



UTILITIES DISPUTES

TAUTOHETOHE WHAIPAINGA



3 September 2020

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|MC:TOC|

Welcome from the Commissioner, Mary Ollivier



Kia ora koutou katoa,

Happy Spring! We hope you have kept safe and well over winter.

What a year! Managing, and responding to change whether it be alert levels or something else, is now part of daily life. At Utilities Disputes we have expanded access to our free and independent service in response to increased demand. Our early resolution team is now available from 8am to 6pm weekdays, on Saturdays, and via website live chat.

This year has highlighted the strength of community, and we appreciate working collaboratively with utilities providers, and with community, industry, and government organisations.

Customer support has increased, particularly for those experiencing vulnerability and hardship. It's really important for consumers to stay connected, understand their options, and seek extra help if they need it.

Free access to an independent dispute resolution service is vital. Consumers must be able

to voice their concerns, ask for guidance and information, and make informed choices.

Thank you for your work, and your ongoing support of Utilities Disputes.

Ngā mihi nui kia koutou katoa



Mary Ollivier

Commissioner + CEO

Electricity Authority: Empowering consumers by raising awareness of Utilities Disputes and Powerswitch

Utilities Disputes welcomed the announcement from the Electricity Authority (EA) about changes to the Electricity Industry Participation Code. From April 2021, all electricity providers must have clear and prominent information about Utilities Disputes on their websites, bills, and customer information.

“Every initiative to increase awareness of our free, independent and not for profit service is welcomed,” says Utilities Disputes Commissioner, Mary Ollivier. “The Code changes will build on current requirements for energy companies to inform their customers about Utilities Disputes. This will help us to assist customers with disputes they are unable to resolve directly with their company.”

“With increased competition in the energy market, it’s important consumers have access to the assistance they need to voice their concerns, and to ask for extra help if they need it.”

See the EA media release [here](#).

Annual Report 2020



Last year’s Annual Report, released on 5 August at our Annual Stakeholder Meeting, highlighted a total of 7,815 contacts to Utilities Disputes, with a 17% increase in enquiries (total: 5603) and a 10% decrease in complaints (total: 2212). Electricity and gas issues accounted for 89% of contacts, followed by broadband installation on shared property

(6%), and water (3%). Bills were the most common complaint issue, followed by customer service, meters, disconnections, and supply.

Decreased complaint investigations signals a greater effort by providers, and our team, to work with consumers to proactively resolve issues before they escalate. Over the past few months we've seen more of this proactive support, with a marked increase in enquiries.

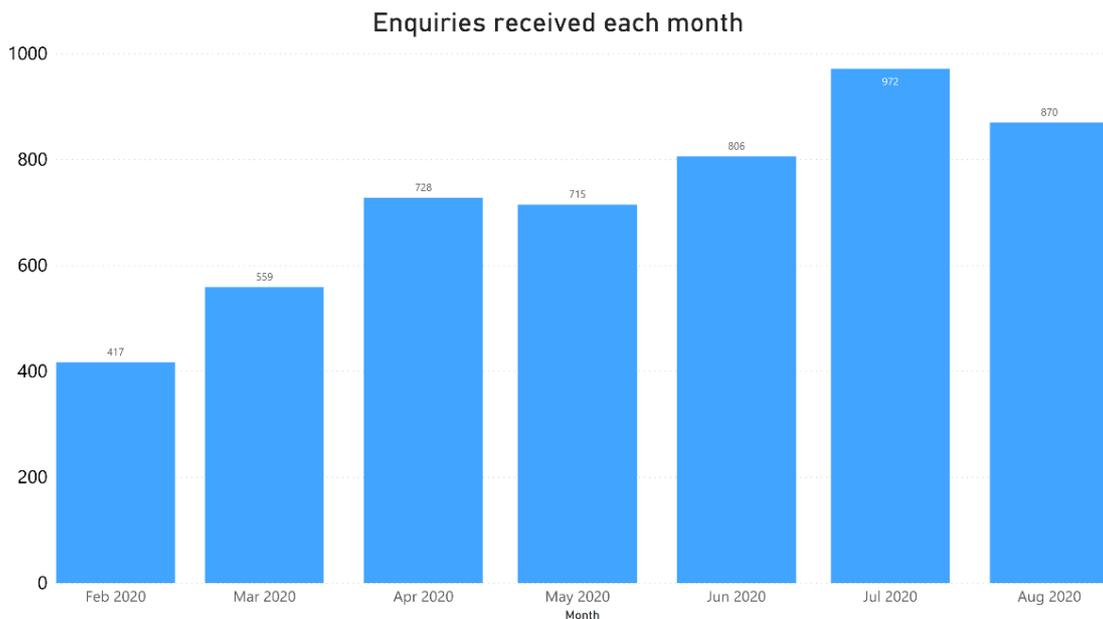
A Stuff article focused on a billing complaint about a \$1,219 back bill and a switching error. The case highlights the importance of getting it right from the beginning – good, clear communication and information can prevent complaints from arising. Customers want clear and accurate information. They want their questions answered, their complaints acknowledged, and some appreciate talking to an independent person, which is where we can come in.

