

Fiona McLeod was appointed as Australia's first electricity ombudsman in 1995 and has overseen the expansion of the EWOV scheme to the gas and water industries. She has also served as Commissioner and Assistant Commissioner for Equal Opportunity in Victoria and as a Conciliator/Community Educator for the Victorian Equal Opportunity Commission and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Queensland.

### TRENDING TOWARDS MORE STABLE CASE RECEIPT

For a few years, EWOV case receipt increased year after year. In our *2002 Annual Report*, I wrote about receiving 6,658 cases during the year. By the time I reported on the 2004/05 year, our cases had leapt 188% to 19,158, over four years.

In the *2006 Annual Report*, I cautiously welcomed a 7% fall in cases as a sign that we'd possibly seen the end of successive massive increases.

While cases increased a little in 2006/07 — up 3% to 18,280 — the overall trend towards stabilisation has been maintained. Complaints received for full investigation fell 3%.

I think that, through a combination of EWOV activities and resources for scheme participants, we've played a role in bringing about this level of case stabilisation.

Over the last couple of years, we've put a lot of work into helping scheme participants improve their internal dispute resolution (IDR) processes. In 2006/07, we facilitated nine complaint handling workshops, attended by over 200 scheme participant staff. One of these was an advanced workshop introduced at the request of attendees at the introductory workshops.

At the same time, we've continued to run sector-specific training sessions for scheme participants — for example, how EWOV investigates wrongful disconnection issues, high energy bills and high water bills. 20 sector-specific sessions were run in 2006/07.

We ran our first scheme participant conference during the year — a well received mix of the latest in dispute resolution practices, practical complaint handling workshops, and the opportunity to share experiences with those doing similar jobs across industries. We plan to run the conference annually.

We also introduced a scheme participant 'extranet'. This is a secure website through which scheme participants now receive their EWOV case reports. As well, it gives them ready access to resources, including the case handling manual, contact lists, frequently asked questions and case studies.

In addition, *EWOV Link*, our quarterly electronic newsletter for scheme participant staff, continues to provide the latest information on case trends, issues and tips for addressing particular types of complaints.

## MEETING SOME EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES

As highlighted by EWOV Chairperson, Tony Staley, in his message on page 3, it was a challenging year for us on the employment front. Staff departures, including all four Conciliation Team Co-ordinators, saw us recruiting at a time when the human resources market was very tight. This wasn't completely unexpected, but the suddenness and level of the attrition had a significant impact.

We were able to recruit well though. We also worked hard on induction and building relationships among existing and new staff. While we ended 2006/07 with quite a different team overall, our selection and induction procedures ensured that we've maintained the team's high quality and commitment.

## ACHIEVING KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The level of staff turnover, and the impact of ongoing recruitment and induction, meant there were times during the year when we found ourselves really stretched — management of workloads and meeting of key performance indicators (KPIs) became very challenging.

In this context, the outstanding staff achievements noted by EWOV Chairperson, Tony Staley — in relation to KPIs and, in particular, complaint-related KPIs — were even more significant. As it turned out, our KPI performance in 2006/07 was the best we've achieved.

## REVIEWING OUR PERFORMANCE

Independent review is an ongoing feature of EWOV's operation. It enables us to take a look at what we're doing through fresh eyes — and, because it's an ongoing programme, we can focus in on particular aspects and make timely changes to address any shortcomings. On page 9, you'll find a stocktake of our continuous review activities since EWOV commenced operation in 1996.

In 2006/07, as part of our quality assurance programme, we commissioned an independent evaluation of a number of aspects of our compliance with EWOV's obligation to function independently and impartially. This included compliance with the rules of natural justice and procedural fairness in our policies, processes, investigations and complaint outcomes. The evaluation was very positive for all four of these aspects.

At the beginning of 2007, we undertook an independent assessment of consumers' awareness of EWOV. *Resolution 24*, released in September 2007, contains a more detailed report but, overall, our surveying confirmed good general levels of consumer awareness.

