1. The Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland (EWOQ) provides a free, independent dispute resolution service for residential and small business customers to help them resolve complaints with energy and water suppliers. Small businesses for these purposes are currently defined as businesses using less than 100 megawatt hours (MWh) of electricity per year.
2. This definition means that many businesses that may otherwise be classified as “small” in terms of employee numbers or annual turnover but use high amounts of electricity (for example bakeries, laundries and small food manufacturers) do not have access to EWOQ services. Evidence suggests that these businesses do not generally have the resources or expertise to pursue complaints against their electricity retailer through other more complex and/or costly avenues.
3. The Energy and Water Ombudsman Amendment Bill 2015 will:

* Allow some small businesses that use high amounts of electricity to access the services of EWOQ;
* Extend EWOQ’s role so that it can apply to become a recognised External Dispute Resolution (EDR) scheme to deal with credit reporting customer complaints; and
* Allow EWOQ to provide customer identifying information to complainants’ respective energy providers and water utilities for billing reconciliation purposes.

1. The Bill allows high energy small business customers using between 100 and 160 MWh of electricity per year access to EWOQ services. It is estimated that this will provide more than 5000 additional businesses across the State with access to EWOQ services.
2. In addition, recent amendments to the Commonwealth *Privacy Act 1998* (Privacy Act) require that businesses considered ‘credit providers’ under the Privacy Act, including certain utility providers, be members of a recognised external dispute resolution (EDR) scheme. The Bill proposes that EWOQ’s functions be extended to allow it to be recognised as an EDR scheme for Privacy Act purposes, which will allow EWOQ’s investigations to include credit related complaints. It is considered that this extension of EWOQ’s role is the most efficient way to achieve Queensland’s obligations under Commonwealth law. EWOQ’s status as an EDR scheme will commence on 1 January 2016.
3. The Bill also proposes to allow energy providers and water utilities access to certain customer identifying information from EWOQ about complainants for the sole purpose of billing reconciliation.
4. Cabinet approved that the Energy and Water Ombudsman Amendment Bill 2015 be introduced into the Legislative Assembly.
5. *Attachments*

* [Energy and Water Ombudsman Amendment Bill 2015](Attachments/Bill.PDF)
* [Explanatory Notes](Attachments/ExNotes.PDF)