



Energy & Water
Ombudsman NSW
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Quarterly Activity Report:

Complaints, Case Studies and Community

Quarterly Report

1/1/2017 to 31/3/2017

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Quarterly Activity Report Contents

- INTRODUCTION..... 1**
- COMPLAINT ACTIVITY JANUARY – MARCH 2017 2**
 - OVERVIEW..... 2
 - CUSTOMER COMPLAINT ISSUES..... 4
 - ENERGY..... 5
 - CUSTOMER SERVICE 5
 - WATER COMPLAINTS 18
- STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT..... 21**
 - MEMBERS 21
 - COMMUNITY 21**
 - GOVERNMENT AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS 23**

Introduction

Complaints received by EWON this quarter increased by 6.3% in comparison to the same period last year (5,908 compared to 5,557). This is significant because, after a lengthy period of declining complaints, this is the first increase in a quarter's complaint numbers compared to the equivalent quarter in the previous year.

This report therefore focuses on one of the drivers for this increase. Complaints about customer service have increased, both in overall numbers and as a percentage of total complaints to EWON. Other drivers are digital meters (delayed or not installed), high bills and billing errors.

Poor customer service takes many forms and, based on what customers tell us, comes back to one of the following:

- provision of poor/inaccurate advice
- not being listened to
- unreasonable demands being made of the customer
- the provider not doing what it promised
- the provider passing responsibility for an issue to a third party.

Poor customer service means customers come to EWON about matters which should be resolved when the customer first contacts their provider.

EWON's Charter requires us to identify systemic issues and help members reduce complaints. Poor customer service is clearly a systemic issue across EWON's membership and improved customer service could significantly reduce complaints. With that in mind, in addition to making customer service the focus of this Members' Quarterly Report, we organised a Members' Forum on 26 April 2017 focused on this topic. The Forum explored key themes in complaints to EWON, external speakers shared best practice tips from other sectors and industries, and members shared strategies to improve their customer service. The Forum also focused on the power of a genuine apology.

In our last Quarterly Report, we also stressed the importance of apologies when dealing with customers and the fact that a genuine "we are sorry" can instantly clear the waters with a customer, leading to a better, quicker resolution. Many of the case studies included in this report illustrate that point. There were often multiple opportunities for members' complaints staff to apologise for poor customer service and move quickly to resolution.

We welcome any feedback about this report. For further information, or to discuss any aspect of it, please contact our office. Contact details are on the cover of this report.

Complaint Activity January – March 2017

Overview

Complaints received by EWON this quarter increased by 6.3% in comparison to the same period last year (5,908 compared to 5,557). This is significant because, after a lengthy period of declining complaints, this is the first increase in a quarter's complaint numbers compared to the equivalent quarter in the previous year. This is also the third quarter in a row where complaints have increased.

Electricity: Electricity retail complaints increased by 8.0%, from 3,637 opened in the same quarter of 2016 to 3,927. There was a 5.2% reduction in electricity distribution complaints, from 288 to 273. General enquiries in electricity increased from 100 in the same quarter in 2016 to 149 this quarter. The increase in electricity complaints is directly related to the digital meter rollout. EWON received 538 complaints concerning digital meters this quarter. Complaints about delays in digital meter installation were the biggest cause of complaints, with 313 customers complaining about this issue. Overall electricity complaints increased by 8.0%, 4,374 this quarter compared to 4,052 in 2016.

Gas: The number of gas retail complaints received this quarter declined by 1.0% (1,255) in comparison to the corresponding period in 2016 (1,268). However the number of gas distribution complaints (78) rose by 77.3% in comparison to the equivalent period last year (44). Overall gas complaints increased by 1.8%, 1,340 this quarter compared to 1,316 in 2016

Water: The number of water complaints received this quarter (187) increased by 5.1% compared to the corresponding period (178 in 2016).

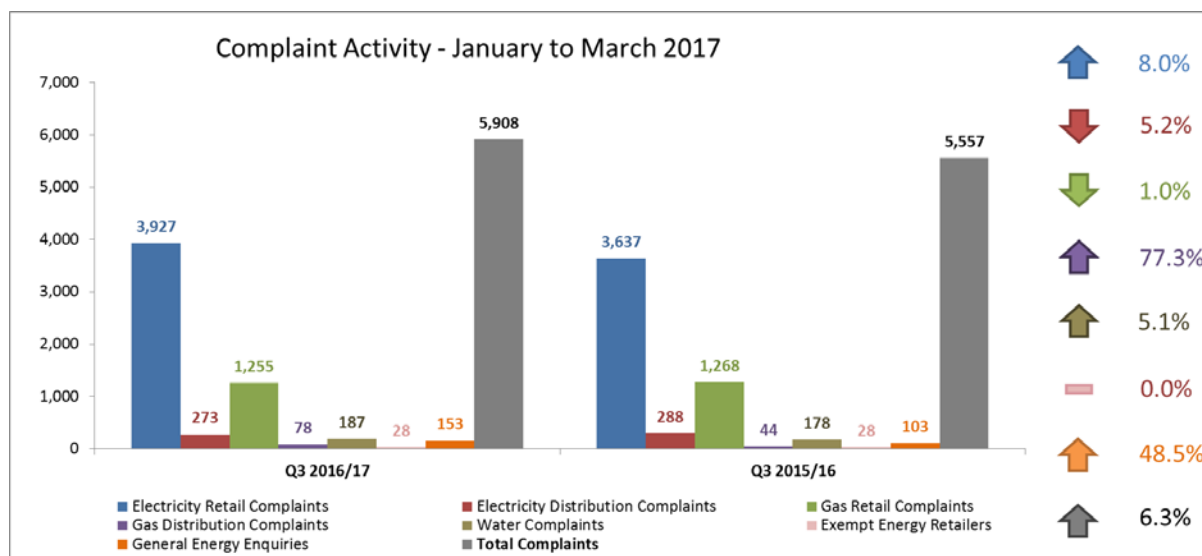


Table 1 below provides more detailed information about the number of complaints received during January to March 2017, in comparison to the corresponding period in 2016, along with the change, presented in actual and percentage terms.

