

This is an uncorrected proof of evidence taken before the committee and it is made available under the condition it is recognised as such.



GOVERNANCE, ENERGY AND FINANCE COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr MJ Crandon MP—Chair
Mr CG Whiting MP
Ms B Asif MP
Mr JT Barounis MP
Ms KJ Morton MP
Mr LP Power MP

Staff present:

Mr T Horne—Committee Secretary
Dr S Dodsworth—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC BRIEFING—OVERSIGHT OF THE ENERGY AND WATER OMBUDSMAN

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 2 April 2025

Brisbane

WEDNESDAY, 2 APRIL 2025

The committee met at 10.30 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open this public briefing. My name is Michael Crandon. I am the member for Coomera and chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. Other committee members with me here today are Mr Chris Whiting MP, member for Bancroft and deputy chair; Ms Bisma Asif MP, member for Sandgate; Mr John Barounis MP, member for Maryborough; Ms Kendall Morton MP, member for Caloundra; and Mr Linus Power MP, member for Logan, as a substitute for Mr Lance McCallum, member for Bundamba.

This briefing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the briefing at the discretion of the committee. I remind committee members that the Office of the Energy and Water Ombudsman are here to provide factual or technical information. Any questions seeking an opinion about policy should be directed to the minister or left to debate on the floor of the House. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. Please turn your mobile phones off or to silent mode.

McNALLY, Ms Rowena, Chair, Energy and Water Ombudsman Advisory Council, Office of the Energy and Water Ombudsman

PIRES, Ms Jane, Energy and Water Ombudsman, Office of the Energy and Water Ombudsman

CHAIR: Welcome. I invite you to make an opening statement, after which committee members will have some questions for you.

Ms Pires: Good morning, committee, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I was appointed to my position as the Energy and Water Ombudsman in November 2016. I am taking the opportunity today to give you a really broad overview of our scheme and what we do, the issues and trends we are seeing at the moment and what we are looking at, for us as a scheme and Queenslanders, going forward in how we can assist them with their energy and water disputes. My focus today will remain on energy, being electricity and gas.

By way of background, the scheme commenced in 2007 as the energy ombudsman and in 2011 took water for South-East Queensland under its jurisdiction. We are a statutory body which is fully industry funded, so we do not obtain any funding from the government; nor have we had any appropriation since the time the scheme commenced. We did receive a grant in 2011 to bring the water jurisdiction into the scheme. That is the only time we have received any government funding.

Our governance structure is very simple. We have an advisory council, of which Ms McNally is the chair, with 10 other council members. Five of them are consumer representatives from various consumer industries and five of them are industry reps, four of which are energy and one is water. We meet quarterly and the advisory council oversees what we do and how we do it. A lot of the members work with us or have teams that work with us, so they have very good insight into our operations. We also have an audit and risk committee, which has two external members, which includes the chair. They also have a strong government background and experience so are able to guide us and direct me as I need to be in that space. We work closely with the regulators for the Australian Energy Regulator and the Australian Energy Market Commission as well as the Queensland water and energy departments. We also have a lot to do with the Australian Information Commissioner because we actually hold authority to handle any privacy disputes. We are a formalised EDR participant for them, so we have an arrangement in place with them as well.

In terms of our membership numbers, for electricity and gas we have 50 members. We also have water members and embedded network operator or exempt seller members. The exempt sellers are up around the 350 mark of members at this time, so we have a very broad membership. A lot of our embedded network operators are down here. There are a lot in South-East Queensland and there are a lot in Far North Queensland, with a few in between, but they are very concentrated in those areas, which is where our focus is with those types of issues that come from that group.

As I stated before, we are fully funded by the industry. We have an annual levy and a case-fee model with our funding. Our budget for 2024-25 was just over the \$10 million mark. This funding helps us run the three offices: an office here in Brisbane, an office in Rockhampton and an office in Cairns. Having those regional offices gives us the opportunity to engage with those regional communities and have a really good understanding of what is happening in those communities. Our callers or complainants—I call them our customers—like to know that they are speaking to a local, so depending where they come in they will get the closest local office to them because it helps them know and take comfort that they are dealing with someone who knows and understands their area.

We have a 42.5 FTE count and we are currently sitting with four additional positions. That was due to the 60 per cent increase in case volume that we experienced last financial year. We are still running at an amount over that—not at the 60 per cent, but we are anticipating that with the price increases scheduled for energy in the next financial year we are going to see an increase to our scheme numbers. The completion of the rebate is certainly starting to impact our numbers now, so we do expect to see a significant increase in volumes again going forward.

