



Enquiries and Complaints Report

2017-18

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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 complaints 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 2017-18 has seen a 47% increase in Stage 2 complaints from 2016-17; which in itself was a 23% increase from 2015-16. This shows that consumers in Northern Ireland are becoming more aware of their consumer rights and have a greater understanding of how The Consumer Council can help them.

During this year, The Consumer Council has continued to improve our standards and has 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 named as a finalist in the UK Complaints Handling Awards 2019, which recognises and rewards outstanding achievement in complaints handling.

The Consumer Council recognises the time spent, and indeed the anxiety that can occur, in making a complaint. However, providing essential feedback to companies should improve their overall levels of service and relationship 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 consumers in Northern Ireland.

John French
Chief Executive Officer

¹ In 2018 The Consumer Council achieved 12 "Compliance Plus" (7 in 2017), 45 "Compliance" (42 in 2017), and no "Partials" (5 in 2017).

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 be appropriate having regard to any other remedy which may be available, and to investigate the complaint and take such further action as required;
- 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 by The Consumer Council from consumers for the year to 31 March 2018.

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**.

If there is no organisation or statutory body we can signpost the consumer to, we can use powers in our general remit to investigate the issues on the consumer's behalf.

Our Year in Review

Complaints Overview



1,346

Advised and signposted over 1,300 consumers



2,694

Investigated over 2,600 enquiries and complaints



£141k

In total returned to the pockets of consumers



£79.2k

Returned for transport complaints, ranging from:

£1-£2,498



£11.4k

Returned for energy complaints, ranging from:

£2-£848



£41.6k

Returned for water complaints, ranging from:

£20-£6,339



£1k

Returned for postal services complaints, ranging from:

£9-£899

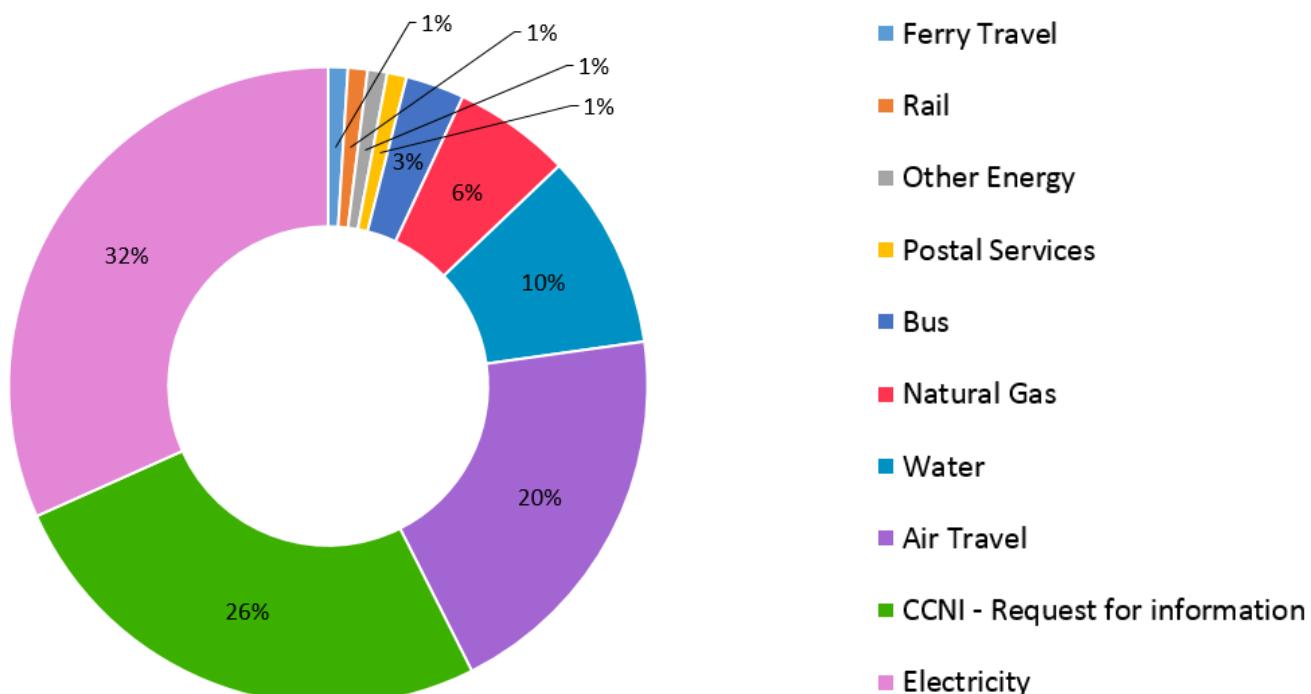


£7.8k

Returned for complaints within our general remit, ranging from:

£8-£654

Breakdown of Enquiries & Complaints Received²



Customer Satisfaction³



99.6%

Customer Satisfaction
with our service

Top Issues



Energy Issues



Air Travel Cancellations
& Delays



Customer Service &
Communication Issues

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

³ See page 48 for explanation of Net Promoter Score (NPS).

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 we represent and assist consumers across all of Northern Ireland, 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 following table shows a comparison between the percentage of total Northern Ireland population in each Council area compared to the percentage of contacts we received from each Council area.

Table 1: Comparison of Council Area population compared to contacts received by The Consumer Council

District Council	Percentage of total population per council area ¹	Percentage of total contacts received by The Consumer Council per council area	Percentage difference
Antrim and Newtownabbey	8%	8%	-
Ards and North Down	9%	11%	+2%
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	11%	9%	-2%
Belfast	18%	23%	+5%
Causeway Coast and Glens	8%	7%	-1%
Derry and Strabane	8%	7%	-1%
Fermanagh and Omagh	6%	7%	+1%
Lisburn and Castlereagh	8%	7%	-1%
Mid and East Antrim	7%	7%	-
Mid Ulster	8%	5%	-3%
Newry, Mourne and Down	10%	9%	-1%
Total	100%	100%	

¹ NISRA - June 2018.

Analysis of Enquiries & Complaints 2017-18

Table 2: Total contacts 2017-18

General Referrals & Requests for Information	Complaints & Enquiries	Total	Financial Return to Customers
1,346	2,694	4,040	£141,083

The Consumer Council helped a total of 4,040 consumers in 2017-18. We investigated 2,694 enquiries and complaints, and assisted 1,346 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 2017-18 and 2016-17.

Table 3: Two year comparison of enquiries & complaints 2016-18

Categorisation	2016-17	2017-18	Increase/Decrease
Enquiry	2,166	2,227	+3%
Stage 1 Referral	88	71	-19%
Stage 1 Investigation	54	27	-50%
Stage 2	251	369	+47%
Total	2,559	2,694	+5%

In 2017-18, the overall number of enquiries and complaints received increased by 5% from the previous year. This can be attributed to an increase in the number of Stage 2 complaints which, from 2016-17, have increased by 47%.

Requests for information and advice from The Consumer Council and enquiries about transport increased by 43% and 36% respectively. The increase in transport enquiries is mainly due to several high profile announcements made by Ryanair to suspend flights between Belfast International Airport and London Gatwick between November 2017 and March 2018.

Chart 1: Analysis of Total Enquiries & Complaints received 2017-18 (n=2,694)

