

Media release



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Ombudsman reports 33 per cent increase in energy cases

Growing consumer interest in the energy sector has resulted in 33 per cent more electricity and gas cases over the past 12 months for the industry ombudsman, according to the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland (EWOQ) 2017-18 Annual Report, which was released last week.

Queensland's Energy and Water Ombudsman Jane Pires said more than 10,000 Queensland residents and small businesses sought help from her office during 2017-18 to resolve issues with their electricity, gas and water retailers and distributors.

"The top three issues for energy and water consumers during 2017-18 were billing, credit and provision, and we experienced an increase in each of these complaint types during the year," Ms Pires said.

"High bills, billing errors, problems with estimated bills, and errors with rebates and concessions were among the top billing complaints we received as the cost of energy continues to affect household budgets.

"We saw credit-related complaints increase too as consumers dealt with the effects of not paying their bills on time, including the threat of debt collection, the impact of debt-listing on their credit rating, and having their energy disconnected or water restricted because of non-payment.

"During the second half of the year, consumers also experienced delays in electricity connections while metering responsibilities transferred from distributors to retailers from 1 December 2017, along with an initial shortage in the availability of digital meters, which are now required for all new and replacement electricity meters."

Ms Pires said 86 per cent of EWOQ's cases during 2017-18 were about electricity, followed by seven per cent about gas and five per cent about water, with a 34 per cent increase in electricity complaints closed during the year.

"We've helped keep the power on for thousands of Queenslanders over the past 12 months by negotiating reasonable payment plans for large back bills, resolving situations where consumers felt pressured to switch energy retailers, and preventing disconnections," she said.

"While the total number of cases about gas is comparatively smaller than electricity, these too have increased over the past 12 months, including an investigation into who was responsible for a large bill caused by a gas leak, and problems with pensioner concessions being incorrectly applied to residential gas accounts.

"Despite a nine per cent decrease in water complaints during 2017-18, problems with water bills remain an issue, including a case where we negotiated a reasonable payment plan for a customer who was suffering financial distress as a result of a substantial water bill caused by an undetected leak.

"My team appreciates how stressful it can be for consumers to try and resolve their issues with energy and water companies, and we worked hard last year to close 83 per cent of cases within 28 days while also negotiating more than \$912,713 worth of outcomes for customers, including billing adjustments, goodwill gestures and payment plans.

"While this is a great outcome, it's important for those who are having problems with their energy or water supplier to contact the company as soon as possible to resolve the issue – and if you're having problems paying a bill on time, ask about payment options."

EWOQ is a free, fair and independent dispute resolution service for residents and small businesses who have unresolved issues with their electricity, gas and water suppliers. For energy, we can help those across Queensland, as well as water customers in south-east Queensland.

Please contact your electricity, gas or water supplier in the first instance to try and resolve your problem. If you can't resolve it directly with them, call us on 1800 662 837 or go to www.ewoq.com.au to lodge a complaint online.

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