

The EWOV scheme was essentially set up to help Victorian residential and small business customers with complaints they aren't able to resolve directly with their electricity, gas and water providers. Higher usage customers may also lodge complaints, but they're more often in a position to resolve matters directly.

ISSUES WE DEAL WITH

EWOV handles most of the issues which will arise between customers and their energy and water providers:

- the provision and supply of, or failure to provide or supply, electricity, gas or water services
- billing
- credit and payment services
- disconnections and restrictions
- bills, billing and payment arrangements
- refundable advances (security deposits)
- land and land access, including vegetation management issues.

We can also investigate:

- matters raised with the scheme by the Essential Services Commission
- matters referred to us by a scheme participant, with the consent of the customer
- the concerns of third parties directly affected by the activities of a scheme participant (where the provider's activity affects someone who is not their customer — such as the marketing of electricity or gas to the general public, vegetation management or network augmentation).

HOW WE GROUP ISSUES

EWOV uses eight 'first level' issues categories — Billing, Credit, Customer Service, Land, Provision, Retail Competition, Supply and General Enquiry. Each of these has sub-issues, which describe customer concerns in more detail.

For example, a Billing case may be further described as being about a backbill (second level) and further about an error (third level). A Credit case may be further described as being about a payment plan (second level) under a smoothpay arrangement (third level).

During 2006/07, we aligned our issues categories with those of the Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW.

OUR CASE TYPES

The term 'case' describes all matters customers contact EWOV about — enquiries and complaints.

An 'enquiry' is a request from a customer for general information (e.g. about relevant codes or guidelines) or a matter that is referred to another agency (e.g. if it's outside EWOV's jurisdiction).

A 'complaint' is an expression of dissatisfaction regarding a policy, practice or customer service performance of an energy or water provider which is a participant in the EWOV scheme, where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected.

Complaints are registered as follows:

- 'complaint received for full investigation' — where a complaint remains unresolved after two or more contacts between the customer and their provider, we fully investigate it
- 'complaint referred to higher-level contact' — where the customer has spoken once with someone at their provider's contact centre about their complaint, but it remains unresolved, we usually refer them to a higher-level contact at the provider
- 'complaint referred to provider' — where the customer hasn't yet spoken with their provider about their complaint, we usually refer them back to the provider's contact centre
- 'complaint referred elsewhere' — for example, to a regulator, another Ombudsman, government or other body
- 'other complaints' — where the customer wishes to register their complaint issue with EWOV, but doesn't wish to have it investigated or referred.

See Figure 7 on page 24 for information on complaint outcomes in 2006/07.

OUR INVESTIGATION PROCEDURES

EWOV's procedures are informal rather than legalistic, giving consideration to the wider context of each complaint — what is fair and reasonable, good industry practice and current law.

Our focus is on conciliation. This is where the customer and the provider agree on the outcome, as well as on any future action each may be required to carry out. At all times, our aim is to establish an objective view of what's happened. This helps the parties better understand the issues, as well as each other's point of view. It also increases the likelihood that they'll reach an agreement with which they're each satisfied.

There are three levels of 'complaints received for full investigation', each with an increased cost implication for the scheme participant. Generally, if a complaint isn't resolved within the required timeframe, it's upgraded to the next level.

If, despite detailed investigation and negotiation, a matter can't be conciliated, the Ombudsman may review it and make a Binding Decision. While this decision is binding on the scheme participant, the customer has the option of taking action in another forum, such as a court. However, if a customer rejects a decision by the Ombudsman, the scheme participant is no longer bound by it.

The Ombudsman also has the discretion to discontinue an investigation where a case has insufficient merit.

OUR 'REFER TO HIGHER LEVEL' (RHL) PROCESS

It's EWOV policy that, where a customer contacts us with a complaint they haven't been able to resolve through an initial call to their provider's call/contact centre, we refer them to a higher level contact at the provider. We give the provider the customer's name, address, contact details and a brief summary of their complaint. The provider then has 24 hours to phone the customer and 21 days to resolve the complaint.

As part of our quality assurance programme, we regularly survey customers to check how well the RHL process is working. While our most recent survey, in mid-2007, showed a continuing high level of customer satisfaction (88%), this result was down slightly from previous surveys.

One contributing factor was that some providers hadn't contacted the customer within the 24 hour timeframe, as they were supposed to. There was also a fall in the percentage of customers whose complaint was resolved within the required 21 days — 80% compared with 85% some eighteen months earlier.

Scheme participants have been asked to review their resourcing and practices to ensure that they do contact customers within 24 hours and resolve complaints within 21 days — as required by the RHL process. We've also reminded them that RHL process training is available from EWOV as part of our sector-specific training programme.

For our part, we're ensuring we clearly explain the RHL process to customers — verbally and in writing — so they understand that, if their complaint isn't resolved, they can come back to EWOV.

