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# Our priorities

We are committed to providing a high-quality, effective and confidential service for residential and small business customers who are unable to resolve issues with their electricity, gas or water supplier.

With offices in Brisbane, Cairns and Rockhampton, we work directly with Queensland customers and suppliers to investigate and resolve disputes.

## Vision

Providing Queenslanders an independent and effective way of resolving disputes with their energy and water suppliers.

## Values

These are the beliefs and philosophies that drive EWOQ. They are the principles that impact the employee experience we deliver as well as the relationship we develop with our customers, partners, and shareholders.

**RESPECT**



We act and interact with honesty and integrity – manners, respect and courtesy are a given.

**INTEGRITY**



Our actions are consistent with our words and we demonstrate our values through our actions.

**COMPETENCY**



We encourage each other and seek opportunities to learn and share our knowledge and ideas, to continuously improve ourselves and our service.

**ACCOUNTABILITY**



Each of us is accountable and responsible for our work, attitude and behaviours.

**EXCELLENCE**



We strive to be the best we can be and deliver excellent service and quality results.

## History

The Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland (EWOQ) was first established as the Energy Ombudsman Queensland (EOQ) on 1 July 2007, to provide a free, fair and independent dispute resolution service for small electricity and reticulated gas customers in Queensland.

On 1 January 2011, EOQ became EWOQ as our jurisdiction expanded to also investigate disputes about water suppliers in South East Queensland.

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# Our role

## Our role, structure and strategic direction

### Our role

#### Our primary functions are to:

- receive, investigate and facilitate the resolution of disputes between Queensland's small energy customers and small water customers in South East Queensland, and their energy and water retailers and distributors
- promote our services throughout Queensland to those who may need our assistance
- identify systemic issues arising from complaints received from our customers.

We achieve this through a process that is free, fair, independent, accessible, accountable, effective and efficient. We take into account the rights and responsibilities of customers and scheme participants under relevant legislation, codes and standards to achieve a fair and reasonable outcome.

### Our structure

EWOQ was established under the *Energy and Water Ombudsman Act 2006* to provide for investigation and resolution of particular disputes involving energy and water suppliers.

The Energy and Water Ombudsman is not subject to direction from anyone, however, must consider the advice of the Advisory Council to the Energy and Water Ombudsman in performing certain functions under the Act.

The executive management group assists the Ombudsman in the stewardship of EWOQ.

### Strategic direction

Each year, we develop a four-year strategic plan that guides our work and confirms our vision for the office.

#### During 2019-2020, our key priorities included:

- reviewing our scheme in terms of proposed legislative changes
- proactively promoting our services to small energy and water customers
- identifying systemic issues
- redeveloping our website and intranet
- upgrading our case management system
- implementing an electronic document and records management system
- undertaking a customer satisfaction survey and implementing monthly Voice of the Customer surveying
- commissioning an independent review
- reimagining our Indigenous artwork and launching our second Reconciliation Action Plan, the Innovate RAP.

A review of our performance against the strategic plan is on page 20.

### Looking forward

We continually review our business processes and customer service delivery to ensure we continue to deliver a timely, effective, independent and fair dispute resolution service to the people of Queensland.

#### In 2020-2021, our key projects include:

- implementing a new cloud-based telephony system
- introducing live chat on the new website
- reviewing our dispute resolution process to continuously improve customer experience
- improving our stakeholder engagement and community outreach programs
- contributing to public policy through insights and submissions
- continuing preparations to expand our services in the energy market, including embedded network customers.

