



Enquiries and Complaints Report 2015–16

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Introduction

The Consumer Council is a non-departmental public body (NDPB) established through the General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984. Our principal statutory duty is to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland (NI).

The main statutory functions of the Consumer Council are to:

- Consider any complaint made to it relating to consumer affairs and, where it appears to the Council to be appropriate having regard to any other remedy which may be available to the complainant, investigate the complaint and take such further action in relation thereto as the Council may determine;
- Carry out, or assist in the carrying out of, inquiries and research into matters relating to consumer affairs;
- Promote discussion of, and the dissemination of information relating to, consumer affairs; and
- Report to an NI department on any matter relating to consumer affairs which is referred to the Council by that department.

The Consumer Council has specific statutory duties in relation to energy, postal services, transport, and water and sewerage. In these areas, we are to have particular regard to consumers:

- Who are disabled or chronically sick;
- Of pensionable age;
- With low incomes; or
- Who reside in rural areas.

The Consumer Council is a designated consumer body under the Enterprise Act 2002 and the Financial Services and Markets Act Order 2013. Designated consumer bodies can raise a super-complaint to the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), in the case of goods and services, and the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) or the Payment Systems Regulator (PSR) as appropriate, in the case of financial services if a market in the UK is, or appears to be, significantly harming the interests of consumers.

This report covers all contacts received from consumers during the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016.

How we deal with contacts from consumers

The Consumer Council classifies the contacts we receive about transport, natural gas, electricity, coal, water and postal services under four categories:

1. Enquiry;
2. Stage 1 referral;
3. Stage 1 investigation; or
4. Stage 2 complaint.

Definitions

- **An enquiry** is a request for information or advice about any of the areas we cover within our remit.
- **A stage 1 referral** is when the consumer has not contacted the service provider in the first instance to give them the opportunity to resolve the complaint. The complaint is therefore forwarded to the service provider directly and they are asked to respond to the consumer as per their complaints procedure.
- **A stage 1 investigation** is an instance where the consumer has not yet contacted the service provider; however the Consumer Council believes it is in the consumer's best interests if we raise the complaint on his/her behalf. For instance, if the consumer is vulnerable in some way.
- **A stage 2 complaint** is where the consumer has contacted the service provider but he/she remains dissatisfied with the response received or is yet to receive a response after a reasonable period of time has elapsed.

The Consumer Council also receives a large number of contacts from consumers about issues outside our statutory remit and, where this happens, we signpost consumers to the appropriate organisation. These contacts are classified as general referrals.

Our Year in Review

Complaints Overview



1,516

Advised and signposted over 1,500 consumers



3,135

Investigated over 3,000 enquiries and complaints



£897K

In total returned to the pocket of consumers



£59K

Returned for transport complaints, ranging from: £5–£2,030



£156K

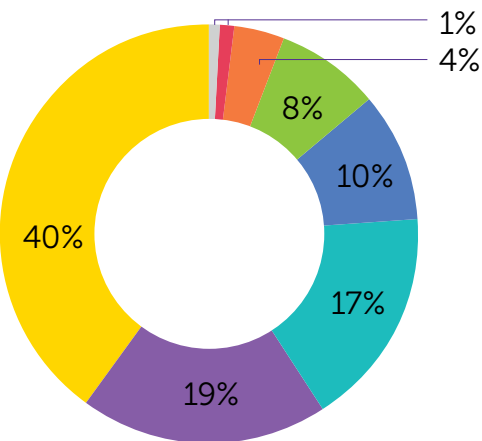
Returned for energy complaints, ranging from: £10–£80,000



£680K

Returned for water complaints, ranging from: £82–£594,000

Breakdown of enquiries & complaints received



- Other energy
- Postal Services
- Public Transport
- Natural Gas
- Water
- Other
- Air Travel
- Electricity

