



Enquiries and Complaints Report

2014 - 15

August 2015

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1.0 Foreword

It's not good to have something to complain about; but it's good to complain when you do. Only by complaining and making your voice heard about poor service, can you hope to receive a satisfactory resolution.

Complaining is good for service providers too. It is better for them to know where their service has fallen short of expected standards, so they have the opportunity to put it right. Importantly, this means they can learn from any mistakes and improve their service.

Complaining is not always easy though. Most of us don't like to make a fuss and prefer to keep quiet. This is where the Consumer Council comes in. We help consumers understand their rights and what to do when they are not satisfied with the service provided by energy, postal services, transport and water companies. We provide the resources for consumers to do this effectively, through guidance and template letters. We also provide additional support for vulnerable consumers. When consumers are not happy with the initial response they receive to their complaints from service providers, we investigate their complaint to make sure that they have been properly dealt with and, if not, an appropriate response is sought.

In 2014–15 we continued to experience the high level of contacts with consumers that we had in the previous year and achieved the highest amount of redress for consumers in our 30 year history. We returned £630k to consumers, an increase of 30 per cent on the previous year, which in itself was a record.

Based on our experience, these figures suggest a greater awareness by consumers of their rights and willingness to complain rather than a decline in service standards. Either way, our Consumer Support Team continues to provide high levels of service, with 98 per cent customer satisfaction.

Thank you for your interest in the Consumer Council and our work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Don Leeson', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Don Leeson
Director of Operations

2.0 Introduction

The Consumer Council is an independent consumer organisation, working to bring about change to benefit Northern Ireland consumers. Our aim is to make the consumer voice heard and make it count.

We have a statutory remit to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers and have specific functions in relation to energy, water, transport and food. These include considering consumer complaints and enquiries, carrying out research and educating and informing consumers. In addition, from April 2014, we took responsibility for representing consumers in respect of postal services in Northern Ireland.

The Consumer Council is also a designated body for the purposes of supercomplaints, which means that we can refer any consumer affairs goods and services issue to the Competition and Markets Authority, the Financial Conduct Authority, or the Payment Systems Regulator as appropriate where we feel that the market may be harming consumers' best interests.

In taking forward our broad statutory remit we are informed by and representative of consumers in Northern Ireland. We work to bring about change to benefit consumers by making their voice heard and making it count. To represent consumers in the best way we can, we listen to them and produce robust evidence to put their priorities at the heart of all we do and campaign for.

The Consumer Council has a dedicated team, Consumer Support, which assists consumers with their complaints and enquiries in our statutory areas of transport, natural gas, electricity, coal, water and postal services. Our service is free, independent and confidential. We make every effort to obtain fair and realistic outcomes for the consumers who contact us.

This report covers all contacts received from consumers during the period 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015.

3.0 How we deal with contacts from consumers

The Consumer Council has a statutory duty to offer advice and assistance to consumers and/or investigate their complaints about transport, natural gas, electricity, coal, water and postal services. We also provide a signposting service to consumers who contact us about issues outside of these areas.

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

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

Definitions:

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

Enquiries and complaints highlight areas of a company's operation that do not work as they should and also provide an opportunity to improve service delivery. This is achieved by working closely with all service providers and, where necessary, engaging partner organisations to ensure consumer complaints are best served.

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

The Consumer Council publishes leaflets and guides for consumers, reports and other resources. Contacts from consumers to request these are classified as **requests for information**.

4.0 Overview and analysis of contacts 2014 - 2015

Table 1: Total contacts 2014 - 2015

General referrals & requests for information	Complaints & Enquiries	Total
1,465 (1,387)	3,478 (3,474)	4,943 (4,861)

Table 2: Nature of complaints & enquiries received¹

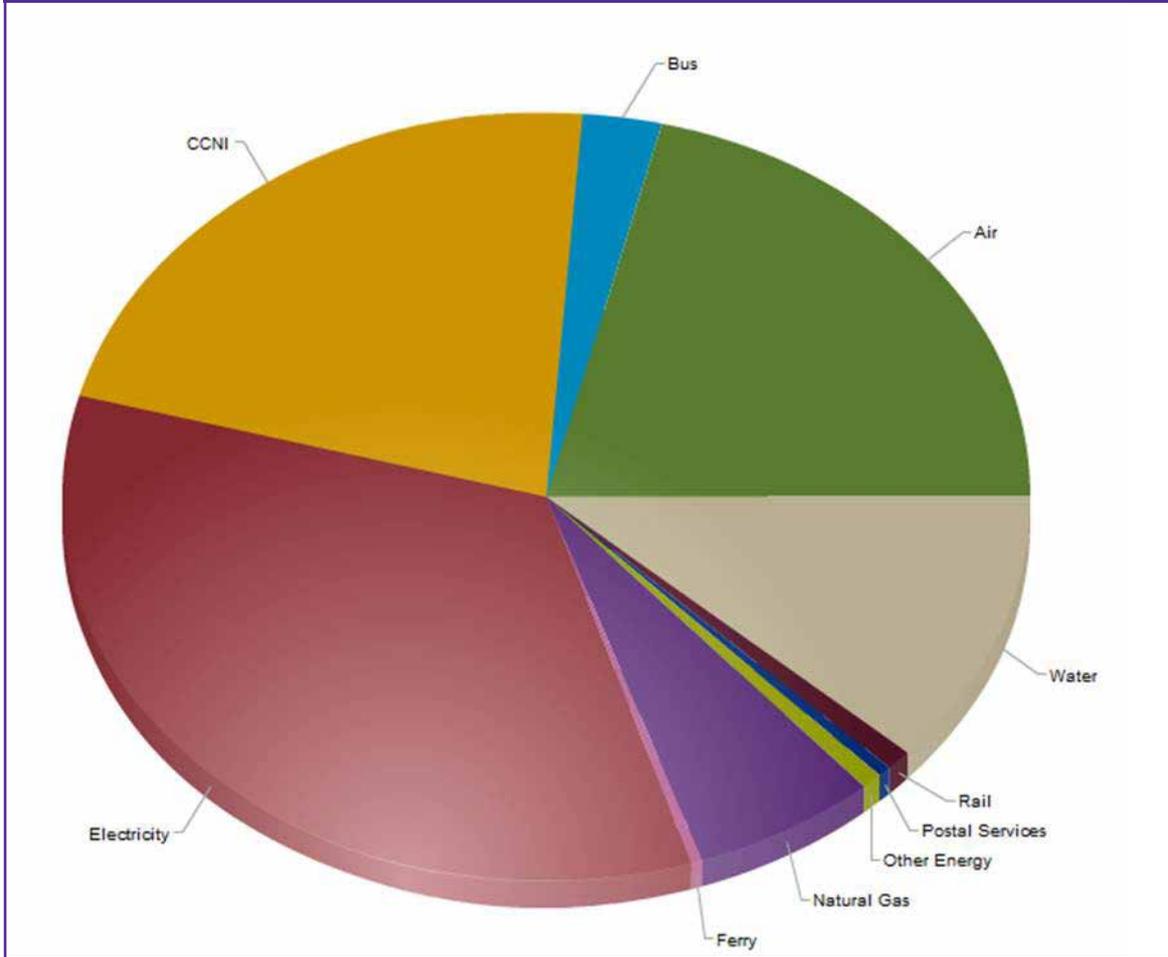
Nature of Complaint	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Air	545 (560)	2 (8)	0 (4)	189 (225)	736 (797)
Bus	47 (89)	5 (11)	13 (18)	27 (30)	92 (148)
CCNI	763 (542)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	763 (542)
Electricity	1,085 (1,231)	22 (32)	23 (31)	56 (49)	1,186 (1,343)
Ferry	12 (10)	0 (1)	0 (0)	1 (2)	13 (13)
Natural Gas	200 (184)	7 (8)	4 (3)	4 (6)	215 (201)
Other Energy	24 (30)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	24 (30)
Postal Services	14 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (0)	16 (0)
Rail	19 (9)	0 (0)	4 (8)	7 (10)	30 (27)
Water	336 (282)	17 (33)	21 (17)	29 (41)	403 (373)
Grand Total	3,045 (2,937)	53 (91)	65 (81)	315 (365)	3,478 (3,474)