Table 1 – Files opened Jan – Mar 2017 compared with previous quarter 2016

Case Subject	Provider Type	Jan 17 – Mar 17	Jan 16 – Mar 16	Increase or decrease	% change
Electricity	Distributor	273	288	-15	-5.2%
Electricity	Exempt retailer	25	27	-2	-7.4%
Electricity	General enquiry	149	100	49	49.0%
Electricity	Retailer	3,927	3,637	290	8.0%
Electricity Total		4,374	4,052	322	7.9%
Gas	Distributor	78	44	34	77.3%
Gas	Exempt retailer	3	1	2	200.0%
Gas	General enquiry	4	3	1	33.3%
Gas	Retailer	1,255	1,268	-13	-1.0%
Gas Total		1,340	1,316	24	1.8%
Non energy/ Non water	General enquiry	7	11	-4	-36.4%
Non energy/ Non-water Total		7	11	-4	-36.4%
Water	Distributor	60	64	-4	-6.3%
Water	Exempt retailer	1	0	1	N/A
Water	General enquiry	12	7	5	71.4%
Water	Retailer	114	107	7	6.5%
Water Total		187	178	9	5.1%
Grand Total		5,908	5,557	351	6.3%

Customer Complaint Issues

Complaints about customer service issues have increased significantly compared to the same period in 2016:

- Customer service / poor service up 14.9% (1,358 from 1,182). This issue was 10.8% of all issues identified.
- Customer service / failure to respond up 36.7% (990 from 724). This issue was 7.9% of all issues identified.
- Customer service / Incorrect advice or information up 28.1% (502 from 392). This issue was 4.0% of all issues identified.

High bill disputes increased by 4.3% and complaints about billing errors rose by 17.3%. It was pleasing to see complaints about payment difficulties decrease by 22.2% from 500 in 2016 down to 389 this quarter. The other decreases in complaints were related to either opening or closing accounts, down 16.3%.

This quarter saw digital meter issues appear in the top ten issues for the first time. Complaints about delays in installation were identified by 313 customers, while complaints about meters not being installed after being arranged numbered 291. There is significant overlap between these two issues, with many customers identifying both issues in their complaint.

Table 2 – Top 10 issues Jan – Mar 2017 compared with previous quarter 2016

Primary Issue	Secondary Issue	Tertiary Issue	Jan 17 – Mar 17	% share of total issues	Jan 16 – Mar 16	% share of total issues
Billing	High	Disputed	1,563	12.4%	1,499	12.9%
Customer service	Poor service		1,358	10.8%	1,182	10.2%
Customer service	Failure to respond		990	7.9%	724	6.2%
Billing	Estimation	Meter access / not read	606	4.8%	603	5.2%
Customer service	Incorrect advice/information		502	4.0%	392	3.4%
Billing	Opening/closing account		484	3.9%	578	5.0%
Credit	Payment difficulties	Current/arrears	389	3.1%	500	4.3%
Digital meter exchange	Delay		313	2.5%	N/A	N/A
Billing	Error	Other	298	2.4%	254	2.1%
Digital meter exchange	Not Installed		291	2.3%	N/A	N/A
Total Number of Issues Per Quarter			12,564		11,615	

Energy

In many instances appropriate levels of customer service would have resolved the customers' issues when complaints were first raised with the provider. The breakdown by energy complaint types is shown in *Table 3*.

Table 3 – Case breakdown – energy

Complaint type	Number of complaints	% Total energy complaints
General Enquiry	56	0.9%
Complaint enquiry	1,931	32.7%
Refer to Higher Level	2,610	44.2%
Investigated	1,311	22.2%
Total	5,908	100%

Customer Service

Poor customer service means customers have come to EWON about matters which should have been resolved when the customer first contacted their provider. The rise in complaints about customer service issues, both in overall numbers and as a percentage of total complaints, is an unwelcome trend.

Some customers only approach EWON after multiple attempts to resolve a simple issue have been poorly handled. Poor customer service can be compounded when EWON gives the provider the opportunity to resolve the issue through the 'refer to higher level' process, and an agreed resolution is then not implemented.

Customer service issues have traditionally been seen as a retailer problem, however distributors also have responsibilities to customers. The following case studies provide an overview of where customer service can be improved for both retailers and distributors.

