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MEDIA RELEASE

Caution recommended on falls in energy and water cases

While reporting 18% fewer cases in 2020-21 — on the heels of a 24% fall in 2019-20 — the Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria) (EWOV) is taking a cautious approach.

- **EWOV received 19,542 cases in 2020-21, down 18%.**
- **High bill continued to be the top complaint issue overall.**
- **EWOV identified 26 systemic issues, all of them about energy.**

"Predicting rises or falls in overall case numbers is proving difficult in the COVID-19 environment — community responses, government support, regulatory responses — all of these have changed significantly over the past year," says Ombudsman Cynthia Gebert.

"And after trending down in the second half of 2020, our cases have generally been on the rise in the first half of 2021 — especially billing cases."

In EWOV's 2021 *Annual Report*, the Ombudsman highlights a 35% fall in credit cases.

"The fall in cases about credit issues — payment difficulties, disconnection, debt collection — has been more sustained. We believe energy and water companies have demonstrated high levels of compassion for the difficult circumstances so many customers have been facing. However, since the beginning of 2021, we have seen cases about imminent disconnection of electricity and gas rising too," Ms Gebert said.

"The challenge for the companies now is to work out how to maintain a more compassionate approach, and to embed that approach in their business culture and practices."

In December 2020, EWOV published *Missing the Mark*, a major piece of research on the *Payment Difficulty Framework* (PDF) introduced by the Essential Services Commission in January 2019. The research report provides EWOV's insights on the impact of the PDF — where it has been working and where (and how) it hasn't.

"EWOV's research report was timely and insightful," says Ms Gebert. "While regulatory requirements around payment difficulty have undergone a step-change, the culture of some companies in the retail energy sector hasn't. Our experience is that too many vulnerable customers are still missing out on their PDF entitlements."

The online version of EWOV's 2021 *Annual Report* — with links to the full report, cases and complaint trends for individual energy and water companies and embedded network entities, and case studies around common issues — is available at ewov.com.au

For more information or to arrange an interview with the Ombudsman, contact:

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EWOV is an industry-based, customer dispute resolution scheme. It has dealt with electricity cases since 1996, extending to natural gas cases in 1999, water in 2001, LPG in 2005 and embedded networks in 2018. The Ombudsman has the power to investigate and resolve disputes between customers and their energy and water companies, fairly and independently.