1. Categorisations correct as of 1 April 2015 and may be subject to change.

2. Figures in brackets are for the period 1 April 2013 - 31 March 2014.

3. Consumer Council took responsibility for Postal Services from April 2014.

**Chart 1:
Number of complaints and enquiries received**



In 2014-15 the Consumer Council received 3,478 enquiries and complaints. Table 2 and Chart 1 demonstrate the nature of these enquiries and complaints.

Electricity and Air Travel issues were the most common types of contact received. Electricity accounted for over one third (34 per cent) of the total figure which is consistent with 39 per cent last year. Air Travel accounted for one fifth of the total (21 per cent) which again reflects the 23 per cent reported last year.

Enquiries categorised as 'CCNI' are instances where consumers have sought independent advice from the Consumer Council on matters including energy prices, switching energy supplier, water allowance entitlements and rights regarding travel. We also receive requests for our publications such as Plane Facts and Access to Air Travel detailing air passenger rights and Switch On which assists consumers with switching energy supplier.

5.0 Energy

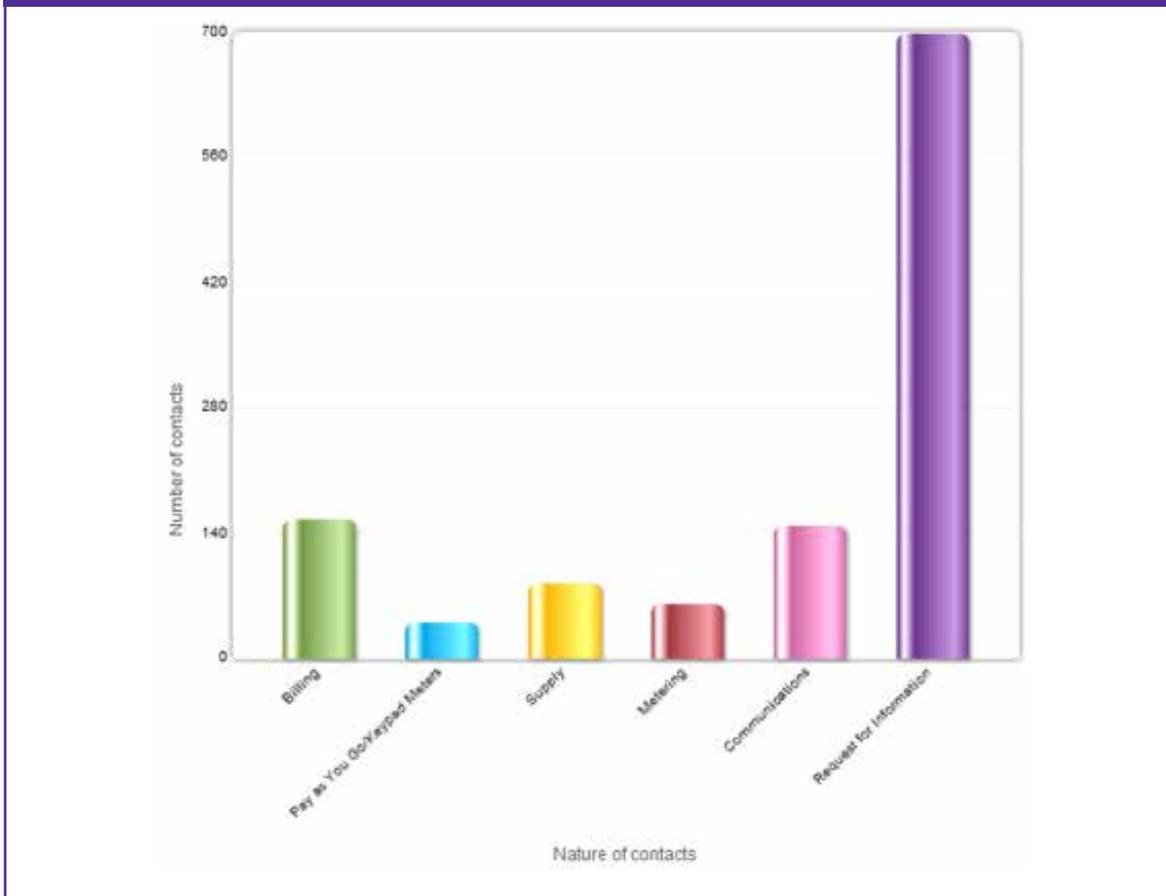
Energy related issues are typically the most common type of enquiry or complaint received by the Consumer Council. In 2014-15 energy contacts accounted for 41 per cent of all consumer contacts, with electricity responsible for 83 per cent of this figure.

5.1 Electricity

Table 3: Electricity contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Budget Energy	44	0	2	14	60
Electric Ireland	23	0	3	6	32
Energia	17	0	0	4	21
NIE T&D	144	5	9	4	162
Power NI	705	9	5	4	723
SSE Airtricity	152	8	4	24	188
Grand Total	1,085	22	23	56	1,186

Chart 2:
Analysis of electricity contacts



The electricity network for Northern Ireland is owned and maintained by Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) with a variety of suppliers available to domestic and commercial customers.