As I stated, we find a lot of value in our regional offices. It also helps us with the continuity of service. When we have a natural disaster in one location, we can transfer all contacts down so that our office is available at all times for our consumers. It helps us manage risks. We are proud of our regional employment in ensuring we can have representation where we need to across this state. Far North Queensland particularly has a lot of varied issues and a lot of different issues than you experience in South-East Queensland, so it is great to have that local connection which we can forge forward as needs be.

In terms of our complaint volumes, as I stated, we had a 60 per cent increase last year, 2023-24. We had 11,100 cases of which 9,290 turned into full complaints, so complaints investigations. With regard to the difference between a case and a complaint, we will get calls from people asking us for information to clarify that a new entrant into the market is real and they are not being scammed and a lot of those types of questions, so that is the difference between cases and complaints. It is complaints they get charged for; cases are managed under the levy model more generally. To date this year we have had 7,191 cases and 5,548 complaints, so we are down slightly but, as I said, we expect it to increase in this calendar year.

The top three issues have always been around billing and the variations on that. At the moment what we have seen with billing is high bills, so a lot of calls we will receive are from consumers saying, 'My bill's too high. It's been calculated incorrectly,' so it is going through that. Unfortunately, when we actually get some information—meter reports and things like that—and work with the client, a lot of the core issue is actually affordability for that consumer. It will be that they were expecting to receive a bill for this much and it is more, or last year for the same period it was less, so it is really working through those issues with that customer to help them understand that.

The other issue we have had this year is refunds. You may have seen some issues in the media where the regulator has taken some of the energy companies to court and had rulings against the energy companies. Through the Centrepay process, people have been able to pay in advance on their electricity bill, but now, in the current economic environment, some people I have had across my table are \$4,000 or \$5,000 in credit—that will go a long way to pay other bills and buy groceries—and they have had difficulty getting that money from the energy company. They are some of the types of issues we have had.

We have also had issues with both the federal and the state government rebates. There were issues with regard to the fact that people have solar, they are in credit and they want to get that rebate out and issues in terms of being able to access that money. We have worked very closely with the energy companies to resolve those issues. Now it is looking and working with that industry on how to improve that so that if those opportunities are provided again we do not have these issues and what policies or systems need to be put in place. That has been a key area of focus.

In the gas area it is pretty much the same types of issues, but a much more core issue with gas is provision of the gas. It will be the opening or closing of accounts or the delays they are experiencing. Particularly here in South-East Queensland, a lot of it is hot water—that is, they move

into a premises and they do not have hot water for the first few days—and those types of issues. The other big area is affordability or vulnerability or hardship. It comes under all of those names but it means the same thing. It is the inability to afford that bill.

To date we have had 10 credit or hardship matters, so their electricity company has lodged on their credit report their inability to pay a bill. Therefore, it makes it difficult for them to obtain electricity from another provider. That has come out of the pandemic and the issues within the industry and the regulator at the time. They were not allowed to disconnect anyone through that period, so many people were accruing significant bills over that time, and now they are starting to take debt collection processes. Some of those bills can be upwards of \$30,000 in terms of the debt that is owing, so they are significant issues there. They are not a large volume, but if you are a national energy company and you have customers with bills like that across a few states, that adds up to be significant money, so it is working with them for a realistic outcome for all parties as well. Again, gas has those issues but a much smaller number. We have only had two of those so far this year.

Another part of what we do is systemic issues. Systemic issues are a key part of any ombudsman scheme. We may identify a systemic issue through one customer. One customer will come in with a complaint and we may identify a problem with the process or a system. Then we look to determine whether that was human error or a core issue that may impact many customers. Even though we as the scheme may only receive one or two complaints on that issue, we will lodge a systemic issue notice against the energy company and ask them to provide that information and then we will work through it with them. If we determine that it is a systemic issue, we will report them through to the regulator and then the regulator will commence the required action with them. You may recall that Origin Energy had, I think, a \$17 million fine by the regulator for not following hardship provisions correctly, and it had been over a number of years. That was a part of the systemic issue processes that are conducted by the ombudsman. We were a party to that work as well. That is an example of where it can be really beneficial to most parties—I will acknowledge that. It helps us have that outside look and it gives confidence to our customers that we are looking more broadly, not just at the dispute we have in front of us.

