

Notes of a meeting on 13 October 2020 between the Independent Accountability Panel and Janine Young, Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW (EWON), Cynthia Gebert, Energy & Water Ombudsman Victoria (EWOV), Janes Pires, Energy & Water Ombudsman Queensland (EWOQ), Sandy Canale, Energy & Water Ombudsman SA (EWOSA).

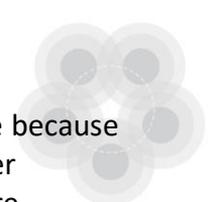
The Panel appreciates the input by the Ombudsmen about their experience of the energy sector and the Signatories during 2020.

Purpose

Energy & Water Ombudsmen around Australia are key stakeholders for the IAP, as complaints to their offices highlight customer issues generally, but particularly in relation to the Energy Charter.

Notes from the discussion

- Over the past financial year (2019/20), complaints to the Ombudsman have stabilised or decreased – in some cases up to 25%. The key driver for this is a change in the credit and debt collection activity of energy retailers as a result to the new payment difficulty related regulatory obligations on energy retailers in Victoria and the impact of the Best Practice Hardship Guidelines in NSW, Queensland and South Australia. In the latter part of the year, a further important factor was the cessation of disconnection and debt collection in the COVID environment. It is not clear that there is a direct correlation between the energy companies focus on the Energy Charter and the complaint volumes experienced by the Ombudsman.
- An increase in complaints was expected in 2020 as a result of COVID, but the companies stepped up early to offer support to customers who contacted them.
- The Ombudsmen are waiting for the real impact of COVID and affordability issues, particularly when government supports are reduced or removed and other industries also reduce the support provided to customers. There does not seem to be a sense of urgency about how best to tackle the impending affordability issues once customers have reduced government and other sector financial support. The Ombudsmen are concerned about the prospect of significant debt collection action once customer supports are reduced.
- Even though many people have been working from home, complaints about high bills, which are often reflect underlying affordability issues, have been muted to date.

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- Many customers are still missing out on concessions for which they are eligible because they hit administrative barriers at the energy retailers. In Victoria, this is further complicated by the backlog in the assessment of Utility Relief Grants. These are customer entitlements and retailers should be actively promoting these entitlements and assisting customers to get them. The water industry is much more proactive in assisting customers to access government assistance.
 - Support for people of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds continues to be a gap for energy companies. This is a barrier for customers and creates a disincentive to engage.
 - EWOQ has monitored their complaints against the Energy Charter principles and have found a notable number of complaints which are not aligned with Energy Charter principles.
 - While noting this, there are some stand out energy companies that have demonstrated their focus on becoming customer-centric. Jemena is an example of this. Their focus is reflected in the way in which Jemena engages with stakeholders and how they have taken a lead in initiatives to assist customers in the COVID period.
 - Standard complaints continue to be billing, credit, provision, customer service. Most complaints are about electricity, with few water issues. The fairest measure of complaints is the percentage per 10,000 customers. Using this measure, 2nd tier retailers are represented more in complaints to Ombudsman offices. Information about complaints is available in the Ombudsman Annual Reports for 2019-2020.
 - Some companies do not promote complaints and information about how to make a complaint is not easily found on some websites or in letters. The need to improve the accessibility of information about complaints on signatories' websites was noted in last years' Independent Accountability Panel report and it is not clear whether these changes have been implemented.
 - A comparison of reported Ombudsman complaints by signatories to Ombudsman annual report data indicates significant variance. It is still evident that signatories do not define complaints or ensure their complaints management processes are aligned with AS/NZS 10002:2014 Guidelines for complaint management in organizations.
 - Ombudsman offices continue to see a disconnect between the principle of customer-centricity and the customer experience when dealing with front line staff. We question whether organisation culture, communication, systems and processes are supporting the front line to deliver on the aspirations and goals outlined in the Energy Charter.
 - It is generally the Ombudsmen who initiate discussions with senior representatives of energy companies about complaints and the feedback complaints provide, rather than the energy companies seeking insights from Ombudsman offices.
 - If the companies have effective internal dispute resolution (IDR) processes, this will reduce complaints to the Ombudsman.

ANZEWON

EWON, EWOV, EWOQ and EWOSA are members of ANZEWON - the Australia & New Zealand Energy and Water Ombudsman Network. While the schemes vary in structure, governance and operations, there are commonalities that are relevant to their work. They all:



- provide a key consumer protection mechanism for energy and water consumers,
- help customers resolve individual disputes,
- build trust in the industry through identifying systemic issues and using data to improve customer service across the industry,
- are a trusted source of independent data and case studies reflecting the customer experience of the energy and water market, and
- inform customers about their rights and responsibilities and industry about how to improve their customer service and reduce complaints.

They investigate a broad range of complaints about issues such as:

- disputed accounts
- high bills
- disconnection or restriction of supply
- payment difficulties
- reliability and quality of supply
- connection or transfer issues
- contract terms
- marketing practices
- metering
- customer service.

Clare Petre
Chair
Independent Accountability Panel

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