Case Studies: Customer service and distributors

Case	Customer information / outcome
<p>Change of service address</p>	<p><i>The refusal of the distributor to change the supply address until EWON investigated meant the customer suffered financial detriment. Positively, despite not being responsible for the action that led to the complaint, the retailer gave good customer service by compensating the customer for the amount of the rebate they did not receive.</i></p> <p>A customer stopped receiving her Low Income Household Rebate. After trying to get the rebate restored by the retailer, the customer contacted EWON, who referred the matter back to the retailer at a higher level.</p> <p>The retailer told the customer that the distributor had changed the service address and therefore Centrelink matching would not allow verification.</p> <p>In EWON's investigation, it emerged that the retailer had tried to get a change of the service address, but the distributor required a rates notice to make the change. The customer could not provide this as she was a tenant. This case was then registered against the distributor who initially insisted on a rates notice along with a lease agreement as 'this was policy.'</p> <p>The distributor finally agreed that a lease agreement would be sufficient and the service address was changed to reflect the mailing address that Centrelink had. The retailer paid the customer an amount equivalent to the rebate the customer did not receive.</p>
<p>Poor communication channels</p>	<p><i>The business should not have had to come to EWON to make contact with the relevant section of the distributor's business.</i></p> <p>EWON was contacted by a construction company which was installing a mobile tower at the supply address. It needed approval to lift equipment over power lines and had submitted the relevant paperwork. The distributor had not responded and whenever its staff called the call centre, they were told to contact the distributor's construction work department by e-mail. They had done so but had not received any response.</p> <p>EWON put the company in touch with the relevant section of the distributor.</p>
<p>Meter access issue</p>	<p><i>Despite an earlier resolution, the distributor failed to ensure instructions were given to the meter readers. Telling the customer to talk to the subcontractors was inappropriate.</i></p> <p>A customer said that in 2014 she had started receiving estimated bills and was advised this was due to a locked gate. There was no gate, and her meter was next to a neighbour's meter which was always read with no problems. In 2015, the customer had come to EWON and some specific instructions on the meter's position were added to the customer's account.</p> <p>The customer returned to EWON and advised she was again having issues with meter access and, as a result, considered she was receiving</p>

Case	Customer information / outcome
	<p>unreasonably high estimated bills. The customer provided clear access instructions to the distributor, however when she contacted them they kept directing the customer to the meter reading sub-contractor as it was "not their problem".</p> <p>During EWON's investigation, it was established that each year meter readers were rotated and, when this happened, the specific instructions on file were not passed on to the new meter reader. The distributor agreed to put a further note on the file that any time the meter could not be located the reader was to contact a supervisor. The distributor said this should solve the issue.</p> <p>The above was discussed with customer, who accepted the outcome and considered the matter resolved.</p>

Case Studies: Customer service and digital meters

Case	Customer information / outcome
<p>Delayed service still charged for</p>	<p><i>A delay in meter installation should be explained to the customer. Any fees associated with a new meter installation should not be charged until the meter is installed.</i></p> <p>A customer entered into a contract with the retailer, which included a new meter. The meter was not installed and when the customer contacted the retailer, a date for the installation could not be provided. The customer was particularly upset because he was being charged a monthly fee, even though the meter had not been installed. The customer said he had lost trust in the retailer as they did not provide him with adequate information.</p> <p>The matter was referred to the retailer at a higher level with the customer's agreement, knowing he could re-contact EWON if necessary.</p>
<p>Delay in installation</p>	<p><i>Where a customer is paying for a meter to be installed as part of a larger package, they have a right to expect the meter installation as promised.</i></p> <p>A customer agreed to upgrade her solar installation and, as part of the upgrade agreement, a new digital meter was to be installed. After the solar upgrade she was informed she would not receive a new meter for at least three months, and that the upgraded installation would not work properly without the meter. She was also told that if she had bought a new installation, rather than an upgrade, a meter would have been available. This matter was referred to a higher level.</p> <p>The customer returned to EWON as she was dissatisfied with the outcome. An investigation resulted in an appointment to install a new meter. The customer again returned to EWON as the meter was not installed. A new date was set for the installation and the retailer agreed to pay the customer for the missed solar generation based on an estimate for the period that the meter was not installed.</p> <p>The customer was satisfied with this outcome.</p>

Case	Customer information / outcome
Damage due to installation	<p><i>There should not be barriers for customers seeking redress for damage caused by the installation of new meters. Retailers should investigate such claims, not require the customer to do the investigation themselves.</i></p> <p>A customer's inverter on his solar installation failed after a new digital meter was installed. The customer contacted the retailer responsible for the meter installation and, after a series of delays, did not receive an adequate response to the complaint. The customer approached EWON and the matter was referred to a higher level.</p> <p>The retailer contacted the customer and said he would be contacted in the near future. The customer returned to EWON because he thought this matter required immediate attention as he was losing income due to the failed inverter. During the investigation the retailer initially denied responsibility and insisted that the customer prove that the failure was related to the installation of the meter. A technical report established that the error code on the inverter showed it failed due to an incorrect shut down and restart. The retailer accepted this and agreed to pay for the replacement of the inverter.</p> <p>The retailer paid the customer \$179 for the cost of the independent report and \$1,850 for the cost of the replacement inverter.</p>

Estimated reads often leave customers confused. The failure to provide adequate information combined with a refusal to further investigate a customer's concerns can result in an avoidable EWON investigation.