See our media release [here](#)

See the Stuff article [here](#)

Increase in enquiries

The average monthly enquiries for April 2019 - March 2020 was 467. We had 728 total enquiries in April 2020, 715 in May, 806 in June, 972 in July, and 870 in August. While our [Stay Connected](#) campaign helped to raise awareness, it is not the main cause of the increase. Our observation is that during times of stress, confusion, and hardship, people appreciate the readily available support and guidance we offer. We can answer questions, clarify issues, talk through options, and connect people to the right place.

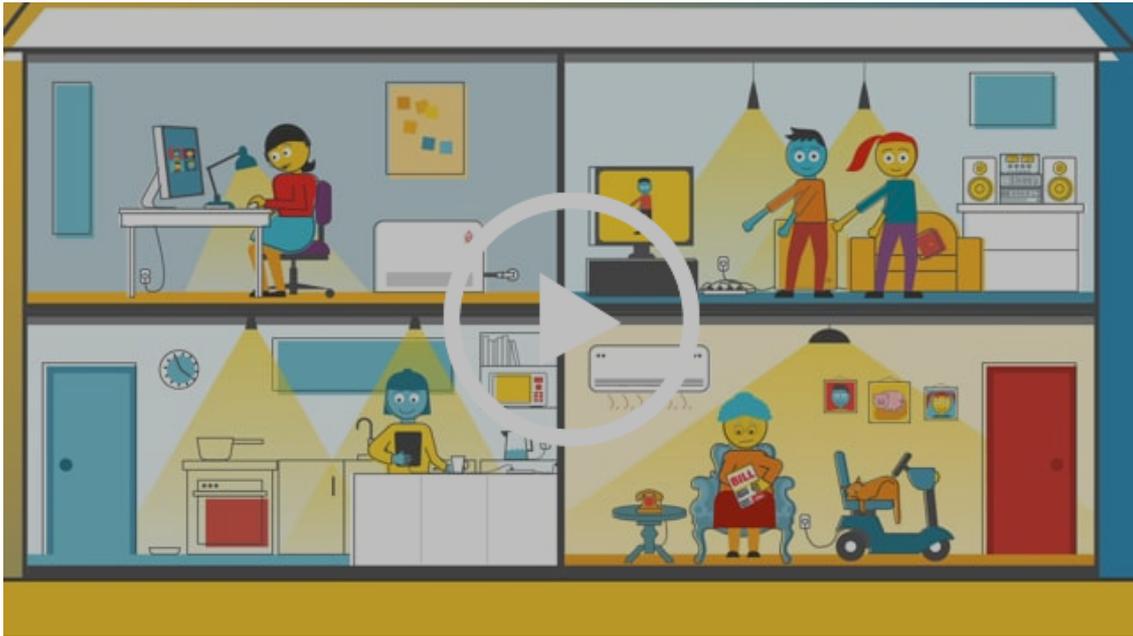


Stay connected

Thank you to those who shared our awareness campaign. Your support makes a real difference, as we want more people to know that if they have questions or concerns, they can access our free service.

The campaign ran from late April to late June with messages aligned to lockdown, isolation, and the importance of staying connected. The campaign had a positive response across social media and online platforms. TVNZ was the most active site, followed by Stuff. We generated more followers and engagement on our own Facebook page and on the campaign site: www.havethepower.nz

Increased awareness does not necessarily result in increased complaints. While the campaign may have contributed to our increased enquiries, the main cause of the increase is likely to be the wider need for information, guidance, and readily available support.