The other key part of what we do is community education and engagement. We work very closely with community organisations and social service organisations. We also work with consumers. We have a program called Bring Your Bills day. My team, along with a lot of other ombudsman schemes, Legal Aid Queensland and Services Australia, were in Toowoomba yesterday, they are in Ipswich today and then they are coming to Beenleigh tomorrow. We host these with community organisations in the area and we open it up to all parties to come in and have conversations. We make sure, from our perspective, we are there for the community to become aware of the ombudsman schemes and we encourage them to work with the provider that may be in the room. It is about making sure consumers know that we are here and available to assist and that if they have trouble with the person in the room they can come through to us and we can get it resolved there and then, on the spot. We find them a very effective way to raise knowledge of our schemes and also to get real outcomes for the consumer. What I have found in that work is that when you get the energy companies out in the community, face to face with people, they learn a lot more about the community they are engaged with and what is actually happening in that location. We find them very beneficial.

A lot of the other work we do will be via social media or directly with consumer groups. We also do a lot of education. When anyone calls us, we talk about how to save money on electricity and give them some saving tips. We always ask, 'Do you have a second fridge?' and all of those tips that we have. When I started I had to learn about the mirror and the rubbers on your fridge—I had no idea. It is all of those types of little things that people learn that really can make a big difference to electricity consumption. That is a key part of what we do and one of the really valuable things we add to the industry as well.

In my role I work very closely with the other energy and water ombudsmen across Australia, making sure that the industry is held to account, as we are required to do, but also that when we are talking about regulators or understanding what goes on in each state the Queensland perspective is there and understood. A lot of the conversations I have with my southern counterparts are about how it takes me longer to get from Brisbane to Cairns than it does Brisbane to Melbourne. They need to understand what happens in Queensland—the size of the state and the weather, which is a big contributor. It is making sure all of that is well understood by all parties across the energy industry.

We work closely with the other ombudsman schemes, and also ourselves, on policy submissions and work, whether it is through to the Queensland government or to the national regulators. In 2023-24 we did two EWOQ-only submissions but we did 16 joint submissions. One of those was on the payment difficulty framework: how energy companies work with consumers on

payment difficulties, making sure they are taking realistic actions and activities. This year so far we have done one EWOQ-only submission and 10 joint submissions. When you have a team of 1.5 people doing that, it is a lot of work to get done. The team is very committed and focused on delivering on that and making sure our voice representing the Queensland consumer is heard and shared.

I will make final comments on our future focus. We are looking at handling the renewable energy infrastructure disputes and what they may mean. The future from that, for us, is consumer energy resources. As the market improves and grows, we are going to have more people with solar, batteries and so forth in their homes or in their small business. Right now, the consumer protection framework is not as it needs to be to make sure they are given the required support and assistance. It is about making sure that EWOQ, as we affectionately call ourselves, is known and is considered to be providing that scheme and that service for that group going forward.

We are working with the consumer organisations and the department on the Home Energy Emergency Assistance Scheme, affectionately known as HEEAS, which is a Queensland government support service. The feedback we are getting on the process is that it is not easy to navigate. If English is your second language, it is very difficult. There are many parties involved. It is about whether the payments and how you receive the payments are really effective. We are working with all areas of the industry and consumers to see what can be done to influence the changes required there. That is my opening statement. Thank you for your time.

CHAIR: Thank you. That is a good broad overview. Rowena, would you like to make any comments at this stage or are you just braced for the questions?

Ms McNally: I have been in the role of advisory council chair for three years and I have been absolutely blown away by the commitment of the ombudsman and her staff. It is a very tight team in terms of numbers and the work they have. I have been very impressed with the dedication of the team, which was a nice surprise, frankly.

CHAIR: Thank you for that. Ms Pires, can you confirm your full-time-equivalent numbers? I think you said you had some vacancies.

Ms Pires: I have 42.5 confirmed FTEs and I have four additional positions at the moment that were brought on due to the increasing volume.

CHAIR: And vacancies at this stage?

Ms Pires: As of today I have one vacancy, which I am recruiting for on Monday.

Ms ASIF: Thank you for your opening statement, Ms Pires. It was very helpful, especially around the complaints that people make. A number of people have reached out to me, and I know there are others across Queensland who are really doing it tough in terms of hardship when it comes to energy bills. I note in your 2023-24 annual report that you have indicated there is a significant rise in the complaints due to increasing energy prices and the need for hardship payments. While the rebates of the former Queensland government did provide some relief to Queenslanders, people are still struggling with the energy price increases. Can you make any recommendations as to how we can best support people who are struggling and are coming to you? As you have said, Origin did cop a \$17 million fine for not meeting those requirements through the regulators. What could we put in place that would protect people, especially at a time like this?

Ms Pires: From our perspective and from what we see, it is really working with the consumer on what they are doing and how they are doing it but also what is available to them in the market. There is the Energy Made Easy website, which is done by the regulator. They own it and they set it up. It is really about understanding what you use and how and when you use it. Also, if you are going to change your contract then is it really the right contract for you?

