

Early resolution of a potential water restriction to a family home

Legislation	Ombudsmen Act 1975
Agency	Water Company contracted by Local Government
Ombudsman	Leo Donnelly
Case number(s)	464631
Date	March 2018

Summary

A family received notice that an agency would be severely restricting its water supply because of an overdue account. Once the Ombudsman became involved, the agency reviewed its accounts and realised it was in error. On the Ombudsman's request, the agency apologised to the family and committed to reviewing its accounts more carefully before advising of possible water restrictions.

From complaint to resolution, the issue was resolved in only 12 working days without the family suffering water restrictions.

Background

An agency wrote to a household advising that its water supply would be severely restricted unless an overdue amount of \$9449.50 was paid promptly.

A family member contacted the Ombudsman with strong concerns about the possible restriction of water to her property to one litre per minute. There were three generations of family living at the household, and a reliable water supply was essential.

The complainant advised the Ombudsman that the alleged debt to the agency was not hers, but her father's, who had once owned the property.

At this point, it was less than a week before the water was due to be restricted.

Early Resolution

The Ombudsman immediately contacted the agency, who advised that:

- the planned water restriction was due to an unpaid debt the agency had been chasing; and
- the complainant was generally late with her water payments, and the agency was not prepared to allow her to not pay her water bill.

Given the urgency of the matter, and the fact that there was a family relying on an unrestricted water supply, the Ombudsman asked the agency to delay any restriction until the Ombudsman could properly review the situation. The agency agreed to delay for a week but required a formal letter from the Ombudsman if it was going to delay for any longer.

The Ombudsman then sent the agency formal notification of the complaint, and:

- sought evidence to justify the agency's decision to restrict the water to the household; and
- requested that the agency continue to suspend any water restrictions until the Ombudsman's investigation was concluded.

Outcome

On receiving this formal notification, the agency reviewed its records once more.

The agency then acknowledged to the Ombudsman that it had been in error in pursuing the debt, as the relevant account had been closed. The complainant did have an outstanding debt for a smaller amount, but the agency accepted it did not have cause to restrict the water.

The Ombudsman asked the agency to apologise to the complainant, and suggested in future it always review its clients' accounts carefully before advising them of any intention to restrict their water.

The complainant later wrote to the Ombudsman, thanking him for his prompt action and for relieving the burden and stress on her family.