



Annual complaints and communication report 2022-2023

**Consumer Council
for Northern Ireland**

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Foreword

In 2022-2023, our front-line services experienced the busiest year in Consumer Council's 40-year history. As the statutory body for consumers in Northern Ireland, we are proud of the work we have done to protect, empower and advocate on behalf of consumers.

This report provides an overview of our services to local people in Northern Ireland, as we protect, empower, and promote their interests. We helped over 14,000 consumers with complaint handling and advice through our phonelines, met and engaged with 17,000 face-to-face through our outreach work, and our online services including advice, guidance, and comparison tools, were used over 600,000 times.



The reality behind these numbers is that consumers in Northern Ireland are struggling.

People come to the Consumer Council when they need help, support, or advice. Our latest Northern Ireland Household Expenditure Tracker shows that from January to March 2023, Northern Ireland's lowest earning households had £19.83 left per week to live on after all essential bills and expenses. These figures, coupled with the increase in demand for our front-line services, highlights the level of detriment that exists here and the important role that the Consumer Council serves in Northern Ireland.

In 2022-2023, the focus of all our work shifted to focus on the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis and helping consumers navigate this through complaint handling, advice provision, education, and empowerment.

We are incredibly proud of the work that we have delivered, and we are honoured to be able to help so many people when they need us. We've helped consumers get over £451,000 back into their pockets through complaint investigation, providing advice, or sign-posting consumers to additional support services such as grants/schemes or foodbanks, our work is varied and always worthwhile. In addition to being there to help when people come to us, we work proactively to reach communities across Northern Ireland to educate and empower them to make more informed choices, understand what is happening, and sharing information and advice on a wealth of topics – from energy efficiency, how to reduce food costs, how to switch energy supplier, and what to do if you experience financial difficulty.

In our empowerment, campaigns and outreach work, we engaged with over 17,000

consumers face to face, received over 600,000 visits to our website and our information was viewed over 3,200,000 times on social media. In addition, our online price comparison tools were used over 300,000 times, helping consumers see ways to save money on their bills, and our online educational video were viewed over 535,000 times. This was underpinned by our strong media and press engagement, where we appeared in local and national TV, press and radio over 1,400 – providing consumer information and advocating on their behalf.

My message to consumers in Northern Ireland is to continue to come to us, because we want to keep helping during this difficult cost-of-living crisis.

Noyona Chundur, Chief Executive

About the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland

The Consumer Council was established in April 1985 as a non-departmental public body (NDPB) under the General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984 (The Order).

We are committed to ensuring positive outcomes for consumers in Northern Ireland. Our principal statutory duty is to safeguard their interests and we operate under our sponsor department, the Department for the Economy, on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive.

To ensure we protect consumers, we have a range of legal powers and duties, drawn from legislation, licences given to companies working in Northern Ireland, and cooperation agreements set in memorandums of understanding. The work we carry out also aligns with a number of the Articles in the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland (NI Protocol).

We are passionate about championing consumer interests, and we put them at the heart of everything we do. As the consumer representative body of Northern Ireland, we are responsible for ensuring legislation and regulation for consumer protection works effectively for consumers here.

We are an insight-led evidence based organisation:

- Providing consumers with expert advice and confidential guidance.
- Engaging with government, regulators and consumer bodies to influence public policy.
- Empowering consumers with the information and tools to build confidence and knowledge.
- Investigating and resolving consumer complaints under statutory and non-

statutory functions.

- Undertaking best practice research to identify and quantify emerging risks to consumers.
- Campaigning for market reform as an advocate for consumer choice and protection.

Our statutory powers cover consumer affairs, energy, transport, water and sewerage, postal services and food affordability and accessibility. Our non-statutory functions educate, empower and support consumers against discriminatory practices in any market through advocacy work, and education and outreach programmes on consumer rights, safer finances or a more sustainable energy future.

We are the trusted, independent voice of Northern Ireland consumers. We achieve this by responding to enquiries, providing expert advice, investigating complaints, conducting independent research, advocating across consumer issues, delivering information campaigns, collaborating, influencing public policy, and advising government on matters of consumer rights and protection.

In everything we do, we prioritise consumers:

- who are disabled or chronically sick;
- who are of pensionable age;
- who are on low incomes; and
- who live in rural areas.

We have responsibilities under the Rural Needs Act 2016 and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. In this role, we aim to ensure government policies recognise consumer needs in rural areas and promote equality of opportunity and good relations across a range of equality categories.

We are a designated super-complaints body set up under the Enterprise Act 2002 and the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 Order 2013.

Under both Acts, the Consumer Council can raise a super-complaint on behalf of consumers if we believe any feature or combination of features of a market in the United Kingdom is, or appears to be, significantly harming the interests of consumers.

Empowering consumers: communication and outreach

Our principle statutory duty is to protect the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland by empowering them and providing a strong representative voice to policy makers, regulators and service providers. We also promote the services provided by the Consumer Council so that we can help the people who need us.

Consumer empowerment means providing consumers with information and advice about matters within our remit, informing them about their rights and responsibilities, so they can make informed decisions and ultimately improve their quality of life.

To reach consumers across Northern Ireland, we work hard to ensure our information is available where consumers need it. In 2022-2023, we delivered:

- Attended 181 outreach events, reaching 17,128 consumers
- Over 600,000 visits to our website
- Our information was viewed over 3,200,000 times on social media
- Over 300,000 uses of our price comparisons tools
- Over 535,000 views of our online videos
- Appeared in press, TV and radio over 1,400 times

We have achieved growth in many of our outputs as we strive to reach the consumers who need us, our digital footprint grew by 21%, and our press and media engagement increased by 59%.

In our campaigns, communication and outreach work in 2022-2023, we have provided consumers with useful information on a breadth of topics. We shared information, advice, and guidance on the following topics online, offline, in-person, and via our telephone service:

- Cost-of-living
- The energy price crisis
- Energy efficiency
- Flight cancellations
- P&O Ferries cancellations
- Scams awareness
- Shopping safely online
- Consumer affairs
- Illegal money lending
- Gaming and gambling
- How to save money on water bills
- Food affordability and accessibility
- EU exit

We worked with the following partner organisations to ensure consumers in Northern Ireland are receiving timely information about issues that matter:

- Danske Bank
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
- Department for the Health and Social Care Trust
- Department for Finance (NICS)

- Live)
- Department for Communities
 - Police Service of Northern Ireland
 - Northern Ireland Housing Executive
 - NI Assembly
 - NI Courts and Tribunal Services
 - NI Fraud Forum
 - Southern Regional College
 - Belfast Met
 - North West Regional College
 - South West College
 - South Eastern Regional College
 - Ulster University
 - Stranmillis College
 - Queen's University Belfast
 - St Catherine's College
 - Tourism NI
 - Invest NI
 - Fermanagh & Omagh Council
 - Lisburn & Castlereagh Council
 - Newry, Mourne & Down Council
 - Mid Ulster District Council
 - Belfast Health & Social Care Trust
 - South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust
 - Southern Health & Social Care Trust
 - Western Health & Social Care Trust
 - Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Association
 - Arbour Housing Association
 - Choice Housing
 - Radius Housing
 - Girls Brigade
 - Co-op Ireland
 - Ability Action
 - Network Personnel
 - Action for Children
 - Age Friendly
 - Action Mental Health
 - Inspire Wellbeing
 - Disability Action
 - Rural Health Network
 - NI Rural Women's Support Network

We tailor our approach to meet audiences across Northern Ireland; we are here for every person in Northern Ireland, and in everything we do, we prioritise consumers who are disabled or chronically sick, are of pensionable age, are on low incomes or who live in rural areas.

Through our annual research programme, we carry out research to understand the perceptions and experiences of consumers, combined with what we hear daily from our helpline and when we meet consumers face to face, we ensure that we are providing consumers with the information that they need, in a way that suits them. As such, a multi-channel, targeted, and inclusive approach is delivered.