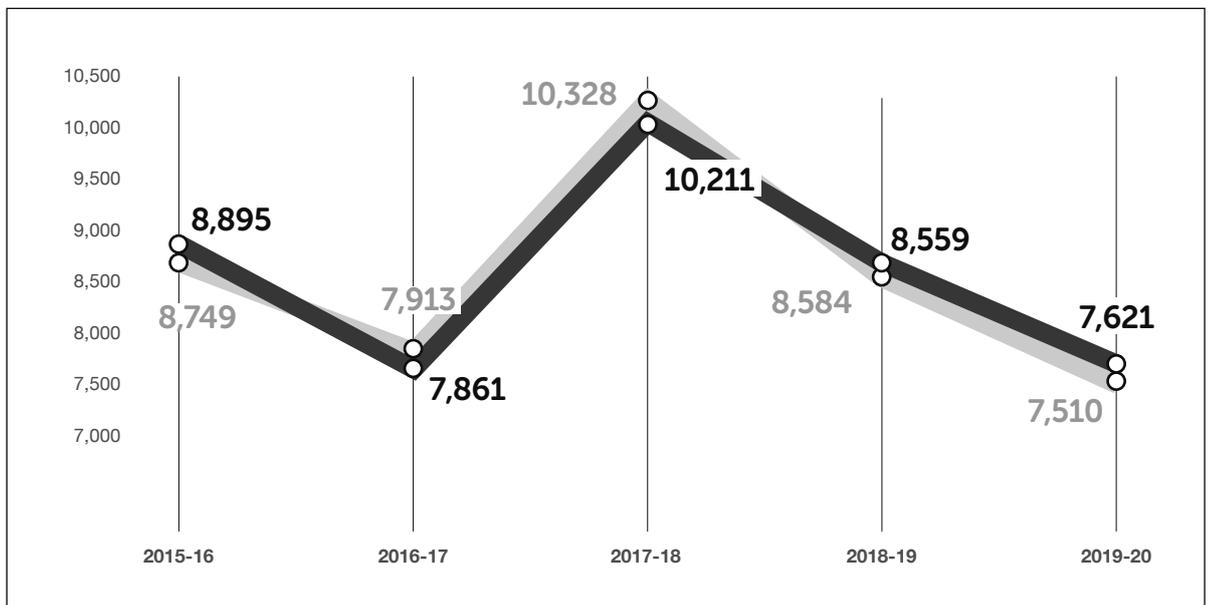
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# Highlights

**7,621**  
cases closed

electricity	gas	water
<b>84%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>6%</b>

## Cases received and closed by year



## Top 3 issues

-  1. Billing
-  2. Credit
-  3. Provision

## Who contacted us?

-  **95%** Residential
-  **5%** Small business

## Monetary outcomes

Negotiated a total of **1983** outcomes worth **\$878,849\*** for customers

### Top 5 monetary outcomes

	Number	Amount
1. Billing adjustment	401	\$352,205
2. Goodwill gestures	963	\$243,462
3. Debt waiver	102	\$75,945
4. Refund/EFT issued	96	\$74,376
5. Payment plan offered	234	\$53,604

\* figures rounded to the closest dollar.

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# A Message from the Ombudsman

As Energy and Water Ombudsman for Queensland, I am delighted to present the 2019-2020 annual report, a year where affordability and customer hardship have become areas of greater focus against the backdrop of summer bush fires in parts of Australia and the COVID-19 pandemic.

We've seen both the energy and water sectors proactively respond to these events by introducing a range of measures to support their customers.

In the energy sector, the Energy Charter demonstrated the power of energy companies coming together with a range of commitments to provide support to people and businesses impacted by COVID-19. We also saw the Queensland Government introduce a \$200 COVID-19 household utility assistance payment to provide relief directly to customers via their electricity bill. It has been reassuring to see government and industry act quickly to deliver these measures to ease pressure on consumers.

As the economic effects of the pandemic started to impact Queensland, our service played a role in supporting energy and water customers needing information about hardship support, rebates and concessions – many for the first time.

As a service, we moved our entire team to work from home in late March and continued to deliver our dispute resolution service without disruption to consumers. This resulted in unexpected benefits for our corporate culture as the physical location of team members became less relevant.

