

## Ombudsman's Overview

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In this issue of *Res Online* we discuss the issue of high bills. This isn't new territory for us, but it's clearly an ongoing issue for both customers and companies and, therefore, for EWOV.

As we reported in EWOV's *2012 Annual Report*, in 2011-12, 5,852 customers raised high bill with us as their main issue of complaint—up 1% from 2010-11 and up 46% from 2009-10. 94% of those were residential customers.

This issue of *Res Online* reports on EWOV cases for the July to September 2012 quarter—the first quarter in the 2012-13 year. Already 2,385 customers have raised high bill as their main issue—up 90% from April to June 2012 and up 32% from July to September 2011. Projected to 30 June 2013, this trend could mean EWOV receives around 9,540 high bill cases in 2012-13.

While most of the high bill cases we received from July to September 2012 were still lodged by residential customers, we also saw a 30% increase in cases from small business customers.

As our feature shows, the underlying causes of high bills are many, varied and sometimes unusual. Usage patterns, billing system problems, back billing, accumulation of unpaid amounts, meter exchanges—all of these come up. What also comes up, commonly, is that a customer complaining about a high bill is also most likely going to have difficulty paying it—especially in one lump sum as many are asked to.

Dealing with high bills is a responsibility shared by customers and companies. Energy and water customers need to do all they can to manage their usage. Energy and water companies need to have effective high bill investigation processes, recognise the underlying issues and work with customers towards sustainable, long-term, payment solutions.

As always, we welcome your suggestions for Res Online content. Please send them to Matt Helme, EWOV's Research and Communications Manager, at [ewovinfo@ewov.com.au](mailto:ewovinfo@ewov.com.au)



**Cynthia Gebert**

**Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria)**

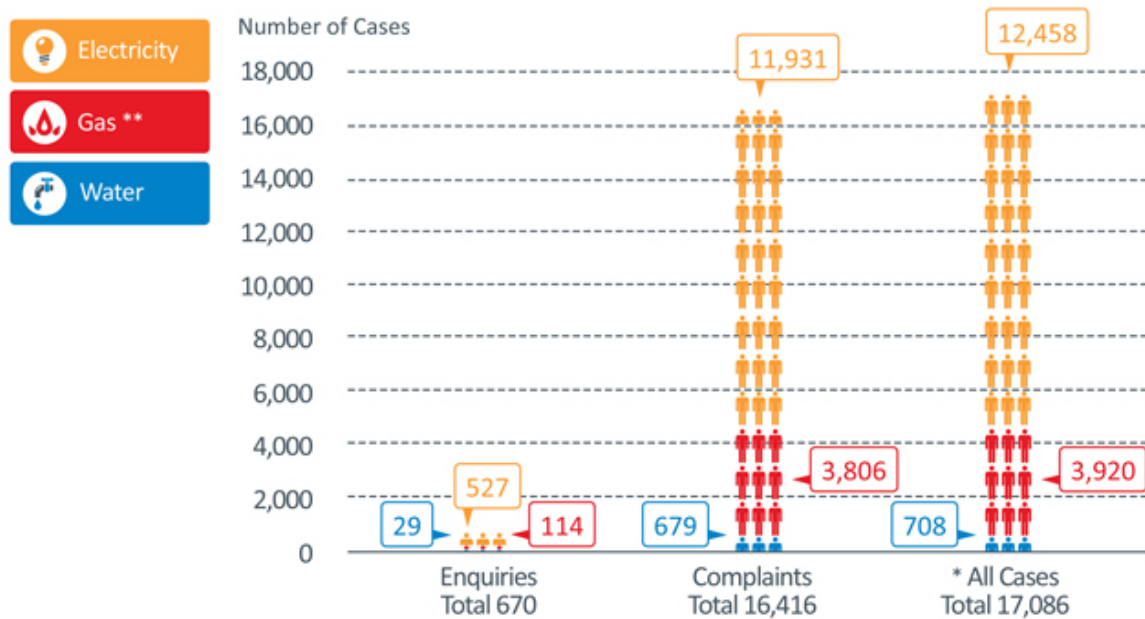
## Cases, Complaints, Enquiries - a Snapshot