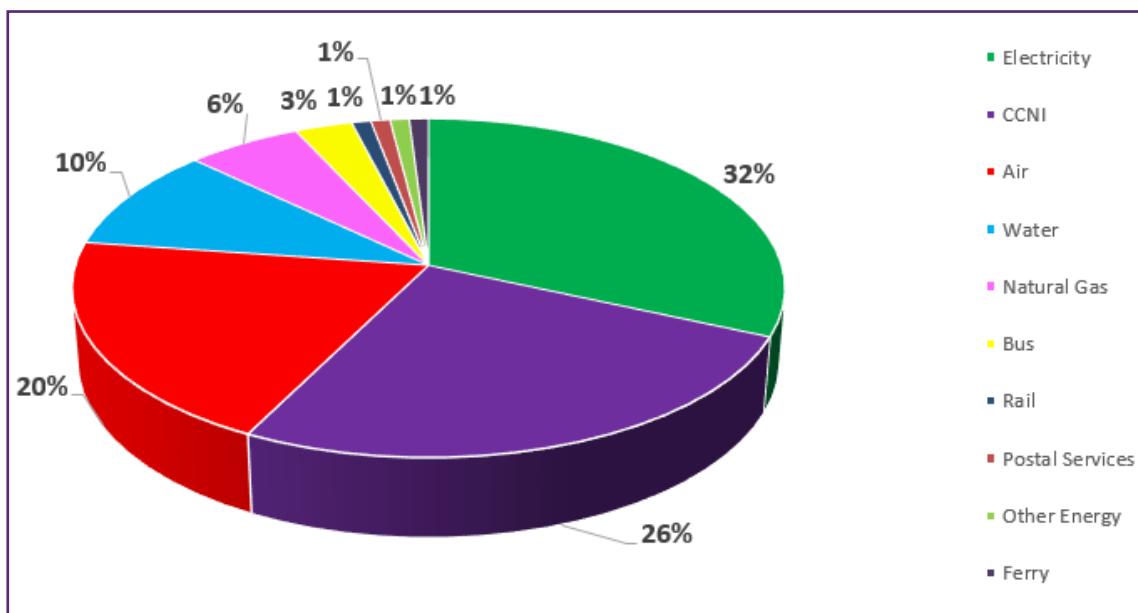
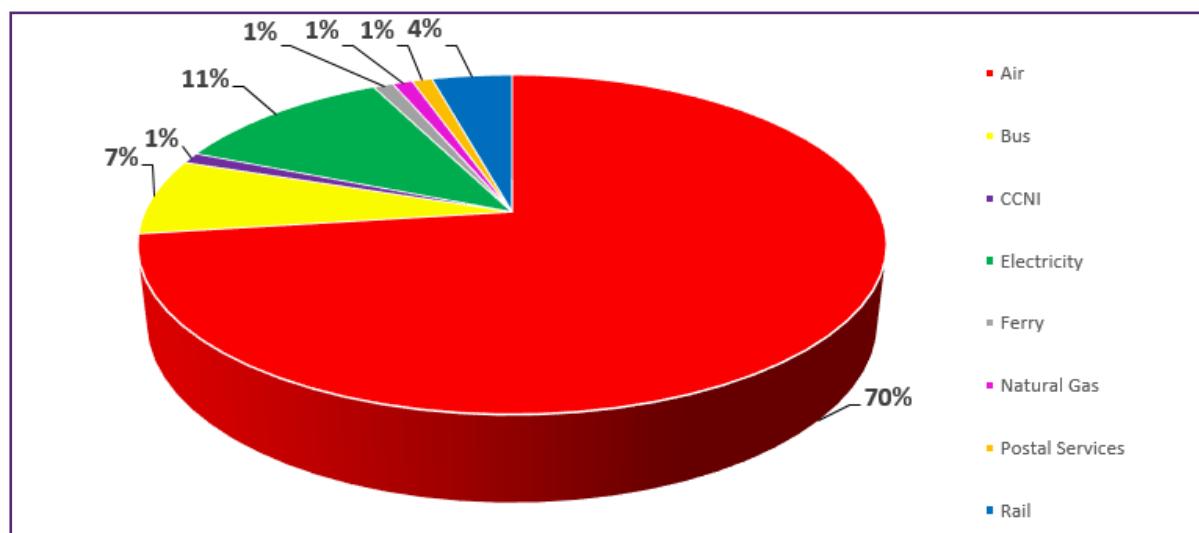


Chart 2: Analysis of Stage 2 Complaints received 2017-18 (n=369)



In 2017-18, Stage 2 complaints increased by 47% from 2016-17 (251 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.

Complaint Resolution Times

Table 4 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 2017-18 was 41 days compared to 32 days in 2016-17⁴. This increase was mainly due to an increase in more complex cases requiring extensive investigation.

Table 4: Average complaint resolution time by area in 2016-17

Area of Contact	Number of Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2 complaints 2016-17	Number of Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2 complaints 2017-18	Average number of days in 2016-17	Average number of days in 2017-18	% increase/decrease
Transport	179	304	36	33	-8%
Energy	80	58	27	46	+70%
Water	44	26	55	48	-13%
Postal Services	2	5	9	35	+289%

⁴ Complaint resolution times are calculated in working days.

Energy

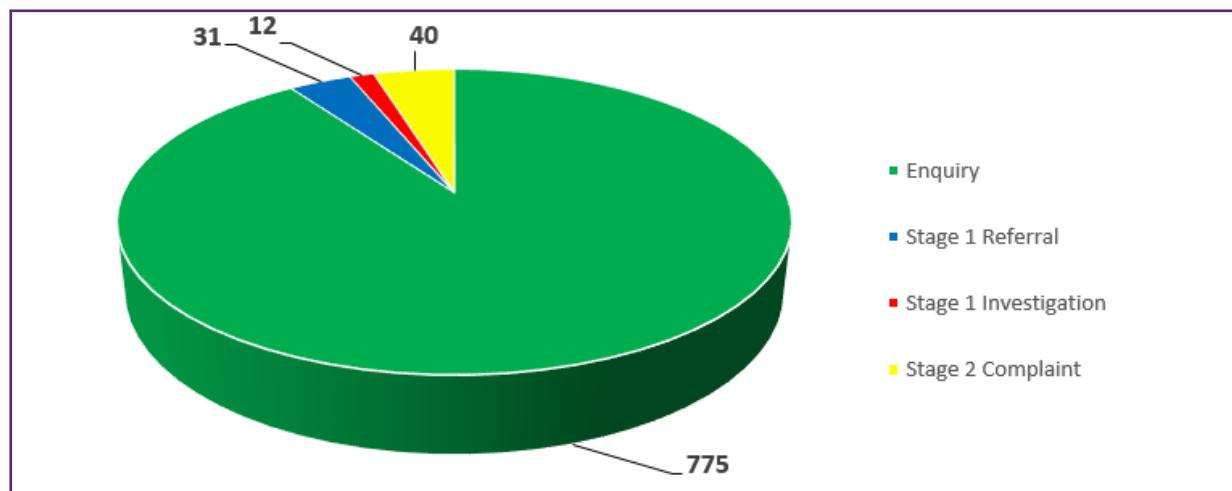


Energy related issues are typically the most common type of enquiry or complaint received by The Consumer Council. In 2017-18 energy contacts accounted for 39% of all consumer contacts, with electricity accounting for 83% of these.

Electricity

In 2017-18, The Consumer Council received a total of 858 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=858)



The total number of electricity contacts received in 2017-18 (858) has reduced by 21% from 2016-17 (1,091). This can be mainly attributed to a 21% drop in the number of enquiries received in 2017-18 (775) from the previous year (976). Over the past two years, we have noticed a steady decline in electricity enquiries. This coincides with an increase in hits to The Consumer Council website (up 13.3%, from 133,486 hits in 2016-17 to 151,232 hits in 2017-18) 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.

Similar to last year, the Electricity Price Comparison Tool and the Switching Supplier web pages were in the top three most visited pages of The Consumer Council website in 2017-18. Hits to these pages were up 53% this year, from 44,991 hits in 2016-17 to 68,809 hits in 2017-18.

The number of Stage 2 complaints about electricity (40) remained consistent with last year's figures. Chart 4 shows the most common electricity issues received by The Consumer Council in 2017-18. Regardless of this, requests for general advice and information on electricity accounts for 51% of the total electricity contacts received.

Chart 4: The top electricity issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2017-18 (n=858)

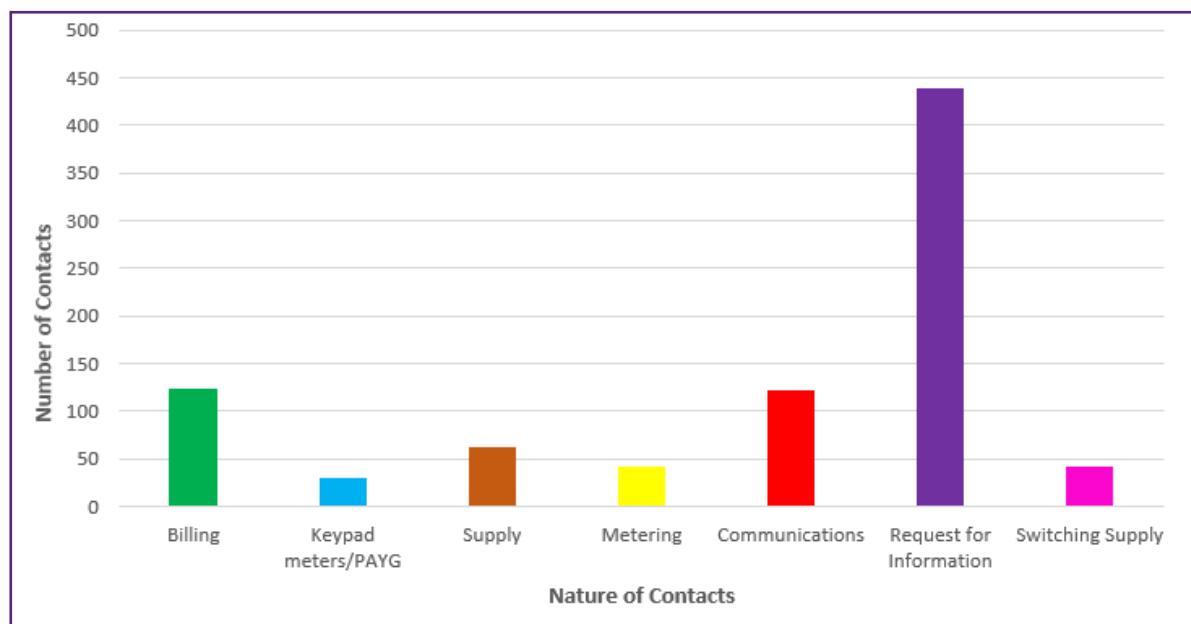


Table 5: Electricity contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Customers
Budget Energy	38	1	3	6	48	£306
Click Energy NI	9	0	0	0	9	£15
Electric Ireland	71	0	7	15	93	£1,439
Energia	10	0	0	3	13	£665
Go Power	5	0	0	1	6	£0
NIE Networks	131	4	8	1	144	£1,482
Power NI	430	5	8	3	446	£4,158
SSE Airtricity	81	2	5	11	99	£2,105
Total	775	12	31	40	858	£10,170

Chart 5 shows the share of complaints⁵ received in 2017-18 by the four major electricity supply companies in Northern Ireland against their respective percentage of market share⁶. Similar to last year, this shows that there is no direct correlation between market share and the number of complaints received.