This year there has also been a continued spotlight on policy transformation within the energy sector as the review of Queensland's energy legislation continued. As part of the consultation process, we provided a submission to the review of the Queensland energy legislation issues paper, providing our response on the review of the *Energy and Water Ombudsman Act 2006* and the inclusion of residential embedded network customers in the EWOQ scheme.

In May, the Mineral and Energy Resources and other Legislation Amendment Bill passed through Queensland Parliament and amended the *Energy and Water Ombudsman Act 2006*. 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.

## Our cases

During 2019-2020, electricity made up the bulk of our caseload, accounting for 84 per cent of the 7621 cases closed. Our total cases closed fell from 8559 in

2018-2019, with a significant drop in general enquiries, referrals and refer backs.

We believe the steps taken by our scheme participants to improve their internal dispute resolution processes and to support their customers during COVID-19 has contributed to the downward trend of our case numbers. We encourage these initiatives as they are in the best interests of consumers. Our efforts to raise awareness of our service and continued promotion of the requirement for consumers to contact their retailer or distributor first is also reflected in this result.

The number of investigations our office closed continued to increase during 2019-2020. This is an area we add value by helping both industry and consumers resolve complex issues.

Billing disputes continue to account for more than half of the complaints we receive, followed by credit-related issues (including payment difficulties, hardship and debt listings), which is consistent with previous years. Our third most common area of complaint is provision, which are problems with new or existing connections, followed closely by customer service issues.

## Our contribution

As a free, fair and independent dispute resolution service for energy and water consumers, we are committed to ensuring our service evolves with consumer and member expectations.

Over the past 12 months, we have focused on a number of internal projects designed to improve our services for energy and water consumers – and their providers – and ensuring Queenslanders who need our help know what we do and how to contact us.

We are working to streamline our service and improve customer experience across case management, telephony and online channels. We have delivered significant improvements to our working environment for team members too, with a cloud-based electronic document and records management system and a new intranet.

The first phase of our new website, which launched in June, takes a mobile-first and customer-centred approach designed to make it easier for customers and members to quickly find the information and services they need.

Our case management system has been upgraded and will integrate with our new telephony system and

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website, incorporating enhanced call and customer functions, including live chat on the website and improved quality assurance and reporting.

We also completed a customer satisfaction survey, implemented regular Voice of the Customer surveys and commissioned an independent review of our service, assessing our complaint handling service and operations against the benchmarks for industry-based dispute resolution.

One of our greatest achievements in 2019-2020 was launching our second Reconciliation Action Plan – our Innovate RAP. Featuring our new Indigenous artwork, the Innovate RAP builds on the foundations of our Reflect RAP and continues our reconciliation journey. As the Ombudsman, I am committed to delivering the actions detailed in the RAP and to helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers know that it is okay to complain if they have a problem with their electricity, gas or water provider.

We look forward to contributing our insights to broader conversations with energy and water providers and community stakeholders in the interests of improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers.

## Our people

During 2019-2020, we continued to invest in and support our people. The groundwork we made last financial year in progressing flexible working arrangements and improving mobility across our teams paid dividends as our entire team moved seamlessly to the new working from home arrangements during March.

We have continued to focus on our people, capability and culture this year and developing the skills of our team to encourage career growth, development and strengthening our succession planning.

Throughout COVID-19, we continued to consult our managers and teams to support our people to perform at their best under the circumstances and reduce the uncertainty around return to work and workplace health and safety. Our move to a Microsoft 365 environment, incorporating Teams, SharePoint and Yammer, prior to the pandemic has allowed us to stay connected and collaborate effectively.

## Our connections

Community outreach and stakeholder engagement are an important part of our service.

Our outreach program during 2019-2020 focused on reaching consumers in regional areas, older Queenslanders 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, with highlights including visits to Mt Isa and Yarrabah.

While our planned face-to-face outreach activities were cancelled or postponed from late March onwards because of COVID-19, we have continued to create

opportunities to raise awareness of our services by other means, including webinars and mainstream media.