### Cases, Complaints and Enquiries: Snapshot

1 July 2012 to 30 September 2012

#### CASES CUSTOMERS LODGED

(July – September 2012)



\* This does not include 67 Dual Fuel and 83 other industry complaints

\*\* Gas includes Natural Gas and LPG cases

#### Overall

- 17,236 cases lodged with EWOV
- 16,516 complaints and 720 enquiries
- 1,666 investigated complaints
- 11,552 assisted referrals
- 3,298 unassisted referrals
- 1,463 complaint investigations finalised

#### Electricity

- 12,458 cases lodged with EWOV by electricity customers
- 11,931 complaints and 527 enquiries
- 1,215 investigated complaints
- 8,235 assisted referrals
- 2,481 unassisted referrals
- 1,098 complaint investigations finalised

#### Gas - Natural Gas and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG)

- 3,920 cases lodged with EWOV by gas customers
- 3,806 complaints and 114 enquiries

- 386 investigated complaints
- 2,847 assisted referrals
- 573 unassisted referrals
- 317 complaint investigations finalised

### **Water**

- 708 cases lodged with EWOV by water customers
- 679 complaints and 29 enquiries
- 60 investigated complaints
- 419 assisted referrals
- 200 unassisted referrals
- 44 complaint investigations finalised

# Trends

## Trends

1 July 2012 to 30 September 2012 compared with 1 July 2011 to 30 September 2011

### QUARTERLY CASE TRENDS



#### ELECTRICITY

##### ELECTRICITY OVERALL

Billing -----	55%
Transfer -----	12%
Credit -----	11%

##### ELECTRICITY RETAIL SECTOR

Billing – high -----	14%
Billing – tariff -----	11%
Billing – delay -----	8%

##### ELECTRICITY DISTRIBUTION SECTOR

Provision – existing connection -----	49%
Supply – off supply (unplanned) -----	13%
Supply – off supply (planned) -----	6%



#### GAS

##### GAS OVERALL

Billing -----	47%
Transfer -----	19%
Credit -----	18%

##### NATURAL GAS RETAIL SECTOR

Billing – high -----	16%
Credit – disconnection --	12%
Billing – error -----	9%

##### NATURAL GAS DISTRIBUTION SECTOR

Supply - off supply (unplanned) -----	28%
Provision – existing connection -----	22%
Supply – quality -----	11%

##### LPG (LIQUEFIED PETROLEUM GAS) RETAIL SECTOR

Billing – error -----	13%
Credit – collection -----	13%
Credit – deliveries stopped -----	13%



#### WATER

##### WATER OVERALL

Billing -----	72%
Credit -----	8%
Land -----	7%

##### METROPOLITAN RETAIL WATER SECTOR

Billing – high -----	39%
Billing – fees and charges -----	12%
Billing – error -----	6%

##### METROPOLITAN WHOLESALE WATER SECTOR

Land – other -----	45%
Land – network assets --	18%
Billing – fees and charges -----	9%

##### REGIONAL URBAN WATER SECTOR

Billing – high -----	26%
Billing – fees and charges -----	23%
Billing – error -----	6%

##### RURAL WATER SECTOR

Billing – fees and charges -----	20%
Billing – high -----	15%
Supply – water licensing -----	15%

##### RURAL URBAN WATER SECTOR

Supply – quality -----	16%
Billing – concession/ rebate -----	11%
Billing – delay -----	11%

Please refer to company individual line graph for more details

### **Overall**

- cases down 10%
- complaints down 8%
- enquiries down 41%
- investigated complaints down 67%
- assisted referrals up 35%
- unassisted referrals down 23%

### **Electricity**

- cases down 11%
- complaints down 9%
- enquiries down 39%
- investigated complaints down 66%
- assisted referrals up 33%
- unassisted referrals down 24%

### **Gas - Natural Gas and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG)**

- cases down 13%
- complaints down 12%
- enquiries down 42%
- investigated complaints down 71%
- assisted referrals up 33%
- unassisted referrals down 33%

