Association (ANZO) Indigenous Engagement Interest Group
- Thriving Communities Partnership
- Far North Queensland Indigenous Consumer Taskforce.

How many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers complain?

From 1 July 2019, we started asking our customers whether they identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, to provide a more accurate insight into the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customers who use our service. This enables us to monitor, determine and report if there are industry trends affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers and engage with industry about the challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers.

330 cases closed for customers identifying as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both.

284
complaints

41%
billing

38%
credit

By comparison, for complaints where the customer did not identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, 52 per cent were about billing and 17 per cent about credit in 2019-2020.

Billing = high or disputed bills, metering faults, billing errors, rebates and concessions.

Credit = payment difficulties, hardship and disconnections.