Case Studies: Customer service and estimated reads

Case	Customer information / outcome
No meter access	<p><i>Where there are permanent meter access problems retailers should provide customers with relevant information about how to provide self reads. Charges for special reads should only be applied after customers have been advised of these options.</i></p> <p>A customer approached EWON concerned about receiving regular estimated bills. She had been in contact with her retailer a number of times to resolve this issue and had not had a satisfactory response. The meter was inside her apartment and, when she had arranged for a special meter read, it had not occurred. EWON arranged for a photo to be taken of the meter and provided this to the retailer. The rebilling based on the photo resulted in an adjustment of \$1,196 which left the customer's account \$364 in credit. The retailer also waived a \$19 fee for the special read which had not occurred. EWON provided the customer with a number of self-read options which would ensure future billing was accurate.</p> <p>The customer was happy with this outcome.</p>
Final read on a removed meter	<p><i>Delays in responding to the customer's concerns, refusal to properly investigate the issue, referral of the customer to the distributor, and</i></p>

Case	Customer information / outcome
	<p><i>refusal to accept the customer's evidence were compounded by incorrect information initially being provided to EWON.</i></p> <p>A customer received an estimated bill, as her meter was replaced on the final day of the billing period. The customer provided a photo of the replaced meter reading prior to its removal and the retailer agreed to revise the estimated bill. Two months later this had not occurred and the retailer requested that she resend the photo. After another month the customer contacted the retailer again only to be told that the original bill was correct and that if she was dissatisfied she should contact the distributor. The distributor told the customer that she had to deal with the retailer over the issue. The retailer again told the customer that the final reading was correct.</p> <p>The customer then contacted the contractor which had removed the meter, and got an accurate reading from the paperwork associated with the meter removal. The customer approached EWON and was referred to a higher level at the retailer. The customer returned to EWON as the retailer insisted on using the estimated read and required the customer to pay the original bill.</p> <p>When EWON investigated, the retailer claimed to have the final read on the replaced meter that was exactly the same as the estimated read. This was unusual so further information was sought. The retailer then provided EWON with a new revised read and agreed to reissue three invoices. The revised billing resulted in the customer's account having a credit balance of \$648 and the retailer also applied a further \$100 customer service gesture for the inconvenience caused by its poor customer service.</p> <p>The customer was pleased with this outcome.</p>
<p>Estimated final bill</p>	<p><i>Although the retailer was technically correct, the manner in which the customer was informed of this and the failure to admit that the extremely late catchup bill was due to its own initial error compounded the customer's distrust of the information that the retailer provided.</i></p> <p>A customer closed her gas account and paid the final bill. Five months later she received two amended gas bills for different amounts. The customer disputed these bills and the retailer agreed there was clearly a mistake and a hold would be placed on the account. The customer then received a final demand and credit collection calls so she came to EWON. The matter was referred to a higher level at the retailer. The retailer responded to the customer and insisted that the final bill had been estimated and that the new invoice was correct and needed to be paid. The customer was not convinced that this information was correct and returned to EWON.</p> <p>EWON's investigation established that the retailer received two sets of data on the same day and billed on the estimated rather than the real data; and only issued an invoice based upon the real data five months later. The retailer could not explain to EWON why a final bill was issued on estimated data. In recognition of the original error and the delay in rebilling, the retailer waived the closing balance of \$752.</p>

Case	Customer information / outcome
	The customer was happy with this outcome.
Billing on a disconnected meter	<p><i>As there had been no consumption at the site, this issue should have been resolved when the customer first contacted the retailer.</i></p> <p>A customer was renovating his home and not consuming gas. He then received an estimated bill with usage charges of \$600. This was disputed with the retailer and the usage charges amended to \$300. The customer came to EWON and the matter was referred to a higher level to the retailer.</p> <p>The retailer offered a resolution of \$200 but the customer returned to EWON because this offer still included some charges for consumption which the customer did not think reasonable as he had photos confirming that there had been no gas used. The customer had paid the supply charges but was not prepared to pay estimated usage when no gas had been used. When EWON opened an investigation, the retailer immediately offered to waive the balance of the account, which was the estimated consumption charges that were in dispute.</p> <p>The customer was satisfied with this outcome.</p>

Case Studies: Customer service and payment arrangements

Case	Customer information / outcome
Refusal to transfer a credit balance to a new account	<p><i>Failure to transfer a credit balance to a new account resulted in two EWON cases.</i></p> <p>The customer moved house and opened a new account with the same retailer. The customer said that she had a credit on the old account and wanted this transferred to her new account but the retailer would not do this. The matter was referred back to the retailer at a higher level for resolution. The customer returned to EWON as the retailer still refused to transfer the credit balance.</p> <p>EWON began an investigation and the retailer transferred the credit balance to the new account as well as applying a \$100 customer service gesture to the account.</p> <p>The customer was happy with this outcome.</p>
Cancelled payment arrangement	<p><i>A threat of disconnection and cancellation of this payment arrangement should not have occurred because of the customer's promptly corrected error.</i></p> <p>EWON had assisted a business customer establish a payment arrangement for a large backbill. The customer re-contacted EWON because they had made an error and paid \$3,475 instead of \$3,575. On realising the error, the additional \$100 was paid a few days later. After two more monthly payments by the customer, the retailer issued a disconnection notice and cancelled the payment plan. When the customer contacted the retailer, it refused to reinstall the payment</p>