### **Water**

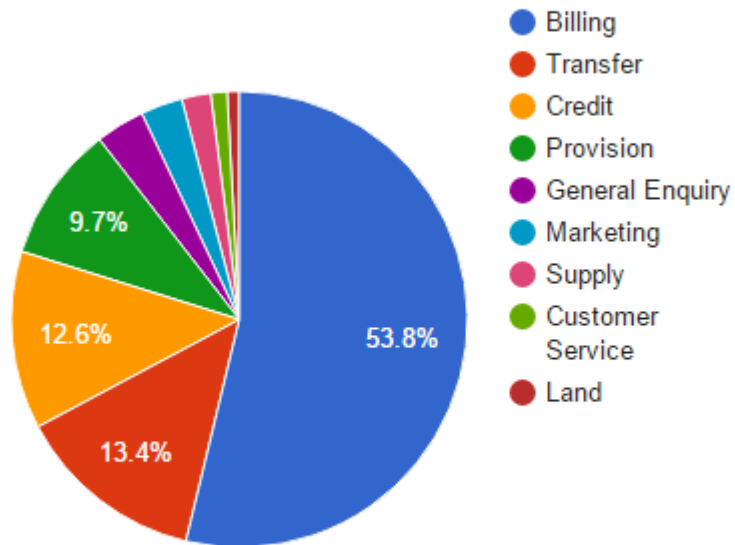
- cases up 16%
- complaints up 18%
- enquiries down 22%
- investigated complaints down 58%
- assisted referrals up 78%
- unassisted referrals up 3%

## Most Common Issues

### Most Common Issues Overall

1 July 2012 to 30 September 2012

The issues customers complained about



Click on the following links for most common issues in more details

[Billing](#)

[Credit](#)

[Transfer](#)

## A Closer Look at Billing

### What's really behind that high bill?

It's a question EWOV team members find themselves asking several times a day, every day—and, given the case trends, more often than ever before. Each one of the following high bill cases represents a customer who considered it necessary to contact EWOV to have their concerns addressed following unsuccessful contact with their retailer.

### Year-on-year

In 2011-12, 5,852 customers raised high bill as their main issue

- 1% more customers than in 2010-11 (5,766)
- 46% more customers than in 2009-10 (4,013)

### Against the same quarter last year

In the July to September 2012 quarter, 2,385 customers raised high bill as their main issue

- 32% more than in the July to September 2011 quarter (1,804)
- 90% more than in the April to June 2012 quarter (1,254)

### Which customers?

In 2011-12, 5,470 residential customers and 366 business customers raised high bill/s as their main issue. Compared with 2010-11, the number of residential customers remained very high but fell slightly from 5,479, but the number of small business customers increased 30% from 282.

### About high bill investigations

EWOV's investigation of a high bill complaint is a process of determining whether the company has contributed to the reason for the high bill. It's not always possible to pinpoint the exact cause of a higher-than-expected bill—it's often only possible to identify what wasn't the cause. The aim of our investigation is to confirm that the customer has been billed accurately, with the meter correctly recording their usage.

### So what does EWOV find behind high bills?

- Affordability issues—the customer can't afford to pay the bill and possibly can't afford to pay for the electricity, gas and/or water they're using day-to-day
- Customer usage patterns—hot or cold weather; new or old appliances; building alterations; more people living in or using the property (See High bill case study: It was the customer's usage below)
- Billing system problems
- Back billing after billing system problems, estimated meter reads, account errors ([residential case study](#); [small business case study](#))
- Accumulation of unpaid/partially paid accounts
- Concessions or loyalty rewards not applied or applied wrongly
- Faulty wiring/plumbing/appliance in the customer's property
- Smart Meter installation ([case study](#))
- Missing solar feed-in credits
- Bulk hot water meter issues ([case study](#))

- Meter data errors ([case study](#))
- Meter reading errors (residential case study (See High bill case study: Customer's insistence (and persistence) pays off below; [small business case study](#))
- Incorrect tariff calculations, increases, changes
- Gas and water leaks

### High Bills - Things customers should do

- Customers should understand and manage their usage to minimise the potential for high bills.
- Customers should tell their company early on if they receive a bill they can't afford to pay.
- Customers should work with their company to set up a payment plan they can stick to.

