

It is increasingly common for Australian consumers to turn to an industry-based alternative dispute resolution (ADR) scheme, if they are unable to resolve a dispute directly with their service provider. In fact, Australia probably leads the world in establishing schemes of this type. And, while they are described as an alternative to the court system, in reality, for many people who would not be able to afford court action, they are the only practicable option.

In June 2005, I was able to spend some time at the National Consumer Representatives Forum held in Melbourne. Three of EWOV's consumer directors, Mark O'Brien, John Mumford and David Headberry, also participated, as did the Ombudsman and members of the EWOV executive team. This forum is an annual event supported by EWOV, the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman, the Banking and Financial Services Ombudsman, the Insurance Ombudsman Service, the Financial Industry Complaints Service and the Insurance Brokers Dispute Facility. It provides a valuable opportunity for consumer representatives involved with industry-based ADR schemes to learn more about how our schemes operate and to raise and discuss common issues.

the Chairperson's message



An impressive line-up of speakers — from the schemes, and from the consumer, regulatory and industry sectors — covered a wide range of topics. They included various challenges facing the industry-based ADR sector; issues being dealt with by individual schemes; governance issues and director responsibilities; the role of our schemes in identifying systemic issues; potential barriers to consumer access; and the respective roles of schemes, regulators and government. While I do not need convincing about how important schemes such as EWOV are to the overall consumer protection framework, the forum certainly reinforced that for me.

2004/05 was a particularly challenging year for EWOV. With case receipt estimates greatly exceeded, it was necessary to approve additional operational funding to resource case work and allow the scheme to meet its obligations. The Board was impressed with the marvellous effort put in by all members of the EWOV team, as they ensured cases were closed within target timeframes and targets in relation to older cases were met. Given the pressures on the scheme, and the fact that key performance indicators were set at the beginning of the year on case estimates which were significantly exceeded, this was an extraordinary result. Achieving it also required streamlining of some of the scheme's case handling processes and the introduction of some new procedures. These changes, made to deal with the situation EWOV found itself in this year, will be reviewed for applicability moving forward.

This year also saw arrangements finalised for the LPG (Liquefied Petroleum Gas) industry to join EWOV from 1 July 2005. Revisions to EWOV's *Constitution* and *Charter* reflecting LPG entry were adopted by the Board and approved by the members. The Board is very pleased with how the Ombudsman has progressed this development to provide customers of Victorian LPG retailers with the same access to an independent dispute resolution body as natural gas customers.

There were also some important developments in EWOV's external environment during the year, in particular the move towards national energy regulation. In October 2004, the Board made a submission to the Ministerial Council on Energy's Issues Paper, *National Framework for Electricity and Gas Distribution and Retail Regulation*. Over the coming year, we will be monitoring further developments on the national front with interest and for how they may impact EWOV's operations.

Another recent external development which the Board noted with great interest was the State Government's May 2005 announcement of a Committee of Inquiry into Financial Hardship of Energy Consumers. The issue of billing-related disconnection has been on the EWOV agenda for some time now, and we hope to assist the Inquiry with relevant information from EWOV cases.

Thank you to all of the EWOV Directors for your contributions throughout the year and to the EWOV team for your hard work. I am delighted to have been re-appointed as EWOV Chairperson, for a further 3 years to November 2007, giving me the opportunity to help ensure our scheme continues to serve the community to the same high levels it always has.



The Hon. Tony Staley
EWOV Chairperson