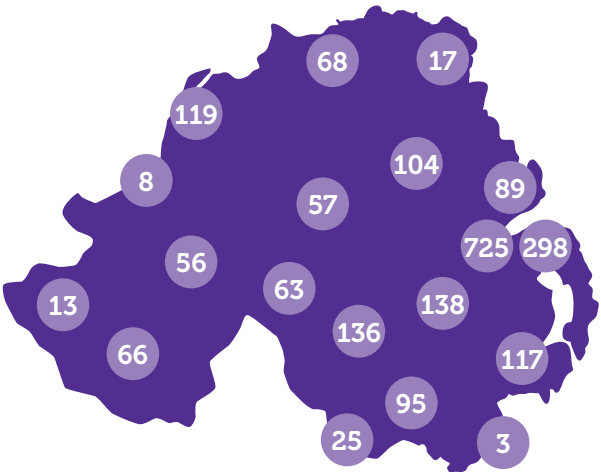
Satisfaction



99%

Customer Satisfaction with our service

Geographical Analysis of Contacts Received



Top issues



Electricity Bills



Water Bills



Gas Bills



Air Travel Cancellations and Delays



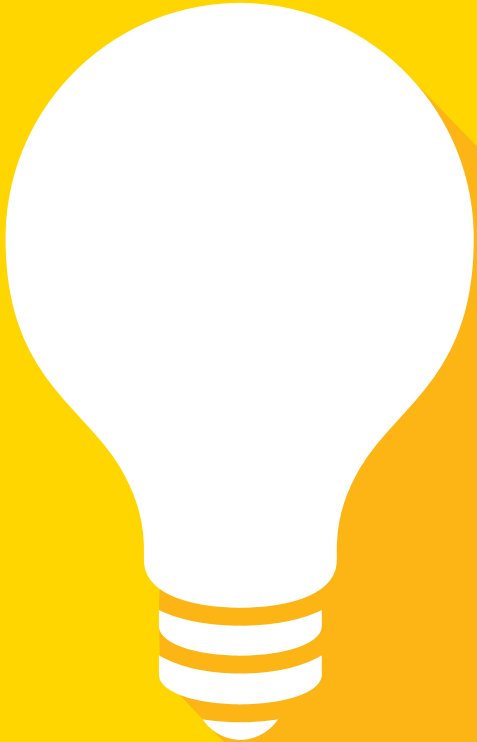
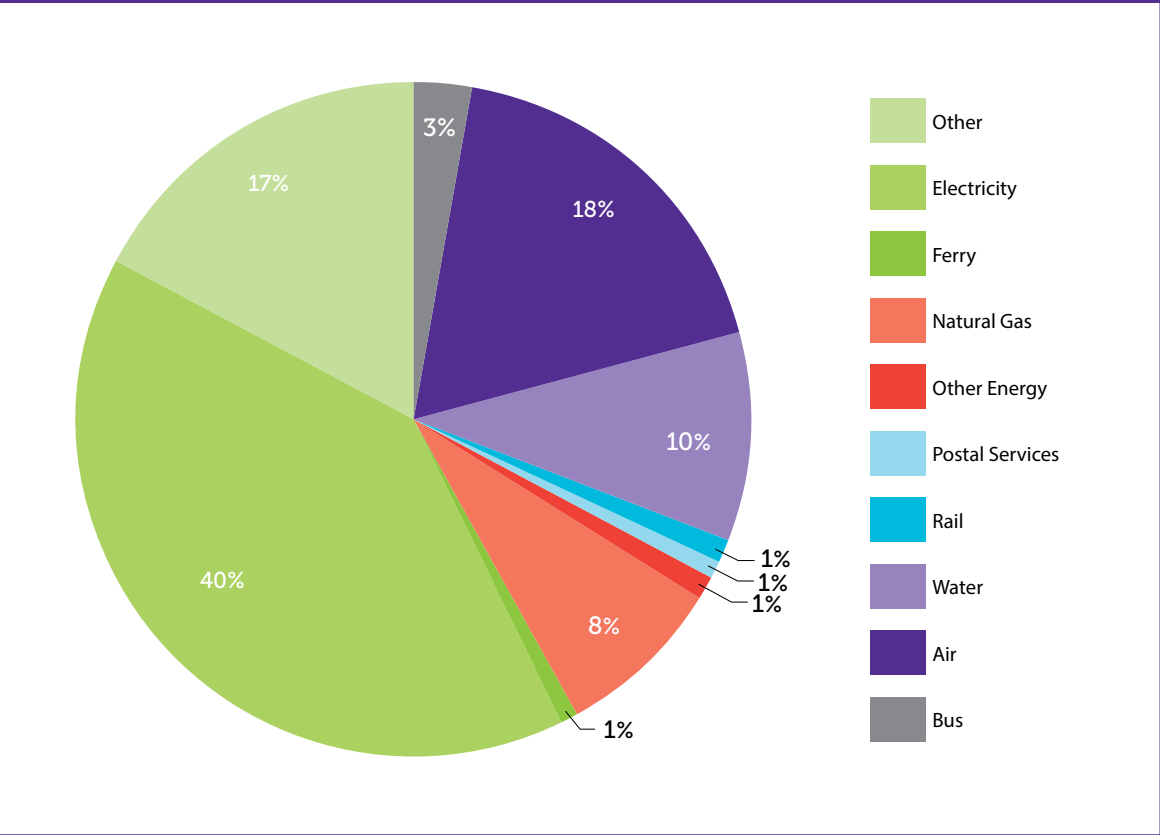
Customer Service and Communication issues

Analysis of Enquiries & Complaints 2015-16

General Referrals & Requests for Information	Complaints & Enquiries	Total	Financial Return to Consumers
1,516	3,135	4,651	£897,000

The Consumer Council helped a total 4,651 consumers in 2015-16. We investigated 3,135 enquiries and complaints and assisted 1,516 consumers by providing general advice and signposting them to other organisations.

Figure 1: Analysis of Enquiries & Complaints received in 2015-16



Energy

Energy

Energy related issues are typically the most common type of enquiry or complaint received by the Consumer Council. In 2015-16 energy contacts accounted for almost half of all consumer contacts (49%), with electricity responsible for 82% of this figure.

Electricity

The electricity network for NI is owned and maintained by NIE Networks with a variety of suppliers available to domestic and commercial customers.

Table 1: Electricity contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers £
Budget Energy	45	2	5	6	58	£564
Click Energy NI	6	0	0	0	6	£0
Electric Ireland	26	3	3	5	37	£40
Energia	16	0	0	0	16	£0
Go Power	3	0	0	0	3	£0
NIE Networks	180	5	2	4	191	£29,000
Open Electric	1	0	0	0	1	£0
Power NI	659	5	1	3	668	£101,000 ¹
SSE Airtricity	256	7	5	15	283	£21,000
Grand Total	1,192	22	16	33	1,263	£151,564

In 2015-16, three new electricity suppliers entered the market, two domestic suppliers, Open Electric and Click Energy, and one commercial supplier, Go Power.

1. £80,000 of this relates to the potential savings that could have been made by the 5728 Power NI customers affected by a billing error that we identified through the investigation of a complaint.

Domestic customers in NI can now choose from a total of six electricity suppliers, Power NI, SSE Airtricity, Budget Energy, Electric Ireland, Click Energy NI, and Open Electric.

The chart below shows the number of complaints received in 2015-16 by the four major electricity supply companies in NI against their respective percentages of market share.