### Customers should understand and manage their usage

Customers have a responsibility to understand the appliances, equipment and fixtures at their property, how much energy or water is being used and when. Customers buying new appliances, equipment or fixtures should check efficiency ratings as well as the price. The busiest times of year for high bill complaints are straight after winter and summer—especially when it's been very cold or very hot. Heating appliances (particularly oil column heaters, electric wall heaters) and cooling appliances (particularly air-conditioning) can be expensive to use— especially if used at incorrect settings or with faults.

High electricity bills are most common. The Victorian Government's SwitchOn web site [www.switchon.vic.gov.au](http://www.switchon.vic.gov.au) is a great source of information on electricity usage:

- [What is the cost of your 10 major appliances?](#)
- [Do you use more or less electricity than other similar households?](#)

### Customers should make their premises as energy and water efficient as they can

Some properties use a lot more energy and water than others, costing their occupants more than average to heat and/or cool. It might be the appliances, equipment or fixtures, or it might be the way the building is constructed—for example, where the windows are placed and how they're covered, how the walls, ceilings and floors are insulated, the choice and placement of heating, cooling and hot water systems, and the extent of draught-proofing.

#### Average energy use in an Australian home\*

38% heating and cooling  
25% water heating  
16% other appliances  
7% fridges and freezers  
7% lighting  
4% cooking  
3% standby power

\* Victorian Government's [SwitchOn website](#)

### From EWOV:

- [high electricity and natural gas bills fact sheet](#) for residential customers
- [high water bills fact sheet](#) for residential customers
- [high energy and water bills online video](#) for customers
- [energy efficiency online video](#) for customers

Tips from the [SwitchOn](#) web site :



- [What makes up my power bill costs?](#)
- [Top 10 ways to save power](#)
- [Get saving tips for every room in your house](#)

From the [Department of Sustainability and Environment website](#):

[7.5 ways to save water](#)

[Doing a home water audit](#)

[Information and advice for householders, businesses, schools and the community](#)

### **ALERT: WILL YOUR WATER USE MEAN YOUR NEXT WATER BILL IS A HIGH ONE?**

*The Age – Friday 18 January 2013*

“After years of conserving water, the city's usage has surged this year. A hot summer and easing water restrictions have coincided with a big jump in water use. In the week to January 10, Melburnians used an average of 238 litres per person – 50% more than the former daily usage target of 155 litres a day. It was the highest weekly per capita water use since the week ending February 15, 2009, when 241 litres a day were used ...”

### **From the Department of Human Services (DHS):**

Information on [financial support](#) from the Department of Human Services (DHS): DHS also has a scheme to assist customers repair or replace faulty appliances/fixtures.

### **Customers should be aware of their rights.**

The [Energy Retail Code](#) sets out the rights and responsibilities of residential and small business customers when it comes to bills, billing, capacity to pay, payment difficulties and instalment plans. The Victorian [Water Customer Service Codes](#) set out the same in water.

A property's energy and water efficiency can be hard to control if you're renting. Tenants should talk to the landlord if they think a fixture, such as the hot water service or the wired-in heating, is contributing to their high bills. Residential tenants may also have rights under the [Residential Tenancies Act](#). The website of the [Tenants Union of Victoria](#) contains useful information about tenants' rights.

### **High bills - actions energy and water companies should take**

- Companies should respond to high bill concerns with swift and effective investigations.
- Companies should train staff in early identification of customers in financial hardship.
- Companies should empower staff to negotiate long-term, sustainable payment plans.

### **Companies should act on the customer's first contact to investigate billing concerns quickly and effectively**

Customers shouldn't have to contact EWOV for answers to their high bill concerns, but many find they need to. In the July – September 2012 quarter, we recorded 2,385 high bill cases – 1,814 of these were handled as Assisted Referrals and 210 as Investigated Complaints. This means 2,024 customers had already tried to resolve the issue with their company directly and unsuccessfully.

Too often we're told by customers that, when they rang their company about a high bill, their concerns were largely dismissed—the response was that the bill was based on a meter reading, was correct and just had to be paid. It's clear that some companies could be doing much more to address high bill complaints on the customer's first contact. Staff should be required to help customers with information and proper explanations. They should be given the tools and account information they need to do that—and the capacity to co-opt further expertise when it's required.