Table 3 highlights the enquiries and complaints received in 2014-15 against the respective electricity providers.

Chart 2 provides further analysis on the types of electricity issues we dealt with in the last year.

'Requests for Information' were the most common reason that consumers contacted the Consumer Council. This encompasses enquiries about the switching process, available tariffs and details of suppliers available. Billing issues include disputed bill amounts, disputed liability of bills and debt/disconnection procedures adopted by suppliers.

We are pleased that sales related complaints have remained low in comparison to the peak experienced in 2012-2013. The Consumer Council continues to work closely with suppliers to ensure the sales and switching process is clear and transparent to give consumers the confidence to shop around for the best deal.

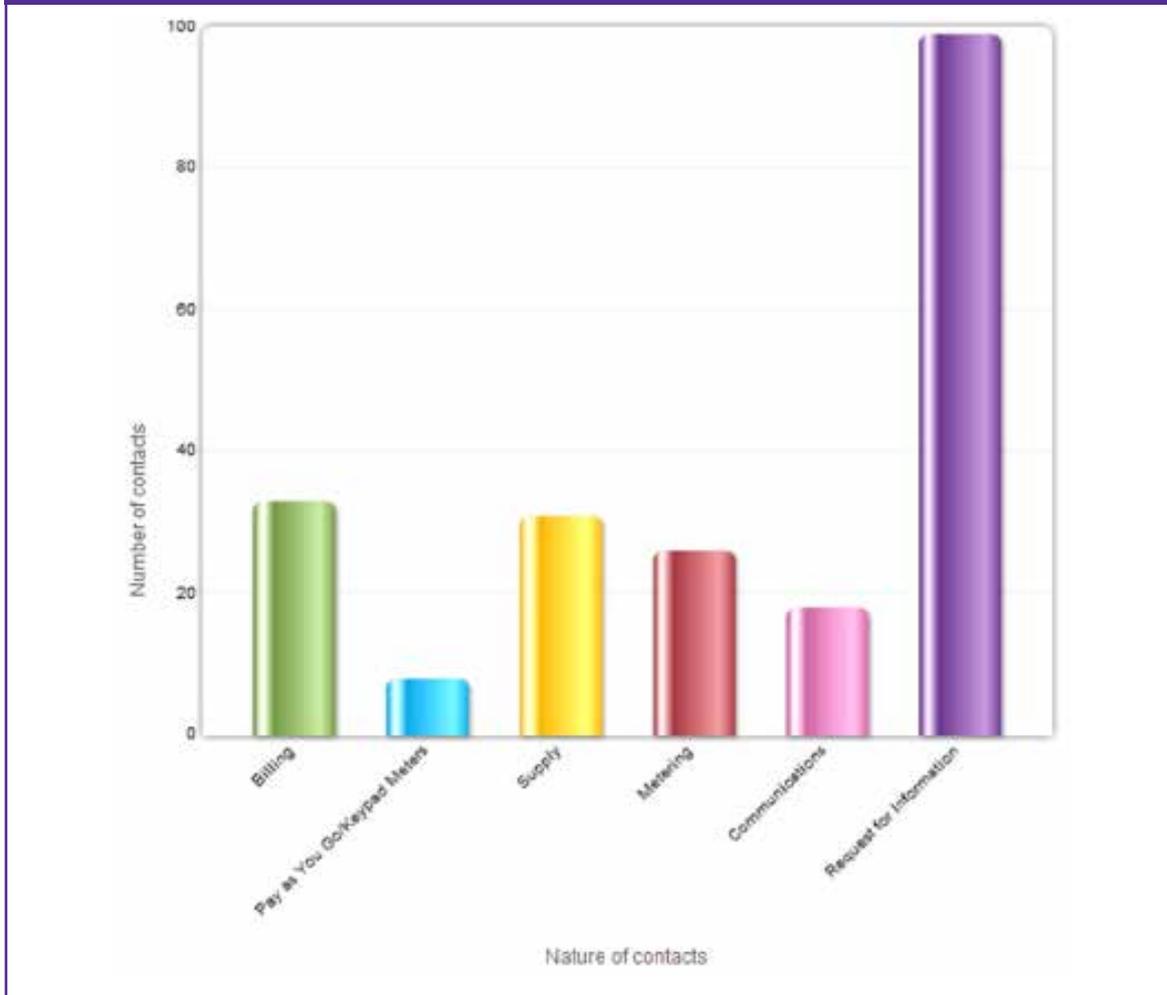
5.2 Natural Gas

Table 4: Natural gas contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Firmus Energy	73	2	0	1	76
Phoenix Natural Gas	58	1	0	0	59
SSE Airtricity Gas	69	4	4	3	80
Grand Total	200	7	4	4	215

"Great work by yourselves. I had tried unsuccessfully to resolve my issues for three years and after contacting yourselves the matter was resolved quickly and to my specification."

**Chart 3:
Analysis of natural gas contacts**



Phoenix Natural Gas is responsible for the distribution of natural gas and operation of the network in Greater Belfast. Firmus Energy is responsible for the distribution of natural gas and operation of the network in towns outside Greater Belfast. The domestic and commercial natural gas market is also served by various suppliers with SSE Airtricity and Firmus Energy being the sole domestic providers.

Table 4 and Chart 3 display the number and nature of enquiries and complaints received in relation to natural gas in 2014-15.

The natural gas market has significantly less customers than electricity and there are less competitors therefore there is limited availability of alternative natural suppliers available. However we acknowledge that complaints are relatively low and consumers appear to be satisfied with the overall level of service they receive.

'Request for Information' was the most popular reason that consumers sought our assistance. This includes independent advice on suppliers, tariffs and policies such as gas availability.

5.3 Coal, Oil & Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG)

Table 5: Coal, Oil & LPG contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Total
Calor Gas	19	19
Flogas	4	4
NI Oil Federation	1	1
Grand Total	24	24

Contacts from consumers in relation to coal, oil and LPG remain consistently low and comparable with previous years. Overall the Consumer Council received 24 enquiries with 96 per cent of these in relation to LPG.

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

5.4 Energy Case Studies

Case Study 1

The owner of a Kebab Takeaway received a backdated electricity bill for £31,302. The electricity provider had billed the business over a seven year period on the basis that there was a five dial meter serving the property when in fact the meter had six dials. Despite all bills being paid in good faith, the supplier demanded payment in full.

The Consumer Council deemed this approach to be unacceptable. Following our intervention, the supplier offered the consumer a sincere apology, advising that the backdated bill for £31,302 had resulted due to an error on their part.

As a resolution the supplier offered a 50 per cent reduction totalling £15,651, They also provided a suitable repayment plan for the consumer over a number of years.

