

Introduction

Welcome to the first issue of Energy Connections, a newsletter designed to keep you up to date on the work of the Energy Industry Ombudsman of South Australia.

We're hoping it keeps us in touch with the many people and groups who have an interest in the work we do: energy providers, community service groups, consumer organisations, MPs, community information services and others.

As many of you know, I was appointed Energy Industry Ombudsman late last year, succeeding Nick Hakof, who put in place a strong and independent service for South Australian electricity and gas consumers as the State's founding Energy Industry Ombudsman from 2000.

I've come to the position with long experience in the energy sector, having worked in many senior roles in different parts of the industry. Much of my career has involved dealing with consumers and finding resolutions to problems that they have encountered. I'm really keen to work with consumers, energy companies and other stakeholders to resolve matters effectively and efficiently, to identify opportunities for continuous improvement and be as accessible as possible to all who need our services.

For those who don't know our background, the Energy Industry Ombudsman (SA) Ltd started as the Electricity Industry Ombudsman (SA) Ltd in 2000. The jurisdiction of the Scheme was broadened in November 2003 to include the gas industry and the Company's name was changed to Energy Industry Ombudsman (SA) Ltd at this time. EIOSA is a not-for-profit public company limited by guarantee and governed by a Board of Directors.

Our role is to facilitate the prompt resolution of complaints and disputes between consumers of electricity and gas services and their energy companies by providing a free, independent, accessible, fair and informal service. Put simply: we're here to help!

My first six months in the office has confirmed that the smooth supply of energy is something we can usually take for granted in SA. And that's how it should be. But things can go wrong, and this year we're already noticing a steady increase in contacts from energy consumers, spread across a range of issues.

We are obviously concerned to help resolve each and every issue, but we don't believe the current rise in contacts reflects any major systemic problem. Rather we're pleased that it shows growing awareness about the services we offer.

We would appreciate it if you can further spread the word and let others know that the Ombudsman's office can investigate:

- Billing disputes
- Energy sales and contracts
- Problems with the provision and supply of electricity and gas
- Disconnection disputes
- Credit and payment difficulties
- Complaints about the way electricity or gas companies access property, and
- Behaviour of electricity or gas company staff, contractors and agents.

It's vital that customers should first try to resolve any problems with their service provider. But, if they remain dissatisfied with the response, they should contact us on Free Call 1800 665 565.

I'd be pleased also to get any feedback from you, about the services we offer and any particular issues you'd like more information about in future newsletters.

All the best,



Sandy Canale
Energy Industry Ombudsman (South Australia)



Sandy Canale
Energy Industry Ombudsman

Contents

table of issues

Details the number and type of contacts with the Energy Industry Ombudsman's office between 1 July 2007 and 30 April 2008.

hottopics

A snapshot of main areas of consumer concerns and some helpful hints.

news inbrief

Latest news, community events and activities.

circuitbreaker

Two Case Studies providing an insight into how issues can be resolved, to the benefit of all.



**Energy Industry
Ombudsman SA**

Free call 1800 665 565
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table of issues

ISSUE	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER
Billing	High bills, back bills, not receiving bills or delay in billing, information about bills, fees, charges and tariffs.	1639
Competition	Contract issues including terms and conditions of contract, information about retailers, conduct of salespeople, delay in transfer, and consent not given for transfer.	898
Credit Management	Credit reference, disconnection, difficulty in payment, liability for charges.	496
Customer Service	Call-queue problems, delay in response to enquiries, poor behaviour.	281
General Enquiry	Matters to do with electricity and gas that are outside the jurisdiction of the Ombudsman scheme, including queries about electrician and gas fitters, LPG, regulatory issues. Enquiries about the Ombudsman scheme and general information.	415
Land	Damage to property, easement issues, location of infrastructure, vegetation clearance.	80
Privacy	Giving out personal information, not being able to deal with another person's account on their behalf.	7
Provision	Connection, disconnection, meter provision and street lighting.	220
Supply Quality	Damage claims from quality of supply, delays in repair, planned and unplanned outages (blackouts), variations in electricity voltage or gas quality.	113
TOTAL ALL ISSUES for the period 1 July 2007 to 30 April 2008		4149

free independent
complaint resolution

hottopics

High Bills

What do you do if you get a bill that's higher than expected?

1. Check your bills

- Does this one include previous amounts you haven't paid?
- Did you receive your last bill? If you didn't or paid only part of it, this high bill probably includes an amount that was owing.
- Have your recent bills been based on estimates of your usage? Your energy company may estimate your usage, but it must read your meter at least once a year. Check your last few bills for the word 'estimated' or the letter 'e' beside the meter readings.

If you're being billed for previously unpaid amounts, contact your energy company to arrange a payment plan to pay it off. You can also ask for advice on how to manage paying future bills.

Estimated bills are usually based on the amount of electricity or gas you've used in the past. This may be more than the amount you've actually used. Ask your energy company if you think your high bill may include 'catch-up' amounts.