Through our outreach work, we travel across Northern Ireland to meet and help consumers who need us the most. We work in partnership across Northern Ireland and engage in a variety of formats, including presentations, train-the-trainer format, webinars, workshops, and attending large scale community events.

The Consumer Council has steadily expanded its communications and advertising functions over the past few years, with success including increase in the organisations profile (figures below), campaigns winning awards (Best Public Sector campaign in 2022 at the Chartered Institute of Public Relations Awards for the True Cost campaign) and the receiving of increased funding from DfE for the Consumer Council to run an energy efficiency campaign, received due to the Consumer Council's expertise in consumer empowerment and education.

Campaigns in focus

True Cost Campaign: educating consumers about financial difficulties and understanding the true cost of borrowing money

Based on research carried out by the Consumer Council, consumers most at risk of using an illegal money lender therefore would benefit from receiving advice and information around safer ways to borrow money, are: those in social housing, young people, those on low incomes, woman, those with disabilities and older people.

Through implementing a multi-channel campaign, we met this target audience through a variety of ways, sharing information in a staged approach through from having money worries, to be in significant financial difficulties, sign-posting to the appropriate information and advice provider at each stage. The campaign reached over 800,000 listeners on radio, over 1 million readers through print advertising, and over 5.5 million impressions through digital advertising.

The campaign signposted consumers to alternative forms of ethical credit; Scotcash and Fair 4 You, who both experienced an increase in applications as a result of the campaign. For Scotcash, there were 86 loan applications in February and 93 loan applications in March. This represents an increase on the average monthly loan applications (63) of 36% in February and 47% in March. With regard to Fair 4 You, there were 539 loan applications across their standard loans and the Iceland food loans. The typical monthly average is 194 total loan applications so again this represents a significant increase. However, only 97 of the loans were approved, meaning a conversion rate of only 18%.

Save Energy and Money: educating consumers on ways to reduce their electricity, oil and gas costs through energy efficiency

The Northern Ireland Energy Strategy states that an initial focus of the Department for the Economy in providing support to consumers will be “*energy efficiency – an urgent priority of the Energy Strategy.*” In addition, consumers' need for support with energy efficiency had intensified because of the energy price crisis which resulted in many consumers' heating and electricity bills increasing significantly in the winter of 2022 – 2023.

The purpose of the campaign was to raise consumer awareness of energy efficiency in the context of the 2022-2023 energy price crisis, so they were better prepared for the winter. Research indicated that consumers most in need of this information was young adults, older consumers and those on low incomes. Working in partnership with the Department for the Economy, regulators and industry, we developed a multi-channel campaign which ran throughout the winter.

Campaign themes were decided based on information that would be most helpful to consumers. It was crucial that the campaign prioritised communication using simple, easy to understand terms to allow consumers to fully understand energy in their homes and how they can make necessary energy efficiency changes to potentially save money. Campaign outputs included over 400,000 views of online educational videos, the distribution of 15,000 printed guides across the advice sector, 520,000 impressions through outdoor advertising, reach of 1.8 million radio listeners and 3.5 million impressions on social media.

This was supported by a strong media voice being held by the Consumer Council, advocating on behalf of citizens, explaining ongoing price changes, and providing consumer advice. Press and media coverage increased 30% on the previous year, with coverage achieved on BBC Newsline, UTV News, BBC News Online, Irish News, Newsletter, Belfast Live and regional outlets.



Figure 1 An example of the adverts for the 'Save Energy and Money' campaign

Outreach in focus

Responding to the cost of living crisis

As the impact of the cost of living became more pronounced in Northern Ireland, our outreach function became a vital source of information particularly for consumers who are hard to reach or digitally excluded. We shared information on financial support, energy efficiency, ways to reduce food costs and the support available to the Consumer Council, partnering with organisations across Northern Ireland to engage with consumers.

Examples include:

- Attendance at nine 'Energy Cafes' with Fermanagh and Omagh Council, Newry, Mourne and Down and Mid Ulster Council, discussing consumer concerns about the energy crisis and offering our support.
- Engagement with over 95 foodbanks and community centers in Northern Ireland to provide information and resources for their service users.
- Facilitation of one-to-one consumer support through organisations such as The Warehouse, Newtownards. The Warehouse is open to all residents living in the Newtownards area and provide free breakfast, lunch, and an evening meal during the week, offering a food and clothes bank and a referral and sign-posting service. Following a visit in November and a follow up, a consumer advised the Consumer Council that she received a grant under the boiler replacement scheme and a grant under the Warm Home Scheme based on the information from the energy section on the website.



Figure 1 Consumer Council staff members helping consumers at the Balmoral Show

Education about illegal money lending

We delivered education and outreach focused on Illegal Money Lending and Safer Finances to a range of organisations. We delivered 4 online webinars to Money Guiders Network (x2), Queens Health and Wellbeing Team and Business In The community on the topic of safer finances with a combined total of 62 people attending. We also delivered focused training to 45 Radius Housing staff across 3 webinars and also 11 Trussell Trust foodbank managers from across Northern Ireland. We also delivered a presentation to 220 students from St Louise's College in Belfast on budgeting.

We expanded our Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCNNI) project which educates users about safer finances, delivering training to 10 staff from the Now Group to develop their knowledge of safer finances so they can now deliver our OCNNI endorsed course to their service users. Since then, 35 Now Group Service users have received the training.

Workplace engagement

Working with organisations provides the opportunity to educate staff members on being an advocate for the Consumer Council, sharing our help and advice with their service users.

During 2022-2023, we engaged with 823 members of staff through 34 presentations working for a range of organisations. Working with Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke, we engaged with 109 service users across six locations, we delivered presentations to staff from Fermanagh & Omagh District Council, Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), the Department for Communities, Ulster University (UU), Whiterock Family Support and to 200 participants from across the civil service at NICS Live.

Protecting consumers: complaint investigations and enquiries

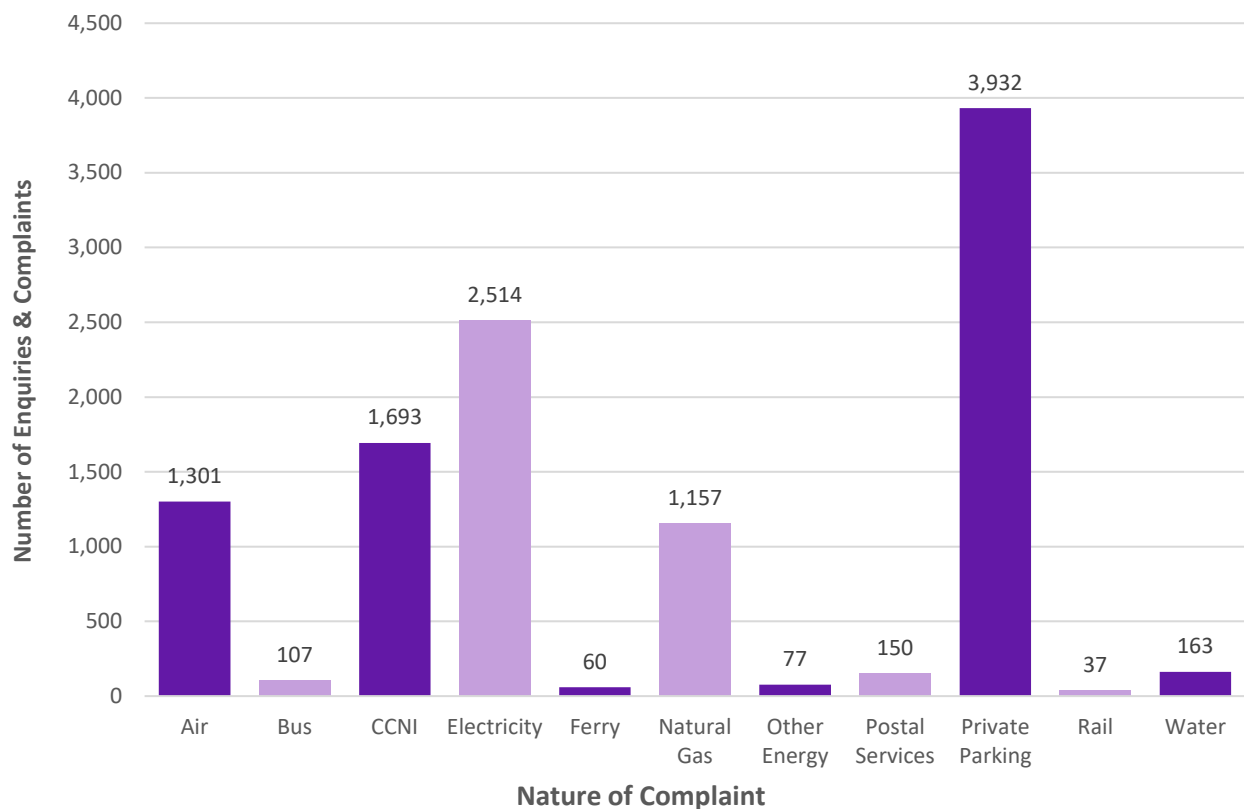
In 2022-2023, we received over 14,200 contacts to our consumer helpline, making it the busiest year in the history of the Consumer Council¹. We helped 3,037 of these consumers by providing advice and signposting to other organisations who could support them. We took on 11,191 consumer complaints for further enquiry, and we investigated 2,610 of these as detailed stage 1 and stage 2 complaints². In 2022-2023, we returned £451.1k to Northern Ireland consumers via our consumer protection activity.