Case Study 2

A consumer highlighted concerns about how the average daily consumption (ADC) was detailed on his electricity bill. The consumer noticed that the ADC was always rounded to a whole number and he did not believe this was an accurate reflection of usage.

The Consumer Council supported the view that for complete transparency, ADC on bills should be recorded to the decimal unit rather than rounded to whole figures.

The electricity provider subsequently reviewed its position and agreed to implement this change, impacting over 700,000 consumers in Northern Ireland. This policy change ensures that customer bills display an ADC that accurately reflects their electricity consumption.

6.0 Transport

In 2014-15 transport related enquiries and complaints accounted for one quarter of all contacts received by the Consumer Council, with air travel accounting for 84 per cent of these.

In 2014-15 the Court of Appeal issued a judgment that airlines must pay flight compensation for delays caused by technical problems as these are not considered an 'extraordinary circumstance' in accordance with EU regulations. The Supreme Court later refused the airlines permission to appeal this decision.

In response to this judgment, the Consumer Council sent over 1000 emails and letters to passengers who had previously contacted us for assistance following a delay or cancellation and had been unsuccessful in their claim. We advised them of the new ruling and provided the necessary guidance to resubmit their claim.

A number of passengers have since contacted us and confirmed they were successful in getting their compensation paid following our advice to resubmit their claim.

"My complaint was dealt with extremely quickly. A member of staff contacted me via telephone within 2 hours of completing the online form. I was paid full compensation by the airline around two weeks after my initial contact. Your help with this is much appreciated. Thank you."

6.1 Air travel

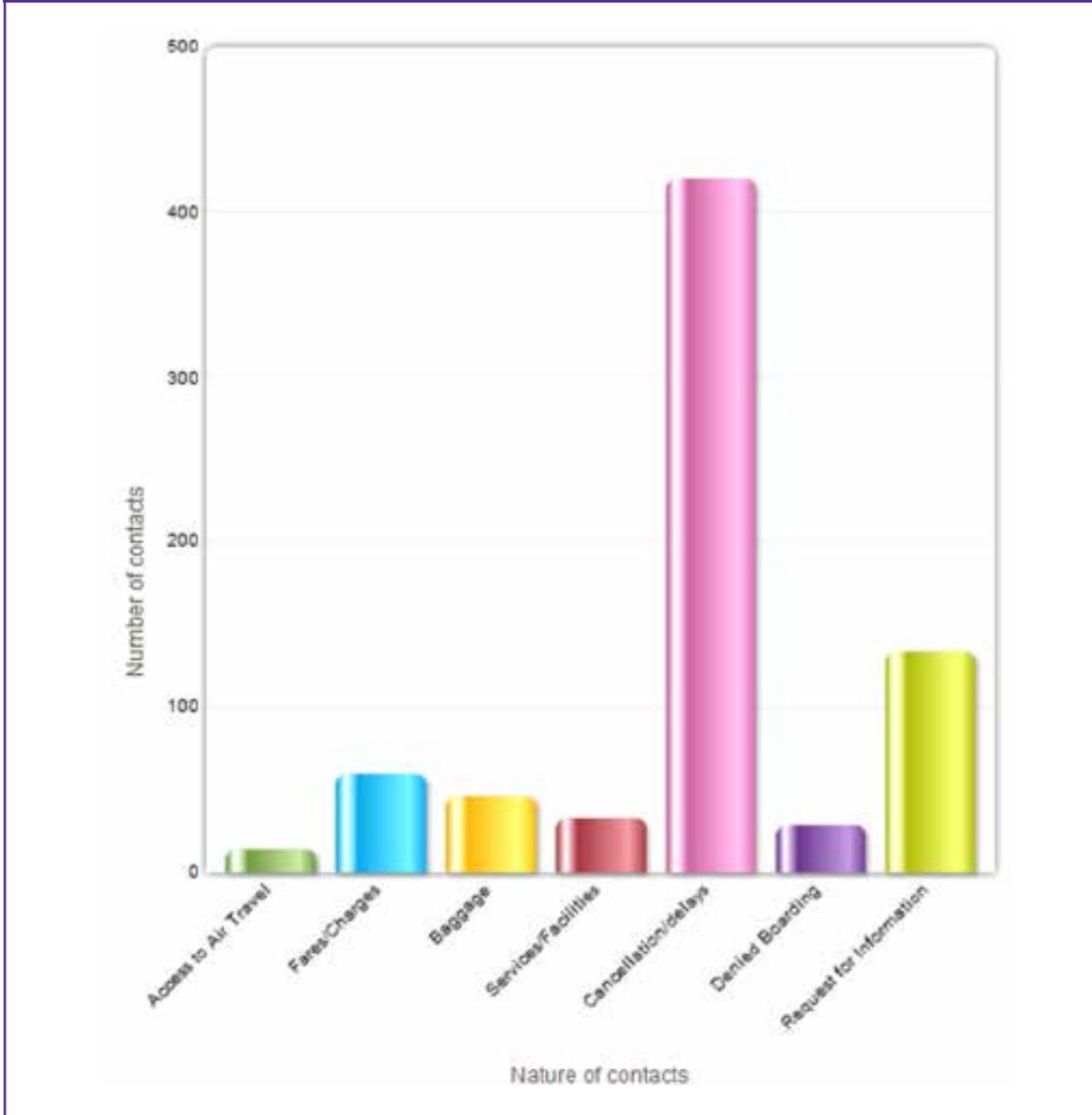
Table 6: Air contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Aegean	2	0	1	3
Aer Lingus	13	0	9	22
Belfast City Airport	0	0	2	2
Belfast	3	0	1	4
BMI Baby	3	0	0	3
British Airways	21	1	13	35
CAA (referral)	258	0	0	258
Cathay Pacific Airlines	1	0	0	1
EasyJet	66	1	52	119
ECC	6	0	0	6
Flybe	38	0	30	68
Jet2.com	25	0	10	35
Loganair	0	0	1	1
Ryanair	15	0	4	19

The Consumer Council	1	0	0	1
Thomas Cook Airlines	49	0	35	84
Thomson Airways	22	0	8	30
United Airlines	19	0	20	39
Volotea	3	0	3	6
Grand Total	545	2	189	736

"Delighted! Highly recommend to friends and family. Staff were extremely down to earth, informative, friendly and professional."

Chart 4:
Analysis of air contacts



Cancellations and delays were the primary reason for Air Travel contacts in 2014-15, accounting for over half (56 per cent) of all issues raised.

Passengers who experience a cancellation or delay may be entitled to claim compensation under European Law. The Consumer Council has subsequently helped return over £70,000 to air passengers in the last year.