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

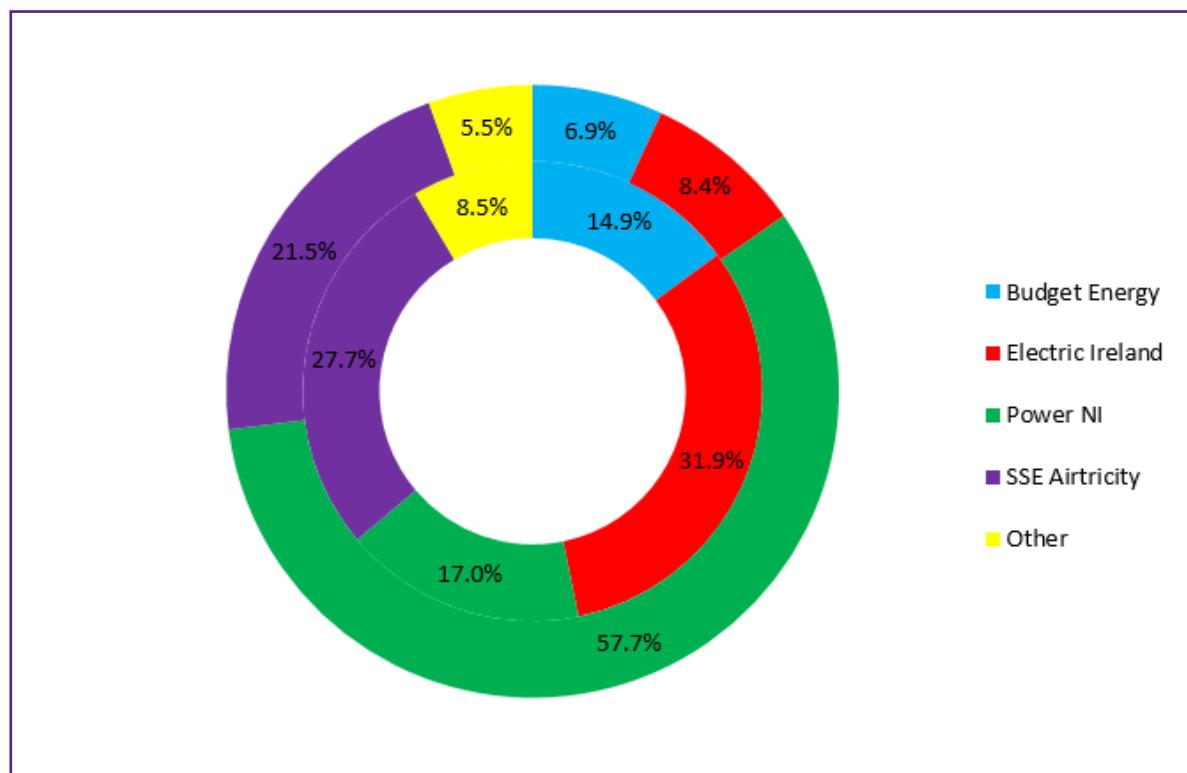
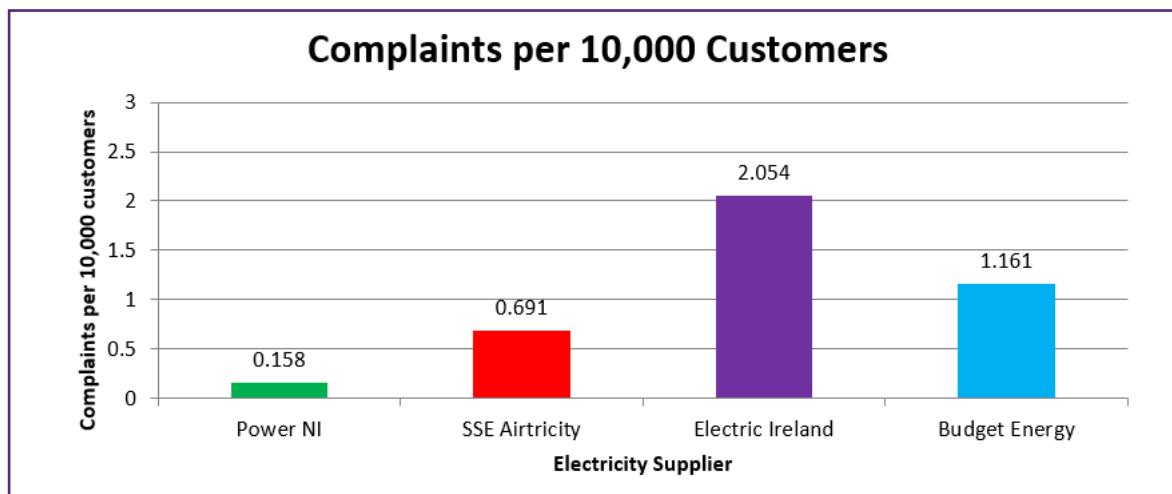


Chart 6: Complaints⁷ received by electricity supplier per 10,000 customers⁸



⁵ Stage 1 Investigation & Stage 2 Complaints received.

⁶ Utility Regulator - Retail Market Monitoring, Quarterly Transparency Report, Quarter 4: October - December 2017.

Case Study - Electricity

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer from Belfast who received a large electricity bill for over £1,400. In our dealings with the consumer it became apparent that she was vulnerable both physically and in terms of her mental health, and she was also struggling financially.

The consumer had concerns regarding the accuracy of the bill as it was based on estimated readings and covered a period of time when she was not living at the property. The consumer was extremely anxious about the bill and was afraid to turn on lights or use the heating for fear of adding to it.

The Consumer Council contacted the electricity supplier and explained that due to the consumer's circumstances we were acting on their behalf to investigate the large bill she had received.

The electricity supplier reviewed the account and advised that the large bill had accumulated over several years, and had been calculated based on estimated readings as no actual meter readings had been provided since 2015.

In light of the consumer's circumstances, and as a gesture of goodwill the supplier agreed to:

- Recalculate the bill to account for the periods when the consumer was not living in the property;
- Apply the tariff rate in place at that time, which would reduce the arrears;
- Remove the Economy 7 meter that was installed in the property and replace with a standard 24 hour meter;
- Offer the consumer a range of discounted payment options, including a keypad meter or direct debit;
- Adjust the repayment rate to take account of the consumer's financial difficulties; and
- Carry out a benefit check to ensure the consumer was in receipt of all the financial assistance they were entitled to.

As a result of these actions by the supplier, the consumer's bill was reduced by over £750 and she was given more time to pay the arrears.

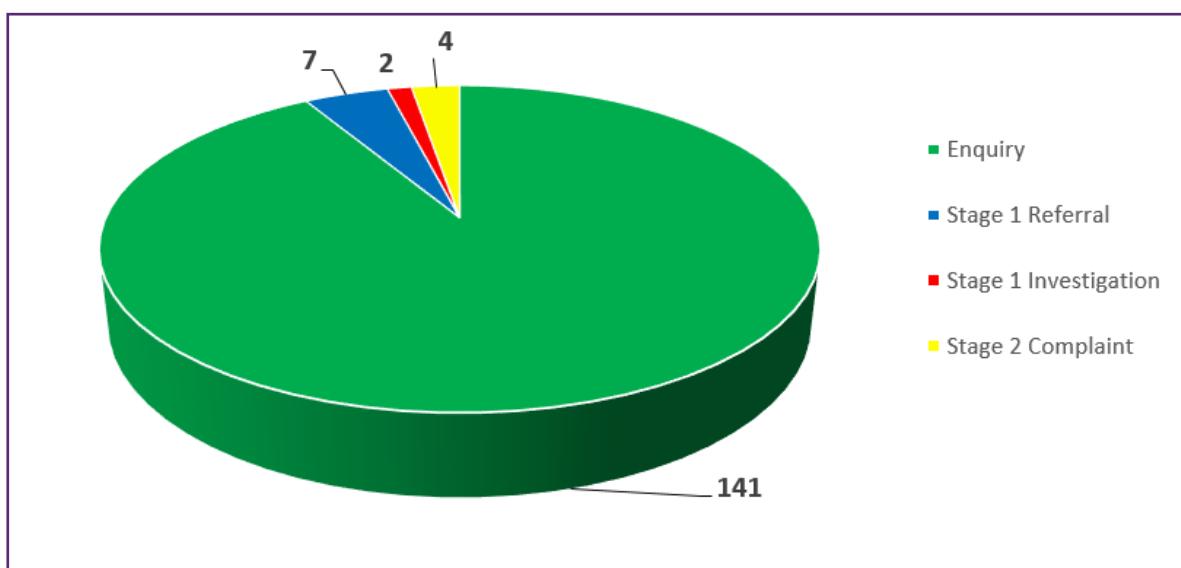
It also transpired that the meter was located outside the property; therefore meter readings should have been taken by NIE Networks on a regular basis. In light of this failing, NIE Networks agreed to offer a £175 goodwill gesture to the consumer. In addition, the benefit check led to the consumer receiving increased financial support.