¹ Our consumer helpline, 0800 121 6022, is supported by a team of Consumer Protection Officers 9am-5pm Monday to Friday. More information is available at www.consumercouncil.org.uk.

² For further information on how we classify enquiries and complaints, please see the appendix.

The total number of contacts received in 2022-2023 increased by 59% compared to the year previous. The increase is largely due to the Cost-of-living crisis, which drove demand for our front-line service, particularly in relation to energy enquiries and complaints.

Chart 1: Breakdown of enquiries and complaints received in 2022-2023 (n= 11,191)



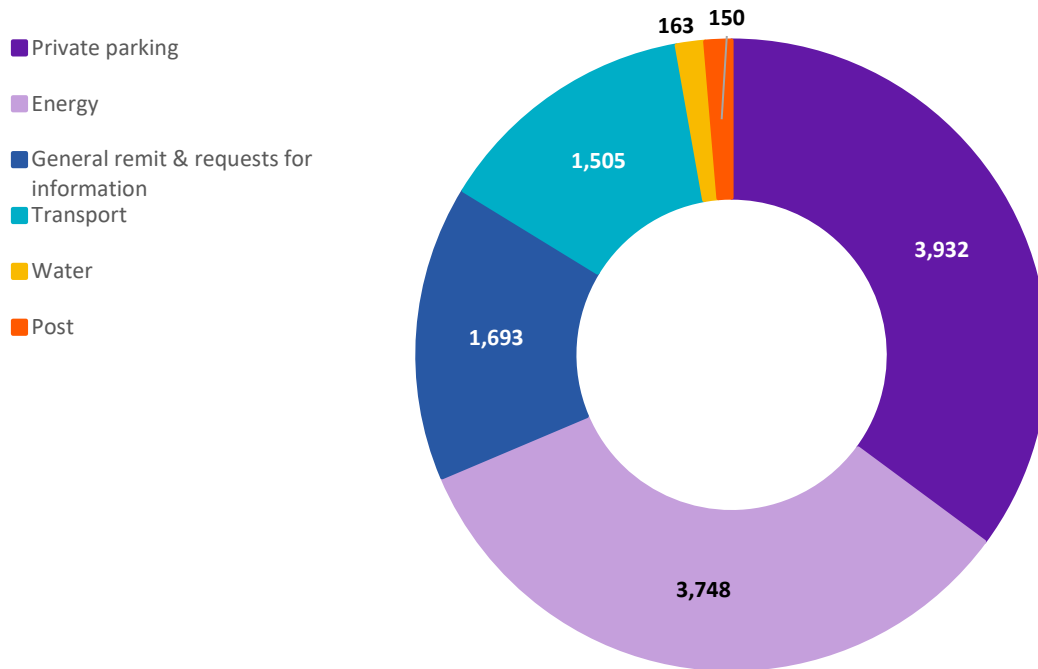
The chart above highlights how over a third of all enquiries and complaints (35%) received in 2022-2023 were in relation to private parking charges, making it the most common issue raised by consumers. In August 2022, we launched a new 'self-serve' portal on our website for consumers to acquire information on private parking charges, appeal the notice themselves using our free template, and learn how to avoid getting future parking charges. Since the launch of this portal, we have reduced the number of direct appeals being made to parking operators on behalf of consumers and instead have been providing advice and guidance to consumers to empower them to deal with the PCN themselves.

Contacts across other areas (such as energy and transport) are explored in greater detail later in the report.

The Consumer Council can receive enquiries and investigate complaints across our remits: postal services, energy, water, transport and our general remit which includes

private parking charges, as well as our standard signposting and referral activities.

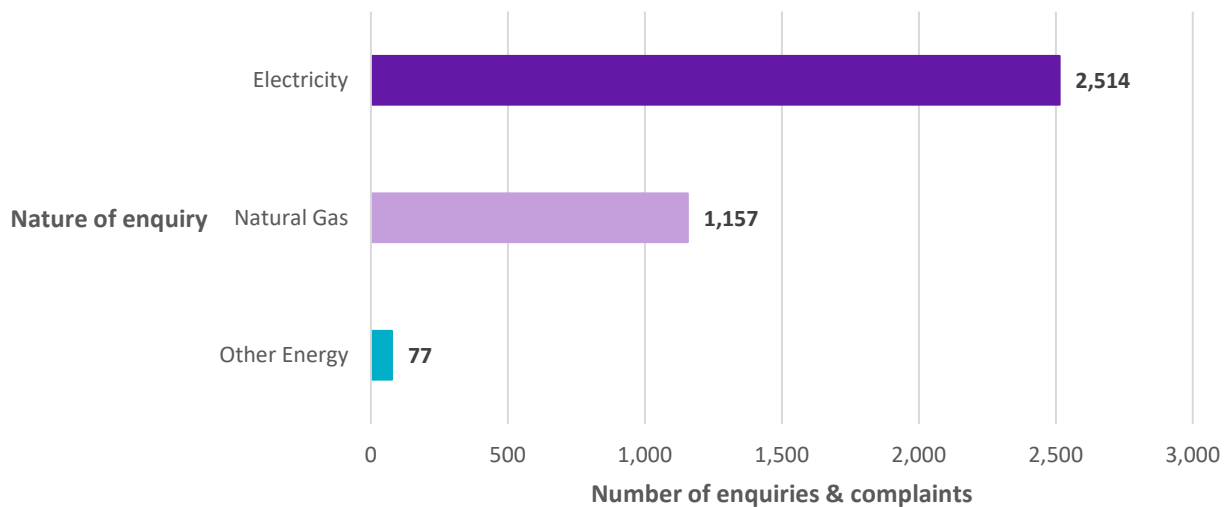
Breakdown of enquiries and complaints received in 2022 – 2023



Energy enquiries and complaints

Contacts to the Consumer Council about energy consist of issues around electricity, natural gas and other energy sources such as coal, liquid petroleum gas (LPG) and home heating oil (HHO). In 2022-2023, energy contacts accounted for 33% (n=3,748) of the total enquiries and complaints received, with electricity issues specifically accounting for 67% of this (n=2,514).

Breakdown of Enquiries & Complaints by Energy Type



Electricity

In 2022-2023, the Consumer Council received a total of 2,514 enquiries and complaints from consumers about a range of electricity issues including billing, metering, problems with supply, and poor customer service.

The total number of electricity contacts received last year has increased by 199% compared to 2021/22 (n=842 vs n=2,514). The rise in contacts can be attributed to the unprecedented number of electricity tariff increases (19 in total) that were announced in 2022-2023 due to the Cost-of-living crisis and the impact this had on consumer's household budgets.

The rising energy costs led to increased demand for our front-line advice service as consumers sought help with increased direct debits and disputed bills, as well as requesting advice and information on energy tariffs so they could switch suppliers to help them reduce their energy costs.

In response to the energy crisis, the Government stepped in and offered a range of support to assist consumers, including the Energy Price Guarantee (EPG)³ which was introduced in November 2022 and the Energy Bill Support Scheme (EBSS)⁴ which was rolled out in January 2023.

³ The Energy Price Guarantee (EPG) is a government subsidy which was introduced in Northern Ireland in November 2022 to help protect consumers from rising energy prices. The EPG helped reduce bills by lowering the price per unit of electricity and gas.

⁴ The Energy Bill Support Scheme (EBSS) was a payment of £600 from government to households in Northern Ireland to help with energy bills. The payment was made up of the Energy Bills Support Scheme (£400) and the Alternative Fuel Payment (£200).

When the EPG went live on 1 November 2022, energy tariffs changed and this generated an increase in demand for our front-line service, as consumers contacted us to obtain energy tariff information and advice on switching suppliers.

Energy suppliers also encountered unprecedented demand for its contact centres as consumers were contacting them to get information on the government support payment, as well as general billing queries and advice. Some energy suppliers were not adequately resourced to cope with the demand which led to long telephone wait times of over an hour for consumers and written response timeframes of up to a month.

The long wait times and the inability to get through resulted in customers abandoning the call and contacting the Consumer Council instead to raise their query. This inevitably led to us dealing with an increase in energy enquiries, which typically should have been being dealt with by the energy suppliers directly.

As suppliers failed to meet their response timeframes for complaints, consumers became frustrated and aggrieved at the level of service being provided, resulting in them making formal complaints to us and seeking our assistance to have account and billing issues investigated and resolved.

During this challenging period, we worked closely with energy companies and the Northern Ireland Utility Regulator (NIAUR) to highlight the issues that consumers were facing when contacting their suppliers.

The roll out of the EBSS across Northern Ireland in late January 2023 until 30 June 2023, meant that supplier demand and subsequently, demand for our front-line service remained high, as consumers sought assistance with queries and issues around the implementation of the scheme and payment of the £600.

In 2022-2023, we dealt with and investigated 2,220 electricity enquiries, an increase of 205% compared to last year (n=728 vs n=2,220) and Stage 1 and 2 complaints also increased by 158% compared to last year (n=114 vs n=294).

Consistent with previous years, billing was the most common issue (n=686) raised by consumers, followed by communications/customer service issues (n=597) and the £600 EBSS payment (n=349).

A breakdown of the electricity contacts we received by company can be found in the Annex.

Through our investigations into electricity enquiries and complaints we returned over £27k to consumers in Northern Ireland.

Electricity consumer success story

The issue

We helped a consumer who was having billing issues with Electric Ireland. She had moved into a property and disputed the usage that she was being charged, in particular the start reading used. She had raised the issue with Electric Ireland directly but was unhappy with the steps taken to resolve the matter.

What we did

We investigated the issue with Electric Ireland and raised the consumer's concerns regarding the meter readings on the account, leading to the disputed usage.

Resolution

Electric Ireland reviewed the information and shared this with NIE Networks who validated the meter reads provided by the consumer. The consumer's meter readings were adjusted, resulting in the consumer's account being re-calculated to leave a credit balance of £526. A goodwill payment of £50 was also provided for the issues on the account and the delay in resolving the matter.

Natural Gas⁵

In 2022-2023, the Consumer Council received a total of 1,157 gas contacts which accounted for 10% of the total enquiries and complaints investigated in this period. Gas contacts increased by 315% compared to last year (n=279 vs n=1,157) and similar to the rise in electricity contacts, can be attributed to the energy crisis and the unprecedented number of tariff increases (14) impacting consumers' gas costs.

The demand issues highlighted in the electricity section above, were also encountered by some gas suppliers, resulting in our team having to assist consumers with enquiries and investigate complaints relating to their gas accounts and bills.

We dealt with 980 gas enquiries, which was a 317% increase compared to last year (n=235 vs n=980) and investigated 177 gas complaints (Stage 1 and Stage 2), a 302% increase on last year's total (n=44 vs n=177).

Like electricity contacts, billing was the most common gas issue raised by

⁵ The natural gas network in Northern Ireland is divided into three distribution areas; the Greater Belfast, Larne and East Down area where the network is owned and managed by Phoenix Natural Gas; the Ten Towns area, which comprises Armagh, Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Craigavon, Newry, Portstewart, Londonderry/Derry and Limavady, which is owned and managed by Firmus Energy Distribution Ltd; and the west of Northern Ireland, which is currently being developed by SGN Natural Gas and will cover Coalisland, Cookstown, Derrylin, Dungannon, Enniskillen, Magherafelt, Omagh and Strabane.

consumers in 2022-2023, accounting for 44% (n=514) of the total gas contacts received (n=1,157). Consumers contacted us to raise concerns regarding the price increases announced throughout the year, to report increases in their direct debits despite large amounts of credits on their accounts and to dispute bill amounts.

A breakdown of the natural gas contacts we received by company can be found in the Annex.

The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into gas enquiries and complaints was £17,544.

Coal, Oil & Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG)⁶ ⁷

Overall, the Consumer Council received 77 enquiries in relation to LPG and Home Heating Oil, a 40% increase compared to last year (n=55 vs n=77) with queries about the Home Heating Oil dominating, accounting for 81% of the total contacts received (n=62).

The main issue being raised by consumers was the cost of home heating oil (n=50), accounting for 81% of the home heating oil contacts (n=62) as prices increased because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which affected oil demand and prices.

Like last year, there was no financial return for these contacts in 2022-2023.

Gas consumer success story

The issue

We were contacted by a consumer who had received a bill for over £230 from SSE Airtricity Gas despite having a pre-payment meter fitted. When she tried to contact SSE Airtricity Gas to resolve the issue, she was unhappy with the actions being taken and contacted us for additional support. No clear explanation had been given as to why she had received the bill, and this was causing the consumer unnecessary stress.

What we did

We raised a formal complaint on behalf of the consumer to investigate the matter with SSE Airtricity Gas.

Resolution

⁶ The Consumer Council does not have a statutory remit to investigate Home Heating Oil and LPG complaints, however we have developed partnerships with Calor Gas, Flogas and the Northern Ireland Oil Federation (NIOF) to support consumers with enquiries and complaints.

⁷ Consistent since 2018/19, the Consumer Council did not receive any enquiries about coal this year.

SSE Airtricity Gas advised that it had failed to update the consumer’s account when the credit meter was replaced with a pre-payment meter. When the meter exchange report was then uploaded, and the account updated, this generated a large catch-up bill as the last bill prior to the meter exchange had been based on an estimated reading.

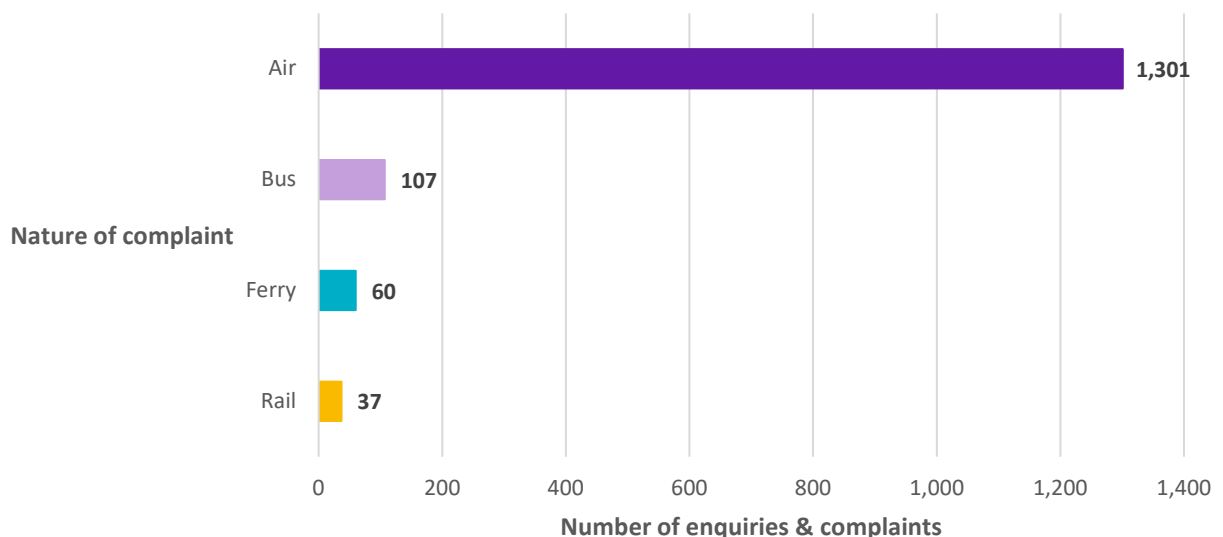
SSE Airtricity Gas confirmed that the large bill could be ignored, and a new bill was issued, saving the consumer over £150. SSE Airtricity Gas also provided a £25 goodwill payment in recognition of the error.

Transport complaints

The Consumer Council investigates enquiries and complaints about airlines, public transport, and ferry travel in Northern Ireland. In 2022-2023, transport contacts accounted for 13% (n=1,505) of all enquiries and complaints received by the Consumer Council (n=11,191). This is an increase of 33% compared to 2021-2022 (n=1,132).

Enquiries and complaints about bus, rail and ferry travel, all accounted for less than 1% of the total contacts received in 2022-2023.

Breakdown of Enquiries & Complaints by Transport Type



Air travel

In 2022-2023, we received 1,301 airline contacts, accounting for 86% of the total transport contacts received (n=1,505). Airline contacts increased by 30% in 2022-2023 compared to last year (n=1,001). In 2021-2022, the airline industry was recovering from the Coronavirus pandemic with air travel not yet returning to normal

levels, which affected the number of airline enquiries and complaints that we received. The increase in airline contacts that we encountered in 2022-2023, was reflective of the industry getting back to normal and demand for air travel increasing.

Consistent with previous years, the main airline issues raised by consumers were in relation to cancellations and delays (n=890) and the difficulties encountered in obtaining refunds for cancelled flights, delayed refunds and airlines refusing to offer refunds.

Last summer, consumers' travel plans were disrupted as easyJet cancelled thousands of flights due to an industry-wide staffing crisis at that time. This led to an increase in airline enquiries and complaints, as consumers sought advice on their air passenger rights and help in obtaining compensation and refunds for affected flights.

Through our investigation into airline enquiries and complaints, we returned over £184k to consumers in refunds and compensation payments.

Air travel consumer success story

The issue

We were contacted by a couple who had booked a return trip from Dublin to America with Aer Lingus. On the return leg of the journey, the plane encountered technical difficulties and had to return to the airport. The passengers affected were advised that Aer Lingus staff would be available to assist them in the airport but when they arrived back, no staff were there. The couple tried calling Aer Lingus Customer Services but couldn't get through, so had to book their own flights back home, costing them an additional £1,200 more than the original flights.

On returning home, the couple submitted a claim to Aer Lingus for reimbursement of the additional costs and compensation, but this was rejected.

What we did

We investigated the flight cancellation on behalf of the couple and requested that Aer Lingus refund the unused portion of the booking and pay the difference in costs between the original flights and the new flights purchased. We also requested compensation in line with EU Reg 261/2004.

Resolution

As a result of our assistance, Aer Lingus apologised for the disruption to the flights and agreed to pay €600 per passenger in compensation. Aer Lingus also refunded the unused flights and agreed to pay the difference in costs for the new flight home. The couple received almost £4,000 in total from the airline.

Bus travel

During 2022-2023, the Consumer Council received a total of 107 contacts regarding bus services, an increase of 70% from the 63 contacts in the previous year. Translink bus services accounted for 95% of the bus contacts received (n=102).

Consistent with the past five years, in 2022-2023 bus passengers most contacted us in relation to poor customer service issues, accounting for 26% (n=29) of the total bus contacts received (n=107). These include complaints about staff attitude, failure to respond to complaints and inadequate customer service in general.

Other issues of concern for bus passengers were Translink services and facilities, fares and charges and cancellations/delays to services. Consistent with the last two years, enquiries and complaints about Ulsterbus services were most common, accounting for 35% (n=38) of the Translink contacts received, followed by Metro with 33% (n=36) of the overall contacts received. Issues regarding cancellation and delays was the most common issues amongst Ulsterbus passengers (n=11), followed by customer service problems with staff and its response to complaints (n=5).

The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into bus enquiries and complaints was £349.

Rail travel

In 2022-2023, the Consumer Council received a total of 37 rail contacts, an increase of 48% compared to last year (n=25). Translink rail services accounted for 89% of the total rail contacts received (n=33).

The most common rail issues raised by consumers, were customer service related and also issues with services and facilities, both accounting for accounting for 24% of the total rail contacts received (n=9). Customer service issues included Translink not responding to complaints within its Passenger Charter timeframe and issues relating to the attitudes and behaviour of staff.

Services and facilities issues included enquiries and complaints about information on rail services, facilities on trains and passenger behaviour on services.

The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into rail enquiries and complaints was £322.

Rail travel consumer success story

The issue

A consumer contacted us about an issue they encountered when travelling from Belfast to Dublin airport onboard the X1 service with Translink. Issues onboard the service led to the bus being unable to continue its journey to the airport and passengers had to be transported to the airport by Bus Eireann without their luggage.

The consumer's luggage never arrived, and she was forced to continue her holiday with none of her belongings which was not only inconvenient but resulted in additional expenses to purchase clothes and toiletries when they reached their destination. Despite making a formal complaint to Translink, the consumer was unhappy with the response.

What we did

We investigated the issue on behalf of the consumer with Translink to find out what led to the issues on the X1 service and to seek reimbursement of the additional expenses incurred.

Resolution

Following our investigation, Translink confirmed that the bus had mechanical issues that prevented it from completing the journey to the airport. Unfortunately, due to the location and positioning of the bus on a busy motorway, it was not deemed safe to off-load the luggage from the under-carriage and the luggage was transported to the airport after the passengers.

Translink apologised for the disruption and agreed to reimburse the consumer £156 for expenses incurred.

Ferry travel

In 2022-2023, we received 60 enquiries and complaints in relation to ferry travel, an increase of 40% compared to last year (n=43).

Consistent with last year, the most common ferry issue raised by consumers in 2022-2023 was in relation to cancellations and delays (n=21), as consumers sought advice and guidance on their passenger rights and assistance in requesting refunds and compensation.

Enquiries and complaints about services and facilities was also a common issue for consumers (n=20), particularly, in relation to the facility's onboard ferries for passengers travelling with dogs, which accounted for 85% of the service and

facilities contacts received (n=17).

The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into ferry enquiries and complaints was £1,116.

Water and sewerage

In 2022-2023, we received 163 enquiries and complaints about Water and sewerage issues, which was consistent with last year (n=163). Of these contacts, 133 were recorded against Northern Ireland Water, who is responsible for the management of water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland.

Like energy contacts, and consistent with previous years, billing was the most common water issue raised by consumers who contacted us in 2022-2023, accounting for 40% (53) of the total Northern Ireland Water contacts received. Billing queries raised by businesses include issues such as clarity of bill, disputed bills (liability and cost) and leakage allowances.

Water consumer success story

The issue

We were contacted by a business regarding its unmetered water bill. The business was small with no kitchen facilities, just a toilet and a small sink, so were unhappy with the £230 charges and wanted assistance in finding out what options were available to them to save money.

What we did

We worked with NI Water regarding the business and asked that the account be reviewed. Initial findings identified that NI Water had attended the business before and confirmed that it had been unsuitable for a meter to be fitted for several reasons. However, NI Water agreed to send a team member to the business to carry out further investigations.

Resolution

Further inspections identified that a meter could be fitted if the pipework at the property was amended to accommodate a meter. The necessary work was carried out by the landlord of the property which allowed the meter to be fitted in the shop. As a result of the meter being installed on site, the unmeasured charges were removed from the business account and new measured charges applied, reducing the bill by over £160.

Postal complaints

In 2022-2023, we received a total of 150 contacts relating to Postal Services. This represents a 10% increase in contacts of this nature compared to last year (n=136). The increase in contacts can be attributed to the Royal Mail 'Stamp Swap Out Scheme', which was launched in March 2022 following the introduction of new bar-coded stamps. The scheme allowed consumers to return their old unused stamps to Royal Mail in exchange for new barcoded stamps. The scheme had originally been set to close on 31 January 2023 but was later extended until 31 July 2023.

Since the launch of the Stamp Swap Out scheme, we have received 42 enquiries from consumers seeking advice and guidance on how the process works and the delivery timeframes for receiving the new stamps.

Consistent with previous years, mail delivery was the primary postal issue raised by consumers, accounting for 45% (n=67) of the total postal contacts received. These include concerns about damaged or lost mail, mis-deliveries, and postal charges.

The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into postal enquiries and complaints was £953.

Postal services consumer success story

The issue

We were contacted by a consumer who had sent an item via Parcelforce and had paid additional money to have the item delivered within 48 hours and signed for on receipt. Unfortunately, the consumer's item was not signed for as requested and according to Parcel Force was left in a safe place, but the recipient claimed not to have received the parcel.

When the consumer complained to Parcelforce they offered him compensation of £100 as this was the cover he had paid for when posting the item. The consumer was unhappy as the item posted was more expensive and he had lost out on a considerable amount of money as a result of the issue.

What we did

We investigated the issue with Parcelforce on behalf of the consumer to establish what had happened and to seek an improvement on the offer made.

Resolution

Parcel Force's investigation confirmed that the driver had not followed the correct delivery procedure which resulted in the item going missing. Parcel Force apologised for the poor service and agreed to offer an additional goodwill payment of £375 on

this occasion to cover the financial loss incurred.

Private parking charges

In 2022-2023, the Consumer Council received 3,932 contacts regarding private parking charges (PCN), an increase of 34% compared to last year (n= 2,930). We assisted 1,667 consumers by appealing the PCN on their behalf and successfully waived PCNs to the value of £212.2k.

Due to the demand for our front-line service due to the Cost-of-living crisis and energy crisis, we had to re-evaluate our priorities to ensure that our limited resources were available to assist consumers in our statutory areas and to support vulnerable consumers. As a result, we decided to create a new self-serve Private Parking section on our website, with a greater emphasis on empowering and educating consumers on PCNs, rather than appealing PCNs.

The website provides information on the following:

- What a PCN is and what to do if you get a PCN?
- The options available depending on a range of circumstances.
- Information on making an appeal and a template letter to use.
- Top tips on avoiding a PCN when parking in private car parks.

The Consumer Council can still offer advice to consumers who require additional assistance, and we will still become involved in appeals if there are extraordinary circumstances that led to the PCN being issued.

Private Car Parking consumer success story

The issue

A consumer contacted us regarding multiple Parking Charge Notices (PCNs) they had received from a private parking operator. The consumer was an employee at a retail park and had used the car park whilst at work. Unfortunately, the consumer had not been made aware by their employer that they needed to add their car registration to an exemption list to avoid receiving PCNs whilst parked on site.

What we did

The Consumer Council acted on behalf of the consumer and liaised with the parking operator to challenge the PCNs on the grounds that he was a staff member and had received the PCNs due to a failure by his employer to communicate the correct parking arrangements for staff. We also highlighted that the PCNs had not been appealed sooner because they were delivered to the car lease company initially

which led to a delay in the consumer receiving them.

Resolution

The parking operator reviewed the evidence and concluded that whilst the PCNs were issued correctly, as the car registration was not placed on the exemption list on the dates when the parking limits were breached, they would agree to reduce each PCN to £20 to cover the administration costs of issuing each PCN. This reduced the outstanding charges from £4,420 to £520.

General support and advice

In 2022-2023, the Consumer Council received 1,693 contacts from consumers requesting general advice and information across all areas of our remit or to provide feedback on our services/staff.

This is an increase of 98% compared to last year (n= 854) and can be attributed to the Cost-of-living Crisis and in particular the energy crisis, as consumers contacted us for advice and guidance on the rising costs in energy, fuel and food and the help available to them in terms of grants and schemes.

Requests for information accounted for 97% of these contacts (n=1,635) and were dominated by energy price comparison enquiries (n=758) and advice on the Government support schemes for rising energy costs (n=449)⁸.

Putting consumers at the heart of what we do: service standards and recognition

We put consumers at the heart of everything we do and are committed to delivering the highest possible standards of service.

We helped over 14,000 consumers through our phonenumber: 3,000 advice calls, and 11,000 enquiries and complaints. We returned over £451,000 to the pockets of local people through redress and complaint resolution, and whilst doing so we upheld the highest standards of customer service; 99% Customer Satisfaction scores and a Net Promotor Score of 98.

The return rate was 41% (n=904), an increase from last year (38%). This is testament to the standards of service that we provide for our customers and our focus on continuous improvement.

⁸ This includes contacts about the Energy Price Guarantee (n=156), the £400 government support payment (n=107), the £200 government support payment (n=34), the £600 Energy Bill Support Scheme (n=134) and the Energy Bill Support Scheme Alternative Funding (n=18).

Awards and accreditations

British Standard for Inclusive service provision

In 2022 we retained our British Standard 18477 for Inclusive Service Provision, having been the first organisation to achieve this award in Northern Ireland in 2021. This award demonstrates the priority we place on helping consumers in vulnerable circumstances and covers practices around the identification of customer vulnerability, inclusive design of products and services, and data collection, protection and sharing.

Customer Service Excellence

In June 2017, the Consumer Council undertook its first Customer Service Excellence (CSE) accreditation. In 2022, we have continued our success in this area and our CSE score now sits at 23 elements graded as 'Compliance Plus' and the remaining 34 graded as 'Fully Compliant'. We are due to complete our next assessment in November 2023.

Chartered Institute of Public Relations

In 2022, we won 2 awards at the Chartered Institute of Public Relations Northern Ireland awards, demonstrating our expertise in communication and consumer empowerment. Awards achieved were: Best Public Sector Campaign, and In-House PR Team of the year. We are delighted to receive an accolade at the 2023 Awards; a silver award for In-House PR Team of the year.

Other accreditations

The above awards are complimented by a host of other awards achieved by the Consumer Council, which include:

- Investors in People Gold
- ISO 9001 for Quality Management
- ISO 27001 for Information Security
- ISO 22301 for Business Continuity
- Responsible Business Champions
- Diversity Mark Bronze
- Cycle Friendly Employer
- JAM Card friendly organisation

Customer feedback and satisfaction

Consumer feedback is important to us. At the end of each complaint investigation, we ask the consumer to complete a customer satisfaction survey to provide feedback on the service provided.

We are proud of the positive impact that we have on the people we help, for many, our work goes far beyond just returning money to their pockets or fixing their issue. The positive impact on wellbeing that is delivered as a result of complaint handling and advice provision is evident in our feedback survey results:

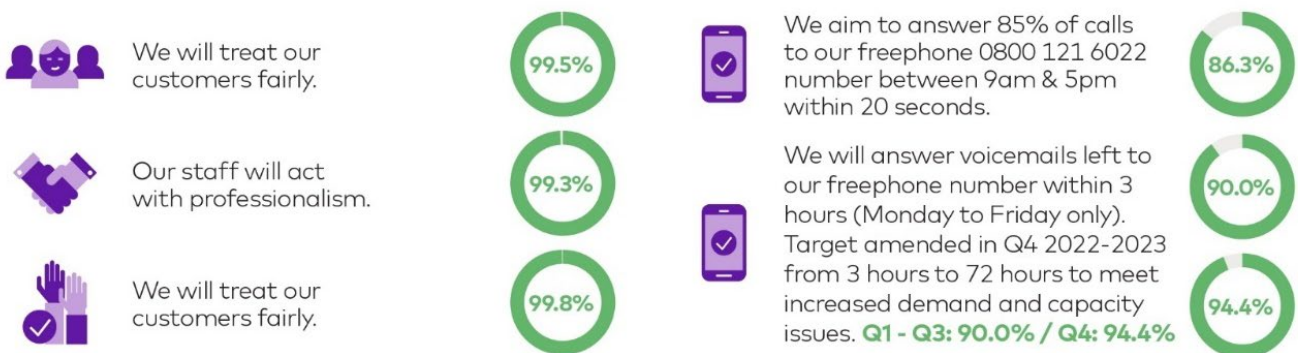
- 98.8% of consumers agreed that our help relieved them of stress and anxiety
- 99.5% of consumers agreed that we made them feel listened to
- 99.5% of consumers agreed that our help made them feel more empowered
- 99.2% of consumers agreed that our help made them feel supported.

Our service standards

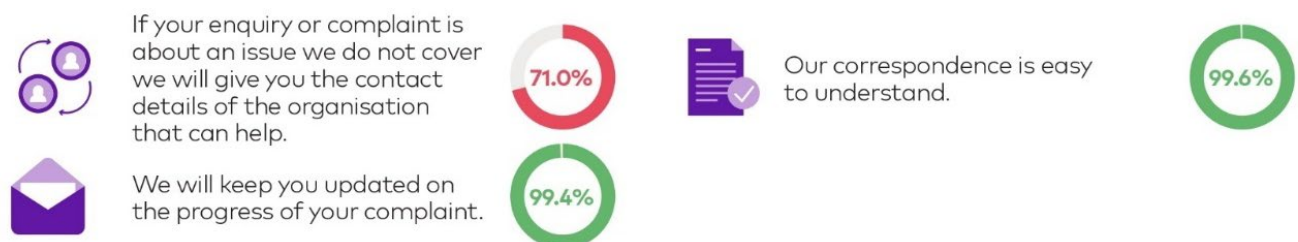
We are committed to providing excellent customer service and meeting the needs of our customers in a professional manner. We have designed our processes with our customers in mind, and regularly monitor our performance which we publish on a quarterly basis.

Our standards of service for 2022-2023 are outlined below.

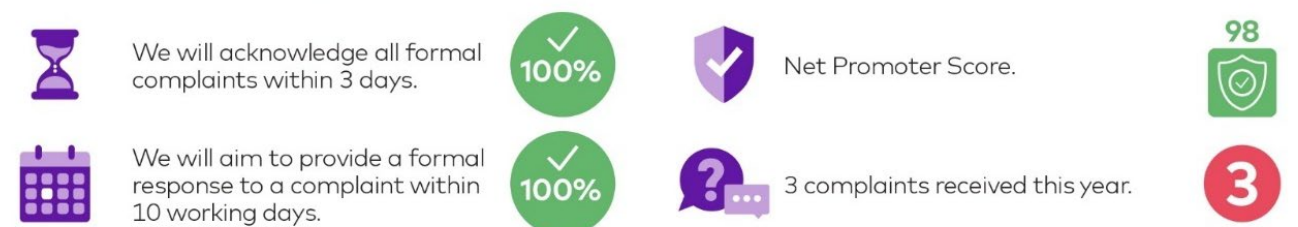
Staff:



Our Service:



Feedback & Complaints:



Key ● Within 10% of set target ● Within 15% of set target ● Target not met

Annex

Annex 1: 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 it the opportunity to resolve the complaint. The complaint is therefore forwarded to the service provider by the Consumer Council, and it is asked to respond to the consumer in accordance with its 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 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**.

Annex 2: Additional Data Tables

Overall

Total contacts received in 2021-22 and 2022-2023 broken down by classification

Categorisation	2021-22	2022-2023	Percentage Increase/Decrease
General Referral	2,537	3,037	+20%
Enquiry	4,031	8,581	+113%
Stage 1 Referral	140	271	+94%
Stage 1 Investigation	15	16	+7%
Stage 2 Complaint	2,205	2,323	+5%
Total	8,928	14,228	+59%

Electricity

Electricity contacts by service provider (n=2,514) in 2022-2023

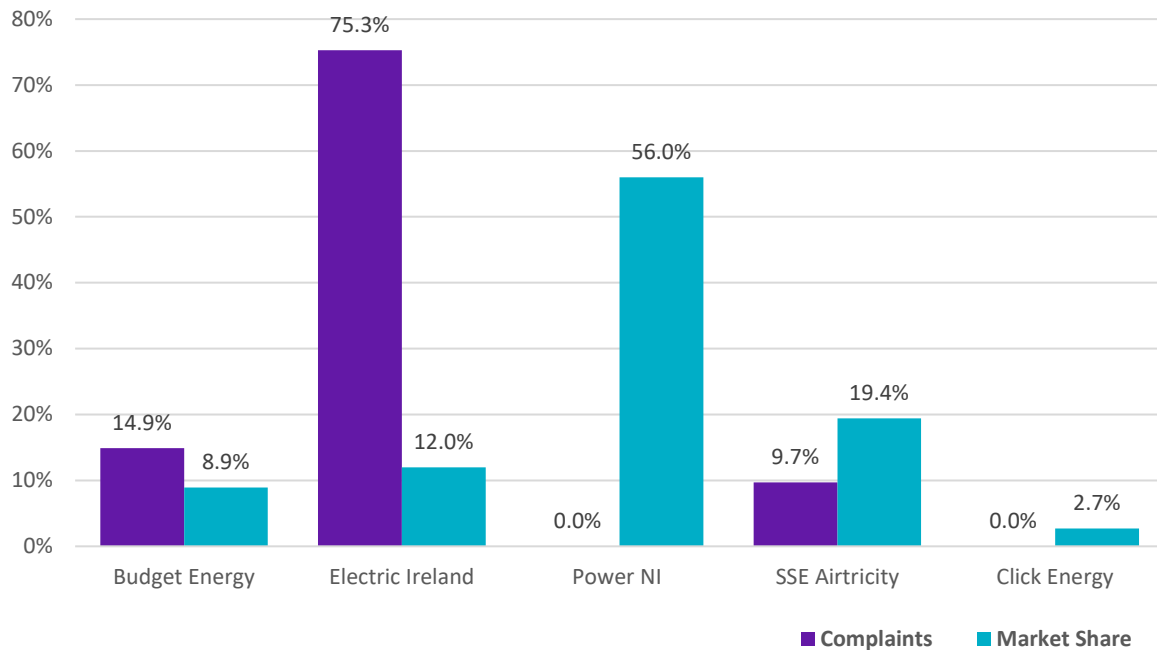
Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Budget Energy	121	5	0	23	149
Click Energy NI	33	0	0	0	33
Electric Ireland	684	66	8	108	866
Energy Ombudsman GB	35	0	0	0	35
Go Power	16	0	0	0	16
NIE Networks	168	1	2	3	174
Power NI	521	11	0	0	532
SSE Airtricity	643	51	0	15	709
Total	2,221	134	10	149	2,514

The chart below shows the number of complaints⁹ received in 2022-2023 by the domestic electricity supply companies in Northern Ireland against their respective

⁹ Stage 1 Investigation & Stage 2 complaints received.

percentage of market share¹⁰. Like previous years, there does not appear to be any correlation between market share and volume of contacts received, with Power NI having no complaints recorded against it despite it having the largest market share.

Complaints to the Consumer Council relating to domestic electricity suppliers compared against total market share in Q4 2022 (n=154, Stage 1 Investigation and Stage 2 only)¹¹



The chart below shows the results of a satisfaction survey conducted by You Gov on behalf of the Consumer Council in 2021 and 2022 to gauge the satisfaction levels amongst consumers with their electricity suppliers.

- Which company do you deal with for electricity supplied to your household?
- How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your household electricity supplier? (On a scale from 1 to 10)
- Please rate how likely or not are you to recommend your household electricity supplier to family and friends (On a scale of 1 to 10)

¹⁰ Utility Regulator - Retail Market Monitoring, Quarterly Transparency Report, Quarter 4: October - December 2022.

¹¹ Total does not add up to 100% as Go Power holds 1% of domestic market share. However, as they do not provide a standard domestic electricity tariff they are not included in this graph

Customer Satisfaction Survey 2021

Electricity Supplier	2021		2022	
	% Satisfied	% Recommend	% Satisfied	% Recommend
Budget Energy	52%	63%	67%	71%
Click Energy	64%	64%	80%	81%
Electric Ireland	52%	66%	45%	54%
Power NI	62%	69%	68%	73%
SSE Airtricity	51%	67%	53%	66%

Notes 2021

- The data reported is from an online consumer survey by YouGov for The Consumer Council.
- It took place between Feb and March in 2022.
- Satisfied Base: All Northern Ireland adults who know their electricity supplier (904) - Power NI (418), SSE Airtricity (278), Electric Ireland (102), Budget Energy (86) and Click Energy (21).
- Recommend Base: All Northern Ireland adults who know their electricity supplier (904) - Power NI (418), SSE Airtricity (278), Electric Ireland (102), Budget Energy (86) and Click Energy (21).

Notes 2022

- The data reported is from an online consumer survey by SMR for The Consumer Council.
- It took place between Feb and March 2023
- Satisfied Base: All Northern Ireland adults who know their electricity supplier (928) - Power NI (479), SSE Airtricity (238), Electric Ireland (115), Budget Energy (60) and Click Energy (37).

- Recommend Base: All Northern Ireland adults who know their electricity supplier (836) - Power NI (431), SSE Airtricity (214), Electric Ireland (105), Budget Energy (56) and Click Energy (31).

Natural Gas

Natural Gas contacts by service provider (n=1,157) in 2022-2023

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Firmus Energy*	218	7	0	0	225
Flogas	1	0	0	0	1
Phoenix Natural Gas	35	0	1	0	36
SGN Natural Gas	1	0	0	0	1
SSE Airtricity Gas	714	110	1	58	883
Energy Ombudsman GB	11	0	0	0	11
Total	980	117	2	58	1,157

* Firmus Energy includes gas distribution and supply.

Other Energy

Home Heating Oil & LPG contacts by service provider (n=77) in 2022-2023

Service Company	Enquiry	Total
Calor Gas	7	7
Flogas	4	4
NI Oil Federation	28	28
Consumer Council (HHO)	35	35
Consumer Council (Coal)	3	3
Total	77	77

Air Travel

Air contacts by service provider (n = 1,301) in 2022-2023

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Referral	97	0	0	97
Aer Lingus	86	1	74	161
Belfast International Airport	5	0	3	8
Belfast City Airport	1	0	1	2
British Airways	82	0	43	125
Cathay Pacific Airlines	1	0	0	1
Civil Aviation Authority (CAA)	93	0	0	93
Commission for Aviation Regulation (CAR)	3	0	0	3
easyJet	278	0	171	449
Emerald Airlines	6	0	49	55
European Consumer Centre (ECC)	3	0	0	3
Flybe	55	0	14	69
Gatwick Airport	1	0	0	1
Heathrow Airport	1	0	0	1
Jet2.com	35	0	7	42
KLM	10	0	2	12
Loganair	13	0	3	16
Lufthansa	14	0	0	14
Norwegian Air	3	0	0	3
Ryanair	69	0	26	95

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Thomson Airways (TUI)	30	0	5	35
Virgin Atlantic	1	0	0	1
Vueling	7	0	2	9
Wizz Air	6	0	0	6
Total	900	1	400	1,301

Bus

Bus contacts by service provider (n=107) in 2022-2023

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Air Coach	2	0	0	0	2
Bus Eireann	2	0	0	0	2
Disability Action Transport Scheme	2	0	0	0	2
Translink	76	7	1	17	101
Total	82	7	1	17	107

Rail

Rail contacts by service provider (n=37) in 2022-2023

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
GB Transport Company Referral	4	0	0	0	4
Translink	23	1	1	8	33
Total	27	1	1	8	37

Ferry

Ferry contacts by service provider (n=60) in 2022-2023

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) Referral	7	0	0	7
Irish Ferries	5	0	0	5
P & O Ferries	10	0	2	12
Stena Line	30	1	2	33
Rathlin Ferry	1	0	0	1
National Transport Authority Referral	2	0	0	2
Total	55	1	4	60

Water and Sewerage

Water and Sewerage contacts by service provider (n=163) in 2022-2023

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
NI Water	125	7	0	1	133
Consumer Council for Water (GB) Referral	30	0	0	0	30
Total	155	7	0	1	163

Postal Services

Postal services contacts by service provider (n=150) in 2022-2023

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
DHL Express	2	0	0	0	2
Hermes	6	0	0	0	6

Royal Mail	92	0	1	6	99
Parcel Force	8	3	0	2	13
Post Office	10	0	0	2	12
Parcel2Go	2	0	0	0	2
The Consumer Council ¹²	11	0	0	0	11
UPS	5	0	0	0	5
Total	136	3	1	10	150

¹² These are general postal queries that we receive and are therefore logged against the Consumer Council as requests for information.

Annex 4: Non-Statutory Remit – Further Information

Private Parking Charges

Since October 2017, the Consumer Council has been helping consumers across Northern Ireland with Parking Charge Notices (PCNs) received from private parking companies. These companies are employed by landowners to manage parking facilities on private land, such as shopping centres, supermarkets, and retail parks. Parking Charge Notices are different from Penalty Charge Notices, Excess Charge Notices (issued by Transport NI, the Department for Infrastructure, and local councils), or Fixed Penalty Notices (issued by the Police Service for Northern Ireland).

The law about parking on private land in Northern Ireland is different from England and Wales. The Protection of Freedoms Act (PoFA) was introduced in England and Wales in 2012. Among other provisions, this legislation provided for vehicles left on land, including the right to claim unpaid parking charges from the keeper of the vehicle. In line with this new legislation, an independent appeals service was established in England and Wales - The Parking on Private Land Appeals (POPLA) service.

In Northern Ireland, it is the driver, rather than the registered keeper, who can be held responsible for any unpaid private parking charges. In May 2019, POPLA was made available to consumers in Northern Ireland, however, to use the service you must accept liability for the charge and confirm you were the driver.

The Consumer Council has continued to educate consumers on how to avoid getting a PCN and offer advice on the options available to consumers if they receive one. We have a new and improved section on our website on Private Parking, and this includes information regarding the legislative differences in Northern Ireland compared to Great Britain, tips on how to avoid getting a PCN and a simple easy to guide for those who wish to appeal a PCN. Please visit:

<https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/pcn>