### **Companies should train their staff to be able to identify and assist customers in financial hardship**

We know that high bill complaints are often linked to affordability issues. It may be that one high bill arriving out of the blue upsets a finely-tuned tight, but otherwise manageable, financial situation. Perhaps the customer hasn't paid the full amount of a previous bill. It may be that their situation has changed due to employment issues. Perhaps things have gradually worsened for them financially.

Companies should focus on early identification of customers in hardship—this includes having early conversations with customers to discuss affordability and payment options before hardship becomes long-term. Front line staff must be equipped and trained to respond to customers experiencing financial difficulty, or who have special circumstances. Staff should proactively offer payment options and, as appropriate, hardship program support — a payment plan, energy efficiency advice, information on government support (the Utility Relief Grant; concessions), referral to a financial counsellor. We can't stress enough the importance of long-term and successful payment plan negotiations between companies and their customers.

### **Companies should alert customers to possible billing problems**

It's common for EWOV to receive high bill complaints that have their origin in billing system changes—bills are delayed; concessions aren't applied; tariffs change. If there's a possibility that changes within a company's billing system will affect the bills of its customers, it should warn them and otherwise take action to ensure customers aren't disadvantaged.

#### **High bill case study: Customer's insistence (and persistence) pays off (2012/5781)**

##### **Issue**

The customer believed the \$2,659 quarterly electricity bill she received in November 2011 was a back bill because of estimated meter readings. Her usual quarterly bills were between \$400 and \$600. While the covering letter accompanying the bill apologised for a billing delay, the customer said she wasn't aware of any billing delays. She said her electricity retailer insisted it was a back bill, but couldn't tell her the period or the reason. She was told that her property had a Smart Meter but, based on information from her local distributor, she didn't think that was right—although she did know that her basic meter was replaced with an interval meter in May 2011. The customer said she'd requested a detailed bill showing the period the back bill related to, but this wasn't provided. She said the next time she contacted the retailer she was told the bill was based on a substitute read. The appointment she set up for a meter inspection was not kept—the retailer blamed staff shortages over the holiday period. In early February 2012, she received another bill for \$4,080.03, with a covering letter identical to the one she received in November 2011. The second bill indicated it was based on a substitute read. The customer said there were no meter access issues and no change to her consumption or appliances. The retailer had told her the bill must be paid.

##### **Investigation**

Contacted by EWOV, the retailer undertook an internal investigation. It confirmed that the

property had an interval meter, not a Smart Meter—the meter was tested and found to be operating correctly. It said that, for the first half of 2011, the customer had been billed on estimated meter data. The November 2011 bill was based on actual meter data and included undercharges from the previous estimated bills. The retailer attributed this to a failure of the distributor's meter probe (the device used by the distributor to extract data from the meter). After another review of its billing of the customer, the retailer found that part of her consumption had been double-billed in February 2012. It couldn't explain why.

### **Resolution**

The retailer apologised to the customer for the billing errors and the time taken to resolve the complaint. It credited her account with \$1,700 in customer service payments, and recalculated her bills from the first half of 2011. At late August 2012, the account stood at \$2,015.01. The customer agreed to pay this by the end of October 2012. She was given a direct contact in case of further related issues. Should she wish to switch retailer, no termination fee would be charged. The customer was satisfied with this outcome.

### **High bill case study: It was the customer's usage (2012/16779)**

#### **Issue**

The customer's quarterly electricity bills ranged between \$274 and \$925. When, in July 2012, he received a bill for \$1,461, he rang his electricity retailer to query it. He said he was told the meter was working properly, the bill was correct and had to be paid. He said there was no offer to discuss the matter further with him. When his next bill was still high at \$817.61, he contacted EWOV, seeking a high bill investigation. The customer maintained his appliances and consumption patterns hadn't changed. He agreed to pay the latest bill and \$600 towards the disputed July 2012 bill.