We are moving into a smart metered environment. I assume that everyone has a basic understanding of what that is. That will mean a lot of changes for a lot of people in tariff types. It is really understanding and having that conversation about whether that is the right tariff type for me and what are my other options. It is also looking at how you use it and what can be done. We work with a lot of people in setting up prepayment. You can get a bill monthly rather than quarterly, but you can also prepay and try to work out a really valuable way to do that. As I have said, Centrepay has worked really well for people—except when it has not. It is about making sure that process is working effectively for them and they are not ending up with too much money sitting there and no access to it to help them manage their budget.

We also work very closely with the financial council of Queensland to refer consumers through to financial counselling. I do not mean it in a general way, but I have dealt with—me and my team; I do not answer the 7,000 phone calls that we receive or anything like that. We have people who, for

the first time ever, are in hardship. It is the not knowing what to do and how to do it. I understand that the cost-of-living crisis has been going on for some time, but people are now at the end of having any savings. There is nothing else to call in, so a lot of people are really hitting an area they have never experienced before. We all affectionately refer to the 'bank of mum and dad', but that is not a AAA rated scheme anymore. Younger people who are living out of home are experiencing that. It is really about working with them to understand and put them in connection with the right resources to help educate them and look at all the options available to them.

Ms ASIF: Based on that, are there any legislative or regulatory changes you would recommend that would better protect consumers in both the energy and water markets?

Ms Pires: There is a lot of work being done at the moment by the Australian Energy Regulator and the Australian Energy Market Commission. They are looking at those type of issues again and making sure the regulations are right. Our focus will be on working with them to make sure that everything we have been told about what people are experiencing is looked at and given consideration. We want to make sure that whatever is gained or realised is available to everybody and we are looking at who is doing it well. It may be that Queensland is different to New South Wales, but it is really understanding and making sure it is done for the right reasons and in the right places for that community as well.

Mr POWER: I note you talked about tariff rates. I am going through a process of trying to understand demand charge rates and I have heard several complaints about that. Obviously, it is something that has benefit for real market pricing for the grid but is difficult for consumers to understand. Have you, as I have, heard complaints about demand charge pricing, especially from people who have been moved onto demand charge pricing and are now getting bills that surprise them or are unusual for them but do not have a full understanding of how the mechanism works?

Ms Pires: Yes, we have had those types of complaints come through to my office. In the work that we do we actually tell people to go back to their retailer. It will be the retailer they will contact about the change or the move to the smart meter. Is the retailer making sure they are disclosing this up-front at point of sale or change before the change occurs? We found that a lot of consumers were not getting advised until they received the bill, and that bill could be hundreds of dollars more than they were expecting through a lack of advice about what has occurred.

Mr POWER: Of course, that contradicts the reason it was introduced. We wanted consumers to have an understanding that demand during peak hours added to the overall cost of the bill. If they are not informing people of the extra charges that come with peak demand use then we are not actually fulfilling what we intended with those things. We need an educated consumer before they are put onto it. Is there better regulation? It seems to be me from the complaints I have received that people say, 'We were moved onto this when we were moved to a smart meter without being told anything at all.' There may have been some fine print, but certainly they were not educated that demand during peak use is really crucial to this type of billing.

Ms Pires: That actual process could have been a lot more effective and efficient up-front to make sure the consumer was fully aware and educated as to what that is. We have been working with the industry, and on our advisory council we have representatives from Ergon Energy and Energy Queensland, the retailer and the distributor. We work closely with them to make sure we ask: are all of the retailers providing this information up-front at the time of change or purchase, is everyone fully educated and aware, and what other options are available to them? They may have to go to a smart meter, and if they are not having to go now then they will in the future. What other contract options are available to them or, looking at their usage, what habits do they need to change to ensure their bill comes back to being as manageable as possible?

CHAIR: You said that people may have to go to smart meters in the future. Will the smart meter be compulsory? Are you told that you are about to be taken onto the smart meter system?

Ms Pires: My understanding is that it is not compulsory yet but it is going to be further down the track. I have had consumers ring me to say, 'I've received this letter to say that I am going to a smart meter and they're coming to install it in two weeks time. Is that right? Is it a scam? Is it misinformation?' The conversation I have with them is: 'It is going to happen to you. If you're not ready for it to occur now, if it's not something you are comfortable with, have you spoken to your retailer? If not, call them and make sure you are ready in the future. So listen to the retailer or do some research because down the track, if we are heading towards net zero and doing all that we wish to do for the energy market of the future, we need to move on to smart meters.' I acknowledge that in Queensland one of the biggest issues we get with smart meters is the cost to have them installed. In some of our regional areas and rural areas, they are in asbestos walls. The consumer is up for the cost of replacing a wall to install the meter. That is the type of information that also needs to be made available.