Case	Customer information / outcome
	<p>arrangement.</p> <p>EWON contacted the retailer, the payment plan was immediately restored and the disconnection warning was withdrawn.</p>
Centrepay confusion	<p><i>A very positive outcome for the customer, following a Centrepay error.</i></p> <p>A customer had set up a Centrepay arrangement for both his gas and electricity accounts. He then noticed that his gas account had a debit and his electricity account had a credit. He requested the retailer to transfer the credit to his gas account and to check his Centrepay arrangement. The retailer refused the transfer and said he needed to check with Centrepay himself. The customer approached EWON and the matter was referred back to the retailer at a higher level.</p> <p>The customer returned to EWON and indicated that he considered the retailer had been rude and unprofessional when it contacted him, and that the issues he raised were still unresolved. EWON opened an investigation and established that an error when the Centrepay arrangement was established meant it was only set up for the electricity account. The retailer established a Centrepay arrangement for the gas account and waived the balance owed on that account.</p> <p>The customer had not expected the retailer to waive his gas bill and was very satisfied with this outcome.</p>
Excessive direct debit	<p><i>The retailer's failure to cancel the direct debit for the full arrears placed this customer in extreme hardship.</i></p> <p>A customer established a payment arrangement of \$45 to be direct debited from her bank account every week. She then received a bill that stated there would be a direct debit for the full arrears of \$779. She contacted the retailer and requested this be cancelled. She contacted the retailer again and was told that the direct debit for the full amount had been cancelled. Despite this, the full direct debit went ahead and her bank account was overdrawn. When she contacted the retailer it told her it would take three days to refund her money.</p> <p>When EWON contacted the retailer it immediately sent a \$200 food voucher to the customer as the refund could not be completed immediately. It also provided a \$250 credit on the customer's account, cancelled the direct debit arrangement, and placed the customer on its hardship program.</p>

Case Studies: Customer service and account arrears

Case	Customer information / outcome
<p>Multiple accounts for one meter</p>	<p><i>The retailer could not provide a satisfactory explanation to the customer or EWON about what had occurred concerning the account, or the multiple bills issued.</i></p> <p>A customer had some billing issues related to meter and address problems for his electricity account which EWON assisted in resolving. As part of that resolution his retailer identified that similar problems related to his address might occur with his gas account and said this would be rectified. The retailer indicated that a new account would be set up with a credit of \$175. The customer then received three bills, all for different accounts, linked to his meter. He was unable to obtain a satisfactory explanation from the retailer about what was happening.</p> <p>The customer was very concerned that despite being told his account was on hold, he kept receiving collection and disconnection notices while trying to resolve the issues. In frustration he contacted EWON.</p> <p>EWON's investigation established that the customer's retailer had opened four different accounts for one gas meter and it could not explain why this had happened. Two of the accounts had a nil balance and were closed. The retailer waived the balance of \$412 on the third account in recognition of poor customer service and also closed that account. The final account was left open with a balance of \$127 owing.</p>
<p>Incorrect backbilling</p>	<p><i>The retailer's initial error was compounded by its inability to correctly bill the customer after identifying the problem. The failure to correct the billing after being provided a further opportunity added to the customer's dissatisfaction.</i></p> <p>The customer moved in and opened a gas account with her preferred retailer. She then began to receive notices addressed to the "Energy Consumer". Her retailer told her to ignore these notices. She was then disconnected and her retailer identified she was being billed for the wrong meter. It corrected this and sent her an invoice for \$4,240 covering an 18- month period. The customer came to EWON and the matter was referred to a higher level. The customer returned to EWON because, despite the retailer reducing the bill to \$2,505, she felt that this was still too high.</p> <p>EWON's review identified that the retailer had failed to apply the nine-month backbilling rule and the customer's final bill was reduced by a further \$1,505, leaving a balance of \$1,000. A payment plan over six months was arranged.</p>
<p>Disputed bill</p>	<p><i>When a customer provides substantiation to support their case, a retailer should respond in a timely manner to correct the error.</i></p> <p>A customer disputed a high gas bill. During the discussion with the retailer he pointed out that the meter number on his bill was different to the number on his meter. The retailer said his meter had been changed, which explained the new meter number. The customer then provided a photo of his meter and the retailer agreed to contact the distributor to</p>

Case	Customer information / outcome
	<p>clarify the situation. The customer followed up with the distributor which told him that the retailer had not made contact so he came to EWON. This matter was referred back to the retailer at a higher level.</p> <p>The customer returned to EWON very frustrated because, despite a number of conversations, no one could confirm whether a new meter had been installed.</p> <p>After an EWON investigation commenced, an inspection of the customer's site was arranged. It was confirmed there was only one meter on the site and that it had not been replaced. The retailer reversed the billing based on the wrong meter and issued a bill for the actual one. This left a credit balance of \$148 and the retailer added a customer service gesture to the account resulting in a \$250 credit.</p> <p>The customer was happy to have resolved the issue but remained extremely dissatisfied with the delays in resolving this matter, and the poor customer service he received from both his retailer and distributor.</p>
Failed reconnection request	<p><i>Wrongful disconnection should be reviewed quickly – repeated promises to reconnect when the retailer did not own the site led to three days off supply.</i></p> <p>A customer had a gas account with her preferred retailer and had paid all her bills so was shocked when she was disconnected without warning. She contacted her retailer who said it would look into the disconnection and call her back. She then rang back many more times and each time the retailer promised to arrange a reconnection. After the third day without gas, the customer rang EWON.</p> <p>EWON quickly identified that the customer's retailer did not own the site and organised with the responsible retailer to arrange an out of hours reconnection. The customer's retailer had opened the account against the wrong meter so agreed to cancel the account and refund all of the money paid against the wrong meter. The customer was advised to open an account with the retailer which owned her meter and then, if she wished to, arrange a transfer to her preferred retailer.</p>

Case Studies: Customer service and failure to implement agreed resolutions

Case	Customer information / outcome
Failure to implement an agreed resolution	<p>As part of an EWON resolution following an earlier complaint, the retailer agreed to waive \$173 leaving a nil balance on the customer's account. The customer returned to EWON after receiving an overdue notice for \$173. EWON contacted the retailer and the amount was credited to the account leaving a nil balance as originally promised.</p>
	<p>As part of an EWON resolution following an earlier complaint, the retailer agreed to provide the customer with a cheque for \$239. The customer</p>

