



Enquiries and Complaints Report 2018-19

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Foreword

The Consumer Council has an overarching statutory role to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland. As part of this remit we can investigate any complaint relating to consumer affairs; whilst having regard to other complaint remedies.

In addition to this principal role, The Consumer Council has specific statutory complaints roles in relation to energy, transport, postal services, and water and sewerage in Northern Ireland.

The year 2018-19 has seen a 162% increase in Stage 2 complaints from 2017-18; which in itself was a 47% increase from 2016-17. This shows that increasingly consumers in Northern Ireland are becoming aware of their consumer rights and have a greater understanding of where The Consumer Council can help them.

During this year, we have continued to improve our own standards as we have recertified against the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) Standard¹. In providing the award the CSE Assessor, Paul Hindley said, *“This was an excellent assessment which showed the high degree of commitment by the staff to the process. It was abundantly clear during the assessment that improvement in customer service was at the heart of everything that the staff undertake”*.

In addition to this, The Consumer Council has been awarded a silver award in Pro-active Complaint Handling and a bronze award in Best Complaints Process Business to Consumer (B2C) in the UK Complaint Handling Awards 2019.

The Consumer Council recognises the time spent, and indeed the anxiety that can occur, in making a complaint, but it provides essential feedback to companies, which in turn should improve their overall level of service and relationships with consumers in Northern Ireland.

The UK’s exit from the European Union could provide additional consumer concerns. The Consumer Council is working with both UK and Northern Ireland government departments and other partners to ensure current levels of consumer protection are at least maintained.

The Consumer Council will continue to work with partners and stakeholders to ensure there is a positive understanding of the interests and needs of consumer in Northern Ireland.

This report has two sections: section A and B explores consumer complaints and enquiries and data for The Consumer Council and beyond, and Section C explores our consumer outreach data, all of which covers our work with consumers in 2018/19.

¹ The Consumer Council achieved 12 “Compliance Plus” (7 in 2017), 45 “Compliance” (42 in 2017), and no “Partials” (5 in 2017).



Introduction

1. Introduction

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

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.

This report covers all contacts received from consumers from 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.

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 he/she remains dissatisfied with the response received or is yet to receive a response after a reasonable period of time has elapsed.

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



Section A: Enquiries and Complaints

Analysis of enquiries & complaints 2018/19²

Table 1: Total contacts 2018/19

General Referrals & Requests for Information	Enquiries & Complaints	Total	Financial Return to Consumers
1,213	3,782	4,995	£212,848.97

The Consumer Council helped almost 5,000 consumers in 2018/19. We investigated 3,782 enquiries and complaints, and assisted 1,213 consumers by providing general advice and signposting them to other organisations.

The table below shows a comparison between the number of enquiries and complaints received in 2018/19 compared to 2017/18.

In 2018/19, the overall number of enquiries and complaints received increased by 40% compared to the previous year. This can be attributed to an increase across all classifications, with Stage 2 complaints in particular, increasing by 162% compared to 2017/18.

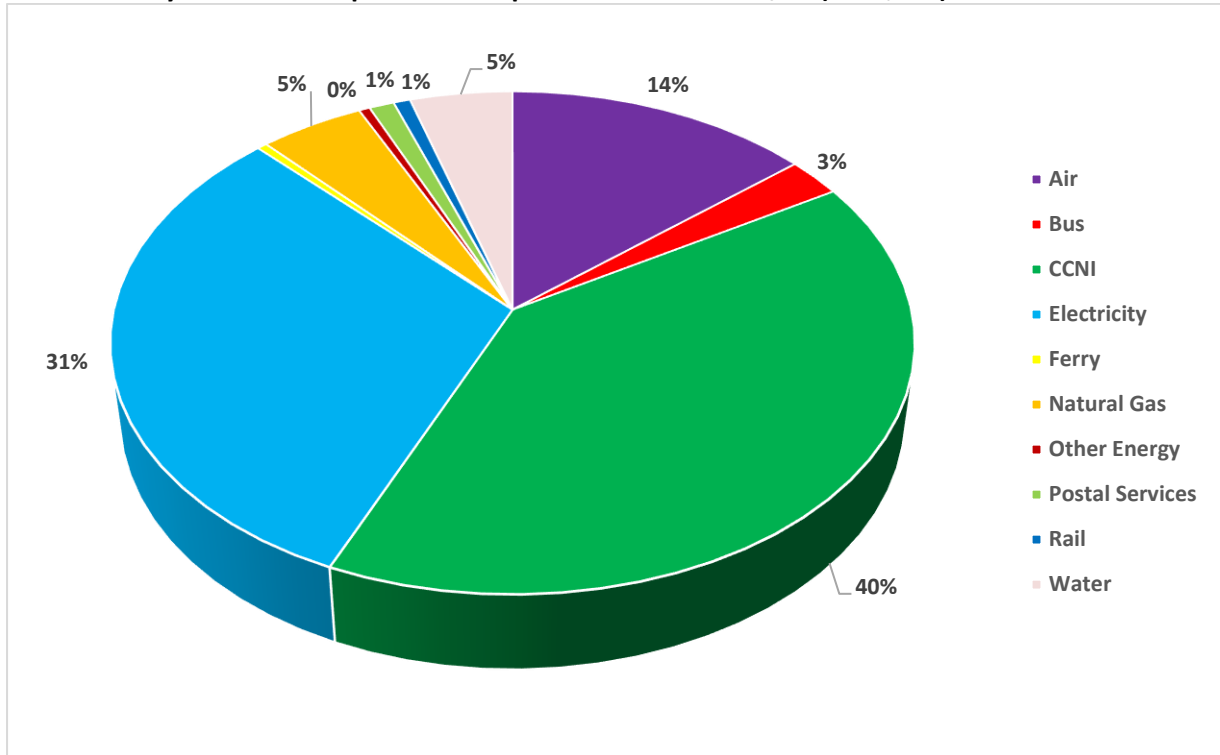
Table 2: Two year comparison of enquiries & complaints 2017/18 - 2018/19

Categorisation	2017/18	2018/19	Percentage Increase/Decrease (%)
Enquiry	2,227	2,701	+21%
Stage 1 Referral	71	81	+14%
Stage 1 Investigation	27	35	+30%
Stage 2	369	965	+162%
Total	2,694	3,782	+40%

The chart below highlights that over two thirds of all enquiries and complaints (71%) were contacts under our general remit ('CCNI'), which is mainly private parking charges, and electricity related issues respectively.

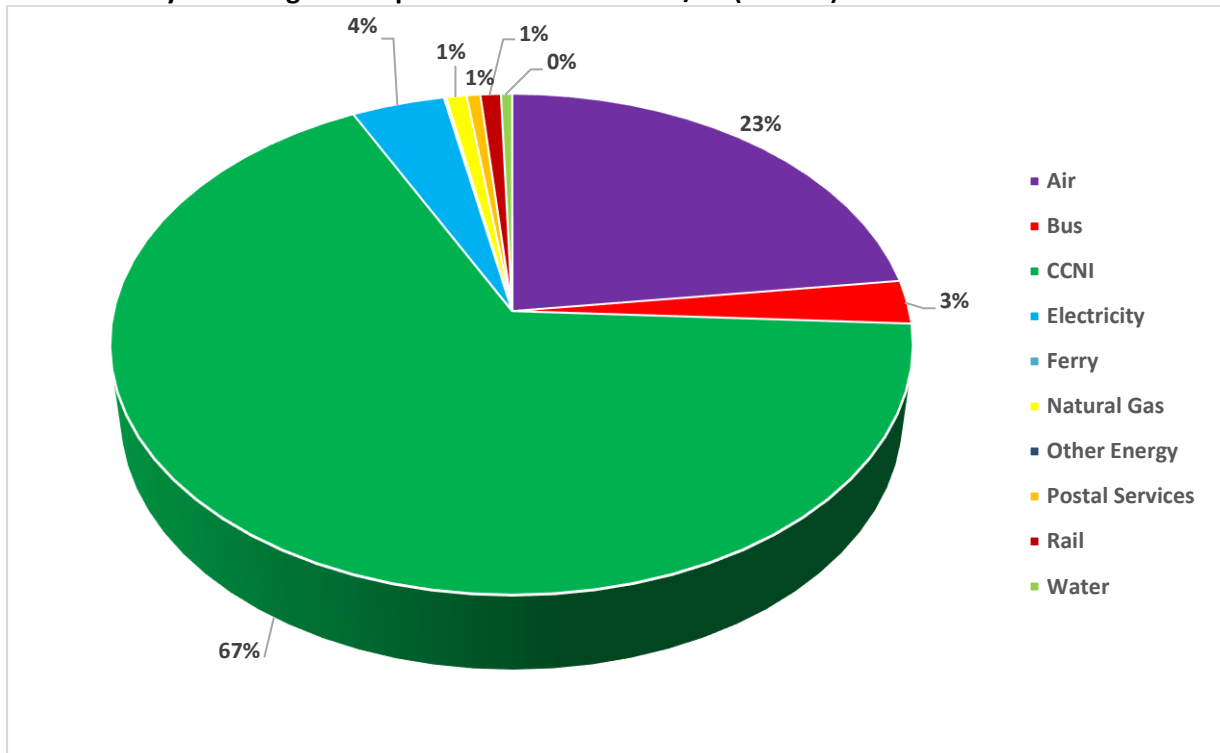
² Percentages in this report may not total 100% due to rounding

Chart 1: Analysis of total enquiries & complaints received 2018/19 (n = 3,782)



The Chart below highlights the breakdown of Stage 2 complaints in 2018/19.

Chart 2: Analysis of Stage 2 complaints received in 2018/19 (n = 965)



In 2018/19, Stage 2 complaints increased by 162% compared to 2017/18 (965 vs 369). Stage 2 complaints typically require a greater level of investigation as they involve gathering information and evidence from both parties, reviewing all the correspondence and communications, which can include telephone calls, bills, emails and other information; and considering relevant legislation, codes of practice, and terms and conditions specific to the complaint. All of the above are taken into account to ensure a full investigation of the complaint and propose a resolution for the consumer.

The increase in Stage 2 complaints can mainly attributed to the introduction of private parking charges in Northern Ireland, whereby private landowners, such as shopping centres, supermarkets and retail parks, sub-contracted their parking facilities to private parking companies who can charge if the terms and conditions of the car park are contravened. This led to an increase in calls in 2017/18, from consumers to The Consumer Council complaining about the parking charges that have been issued.

In light of the increase in calls, The Consumer Council decided to use our general remit to represent consumers' interests in the area of private parking charges, as there was no other statutory body responsible for this area.

As a result, in 2018/19 we received 831 contacts from consumers in relation to private parking charges, of which, 640 (77%) were Stage 2 complaints.

Complaint Resolution Times

Table 3 shows the average time taken to process Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2 complaints across each area within our remit. The average resolution timeframe is calculated by counting the number of working days between the date the complaint is received by The Consumer Council and the date the complaint is closed.

The length of time taken to investigate a complaint will vary depending on several factors such as the type of complaint it is, the response service level agreement (SLA) in place with the service provider (10 working days for energy, post and water cases and 15 working days for transport cases), how complex the case is, and how quickly the consumer provides information or feedback on responses.

The average complaint resolution time in 2018/19 was 47 days compared to 32 days in 2017/18. This increase can be attributed to an increase in the investigation time for water cases, which tend to take longer as the complaints can be more complex and require a more extensive investigation.

The average complaint resolution time for airlines also increased in 2018/19, this was due to Bulgaria Air who failed to correspond with us within the normal 15 working day timeframe, resulting in delays in closing cases.

³ Complaint resolution times are calculated in working days.

Table 3: Two year comparison of average complaint resolution time by area from 2017/18 – 2018/19

Area of Contact	Number of Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2 complaints 2017/18	Number of Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2 complaints 2018/19	Average number of days in 2017/18	Average number of days in 2018/19	% Increase/decrease of resolution time
Transport	304	287	33	41	+24%
Energy	58	65	46	41	-11%
Water	26	10	48	78	+63%
Post	5	8	35	28	-20%

Geographical Analysis of Contacts by 11 Council Areas



The Consumer Council records and monitors the geographical areas from which we receive enquiries and complaints. The information is then used to inform our promotional and educational work to ensure that we represent and assist consumers across all of Northern Ireland and in particular those from disadvantaged areas.

The map above shows the percentage of contacts received within each of the 11 council areas across Northern Ireland.

The table below shows a comparison between the populations residing in each of the Council areas compared to the percentage of contacts we received from each Council area. Overall, the contacts are proportionate to population size (within +/-3%).

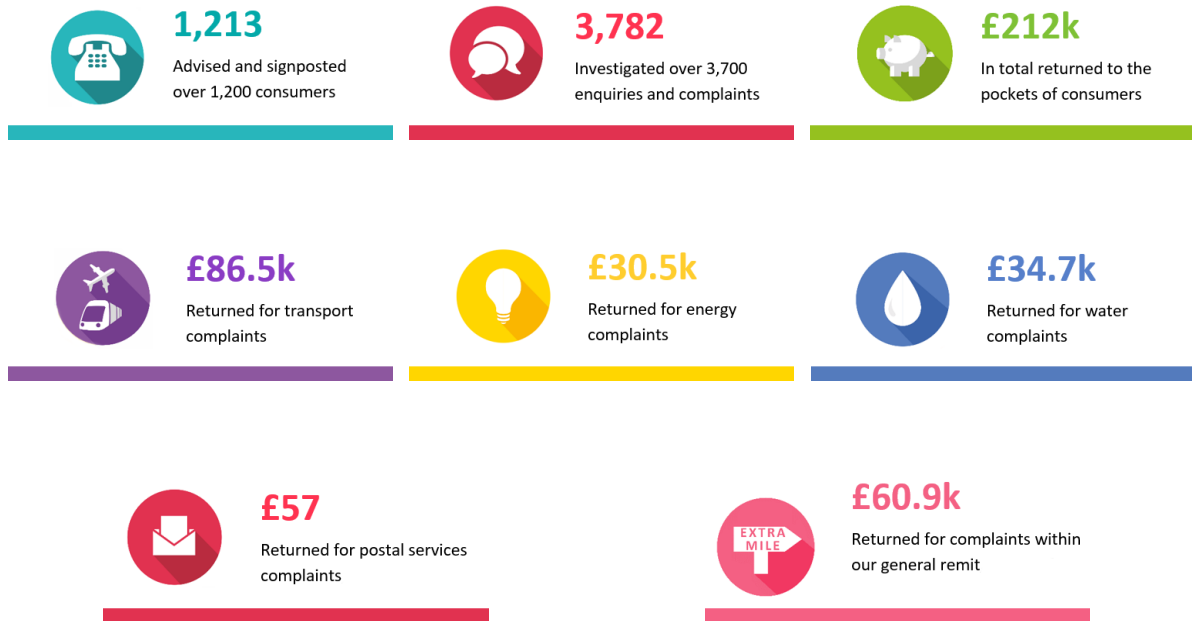
Table 4: Comparison of Council Area population compared to contacts received by The Consumer Council

District Council	Percentage of total Population per council area⁴	Percentage of total contacts received by The Consumer Council per council area (%)	Percentage Difference (%)
Antrim and Newtownabbey	8%	7%	-1%
Ards & North Down	9%	11%	+2%
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	11%	10%	-1%
Belfast	18%	21%	+3%
Causeway Coast and Glens	8%	6%	-2%
Derry and Strabane	8%	7%	-1%
Fermanagh and Omagh	6%	4%	-2%
Lisburn and Castlereagh	8%	10%	+2%
Mid and East Antrim	7%	6%	-1%
Mid Ulster	8%	7%	-1%
Newry, Mourne and Down	10%	10%	-
Total	100%	100%	

⁴ NISRA – June 2019

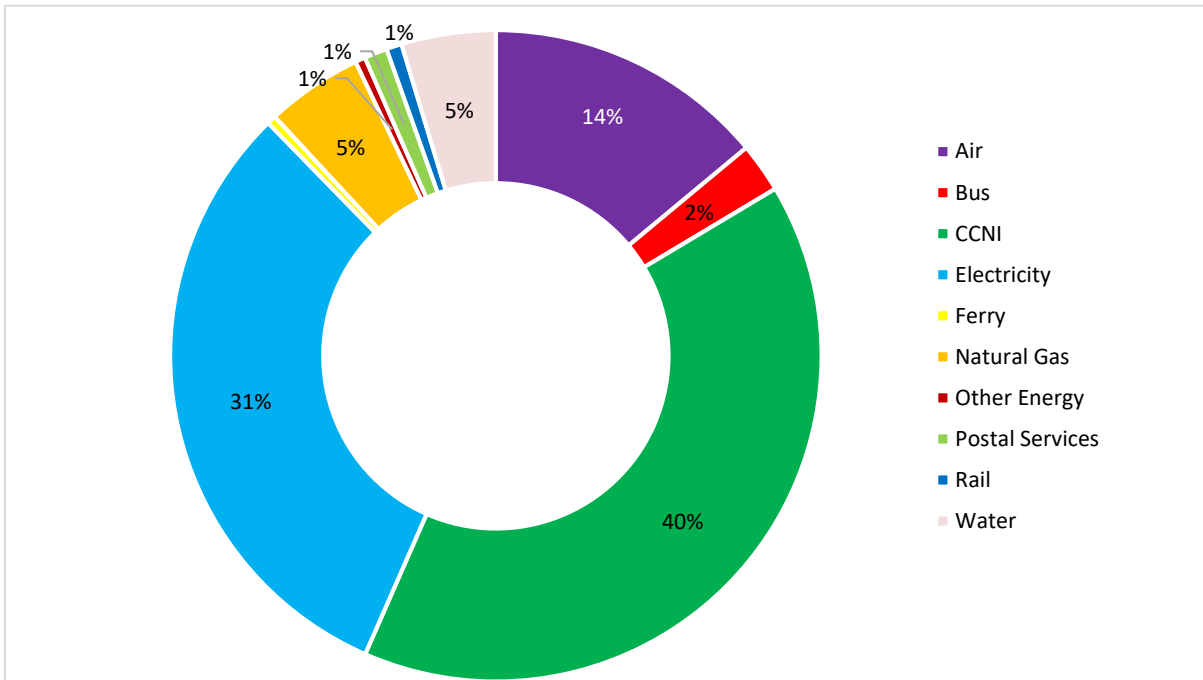
2. Our Year in Review

Overall, we have had a successful year in 2018/19, dealing with a 40% increase in enquiries and complaints, returning £212,000 to consumers (an increase of 51% compared to 2017/18), achieving a 99.2% customer satisfaction rate and a Net Promoter Score (NPS)⁵ of 95, which has improved from last year (92).