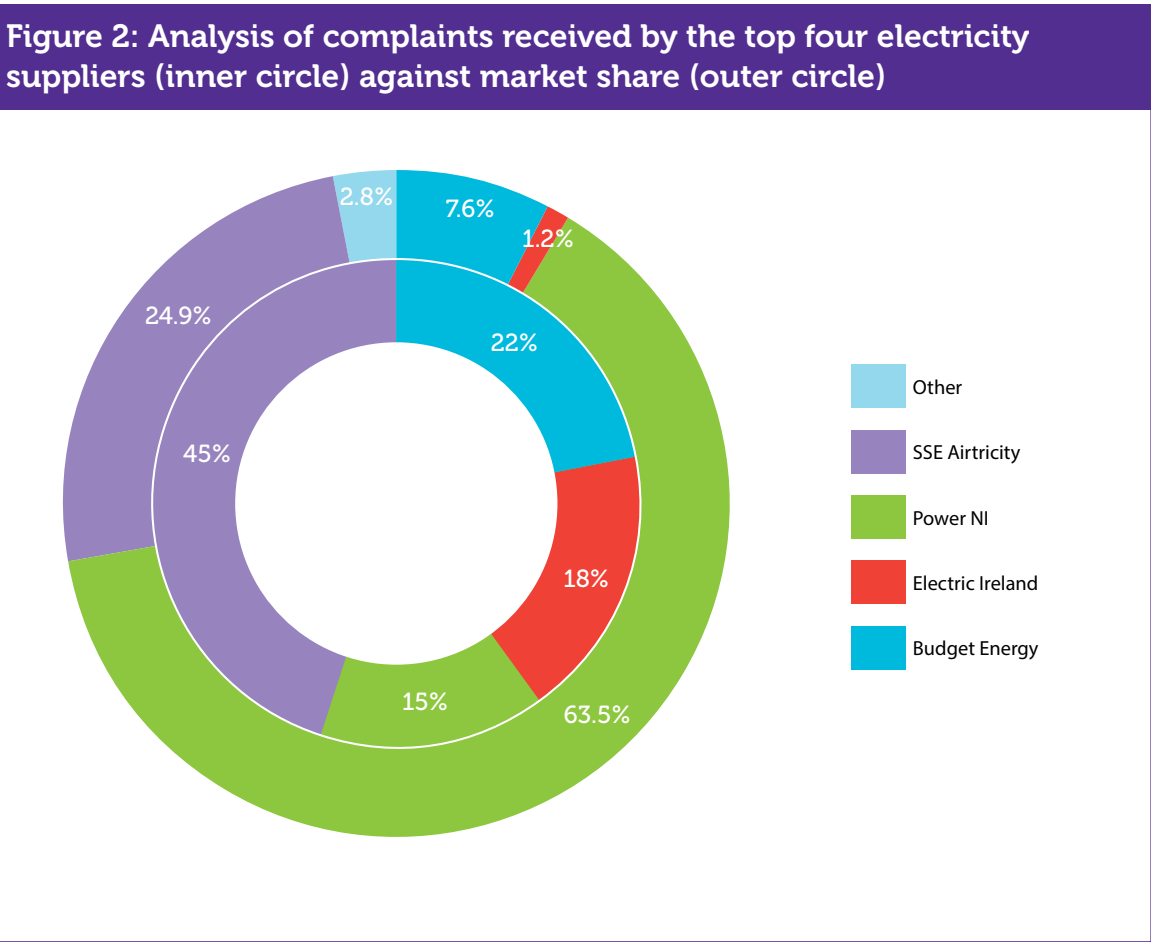


Figure 3: Complaints received by electricity supplier per 10,000 customers

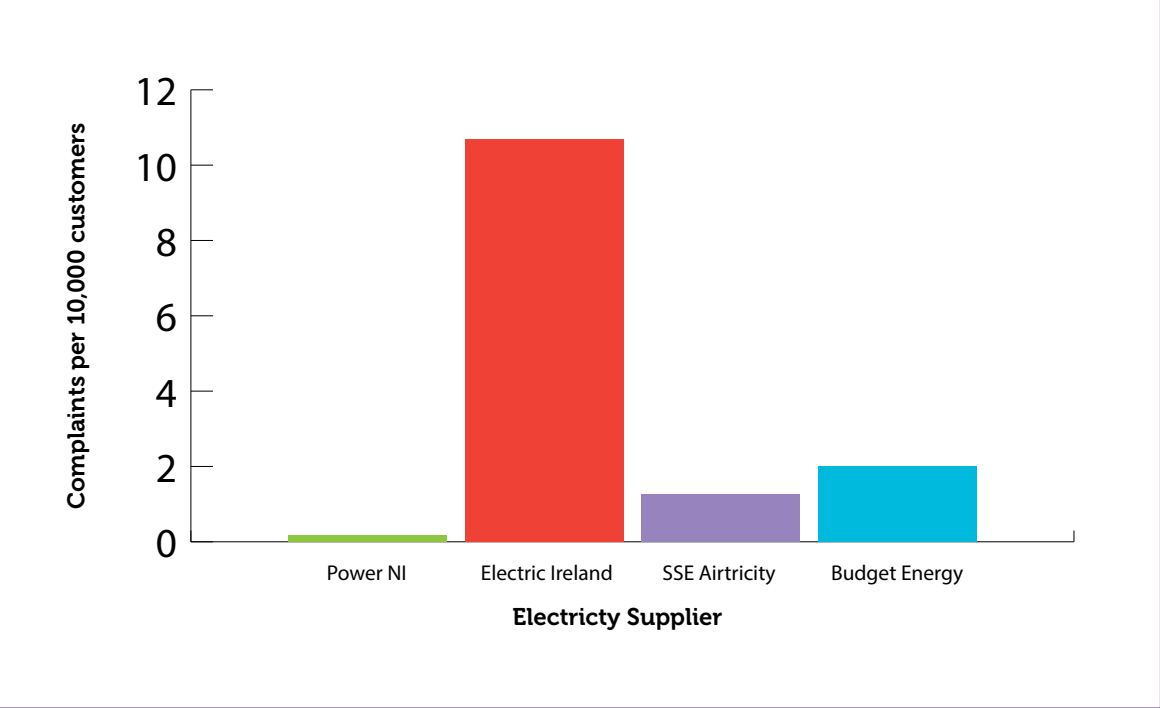
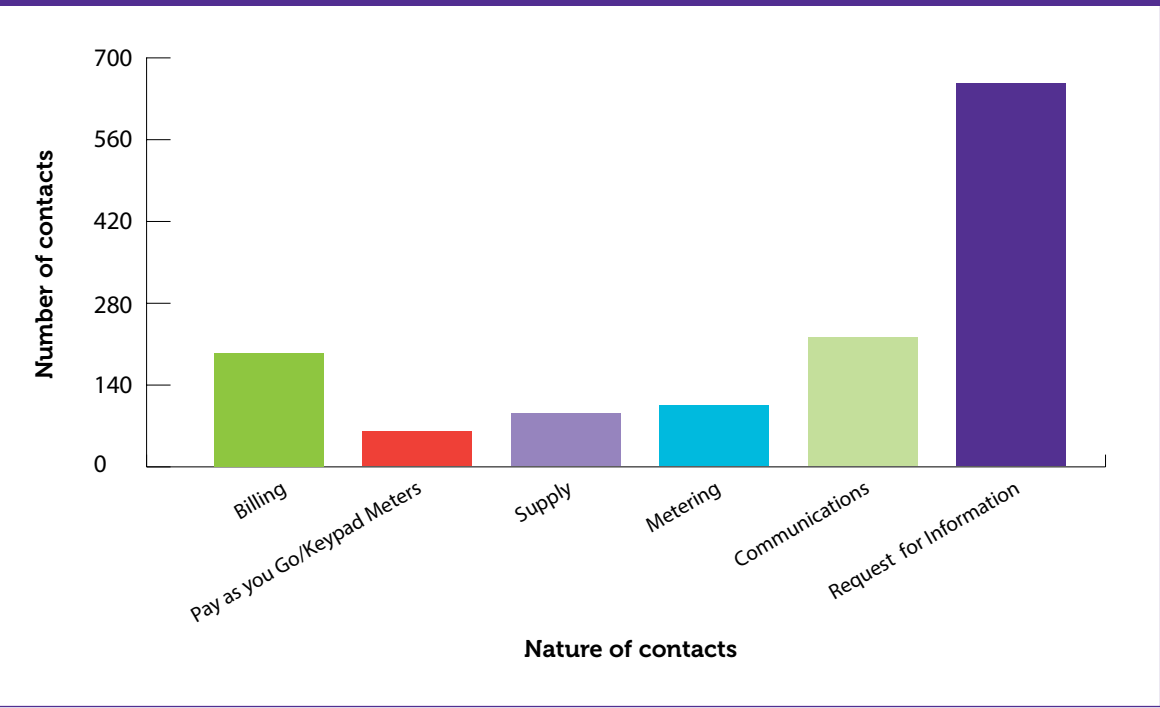