Engaging with our key stakeholders is integral to our service and we continue to look for new ways to develop and strengthen connections with our scheme participants, peers, community groups, government departments and industry regulators.

## Our future

This financial year we've continued our future focus, both in meeting the evolving needs and expectations of customers as well as the proposed legislative changes and an expanded jurisdiction.

With key projects delivered or close to completion, we are well placed to continue to improve our service delivery into the next financial year by working to deliver a better customer experience for all customers across all channels.

We are ready to meet the challenge of an expanded jurisdiction once the Mineral and Energy Resources and other Legislation Amendment Bill is implemented and are looking forward to welcoming the changes and possible new scheme members.

## My thanks

While the changes and challenges of the past 12 months have been significant, I am heartened by the resilience and agility of the energy and water sectors – and how much can be achieved when government and industry work together in the best interests of consumers for these basic essential services

I am grateful for the ongoing support and counsel of the Advisory Council, in particular Anna Moynihan, who has contributed significantly to the scheme over the past five years and who will conclude her term as Chair in the coming financial year. Also, to my peers in the Ombudsman community and my team for their business and industry knowledge and strong performance over the past 12 months, particularly in developing and implementing our rapid response to COVID-19.

I would like to thank our scheme members for their support and commitment to the projects we have undertaken over the past 12 months to improve our service.

While the next 12 months will undoubtedly bring new challenges and opportunities, I am confident we are well placed to continue delivering great results for Queensland's energy and water consumers.



**Jane Pires**  
Energy and Water Ombudsman

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# A Message from the Advisory Council Chair

It has been a year like no other. Weather conditions, including drought and higher average temperatures, signalled an early start to the 2019 bushfire season, with three events in South East Queensland in September. By early 2020, large swaths of the country were being devastated by catastrophic bushfires, with loss of life and communities damaged. Our February Advisory Council meeting minutes recorded our discussions about the effects of the long hot summer on power bills, and, conversely, a deluge which deferred pending water restrictions for customers supplied by the South East Queensland Water Grid.

At this meeting we also discussed an emerging coronavirus, with industry, community members and the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland (EWOQ) reviewing their business continuity plans and expressing concerns about the potential impacts. These are still unfolding for all of us, with the consequences of COVID-19 extending far beyond this 2019-2020 reporting period.

One of our key Advisory Council functions is to provide advice to EWOQ on current and emerging issues in the energy and water sectors and the implications for an external dispute resolution service for consumers. To help equip us in this role, the Australian and New Zealand Energy and Water Ombudsman Network (ANZEWO), of which EWOQ is a member, commissioned research by the University of Sydney to answer the question *What will energy consumers expect of an energy and water ombudsman scheme in 2020, 2025 and 2030?*

Encompassing six domains, the research report concluded that dispute resolution schemes were critical to the proper regulatory and compliance framework of the energy market. It also advised there was strong support for schemes expanding their jurisdiction to encompass more energy products and services.

From a Queensland perspective, the report was timely given the significant policy development work underway by the Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy. The release of its regulatory impact statements for energy legislation review and embedded networks provided the Advisory Council an opportunity to present a submission on two matters – optimal arrangements for the inclusion of embedded networks as scheme participants, and options for improving EWOQ's governance structure to introduce greater flexibility. In terms of the latter, our submission recommended the option of EWOQ transitioning to a company limited by guarantee as we considered this would deliver agility in a

dynamic energy environment. It would also bring EWOQ in line with its counterparts in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia.

We had the opportunity to discuss these and other issues with the Minister for Natural Resources, Mines and Energy, the Honourable Dr Anthony Lynham MP, who joined us virtually at our last meeting for 2019-2020.

Earlier in the year I had the pleasure of chairing the fourth meeting of the ANZEWO group held in Brisbane. Our busy agenda canvassed such issues as complaint trends, governance models, anticipated impacts for consumers after the bushfires, and recent independent reviews of Ombudsman schemes. We reviewed the current ANZEWO work program and settled on the priorities for the next 12 months.