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, Derry/Londonderry 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 2017-18, The Consumer Council received a total of 154 natural gas contacts which accounted for only 6% of the total enquiries and complaints handled in this period.

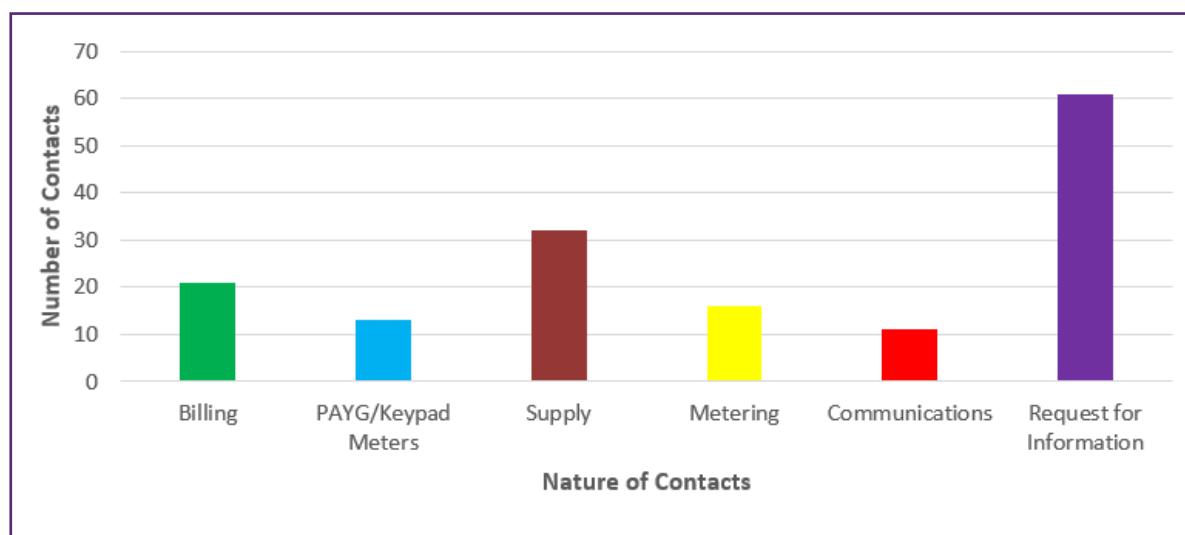
Chart 7: Breakdown of gas contacts by classification (n=154)



Overall, natural gas contacts received in 2017-18 (154) dropped by 10% from 2016-17 (172), with reductions in contacts across all categorisations (Enquiries, Stage 1 referrals, Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2).

Table 6: Natural Gas contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Customers
Firmus Energy	49	1	3	1	54	£30
Phoenix Natural Gas	37	0	3	3	43	£969
SSE Airtricity Gas	55	1	1	0	57	£123
Total	141	2	7	4	154	£1,122

Chart 8: The top natural gas issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2017-18 (n=154)

As with electricity contacts, requests for general advice and information was the most common type of gas contact we received in 2016-17 accounting for 46% of the total gas contacts received. 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 Belfast regarding the poor customer service she believed she received when applying to have natural gas installed at her home. During the initial sales visit she was told by Phoenix Natural Gas that the connection would be free as there was a suitable distribution pipeline outside the property. This information was confirmed in the gas connection agreement, signed by the energy advisor during the sales visit.

On this basis, the consumer agreed to proceed and in preparation purchased a boiler, as well as having some work carried out in her home. However, when the consumer contacted Phoenix Natural Gas a few months later to get an update on the progress of her application, she was advised that the connection was no longer free and would cost £1,800.

The consumer raised a formal complaint with Phoenix Natural Gas but was unhappy with how they handled the complaint.

Through our investigation we discovered that the consumer's property was not readily connectable to the natural gas network as no distribution pipeline existed in the vicinity. Unfortunately, there had been a system record error on the Phoenix Natural Gas database. As a result, the application signed by the consumer and Energy Advisor was rejected.

The issue was further compounded by the fact that Phoenix Natural Gas failed to communicate this to the consumer, despite being aware that the application was rejected the day after the initial visit. It took three months for Phoenix Natural Gas to update the consumer, by which stage the consumer had purchased the boiler and incurred other costs preparing for the gas installation.

Upon review of the complaint raised by The Consumer Council, Phoenix Natural Gas acknowledged that the customer service provided on this occasion had fallen short of expected service standards. Phoenix Natural Gas also acknowledged that it had failed to communicate the rejection of the application to the consumer in an effective and timely manner.

Phoenix Natural Gas apologised for this failing and offered a payment of £275 in line with its Guaranteed Standards of Service. Phoenix Natural Gas also undertook a review of its gas connection processes and put in place several amendments to prevent a similar issue occurring in the future.

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 23 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.

Enquiries about coal remain consistently low and are comparable with previous years. 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 customers
Calor Gas	13	13	£0
Flogas	8	8	£100
Northern Ireland Coal Trade Association Ltd	3	3	£0
NI Oil Federation	2	2	£0
Total	26	26	£100

Transport



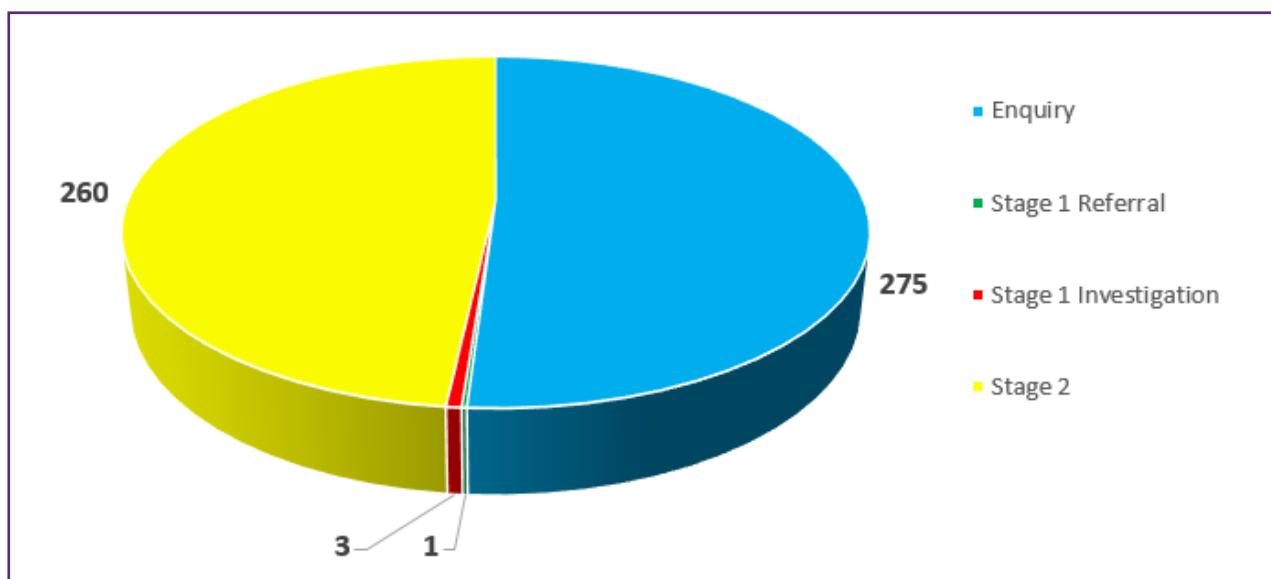
In 2017-18, transport related enquiries and complaints accounted for 24% (655) of all contacts received by The Consumer Council and comprised of complaints and enquiries about travel via air, public transport and ferries in Northern Ireland.

Air Travel

Contacts about air travel (539) accounted for 82% of the total transport related contacts received.