Figure 4: The top electricity issues investigated by Consumer Council in 2015-16



Natural Gas

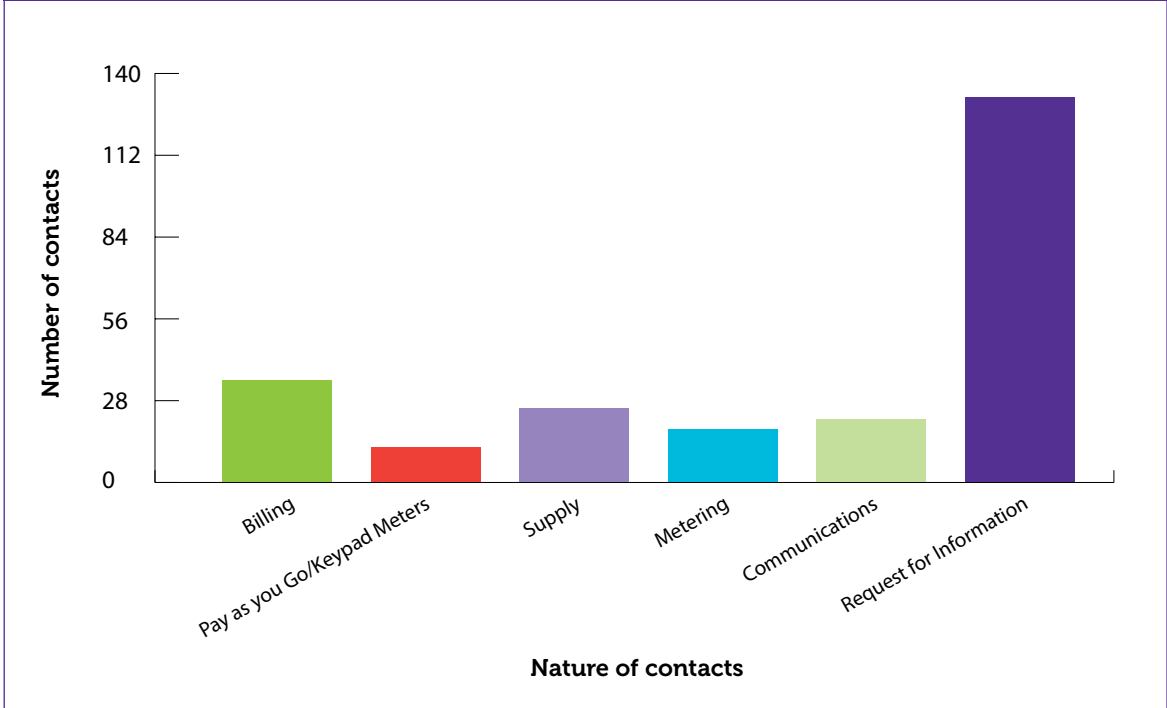
The natural gas market has significantly fewer customers (217,618) than electricity (858,026) and there are fewer competitors. Therefore, customers have less choice when it comes to choosing a gas supplier.

The Consumer Council has noted a 15% increase in the number of natural gas enquiries received in 2015-16 (230) compared to last year (200), however complaints about natural gas remain relatively low (11).

Table 2: Natural Gas contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to consumers £
Firmus Energy	91	1	0	1	93	£296
Phoenix Natural Gas	45	0	1	3	49	£0
SSE Airtricity Gas	94	1	3	1	99	£ 3,863
Grand Total	230	2	4	5	241	£4,159

Figure 5: The top gas issues investigated by Consumer Council in 2015-16



Coal, Oil & Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG)

The Consumer Council has no specific statutory remit to look at oil and LPG complaints, but we have developed a partnership with Calor Gas, Flo Gas and NI Oil Federation to support their consumers with enquiries and complaints.

Table 3: Coal, Oil & LPG contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Total
Calor Gas	16	16
Flogas	10	10
NI Oil Federation	1	1
Grand Total	27	27

Contacts from consumers in relation to coal, oil and LPG remain consistently low and comparable with previous years. Overall the Consumer Council received 27 enquiries with 96% of these in relation to LPG.

Enquiries about the cost of LPG were the most common type of issue raised by consumers.



Transport

Air Travel

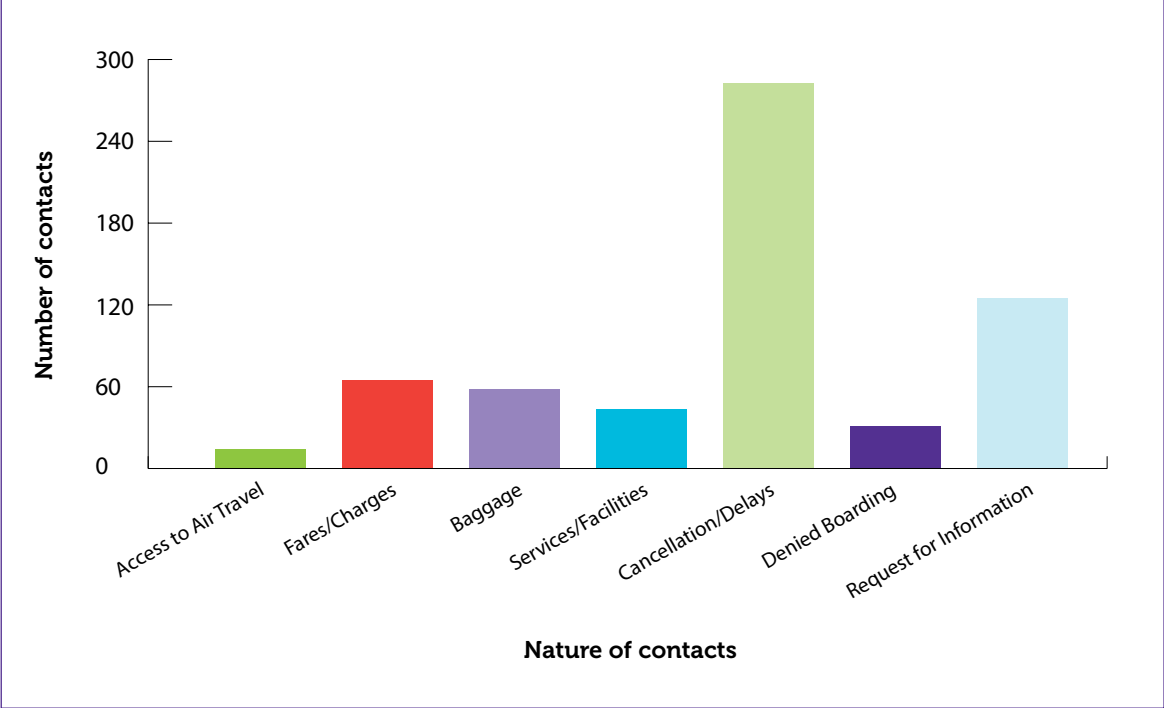
In 2015-16, transport related enquiries and complaints accounted for 23% (710) of all contacts received by the Consumer Council, with air travel (580) accounting for 82% of these. This is consistent with the previous year (736 air contacts accounting for 85% of the total 871 transport contacts received in 2014-15).