#### **Investigation**

Contacted by EWOV, the electricity retailer undertook an internal investigation. From this, it advised that a Smart Meter had been installed at the customer's property in December 2010. A meter test in March 2012 showed it was operating within Australian Standards. It said the disputed July 2012 bill was based on actual meter data provided by the distributor. The retailer also reviewed the daily meter data for the customer's property. The retailer's review revealed a pattern of high consumption around the Christmas/New Year period and on weekends.

Our investigation included a thorough analysis of the information provided by the retailer—the customer's historical consumption, meter data, contact screens, account history and invoices. We found no error on the retailer's part. We did, however, find that the customer's higher electricity consumption coincided with temperature increases. We also found that his property was connected to three phase power, which may not be necessary for his needs. We advised him to consider an in-home display to help him monitor his usage and seek further advice from an electrician.

#### **Outcome**

The complaint was resolved when the customer accepted the retailer's offer of a one-off account credit of \$289. The customer was given time to pay the arrears of \$572.88. He was satisfied with this outcome.

## **EWOV Public Submissions**

### **Public Policy Submissions Made by EWOV July 2012, August 2012 and September 2012**

#### **Electricity**

##### **Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Electricity Prices**

In August 2012, the Senate established the Select Committee on Electricity Prices to inquire and report on [a range of matters related to electricity prices](#). We made a submission based on EWOV's case handling experience. We observed that electricity prices have a potential impact across several complaint areas—especially customer financial hardship, energy disconnections and higher-than-expected energy bills. Supporting this, we provided information about EWOV cases and trends. We also commented on the Inquiry's Terms of Reference—around vulnerable and low income customers, customer choice and information, energy efficiency and new technologies.

#### [Our submission](#)

The Senate Select Committee released its report on 1 November 2012. The full report and links to sections of it can be [found here](#)

#### **Water**

##### **Draft 2013 Water Plan Addenda**

The Essential Services Commission released a Draft 2013 Water Plan Addendum for each of the metropolitan water corporations — City West Water, South East Water, Yarra Valley Water — and Melbourne Water. Based on EWOV's experience in dealing with customer complaints about affordability and related issues, we suggested opportunities for water corporations to:

- improve the early identification of customers in hardship
- have early conversations with customers to discuss affordability and payment options before hardship becomes a long-term issue
- ensure front line staff are equipped and trained to deal with customers who are experiencing financial difficulty and/or have special circumstances
- strengthen relationships with community organisations
- engage with customers who need assistance
- ensure that eligible customers receive concessions and grants (where applicable)
- improve the exchange of information between their credit and hardship departments
- improve record keeping to ensure that details of customer contracts and assistance provided to them are available.

#### [Our submissions are available here](#)

##### **Water Customer Service Code Review 2012 – Regulation of Debt Management Powers**

In September 2012, the Essential Services Commission issued a consultation paper for its Water Customer Service Code Review 2012 – Regulation of Debt Management Powers. As well as providing EWOV case data and trends, we supported the fair and reasonable approach that the ESC's guiding principles provide—particularly for vulnerable customers and those exhibiting hardship indicators. We also recommended that customers be warned before any debt management powers are implemented—preferably in writing via the bill and/or a bill insert.

#### [Our submission](#)

## Case & Complaint Terminology

We use the overall term 'case' for all customer contacts with EWOV. Each case is registered and classified as either an enquiry (a request for information) or a complaint (an expression of dissatisfaction).

When a customer contacts us with an enquiry, we provide them with general information and, usually, we also refer them to their energy or water company. Sometimes we refer them to another body, such as a regulator or a government department.

We define a complaint as an expression of dissatisfaction regarding a policy, practice or customer service performance of an energy or water company, where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected. A complaint may initially be referred back to the contact centre or someone higher up at your electricity, gas or water company.

### **Unassisted Referral**

After providing an overview of the customer's rights and responsibilities, we refer the customer to their energy or water company's call centre. This is because the customer hasn't had any contact with their company.

### **Assisted Referral**

After providing an overview of the customer's rights and responsibilities, we refer the customer to a higher level contact within their energy or water company. This gives the company a final opportunity for direct resolution at a higher level before we open a complaint investigation.

### **Investigated Complaint**

Where the customer's complaint remains unresolved after referral to the company, or where the issues raised in the complaint are complex or point to an immediate need, we open an investigation. By seeking further information from both the company and the customer, and from other sources as necessary, we form an impartial view of what has happened and help the parties reach an agreed resolution.