⁵ See page 54 for explanation of Net Promoter Score (NPS)

Breakdown of Enquiries & Complaints received



Customer Satisfaction



99.2%

Customer Satisfaction
with our service

95

Net Promoter Score

Top Issues



Energy Issues



Private Parking Charges



Air Travel Cancellations & Delays

The following sections explore consumer contacts for each of our remits in more depth, as well as our satisfaction scores and modes of contact.



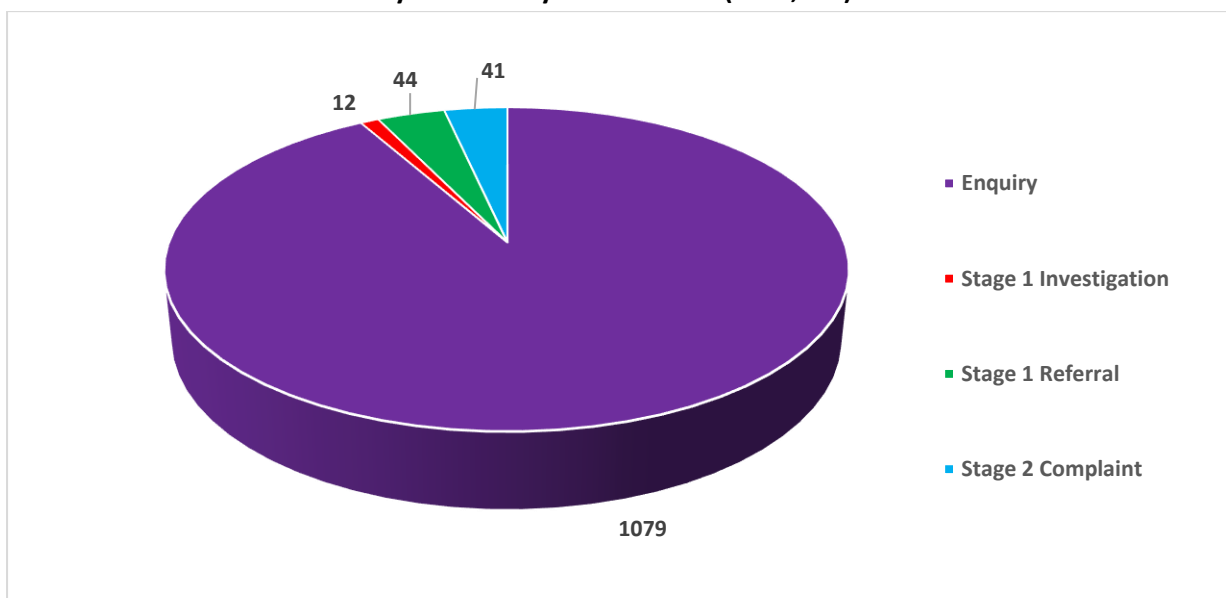
3. Energy

In 2018/19, energy contacts accounted for 36% (n=1,376) of all consumer contacts, with electricity comprising 85% of these. Typically, energy related issues would be the most common type of enquiry or complaint received by The Consumer Council. However, this is the first year since 2011 that it has become the second most common type of issue received from consumers. In 2018/19, the top issue received was in relation to private parking charges.

Electricity

In 2018/19, The Consumer Council received a total of 1,176 enquiries and complaints from consumers about a range of electricity issues including billing, metering, problems with supply, and poor customer service. The chart below shows the breakdown of these contacts by classification.

Chart 3: Breakdown of electricity contacts by classification (n = 1,176)



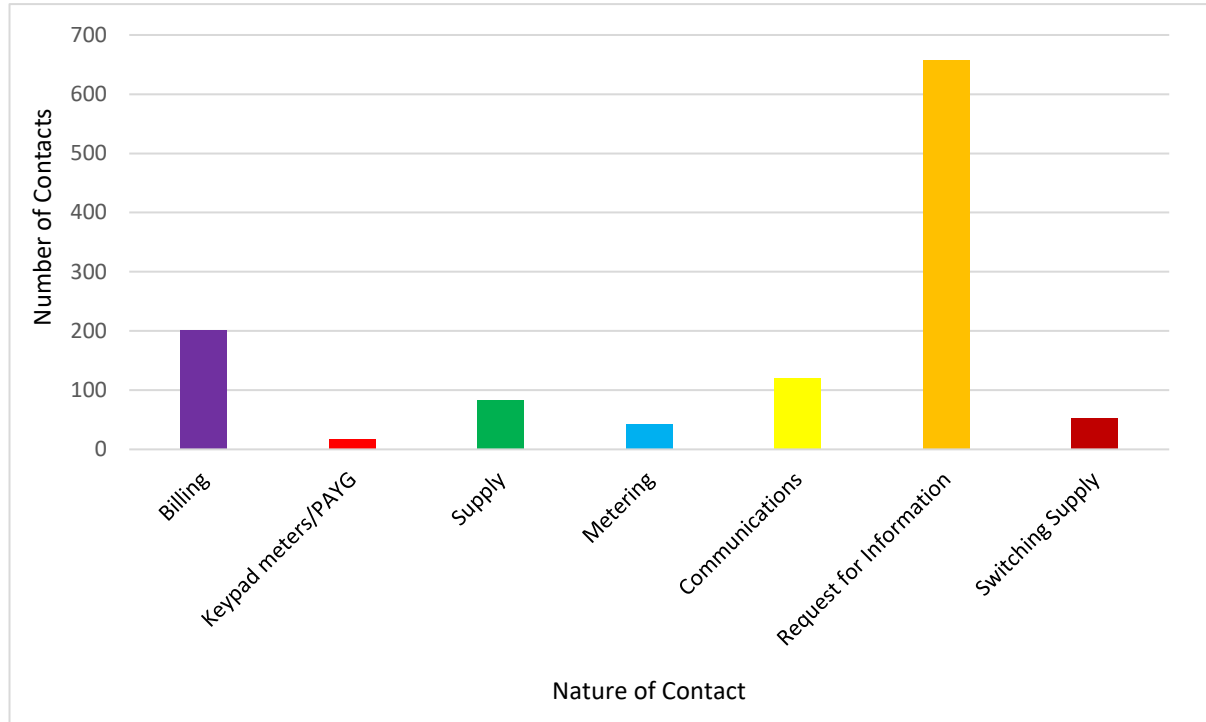
The total number of electricity contacts received in 2018/19 (1,176) has increased by 37% compared to 2017/18 (858). This can be mainly attributed to a 64% increase in the number of contacts received in relation to billing issues (202) compared to the previous year (123). In 2018/19, billing contacts increased across all categorisations with enquiries and Stage 2 complaints in particular, increasing by 39% and 257% respectively, compared to the previous year.

The Consumer Council received an influx in enquiries in May 2018 when Budget Energy announced that they would be introducing a standing charge to all tariffs. This prompted consumers to contact us to get advice on their rights if they wished to leave their contract early or information on switching supplier and getting the best deal.

The most common types of billing contacts we received were in relation to mismanagement of accounts, disputed liability of bills and billing amounts and debt collection procedures adopted by electricity suppliers.

Chart 4 shows the most common electricity issues received by The Consumer Council in 2018/19. Requests for general advice and information on electricity accounts for the majority of the total electricity contacts received.

Chart 4: The top electricity issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2018/19 (n = 1,176)



In last year’s report we highlighted a steady decline in electricity enquiries since 2016. This coincided with an increase in website hits to The Consumer Council website and, in particular, the energy section of the website where consumers can access our Electricity Price Comparison tool and information on the switching process, suppliers available and the tariffs.

Whilst the number of electricity enquiries have actually increased in 2018/19 by 39% compared to 2017/18 (775 vs 1078), the number of website hits to The Consumer Council website has also continued to increase in 2018/19 by 77.9%, from 151,232 hits in 2017/18 to 269,050 in 2018/19.

Similar to last year, the Electricity Price Comparison tool, Home Heating Oil and the Switching Supplier web pages were in the top three most visited and most downloaded pages of The Consumer Council website in 2018-19. Hits to these pages were up 113% this year, from 68,809 hits in 2017/18 to 146,325 hits in 2018/19.

The number of Stage 2 complaints about electricity (41) remained consistent with last year’s figures (40).

Table 5: Electricity contacts by service provider

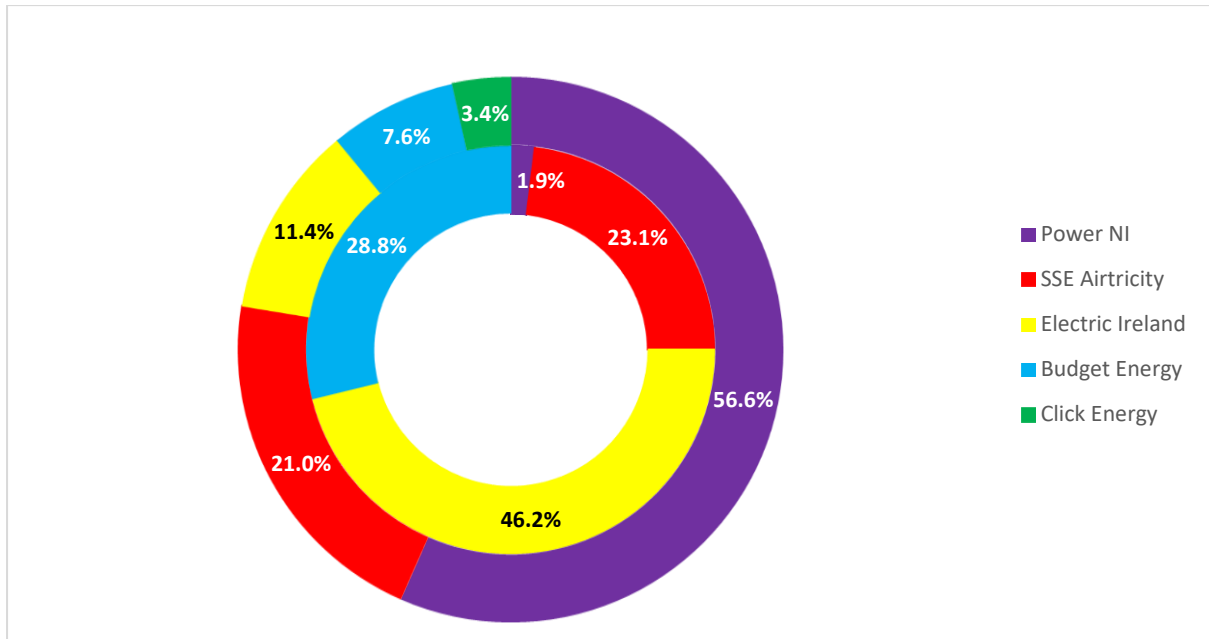
Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to consumers
Budget Energy	77	1	3	14	95	£2,680
Click Energy	8	0	1	0	9	£0
Electric Ireland	105	7	13	17	142	£1,071
Energia	10	0	0	0	10	£80
Go Power	11	0	0	0	11	£5,840
NIE Networks	175	0	11	1	187	£6,246
Power NI	560	0	6	1	567	£1,676
SSE Airtricity	132	4	10	8	154	£11,696
Total	1,079	12	44	41	1,176	£29,289

Chart 5 shows the number of complaints⁶ received in 2018/19 by the four major electricity supply companies in Northern Ireland against their respective percentage of market share⁷. Similar to previous years, there does not appear to be any correlation between market share and volume of contacts received.

⁶ Stage 1 Investigation & Stage 2 complaints received.

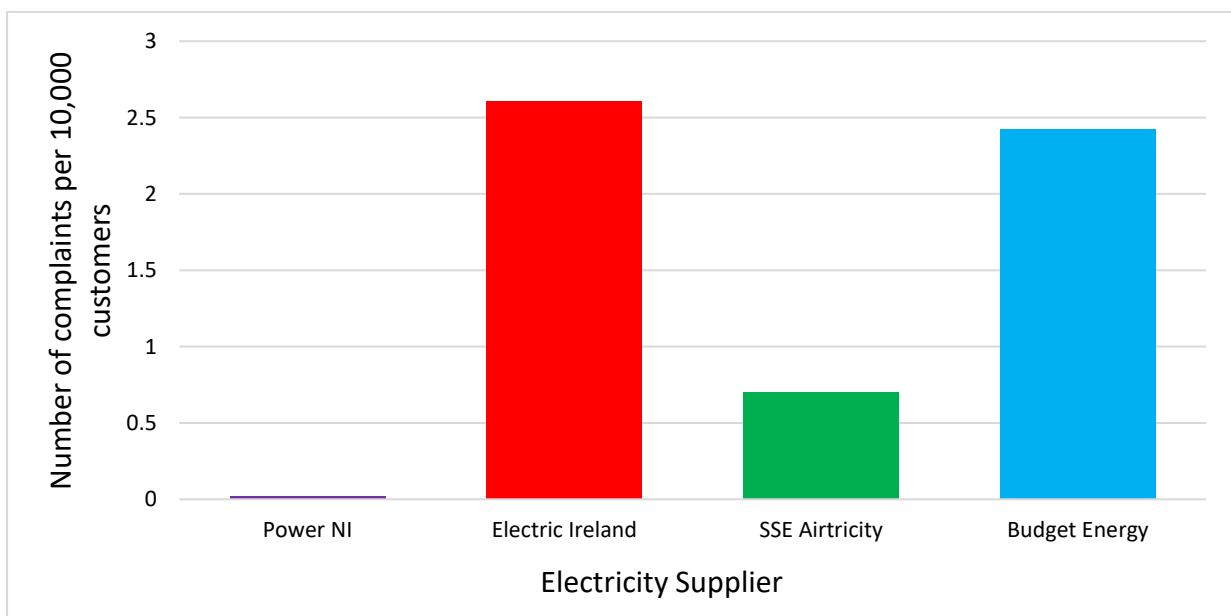
⁷ Utility Regulator - Retail Market Monitoring, Quarterly Transparency Report, Quarter 1: January – March 2019.