Of the 580 air contacts received, almost half of these (46%) related to issues with delays and cancellations. Passengers who experience a cancellation or delay may be entitled to claim compensation under European Law and the Consumer Council has subsequently helped return over £59,000 to air passengers in the last year (an average of £537 per complaint).

Table 4: Air contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers £
easyJet	49	41	90	£13,823
CAA (referral)	310	0	310	£0
United Airlines	6	5	11	£1,462
Jet2.com	13	10	23	£11,060
Belfast International Airport	2	0	2	£0
Belfast City Airport	3	0	3	£0
Ryanair	17	3	20	£728
Aer Lingus	11	11	22	£3,887
Flybe	14	8	22	£4,986
ECC	12	0	12	£0
Thomas Cook Airlines	7	7	14	£7,672
British Airways	13	6	19	£2,573
Thomson Airways	11	10	21	£10,536
Volotea	4	1	5	£200
Aegean Airlines	2	0	2	£800
Vueling	1	1	2	£579
KLM	1	1	2	£772
TOTAL	476	104	580	£59,078

Figure 6: The top air issues investigated by Consumer Council in 2015-16



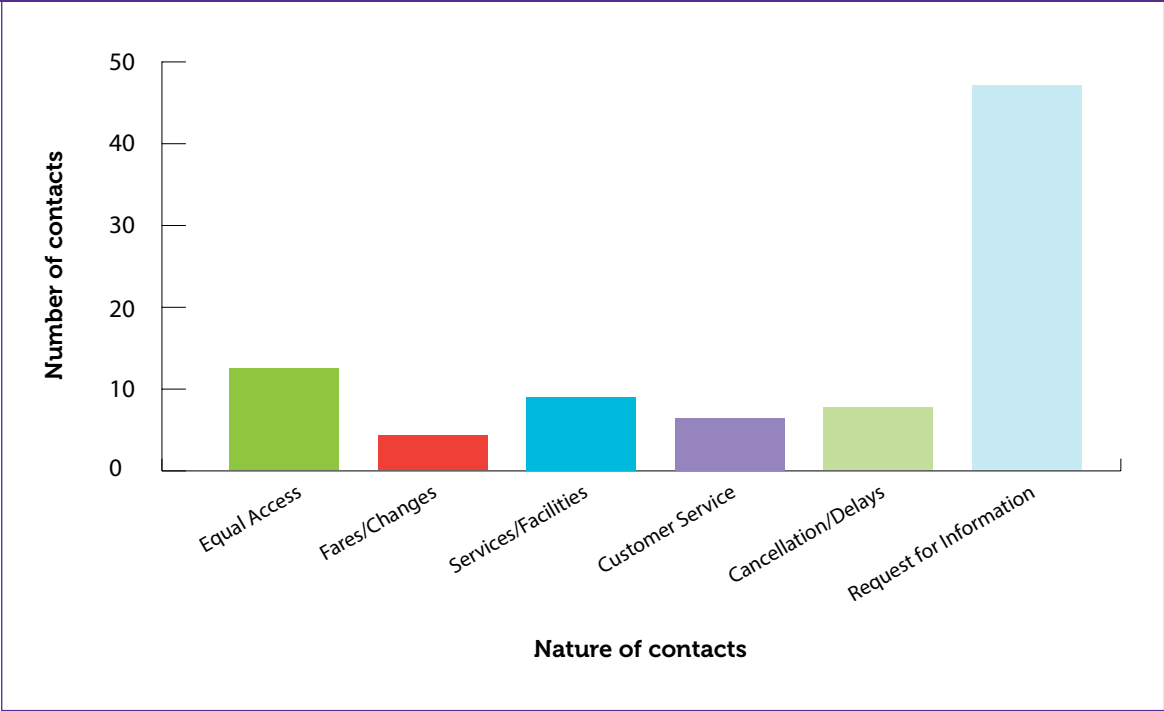
Bus Travel

During 2015-16 the number of contacts regarding bus services (91) remained consistent with 2014-15 (92). Bus passengers most commonly contacted us in relation to poor customer service, issues regarding services and facilities and fares and charges.

Table 5: Bus contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers £
Bus Eireann	2	0	0	0	2	£0
Community Transport (Other)	3	0	0	0	3	£0
Disability Action Transport Scheme	7	0	0	4	11	£35
Lagan Valley Rural Transport	1	0	0	0	1	£0
Translink - Bus	42	3	9	20	74	£170
Grand Total	55	3	9	24	91	£206