Mr BAROUNIS: Would you be able to go back a few years and let us know when you started receiving more complaints about energy? You started in November 2016. If you go back to 2017, for example, how many complaints did you get then and how many did you get in 2024?

Ms Pires: I will not quote exact figures. I do remember 2017 as, technically, I was in my first year and I was still learning a lot about energy. We had approximately—and I will come back and confirm the exact figure for the secretary to share with you—11,000 complaints in that year. That was the first time smart meters had been rolled out in certain regions. Many issues went with the roll-out of the smart meters. Most of them were very easily fixed. The distributors and the retailers worked quickly. A lot of the issues were to do with the fact that it was happening but there was lack of availability of meters. That was a nationwide issue, not just a Queensland issue. They were resolved very quickly for us, but that was the big one, whereas last year the volume of cases was about cost of living. Around the 7,000 complaint volume is pretty average for our service, but I will come back with definite information for you.

Mr BAROUNIS: I was not referring to devices; I was referring to complaints—for example, 'In 2016-17 my electricity bill was \$10 and now in 2024 it is \$50.' How many complaints did you get back then and how many do you get now with regard to the increase in electricity prices?

Ms Pires: I would have to take that on notice and come back to you with definitive figures on that issue.

Mr BAROUNIS: Do you think renewables have increased consumer complaints?

Ms Pires: From our perspective, we do receive a lot of contact in relation to renewables. As we do not have the jurisdiction on renewables, we are unable to handle any of those matters. We may get some that we refer to the Office of Fair Trading. We may get wind farm issues. We will refer them to the Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, which is a national service that handles wind farm disputes.

Mr BAROUNIS: Also, you have been appointed as the ombudsman for land access?

Ms Pires: Yes. I am the Land Access Ombudsman for Queensland.

Mr BAROUNIS: Would you be able to tell us a little bit more about that role and what is involved?

Ms Pires: Even though I am the ombudsman for both schemes, it is a very small team—I have three people in that team. We handle coal seam gas disputes after the code and conduct agreement has been entered into—so any disputes as a result of that. It is a small scheme, but it has now had a jurisdictional increase where we will be able to handle disputes for coal seam gas when they are in negotiation for a code and conduct agreement. That is becoming a standalone ombudsman scheme which will also be industry funded.

CHAIR: It is not a standalone scheme at the moment?

Ms Pires: Not at the moment.

CHAIR: Where is it sitting at the moment?

Ms Pires: It is within the department of resources.

Ms MORTON: Earlier you mentioned some individuals potentially ending up with bills around \$30,000. I am thinking that, even at \$400 a month, it would take six years to accrue that level of debt. I do not know that it would be reasonable for any individual to end up with a debt that big and to realistically be able to pay it back. I am wondering whether you as the ombudsman have a position on retailers allowing that to go on for such a period of time or how that could be avoided.

Ms Pires: As an ombudsman, yes, I would question how that has occurred. That is the conversation we have with the retailer. As I stated before, due to the pandemic and the regulations they were operating under then, they were not able to take any action nor disconnect. That is where the debt has accrued and it has continued to accrue. When the debt is at that type of volume, it is unrealistic to expect that any consumer is ever going to be able to repay that level of debt. We will work with them in writing off some of the debt—the majority of the debt. It is always a focus for any ombudsman scheme, but I will certainly say that, for us, the focus is to get the customer back to a nil or very low debt position and work to move them forward so they may be paying an extra \$10 a month off an old debt but ensuring they have the capability to pay their usage going forward so they can maintain a reasonable life.

Energy, regardless of differing views, is an essential service. Here in Queensland it has to be an essential service for our weather, for our aging population who have medical needs for energy—not just a fridge but for energy. It is about making sure that all consumers can work towards having that option available to them and not sit with that debt over their head.

Ms MORTON: Do you know what period of time retailers were not allowed to disconnect?

Ms Pires: I will come back with the definite dates, but it was late 2020 through to about 2023. I will come back and confirm those details for you.

Ms MORTON: On another matter, in my office we receive a high enough level of complaint that I will mention it—that is, consumers who live in over-55 villages or places like that were unable to access the rebate. Do you have a position on that or how that could be avoided?