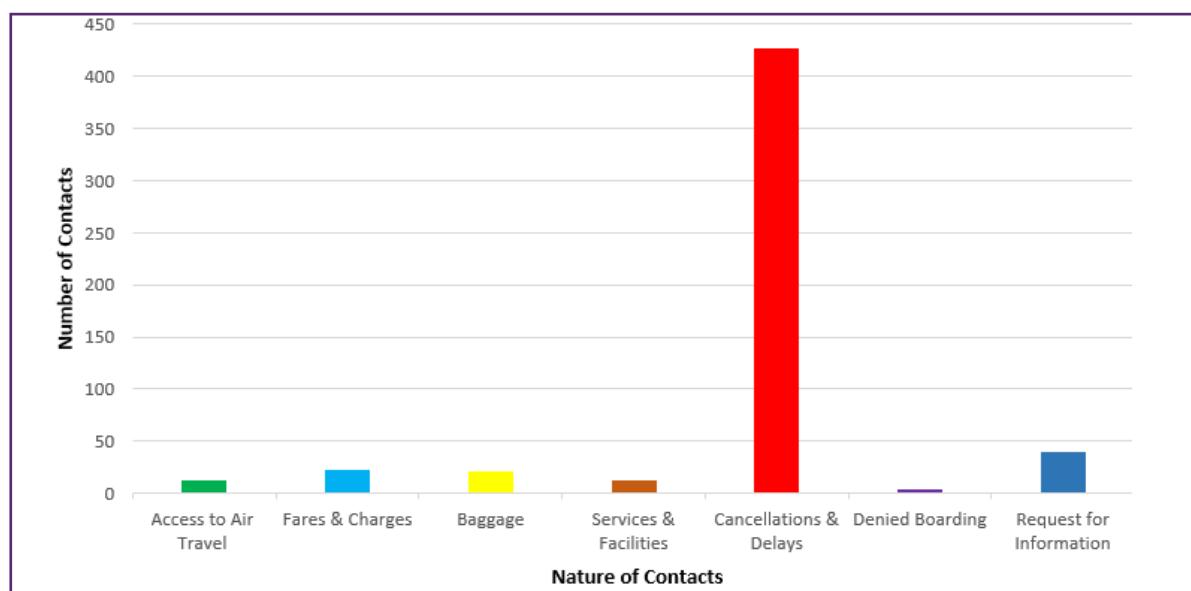
Of the 539 air contacts received, 79% related to delays and cancellations. Passengers who experience a delay or cancellation may be entitled to claim compensation under European Law. The Consumer Council consequently, helped return over £78k to air passengers in the last year.

Chart 9: Breakdown of air contacts by classification



In 2017-18, the number of Stage 2 airline complaints (260) increased by 88% from 2016-17 (138). This increase can be attributed to a number of high profile issues relating to airlines such as Ryanair and Bulgaria Air. Chart 10 shows the top air issues raised by consumers in 2017-18.

Chart 10: The top air issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2017-18



Ryanair Cancellations

In September 2017, Ryanair made widespread flight cancellations which impacted on thousands of consumers across the UK. The Consumer Council raised its concerns with the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) about how Ryanair was assisting passengers affected by its decision to cancel flights. In our view, the airline was not meeting the needs of passengers as required by European Regulations. The CAA took swift action against the airline to ensure it met its legal obligations.

The Consumer Council participated in a number of media interviews to promote awareness of what passengers were entitled to. In 2017-18 we helped 124 Ryanair customers get back over £15K in refunds and redress. In addition, we supported the CAA in its response to the incident, which enabled many more passengers to get the assistance they were entitled to.

Bulgaria Air Delays

Bulgaria Air encountered a series of delays in June and July 2017, affecting many passengers from Northern Ireland. Some passengers were delayed for over 12 hours, and received no assistance from the airline.

The Consumer Council has been helping those passengers affected to obtain compensation from the airline under EU Regulation 261/2004. To date, The Consumer Council has successfully obtained over £7k in compensation, but the airline still needs to settle many outstanding claims.

Case Study - Airlines

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer, who had booked a party of seven to travel to Portugal for a golfing trip. The consumer received an email from Aer Lingus the day before they were due to fly back to Belfast advising that the flight had been cancelled due to Storm Ophelia.

Unfortunately, the consumer did not see the email until the day they were due to return home, and when they contacted the airline to arrange alternative flights, there were no flights available that day. The earliest flight available for all seven passengers was three days later.

In order to get back home the party of seven had to split up, with some flying back to Dublin instead of Belfast. As a result of the cancellation the passengers incurred extra accommodation and food costs as well as transfer costs from Dublin to Belfast.

On returning home, the consumer contacted Aer Lingus to claim compensation for the cancellation, and the out of pocket expenses; however, four months passed without any response from Aer Lingus.

The Consumer Council raised a formal complaint with Aer Lingus on behalf of the party of seven. In its response to The Consumer Council, Aer Lingus 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 extraordinary circumstances, no compensation was payable under EU legislation; however, Aer Lingus did agree to pay all of the accommodation costs and extra expenses incurred by the passengers, along with a refund of the cancelled flight, totalling £2,155.44.

As a further gesture of goodwill, Aer Lingus offered a £50 e-voucher to each passenger, totalling £350, to use on a future Aer Lingus flight.

Table 8: Air contacts by service provider (n=539)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Customers
Aer Lingus	24	1	0	18	43	£6,990
Belfast City Airport	3	0	0	0	3	£0
Belfast International Airport	4	0	1	0	5	£0
BMI	0	0	0	1	1	£0
British Airways	19	0	0	7	26	£2,658
Bulgaria Air	1	0	0	36	37	£7,919
CAA (referral)	13	0	0	0	13	£0
Citywing	2	0	0	0	2	£0
EasyJet	84	0	0	105	189	£31,530
ECC	1	0	0	0	1	£0
Flybe	16	1	0	13	30	£2,983
Jet2.com	15	0	0	13	28	£3,885
KLM	2	0	0	0	2	£0
Norwegian Air	5	0	0	3	8	£1,043
Ryanair	72	1	0	51	124	£15,204
Thomas Cook Airlines	5	0	0	8	13	£3,908
Thomson Airways	5	0	0	2	7	£2,069
United Airlines	4	0	0	2	6	£0
Wizz Air	0	0	0	1	1	£0
TOTAL	275	3	1	260	539	£78,189

Case Study - Airlines

The Consumer Council was contacted by a family from Omagh who had booked a family holiday to Portugal for four days, and encountered a five hour delay on their outbound flight from Belfast with easyJet.

One of the children travelling had special needs, so the delay significantly impacted the family as they found it extremely stressful trying to keep the child happy and relaxed in the confines of the airport for such a lengthy period of time. The family was upset as easyJet staff did not inform them of the delay when they were checking in for the flight.

The Consumer Council contacted easyJet on behalf of the family, and we requested compensation for the delay, in line with EU Regulation 261/2004. EasyJet confirmed the cause of the delay was a technical fault on the aircraft and therefore compensation of €400 was payable to each passenger. As a result the family received €1,600 in compensation. EasyJet also apologised for the inconvenience and stress caused to the family as a result of the delay.

Bus Travel

During 2017-18 the number of contacts regarding bus services (84) increased by 24% from 2016-17 (68). Chart 11 shows the breakdown of bus contacts by classification.

Chart 11: Breakdown of bus contacts by classification

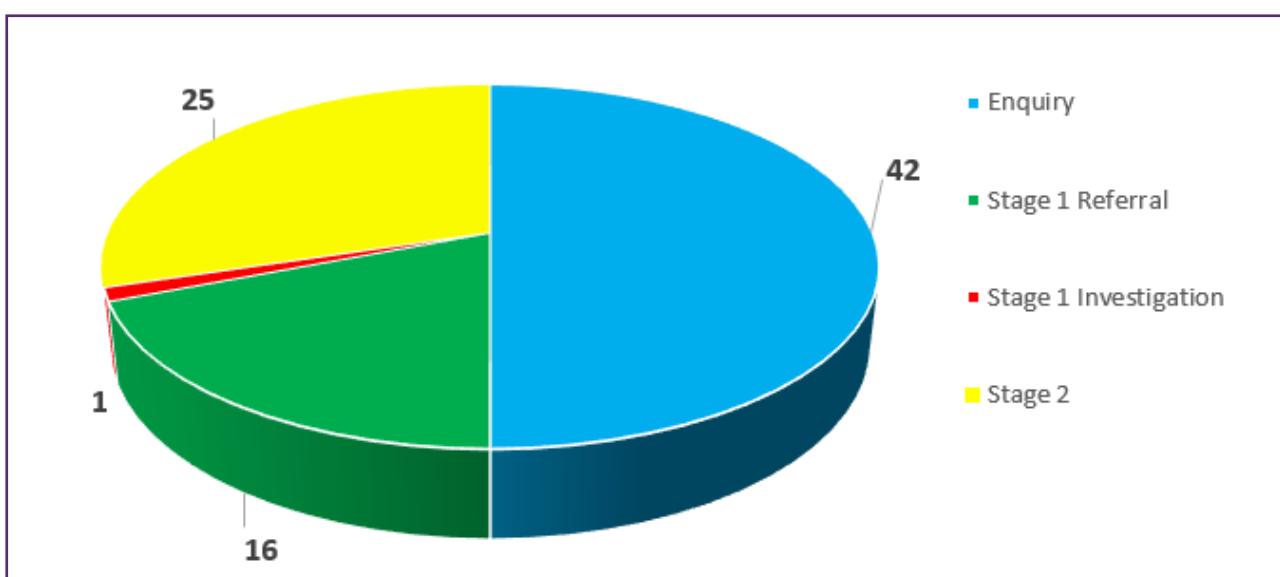
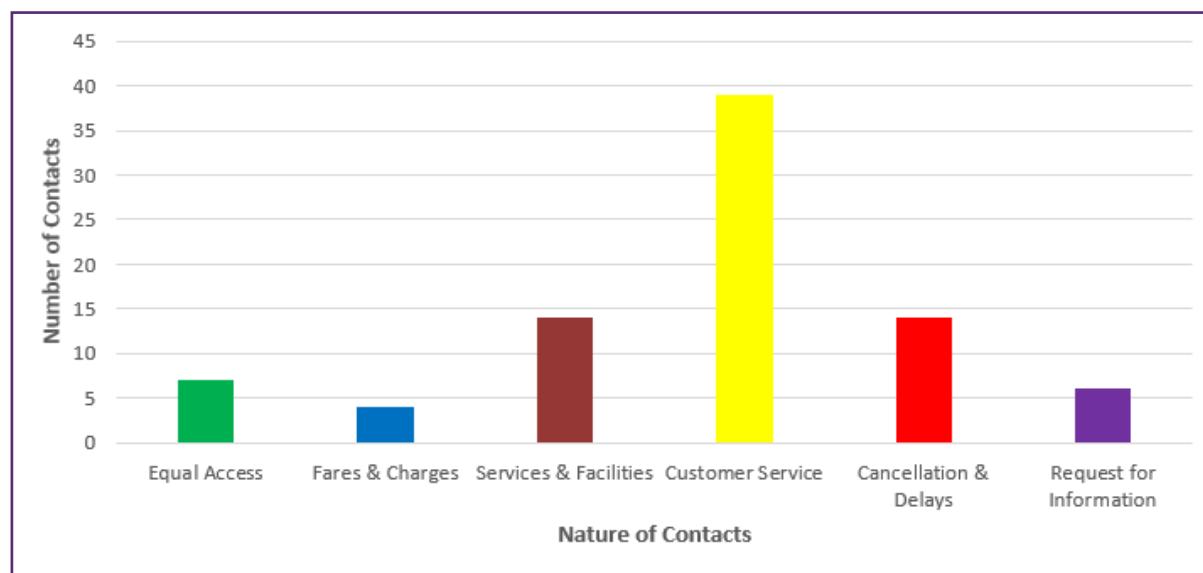