Chart 5: Analysis of complaints received by the top four electricity suppliers (inner circle) against total market share (outer circle)



The chart below shows the number of complaints⁸ received by the top four suppliers per 10,000 customers.

Chart 6: Complaints received by top four electricity suppliers per 10,000 customers⁹



⁸ Stage 1 Investigation and Stage 2 Complaints

⁹ Utility Regulator – Retail Market Monitoring, Quarterly Transparency Report, Quarter 1: January – March 2019

Case Study – Electricity

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer from Coleraine who received a large electricity bill for over £1,220 which had accrued over a period of two years.

The consumer had agreed at the point of registering with her supplier to receive her bills via email which she would access via an online account. However, she never received any information in relation to her online account or how to access her bills and despite contacting her supplier back in 2016 to obtain this information, she never received a response.

The consumer had been set up to pay a monthly direct debit of £25 which she duly paid every month since 2016. During this period she did not receive any correspondence from her supplier to advise her that the monthly payment had not been sufficient to cover her usage and that arrears had accumulated as a result.

The consumer only found out about the arrears when she received a letter in May 2018 notifying her of a change in her unit price, which prompted her to contact her supplier to query the account. The Consumer Council contacted the electricity supplier to investigate how the arrears had accumulated and its failure to communicate with their customer since the account was set up in 2016.

The electricity supplier confirmed that having investigated the complaint they had identified a system error which affected the automatic generation of bills and account review reminders for customers. This resulted in some consumers not receiving bills or account reviews to determine if the direct debit was covering their electricity usage.

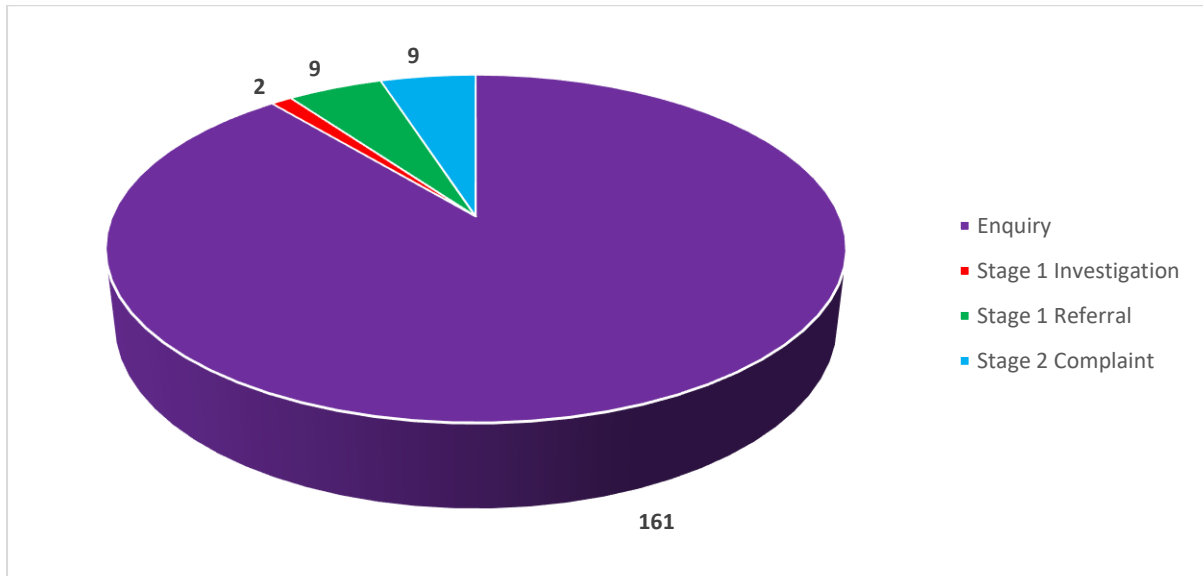
The electricity supplier apologised for the stress and inconvenience caused to the consumer as a result of the system error. The supplier also agreed to reduce the outstanding arrears by 50%, resulting in a balance of £610 which could be paid over a period of 16 months.

Natural Gas

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; 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.

In 2018/19, The Consumer Council received a total of 181 gas contacts which accounted for 13% of the total enquiries and complaints handled in this period.

Chart 7: Breakdown of gas contacts by classification (n = 181)



Overall, gas contacts received in 2018/19 (181) increased by 18% compared to 2017/18 (154), with increases in contacts across all categorisations (Enquiries, Stage 1 referrals, Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2).

Chart 8: All gas issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2018/19 (n = 181)

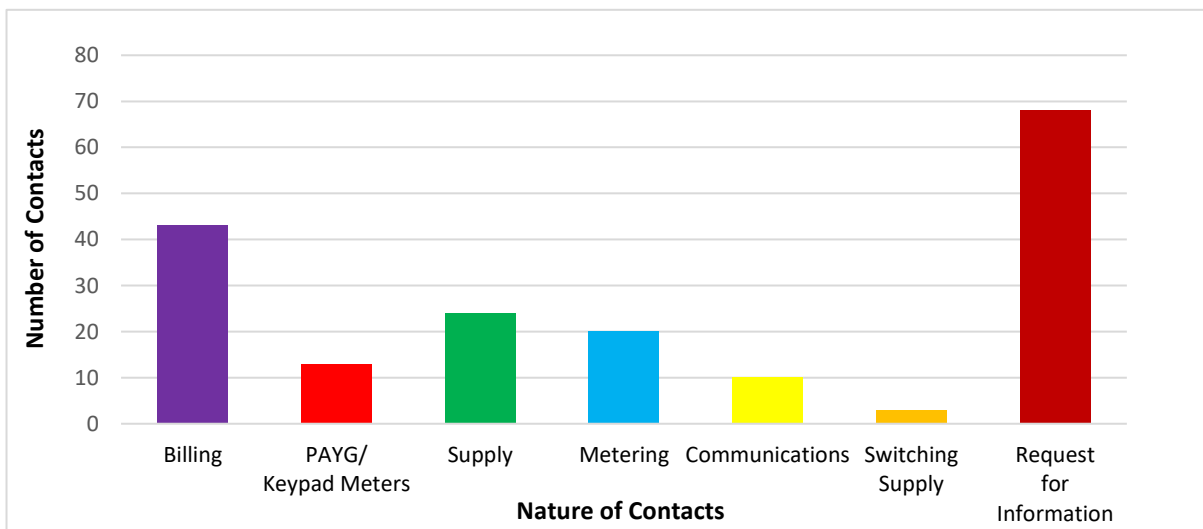


Table 6: Natural gas contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to consumers
Firmus Energy*	57	1	1	0	59	£150
Phoenix Natural Gas	37	0	4	3	44	£350
SSE Airtricity Gas	68	1	4	5	78	£667
Total	162	2	9	8	181	£1,167

* Firmus Energy includes gas distribution and supply.

As with electricity contacts, requests for general advice and information was the most common type of gas contact we received in 2018/19, accounting for 38% of the total gas contacts. Contacts of this nature include advice on supplier tariffs, information on company policy, supplier contact details and information about switching.

Case study – Natural Gas

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer from Bangor regarding issues he encountered when trying to settle his gas account while moving house and the subsequent poor customer service he received, trying to resolve the matter directly with his supplier.

The consumer reported that he had received conflicting information regarding the closing balance on his gas account. When he tried to query this with his supplier he was then given inaccurate information regarding a direct debit that had not been paid in April 2018.

The consumer contacted his bank regarding the direct debit payment and it confirmed that the April payment had in fact been taken from his account by his gas supplier.

When the consumer relayed this information to his gas supplier they realised that the payment not received, was in fact the May direct debit, and not the April payment as previously advised. The supplier provided an account reconciliation to the consumer showing all of the bills issued and payments received, to help explain how the final bill had been calculated.

The consumer settled the outstanding balance of £12 and closed off the account. However, as he remained unhappy with how the matter had been handled he sent a written complaint to his gas supplier but received no response.

The Consumer Council contacted the gas supplier to investigate the company's failure to respond to the consumer's complaint. The supplier provided a summary of the consumer's interactions with

them in relation to the closure of the account and the erroneous information provided to him regarding the missing payment.

The gas supplier acknowledged receipt of the consumer's complaint and advised that due to an agent error the consumer's complaint was not logged and therefore did not receive a response within 10 working days, as per its Guaranteed Standards of Service.

In light of this customer service failing, the supplier provided a £25 goodwill payment to the consumer and apologised for the poor service provided.

The gas supplier also undertook a review of how the account closure had been handled and recognised that the customer service provided had fallen short of the high service standards that they aim to provide to its customers.

The gas supply company provided additional training to its staff and used the complaint as a learning and development exercise to highlight areas where improvement, were required.

Coal, Oil & Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG)

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

Overall, The Consumer Council received 19 enquiries in relation to LPG and home heating oil with the majority of these in relation to LPG. The cost of LPG remains the most common concern raised by consumers.

The Consumer Council did not receive any enquiries about coal in 2018/19.

Table 7 shows the breakdown of these contacts by service provider.

Table 7: Coal, Oil & LPG contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Total	Returned to consumers
Calor Gas	9	9	£0
Flogas	7	7	£100
NI Oil Federation	3	3	£0
Total	19	19	£100



4. Transport

In 2018/19, transport related enquiries and complaints accounted for 18% (667) of all contacts received by The Consumer Council. Transport contacts received cover air, public transport and ferry travel in Northern Ireland.

Air Travel

Contacts about air travel (528) accounted for 79% of the total transport related contacts received.

Of the 528 air contacts received, 72% related to delays and cancellations. Passengers who experience a cancellation or delay may be entitled to claim compensation under European Law. The Consumer Council consequently, helped return almost £85k to air passengers in the last year.

Chart 9: The top air issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2018/19 (n = 528)

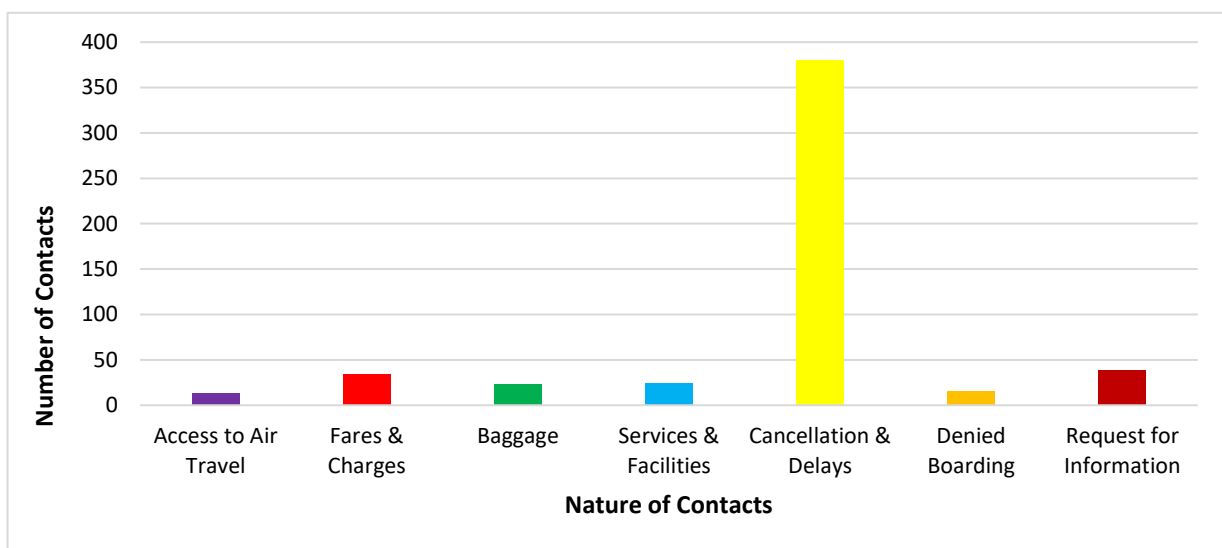
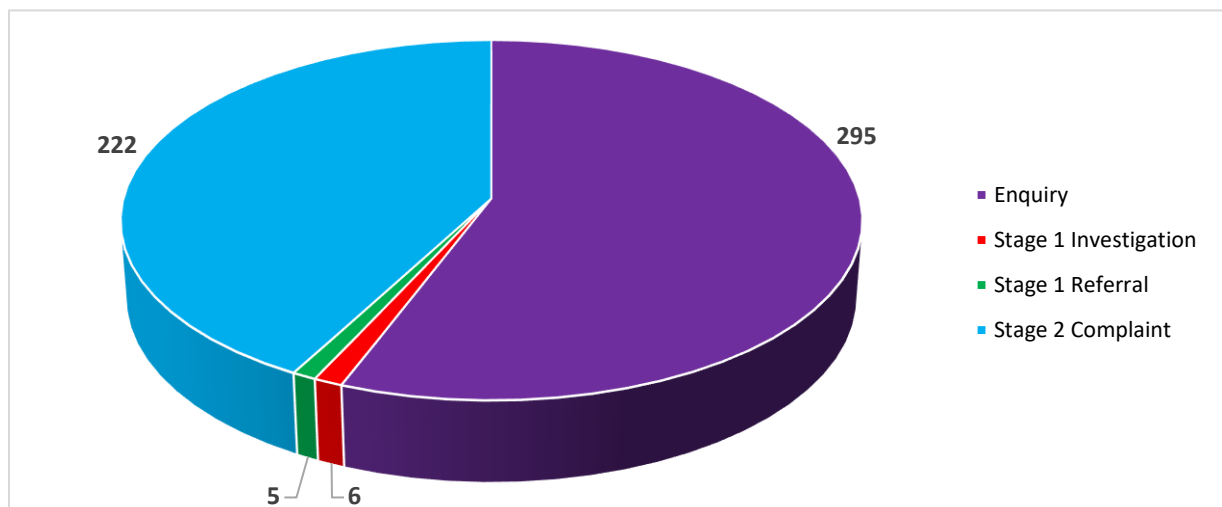


Chart 10: Breakdown of air contacts by classification (n = 528)

In 2018/19, the number of Stage 2 airline complaints (222) decreased by 15% compared to 2017/18 (260). However, airline enquiries increased by 7% compared to last year (275 vs 295).



Flybe's Hand Luggage Policy

In February 2019, The Consumer Council received an influx of enquiries and complaints from consumers who were dissatisfied with Flybe's cabin baggage policy.

The policy which has been in place since April 2016, permits passengers to take one piece of luggage that does not exceed 55cm x 35cm x 20cm and a second smaller item, such as a handbag or laptop case. From 17 January 2019, Flybe adopted a more rigorous approach to implementing the policy across all airports in the UK to ensure that the policy was being adhered to by passengers.

Flybe staff and ground staff in the airports were provided with the tools and resources to implement the policy, with a zero tolerance approach. This included the use of baggage sizers which have been made available at both the check-in desks and boarding gates to help staff identify luggage that does not meet the baggage policy requirements. If luggage does not fit into the baggage sizer, the passenger will be asked to put their bag in the hold of the aircraft incurring a charge.

Passengers who experienced first-hand Flybe's new stringent implementation of its policy and have incurred the charge to have their bag put onto the aircraft, contacted The Consumer Council as they believed they had been treated unfairly, with many reporting inconsistencies in Flybe's application of the policy. Passengers have reported that the same item of luggage that had been approved by Flybe at one airport was then refused at another airport, quite often on the return leg of the same journey, resulting in the passenger being forced to pay to have the bag placed into the hold.

The Consumer Council contacted Flybe's Chief Executive and Director of Customer Care to raise the issue and highlight the concerns of Northern Ireland passengers. We have also been liaising with the Trading Standards Service Northern Ireland (TSSNI) in relation to the baggage sizers being used by Flybe and it has confirmed that the baggage sizers used at George Best Belfast City Airport are compliant with their requirements.

The Consumer Council will continue to monitor the situation and plan to liaise further with Flybe to identify further checks that can be put in place to ensure the policy is being applied consistently and fairly at all UK airports.

Case Study – Airlines

The Consumer Council was contacted by a party of five who had booked to travel with Ryanair to Portugal on holidays. The outbound flight from Belfast to Portugal was delayed for over 4 hours. On returning home, the consumer contacted Ryanair to claim compensation for the cancellation, and the out of pocket expenses; however, they did not receive a response from Ryanair.

The Consumer Council raised a formal complaint with Ryanair on behalf of the family. In its response to The Consumer Council, Ryanair apologised for its failure to respond to the consumer's complaint, and also for the inconvenience caused to the party as a result of the cancellation.