2. Check your usage

- Have you used more electricity or gas than you usually do? Compare the average daily use figure on your high bill with those on your previous bills (including from the same time the previous year so you're comparing on a seasonal basis). If it's a lot higher, have you:

- Been at home more?
- Used appliances more (eg heater, clothes dryer, fan, air-conditioning, pool?) or bought new ones?
- Had people staying with you?
- Undertaken renovations?
- Changed from gas to electric?
- Got a gas leak? (if so, ring your gas energy retailer for advice)

3. Seek advice

- Call your electricity or gas company, or check their interactive on-line programs, to find out how much energy different appliances use.
- Contact the Energy Division Advisory Service on 8204 1888 or Freecall 1800 671 907 (country callers only) or energy.sa@saugov.sa.gov.au for energy efficiency advice

4. Check other options

- There could be a problem with your meter or with other equipment owned by the distributor. Ring your retailer and explain the steps you've already taken.

When you contact your energy company and you're not satisfied with their response, don't be put off. If the first person can't help, ask to speak to someone at a higher level.

If you are then not satisfied call the Energy Industry Ombudsman SA on 1800 665 565

news inbrief

Regional Visit

Energy Industry Ombudsman Sandy Canale and Investigations Manager, Steve Clarke, recently visited Mt Gambier to attend an Information Forum



Sarah Margets AGL, Tom Keenan Origin Energy, David Burgess SA Water and Sandy Canale EIOSA at the Utility Hardship Forum in Mount Gambier.

organised by Anglican Community Care Inc. The focus of the Forum was on hardship programs available to assist energy and water consumers facing financial difficulties. A number of energy companies and SA Water outlined

their programs to local Financial Counsellors, Community/ Consumer groups and Government Departments. Sandy spoke about the Energy Industry Ombudsman Scheme and the assistance it can provide gas and electricity customers and also conducted a number of interviews with local media.

Community Presentations

Presentations on the jurisdiction and operation of the Energy Industry Ombudsman were recently made by Sandy Canale to the Regional Presidents of the St Vincent de Paul Society and to the Association of Major Charitable Organisations. These discussions present an important opportunity to interact with community organisations that deliver assistance services that may involve energy related matters.



circuitbreaker

Case Study 1 – High Bill/Faulty meter

Mrs A had a high electricity bill which had been the subject of ongoing discussions with her retailer for nearly two years, including telephone calls and emails and she felt that the retailer was unresponsive to her concerns. During part of the billing period, Mrs A and her husband had been overseas and the house was unoccupied, however the bill was still higher than previous accounts. Subsequent quarterly bills continued to be higher than Mrs A believed to be correct, so she paid to have the meter tested and it was found to be faulty. This reinforced Mrs A's view that her bills were too high. In the meantime, she received notices from her retailer threatening disconnection of her supply. This upset her as she felt she had given her retailer sufficient time to resolve her concerns and so she contacted EIOSA for advice.

Generally complaints must have arisen from events that occurred no more than one year prior to being raised with EIOSA, however in this case the Ombudsman exercised his discretion for EIOSA to investigate.

The retailer confirmed that the meter was tested and found to be faulty, and replaced it the same day. As a result of the fault, the retailer re-calculated Mrs A's bills using meter readings from the new meter to work out the average daily consumption. It provided EIOSA with evidence detailing all of Mrs A's meter readings on her old and new meter, the bills that had been issued and cancelled, the revised bills and all of the amounts she had paid. This information satisfied Mrs A that she had not been overcharged.

As a result of discussions with EIOSA, the retailer acknowledged that Mrs A's concerns should have been resolved more proactively and, in view of the inconvenience caused to her, reimbursed the meter test fee of \$131, as well as paying her a \$50.00 customer service gesture. In addition, the retailer offered to negotiate a payment plan for the outstanding amount if this was required.

Case Study 2 – Signing up

Mrs G was approached by a door-to-door marketer to sign up with a different electricity retailer. Mrs G told the marketer that she would not sign anything without discussing the offer with her husband who was not home at the time. The marketer left the information with Mrs G and said that she would ring back in two weeks.

A short time later, Mrs G received a letter from the retailer welcoming her as a new customer. She rang the retailer to query this and was told that they had a signed contract on record. When she was given, at the request of her son, a copy of the contract, Mrs G claimed the signature was not hers. She then contacted the EIOSA. As part of our investigation we asked for copies of all the Information, as well as samples of both Mr and Mrs G's signatures. The comparison made it clear that the signature on the contract was not either of theirs.

The retailer appropriately regarded this as a serious case of misconduct and the marketer's service was immediately terminated. Although the retailer believed that the matter was an isolated incident, it was raised with the sales team as an example of unacceptable conduct.

The retailer cancelled the contract, apologised to the customer in writing and provided a customer service gesture of \$100 in recognition of the distress caused to the customer.

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