Ms Pires: Yes. We also received those complaints. They are disputes under what we class as embedded networks or exempt sellers. When we have done the investigation, quite a lot of the embedded network operators—whether it is a body corporate or a caravan park manager or whoever it may be—said that it was too difficult to access the rebates and, therefore, they did not go through the process for that to occur. When we contacted them we would offer to do it for them, ensuring the consumer ended up with the benefit.

A \$1,000 rebate in a caravan park situation or in a retirement community was a substantial amount—that covered their bill for a long period of time—whereas in some areas the \$1,000 rebate did not cover one bill. The disappointing thing was that this was one person. A conversation I had with a gentleman was, 'You have 25 units. You're going to get \$25,000. That would substantially cover your electricity costs for two quarters at least. You need to complete the paperwork.' We were able to gently negotiate with him to fill out the paperwork so that the customer could obtain that benefit. Our conversation then has been, if we have this opportunity and the opportunity is made available to Queensland consumers going forward, you need a better way to ensure that classification of customer, who is in an embedded network, has the same access to that as any other Queensland consumer.

Ms MORTON: That is great. I apologise as I should know this, but I want to be crystal clear in my own understanding. If a consumer is sitting in credit, whether that is through solar or rebate, are they entitled to take that money as a refund from their retailer?

Ms Pires: There are various conditions with different retailers but, yes, they are. Some retailers will pay immediately—'immediately' meaning within the next day or so—whereas others may say, 'We'll wait for a true-up at the end of the quarter or at the end of your billing period,' and they will do it then, or it may be in a six-month period. That is where someone has solar on their house and the credit has been accrued by solar. It does vary and it will be there, but that will be explained. We strongly recommend that if a retailer gets that call and there is an issue or problem and they are not going to do it they refer them through to us and then we will work with them. This has become a real problem probably only in the last six to 12 months. Before then it was never really an issue and never came across to my office, but it does now. I think the retailers are starting to understand and be more flexible in their approach to that issue.

Ms MORTON: I was under the impression that, as a direct result of the recent rebates, consumers could not move that credit if they moved property. Is that incorrect?

Ms Pires: That is not my understanding, no.

Mr WHITING: You mentioned a 60 per cent increase in cases. Could you give us a bit more detail?

Ms Pires: Our case volumes increased over a period of time by 60 per cent on the previous year. It mainly occurred for us in January 2024. In reality, the 60 per cent increase occurred between January 2024 and June 2024. That was when we went through to that volume. We would normally handle approximately 530 cases per month. We were up to 900 or 1,000 cases per month some months.

Mr WHITING: Was there anything in particular at that time which may have triggered that?

Ms Pires: One of the issues was we had a retailer who had some system changes and they were unable to be contacted. I raise this just for your understanding. When people who are on life support systems and who needed to have an address change or have it set up could not get through, they were contacting us. When they were on hardship plans and they were unable to make one or needed to change it, they could not get through so they were coming through to us. That was one of the big issues. That was on top of the cost of living—the price increases that were occurring. We were receiving those calls as well.

Mr WHITING: You said that the ceasing of the rebate will start to impact. Is it already starting to impact or are you just anticipating the impact?

Ms Pires: It has started to impact in Far North Queensland. Their costs are higher. It did not go as far as it did down here, but we are now starting to notice that it is South-East Queensland consumers. The rebate is finished and they are now realising the significance. We expect to see more. We are very cyclical here in my scheme. Here in Queensland I have the summer bill problems. It is February through to June when the summer bills are going out. That is our high-impact time. That is when we will get a lot of complaints to us. If you are in the southern states it will be their winter bills—from October through to December. That has been seasonally cyclical for years. We are still noticing that as well.

Mr WHITING: So you are preparing for more hardship cases right now as that rebate tapers off?

Ms Pires: Yes.

Mr WHITING: What is the difference between cases and complaints again? I did not quite follow that when you initially explained it.

Ms Pires: Cases are when a customer will call us. Every contact is a case. We will establish name, address and basic information. It could be that they want clarity or confirmation of something: 'Is this correct? Am I understanding this contract correctly?' or, 'I was told this by my retailer.' It may be something that is outside our jurisdiction, so we will then refer it off to another agency that we have an MOU with. A complaint is when something is referred and taken through our complaints process.

We basically have three levels of complaints processes. There may be a referral back to another agency, because there may be a component we can deal with but there is another part we cannot and we will refer it through to somebody else. We then have a return to higher level. That is a return to the retail organisation but it will go through to their specific complaints team. It will not just be a call centre operator; it will be someone in their complaints team. We find that 80 per cent of those are resolved at that level because it is going through to a team that has the authority to resolve—the authority to discount, write off debt or whatever they may need to do. If it is not resolved there, it will then go through as an investigations matter. We have three levels of investigation in our processes as well. We also have other matters that, as soon as the customer contacts us, will go directly into an investigation. If it involves life support, disconnection—those types of things—we will take it straight through to investigation due to the criticality of the issue.