As the cancellation was due to technical issues with the aircraft, compensation was payable under EU legislation, resulting in the family receiving compensation of €400 per person, equating to £1,779.

Table 8: Air contacts by service provider (n = 528)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to consumers
Aer Lingus	24	0	1	14	39	£9,811
Belfast City Airport	1	0	0	0	1	£0
Belfast International Airport	10	3	4	1	18	£0
BMI	4	0	0	6	10	£3,447
British Airways	16	0	0	10	26	£5,788
Bulgaria Air	8	0	0	2	10	£21,751
CAA (referral)	12	0	0	0	12	£0
EasyJet	85	1	0	88	174	£19,659
Ernest Airlines	12	0	0	6	18	£0
Flybe	29	0	0	23	52	£6,922
Gatwick Airport	0	0	0	1	1	£0
Jet2.com	13	0	0	7	20	£30
KLM	4	0	0	1	5	£0
Manchester Airport	0	1	0	0	1	£0
Norwegian Air	5	0	0	3	8	£1,786
Ryanair	64	1	0	41	106	£13,800
Thomas Cook Airlines	1	0	0	0	1	£0
Thomson Airways (TUI)	5	0	0	18	23	£0
United Airlines	0	0	0	1	1	£1,937
Wizz Air	2	0	0	0	2	£0
Total	295	6	5	222	528	£84,935

Case study – Airlines

In 2017, The Consumer Council was contacted by 47 consumers who had encountered delays with Bulgaria Air in June and July 2017. The families had been delayed for over seven hours, with many stranded in airports overnight, waiting on a flight to Bulgaria.

The families contacted Bulgaria Air to claim compensation under EU Regulation 261/2004 for the delay they encountered but did not receive a response from the airline.

The Consumer Council agreed to formally investigate the delays on behalf of the consumers and request that compensation be paid to all those affected. Communicating with Bulgaria Air raised new challenges for our staff as the response timeframe for claims was two months and the airline did not appear to have a logical system in place for settling claims, with some families receiving part payments and others not being settled at all. This led to delays in progressing the complaints.

The Consumer Council returned over £21,000 in compensation to some of the passengers affected but many did not receive their compensation, so we liaised with both the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and the UK European Consumer Centre (ECC) to discuss how best to progress the matter with Bulgaria Air. The UK ECC agreed to contact the airline as it has offices in Bulgaria and we have been informed that some of the passengers affected have now been paid compensation by the airline. The ECC is continuing to work with Bulgaria Air to ensure that all compensation is paid to those passengers who have not yet received compensation.

Bus Travel

During 2018/19 the number of contacts regarding bus services (93) increased by 11% compared to 2017/18 (84). Chart 11 below shows the breakdown of bus contacts by classification.

Chart 11: Breakdown of bus contacts by classification (n = 93)

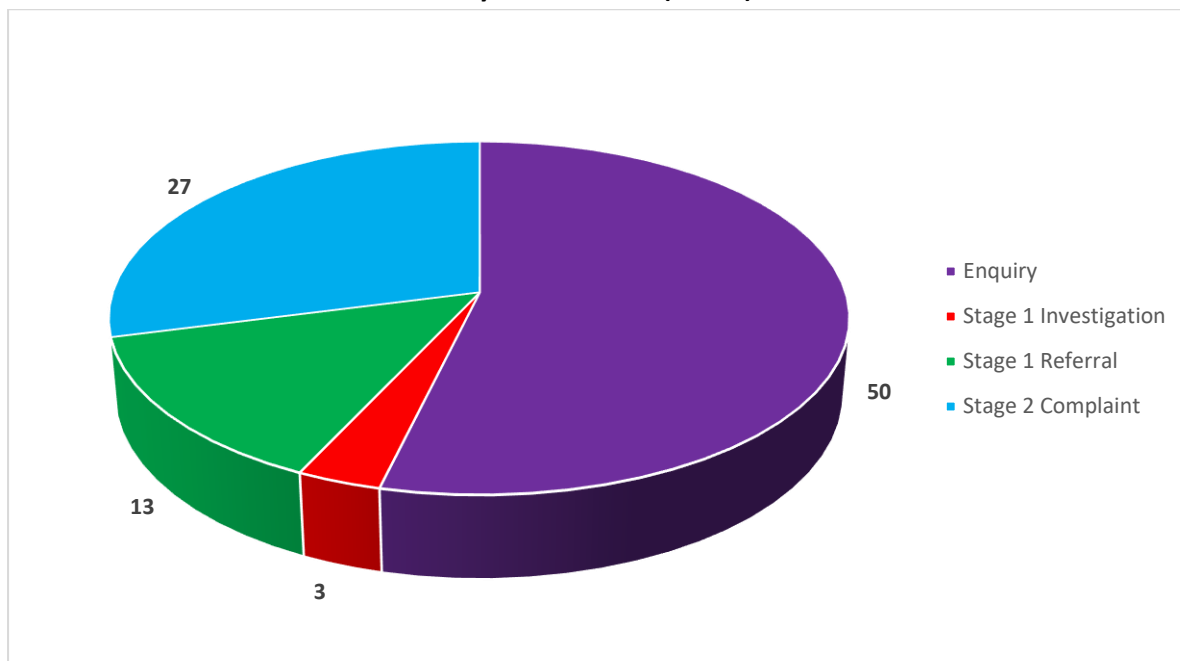
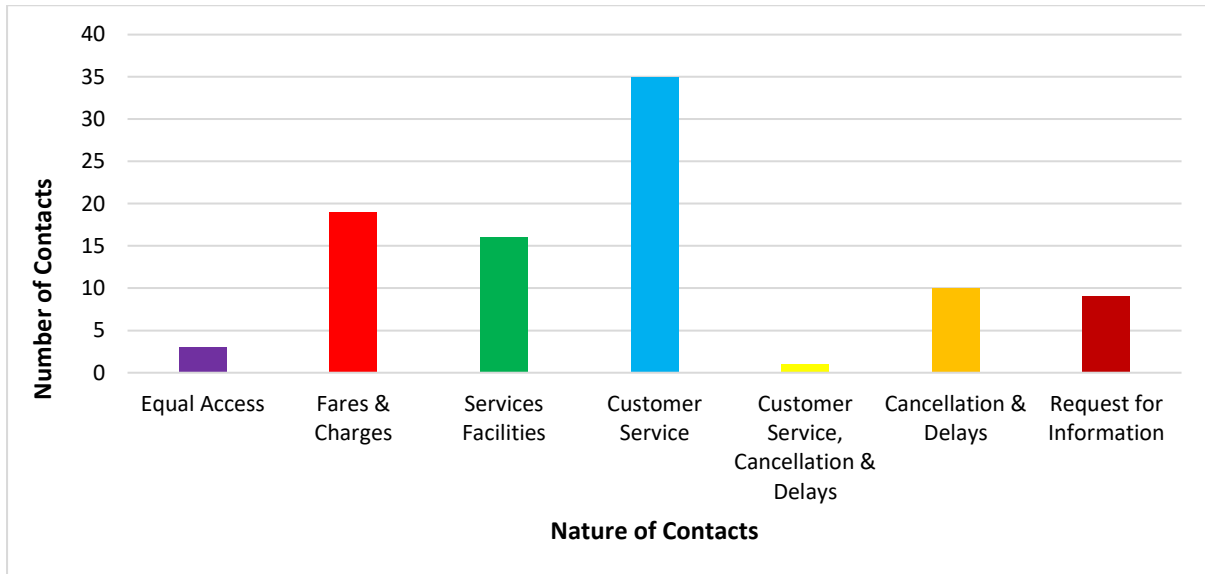


Table 9: Bus contacts by service provider (n = 93)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers
Translink	49	3	13	27	92	£796
Aircoach	1	0	0	0	1	£0
Total	50	3	13	27	93	£796

Consistent with 2017/18, bus passengers most commonly contacted us in relation to poor customer service issues, accounting for 38% of the total bus contacts received. These include complaints about staff attitude, failure to respond to complaints, and inadequate customer service in general. However, compared to last year, issues of this nature have decreased by 10% (39 vs 35).

Chart 12: The top bus issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2018/19 (n = 93)



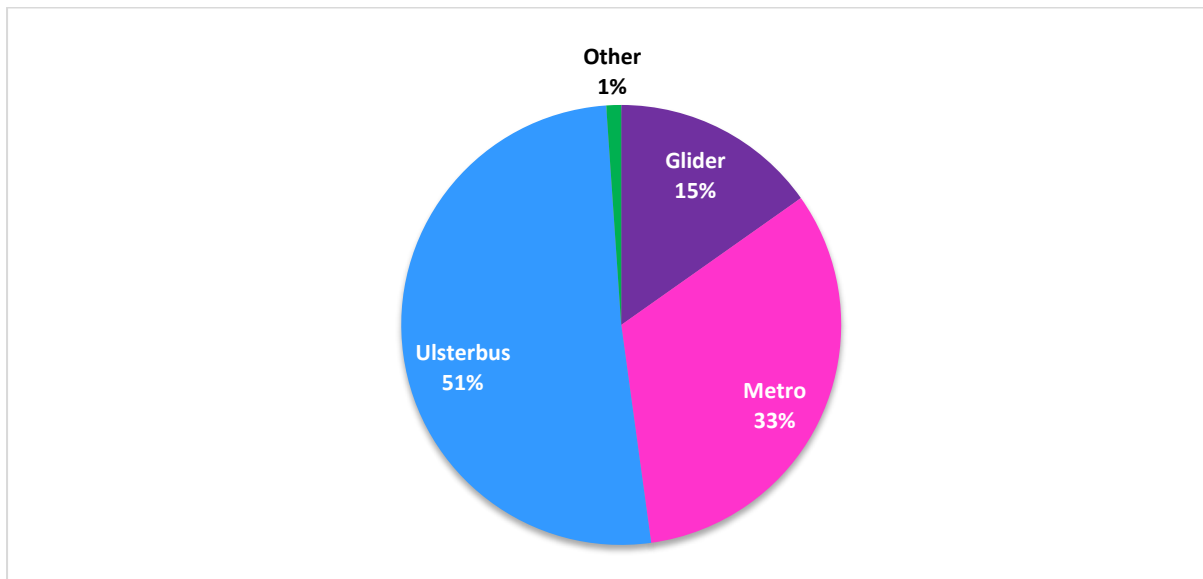
Launch of Glider Service

On 3 September 2018, Translink began operation of the new 'Glider' service. The aim of the new service is to provide a fast, comfortable and reliable service to passengers, and to provide direct cross-city services between the east and west of the city and link into Titanic Quarter. The new Glider vehicles offer a mix of standing and seating areas on-board, with a designated wheelchair space, space for prams and priority seating close to the front of the vehicle for those with reduced mobility or who are assistance dog users. All Glider vehicles have on-board audio visual next stop and destination announcements.

In November 2018, The Consumer Council, in partnership with Translink, arranged for a site visit with a group of passengers with a disability or reduced mobility to use the Glider and provide feedback. Participants were given the opportunity to express their views and make suggestions on how the service could better meet passengers' needs. The Consumer Council will continue to work with Translink during the implementation of the suggestions to ensure that services continue to meet passengers' needs. Since its introduction in September 2018, The Consumer Council has received 14 enquiries and complaints about this specific service.

The chart overleaf shows the breakdown of bus contacts by Translink service.

Chart 13: Breakdown of contacts by Translink Service¹⁰



Case Study – Bus

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer from Banbridge who had encountered customer service issues with Translink and when he contacted them to make a complaint, he never received a response.

The consumer had arranged to get the 238 Ulsterbus service from Belfast to Banbridge on a Saturday evening. He checked the timetable and noted that there was a bus departing Belfast at 12 midnight. However, when the consumer arrived at the Europa Bus Centre he was advised that this service was not operating.

The consumer spoke to a driver on the X1 service which operates between Belfast and Dublin airport and explained the predicament he was in. The driver confirmed that the timetable for the 238 service on Translink’s website was incorrect as the service was not operating.

The consumer asked the driver if it was possible to drop him off in Banbridge as he would be stopping there to pick up passengers. He even offered to pay the full fare to Dublin, but the driver refused and stated the service was ‘pick up only’ and he could get in trouble if he was to stop in Banbridge to let him off.

The consumer had no choice but to get a taxi to Banbridge costing £41.90, £34.90 more than he would have had to pay had he travelled to Banbridge via bus.

The consumer contacted Translink to make a complaint and despite waiting over 5 weeks on a response and contacting Translink within this period to chase the response, he did not receive an explanation or apology for the issues he encountered.

¹⁰ ‘Other’ refers to contacts about Translink facilities rather than an actual bus service

The Consumer Council investigated the issue with Translink and asked Translink to provide the refund requested by the consumer. Translink apologised to the consumer for the manner in which his complaint had been handled and accepted that the delay was unacceptable.

Translink refused to offer a refund as they believed the timetable to have been correct at the time and therefore offered a one day iLink voucher to the value of £16.50 in recognition of the poor customer service offered.

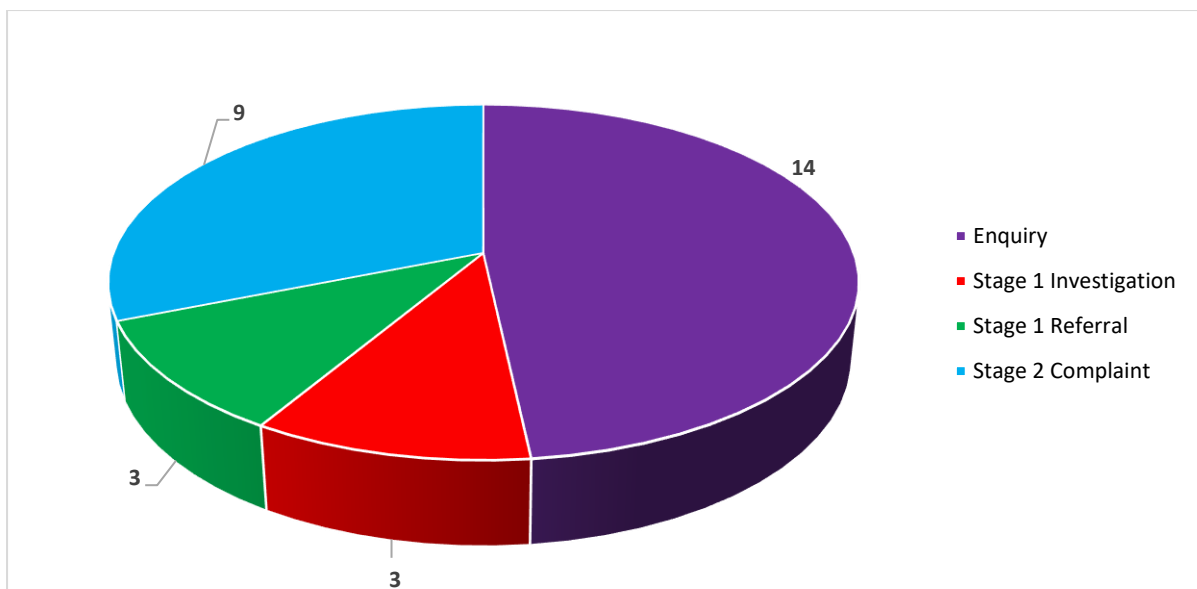
The Consumer Council returned to Translink providing a screenshot of the timetable from Translink's website which had been used by the consumer on the date in question. The information regarding the operating dates and times of the midnight bus on the 238 service from Belfast to Banbridge was unclear and therefore had led to the passenger assuming that it was operating on the night in question.

Translink reviewed this evidence and agreed to refund the £34.90 as well as providing the £16.50 iLink voucher in recognition of its customer service failings.

Rail Travel

Translink is the only rail provider operating in Northern Ireland. In 2018/19, The Consumer Council received a total of 29 rail contacts, which was a 21% increase compared to 2017/18 contacts (24 vs 29).