Case	Customer information / outcome
	contacted EWON a month later as no cheque had arrived. When EWON contacted the retailer it was found that no cheque had been raised. The retailer immediately then raised and posted the cheque.
	As part of an EWON resolution following an earlier complaint, the retailer agreed to waive \$362 from the customer's account on receipt of payment of \$549. The customer returned to EWON, because despite paying the agreed amount, she was receiving collection calls for the balance. EWON contacted the retailer and the \$362 was waived from the customer's account as promised.
	As part of an EWON resolution following an earlier complaint, the retailer agreed to credit the customer's account with \$7,540 once the customer completed a six month payment arrangement. The customer contacted EWON when this credit was not applied. The retailer advised EWON they had failed to note the requirement to pay a credit after the payment plan was completed. It apologised to the customer and applied the agreed credit to the account.

Case Studies: Very poor customer service

Case	Customer information / outcome
Refusal to give written information to hearing impaired customer	<p><i>Two months to provide requested information suggests a clear lack of understanding of the customer's needs.</i></p> <p>A customer had contacted her retailer to update her solar package to include a digital meter. She required the information in writing as she was hearing impaired. She made multiple requests for the information and eventually the retailer told her that it was 'against policy' to send quotes in writing. She complained to the retailer about this in early November 2016 and did not receive a response. She approached EWON in mid-December 2016 seeking assistance in gaining the information she had requested.</p> <p>When EWON contacted the retailer it promised to provide the information to the customer in early January 2017. This did not occur and it required further repeated follow up from EWON before the retailer finally provided the information in writing to the customer on 13 February 2017. The retailer recognised this was poor customer service and provided a credit of \$150 on the customer's account.</p> <p>The customer thanked EWON for the assistance in getting the details but also said she had decided to change retailers as a result of her experience.</p>
Getting customer's name and contact details wrong	<p><i>The retailer compounded its error in getting a customer's name wrong, failing to respond to his requests for the error to be corrected and using an incorrect email address.</i></p> <p>The customer's name was incorrect in his new retailer's welcome pack and he had been trying to correct this without success. He then received</p>

Case	Customer information / outcome
	<p>an overdue notice without having received a bill. This matter was referred to the retailer at a higher level.</p> <p>The retailer failed to contact the customer so EWON arranged for a facilitated contact. The customer returned to EWON as he was dissatisfied with the explanations the retailer provided, the retailer would not issue a new contract with his correct name, nor would it reissue the bill that he had not received.</p> <p>An EWON investigation established the retailer not only had the customer's name wrong but the bill had been sent to an incorrect e-mail address. The customer's name and e-mail address were corrected in the retailer's database and a bill was reissued. The retailer said it could not make changes to a contract once it was issued and the best it could do was correct the details on the database. It provided a written apology to the customer.</p> <p>The customer considered this resolved his complaint.</p>
Customer seeking explanation	<p><i>Customers need their confidence restored after errors; and empathy.</i></p> <p>A customer was contacted by a collection agency about an overdue gas bill. She contacted the retailer which identified the bill had been sent to an incorrect address. The address and the billing issue were resolved. She then became worried about the security of her account and rang the complaints line to seek an explanation about how the address had been changed on her account. She considered she was spoken to so rudely she was reduced to tears. She rang EWON seeking an explanation of the address error and a review of the unprofessional behaviour she had experienced.</p> <p>The matter was referred to the retailer at a higher level with the customer's agreement, knowing she could re-contact EWON if necessary.</p>
Billing details provided to wrong customer	<p><i>The retailer breached the privacy of a business customer whose bills it was incorrectly sending to another party.</i></p> <p>A customer opened an account and provided her e-mail address for the delivery of her bills. She then started receiving bills for a business with a number of different supply addresses. She contacted the retailer a number of times and on each occasion was questioned at length about her possible links to the business. When she was finally able to speak to the retailer's business accounts unit she was informed that she should not be getting these bills and they would stop. When the bills kept arriving, she came to EWON seeking to stop these bills being sent to her.</p> <p>The matter was referred to the retailer at a higher level with the customer's agreement, knowing she could re-contact EWON if necessary.</p>
Rebate failure	<p><i>The retailer missed three opportunities to resolve this matter.</i></p> <p>A customer rang her retailer when she noticed that she was no longer receiving a rebate. The retailer said they would place a hold on the account while they looked into the matter. She contacted the retailer again which kept insisting they were investigating but there was no resolution forthcoming. When she then received a letter requiring payment and threatening credit action, the customer contacted EWON.</p>

Case	Customer information / outcome
	<p>This matter was referred to the retailer at a higher level, however the customer was not contacted. EWON facilitated contact with the customer and the retailer promised a letter addressing her concerns. The customer returned to EWON as no letter arrived and there was no other contact from the retailer.</p> <p>EWON contacted the retailer and they made a resolution offer of \$300. The customer accepted this offer.</p>
Honesty not rewarded	<p><i>A customer's honest actions were blocked by the retailer's inaction and unwillingness to listen.</i></p> <p>A customer identified that payments were being made to her energy accounts from an external source. She contacted the retailer as she thought it unfair that, through an error, someone else was paying for her energy consumption. The retailer provided assurances that this would be fixed but the external payments continued for nearly a year. Even when the accounts were closed and new account numbers allocated, the transfers of money continued. In frustration the customer closed her accounts and transferred to a new retailer. She contacted EWON because the old retailer kept contacting her to offer the credit on the closed account.</p> <p>EWON contacted the retailer which agreed to close the energy accounts with nil balances so the notices relating to credit balances would cease.</p> <p>The customer was happy with this outcome.</p>

Dealing with accounts where the customer has passed away requires the highest level of customer service.