### **Binding Decision**

Where a complaint remains unresolved after investigation, the Ombudsman may make a Binding Decision.

## Systemic Issues Update

### Systemic Issues Investigations Closed by EWOV 1 July to 30 September 2012

#### Energy

##### **Billing delays and subsequent backbilling**

In October 2011, we identified eight complaints where, after a significant billing delay, the customer was back billed more than nine months—without advice of payment assistance for the accumulated arrears. In mid-2012, similar occurrences were still being identified. The energy retailer initially provided a response to us acknowledging the issue. When it didn't continue to participate in our systemic issue investigation, the investigation was referred to the ESC, in line with the EWOV Charter. We consider this an unsatisfactory outcome, because EWOV scheme participants are expected to co-operate with our systemic issues investigations. SI/2011/80

##### **Manual application of Standard Feed-in Tariff (SFiT)**

In June 2012, a customer complained to us that his account had been debited for the Standard Feed-in Tariff (SFiT), instead of credited. Our investigation showed that his energy retailer was still applying SFiT credits manually. The retailer confirmed the issue related to a particular distribution area and to a prior systemic issue investigation (SI/2009/66). It confirmed that a fix was put in place in early 2012 to ensure that any SFiT credits were automatically applied to customers within the distribution area, and any credits were retrospectively applied to eligible customers. We consider the energy retailer took appropriate steps to resolve this issue. We advised the regulator. SI/2012/51

##### **Inaccurate consumption graphs on bills**

When lodging his complaint with us in June 2012, a customer said that a contact centre representative at his energy retailer alerted him to the systemic issue of inaccurate consumption graphs on some bills. The retailer confirmed the issue, but advised it was limited to customers who had the meter at their property exchanged during the billing period—the graph included data from both meters. The retailer confirmed a system fix would be implemented in mid-August 2012. We consider the energy retailer took appropriate steps to resolve the issue, although it should have notified EWOV directly. We advised the regulator. SI/2012/52

##### **Compensation for missed Premium Feed-in Tariff**

Around May 2012, we received 35 complaints from customers who missed out on the Premium Feed-in Tariff (PFiT) due to complications with an energy retailer's processing of the required paperwork. While the retailer was making a fixed offer to resolve these types of complaints, the offer did not benefit all of the customers who missed out on the PFiT through no fault of their own. The retailer met with us to review cases where the fixed offer was unsuitable. The outcome was that, in these instances, the retailer gave the customer a goodwill payment of \$100 to \$200, as well as an upfront credit of the difference between the PFiT and the Transitional Feed-in Tariff (TFiT) for 12 months. The retailer said it would continue to apply ongoing credits, at the end of each 12 months, for the difference between TFiT and PFiT for the life of the PFiT scheme. We consider the energy retailer took appropriate steps to resolve this issue. We advised the regulator. SI/2012/45

##### **Billing on incorrect tariff after billing system upgrade**

In May 2012, an energy retailer alerted us that, because of difficulties transferring customer details to its new billing system, some 350 customers were billed on the incorrect tariff structure.



It said the issue arose when some accounts were manually transferred between billing systems and the operating procedures didn't provide clarity on establishing the correct tariff. The retailer confirmed it had rewritten the operating procedures, contacted and corrected the accounts of affected customers, and retrospectively applied any applicable credits. The regulator was advised. We consider the energy retailer took appropriate steps to resolve this issue. SI/2012/38

#### **Incorrect solar tariff / loss of solar credits**

Through two complaints lodged with us in June 2012, we identified that some customers of an energy retailer had either been put on the incorrect solar tariff or had lost solar credits altogether. The retailer advised that the issue arose when some customer accounts were manually transferred between billing systems and the operating procedures didn't provide clarity on establishing the correct tariff. The energy retailer confirmed that it had rewritten the operating procedures, contacted and corrected the accounts for affected customers and retrospectively applied any applicable solar credits. The regulator was advised. We considered that the energy retailer took appropriate steps to resolve this issue. SI/2012/55