Chart 14: Breakdown of rail contacts by classification (n=29)

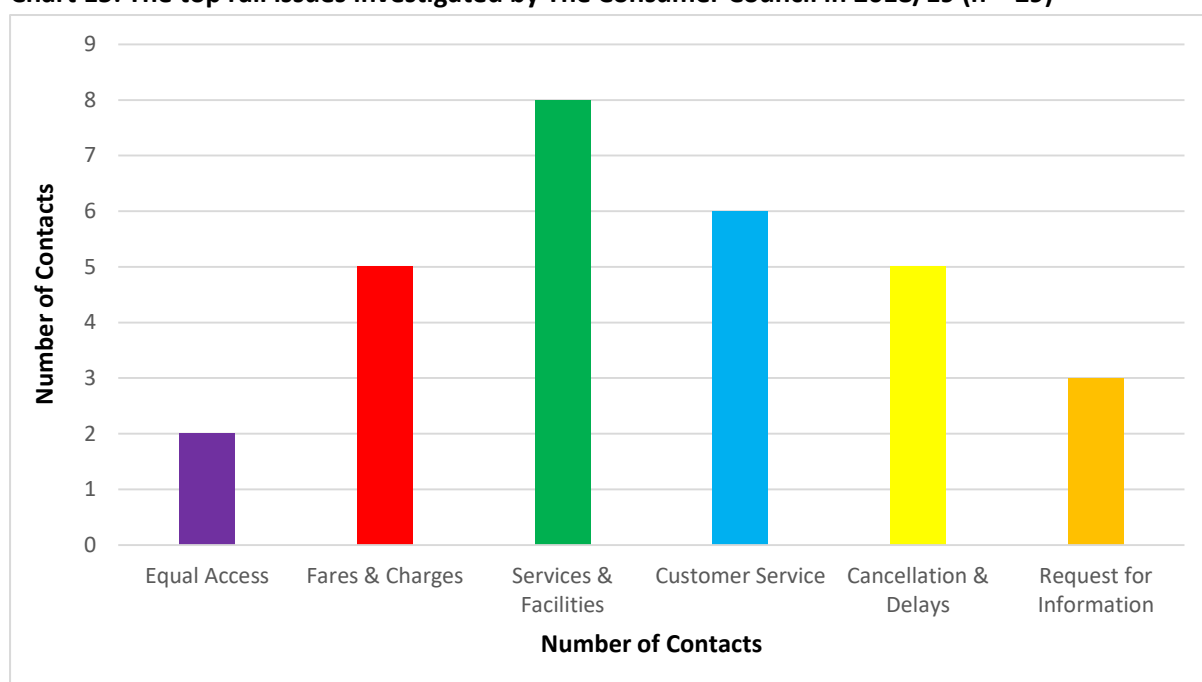


Issues about services and facilities and general customer service remain the most common types of rail contacts received in 2018/19. These include enquiries and complaints about staff attitude, and Translink’s failure to respond to complaints in a timely manner.

Table 10: Rail contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers
Translink - Rail	14	3	3	9	29	£837

Chart 15: The top rail issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2018/19 (n = 29)



Case Study – Rail

The Consumer Council investigated a complaint on behalf of a consumer with a disability who uses a wheelchair. The consumer had encountered a series of customer service issues when he travelled from Belfast to Coleraine return via train and also failed to receive a response when he complained via telephone.

The consumer had travelled via train from Belfast to Coleraine without issue, however, when they arrived at Coleraine there was no ramp available to take the wheelchair off the train. As a result, the consumer missed the train to Portrush as it took them longer to get off the train and make it across the platform.

Furthermore, the lift in Coleraine station was also out of order which again impacted the consumer.

When the consumer was travelling back from Coleraine to Belfast, he asked Translink staff to get the ramp so he could disembark the train, however, the staff member forgot and the consumer had to ask passengers on board the train to assist him instead.

The consumer contacted Translink to make a complaint and during the call he was promised a call back once the issues were investigated. However, no follow up call was received. The consumer was dissatisfied with Translink's customer service and the facilities and assistance available for disabled passengers.

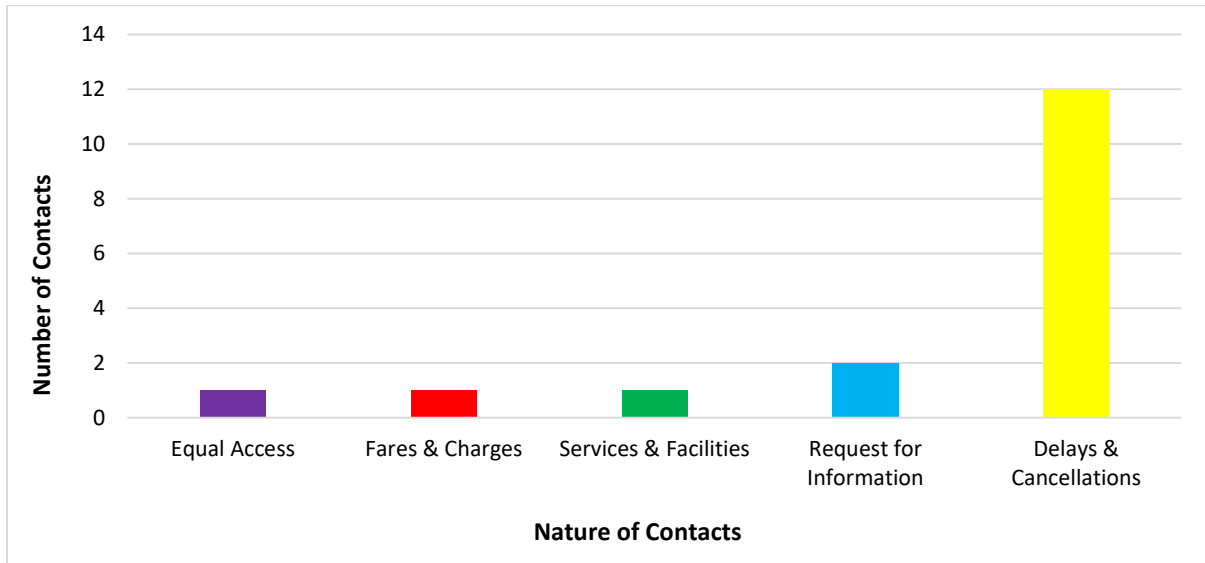
As a result of our formal investigation, Translink issued an apology to the passenger for the stress and inconvenience caused by the poor standards of service provided. Translink addressed the issues encountered at Coleraine station and advised that the staff at Belfast were not aware that the ramp was not available in Coleraine nor that the lift was out of order, otherwise the passenger could have been informed of this prior to purchasing a ticket.

Translink's Accessibility Manager met with the consumer and apologised for the service he had received and the steps that were being taken to improve accessibility and assistance on-board the train services. As a gesture of goodwill, Translink also provided two return tickets to Dublin on the Enterprise service.

Ferry Travel

Consistent with the previous two years, less than 1% (8) of all contacts received by The Consumer Council in 2018/19 relate to ferry travel. The contacts received in this reporting period centred on delays and cancellations.

Chart 16: The top ferry issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2018/19



Irish Ferries Cancellations

In April 2018, Irish Ferries announced that it had to cancel up to 10,000 customer bookings made to travel on its WB Yeats Ferry due to delays with its construction. The ferry was due to travel between Ireland and France and those passengers affected were contacted by Irish Ferries to inform them of the cancellations.

A further 19,000 customers were affected in June 2018, when Irish Ferries cancelled further sailings due to the construction delays with the ferry.

The Consumer Council was contacted by consumers who were affected by the cancellations requesting information on their rights and if they were entitled to compensation. In response we issued a press release on the issue, advising consumers on their entitlements and signposting them to the National Transport Authority (NTA) which is the National Enforcement Body in Ireland for Maritime Passenger Rights in Ireland.

Chart 17: Breakdown of ferry contacts by classification (n = 17)

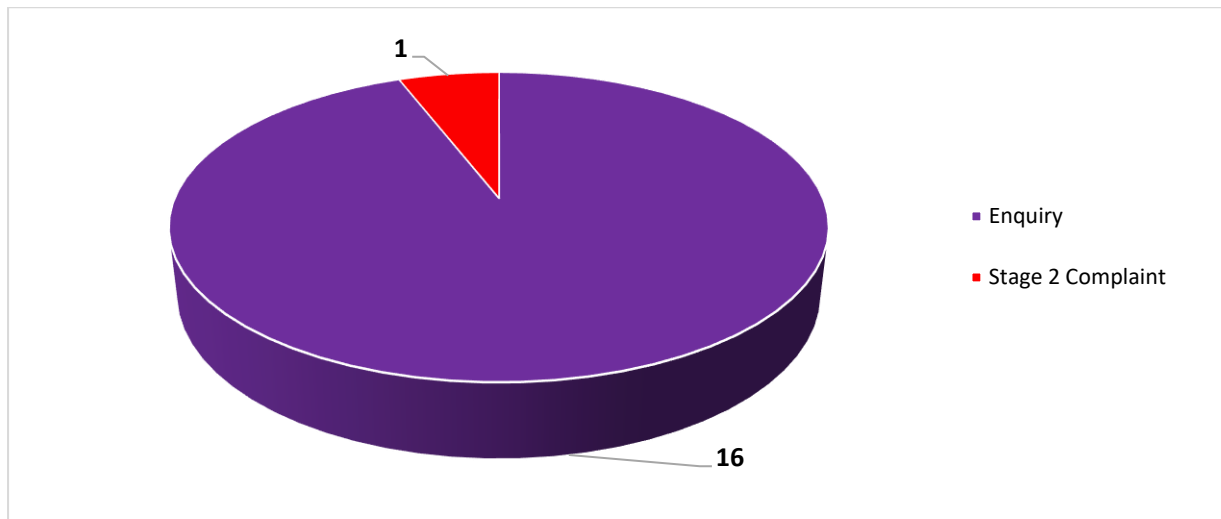


Table 11: Ferry contacts by service provider (n = 8)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers
P & O Ferries	1	1	2	£0
Stena Line	2	0	2	£0
Irish Ferries	13	0	13	£0
Total	16	1	17	£0



5. Water & Sewage

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

Water and sewerage issues accounted for 5% (177) of all enquiries and complaints received by The Consumer Council in 2018/19 (3,781). In comparison with last year, water and sewerage contacts have reduced by 36% (177 vs 275).

As reported last year, this drop in contacts can be attributed to a change in policy by NI Water regarding retrospective or ‘back-dated’ billing, which came into effect in April 2017. This amendment resulted in the maximum back billing period reducing from six years to 18 months. As a result, The Consumer Council has noticed a steady reduction in the number of enquiries and complaints relating to this issue since the policy has been amended, reducing overall contacts received.

Chart 18: Breakdown of water contacts by classification (n = 177)

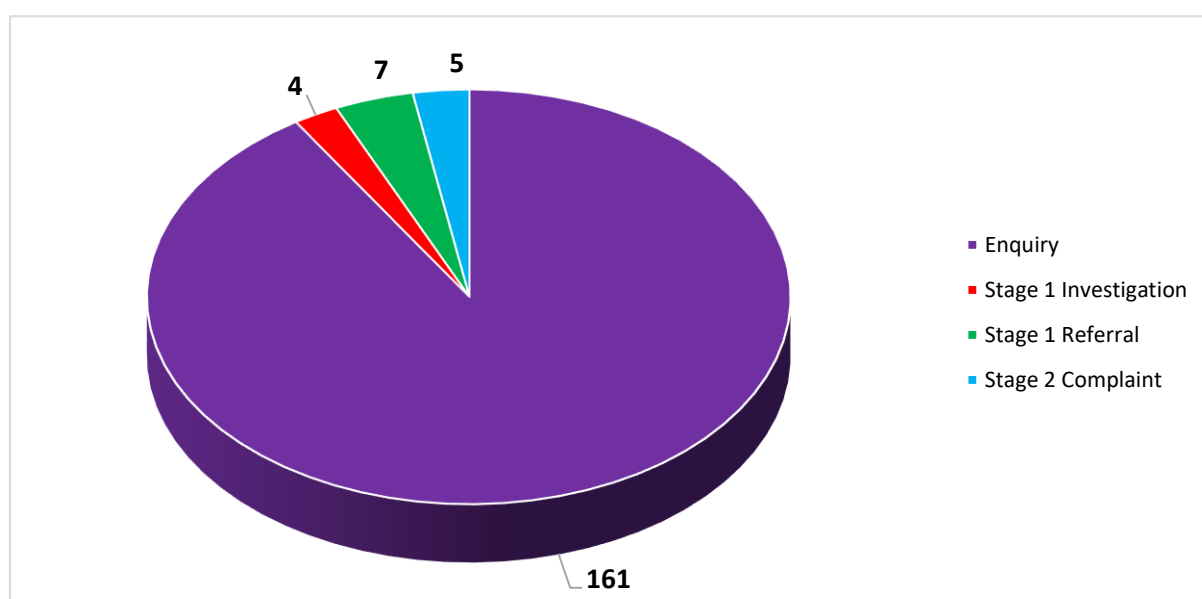
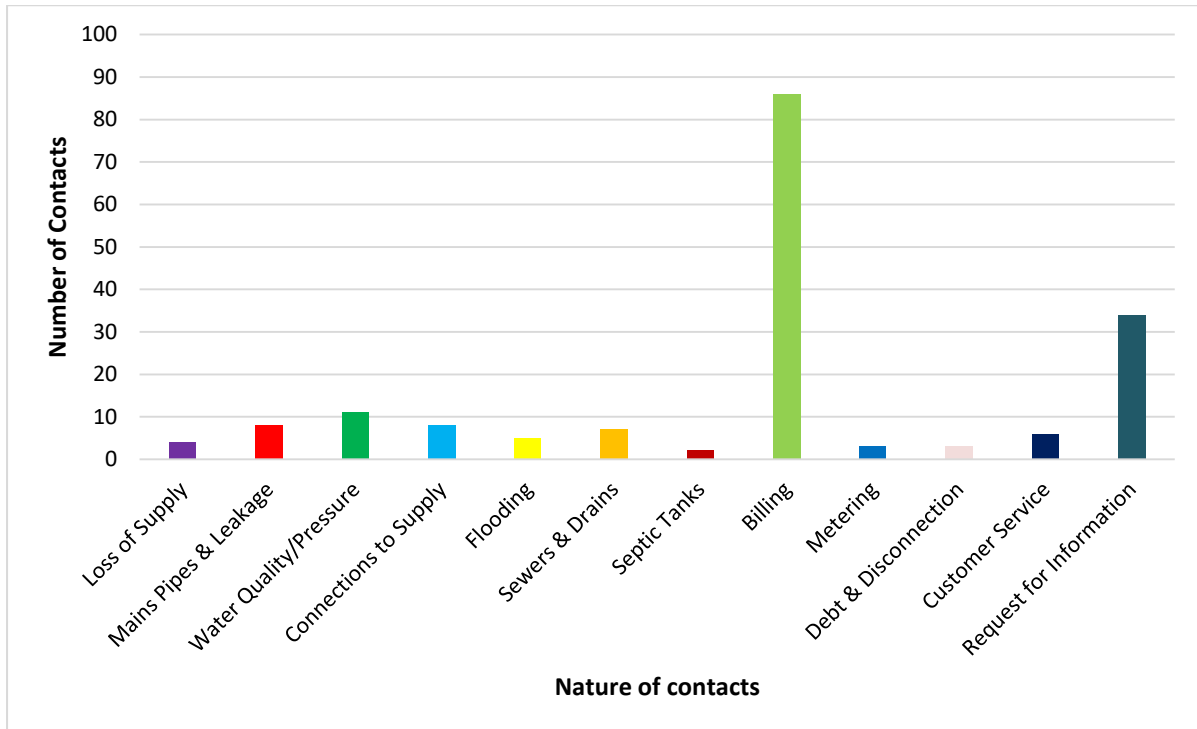


Table 12: Water and Sewerage contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers
NI Water	161	4	7	5	177	£34,760

Chart 19: The top water issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2018/19 (n = 177)



Case Study – Water

The Consumer Council was contacted by a retired business owner who had raised numerous complaints with Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) dating back to 2007, to dispute liability for water charges levied on his business. The business had suggested to NI Water that the property was on a shared supply, resulting in his business being charged for the water consumption of neighbouring businesses, as well as his own.

Despite engaging with NI Water to query his consumption historically, the investigations carried out incorrectly determined that the supply was not shared with any other businesses. . When the business closed, the owner noticed that meter charges continued to be levied by NI Water, highlighting once again his original assertion, that the supply to the business was serving other neighbouring properties.