For the Office of the Energy and Water Ombudsman, this year has involved a range of projects being undertaken, all with the aim of delivering the best EWOQ customer experience and improving the Office's effectiveness. A new telephony system, member portal and website redesign are on track, complemented by improved case management and electronic document and records management systems, and development of an integrated Voice of the Customer program. In addition, EWOQ's independent review is near completion and will deliver important advice on achievement against published performance benchmarks.

Business continuity plans stood EWOQ in good stead as it was able to transition 100 per cent of its team to working remotely in late March with less than a week's notice. The new arrangements under the leadership of Jane Pires and her management team are working very effectively.

In 2019-2020, a total of 7621 cases were closed, a drop of 11 per cent from the previous year. Of the top three cases closed in the reporting year, billing represented 52 per cent, credit 18 per cent and provision 11 per cent. Similar to last year, the percentage of cases managed as an investigation remained high, indicating that those matters being referred to the Office are becoming more complex and the more routine matters are being dealt with more effectively by scheme participants. This is a positive trend for consumers, and, in part, demonstrates the Office's influence in promoting good internal dispute resolution practice.

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There have been some changes to our Advisory Council membership this year. Chris Owen, Manager Customer Engagement, Gold Coast Water and Waste, City of Gold Coast, joined us in October 2019 as the water industry representative. Simone Bridge from Unitywater was the previous representative. At the same time, we were joined by Sharon Edwards as a community representative from North Queensland. Sharon is a financial counsellor with the Indigenous Consumer Assistance Network, known as ICAN. Mary McLean from Financial Counselling Australia was a previous community representative. We thank Simone and Mary for their contributions on behalf of their respective sectors, and welcome Chris and Sharon to the Council. We were sorry to see community representative Laura Barnes from QCOSS resign in May as she brought a wealth of knowledge and networks to our meetings. We wish her well.

I would like to thank other Council members for their contribution and support this year – Ian Jarratt (Queensland Consumers Association), Robyn Robinson (Council on the Ageing), Jenny Gates (Energy Queensland), Rosemarie Price (Ergon Energy), Iain Graham (Red Energy and Lumo Energy) and David Ackland (EnergyAustralia). I have appreciated their valuable insights and they have helped make my role as Chair very enjoyable.

It has also been a pleasure to work with the Ombudsman Jane Pires and her team again over the past 12 months. We appreciated the secretariat support provided by Jacqui Nelson. Every year is busy, but this year has brought unique challenges and EWOQ has been in good hands under Jane's leadership. Next year will also bring challenges, particularly in terms of customer hardship, as COVID-19 continues to impact on lives and livelihoods.

This is my last report as the Chair of the Advisory Council to the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland as my five-year term expires in February 2021. It has been a privilege to serve in this role and I wish EWOQ and Advisory Council members all the very best in ensuring energy and water consumers have access to an excellent dispute resolution service.



**Anna Moynihan**  
Chair

## 2019-2020 Advisory Council Members

### Independent Chair

**Anna Moynihan** (from February 2016 to February 2021)

### Industry representatives (distributors and retailers)

**Chris Owen** Gold Coast Water and Waste, City of Gold Coast (from October 2019 to October 2020)

**David Ackland** EnergyAustralia (from April 2019 to October 2020)

**Iain Graham** Red Energy and Lumo Energy (from October 2017 to October 2021)

**Jennifer Gates** Energy Queensland (from May 2018 to October 2021)

**Rosemarie Price** Ergon Energy Retail (from August 2016 to October 2021)

### Consumer representatives

**Ian Jarratt** Queensland Consumers Association (from September 2007 to October 2021)

**Robyn Robinson** Council on the Ageing Queensland (from August 2016 to October 2021)

**Sharon Edwards** Indigenous Consumer Assistance Network (from October 2019 to October 2021)

### Member appointments completed

**Laura Barnes** Queensland Council of Social Service (from July 2018 to May 2020)

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

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