Mr WHITING: Your 2022-23 annual report had 7,269 cases closed. That has now gone up to 11,169. You spoke about one retailer having problems, but is part of that connected to the greater degree of hardship you are seeing?

Ms Pires: Yes, absolutely. The strong majority of that increase was due to hardship. Whether or not the customer says they are in hardship—it could be the higher bill or affordability—that is what it comes down to.

Ms ASIF: My first question is to your point about increased hardship and people finding their bills more expensive. What conversations are you having with retailers around how they are explaining the bill and what amount of information is included on that? Secondly, in your annual report, one of the strategic initiatives for 2024-25 is to raise awareness about the service you provide. Can you explain what measures have been undertaken, or will be undertaken, to achieve that initiative and how you assess the impact of that?

Ms Pires: Could I ask you to repeat the first question?

Ms ASIF: Yes. It was in relation to the increased hardship people are facing with associated costs and the conversations retailers are having with consumers at the time of billing and what is included. As the member for Logan mentioned, is it the tariffs? What is the actual issue? Are people not understanding their bills or is it a matter of bills going up and people not keeping up with that change?

Ms Pires: Thank you for clarifying. There are a number of aspects. We work very closely, not only as Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland but also as the Energy and Water Ombudsman Network, with all of the retailers because it is an industry issue. It is about what can be done. Headlines in the media create panic, because if people cannot afford it now they are not going to be able to afford it come June and July. There is concern and angst out there in the community. It is about working really closely with the retailer: 'What can you do? We believe you need to explain more. You need to spend more time.' The energy regulator made a Better Bills Guideline on how a bill is set out and what information is in there, but there is still a lack of understanding of what a tariff means and how it is calculated.

It is also about the change in usage. When I grew up, everything was done at night because that was when it was cheapest. There are still a lot of people who operate like that, but when you have solar it is actually better to use it during the day. There is a real change of usage. An understanding of that is one of the big parts. It is also about helping people understand what it is and how it is going to be. Ultimately, unless we can get electricity prices down we will continue to have this issue. If the bills continue to go up we will continue to have a market where a consumer cannot afford to be in the market.

As an ombudsman scheme, we are all giving a call to action. We have to do this better. They are great at handling natural disasters and at event response. That type of focus needs to be put into affordability. We have said that. We work with the Energy Consumers Australia associations to understand that. A focus on small business needs to be achieved as well.

Ms ASIF: There is a second part of the question around the initiatives.

Ms Pires: As I said, we have a program of work on Bring Your Bills day. A part of that will be working with us, but it is about raising the awareness of that in the general community. We do a lot of social media in particular areas where we can see a high level of interest. We will look at our data on which postcodes the complaints are coming in from to help us understand what may be going on in that community. We will share back through that. We send a lot of information out to financial counsellors because we find, particularly in the rural and regional areas, that they are a key component of what is happening, what can be done and the usage of our services. We also work and have discussions with chambers of commerce when we go out and travel. I do travel for the Land Access Ombudsman role and for the Energy and Water Ombudsman role. I wear two hats: Jane with this hat and Jane with this hat.

On-the-ground awareness of us is important, and we measure that in different ways. It is not as easy to measure as I would like it to be. It is about where we see an increase in complaints to us. We will ask, 'Where did you hear about us? Where did you learn about us?' It is really trying to understand that. For a lot of people it is: 'I saw you and your team 12 months ago at an event. That's how I knew to call you.' It is also about working with retailers to ensure our information is provided. Our 1800 number is now on the front page of all of their bills. There will be a general and gradual increase, but that is how we work to do it. I always like to be in front of people in a community and have conversations because, for me, that is how I learn what is really going on.

Mr BAROUNIS: In 2023-24, 97 per cent of the people who contacted you had a complaint with regard to residential issues and three per cent were to do with small business. With regard to residential complaints, do you have a breakdown of owner-occupiers and tenants? I have been a small business owner for a long time. We found that there was not enough time to contact you and that the paperwork takes a long time. Would you be able to reach out to small businesses to let them know you are there in case they need it? For small businesses such as a coffee shops or fish and chip shops, energy consumption has skyrocketed and it is one of the main expenses now.