New investigations undertaken by NI Water in 2017 confirmed that the business was in fact on a shared supply and as a result the metered charges were removed and replaced with unmetered charges based on the Net Annual Value (NAV) of the property, resulting in a refund of over £14,500.

The business remained dissatisfied with how NI Water had handled the complaint and its failings to retain appropriate records for businesses on a shared supply.

As a result of our formal investigation on behalf of the consumer, NI Water undertook a further review of the account and confirmed that a further credit of £1,140 had been added to the account.

Water Bill Health Checks

As well as representing consumers in relation to complaints, The Consumer Council also has a strong focus on educating consumers and businesses in relation to their rights and entitlements, and how to save money and get the best deal when it comes to paying for their energy and water.

Part of this education programme is undertaken by our Water Policy Team who encourage businesses across Northern Ireland to contact us for a water bill health check. This free health check provides a business with a simple breakdown and explanation of their water bill. It ensures they are being billed correctly and helps identify opportunities for them to save money on their water bills. If appropriate for their circumstances then simple water efficiency advice is also provided

In 2018/19, The Consumer Council undertook 107 water bill health checks for businesses across the country to help them save money and ensure they were receiving any allowances they were entitled to. A total of £57,275 was returned to businesses in Northern Ireland (with an additional ongoing annual saving of £27,731 on their water bills) as a result of this work.



6. Postal Services

The Consumer Council is responsible for promoting and protecting the interests of postal consumers across Northern Ireland. This role involves providing consumers with independent advice and guidance on postal service complaints.

Under the Consumers, Estate Agents and Redress Act 2007, The Consumer Council can only investigate complaints about postal services if the consumer is deemed 'vulnerable', and if we are satisfied that it is not reasonable to expect that person to pursue their own complaint.

In 2018/19, we received a total of 43 contacts relating to Postal Services. This represents a 10% increase in contacts of this nature compared to 2017-18 (39).

Consistent with the past two years, mail delivery was the primary postal issue raised by consumers, accounting for 60% of the total postal contacts received. These include concerns about damaged or lost mail.

Chart 20: Breakdown of postal services contacts by classification (n = 43)

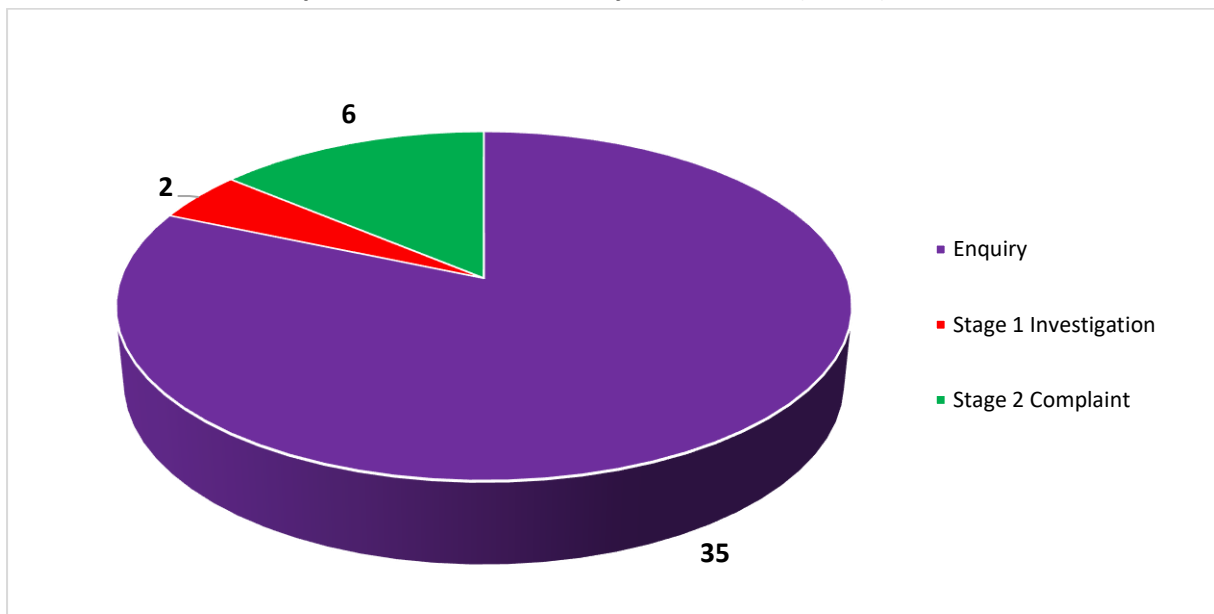
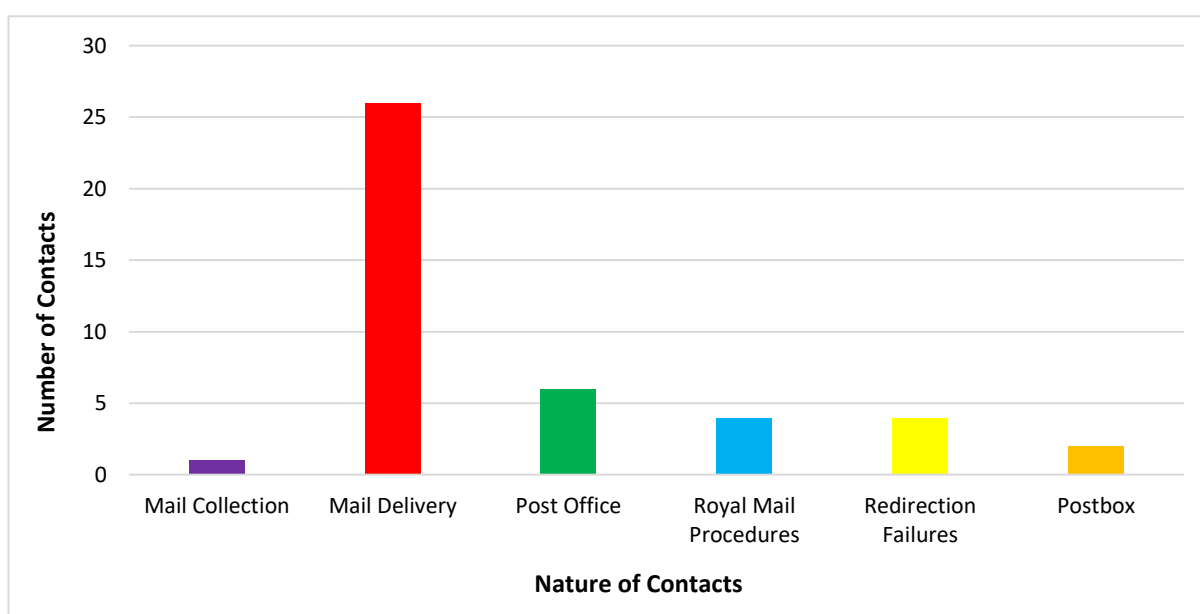


Table 13: Postal services contacts by service provider (n = 43)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers
Royal Mail	20	2	0	6	28	£20
Parcelforce	6	0	0	0	6	£0
Post Office	7	0	0	0	7	£37
Other (Postal Service)	2	0	0	0	2	£0
Total	35	2	0	6	43	£57

Chart 21: The top postal service issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2018/19 (n = 43)



Case Study – Postal Services

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer regarding a passport renewal application they posted at the Post Office. They paid to have the passport sent via express delivery costing £37. Unfortunately, the passport application did not arrive at the passport office and when the consumer tried to raise the complaint and find out where the application was sent, she was passed between Royal Mail and the Post Office Limited without obtaining a satisfactory resolution.

Although the passport express service is a Passport product, it relies on Post Office Limited to deliver this service on its behalf, therefore, we contacted the Post Office Limited to raise a complaint on behalf of the consumer.

Post Office Limited investigated the issue and apologised for the lost mail. Unfortunately, it was unable to provide an explanation as to the whereabouts of the mail but agreed to refund the £37 paid for the express delivery service.



7. The Consumer Council - Requests for Information and General Remit

In 2018/19, The Consumer Council received 1,518 contacts from consumers requesting general advice and information across all areas of our remit or to provide feedback on our services.

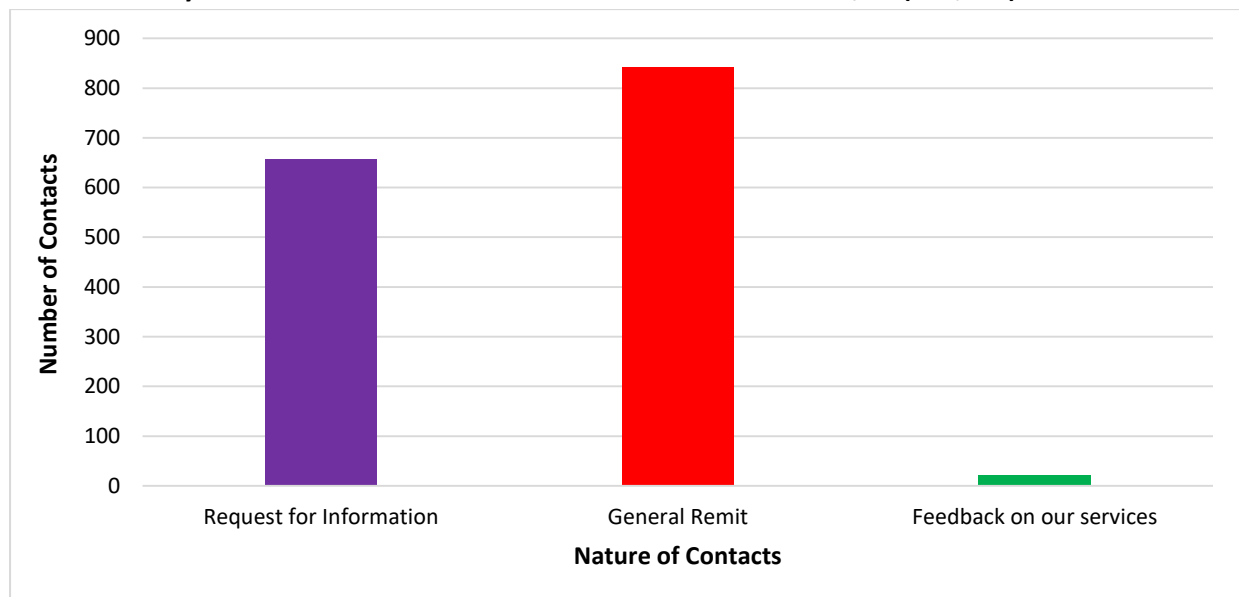
Requests for information accounted for 43% of these contacts and included requests for copies of our publications and guides such as *'Plane Facts'* or *'Switch On'* energy guides, requests for presentations by our outreach team, and general information on energy, water, transport and post.

Aside from our specific statutory duties to investigate complaints in relation to energy, transport, water and postal services, 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 2018/19, we assisted 841 consumers with issues of a more general nature such as complaints about private car parking fines, tour operator issues and providing consumers with information on bank closures.

In 2018/19, The Consumer Council was contacted by 21 consumers to provide feedback on our services, both positive and negative. This feedback is used to develop and improve the services we provide to consumers.

Chart 22: Analysis of The Consumer Council contacts received in 2018/19 (n=1,518)



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 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. In 2018/19, The Consumer Council investigated 641 parking charge notices on behalf of consumers and successfully appealed almost £62k in charges.

In addition, we have a template letter and factsheet available on our website, to help consumers who have been issued with what they believe to be an unfair private parking ticket and have provided tips and advice on how to prevent getting a PCN when parking on private land.

Private Pay and Display Car Parks

Private car parks can be controlled using a variety of methods and consumers need to be aware of the different types of systems that are used so they can avoid breaching the terms and conditions of the car park and receiving a PCN.

Many car parks have Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) cameras located at the entrance and exit of the car park to photograph the car entering and exiting the premises. It will calculate the duration between the two photographs and if the vehicle exceeds the time restriction on the car park then the registered keeper will receive a PCN via post, once the keeper details have been provided by the Driver Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA).

Some car parks also have ticket attendants who will monitor cars and if a car exceeds the allocated time restriction, a PCN will be attached to the windscreen of the car. If payment is not received, a letter will be sent to the registered keeper of the vehicle requesting payment of the charge.

Another method used by private parking companies is a Pay and Display system. These car parks will have ANPR cameras at the entrance and exit of the car park, as well as an electronic ticket machine which the motorist must use to purchase a ticket on entering the car park.

The motorist will be asked to input their vehicle registration into the machine and once input they will be asked to confirm that it is correct. The motorist will then purchase a ticket for the time they wish to stay in the car park and a ticket will be printed by the machine, which is then to be displayed by the motorist in their window. A PCN will be issued if the motorist overstays the period of time that they have paid for or if the vehicle registration has been input incorrectly.

The Consumer Council has received many contacts from consumers who in error, have received a PCN because they did not input the correct car registration despite having paid for their parking and having retained the ticket as proof of purchase. In many of these instances the car registration is only incorrect by one or two digits.

The Consumer Council has been acting on behalf of consumers to appeal these cases and has been liaising with the British Parking Association (BPA) regarding its Code of Practice which BPA accredited parking companies must comply with when issuing PCNs.

Unfortunately, the Code of Practice does not offer any guidance to private parking companies in relation to this particular issue and as a result, private parking companies are continuing to penalise consumers for genuine mistakes.

The Consumer Council is working with the Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service in relation to this specific issue as it is becoming more prevalent and is causing financial detriment to consumers who have legitimately paid for their parking.

Case study – General Remit

A consumer contacted us regarding a parking charge notice (PCN) they had received from a private parking company. The consumer had received a letter from the company advising that they had allegedly breached the terms and conditions of the car park at a retail outlet in Belfast by remaining in the car park for longer than permitted.

The consumer was advised that a charge of £60 had to be paid within 14 days and if not paid on time, the PCN would increase to £100 and a £10 administration charge would apply. The letter advised that failure to pay the charge may lead to legal action being taken.

The Consumer Council contacted the private parking company on behalf of the consumer and we asked them to provide evidence that the person named on the letter (the registered keeper of the vehicle) was driving the vehicle on the day of the alleged contravention. We advised the parking company that if no evidence could be provided then the parking charge notice should be revoked. The private parking company was unable to provide the necessary evidence as requested and as a result the charge was cancelled.



8. Getting in Touch

The Consumer Council can be contacted via telephone, email, website, letter, social media or in person by visiting our offices. We have a dedicated free phone number and email address specifically for enquiries and complaints, as well as an online complaints submission form which can be completed via our website.

In 2019 we also introduced a free post address so consumers can contact us in writing without incurring any postage costs.

This year we also held monthly consumer clinics to encourage members of the public, as well as businesses, to come and see us face to face about a range of issues such as billing queries, home budget planning, water bill health checks and consumer rights.

Website Accessibility

Accessibility of our services is of paramount importance to The Consumer Council. We are always looking at new ways to improve how consumers can access our services, especially those who have disabilities or are vulnerable.

Whilst our website has always been available in over 13 different languages and publications available in easy-read formats or Braille/audio CD on request, we decided to carry out some desktop research to review other organisations websites and identify best practice in terms of accessibility.

We noted that many consumer organisations offered solutions to assist consumers who are blind, partially sighted or those who do not speak English as their first language, to easily access the information on their website by having it read aloud to them.

We decided that a solution like this would benefit consumers who access our services and would be a great addition to the other services we offer such as The Big Word Translation Service and the JAM card, both introduced in 2017/18.

A range of accessibility software packages were tried and tested and in April 2019 we launched ReciteMe on our website to enhance and improve accessibility to our service.

Resolver Partnership

Analysis of our complaints statistics identified that in 2017/18, 1,346 consumers contacted us about issues outside of our remit. A further 71 consumers contacted us without having made a complaint to the service provider in the first instance.

We wanted to better assist consumers by being able to offer them the opportunity to complain about any service provider in Northern Ireland, via our website.

In January 2019, we set up a partnership with Resolver to offer consumers in Northern Ireland the ability to make a complaint about any service provider, across a wide range of areas, via the Resolver website. This makes complaining more accessible and easy for consumers.

Consumers can now make a complaint directly with the service provider via a widget on our complaints webpage, which will take them straight to the Resolver website, where they can make a complaint about any trader or company in the UK.

Since January 2019, we have received 35 referrals from Resolver, 54% of which were in relation to airline complaints about delays and cancellations.