Our 'Stay Connected' campaign video

Share our brochures and fact sheets!



We created new brochures and fact sheets, check them out [here](#). The fact sheets cover issues like: high bills, trees and power lines, electricity and gas when renting, broadband areas we can look at, how to resolve your complaint or dispute with a provider and more!

Please take a look and share among your communities to help people with issues they are

facing.

We can also send out print versions - let us know: communications@utilitiesdisputes.co.nz

Case notes (examples of what we do):



Case #81419 – *Where is my bill? Back bill and switching error*

When a salesperson for electricity company ABC* knocked on Gary's* door in February 2018, he signed up on the spot. But when Gary phoned ABC in April to ask why he had not received a bill; he was told he was not a customer. Gary was referred to his previous company XYZ* and was told he was not XYZ's customer either, because of a separate switching error.

Still no bill, until September, when Gary received a bill from XYZ. Gary reminded XYZ he was not a customer with them and asked again to be switched to ABC. Gary finally received a bill from ABC in November for \$1,219.17, backdated to February. But Gary said he had had no contract during this time. ABC offered to reduce the bill to \$609, but Gary wanted it wiped.

Outcome

During a conciliation conference, ABC apologised to Gary and agreed it should have offered a payment plan for the bill. The Commissioner said ABC missed multiple opportunities to identify and fix Gary's issues. However, it was Gary's responsibility to pay for the electricity he had used, and the switch to ABC was backdated to February. It was fair and reasonable for ABC to reduce the bill to \$509 as an acknowledgement of poor customer service. Both parties accepted.



Case #80742 – *Fibre for a block of flats - Statutory right disputed*

Paula*, a tenant in a block of flats, requested fibre installation, and Mike* (representing the body corporate) objected. He was concerned the installation would damage the driveway and one owner would not contribute to repair costs. The fibre installation company said damage was unlikely, as they use micro-trenching for installations, and a financial dispute in a body corporate was outside the jurisdiction for objections.

Outcome

The Commissioner said the company was entitled to install fibre at the block of flats. Paula's request, with the landlord's permission, was valid, and the company provided adequate information. Mike's objection was not valid as relationship issues were outside jurisdiction. If the body corporate had reinstatement concerns, it could follow up after the installation. The company accepted the preliminary determination and Mike rejected it. Mike was told he could appeal the determination in the district court.



Case #85345 – The leaky water meter - No further consideration

Ben* complained about a leaky water meter and poor customer service. He said he had reported the leak at least five times and had to repeat the same information. He also said he had read insulting comments in the provider's notes.

Outcome

The Commissioner said she was satisfied the provider fixed the leak they were responsible for (at the gate valve on the public side of the meter) and this leak did not affect the bills. The provider informed Ben he was responsible for fixing the leak on his side of the meter, the same leak that affected his bills. Ben's decision to turn off the water for three months until he fixed that leak was not the provider's responsibility. The Commissioner said the customer service was reasonable. The provider responded quickly and visited Ben's property each time he made contact. They informed Ben about his responsibilities and his right to apply for a leak allowance. The comments in an internal note expressed frustration, not poor customer service.

**Names have been changed*

Community outreach

In August we provided SeniorNet with fact sheets about our energy, water, and BSPAD schemes.

SeniorNet supports seniors and older adults to use technology in their everyday lives. After experiencing lockdown, everyone can appreciate the importance of staying connected through technology.

History of Aotearoa quiz

On 21 August, Caitlin Turner (the 'QuizMaster') quizzed us on NZ history and the treaty partnership.

Most knew Te Tiriti o Waitangi was signed on 6 February 1840. We learned that about 500 Māori put their names or moko on the document, including thirteen women.

Our staff put together 60 info packs for different learning centres across NZ.

We're looking forward to learning more about our history when we visit the Treaty exhibition at the National Library, Wellington later this month.

Please feel free to pass along this newsletter to your colleagues. We welcome your feedback, suggestions and questions. You can contact us at the email below.



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Please call or email us to be added to (or removed from) our mailing list.