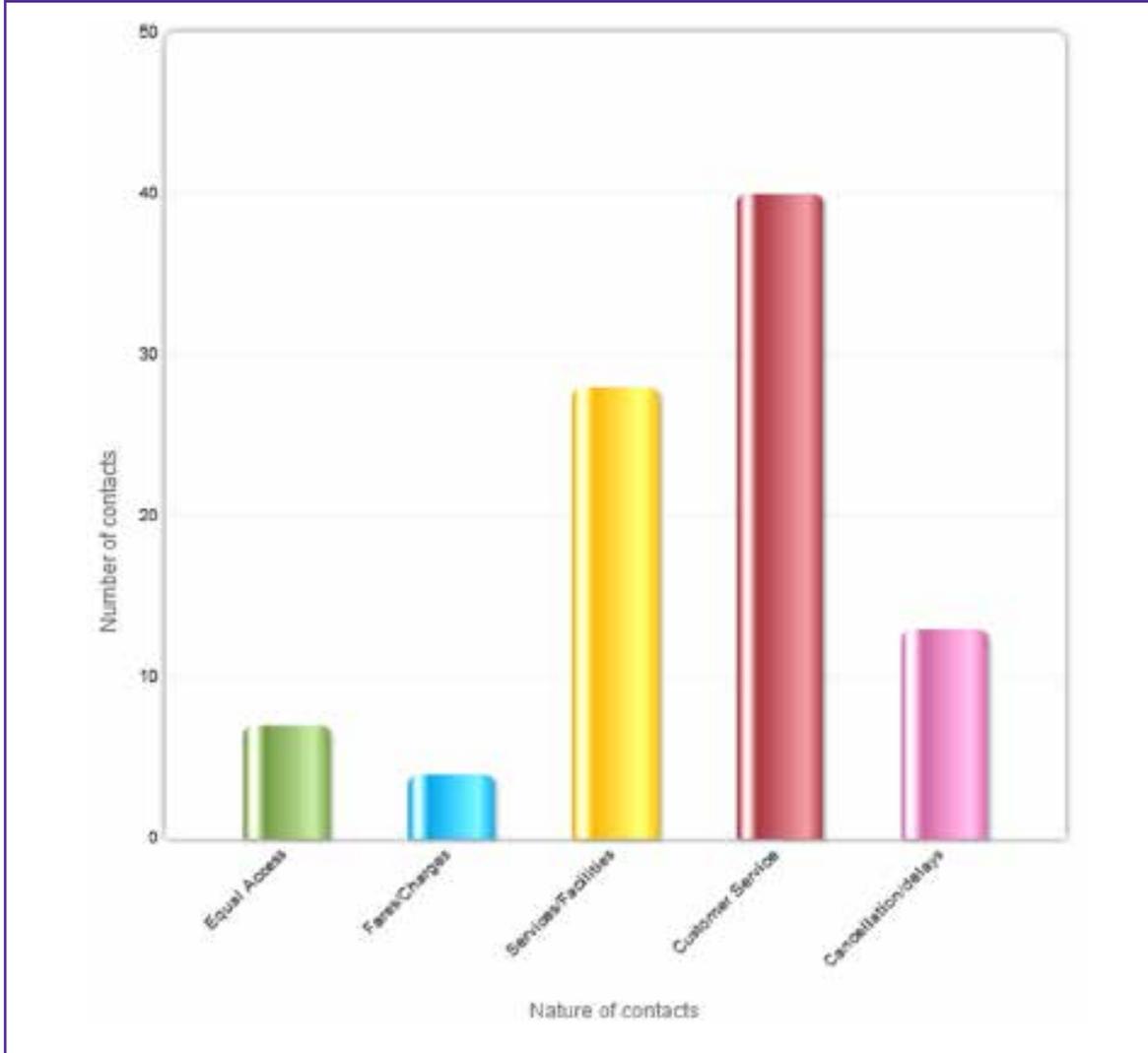
6.2 Bus travel

Table 7: Bus contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Aircoach	0	1	0	0	1
Disability Action Transport Scheme	1	0	0	0	1
Lagan Valley Rural Transport	1	0	0	0	1
Translink - Bus	45	4	13	27	89
Grand Total	47	5	13	27	92

"I found the guidance and assistance extremely helpful and would have no hesitation in recommending the Consumer Council to others."

Chart 5:
Analysis of bus contacts



Translink is responsible for the delivery of public bus services in Northern Ireland which includes the Ulsterbus and Metro services.

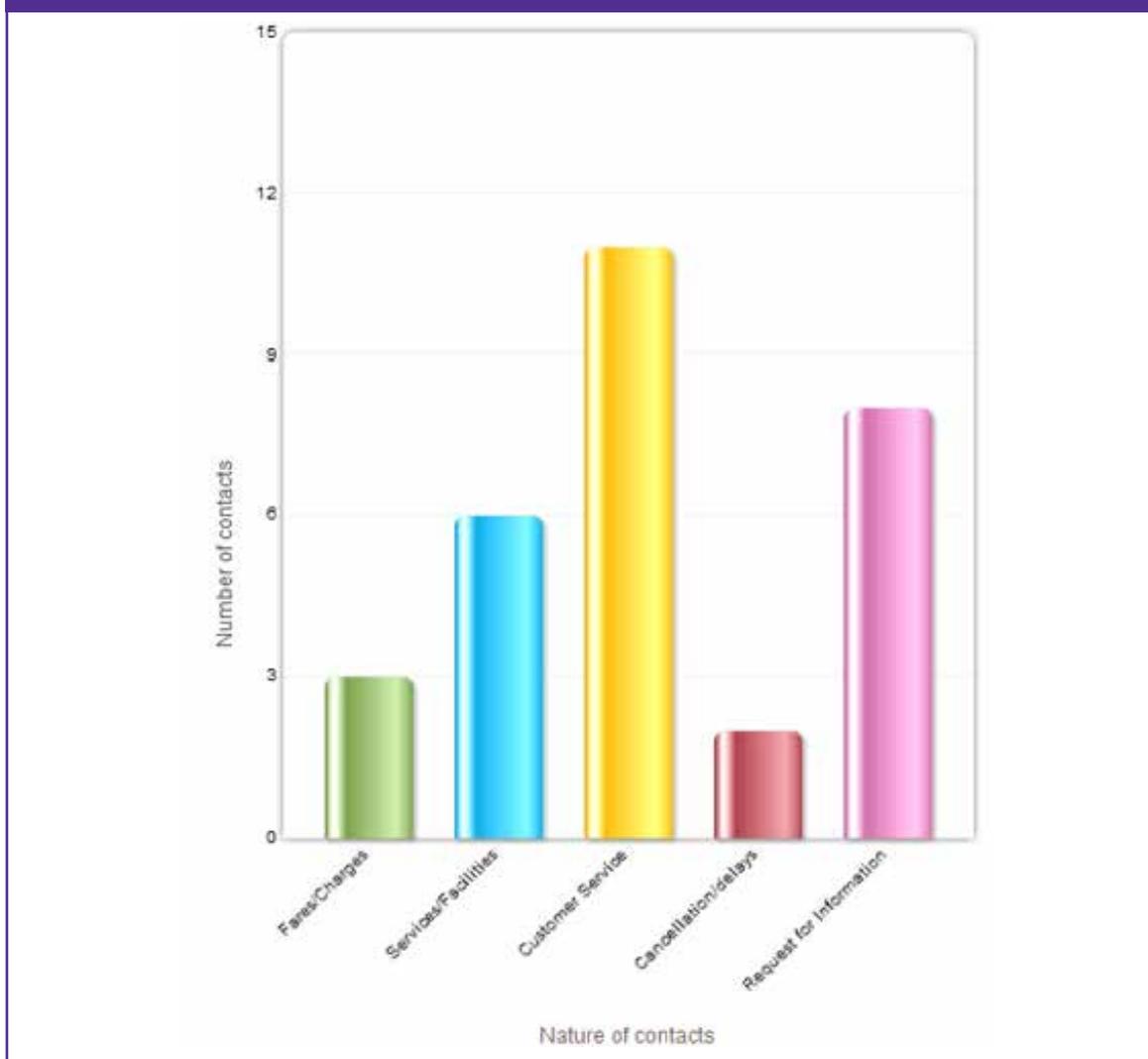
During 2014-15 bus passengers most commonly contacted us in relation to staff behaviour and attitude, failure of services to operate and poor customer service.