Table 9: Bus contacts by service provider (n=84)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Customers
Disability Action Transport Scheme	0	0	2	0	2	£0
Translink	42	1	14	25	82	£443
Total	42	1	16	25	84	£443

Consistent with 2016-17, bus passengers most commonly contacted us in relation to poor customer service issues. These include complaints about staff attitude, failure to respond to complaints, and inadequate customer service in general. Issues of this nature increased by 63% from 2016-17 (39 to 24).

Chart 12: The top bus issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2017-18

Case Study - Bus

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer from Belfast who had encountered customer service issues not only with Translink services from Dublin airport to Belfast, but also with Translink staff.

The consumer had been waiting at the airport to get a bus back to Belfast, however, the bus did not arrive as scheduled. When another Translink bus stopped at Dublin airport, he approached the driver to find out why the earlier bus to Belfast had not arrived. The driver became rude and aggressive towards the consumer.

The consumer made a formal complaint to Translink but was dissatisfied with the actions taken to fully investigate the issue and resolve the matter.

The Consumer Council investigated the issue with Translink and it transpired that due to a failure to carry out a comprehensive and complete investigation in a timely manner, no CCTV was available to assist the investigations and the complaint had been closed off without resolution. Translink apologised for this, and agreed to review its internal processes to ensure this would not occur again.

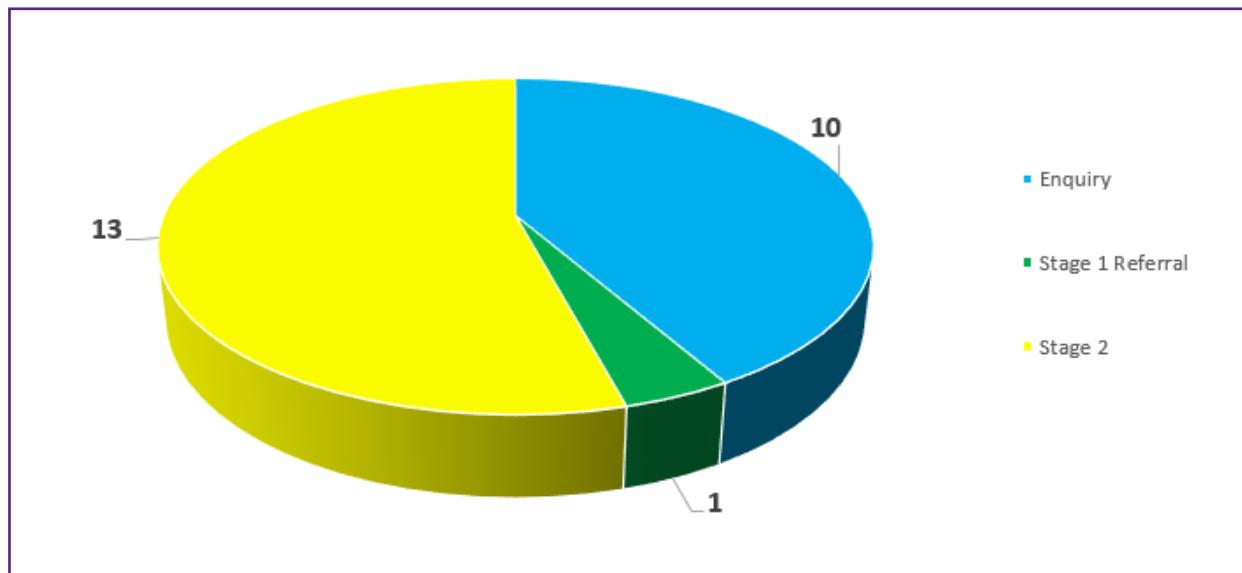
The Consumer Council set up a meeting between Translink and the consumer to give both parties the opportunity to discuss the customer service issues. Translink apologised for the service issues on the night in question and agreed to discuss the failings with their joint service provider, Bus Éireann, to improve the airport service and prevent similar service failings occurring in the future.

Translink also apologised for the customer service issues encountered with the staff member and advised that the necessary action had been taken to address the matter, including customer service training for the staff member in question, as well as customer service refresher training for all staff employed on this route. Translink also offered the consumer four return journey rail tickets to Dublin to the value of £180.

Rail Travel

Translink is the only rail provider operating in Northern Ireland. In 2017-18, The Consumer Council received a total of 24 rail contacts, this was a 20% increase in contacts from 2016-17 (24 vs 20).

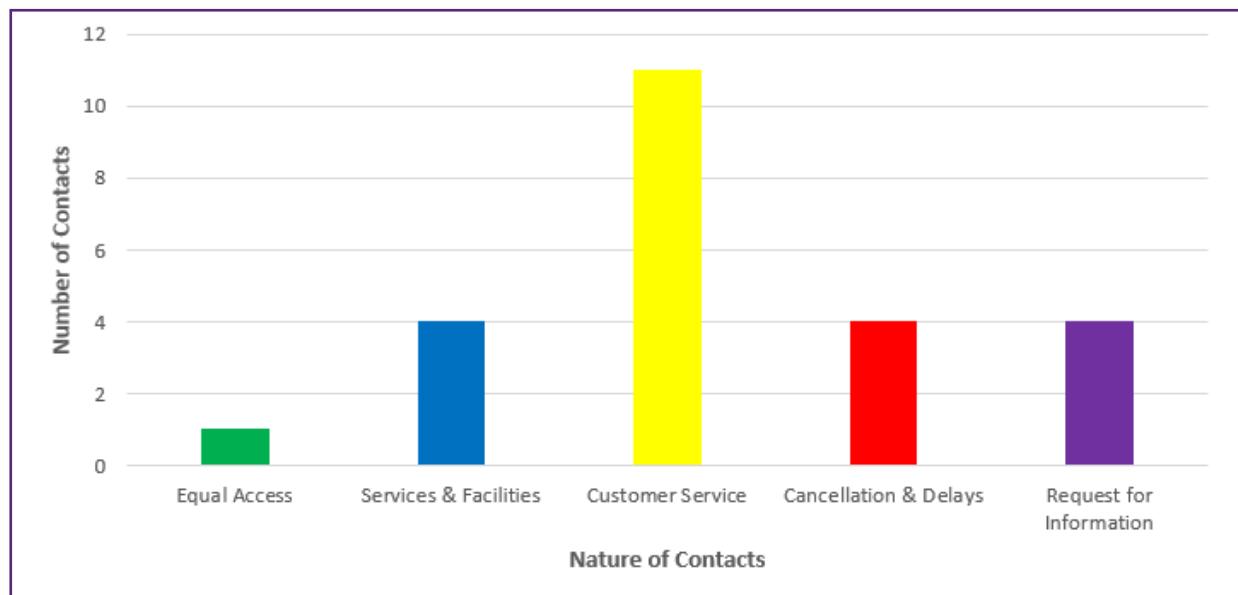
Chart 13: Breakdown of rail contacts by classification



Consistent with last year, issues about customer service remain the most common type of rail contact received in 2017-18. These include 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 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Customers
Translink - Rail	10	1	13	24	£168

Chart 14: The top rail issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2016-17

Case Study - Rail

The Consumer Council investigated a complaint on behalf of a consumer who had purchased tickets to travel on the Enterprise service to a sporting event in Dublin. The ticket permitted the consumer to travel back on a specific service and could not be transferred to another service at a later time.

The consumer was very dissatisfied with the service provided by Translink as it departed later than scheduled which resulted in the passenger arriving one hour late to his final destination. The consumer also advised that passengers on the train were drinking excessively and behaving in an aggressive way which caused a lot of stress and anxiety for other passengers.