Case Studies: Deceased estates

Case	Customer information / outcome
Deceased customer	<p>An advocate advised her mother had died and she had been going through the process to close her electricity account and had found the process to be time consuming and stressful. She also considered the customer service to be obstructive and unprofessional.</p> <p>She originally made the request via the internet to close the account but this was not acknowledged. She then made a number of phone calls but was unable to get the appropriate action taken. As the executor for her mother's estate, she needed the account to be closed to finalise the estate and was still waiting for the final bill. The matter appeared to have been resolved – she had been advised the bill would arrive within 10 days. However, she considered the treatment she received to be unreasonable and insensitive at a time when she was grieving for her mother. She was unhappy with the customer service she had experienced and was not confident the final bill would be received.</p> <p>With the customer's agreement, the matter was referred to the retailer</p>

Case	Customer information / outcome
	at a higher level, knowing she could re-contact EWON if necessary. The referral asked the retailer to review the customer service provided in this matter.

Water Complaints

Water complaints received this quarter (187) increased by 5.1% (9 complaints) compared to the corresponding period (178) in 2016.

Water complaints about customer service increased this quarter, while complaints about high bills decreased, as can be seen in *Table 5*. The proportion of general enquiries is quite high. Many of these are out of jurisdiction complaints from customers concerning local council water authorities, landlords or plumbing issues. These customers are referred to the relevant authorities.

A breakdown of water case types is shown in *Table 6*.

Table 5 – Water Top 5 issues Jan-Mar 2017 compared with previous quarter 2016

Primary Issue	Secondary Issue	Tertiary Issue	Jan 17 – Mar 17	Jan 16 – Mar 16	Increase or decrease	% change
Customer service	Poor service		37	13	24	184.6%
Billing	High	Disputed	32	49	-17	-34.7%
General	Energy / Water		28	11	17	154.5%
Customer service	Failure to respond		19	19	0	0.0%
Land	Property damage/restoration		15	16	-1	-6.3%

Table 6 – Case breakdown – water

Complaint type	Number of complaints	% Total water complaints
General Enquiry	3	1.6%
Complaint enquiry	104	55.7%
Refer to Higher Level	60	32.1%
Investigated	20	10.6%
Total	187	100%

Many poor customer service complaints against water providers would not need EWON involvement if members had better customer service practice.

Case Studies: Water complaints

Case	Customer information / outcome
<p>Customer charged on an incorrect classification</p>	<p><i>The water provider did not give appropriate consideration to the customer's situation when he was trying to resolve his complaint about overcharging.</i></p> <p>The customer was notified by the water provider that he would no longer be charged for a dual occupancy dwelling due a change in the way properties were being billed.</p> <p>The customer had not been aware that he had been incurring higher charges based on dual occupancy because this information was not included on the customer's bill. As the property had not been a dual occupancy for a number of years, the customer contacted the provider seeking a refund of the higher level of fees.</p> <p>The water provider asked the customer to provide documentation showing when the property had been converted from dual to single occupancy. However, due to the time that had elapsed, the customer did not have access to this information.</p> <p>After initial investigation by EWON, the provider agreed to arrange a site inspection of the customer's premises and it contacted the local council regarding its records in relation to the status of the property. These further investigations satisfied the water provider that the property was a single occupancy.</p> <p>The customer was refunded the additional fees charged.</p>
<p>Failure to explain fees and charges</p>	<p><i>The customer should not be referred to an external regulatory body to discuss a fee on her bill.</i></p> <p>A customer wanted to understand why her sewerage charge was so high so she contacted the provider to seek an explanation for the services covered by the fee. The customer spoke to a number of the provider's customer service representatives. Eventually, she was referred to IPART.</p> <p>The customer contacted EWON as she considered the water provider should be able to explain one of its charges.</p> <p>With the customer's agreement, the matter was referred to the provider at a higher level, knowing she could re-contact EWON if necessary.</p>
<p>Above and beyond the relevant policy</p>	<p><i>Sometimes EWON can provide independent advice that confirms for the customer that a provider's response has been appropriate and reasonable.</i></p> <p>The customer received a high water bill due to a concealed water leak at their property. After contacting their provider, the customer was offered a credit against their bill in accordance with the provider's concealed leak policy. The water provider also applied a \$600 customer service gesture.</p> <p>EWON was able to confirm that the water provider had acted reasonably in applying its concealed leak policy and offering a customer service</p>