6.3 Rail travel

Table 8: Rail contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Translink - Rail	19	4	7	30

Chart 6:
Analysis of rail contacts



Translink is the only rail provider available to passengers in Northern Ireland.

Chart 6 identifies passenger issues about rail travel in 2014-15 with the top concerns being a delay or failure in responding to complaints, staff behaviour and attitude and no provision of service.

6.4 Ferry travel

Table 9: Ferry contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
ABTA Referral (Ferry)	2	0	0	2
DFD	1	0	0	1
P & O Ferries	1	0	0	1
Stena Line	6	1	2	9
Grand Total	10	1	2	13

"I received an excellent service. Everyone I spoke to was courteous and very helpful. I have already recommended you to friends."

Less than one per cent of all contacts received by the Consumer Council relate to ferry travel. In 2014-15 issues about fares and charges were the most common concern raised by ferry passengers.

6.5 Transport Case Studies

Case Study 1

The Consumer Council was contacted by a couple who had encountered a 14 hour delay back in 2013 when flying to Cyprus on their honeymoon. They had contacted the airline on numerous occasions to request compensation under EU Regulation 261/2004. The airline refused compensation on the grounds that the delay was caused by a technical fault with the aircraft and was therefore deemed as an extraordinary circumstance.

On 11 June 2014, the Court of Appeals ruled that ordinary technical problems that cause flight disruption should not be considered "extraordinary circumstances".

The airline in question refused to pay compensation as they were seeking the right to appeal the decision. However airlines were refused the right to appeal by the Supreme Court in October 2014, resulting in the airline having to review previous claims declined due to technical faults.

The Consumer Council asked the airline to re-assess the claim made by the couple and they subsequently received £1005.47 compensation.

Case Study 2

An elderly couple flying from Belfast to Birmingham were distressed to discover that their luggage was missing on arrival. Not only did this result in a loss of clothing and toiletries, one of the passengers had vital medication that was not allowed on the flight as hand luggage.

Due to the bank holiday weekend, difficulties were experienced when making telephone calls to obtain an update and as a result they made several trips to the airport. The lost luggage was eventually discovered and returned by the airline 24 hours before their scheduled return to Belfast.

When they contacted the airline on their return they were offered a £200 flight voucher to be used within 12 months. As they did not intend flying again they contacted the Consumer Council for further assistance.

Following the Consumer Council's intervention, the airline offered a sincere apology for the poor customer service provided and for the inconvenience caused to the couple. The airline also provided a full refund of £400.

Case Study 3

A lady who was seven months pregnant was travelling from Doagh to Belfast and upon boarding the vehicle she realised no seats were available. As a result, she had to stand for the duration of the journey.

She noticed there were at least six seats occupied by Translink staff and was aware that there is a policy that staff must vacate seats for paying passengers if there are insufficient seats. However this offer was not forthcoming.

She made a complaint and Translink apologised for her poor travel experience, acknowledging how difficult it must have been. They confirmed that travelling staff members are obliged to vacate seats for paying passengers if insufficient seats are available.

Following this outcome, the Consumer Council sought a gesture of goodwill for the passenger's poor experience and obtained a full fare refund and two complimentary iLink tickets valued at £16 each.

"I received a first class and friendly service for which I sincerely thank you."