Figure 7: The top bus issues investigated by Consumer Council in 2015-16



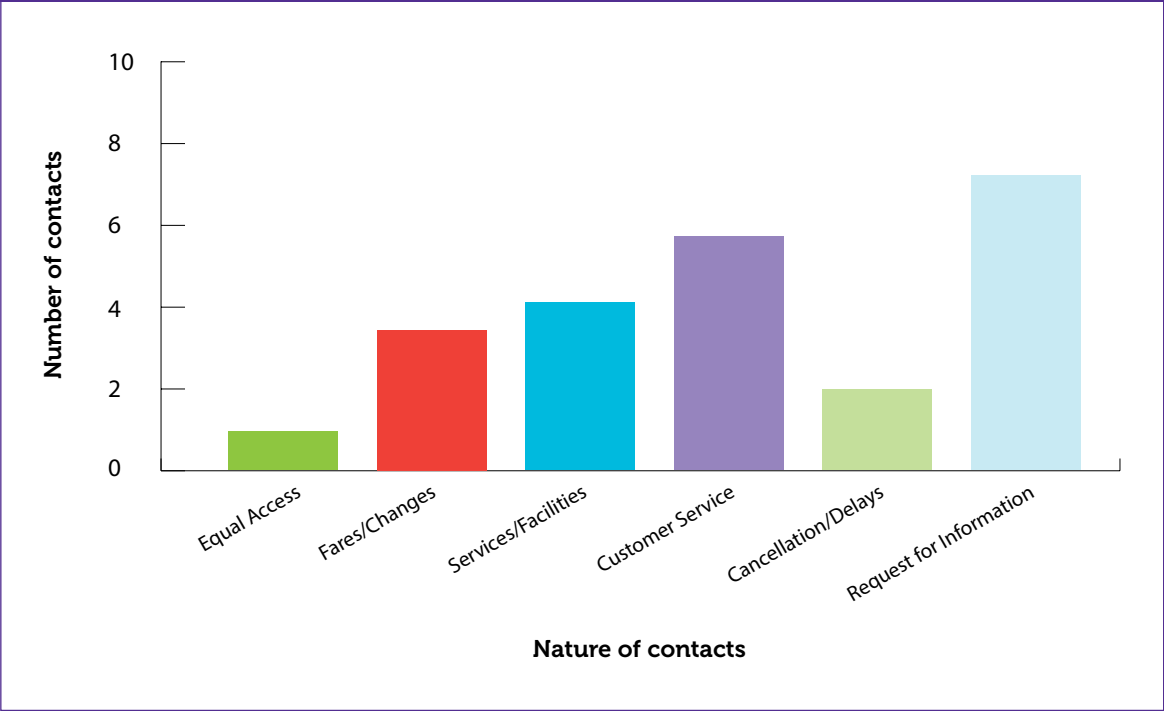
Rail Travel

Translink is the only rail provider available to passengers in NI. In 2015-16 the number of rail contacts decreased by 23% compared to last year (23 v 30).

Table 6: Rail contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers £
Translink - Rail	14	2	3	4	23	£336

Figure 8: The top Rail issues investigated by Consumer Council in 2015-16

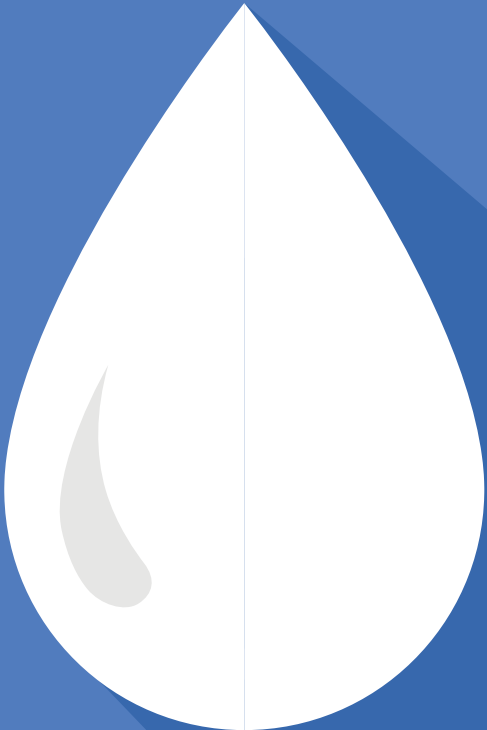


Ferry Travel

Less than 1% (16) of all contacts received by the Consumer Council relates to ferry travel. In 2015-16 issues about fares and charges were the most common concern raised by ferry passengers. This is consistent with the previous year (13).

Table 7: Ferry contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Total
ABTA Referral (Ferry)	4	4
Isle of Man Steam Packet	1	1
P & O Ferries	3	3
Stena Line	5	5
Strangford Lough Ferry Service (Strangford - Portaferry)	3	3
Grand Total	16	16



Water & Sewerage

Water & Sewerage

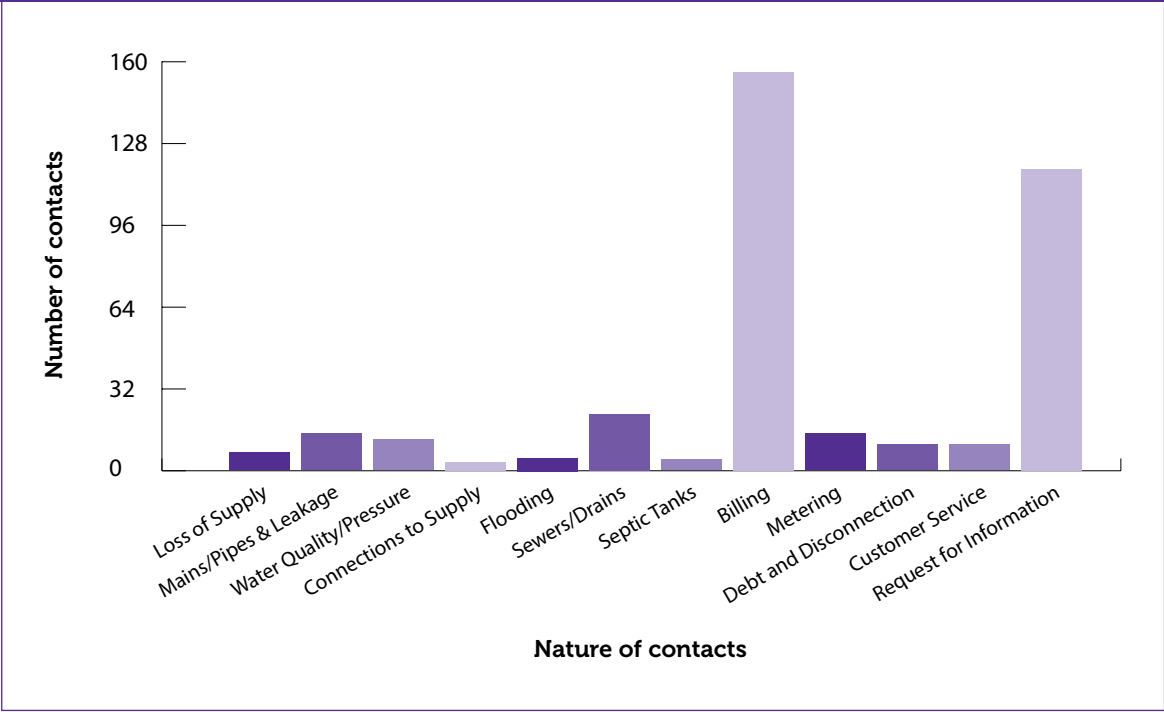
Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) is responsible for the management of water and sewerage services in NI.

Water and sewerage issues equated to 10% (317) of all enquiries and complaints received by the Consumer Council in 2015-16 (3,135). Contacts of this nature have decreased by 21% compared to last year (403 v 317). Consistent with the previous year billing remains the most common type of water complaint received.