The consumer complained directly to Translink in the first instance, but was dissatisfied with the response as it contained several errors in relation to the service in question. The consumer had also requested a refund of his ticket but this was misinterpreted as a request for compensation and was refused on these grounds.

As a result of our formal investigation, Translink issued an apology to the passenger for the stress and inconvenience caused whilst travelling on the service. Translink also provided an explanation for the issues that led to the late departure of the service and the steps that were taken to ensure the safety of passengers on-board. A full refund of £23 was also provided to the consumer along with four complimentary vouchers for coffees.

Ferry Travel

Consistent with the previous two years, less than 1% (8) of all contacts received by The Consumer Council in 2017-18 relate to ferry travel. These centred on services and on-board facilities.

Chart 15: Breakdown of ferry contacts by classification

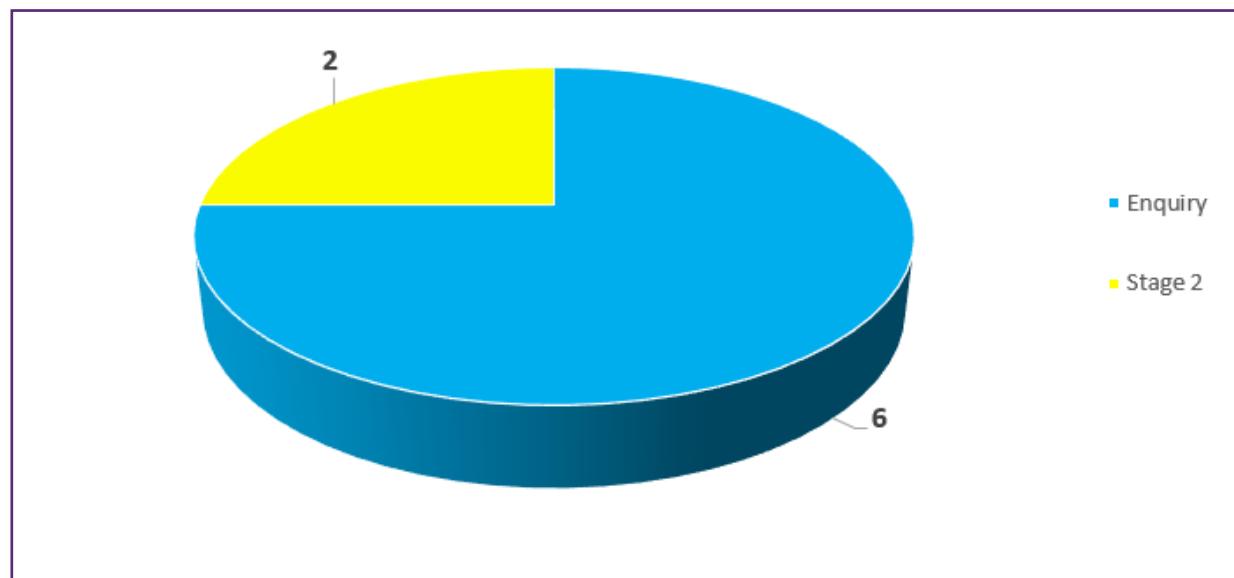


Table 11: Ferry contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Total	Returned to Customers
P&O Ferries	2	1	3	£400
Stena Line	3	1	4	£0
ABTA Referral (Ferry)	1	0	1	£0
Total	6	2	8	£400

Chart 16: The top ferry issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2017-18 (n=8)



Special Assistance Provision at Stena Line

In October 2017, The Consumer Council arranged a site visit to Stena Line for a group of passengers with a disability or reduced mobility. The site visit involved a journey between Belfast and Scotland to examine the special assistance available at the ports and on-board.

Stena Line staff guided the group through the entire passenger process of arriving, boarding, using services and facilities on-board and disembarking at both ports. Organisations represented included Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), Parkinson's UK, Age Sector Platform, Guide Dogs NI, Prosthetic User Forum and the Cedar Foundation.

Overall, participants found it was a positive experience. They made a number of recommendations regarding boarding the shuttle bus, availability of information/signage for passengers with a visual impairment, facilities for assistance dogs, seating, and information to help make passengers aware of the assistance that is available.

The Consumer Council provided Stena Line with a report of the findings from the day. We are now working with Stena Line to support the implementation of the suggestions to ensure its services continue to meet passengers' needs.



Photo: Staff from The Consumer Council pictured alongside Stena Line representatives and participants who attended the Special Assistance audit on board Stena Line in October 2017.

Case Study – Ferries

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer from Birmingham regarding poor customer service he received on board a P&O ferry from Larne to Cairnryan. The consumer advised that on the day in question a large group of football supporters, who were drunk and unruly, boarded the ferry in Larne. Throughout the journey they continued to consume alcohol and were generally loud and boisterous, which caused great anxiety and stress to other passengers.

The consumer had complained to P&O Ferries but was unhappy with the response provided.

The Consumer Council acted on behalf of the consumer and asked P&O Ferries to explain what steps had been taken to deal with the intoxicated passengers during the journey and to protect the health and safety of those on-board. We also highlighted how the stress and anxiety caused to other passengers affected the customer experience they had had on board the ferry.

P&O Ferries investigated the issues raised and apologised for the poor experience the consumer had encountered on-board. It explained the steps that had been taken by the crew to monitor the situation and to ensure the safety of its passengers. P&O Ferries agreed to offer a refund of the sailing, costing £200, along with a £200 voucher to be used on a future booking.

Water & Sewerage



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

Water and sewerage issues accounted for 10% (275) of all enquiries and complaints received by The Consumer Council in 2017-18 (2,694). In comparison with last year, water and sewerage contacts have reduced by 12% (312 vs 275).

This drop in contacts could 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 reduction in the number of enquiries and complaints relating to this issue.

Chart 17: Breakdown of water contacts by classification (n=275)

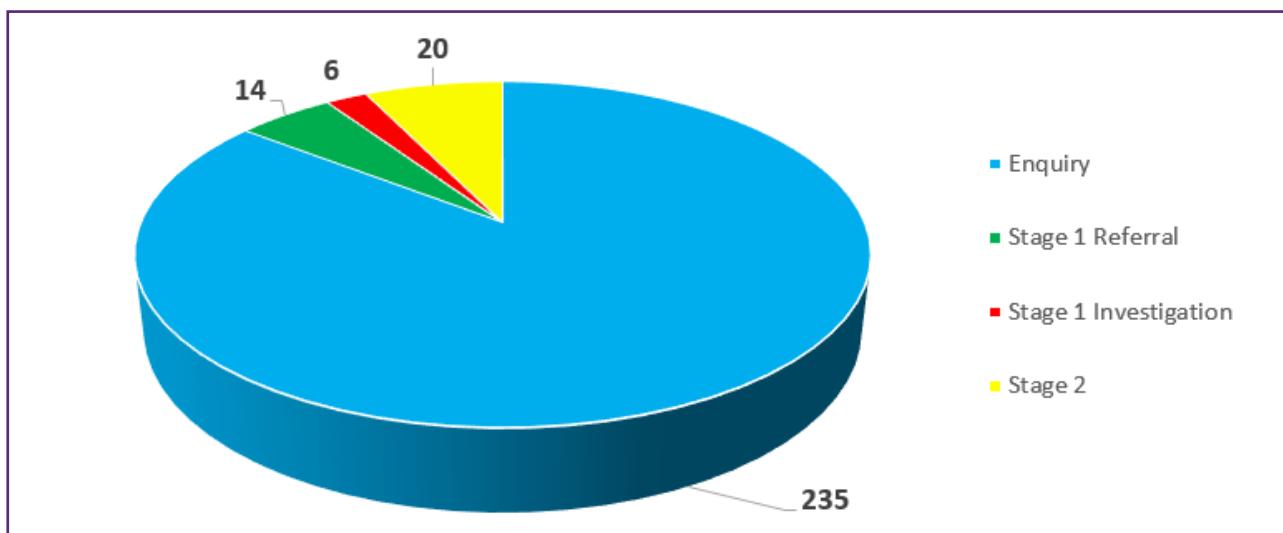
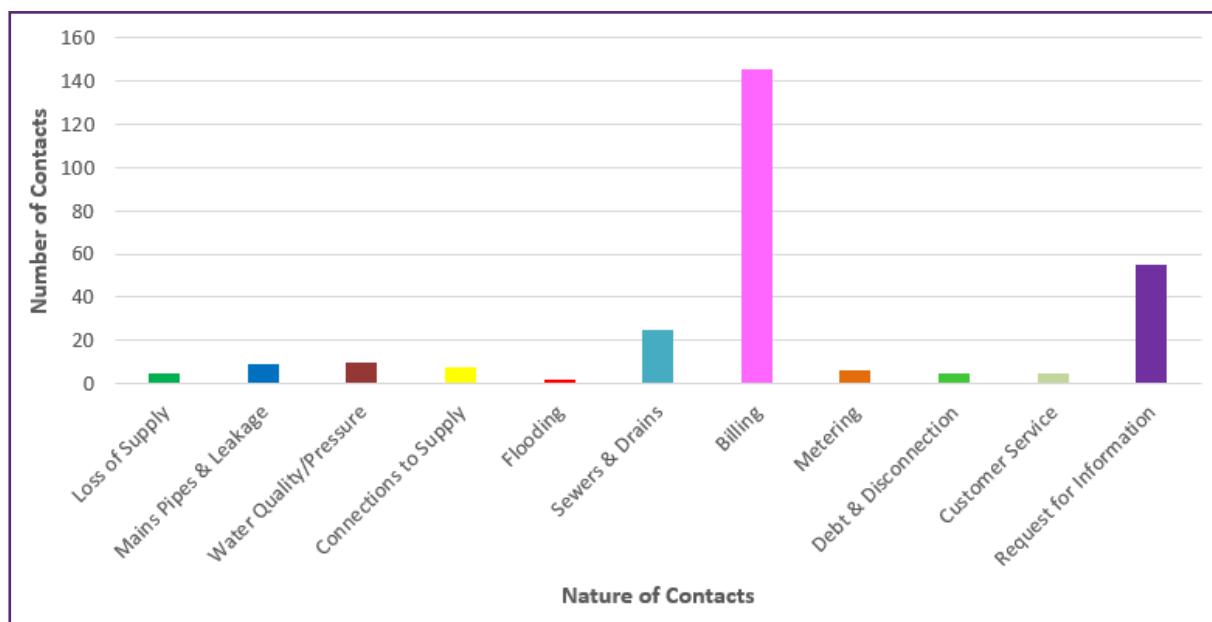