#### **Overcharging from incorrect service process for solar installation**

In July 2012, the Essential Services Commission alerted us to an issue involving an energy retailer and an energy distributor—some 269 customers were overcharged for solar installation services. The retailer advised that its service order process with the energy distributor was the cause of the problem. A temporary fix was implemented while the energy retailer sought a permanent solution. All affected customers were contacted and credited. We consider the energy retailer took appropriate steps to resolve this issue, although it appears to be taking considerable time to develop a permanent solution. SI/2012/68

#### **Frequent and unplanned electricity supply outages**

Five complaints in August 2012 alerted us to instances of frequent and unplanned electricity supply outages within a specific distribution area. The energy distributor said a series of things caused supply problems for some 69 customers. It said it was undertaking further testing and inspections to identify the key fault. It arranged a letter drop to customers in the affected area, published a media release and confirmed it would monitor the outages and apply Guaranteed Service Level payments if applicable. We considered that the energy distributor was taking appropriate steps to resolve this complex issue. We did not advise the regulator. SI/2012/71

#### **Confusing supply connection process as a result of system limitations**

One customer's complaint to us in August 2012 highlighted their preferred energy retailer's confusing process for supply connection. The customer was told they would have to arrange their connection through the property's existing energy retailer, wait to receive the first bill, and then contact the preferred retailer to arrange the transfer. The retailer confirmed that it follows this complex process because of system limitations. It said it was attempting to fix the issue, to make the connection and transfer process more customer-focused, but a specific timeframe couldn't be provided. Although this issue wasn't a licence breach, we believe the significant inconvenience caused to customers warrants a solution as soon as possible. SI/2012/73

#### **Delay in passing on Guaranteed Payment level (GSL) payments**

Through 10 complaints lodged with us around March 2012, we identified that Guaranteed Service Level (GSL) payments made by a distributor to customers affected by ongoing unscheduled outages hadn't been passed on to those customers by the energy retailer. The energy retailer blamed complications processing the GSL file from the distributor. It said all affected customers had since been paid. We advised the regulator. We consider the energy retailer took appropriate steps to resolve the issue. SI/2012/28

### **Unauthorised direct debits after backbilling**

From two complaints received in August 2012, we identified instances of unauthorised direct debit. This appeared similar to an earlier systemic issue investigation (SI/2011/94) concerning the same energy retailer in 2011. The retailer confirmed an issue with direct debit transactions for a group of customers who'd been back billed. Some customers who elected for a partial direct debit payment had the full arrears debited. The retailer said it had arranged for a refund, an apology and a customer service payment. We advised the regulator. SI/2012/79

### **No issue dates on bills**

From a complaint lodged with us in August 2012, we identified instances where an energy retailer's bills didn't contain issue dates. Although this isn't a requirement of the Energy Retail Code, it would have provided clarity for the retailer's customers and bring its billing into line with that of other energy retailers. The retailer advised that, from 31 October 2012, its bills would include an issue date. It provided an example of the billing template, which confirmed the issue date inclusion. We consider the energy retailer took appropriate steps to resolve this issue. We advised the regulator. SI/2012/81

## **Water**

### **Overcharging related to desalination plant construction delay**

June 2012 media coverage alerted us to overcharging of some 1.6 million customers of a water corporation, related to the desalination plant construction delay. We received 16 complaints. The water corporation advised that repayment of the overcharge (averaging \$82 a household) would be implemented through a 2012-13 price freeze. It said it was consulting with the Essential Services Commission to determine how to repay any additional money which may be owed to customers at the end of the 2012-13 financial year. We consider the water corporation took appropriate steps to resolve this issue. We advised the Department of Sustainability and Environment. SI/2012/53



## **EWOV Issue Categories**

**We group issues into nine first level issues categories:**

- Billing
- Credit
- Customer Service
- Land
- Marketing
- Provision
- Supply
- Transfer
- General Enquiry

Sub-issues in each category describe customer concerns in more detail. For example a billing case may be about fees and charges (second level) and, further, about a late payment fee (third level) and a transfer case may be about billing (second level) and, further, about double-billing (third level).

**You'll find a full list of our issues and sub-issues categories [here](#).**