Table 8: Water and Sewerage contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to consumers £
Northern Ireland Water	251	23	9	34	317	£680,000

Figure 9: The top water issues investigated by Consumer Council in 2015-16



Postal Services

Postal Services

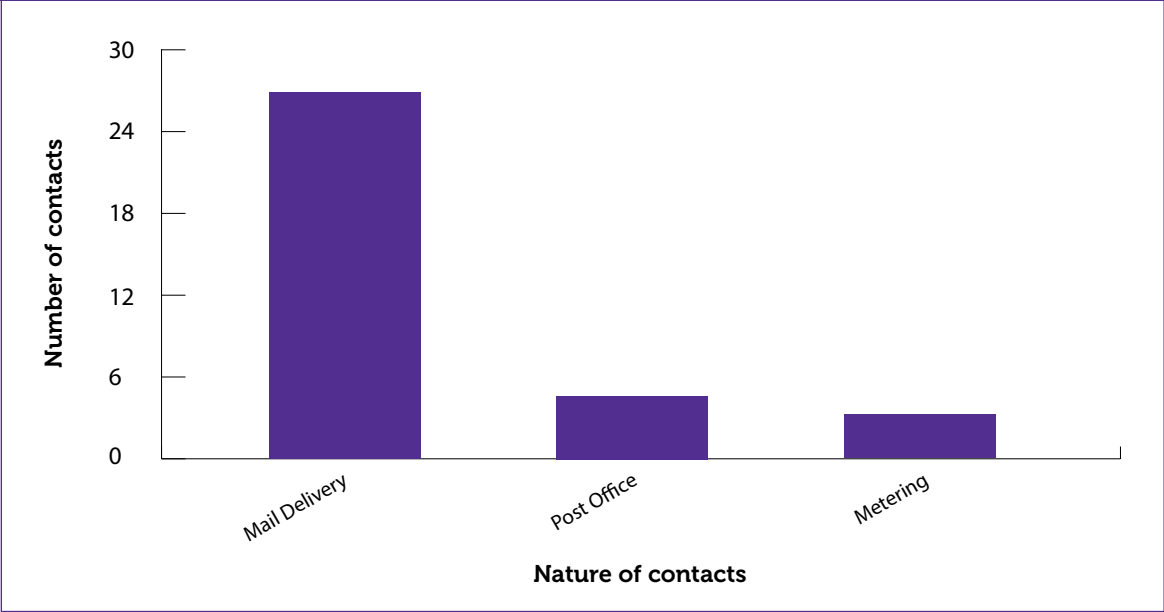
In 2014-15, the Consumer Council assumed responsibility for promoting and protecting the interests of postal consumers across NI. This recent role involves providing consumers with independent advice and guidance on postal service complaints.

In 2015-16, we received a total of 34 enquiries relating to Postal Services. Mail delivery was the primary postal issue raised by consumers accounting for 79% of the total contacts received and includes concerns such as damaged mail and lost mail.

Table 9: Postal Services contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Total	Returned to Consumers £
Royal Mail	20	20	£7
Parcelforce	3	3	£0
Post Office	2	2	£0
Other (Postal Service)	8	8	£0
UPS	1	1	£0
Grand Total	34	34	£7

Figure 10: The top postal service issues investigated by Consumer Council in 2015-16



Customer Feedback & Satisfaction

Customer Feedback & Satisfaction



99% Customer Satisfaction Rate

Consumer feedback is an essential part of the Consumer Council’s learning and development process, adding particular value to our complaints handling service.

At the end of each complaint investigation we ask the consumer to complete a customer satisfaction survey to provide feedback on the service provided by both the Consumer Council and the respective service provider.

We are proud to report that overall satisfaction with the Consumer Council in 2015-16 was 99%. This represents an average of the five measures displayed below.

Figure 11: Analysis of survey return rate & satisfaction rate from 2011-2016

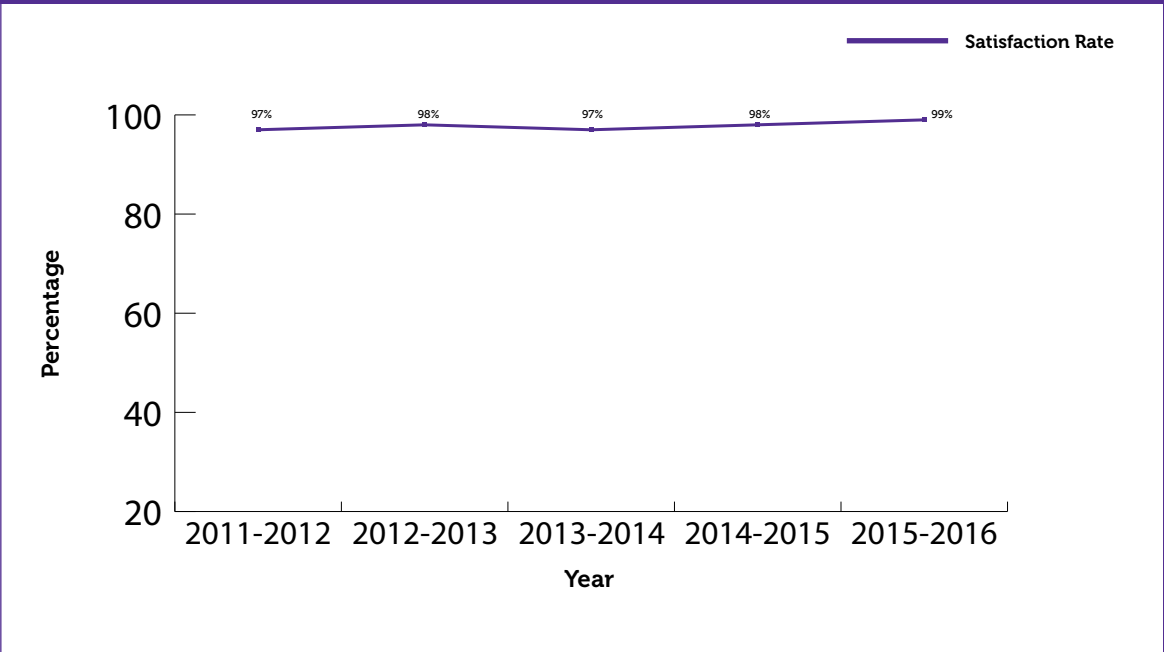
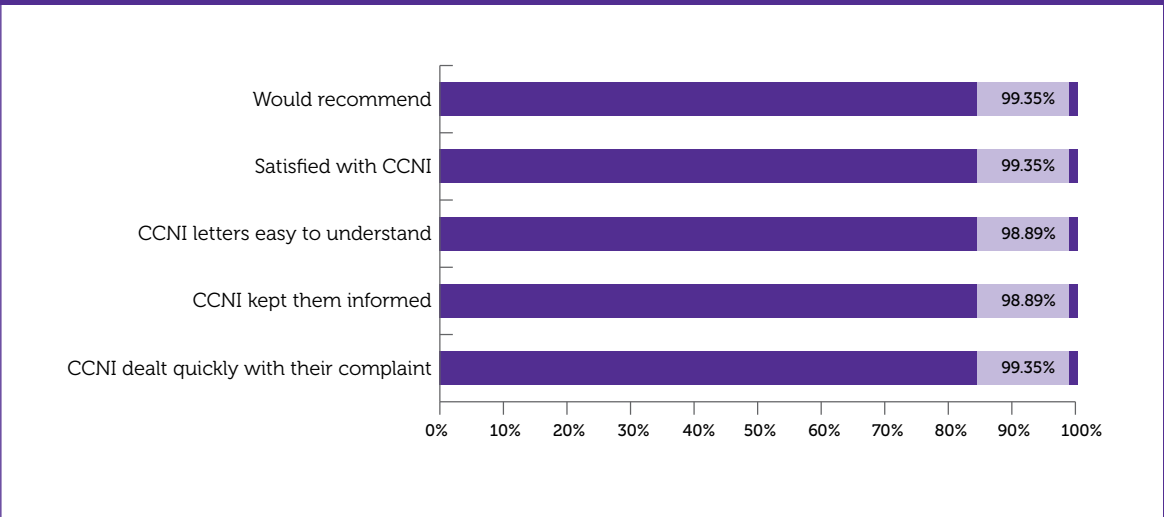


