

Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria) Accessibility Policy

April 2015

This document is to be read in conjunction with the [EWOV Case Registration Procedure](#).

Overview

EWOV operates in accordance with the *Benchmarks for Industry-Based Customer Dispute Resolution Schemes* (August 1997)¹. “Accessibility” is the first of the six benchmarks, EWOV meets this benchmark by making itself readily available to customers by promoting knowledge of its existence, being easy to use and having no cost barriers.

EWOV also has legal obligation, under Section 24 of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, to ensure that its service is accessible to people with a disability.

This policy outlines:

- how EWOV ensures that its services are appropriately accessible to customers
- the circumstances where EWOV may consider limiting access to its services for individuals.

Community awareness

EWOV promotes knowledge of its existence and role through:

- public material, including quarterly and yearly public reports, educational material and media releases
- requiring scheme participants to advise their customers about the scheme, on one set of customer accounts per year, all disconnection/restriction warnings, customer charters, on their websites, and verbally if a complaint cannot be resolved internally
- having links to EWOV through relevant regulators and other dispute resolution bodies – particularly via websites
- regular community visits, to discuss EWOV’s role and processes.

Ease of use

EWOV makes its service easy for customers to use by encouraging complaint lodgement by telephone. There is no requirement for customers to lodge complaints in writing; however

¹ <http://www.selfregulation.gov.au/publications/BenchmarksForIndustry-BasedCustomerDisputeResolutionSchemes/bench1.asp>

customers may do so if they wish to. EWOV explains in simple terms its role, the investigation process including all relevant timelines and any limits to its role.

EWOV takes a non-adversarial and informal approach to resolving complaints.

Additional measures EWOV takes to ensure its service is easy for customers to use are:

- making a Freecall (1800 500 509) and Freefax (1800 500 549) number available. The Freecall number can also be used from restricted Telstra services
- facilitating the use of reverse charges for non-Telstra customers who contact EWOV on a restricted phone service. These customers are advised that they may contact EWOV from their restricted phone on 12550 (Telstra reverse charges), quoting EWOV's administration line phone number ((03) 8672 [44604599](tel:44604599)). EWOV will accept the reverse charges
- advising customers using mobile phones that they may attract a fee from their mobile service provider and offering to call them back
- providing access to a free telephone interpreting service where required, and using a translation service to translate correspondence when necessary
- providing for complaint lodgement via its website and in writing
- meeting with customers in person will be considered and a suitable location advised
- allowing authorised representatives to act on behalf of a customer to lodge complaints and during the course of an investigation²
- periodically reviewing its website for compliance with the *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0* AA standard for accessibility.

Where EWOV's ordinary processes are not accessible to an individual, EWOV will, on a case-by-case basis and in negotiation with the customer, consider the most appropriate way communicate with them and handle their complaint.

No cost barriers

EWOV is a free service, and does not present any cost barriers for customers. Customers are not required to pay for testing, audits, independent advice or for lodging a complaint³.

² Please refer to EWOV's Authority to Act Policy and Privacy Policy. The customer must provide explicit authority for someone to act on their behalf when dealing with EWOV.

³ Customers may be required to:

- pay for the normal costs of substantiating their claims – such as the cost of having a qualified repairer assess damage caused to property. This is not a cost associated with EWOV's service or with the service of a scheme participant.
- make payments either towards the undisputed amount, or towards their ongoing costs (this can initially be the customers' self-assessment of what they can afford).

As outlined above, customers can contact EWOV without incurring any expense. Where a customer is required to send documents to EWOV during an investigation, EWOV can also provide a stamped and self addressed envelope.

Limiting access to EWOV

EWOV is very committed to public access. In the absence of very good reasons to the contrary, members of the public have a right of access to seek advice and assistance from EWOV. However, this may be qualified where full access would be likely to:

- compromise EWOV's obligations as an employer
- be excessively wasteful of EWOV's resources or
- encourage or allow behaviour which goes against the rules of common courtesy.

Steps to limit access to EWOV will only be taken as a last resort; after all other possible avenues have been exhausted. Any decision to limit access to a customer must be approved by the General Manager Operations or the Ombudsman . Any letters sent to a customer advising of EWOV's decision to limit access must be signed by the General Manager Operations or the Ombudsman.

Termination of aggressive or abusive telephone contact

EWOV approaches telephone contact with customers calmly and professionally. EWOV understands that customers will sometimes be angry and frustrated about their issue when they contact EWOV. Although EWOV staff are trained to handle difficult calls professionally, EWOV does not accept abusive behaviour from customers. Where a customer becomes abusive during a telephone call, EWOV staff can warn them that the call will be terminated if the behaviour continues, for example by saying:

"I'm sorry but I don't feel we can discuss this while you are speaking this way. Unless we can discuss this calmly I will have to terminate the call"

If the customer continues with the same behaviour, EWOV staff can terminate the call and, if appropriate, advise the customer that another staff member will call them back at a later time. EWOV only provides customers with one warning, and does not expect its staff to accept continued abusive behaviour.

Responding to correspondence

All correspondence from customers will be answered within a maximum of five business days. However, if the correspondence is abusive towards staff and does not raise any new issues, this should be brought to the attention of the General Manager Operations or the Ombudsman for review and action.

Any correspondence to EWOV containing material clearly intended to intimidate, or containing personal abuse or inflammatory statements will be returned to sender and not otherwise acted upon. Where correspondence provides evidence or alerts EWOV to criminal

offences, breaches of the law, threats to the safety of persons or property, or the like, it should be given to the General Manager Operations or the Ombudsman and considered for referral to the Police.

Excessive contact with EWOV

Where excessive demands are placed on EWOV by a constant and/or abusive stream of letters or telephone calls from a customer, EWOV may limit access to the scheme for that customer in the following way:

- EWOV can advise the customer that all future contact must be in writing.
- EWOV can advise the customer that the Conciliator/Senior Conciliator will contact the customer at a particular date and time e.g. 3:00pm each Thursday to discuss the complaint. If the customer calls EWOV, the customer will be reminded by the staff member answering the call about the appointment time.
- Where a matter has been previously investigated, considered under EWOV's Internal Complaint Handling policy where appropriate, and the customer is not raising any new issues, EWOV can advise that no phone calls will be accepted, or interviews granted, regarding that specific issue.
- If customers visit the office unannounced and/or uninvited, or are abusive when they visit, the General Manager Operations or the Ombudsman may set limits on the customer's contact.
- Under some limited circumstances, where a customer makes demands that are significantly impacting on EWOV's resources, or is consistently rude or abusive, EWOV can advise that their correspondence will be received, read and filed. It will only be acknowledged or otherwise responded to if the person raises new issues which, in EWOV's opinion, warrant further action.

Where EWOV decides to limit a customer's access, the General Manager Operations or the Ombudsman will flag this in the "Refer to Manager/Lead" field in the customer profile of EWOV's Case Management System (Resolve). Detailed notes regarding the type of limitation applied to the customer are kept in the comments field in the customer Resolve record. When a customer whose access has been limited contacts EWOV, they should be advised again of EWOV's decision in the terms outlined in the correspondence, and the conversation or contact politely brought to an end.

If the person appears at EWOV and refuses to leave, the Police will be called, to assist in removing them.

Document history

Action and Date	Updated By
Updated September 2012	MWC
Updated June 2013	TMM
Updated April 2015	CJW