7.0 Water and sewerage

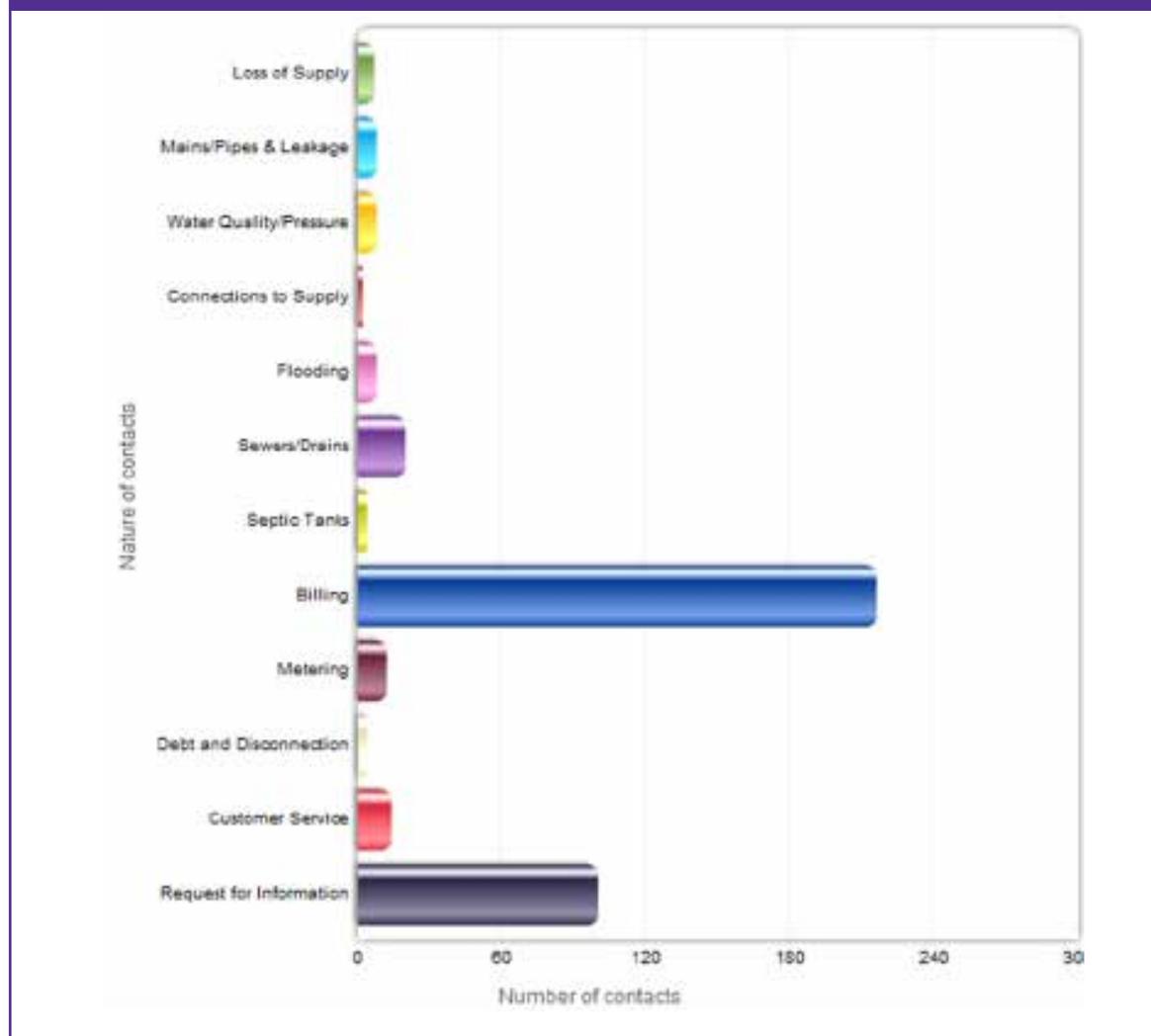
7.1 Water and sewerage

Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) is responsible for the management of water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland. Domestic households in Northern Ireland are not charged directly for water and sewerage services; however direct charging does apply to business premises.

Table 10: Water and sewerage contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Northern Ireland Water	336	17	21	29	403

Chart 7: Analysis of water and sewerage contacts



Water and sewerage issues equated to 12 per cent of all enquiries and complaints received by the Consumer Council in 2014-15.

Billing was the primary water issue raised by consumers and accounted for 54 per cent of all enquiries and complaints. Billing issues included disputed bills and liability of bills. Other matters of concern raised by consumers included installation of water meters, NI Water policy and failure to provide adequate information during loss of supply.

7.2 Water Case Studies

Case Study 1

NI Water advised a consumer who received an unusually high bill to ignore it whilst further investigations took place. Despite following up with NI Water, the consumer was continuously advised that investigations were ongoing and to disregard the bill.

Unexpectedly, the consumer received a water bill for £4,509. He immediately contacted NI Water and was advised a leak had been discovered and repaired. As the leak was on the consumer's land, NI Water asserted that he was liable for the usage and subsequent bill.

The Consumer Council intervened and asked NI Water to listen to the telephone exchange that had occurred throughout the period with the consumer. NI Water confirmed that that the consumer was advised to ignore the reminders he received as the high consumption registered through his meter was under investigation. NI Water also acknowledged that the prolonged timescale taken to investigate the matter contributed towards increased levels of consumption and had prevented the opportunity for earlier corrective action.

As a result of our intervention, NI Water averaged the consumers' consumption and the bill for £4,509 was subsequently written off. The consumer expressed his sincere gratitude for the Consumer Council's help, advising that he had been suffering from sleep deprivation as a result of feeling anxious and stressed about the bill.

Case Study 2

A consumer noticed cracks on his driveway following repairs to a leak on the public watermain outside his property. After formally complaining, NI Water inspected the repair work but denied liability for the damage.

NI Water was only able to provide a photograph of the completed work and advised that the damage was already sustained prior to their work. The Consumer Council investigated the matter further and was able to obtain a photograph of the property prior to the reinstatement work which demonstrated no apparent damage. In the absence of a photograph from NI Water prior to its repair work, we suggested that the benefit of the doubt should be given to the consumer.

NI Water agreed with our position and subsequently returned to complete further repairs.

"Great communication and very efficient staff. Could not fault the service."

8.0 Postal Services

From April 2014 the Consumer Council assumed responsibility for promoting and protecting the interests of postal consumers across Northern Ireland. This new role involves providing consumers with independent advice and guidance on postal service complaints.

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Royal Mail	8	2	10
Post Office	2	0	2
Parcelforce	1	0	1
Other (Postal Service)	3	0	3
Grand Total	14	2	16

In its inaugural year, contacts about postal services were low, as expected and accounted for less than one per cent of overall enquiries and complaints. However, they were higher than the volume handled by Consumer Futures in previous years.

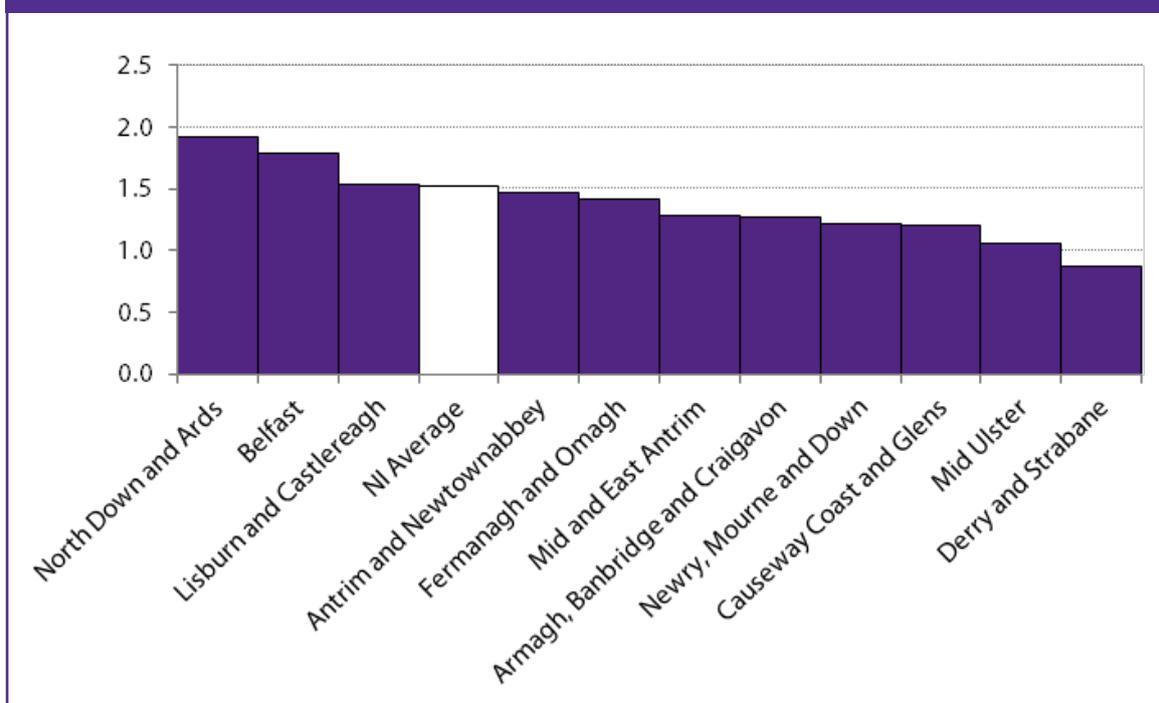
As we anticipated, the majority of contacts received were about Royal Mail, accounting for almost two thirds. The most common types of postal issues raised were damaged and lost mail.