Figure 12: Customer satisfaction with the Consumer Council in 2015-16



“

“The Consumer Council was extremely professional and helpful in their communication and advice during the complaint process. The Council’s input helped to resolve an outstanding issue that we had found impossible.”

“

“A professional, courteous and invaluable service.”

“

“I was very happy with every aspect of the service provided by the Consumer Council. My problem was handled very professionally and efficiently. A 5 star service!”

“

“My complaint was dealt with efficiently and effectively from the moment I got in touch with the Consumer Council. I could not fault one thing. I was kept up to date with emails and phone calls all the way through the process. I was getting nowhere with my complaint until I got in touch with the Consumer Council.”

Case Studies

Case Study 1

A consumer from Enniskillen contacted us regarding a nine hour delay she and her family had encountered returning from their holiday. Despite contacting the airline on numerous occasions to claim for compensation and to raise her concerns, no response was ever received.

We contacted the airline to find out the cause of the delay and if compensation was payable. The airline responded to us to confirm that the delay was not caused by extraordinary circumstances and therefore the family received over £2,000 in compensation.

Case Study 2

A consumer contacted us about a complaint she has raised with her gas supplier regarding her account, and a faulty pre-payment meter.

The consumer’s meter had failed to record the flow of gas since November 2013 however this went unidentified and as a result the error was only reported in February 2015, and actioned in June 2015.

The gas supplier advised that due to the faulty meter not all of the gas used was being charged and based on previous usage they had calculated that the consumer had used £642 worth of gas over this period.

However, in the same period the customer had topped up credit on her meter equivalent to £284 of gas which the gas supplier proposed to offset against the £642.

We identified that the gas supplier had been receiving electronic meter failure messages since November 2013 but failed to act upon these until February 2015.

The company accepted responsibility for not identifying the fault sooner and as a further gesture of goodwill refunded the customer the £286.38 worth of top-ups.

Case Study 3

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer from Lisburn who had encountered problems with an Enterprise service from Lisburn to Dublin.

The consumer had purchased a 1st Plus Return Ticket however when she boarded the train there was no room in the overhead storage facility for her luggage. Therefore she had to place her luggage at the front of the 1st Plus carriage.

On her return journey a similar situation arose and she again had to leave her luggage at the front of the 1st Plus carriage where passengers were allowed to sit and stand for the entire journey, despite this area being filled with luggage.

At the end of her journey she discovered her case had been badly damaged and was covered in split alcohol.

Translink advised that the service in question was extremely busy due to a horse show in Dublin. They apologised for the service on that day but said the area where the luggage was placed was not a designated luggage area and that all passengers are responsible for their own luggage.

In recognition of the poor service received, Translink offered two complimentary 1st Plus Return tickets to the value of £130.

As the service was crewed and operated by Iarnród Éireann, an investigation was undertaken into the damage caused to the luggage and as a result, Iarnród Éireann paid the consumer £100 in compensation for the damage caused.

Case Study 4

A consumer from Newtownards contacted us on behalf of her elderly mother regarding a water bill she had received for over £2,500 caused by a leak.

Unfortunately the farm spanned over 27 acres of land and as a result it took three months for the leak to be located and repaired.

When the consumer submitted the leakage allowance form to NI Water it was rejected on the grounds that the leak had not been repaired within 4 weeks of the date when they became aware of it.

The consumer was extremely dissatisfied with this decision as she had not been advised, verbally or otherwise, of specific timeframes that needed to be adhered to in order to obtain a leakage allowance.

The Consumer Council acted on behalf of the consumer and highlighted the difficulties encountered in locating the leak due to the size of the farm. NI Water carried out a review of the case and agreed that the timescales associated with the location and repair of a leak and subsequent application for a leak allowance had not been made explicit by NI Water in their communication with the consumer.

NI Water agreed to adjust the water charges for the two periods of high consumption to reflect consumption prior to the leak. As a result the bill was reduced from £2,700 to £21.

NI Water also amended the leak allowance form issued to consumers, adding guidance notes about timescales.

Case Study 5

A consumer from Belfast contacted us as she had had received a high electricity bill from her supplier, which she was adamant was not in line with her consumption.

The consumer had switched suppliers and had changed from a keypad meter to a credit meter. The meter had been used before.

Initially the supplier told us that its bills were correct and based on actual meter readings, so the Consumer Council asked it to clarify what the closing meter reading was when the meter had been removed from the previous premises.

As a result of the Consumer Council's investigation and persistency, it transpired that the high bill was the result of an incorrect opening reading provided by the network distributor.

Bills were recalculated; a security deposit refunded and a goodwill payment applied resulting in the consumer being £466 better off.

Notes

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Notes

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Complaints line: 0800 121 6022



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Website: www.consumercouncil.org.uk



Consumer Council Northern Ireland



ConsumerCouncil