

EMBARGOED UNTIL midnight 4 October 2020

5 October 2020

MEDIA RELEASE

An extraordinary year of unusually low energy and water cases

Reporting a 24% annual fall in case numbers, Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria) (EWOV) cautions that the far-reaching financial and economic effects of COVID-19 are yet to emerge.

- **EWOV received 23,786 cases in 2019-20, down 24% from 31,180 in 2018-19**
- **\$2,647,415 was provided for customers through EWOV's dispute resolution processes**
- **High bill was the top issue overall.**

In EWOV's 2020 *Annual Report*, Ombudsman Cynthia Gebert discusses how EWOV has navigated the changes driven by COVID-19 to deliver on its internal and external responsibilities.

"It's unusual and surprising that our cases are so low — COVID-19 has led to more financial hardship for many Victorians," said Ms Gebert. "We think it's a question of when cases will rise, not if." The lead issue has been high bills which we consider to be further impacted by the move working from home and remote learning through the March-June period of the financial year.

"The extensive financial support provided to people — by governments, industry, and community organisations — has done the job it was intended to do. As this support is wound back, we expect people will find it hard to meet their energy and water costs — and will look to EWOV for help when they can't reach an agreement with the company or entity directly."

EWOV's 2020 *Annual Report* also looks to the future and the growth of non-traditional energy arrangements facilitated by emerging technologies. Recent research undertaken by the EWOV team concluded that — without targeted reform — an increasing number of energy customers may not have access to EWOV in the decades ahead.

"This concerns us enormously — and should concern anyone with an interest in ensuring effective dispute resolution options accompany the changing energy market," Ms Gebert said.

"Our research has given us an early roadmap of what to expect from the future energy system. We're sharing this with policymakers to help get the settings right for a robust and capable consumer protection framework."

The online version of EWOV's 2020 *Annual Report* — with links to the full report; cases and complaint trends for individual energy and water companies and 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 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 providers, fairly and independently.