Case	Customer information / outcome
<p>Inappropriate restriction fees</p>	<p>gesture.</p> <p><i>A tenant should not be liable for fees associated with restricting the water supply to a property.</i></p> <p>The customer advised that he was a tenant and his supply address was managed by a real estate agent and the water to the supply address was restricted due to bills not being paid. When the tenant contacted the provider, the restriction was lifted on the same day, however the customer was advised that he would be charged a fee for lifting the restriction. The customer then approached EWON.</p> <p>With the customer's agreement, the matter was referred to the provider at a higher level, knowing he could re-contact EWON if necessary.</p> <p><i>* As a result of EWON's systemic review and policy submissions relating to water issues affecting tenants in this provider's patch, it has since agreed to review their processes for restricting tenants and for dealing with tenant enquiries.</i></p>
<p>Inappropriate claim process</p>	<p><i>A customer who has a claim resulting from the actions of a contractor should not be referred to the contractor to resolve their claim.</i></p> <p>A customer wanted to make a claim for damage caused to her car by a pothole in the road. The local council referred the customer to the water provider as the provider's contractors were conducting work in the area. The customer contacted the water provider which referred her to the contractor. The contractor did not want to discuss the claim and referred her back to the water provider. The water provider then told the customer it could not assist with the claim as it was the contractor's responsibility. The customer approached EWON.</p> <p>EWON advised the customer to lodge a claim with the water provider and return to EWON if the claim was formally refused.</p>

Stakeholder Engagement

This section gives a summary of significant stakeholder activities by EWON during this quarter.

Members	
<i>Meetings</i>	<i>EWON staff involved</i>
Member Induction	<i>Ombudsman, General Manager Investigations, General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy, Manager Governance, Investigations Managers, Stakeholder Relations Officers</i>
Momentum Energy	<i>Ombudsman</i>
Ausgrid Customer Council	<i>Ombudsman, Manager Policy and Research</i>
Jemena	<i>Ombudsman, General Manager Investigations, Manager Policy and Research</i>
Simply Energy	<i>Ombudsman</i>
AGL	<i>Ombudsman and General Manager Investigations</i>
EnergyAustralia	<i>Ombudsman / Investigations</i>
Endeavour Energy	<i>Ombudsman</i>
Origin Energy	<i>Ombudsman</i>
Energy Locals	<i>Ombudsman</i>
Red Energy	<i>Ombudsman</i>
Living Utilities (Lendlease Recycled Water)	<i>General Manager Governance, Policy and Awareness, Manager Governance, Stakeholder Relations Officer</i>
Community	
<i>Forums</i>	
Hunter Water Payment Assistance Forum	<i>Community Engagement Officer</i>
Good Service Mob	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
<i>Presentations</i>	
Disability Interagency Group – Central Coast	<i>Community Engagement Officer</i>
Lifestart NDIS Network	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
Probus – Berowra, Nepean Riverlands, and Campsie	<i>Community Engagement Officer</i>
Coolaburoo Neighbourhood Centre	<i>Investigations Officers</i>
Sydney West Multicultural Services	<i>Community Engagement Officer</i>

(Fijian and Indian group)	
Murray River Council	<i>Community Engagement Officer</i>
Boronia Multicultural Services – Arabic group	<i>Investigations Officers</i>
Good Service Mob	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
<i>EWON stalls</i>	
Bring Your Bills Day – Sydney West Multicultural Centre	<i>Investigations Officers</i>
Bring Your Bills Day – Mt Druitt, Bankstown, Arncliffe, Warrawong	<i>Investigations Officers</i>
Bring Your Bills Day – Surry Hills	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
Mardi Gras Fair Day	<i>Investigations Officers</i>
International Women’s Day	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
Yabun Festival	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer and Investigations Officers</i>
Summer on the Green	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
Storehouse Kogarah	<i>Investigations Officers</i>
Intercultural Expo – Eastwood	<i>Community Engagement Officer</i>
Hornsby Council – Earth Hour	<i>Community Engagement Officer</i>
Salvation Army ‘One Stop Shop’ Expo	<i>Community Engagement Officer</i>
<i>Meetings</i>	
Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC)	<i>Community Engagement Officer, Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
JOIN group hosted by Australian Information Commissioner	<i>Community Engagement Officer</i>
Anglicare and St Vincent De Paul, Mt Druitt	<i>Community Engagement Officer</i>
Mana-nula Ngara Interagency	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
Good Service Mob	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
Dareton Solar Project	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>

Indigenous Debt Prevention Day	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
NSW Ombudsman	<i>General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy and Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
Power & Usage Workshop	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer and Investigations Officers</i>
ATSI ADB Advisory	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
Redfern Community Centre	<i>Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>

Government and Other Stakeholders

Meetings

AEMC	<i>Ombudsman, General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy, Manager Governance</i>
AER	<i>General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy and Manager Policy and Research</i>
Minister for Energy and Utilities (NSW)	<i>Ombudsman, General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy</i>
Shadow Minister for Industry, Resources and Energy	<i>Ombudsman, General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy</i>
National Consumer Congress	<i>Ombudsman</i>
Legal Aid NSW	<i>General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy, Investigations Manager, Manager Communications, and Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>
CHISAL – Seminar on Procedural Fairness	<i>Staff from Governance, Awareness and Policy and Investigations</i>
Energy Consumers Australia	<i>Ombudsman, General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy, Manager Policy and Research</i>
Commissioner NSW Fair Trading	<i>Ombudsman, General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy</i>
EWOV, EWOQ, EWOSA	<i>Ombudsman</i>
NSW Planning & Environment – Resources & Energy	<i>Manager Policy and Research and Manager Governance</i>
SOCAP and ACCC	<i>Ombudsman</i>
IPART	<i>Senior Policy Officer</i>
Westfield and Shopping Centre Council of Australia	<i>General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy and Manager Policy and Research</i>
Stocklands	<i>General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy and Manager Policy and Research</i>
Audit Office of NSW	<i>General Manager Governance, Awareness and Policy, Manager Policy and Research, Community Engagement Officer, and Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer</i>