Ms Pires: We are very lucky that the Small Business Commissioner is now on our advisory council. We have done a lot more work together now on sharing information. When the commissioner or any of her team are out and they have someone, they will refer them through to us. We will then work directly with them. We have gone to all of the mayors. We write and let them know. We will be doing that same sort of call-out to all of the chambers of commerce. From my perspective, we do not receive—again, this is my position—enough complaints from that area. I acknowledge that it takes time and effort. I make sure that on my website there is sufficient information to help, because I know it will be 11 o'clock at night when people are thinking, 'Where can I go? What can I do?' I do not have anyone there at 11 o'clock at night, but it is about making sure the information on our website is as relevant as it can be and working through all of those other networks that small businesses would interact with. I find the time to make sure that information is available there for them—absolutely.

Mr BAROUNIS: How often do you report to the energy and water ministers? Do you think if you reported more frequently it would give the ministers the opportunity to act sooner rather than later?

Ms Pires: I do a monthly report to both ministers. I provide the statistics, the key issues and any other matters that we are seeing or that we wish to raise. That is provided through the department. I have various opportunities to meet with the ministers. It has not been as regular as it used to be, but I always know that if I need to I can pick up the phone and ring the director-general and say that I need to meet them. I do not ever feel that I am not heard or that no-one is willing to listen to me if I need it.

CHAIR: Have recent natural disasters fed into any increase in complaints? I am aware that Energex and Ergon are the suppliers, but are people contacting you because they have not been able to be reconnected and that type of thing?

Ms Pires: We get very minimal numbers of those type of matters at the time or in the immediate time after the event.

CHAIR: They probably just come to us as members of parliament. You might take this question on notice. You referred to an advisory council of five consumer and five industry representatives. Could you provide us with a list of who those people are, their industry backgrounds and how often they are rotated through or changed? Is it the same people there on an ongoing basis?

Ms Pires: Yes.

CHAIR: In respect of your contact with the community, if Queensland state MPs are not on your mailing list for all of your emails and social media, please add us because that sort of information is absolutely invaluable. Members and our electorate office staff can then use our social media to promote those things. You spoke about the Energy Made Easy website—that kind of thing. If you have a website or regular newsletters, please put all 93 of us on the list.

Mr POWER: Something I am very passionate about is water pipe leaks that people do not know about. We had a change in legislation that has given relief. I know of one elderly lady who was on a pension who got a \$12,000 bill. The change we made meant that was eradicated, because she did not know about the leak. Has that change reduced complaints in that space? Has it changed the nature of complaints? I would like some feedback about that policy because it is quite important to me.

Ms Pires: Certainly. That was one of the best decisions I have seen made in my time in this role.

Mr POWER: Mrs Crowther thanks you for your advocacy. In terms of the fine-tuning of that policy, is there anyone missing out? Is there anything the legislation did not capture?

Ms Pires: From our perspective, we have seen a reduction in those types of matters. They do not come near us anymore. Because they receive the benefit, there is no need to come to us. We believe that was a really great outcome because the customer nine times out of 10 had no idea. You cannot control what you cannot see. We have had nothing more. There has been nothing else that has come up that has been missed out of that change in legislation—the availability and what it is. Overall, it has been a very positive and productive outcome.

Mr POWER: Also, our intent of water charging was to stop known use with shorter showers and those sorts of things. This had no impact on that intended policy. I do think it is a really great thing and I am quite proud that I drove it. Thank you for that feedback—if you could just see if anyone is missing out, because it was an extraordinary hardship for the people I encountered.

CHAIR: Is anything further from you?

Mr POWER: Not from me.

Ms ASIF: As you said, that was something that was being brought forward to you at the time. Is there anything like that where you would recommend any regulatory changes that government could make at this stage that you see would be feasible to help people?

Ms Pires: From the water perspective, our water disputes are less than five per cent of our whole caseload—

Ms ASIF: Or energy.

Ms Pires: The core of the biggest issue with energy is always going to be pricing. That is a whole market issue with many aspects to it. I do not have any particular comment to make there. I do acknowledge that the work and the focus needs to continue at every level and at every stage within the energy industry.

CHAIR: The last question goes to the member for Maryborough. It will be a quick question and quick answer.

Mr BAROUNIS: You have been in this role since 2016. Just briefly, what have you and your team achieved and what are you proud of during this time?

CHAIR: That sounds like a long answer.

Ms Pires: That is a long answer. I am proud of the work we do. We are looking forward to the future and how to deliver this service efficiently and effectively for all parties.

CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Pires and Ms McNally. That concludes this briefing. Thank you to everyone for your participation today. We do have some questions on notice. They are due by 5 pm on Wednesday, 9 April. I now declare this briefing closed.

The committee adjourned at 11.32 am.

PROOF