9.0 Geographical Analysis for Contacts

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

During 2014–15 we obtained postcodes for 73 per cent of consumers with an enquiry or complaint.

Chart 8:
Contacts per 1,000 of population by District Council areas



On 1 April 2015, the 26 District Council's amalgamated into 11 new bodies. Chart 8 provides an analysis of how our contacts in 2014–15 are evaluated per 1,000 of the population under the new local government structure. We have highlighted the NI average for guidance.

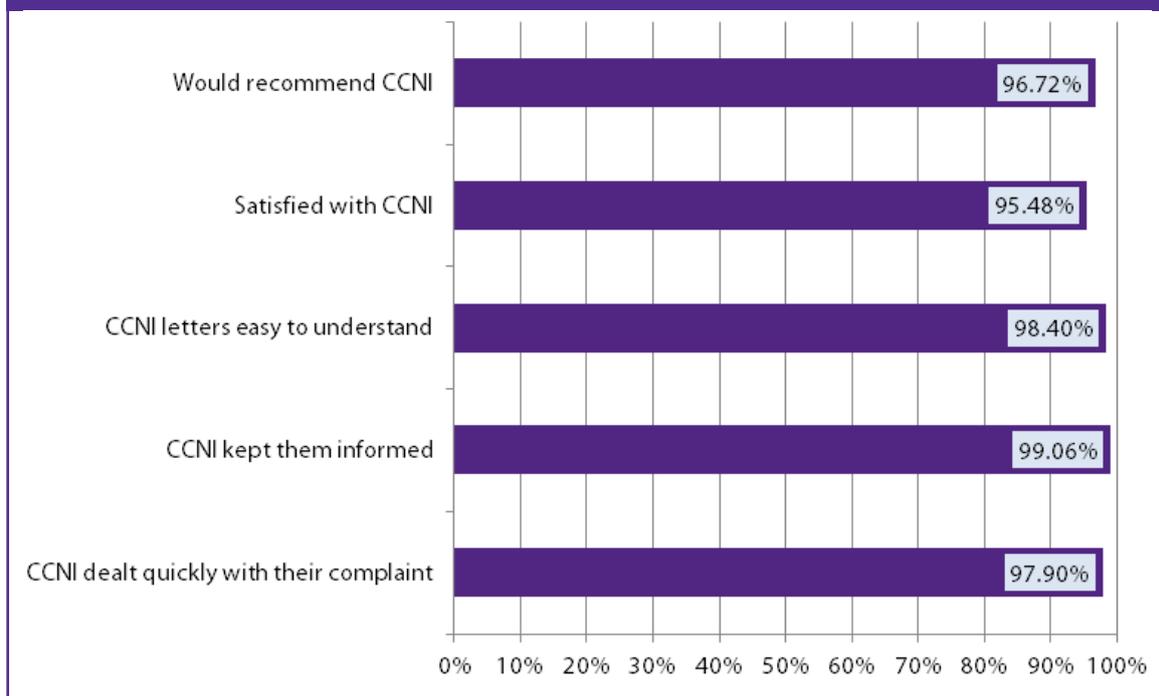
This information helps to inform the Consumer Council's Outreach Strategy which focuses on targeting resources to raise awareness of our role in those areas with below average level of contacts.

10.0 Feedback from consumers

Consumer feedback is an essential part of the Consumer Council's learning and development process, adding particular value to our complaints handling service. At the end of each complaint investigation we ask the consumer to complete a customer satisfaction survey to provide feedback on the service provided by both the Consumer Council and the respective service provider.

During 2014- 2015 we issued 351 customer satisfaction surveys of which 200 were completed and returned. This represents a 57 per cent return rate. The results of the surveys returned in the last year are shown in Chart 9 below.

Chart 9:
Customer satisfaction with the Consumer Council 2014–15



We are proud to report that overall satisfaction with the Consumer Council in 2014–15 remained at 97.51 per cent. This represents an average of the five measures displayed above.

11.0 Conclusion: looking to the future

It is likely that complaint handling services will start to evolve quite significantly over the next year.

For our part, the Consumer Council is working with the advice sector in Northern Ireland to ensure that effective referral mechanisms are in place. Through greater partnership working, we are seeking to ensure with colleagues in Citizens Advice, Advice NI and the Law Centre that consumers with a complaint are referred seamlessly to the right body that can help them. This should help ensure that consumers are more aware of the support that the Consumer Council provides to consumers.

In a similar vein, the Consumer Council is looking carefully at who is – and more importantly who is not – currently using our services, through our equality monitoring work. This has shown that people from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds, or those people who have migrated to Northern Ireland, are less likely to use our services. On the back of this work, we are planning to work with representatives to consider how we raise awareness of our work and the support we can offer when consumers from these backgrounds experience poor service.

Lastly, the European Union has recognised the importance of effective complaints resolution in giving companies a competitive edge. The Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Directive came into effect in July 2015. This seeks to ensure that all consumers can assert their rights through a non-confrontational, non-legalistic complaint resolution mechanism. The ADR Directive extends an opportunity to have complaints resolved by independent bodies in most sectors, in a similar way that the Consumer Council resolves complaints in respect of energy, transport, postal services and water. While participation in ADR is voluntary, we hope that all service providers will appreciate the value in using ADR to resolve customer complaints through this mechanism.

Whatever 2015-16 brings, we will remain dedicated to providing a voice for consumers and putting their needs at the heart of the work that we do on their behalf.



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