NI Direct Telephony Support

From March 2019, NI Direct have been providing telephony support to The Consumer Council by operating and managing all calls received via our free phone number.

In preparation for the handover, The Consumer Council worked closely with NI Direct to prepare scripts and provide information on the types of queries we receive, so that its staff can assist consumers and provide a high standard of service to consumers who contact us.

If the issue is within our remit or if the consumer is vulnerable, the call is transferred through to the Consumer Protection Team within The Consumer Council so we can investigate the issue on their behalf.

In the month of March 2019, NI Direct received 489 calls on behalf of The Consumer Council, of which 185 (38%) were transferred to The Consumer Council – the remainder of which were signposted to other organisations.

Method of Contact

In 2018/19, the telephone was the preferred communication choice when contacting The Consumer Council, accounting for 71% (n=2,690) of the total contacts received.

The infographic overleaf shows a breakdown of the enquiries and complaints received in 2018/19 by communication method.



Telephone

2,690 consumers



Email

826 consumers



Website Online Form

106 consumers



Letter

60 consumers



In Person

46 consumers



Social Media

39 consumers



Outreach Event

14 consumers

The Consumer Council also likes to learn how consumers hear about our services as this helps inform our promotional and educational work.

In 2018/19, a quarter of consumers (27%) who contacted us found out about us using search engines such as Google.

Table 14: How consumers heard about The Consumer Council in 2018/19

How did consumers find out about The Consumer Council?	Total
Search engine e.g. Google	1,332
The Consumer Council's details on the back of a utility bill	792
Not disclosed	518
Friend/Relative	496
Used our services before	363
Other	307
The Consumer Council website	265
Referred by Advice agency	181
Radio	132

How did consumers find out about The Consumer Council?	Total
Referred by service provider verbally	108
Social Media	107
Outreach presentation/event	96
Referred by constituency office	84
Newspaper	64
The Consumer Council advertisement in airport	55
Resolver Referral	35
Referred by service provider in writing	31
The Consumer Council's details on service provider website	16
The Consumer Council advertisement in bus station/bus	6
The Consumer Council Publication/leaflet	2
Television	2
Yellow pages/BT Phone Book	2
Referred by solicitor	1
Total	4,995



9. Consumer Feedback and Satisfaction

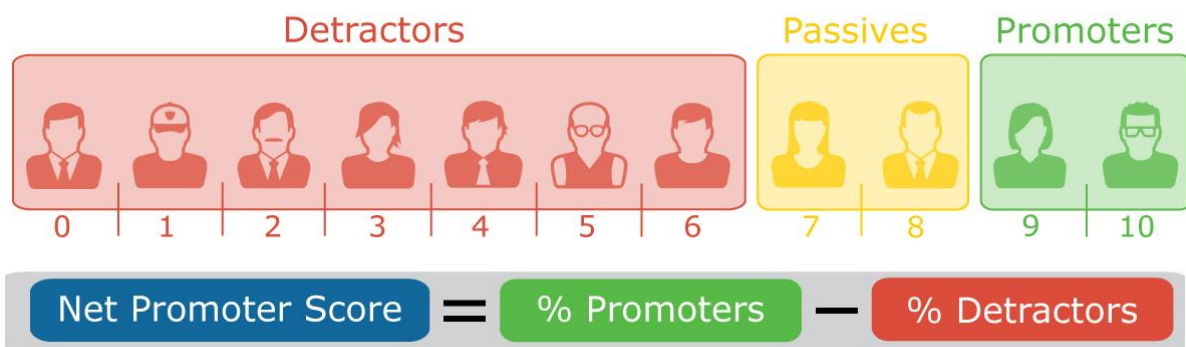
Consumer feedback is an essential part of The Consumer Council’s learning and development process, adding particular value to our complaints handling service.

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

Our Customer Satisfaction survey includes a Net Promoter Score (NPS) question. The NPS system is designed to test if a consumer likes a ‘brand’ enough that they would recommend it to others. It uses one basic question to measure customer loyalty:

“How likely is it that you would recommend our organisation to a friend or colleague?”

The question uses a score of 0-10 and respondents’ scores are grouped as follows.



- Promoters (score 9-10)
- Passives (score 7-8)
- Detractors (score 0-6)

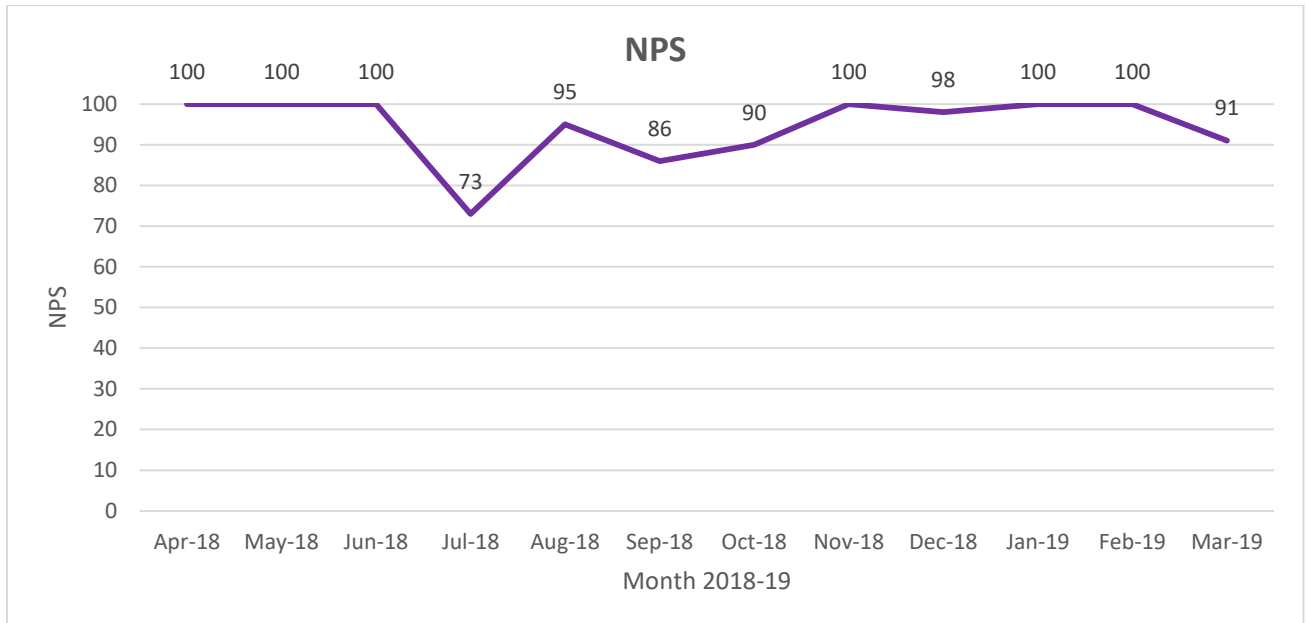
The NPS subtracts the percentage of Detractors from the percentage of Promoters, which can range from a low of -100 (if every customer is a Detractor) to a high of 100 (if every customer is a Promoter).

We also ask consumers to explain their score so we can identify the specific areas of our service that consumers like and, more importantly, to identify any area of our service that does not meet their expectations, or that needs improvement.

In 2018/19, our NPS score was 95, which has improved from 2017/18 (92).

The chart overleaf shows the monthly NPS score we received from April 2018 to March 2019. The dips in NPS are caused by the detractor (0-6) scores that we received from consumers. In 2018/19, we received six detractor scores in total.

Chart 23: Net Promoter Score received by The Consumer Council from April 2017 - March 2019 (n=358)



As well as measuring the NPS, we also measure other aspects of our customer service including:

- Our efficiency in acknowledging consumer complaints;
- Our ability to keep the consumer informed throughout the complaint investigation;
- How easy our correspondence is to understand;
- If our staff are polite and friendly;
- If our staff are professional; and
- If our staff treat consumers fairly.

Overall satisfaction with The Consumer Council in 2018/19 was 99.2%. This represents an average of all the measures above.

In 2018/19, the return rate for our Customer Satisfaction survey was 48%, a small increase on last year (47%). The number of satisfaction surveys issued in 2018/19 has increased by 107% compared to 2017/18, this is due to the increased number of Stage 2 complaints received this year.

Emotional Wellbeing

In addition to the questions above, our survey also includes a series of what we refer to as ‘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 2018 to March 2019 (n=358).



94.8%

Agreed that our help **relieved** them of stress and anxiety



98.3%

Agreed that we made them **feel listened to**



95.7%

Agreed that our help made them feel **more empowered**

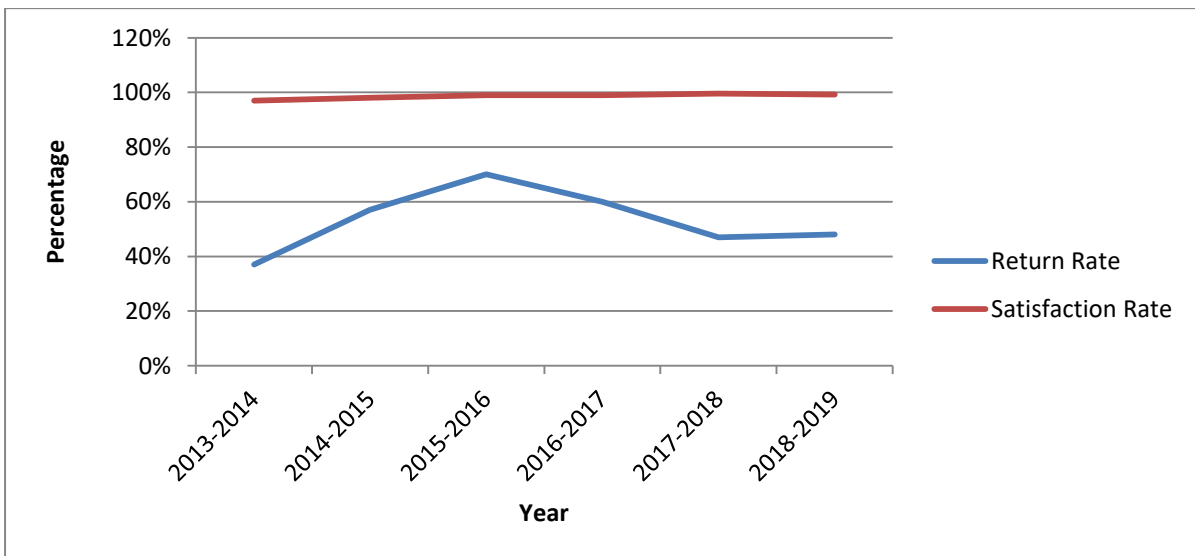


98.5%

Agreed that our help made them feel **supported**

The chart below shows The Consumer Council’s satisfaction rates and return rates from 2013 to 2019.

Chart 24: Analysis of survey return rate & customer satisfaction rate from 2013-2018



Our Service Standards

The Consumer Council formally introduced Service Standards in 2017/18 (Chart 26) 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 on a monthly basis and publish our results quarterly on our website.

In 2018/19, The Consumer Council met our 100% target by no less than 90% in all of its Service Standards, bar one.

This year we had to amend our service standard in relation to how quickly we answer telephone calls due to NI Direct taking responsibility for our Free Phone number in March 2019. As a result we had to amend our telephone efficiency standard from 100% of calls in 10 seconds to 85% of calls within 20 seconds, as this is the Service Standard operated by NI Direct across all sectors.

Chart 25: The Consumer Council Service Standards



Chart 26 shows our performance for the year against our service standards.

Chart 26: Service Standards Results 2018/19



The Consumer Council Standards of Service Annual Report: 2018 - 2019

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.

Calling in Person:



If you have an appointment we aim to meet you within 5 minutes of your appointment time.



If you call in person and do not have an appointment a member of staff will meet you within 15 minutes.



Staff:



We will treat our customers fairly.



Our staff will act with professionalism.



Our staff will be polite and friendly.



Telephone:



We aim to answer 85% of calls to our freephone 0800 121 6022 number between 9am & 5pm within 20 seconds.



We will answer voicemails left to our freephone number between 9am and 4pm within 3 hours, or the next working day if left outside office hours.



Our Service:



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.



We will respond to all correspondence within 3 working days.



We will keep you updated on the progress of your complaint.



We will provide you with a copy of the response from service providers within 5 working days.



Feedback & Complaints:



We will acknowledge all formal complaints within 3 days.



We will aim to provide a formal response to a complaint within 10 working days.



3 complaints received this year.

Our Net Promoter Score:

NPS score



Key:

Within 10% of set target



Within 15% of set target



Target not met



Customer Service Excellence

In June 2017, The Consumer Council received The Customer Service Excellence (CSE) accreditation. The CSE standard was developed to drive customer focused change within organisations by placing the consumer at the heart of service provision.

In order to obtain the accreditation, The Consumer Council had to go through a formal assessment, which tests in great depth areas that are of particular interest to consumers such as delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude.

The CSE standard has been beneficial for our organisation as it has helped drive continuous improvement by identifying areas of customer service that we are excelling in and those that require further improvement.

The accreditation tests 57 elements across 5 criterion; Customer Insight, The Culture of the Organisation, Information and Access, Delivery and Timeliness and Quality of Service.

Since 2017, The Consumer Council has continued to be assessed on a yearly basis on a rolling programme which tests specific elements over a three year period. To maintain the accreditation, we must provide evidence of development and continuous improvement within the organisation.

In 2018/19, we successfully completed our second rolling programme which tested 19 of the 57 criterion. Out of the 57 criterion we have been awarded, 17 Compliance Plus, which signifies best practice within this area, and 40 Compliant.

Complaints Handling Awards 2018/19

In January 2019, The Consumer Council was shortlisted for three categories in the UK Complaints Handling Awards. The three categories were: Pro-active Complaint Handling, Best Complaints Process Business to Customer (B2C) and Best Complaint Handling Team.

We were up against large UK companies and organisations such as HSBC Bank, Checkatrade.com, Lastminute.com and Zurich Insurance.

The final was held in London, where representatives from The Consumer Council had to present their entry in front of a panel of judges and answer questions from the panel.

The Consumer Council was awarded a silver award in Pro-active Complaint Handling and a bronze award in Best Complaints Process B2C.



Pictured are Mark Crawford, Noleen Charnley and Laurie Brown who represented The Consumer Council in the final at the UK Complaint Handling Awards in March 2019.

Consumer Testimonials

The company I was complaining about tried to fob The Consumer Council off several times. I was impressed with how they kept fighting this frustrating case. They kept pursuing the matter, keeping me informed throughout the whole process. I finally won my case and received full compensation. I'm already telling everyone to spread the word about the great work that The Consumer Council does.

Customer service was excellent. The matter was dealt with in a short space of time, and in an extremely efficient and friendly manner. I was recommended the service and I am very impressed with how efficient and quickly the matter was sorted.

The nature of my complaint was quickly understood, which gave me the confidence that it would be thoroughly and professionally investigated. After speaking with a staff member, I knew that I had made the right decision in seeking assistance from The Consumer Council.

The correspondence I received from The Consumer Council has been outstanding and I have been given good advice. I was also regularly given updates on the expected timeline throughout the complaint handling process.

Excellent service - quick, clear communication and great outcome!



Section B: Northern Ireland Consumer Complaints

An additional exercise was undertaken by The Consumer Council to analyse complaints data from Trading Standards Service Northern Ireland, Consumer Advice Service Belfast (Belfast City Council) and The Consumer Council.

The purpose was to understand what type of complaints consumers in Northern Ireland are making, how many complaints are made, and what level of redress is being received.

All data presented in this overview is for the financial year 2018/19, and all data used has been provided and analysed in an aggregate and anonymous matter i.e. it is top-level only data.

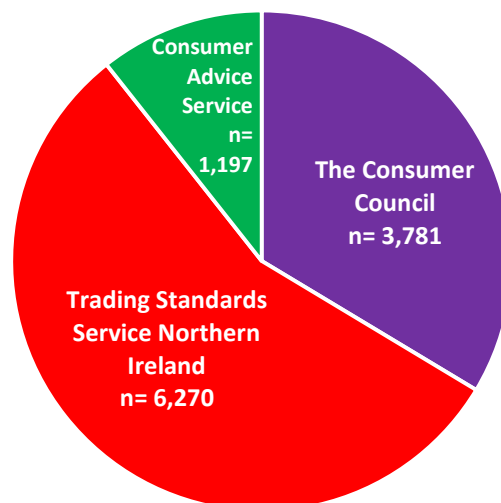
NB: the term ‘complaints’ can mean different things to different complaint handling organisations. In this report, the definition means any complaint or enquiry which was taken on board and dealt with pertaining to the statutory area of interest. For example, it does not include signposting, general referrals, metrology, trader requests, other agency requests etc. These contacts would have been given consumer advice by experienced staff in relation to consumer problems, and may have led to a full investigation.

Volume of complaints

The data highlights that a total of **11,248** consumer complaints were made to Trading Standards Service Northern Ireland, Consumer Advice Service Belfast (Belfast City Council) and The Consumer Council in 2018/19. Over half of these complaints were made to Trading Standards Service Northern Ireland (56%, n=6,270 complaints).

This is an increase of 15% (n=1,467) total complaints from when we first undertook this exercise in 2017/18. This is reflective of increases in contacts to The Consumer Council and Trading Standards Service, though there were modest decreases in complaints handled by the Consumer Advice Service.

Chart 27: Number of Enquiries and Complaints Received by Each Consumer Body 2018/19



Complaint Themes

As each organisation categorises complaints in different ways a direct comparison cannot be made. However, the most common complaints made across all three organisations included:

- Vehicles and Public Transport;
- Furniture and Household;
- Clothing, goods and services;
- Electricity and energy;
- Air travel and holidays; and,
- Other matters, such as private car parking charges.

This is the same trend as 2017/18 and no changes in complaint type has been experienced in 2018/19.

Geography

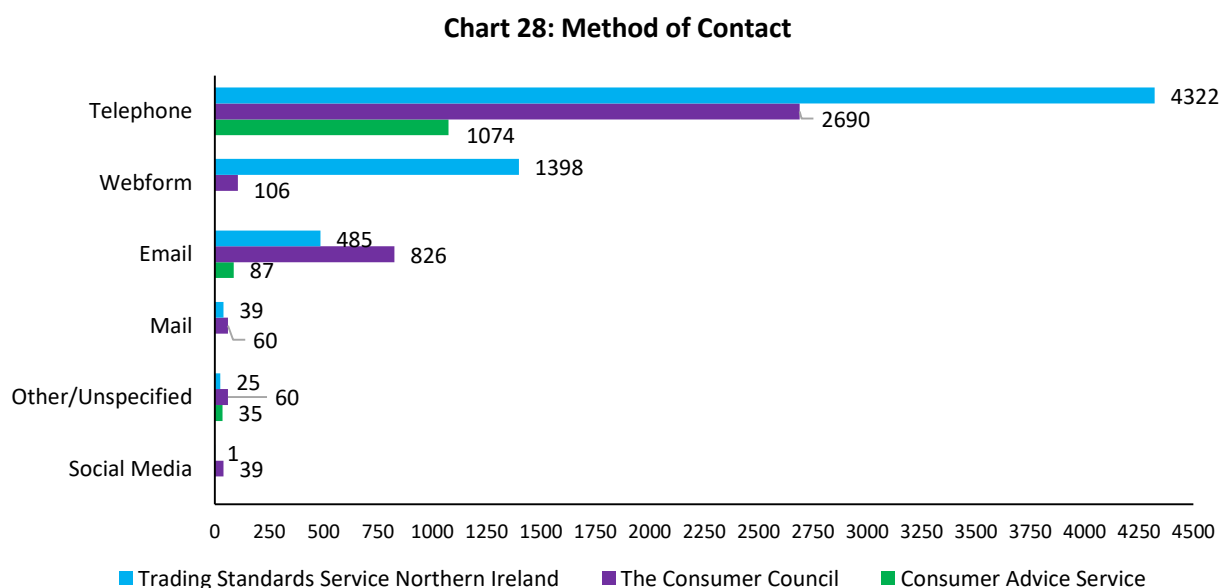
Most contacts (proportionately per 1,000 population) to The Consumer Council and Trading Standards Service Northern Ireland come from Lisburn and Castlereagh Council area, this is similar to last year for Trading Standards Service Northern Ireland, although different for The Consumer Council as Ards and North Down Council area had the most proportionate complaints in 2017/18.

In terms of numbers (and not proportions), the highest volume of consumer complaints in Northern Ireland comes from the biggest city i.e. Belfast. This is to be expected and is the same as 2017/18.

Least contacts (proportionately per 1,000 population) to Trading Standards Service Northern Ireland come from Derry City and Strabane Council area, the same as last year, whereas least complaints to The Consumer Council come from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area, which is different to last year when the least proportional complaints came from Mid Ulster Council area.

(Please note: Consumer Advice Service covers Belfast City Council area only.)

How do consumers complain?



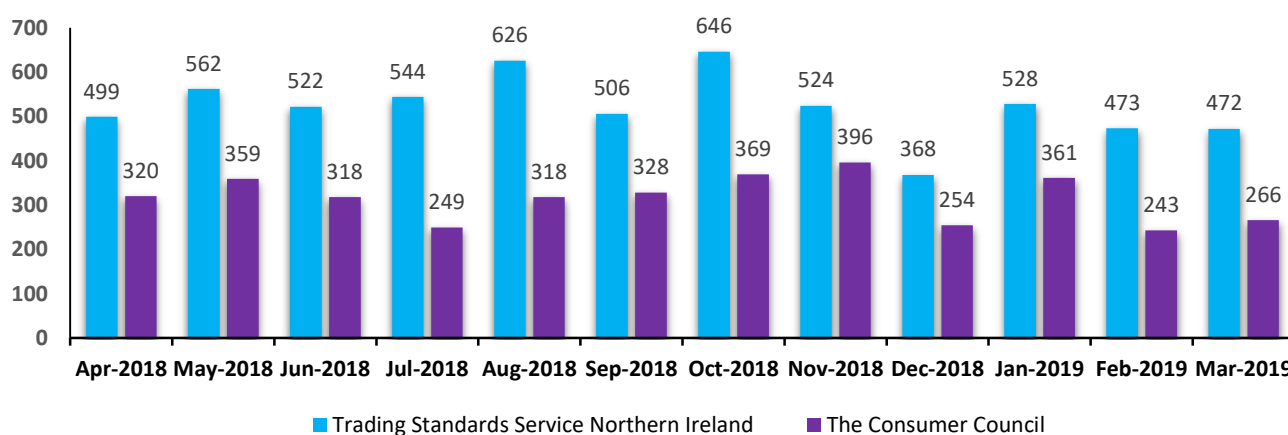
Data from Trading Standards Service Northern Ireland, The Consumer Council and Consumer Advice Service highlights that most complaints are made by telephone (72% combined), despite availability of online mechanisms. Telephone contacts were also the most popular method of contact in 2017/18, accounting for 69% of Trading Standards complaints and 74% of The Consumer Council contacts.

When do consumers complain?

The chart below shows the total number of contacts received by Trading Standards Service for Northern Ireland and The Consumer Council each month in 2018/19. The month in which most contacts were made to Trading Standards and The Consumer Council combined was October 2018 (n= 1,015 contacts) while the majority of contacts to The Consumer Council (n=396 contacts) were made in November 2018 in 2018/19. This is different to 2017/18 when the busiest month for complaints to both organisations was January.

The quietest months were December 2018 (Trading Standards) and February 2019 (The Consumer Council). This compares to last year when December and April were the quietest months for both organisations.

Chart 29: Total Contacts Recieved each month



What is the level of redress received?

The level of redress received by complainants from accessing The Consumer Council and Consumer Advice Service Belfast totals **£416,207** (a 77% increase from 2017/18), which equates to £84 on average returned per complaint.

SECTION C: Outreach



Introduction

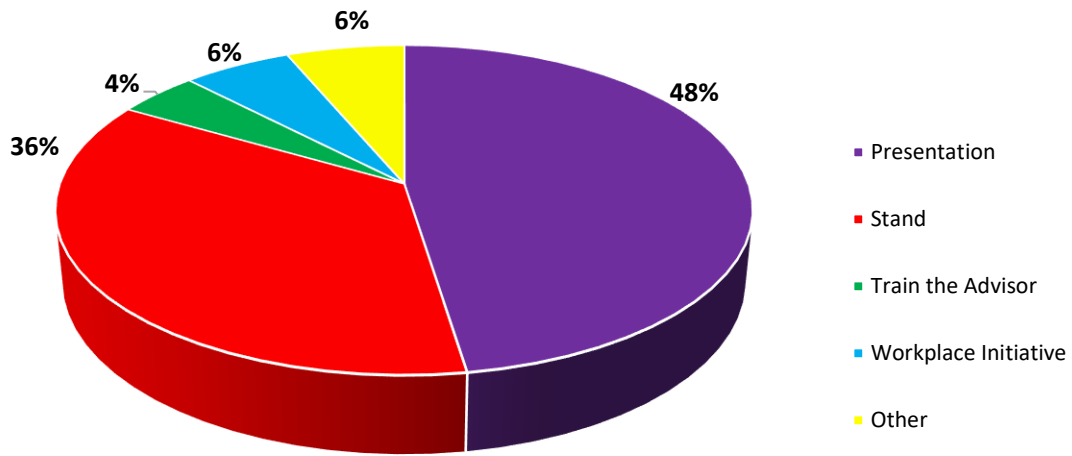
The Consumer Empowerment Team attend various events throughout Northern Ireland to promote awareness of The Consumer Council while informing consumers about their rights and options, as well as signposting and referring to relevant organisations.

The Team promote many of the functions of The Consumer Council, including: help with complaints in regards to water, energy, transport and post; and highlighting online tools such as switch and save and price comparison. The Empowerment Team also provide consumers and businesses with a range of our resources at each event.

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. Events can involve presentations, information stands and other activities (see figure 1).

- **Events:** In 2018/19, The Consumer Council attended 204 events (an increase of 52% compared to 134 events in the previous year). On average, for a team of two staff members, this equates to 102 events each in 2018/19.
- **Attendees:** These events were attended by a total of 7,857 people, which is an increase of 59% attendees compared to 2017-18.
- **Range (attendees):** The number of people at each event ranged from 1 to 641. Almost two-fifths (38%) of these events were attended by 30 or more people.
- **Range (consumers):** A wide range of consumer groups were covered at the 204 events in 2018/19, such as
 - Businesses (n=8 events, 4%)
 - Consumers with Long Term Illness/Disability (n=23 events, 11%)
 - Older People (n=40 events, 20%)
 - Rural Consumers (n=10 events, 5%)
 - Staff (n=28 events, 14%)
 - Migrants (n=2 events, 1%)
 - Stakeholders (n=12 events, 6%)
 - Students (n=37 events, 18%)
 - Rural Youth Groups (n=1 events, <1%)
 - General Consumers (including low income consumers) (n=43 events, 21%)
- **Event type:** As demonstrated by the below chart, the majority of outreach activities consist of delivering presentations and hosting stands at events, accounting for 84% combined.

Chart 30: Chart showing types of outreach events attended by The Consumer Council (n=204)



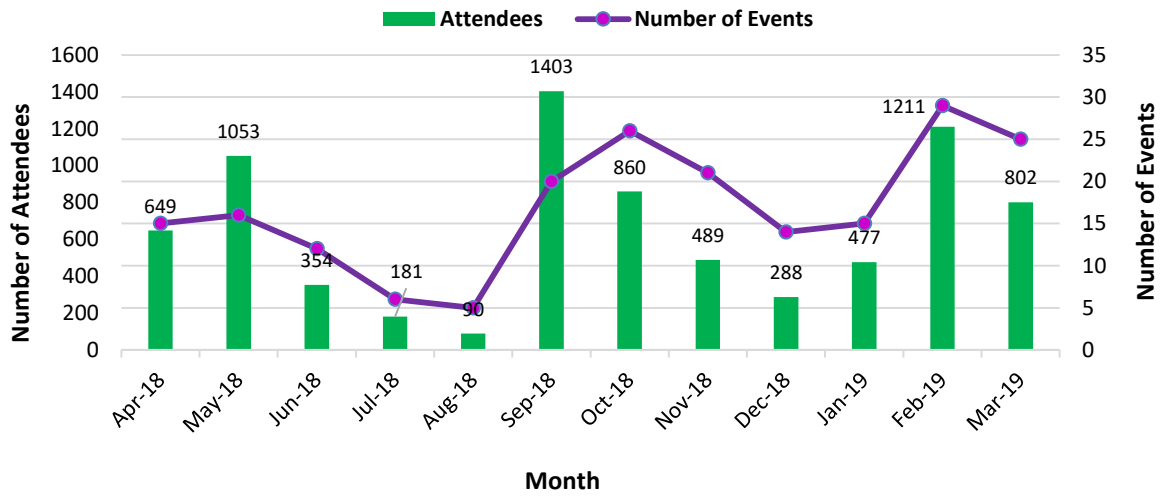
- Event Evaluation: When possible, The Consumer Council staff will distribute evaluations (i.e. surveys) to consumers following presentations or workshops. The table below shows the improvements in scores for each evaluated area from 2017-19 compared to 2018-19.

Evaluation	2017-18 (n=375)	2018-19 (n=409)	
Consumers satisfied with information provided	95%	99%	↑
Consumers indicated that knowledge had improved	97%	99%	↑
Consumers intend to make changes in behaviour	60%	61%	↑
Net Promoter Score	61	78	↑

Events/Attendance by Month

The chart below (figure 2) shows the number of events and number of attendees each month for the year 2018/19. The most events (n=29) were in February 2019, though the busiest month for attendees at events was September 2018 (with over n=1,400 consumers at events).

Chart 31: Chart showing number of events and attendees each month 2018/19

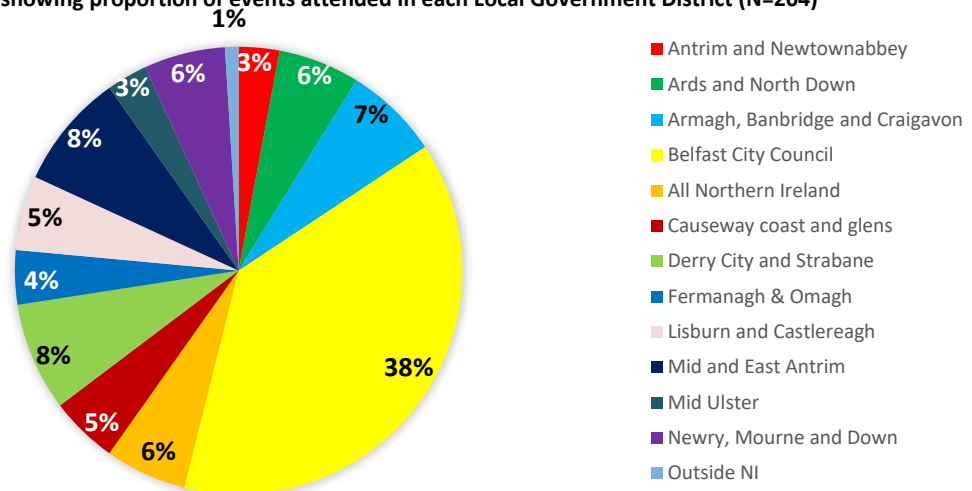


The Consumer Empowerment Team delivered outreach at ten student fresher’s fairs in the month of September, as well as at the Portrush Airshow, resulting in large attendee figures for this month. May was also a busy month with 16 events and n=1,053 attendees, the Balmoral Show alone accounted for 61% of these. The quietest month for events was August 2018, with five events attended by 90 consumers, this is typical of summer/holiday season.

Events by Local Government District

The Consumer Council operates throughout Northern Ireland and takes part in events across the region. Figure 3 shows the proportion of events attended in each local government district in 2018-19. Belfast City Council was the most common area where events took place (44%)¹¹. The population of Belfast (n=340,220 people) accounts for 18% of the total Northern Ireland population, so this concentration of events is somewhat disproportionate of the population spread of Northern Ireland. Over half (remaining 56%) of events took place outside of the Belfast City Council area.

Chart 32: Chart showing proportion of events attended in each Local Government District (N=204)



¹¹ Although 44% of all activity took place in Belfast, of this 87% was classed as local Belfast City Council events, while 13% of activity was held in the council area but open to attendees from anywhere, i.e. regional activity.

For further information about our work, or to get in touch and have us visit your local area or workplace, please visit www.consumerCouncil.org.uk



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