## IMPROVING OUR PUBLIC REPORTING

Public reporting is a hallmark of the EWOV scheme, one of our aims being to put meaningful information about energy and water issues into the public arena. Always looking to improve our reports, during the year, we introduced clearer trend reporting, the use of bandwidths to put energy retailers' case numbers into context, and maps showing where in Victoria our cases are coming from.

## BUILDING COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Community visits, joint projects and publications underpin EWOV's community liaison strategy. There's an overview of our 2006/07 activities on pages 31 and 32.

I took part in as many of the community visits as I could, accompanied by different members of the EWOV team. This gave several of us the opportunity to discuss EWOV's role, and energy and water issues, with a range of community groups. It also went a long way towards keeping us in touch with customer concerns and building valuable ongoing community links.

We continued to produce and distribute *EWOV Connect*, our electronic newsletter for workers in community, welfare and health service agencies. A survey of readers revealed a 93% very good/good satisfaction rating, which confirms that we're on track with this still relatively new publication.

## CONTRIBUTING TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT

For some years now, EWOV has supported a requirement on energy and water providers to provide accessible and effective hardship programmes for customers in financial difficulty. We were, therefore, very pleased to see the Essential Services Commission approve the hardship policies of 13 energy retailers in mid-2007. You can read more about this development on page 30.

We drew on our practical case handling experience, to make 25 public submissions to regulatory and government authorities during the year. These are listed on page 29. Our comments often had a preventative focus as we highlighted issues causing recurrent complaints — and potential issues that could do the same. It's our strong belief that, taken on board, our independent insights can help prevent customer dissatisfaction, leading to fewer complaints for providers and for EWOV.

## OMBUDSMAN'S REPORT CONTINUED

With the move to national energy regulation firmly underway, we made several contributions to consultation papers put out by the Ministerial Council on Energy (MCE) and its various working groups. We regard the Victorian energy consumer protection framework as 'best practice' (overall) and would be concerned should the move to national regulation diminish current consumer protections in Victoria.

We also continued to analyse cases and identify and report on systemic issues, in line with the systemic issues policy approved by the Board. You'll find a systemic issues report on pages 27 and 28.

### WORKING WITH OTHER OMBUDSMAN SCHEMES

EWOV maintained its active involvement within the Australian and New Zealand Ombudsman Association (ANZOA) and the Australia & New Zealand Energy and Water Ombudsman Network (ANZEWON).

ANZOA is a professional association, the membership of which includes Ombudsmen from industry-based schemes and Parliamentary Ombudsmen. Matters considered by ANZOA members over the past year included the identification and addressing of systemic issues, external review of Ombudsman schemes, benchmarking of workloads and efficiency measures, and the use of the term 'Ombudsman'. Ombudsman staff also shared ideas and developed initiatives through ANZOA's 'learning and development' and 'public relations and communications' interest groups. An 'information technology' interest group has recently been established for a similar purpose.

ANZEWON is a network of energy and water schemes operating in New Zealand and across Australia — in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and now, Queensland.

Over the last couple of years, ANZEWON's Australian schemes have been moving towards consistency on a number of fronts. To this end, we've now achieved the alignment of issues categories — other than where regulatory instruments and industries differ — between EWOV and the Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW. The new categories came in from July 2007 and offer benefits for all stakeholders.

Essentially, scheme participants operating in both Victoria and New South Wales now have to work with one set of issues only. This makes it easier for them to identify and address issues across their business as a whole, as well as those which are State-based. For our own staff, the new issues categories are more intuitive and easier to work with.

Another outcome will be greater consistency in public reporting among ANZEWON schemes, particularly in our annual reports. This should assist community organisations, customer groups and others, including energy regulators, who wish to compare case receipt across jurisdictions.

### THANK YOU

While the changing face of EWOV created some considerable challenges, the EWOV team turned in an inspirational performance during another busy year. Thank you all for the enthusiasm and commitment you bring to your work.

EWOV is a robust, high quality, flexible and adaptable organisation which, once again, has demonstrated its capacity to weather and embrace change. We know where we want to head and we know what we need to do to get there. We move into 2007/08 with a renewed sense of purpose, lots of energy and enthusiasm, and a commitment to our role in resolving energy and water complaints — independently.



**Fiona McLeod**

Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria)