



Annual Complaints and Outreach Report

2021-2022



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Foreword



Noyona Chundur,
Chief Executive

When writing the foreword for this report last year, I said that we were emerging from one of the most challenging periods that many consumers had ever experienced, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and EU Exit. And now in 2022, we are moving into another worrying challenge – the cost-of-living crisis.

Our remit as Northern Ireland's consumer representative body allows us to look across the consumer landscape and see what challenges exist, where pressures are felt, and importantly what prevention and solutions can be implemented. Over the past few years, we have seen the disparity in consumer experiences brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, EU exit, risks and opportunities resulting from digitalisation, financial exclusion, affordability, energy transition, and most recently the cost-of-living crisis.

Amidst this state of flux, what has remained constant is the services, passion, and hard work of the Consumer Council. A core purpose of the Consumer Council is to protect and empower consumers in Northern Ireland, undertaking enquiries, investigating complaints under our statutory functions; promoting and disseminating information to educate and empower consumers and undertaking independent consumer research. Our statutory provision covers a wide remit, spanning energy, postal services, water and sewerage, transport, food accessibility and affordability; as well as non-statutory remits, such as financial exclusion and private parking charges for example.

This report is a celebration of our consumer empowerment work over the past year. The teams have worked tirelessly across complaint handling, communications, and outreach to ensure service provision has remained to a high standard and that vulnerable consumers have been included in every aspect of our delivery.

It is worrying to think of the future, and difficult to conceive what impact the cost-of-living crisis will have financially, economically, and mentally on consumers across Northern Ireland, and beyond. The front-line services provided by the Consumer Council are more important than ever, providing consumers with advice and support when it is needed most.

I am very proud of our successes and achievements in 2021-2022, and I hope when you read this report you gain a true understanding of the fantastic support service we provide to all consumers across Northern Ireland.

Noyona Chundur
Chief Executive



Dervla Kearney,
Director of Consumer Empowerment

Undoubtedly, the service provided by our front-line staff, who deliver daily support to consumers in Northern Ireland, has been exceptional in 2021-2022. This is despite various external challenges – emerging from Covid-19 and going straight into a cost-of-living crisis.

The teams have been resilient and have always focused on placing the consumer first. This is evident from our high customer satisfaction scores.

In 2021-2022, we helped almost 9,000 consumers with independent advice, guidance, and redress (through our free service provision), returning over £380,000 to Northern Ireland consumers via our complaint investigation work. Our call volumes in 2021-2022 represented a 65% increase compared to pre-pandemic levels. We also supported over 4,000 consumers at our 64 outreach events across Northern Ireland, giving them advice on consumer rights, scams, energy efficiency and the cost of borrowing, and expanded our relationships with food banks, partners in local housing, and with councils.

In our campaigns and communication work, we have provided consumers with useful information on a breadth of topics, including energy, cost of living, bank closures, illegal money lending, safer borrowing, postal deliveries and returns, travel rights, food costs, and scams. We are passionate about working in partnership with other organisations to reach as many people in Northern Ireland as possible, and in March 2022 during our NI Consumer Week campaign, we worked alongside Advice NI, Christians Against Poverty, Climate Change Committee, Trussell Trust and Translink. Our website has become a vital source of information for consumers, with our price comparison tools being used over 105,000 times, and our online educational resources being viewed over 42,000 times.

The Consumer Council achieved a customer satisfaction rate of 99.9% and a net promotor score of 99 out of 100. We improved our Customer Service Excellence standards, adding two additional 'Compliance Plus' ratings, signifying best practice, with the independent assessment recognising the result as a: "very commendable achievement, in light of the greatly increased workload caused by Covid-19, and its impact on staff". In addition, our Communications team won In-House PR Team of the Year at the Northern Ireland Chartered Institute of PR (CIPR) awards in 2022.

Our results reflect the collective efforts of our staff, who have worked tirelessly to deliver the excellent service that we provide. Their passion and determination to deliver the best possible outcomes for consumers and commitment to each other, coming together as one team to respond to these challenges, is testament to the successes of the Consumer Council.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dervla Kearney". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Dervla Kearney
Director of Consumer Empowerment

1. Our Year in Review

What the Consumer Council achieved in 2021-2022

Consumer Protection

£388k

returned to the pockets of consumers



Investigated
6,391
enquiries and
complaints

2,537

Advised and signposted
over 2,500 consumers

99

 Net Promoter
Score

We dealt with

8,928

consumer contacts

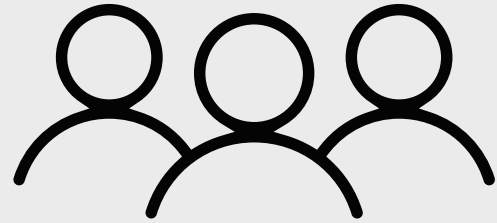


99.9% Customer Satisfaction with our service

Consumer Empowerment

We engaged

4,100



consumers via outreach and education activities (virtually and in-person)

105,000+

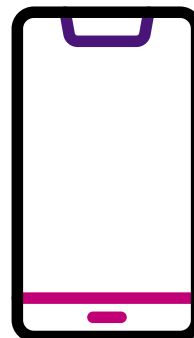
uses of our price comparison tools



▶ Over 245,000 views of our online videos

Appeared in press, TV and radio

950 times



Our information was viewed over **2,100,000** times on social media

2. Our Performance in 2021-2022

The Consumer Council is a free service, empowering and protecting Northern Ireland consumers.

The Consumer Council is Northern Ireland's consumer body. We are here, via the General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984¹, to protect and empower, especially our most vulnerable consumers. We cover consumer matters across energy, post, transport, water and sewerage, and food affordability and accessibility. We do this work via policy, research, complaint handling and education activities.

In relation to our protection and empowerment work specifically, we support consumers with their enquiries and complaints, we undertake investigations on their behalf, we educate consumers and businesses via our outreach work, and we share information and resources via campaigns, media, and our website. All our services and resources are free to access.

The above work is undertaken across two teams at the Consumer Council – the Consumer Protection Team and the Communications and Outreach Team. The following information outlines the activities of these two teams for the year 2021-2022.

Protecting Consumers via our Helpline and Investigations Activity

In 2021-2022, we received almost 9,000 contacts to our consumer helpline². We assisted 2,537 of these consumers by providing general advice and signposting to other organisations who could support them. We took on 6,391 consumer complaints for further enquiry, and we investigated 2,360 of these as detailed stage 1 and stage 2 complaints³. In 2021-2022, we returned £388,044 to Northern Ireland consumers via our consumer protection activity.

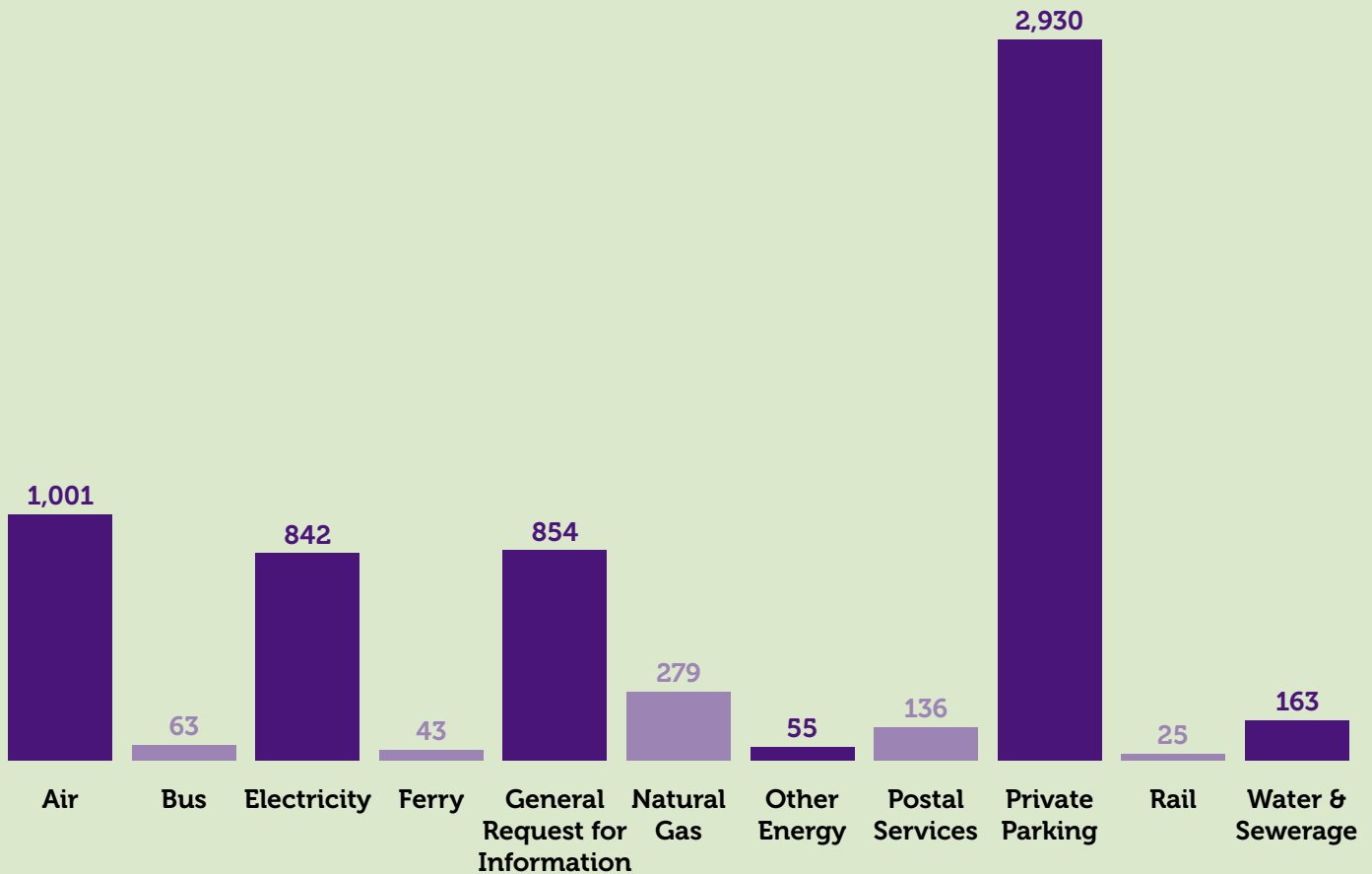
The total number of contacts received in 2021-2022 reduced by 12% compared to the year previous. This is largely due to receiving an unprecedented number of contacts in 2021-2022 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in relation to airline refunds.

¹ For further information on our statutory position, please see the appendix.

² 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.

³ For further information on how we classify enquiries and complaints, please see the appendix.

Breakdown of enquiries and complaints received in 2021-2022 (n= 6,391)



46%
of complaints
and enquiries
were about
private parking
charges.

The chart above highlights how almost half of all enquiries and complaints (46%) received in 2021-2022 were in relation to private parking charges. Due to the demand for our services in this area, the Consumer Council has recently 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.

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

Empowering Consumers through our Communication and Outreach activities

In our campaigns and communication work in 2021-2022, 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



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:



Ulster Bank



Advice NI



Translink



Climate Change Committee



Christians Against Poverty



John Moores University



UK Finance



Trussell Trust



Disability Action



Association of British Insurers



British Dietetic Association



Children in Northern Ireland



Alzheimer's Society



Inspire Wellbeing



Ulster University



Ulster Farmers Union

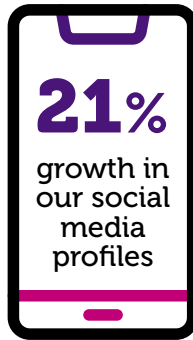


Action Mental Health



Police Service Northern Ireland

To reach consumers across Northern Ireland, we work hard to ensure our information is available where consumers need it. In 2021-2022, we delivered:



Our information was viewed over 2,100,000 times on social media

105,000+

uses of our price comparison tools

Appeared in press, TV and radio

950

 times

▶ Over 245,000 views of our online videos

Attended 64 outreach events, reaching

4,100

consumers via outreach and education activities (virtually and in-person)

We continually focus on designing and delivering timely consumer-friendly campaigns and resources to ensure consumers are getting the right information at the right time. We encourage consumers, businesses, and stakeholders to regularly visit our website, follow us on social media and sign up to our monthly online newsletter.



3. Consumer Outreach and Communication

Through our outreach work, we travel across Northern Ireland to meet and help consumers who need us the most.

Events are attended by a wide range of consumer groups, incorporating priority groups for which we have particular regard such as those on low incomes, in rural areas, young people, consumers with long term illnesses/disabilities and older consumers. Our role is to inform, empower and educate consumers – whether through direct engagement or via representative groups, online activity, and/or workplace initiatives.

In 2021-2022, we had to work within Covid-19 guidelines meaning that we could not meet as many consumers face-to-face as in previous years, but we adapted quickly and undertook online and social media events and webinars to great success.

We delivered almost 70 in-person and virtual events, reaching over 4,000 people across Northern Ireland. Examples of this activity include presentations, train the trainer workshops, workplace initiatives, Facebook Lives, and webinars.

Aside from direct engagement with consumers, we engage with workplaces e.g., NICS Live reaching over 200 staff, consumer shows e.g., Balmoral Show reaching thousands over a four day event, consumer representative groups such as the European Consumer Group (BEUC) and attending representative forums such as Northern Ireland Airports Accessibility Forums. We are also active members of the Northern Ireland Scamwise Partnership and have undertaken considerable activities to inform consumers on how to avoid scams e.g., launching campaigns with the banking industry and Cyber Security Centre, working with the Education Authority to inform over 30,000 people via learning materials on their intranet, and developing the first scams information pack for adults with learning difficulties distributed to over 4,000 people by Health Trusts.

Our satisfaction rates are high, for example from our NICS Live event alone, nine in ten participants were satisfied and would recommend attendance to others.

 **96%**
rated the event
excellent or good

 **90%**
would recommend
event to friend or
colleague

“ Presenter had a pleasant delivery manner; great subject knowledge and I was unaware how much the Consumer Council could help me. ”



Top Outreach and Communication achievements in 2021-2022

NI Consumer Week

NI Consumer Week happened in March 2022, a week-long programme focused on providing consumers with advice and information regarding the cost-of-living. We worked together with partners such as Advice NI, the Climate Change Commission and the Trussell Trust to deliver a series of online videos and information. This campaign resulted in 25,800 video views, 23,000 website visits, 390,000 views of out of home advertising and 1.4 million opportunities to hear on radio advertising.

True Cost campaign

Between November and March, our True Cost campaign was targeted at consumers who needed information regarding the truth about illegal money lending, and what alternative options were available. A combination of media and communication channels were used to reach the target audience with suitable messaging. The campaign achieved 1,025,500 radio plays, reached 271,000 consumers through out of home advertising, and resulted in 33,000 clicks to the website. This project was awarded Best Public Sector Campaign in Northern Ireland at the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) Awards in 2022.

Financial services empowerment

During 2021-2022, we worked with the education, advice, housing and youth and community sectors to develop education and outreach programmes to raise awareness of the issues of money management and responsible borrowing within these consumer groups. 30 young people completed our Open College Network NI accredited course on safer finances, we delivered nine Train-the-Trainer programmes to 250 Northern Ireland Housing Executive Area Managers and 20 Advice NI staff members, and 19 primary schools engaged with our Safer Finances teaching resources.

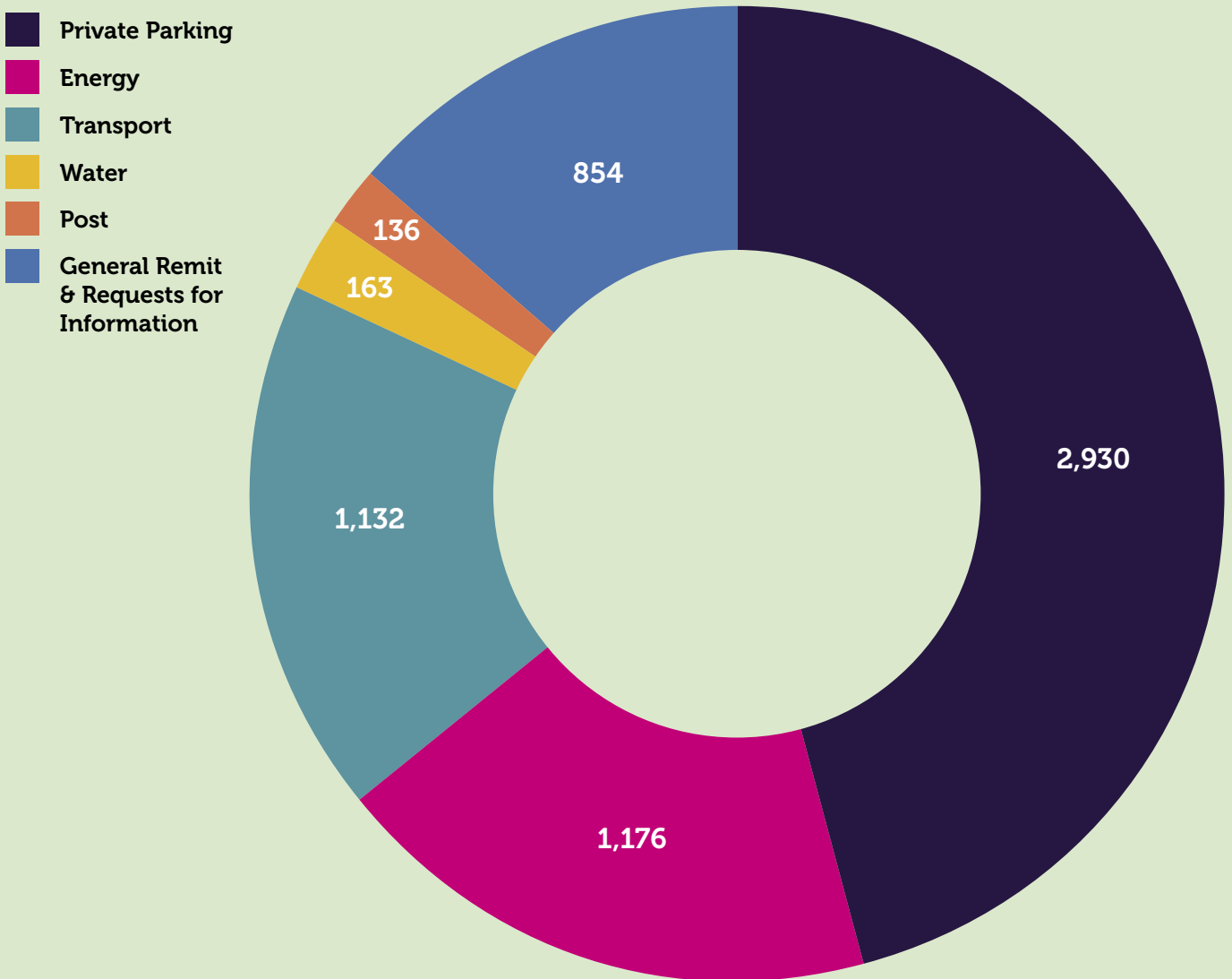
Energy Efficiency training sessions

Working in partnership with National Energy Action, the Consumer Council delivered 27 outreach sessions focusing on energy efficiency, to 455 consumers, both face-to-face and online, during the Winter of 2021-2022. Attendees received information on being ready for the winter, dealing with damp and condensation, energy efficiency, using lights and appliances effectively, and grants and schemes available. Online events were open to the public, and in-person events took place with organisations such as the NOW group, Sure Start groups, Christians Against Poverty and Action Mental Health.

4. Consumer Complaint Handling and Investigations

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.

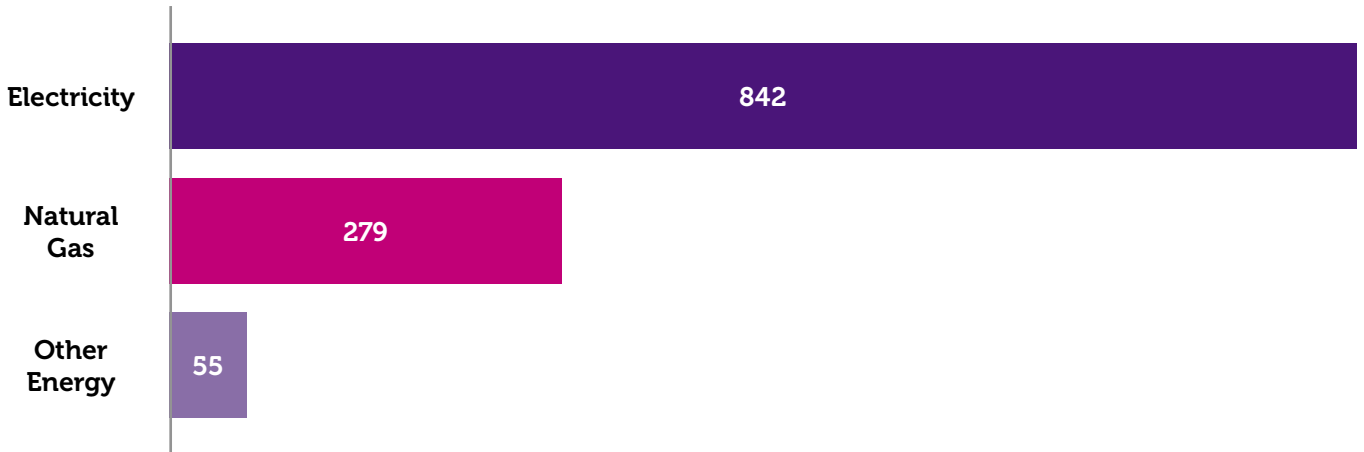
Chart 1: Breakdown of enquiries and complaints received in 2021-2022 (n=6,391)



a. 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 2021-2022, energy contacts accounted for 18% (n=1,176) of the total enquiries and complaints received, with electricity issues specifically accounting for 72% of this (n=842).

Breakdown of Enquiries & Complaints by Energy Type (n=1,176)

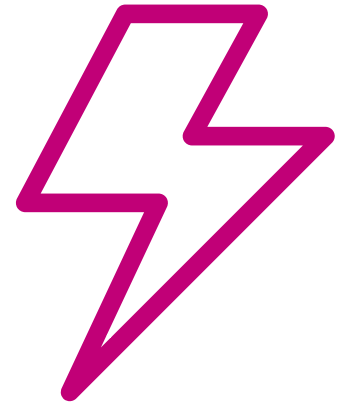


Electricity

In 2021-2022, the Consumer Council received a total of 842 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 in 2021-2022 has increased by 47% compared to 2021-2022 (n=574 vs n=842). The rise in contacts can be attributed to the unprecedented number of electricity tariff increases that were announced in 2021-2022 resulting in consumers seeking help with increased direct debits, disputed bills, and information on switching suppliers. Consistent with previous years, billing is the most common issue (283) raised by consumers, followed by general requests for information (160) and communications (142).

Through our investigations into electricity enquiries and complaints we returned £13,336 to consumers in Northern Ireland.



Success Story

The Consumer Council were contacted by a consumer regarding a vulnerable family member who had unfortunately made a simple error when topping up his meter. The error effectively meant he had lost £90 and the supplier refused to refund this lost top up.



Action

The Consumer Council liaised with both the supplier and NIE Networks to investigate the complaint.



Resolution

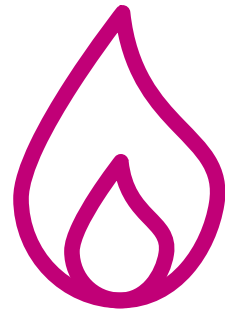
NIE Networks worked alongside the Consumer Council and went over and beyond their call of duty to get information required for the case to prove that the top up had not been used or added to the meter. The Consumer Council was then able to present this information to the supplier and have the lost top up refunded within hours. Both consumers were extremely thankful for the help that was provided and the outcome achieved.

Natural Gas⁴

In 2021-2022, the Consumer Council received a total of 279 gas contacts which accounted for 4% of the total enquiries and complaints handled in this period. This is consistent with the number of gas contacts received last year (n=281).

Like electricity contacts, billing was the most common gas issue raised by consumers in 2021-2022, accounting for 35% (n=97) of the total gas contacts received (n=279). Consumers contacted us to raise concerns regarding the price increases announced throughout the year, to report issues on getting credit refunded on their accounts and to dispute bill amounts.

The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into gas enquiries and complaints was £5,002.60.



⁴ The natural gas network in Northern Ireland is divided into three distribution areas; the Greater Belfast, Lame 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.

Success Story

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer regarding damage that was caused to his driveway following gas installation at his home. The consumer had been in contact with the gas company but was unhappy with the actions being taken to resolve the matter.



Action

The Consumer Council liaised with the gas distribution company to investigate the complaint.

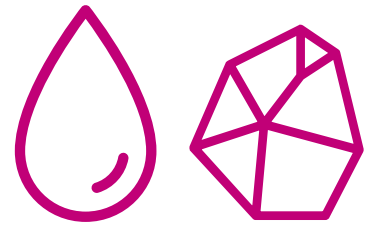


Resolution

The gas distribution company explained that the technique for excavation can vary based on the location of the meter box and the state of the current driveway. Unfortunately, on this occasion the installation required engineers to mole under the ground which meant that the driveway had to be dug up and reinstated. After a meeting with company representatives, the Consumer Council and the consumer, an offer of compensation was made at £500 which the consumer accepted to use towards the resurfacing of the driveway.

Coal, Oil & Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG)^{5, 6}

Overall, the Consumer Council received 55 enquiries in relation to LPG and Home Heating Oil, a 7% decrease compared to last year (59 vs 55) with queries about the Home Heating Oil dominating, accounting for 76% of the total contacts received. Like last year, there was no financial return for these contacts in 2021-2022.



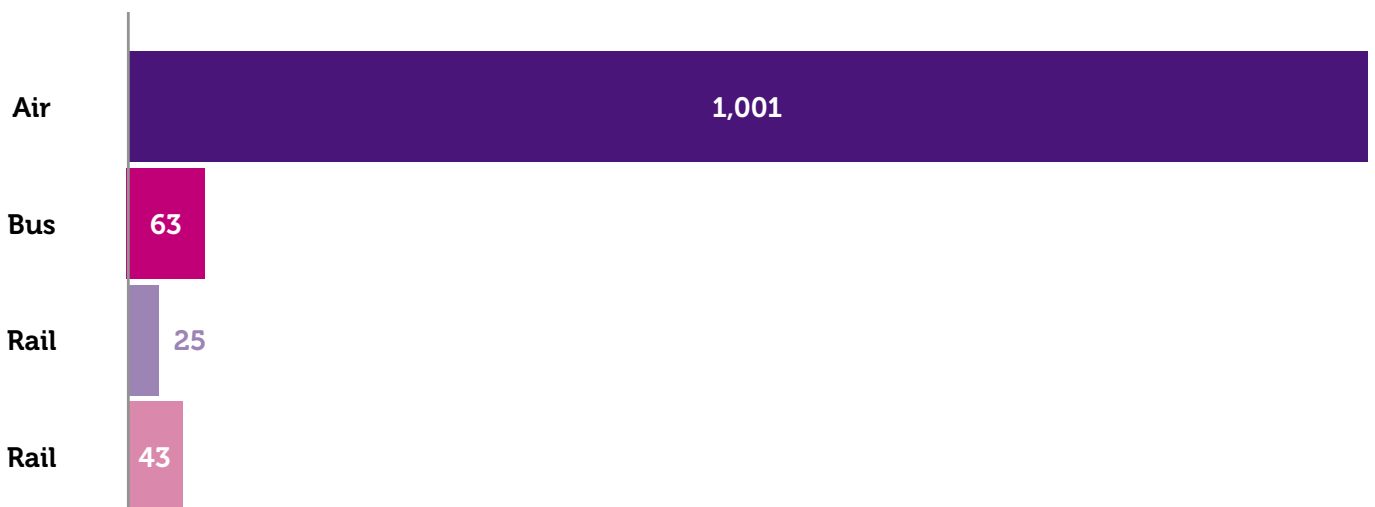
⁵ The Consumer Council does not have a statutory remit to investigate Home Heating Oil and LPG complaints, however we have developed partnerships with Calor Gas, Flogas and the Northern Ireland Oil Federation (NIOF) to support consumers with enquiries and complaints.

⁶ Consistent since 2018-2019, the Consumer Council did not receive any enquiries about coal this year.

b. Transport Complaints

The Consumer Council investigates enquiries and complaints about airlines, public transport, and ferry travel in Northern Ireland. In 2021-2022, transport contacts accounted for 18% (n=1,132) of all enquiries and complaints received by the Consumer Council. This is a decrease of 68% compared to 2020/21 which is explained in more detail below.

Breakdown of Enquiries & Complaints by Transport Type (n=1,132)

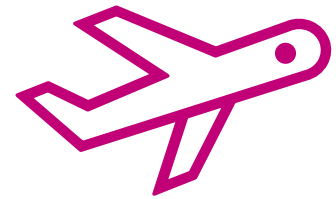


Air Travel

During the pandemic in 2020-2021, the travel industry came to a standstill as flights and holidays across the world were cancelled due to lockdowns and travel restrictions⁷. The Consumer Council was inundated with calls and emails from consumers who had been affected by the mass cancellations and were struggling to obtain a refund from their airline. In 2020-2021, airline contacts (n=3,411) accounted for 97% of the total transport contacts received and 96% of those were specifically COVID-19 related (n=3,275). Given the huge spike in airline contacts in 2020/21 and the fact that the travel industry did not return to normal after lockdown, it was inevitable that the airline contacts in 2021-2022 would reduce. In 2021-2022, we received 1,001 airline contacts, accounting for 88% of the total transport contacts received (n=1,132).

The main airline issues raised by consumers were difficulties in obtaining refunds for cancelled flights, delayed refunds and airlines refusing to offer refunds. We also dealt with problems in relation to vouchers that had been issued by airlines in 2020-2021. Consumers who received a voucher that was only valid for 12 months, were unable to use the voucher as COVID-19 continued to affect travel and restrictions were still in place to some countries, preventing them from travelling. The Consumer Council liaised with the airline on behalf of those affected and were successful in getting the vouchers extended to allow them to travel at a later date.

Through our investigation into airline enquiries and complaints, we returned £132,200 to consumers in refunds and goodwill payments.



⁷ Under EU Regulation 261/2004, if a flight is cancelled by the airline, the passenger is entitled to a monetary refund or a re-route.



Success Story

A consumer saw a poster in Belfast City Airport advertising the services of the Consumer Council. He sent us details of a flight cancellation/re-schedule by Ryanair back in August 2019, including a copy of his EU claim form. Ryanair ignored all requests for compensation and did not respond to his claim through the small claims court. The reason given was extraordinary circumstances due to the pilots' strike.



Action

The Consumer Council carried out research and found out that the High Court had agreed with The Civil Aviation Authority's interpretation of legislation. Ryanair could not class flight disruption due a strike by their own pilots as an exceptional circumstance. Ryanair had been told to pay out compensation. Therefore, we agreed to assist the family and we raised a formal complaint on the family's behalf.



Resolution

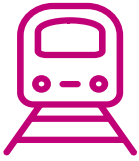
As a result of our assistance, Ryanair agreed to pay €400 compensation per passenger in compensation, totalling €1,600 for the family.



Bus Travel

During 2021-2022, the Consumer Council received a total of 63 contacts regarding Translink bus services, an increase from the 45 contacts in the previous year. The increase in contacts could be attributed to the fact that consumers were using more public transport in 2021-2022 following the lifting of travel restrictions that had been put in place during the pandemic in 2020-2021.

Consistent with the past four years, in 2021-2022 bus passengers most contacted us in relation to poor customer service issues, accounting for 29% (n=18) of the total bus contacts received. 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 last year, enquiries and complaints about Ulsterbus services were most common, accounting for 37% (n=23) of the Translink contacts received, followed by Metro with 32% (n=20) of the overall contacts received.



Rail Travel

In 2021-2022, the Consumer Council received a total of 25 rail contacts, which increased compared to the year previous (8 vs 25). Similar to bus contacts, the increase in contacts was impacted by the lifting of travel restrictions in Northern Ireland, allowing consumers to access rail services again. Also consistent with bus contacts, customer service issues were the most common concerns for consumers in 2021-2022, accounting for 36% 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.

The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into rail enquiries and complaints was £633.



Ferry Travel

Consistent with the previous four years, less than 1% (n=43) of all contacts received by the Consumer Council in 2021-2022 relate to ferry travel. The number of ferry contacts also remained consistent with last year, with a slight reduction (46 vs 43).

As the pandemic continued to affect travel in 2021-2022, consumers sought advice and guidance in relation to travelling by ferry. Consumers also contacted us regarding cancellation and delays to ferry services as they sought help and assistance in requesting refunds.

The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into ferry enquiries and complaints was £1,161.

Consumer Story

A consumer contacted the Consumer Council following an issue they encountered when travelling to Scotland with Stenaline on its rail and sail package. One of the family members was in a wheelchair and therefore needed the transport from the port onwards to be accessible. However, when they arrived at Scotland, the bus was not accessible, resulting in the family having to return to Belfast.



Action

The Consumer Council investigated the issue on behalf of the consumer with Stenaline to find out why the transport was not accessible and to highlight the impact this had on the family.



Resolution

Following our investigation, Stenaline apologised for the poor service encountered by the family and offered the family a free trip for a car and five passengers plus entry to Stena Plus, to the value of over £600.

c. Water and Sewerage Complaints

Water and sewerage issues accounted for 3% (n=163) of all enquiries and complaints received by the Consumer Council in 2021-2022⁸. In comparison with last year, water and sewerage contacts have increased by 61% (101 vs 163). Like transport contacts, water contacts had reduced in 2020-2021 as many businesses were closed due to the pandemic. As lockdown lifted and businesses started trading again, contacts from consumers in relation to bills and the water service started to increase.

⁸ Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) 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 2021-2022, accounting for 41% (66) of the total water contacts received. Billing concerns raised by businesses include issues such as clarity of bill, disputed bills (liability and cost) and queries around leakage allowances.

Success Story

We were contacted by a business regarding its annual water bill. The business was small with no kitchen facilities, just a toilet, so they were unsure why the bill had increased, especially as the business was closed during the COVID pandemic. The business was part of a larger site but as there was no water meter fitted, the bills were based on the Net Annual Value (NAV) of the property.



Action

The Consumer Council liaised with NI Water regarding the business and asked that the account be reviewed. Initial findings identified that there had been an increase in the NAV of the property which in turn increased the water charges. Furthermore, there was also a 0.9% increase on the tariff applied by NI Water in October 2020, which also would have affected the water bills.

NI Water agreed to carry out a site survey to identify if a meter could be fitted which would replace the unmeasured charges.



Resolution

After several different investigations being undertaken at the site, it was identified by NI Water that a bulk meter could be fitted at the site where the business was located. This meant they could install a meter to capture the consumption for the entire centre and the Landlord was taking responsibility. NI Water would then apply domestic allowances for all the rated properties connected to the supply.

As a result of the meter being installed on site, the unmeasured charges were removed from the business account and a credit of £357 applied.

d. Postal Complaints

In 2021-2022, we received a total of 136 contacts relating to Postal Services. This represents a 33% decrease in contacts of this nature compared to 2020-2021 (n=202). In 2020-2021, postal service contacts had increased due to several factors including mail delivery impacted by the pandemic. Additionally, in January 2021, the UK departed the European Union (EU), which impacted postal services as many online retailers suspended deliveries to Northern Ireland due to uncertainty around post-Brexit custom checks, despite a grace period being introduced. In 2021-2022, whilst some of the issues caused by EU Exit remained, the number of enquiries and complaints from consumers reduced.

Consistent with previous years, mail delivery was the primary postal issue raised by consumers, accounting for 55% (n=75) 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 £4,543.

Success Story

We were contacted by a vulnerable consumer who had sent 1000 Swiss Francs via post to a relative in Switzerland. Despite the correct postage service being used the money never arrived at its destination.



Action

The Consumer Council investigated the issue with Royal Mail on behalf of the consumer to establish what had happened the parcel.



Resolution

Royal Mail carried out an investigation into the matter with its International Postage Authority and confirmed that the correct postage service had been used. Initially they thought the parcel was being held at Customs in Switzerland but when they investigated further, the item could not be traced and was considered lost.

Royal Mail agreed to reimburse the consumer £900 in full and final settlement of the complaint.

e. Private Parking Charges

In 2021-2022, the Consumer Council received 2,930 contacts regarding private parking charges (PCN). Of these contacts, we acted on behalf of 1,843 consumers who had received a PCN and successfully appealed £208,300 in charges.

In comparison to last year, the number of private parking contacts almost doubled (1,528 vs 2,930). The increase was inevitable, due to the pandemic in 2020-2021 consumers were in lockdown, thus not utilising private car parks. As the restrictions lifted in 2021, consumers were once again using their cars. We also noticed that in 2021-2022, some private parking operators were issuing debt recovery letters to consumers in relation to unpaid historic PCNs issued several years ago. These letters prompted consumers to contact us for advice and guidance on their options.

Consumer Story

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 shopping centre and had used the car park whilst at work. Unfortunately, the consumer had not been made aware by their employer that there was a designated car park assigned for staff and that he should have used it to avoid getting a PCN.



Action

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. Unfortunately, the parking operator would not accept the challenge and continued to pursue the PCNs via debt recovery action. We continued with our investigation and decided to liaise with the landowner/management company for the site to appeal the PCNs on the consumer's behalf.



Resolution

The landowner agreed that the staff member had received the PCNs through no fault of his own and instructed the parking operator to cancel the PCNs, saving the consumer £1,530.

f. General Support and Advice

In 2021-2022, the Consumer Council received 854 contacts from consumers requesting general advice and information across all areas of our remit or to provide feedback on our services/staff.

Requests for information accounted for 80% of these contacts (n=681) and included requests for copies of our publications and guides such as 'Plane Facts', budget planners and general information on energy, water, transport and post.

Consumers contacting us to enquire about energy tariffs and switching supplier accounted for 42% of these contacts (n=284).

Tour Operator Complaints

In 2021-2022, we assisted 50 consumers with tour operator complaints and successfully returned £18,500 in refunds.

We also received 77 contacts from consumers requesting general advice and guidance in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. These included queries about travel within the Common Travel Area (CTA), questions about quarantine and advice on Lateral Flow Tests (LFT) and Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests.



5. Consumer Feedback & 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.

In 2021-2022, our Net Promoter Score (NPS) score was 99, which was consistent with our score in 2020-2021. Overall satisfaction with the Consumer Council in 2021-2022 was 99.9%. The return rate was 39% (n=834).

In addition to the questions above, our survey also includes a series of 'wellbeing' questions - to find out from consumers how our assistance made them feel. The infographic below shows the responses we received to our wellbeing questions from April 2021 to March 2022 (n=808).



99.4%

of consumers agreed that our help relieved them of stress and anxiety



99.8%

of consumers agreed that we made them feel listened to



99.9%

of consumers agreed that our help made them feel more empowered



99.5%

of consumers agreed that our help made them feel supported

Customer Service Excellence

In June 2017, the Consumer Council undertook its first Customer Service Excellence (CSE) accreditation. In 2021, we have continued our success in this area and our CSE score now sits at an incredible 22 elements graded as 'Compliance Plus' and the remaining 35 graded as 'Fully Compliant'. We are due to complete our next assessment in December 2022.

Our Service Standards

The Consumer Council formally introduced Service Standards in 2017-2018 and these form part of our Customer Charter, which sets out the level of service that consumers should expect to receive from our staff. We monitor our service standards monthly and publish the results quarterly on our website. Please see our achievements across all standards below.

Standards of Service 2021-2022



We recognise that excellent customer service is integral to the delivery of high quality public services and we are committed to meeting the needs of customers in a professional manner. You can expect the following standards when you contact us:

All targets are 100% unless otherwise stated.

Key:

- Within 10% of set target
- Within 15% of set target
- Target not met


Calling in Person:

 <p>If you have an appointment we aim to meet you within 5 minutes of your appointment time.</p> <p>N/A*</p> <p><small>* Office closed in line with government COVID-19 guidelines</small></p>		<p>If you call in person and do not have an appointment a member of staff will meet you within 15 minutes.</p> <p>N/A*</p>
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Staff:

 <p>We will treat our customers fairly.</p>	<p>100%</p>	 <p>We aim to answer 85% of calls to our freephone 0800 121 6022 number between 9am & 5pm within 20 seconds.</p>	<p>66.8%</p>
 <p>Our staff will act with professionalism.</p>	<p>100%</p>	 <p>We will answer voicemails left to our freephone number between 9am & 4pm within 3 hours, or the next working day if left outside office hours.</p>	<p>92.8%</p>
 <p>Our staff will be polite and friendly.</p>	<p>100%</p>		

Our Service:

 <p>If your enquiry or complaint is about an issue we do not cover we will give you the contact details of the organisation that can help.</p>	<p>80.4%</p>	 <p>We will respond to all correspondence within 3 working days.</p>	<p>99.2%</p>
 <p>We will keep you updated on the progress of your complaint.</p>	<p>99.4%</p>	 <p>We will provide you with a copy of the response from service providers within 5 working days.</p>	<p>99.2%</p>
		 <p>Our correspondence is easy to understand.</p>	<p>99.8%</p>

Feedback & Complaints:

 <p>We will acknowledge all formal complaints within 3 days.</p>	<p>100%</p>	<p>99 Net Promoter Score</p>
 <p>We will aim to provide a formal response to a complaint within 10 working days.</p>	<p>100%</p>	<p> 4 complaints received this year.</p>

Feedback from consumers

//

First class service. Genuinely helping people in need of help. Excellent correspondence and hassle-free service. I couldn't recommend highly enough.

//

//

The pleasantness, speed and efficiency was remarkable. I had nothing to do. They took control and did it all for me. I can't thank them enough.

//

//

My call was promptly answered by a person NOT a 'bot' and I was immediately transferred to the relevant person who deals with this problem. I received understanding and polite advice and was informed that the Consumer Council would take care of it for me, which was a great relief as I'm older and not so up-to-date with these matters. I would totally recommend this service and I am grateful to be aware of it.

//

//

Helpful, professional, prompt and efficient. Even if the outcome hadn't been in our favour, I would still have nothing but positives to report.

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//

Every time I contact the Consumer Council, they are efficient, effective and approachable! A great service that makes consumers feel that they have a voice and method of resolution supported by government.

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Annex 1: Our role and statutory provision

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.

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 Consumer 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 Consumer 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 a government agency in Northern Ireland on any matter relating to consumer affairs which is referred to the Consumer 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 have a long-term health condition;**
- **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.

For further information on our Corporate Plan and Forward Work Programme, outlining all our activities and statutory provisions, please visit www.consumerCouncil.org.

Annex 2: 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:



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 3: Additional Data Tables

Overall

Table 1: Total contacts received in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 broken down by classification

Categorisation	2020-2021	2021-2022	Percentage Increase/Decrease
General Referral	3,213	2,537	-21%
Enquiry	3,852	4,031	+5%
Stage 1 Referral	63	140	+122%
Stage 1 Investigation	26	15	-42%
Stage 2 Complaint	3,030	2,205	-27%
Total	10,184	8,928	-12%

Electricity

Table 2: Electricity contacts by service provider in 2021-2022

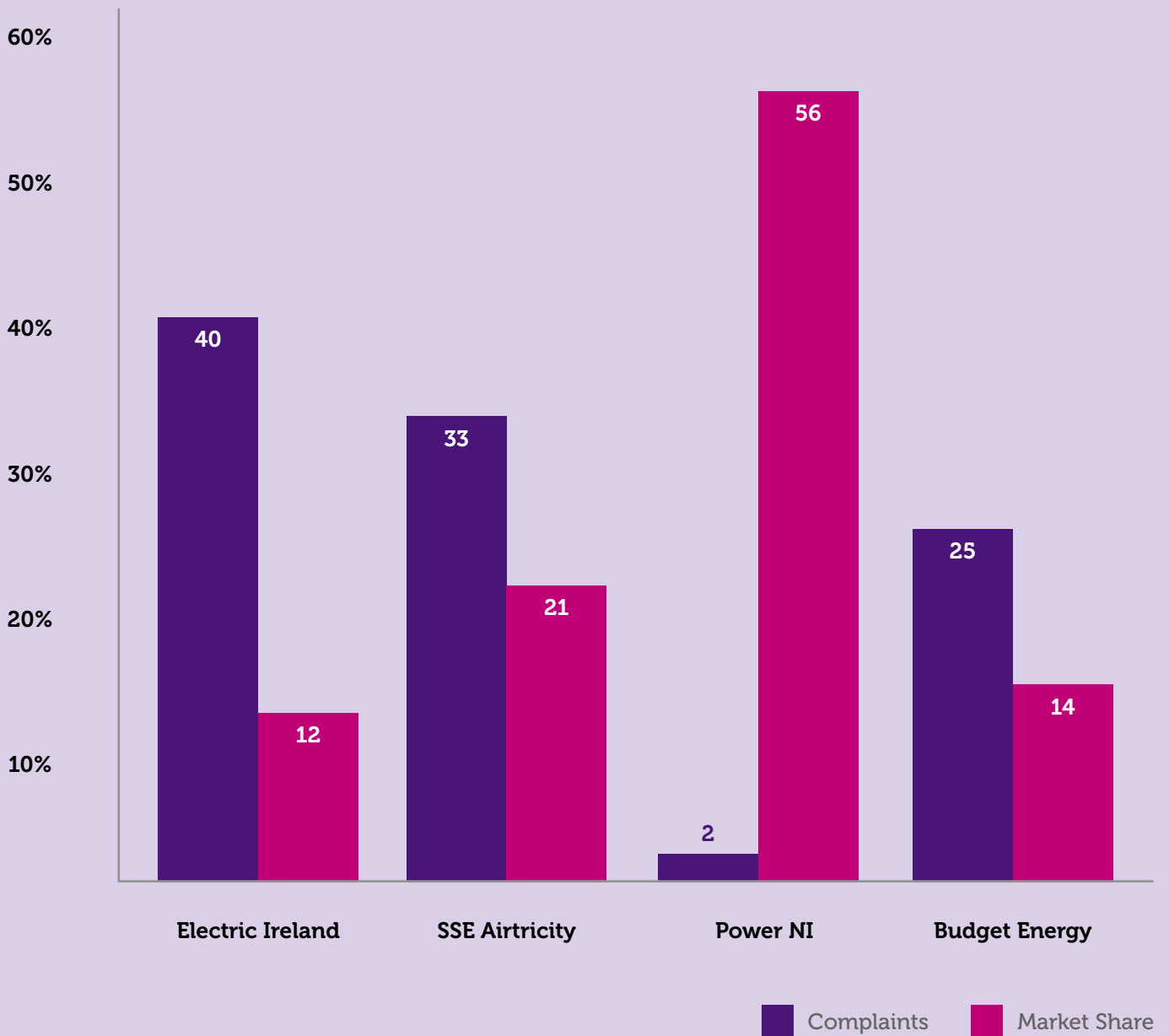
Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Bright Energy	8	0	0	0	8
Budget Energy	70	4	1	10	85
Click Energy	41	0	0	0	41
Electric Ireland	104	22	2	15	143
Energia	0	1	0	0	1
Energy Ombudsman GB	6	0	0	0	6
Go Power	19	0	0	0	19
NIE Networks	137	4	1	1	143
Power NI	193	19	0	1	213
SSE Airtricity	144	20	2	12	178
3T Power	3	0	0	0	3
Total	725	72	6	39	842

⁹ Stage 1 Investigation & Stage 2 complaints received.

¹⁰ Utility Regulator - Retail Market Monitoring, Quarterly Transparency Report, Quarter 4: October - December 2021.

The chart below shows the number of complaints⁹ received in 2021-2022 by the four major electricity supply companies in Northern Ireland against their respective 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 only one formal complaint recorded against it despite it having the largest market share.

Complaints by Top Four Electricity Suppliers against total market share in 2021-2022 (n=43, Stage 1 Investigation and Stage 2 only)



Gas

Table 3: Natural Gas contacts by service provider in 2021-2022

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Firmus Energy*	59	2	1	2	64
Flogas	3	0	0	0	3
Go Power	2	0	0	0	2
Phoenix Natural Gas	42	4	0	6	52
SGN Natural Gas	1	0	0	0	1
SSE Airtricity Gas	127	19	3	8	157
Total	234	25	4	16	279

* Firmus Energy includes gas distribution and supply.

Oil

Table 4: Home Heating Oil & LPG contacts by service provider in 2021-2022 (n=55)

Service Company	Enquiry	Total
Calor Gas	6	6
Flogas	7	37
NI Oil Federation	42	42
Total	55	55

Air Travel

**Table 5: Air contacts by service provider
(n=1,001) in 2021-2022**

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)	198	0	198
Aer Lingus	36	58	94
Belfast International Airport	4	0	4
Belfast City Airport	3	0	3
British Airways	81	21	102
Civil Aviation Authority (CAA)	120	0	120
Commission for Aviation Regulation (CAR)	1	0	1
easyJet	117	62	179
European Consumer Centre (ECC)	11	0	11
Flybe	2	0	2
Gatwick Airport	1	0	1
Jet2.com	28	8	36
KLM	5	3	8
Loganair	10	0	10
Lufthansa	4	0	4
Norwegian Air	1	0	1
Ryanair	115	88	203
Thomson Airways (TUI)	1	0	1
United Airlines	1	0	1
Virgin Atlantic	1	2	3
Vueling	13	2	15
Wizz Air	3	0	3
Total	757	244	1,001

Ferry

Table 6: Ferry contacts by service provider (n=43) in 2021-2022

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
P & O Ferries	11	2	13
Stena Line	6	2	8
Irish Ferries	16	0	16
Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) Referral	6	0	6
Total	39	4	43

Water

Table 7: Water and Sewerage contacts by service provider (n=163) in 2021-2022

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
NI Water	134	18	1	2	155
Consumer Council for Water (GB) Referral	8	0	0	0	8
Total	142	18	1	2	163

Post

Table 8: Postal services contacts by service provider (n=136) in 2021-2022

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Re-ferral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Royal Mail	60	5	2	6	73
Parcel Force	6	0	0	3	9
Post Office	9	0	0	1	10
UPS	11	0	0	1	12
DHL Express	3	0	0	0	3
Parcel2Go	1	0	0	0	1
Hermes	6	0	0	0	6
The Consumer Council ¹¹	22	0	0	0	22
Total	118	5	2	11	136

¹¹ 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

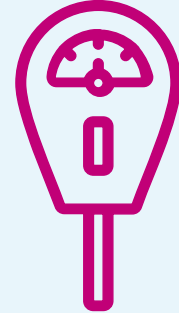
Private Parking Charges

Since October 2017, the Consumer Council has been assisting 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 dedicated section of 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>



Tour Operators

The Consumer Council also has powers to represent consumers on general issues that are causing detriment and where there is no other statutory body operating in this area. In 2020-2021, we were contacted by consumers regarding issues with online tour operators. Following lockdown and travel restrictions across the world, many tour operators were forced to cancel holiday bookings. Unfortunately, many consumers struggled to get a refund from online tour operators such as OPODO, eDreams and TravelUp, with many of them removing telephone contact numbers, causing frustration amongst consumers who had to rely on email contact.

As many tour operators are not members of the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA), consumers had no specific association or body to escalate their complaint to if they did not get a response or were unhappy with the outcome. The Consumer Council decided to assist consumers from Northern Ireland who found themselves in this situation and we successfully established customer service contacts within several tour operators and were able to raise formal complaints and requests for refunds on their behalf.





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