Table 12: Water and Sewerage contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to consumers
NI Water	235	6	14	20	275	£41,605

Chart 18: The top water issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2017-18 (n=275)



Case Study - Water

The Consumer Council was contacted by a nursing home to seek assistance in resolving a complaint about bills totalling over £10,800, which had been ongoing for some time.

A meter accuracy test carried out by NI Water had identified that the meter serving the nursing home had been under-recording. NI Water applied standing and volumetric charges to the account back dated to 2010 when the meter was first installed.

The Consumer Council advised NI Water that had the nursing home been aware of the correct volumetric charges, it would have utilised its rain harvesting system sooner. We requested that NI Water amend the volumetric charges to reflect this.

NI Water agreed to amend the charges from the date the meter was installed to the bill issue date using the current correct average daily consumption. NI Water re-calculated the charges, reducing the bill from £10,896 to £4,556.

NI Water also agreed for the remaining balance to be paid over two years.

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 2017-18, we received a total of 39 contacts relating to Postal Services. This represents a 13% reduction in contacts of this nature from 2016-17 (45).

Consistent with the past two years, mail delivery was the primary postal issue raised by consumers, accounting for 56% of the total contacts received. These include concerns about damaged or lost mail.

Chart 19: Breakdown of postal services contacts by classification (n=39)

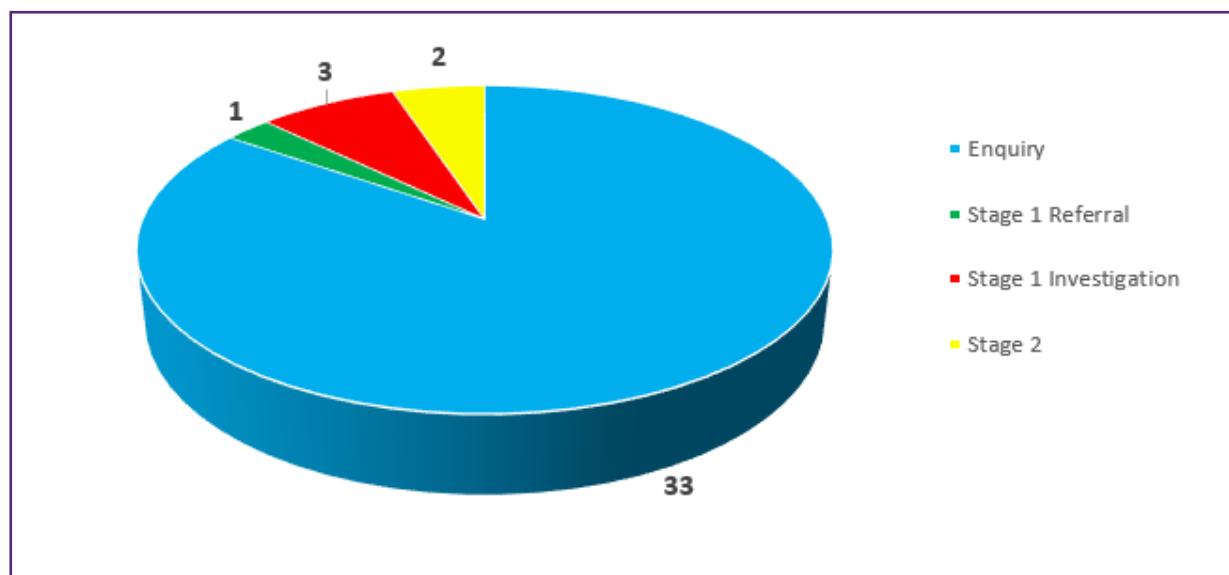
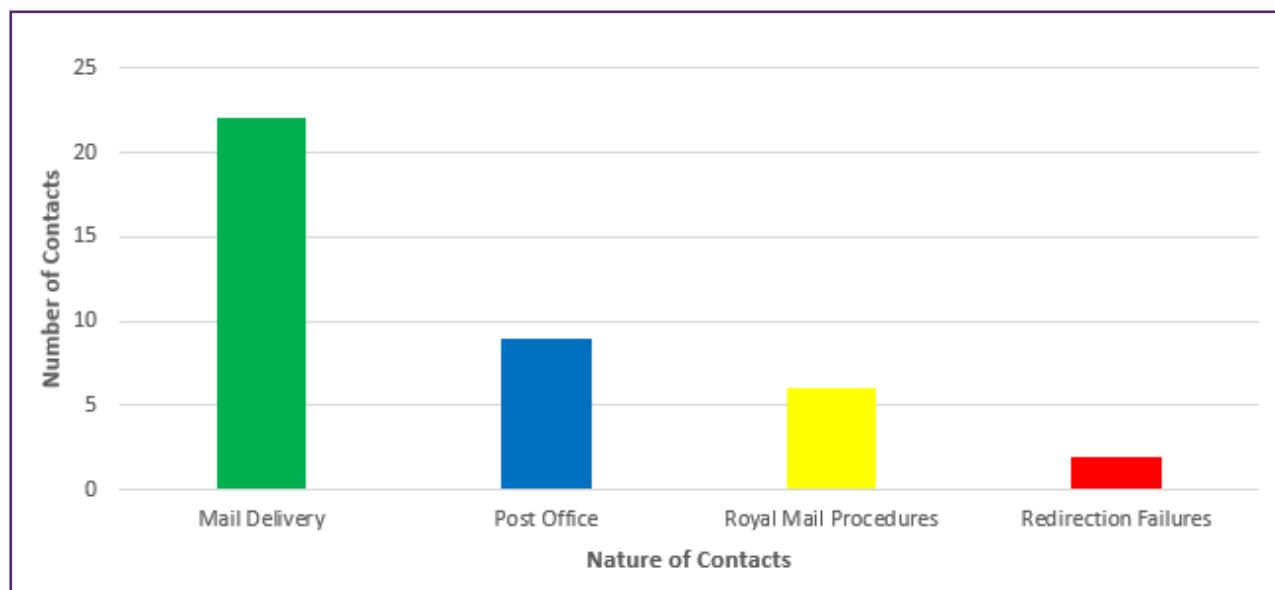


Table 13: Postal Services contacts by service provider (n=39)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to consumers
Royal Mail	22	3	1	2	28	£958
Parcelforce	2	0	0	0	2	£96
Post Office	7	0	0	0	7	£0
Other (Postal Service)	2	0	0	0	2	£0
Total	33	3	1	2	39	£1,054

Chart 20: The top postal service issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2017-18 (n=39)



Case Study - Postal Services

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer regarding a mail re-direct service that was fraudulently placed on his home address. The consumer became aware of the issue when he started to receive mail from service providers addressed to a different person at his address. The consumer then received a letter from Royal Mail addressed to the same person as on previous letters, advising that a re-direct had been requested for his address. When the consumer contacted Royal Mail to advise that no re-direct service had been requested by him, Royal Mail agreed to carry out an investigation but unfortunately did not cancel the re-direct.

The Consumer Council contacted Royal Mail on behalf of the consumer as he was unhappy with the actions taken by Royal Mail to address his concerns.

Through our investigation it transpired that the re-direct service had been requested for a year and had been paid in full by the person named on the letters.

Royal Mail confirmed that none of the consumer's mail had been re-directed to any other address. The re-direct was suspended and a £50 goodwill gesture offered to the consumer for the inconvenience caused. Royal Mail also agreed to amend its internal re-direction process so that when a re-direction is disputed, it will be put on hold until further investigations are undertaken.

The Consumer Council - Requests for Information



**EXTRA
MILE**

In 2017-18, The Consumer Council received 687 contacts from consumers requesting general advice and information across all areas of our remit or to provide feedback on our services.

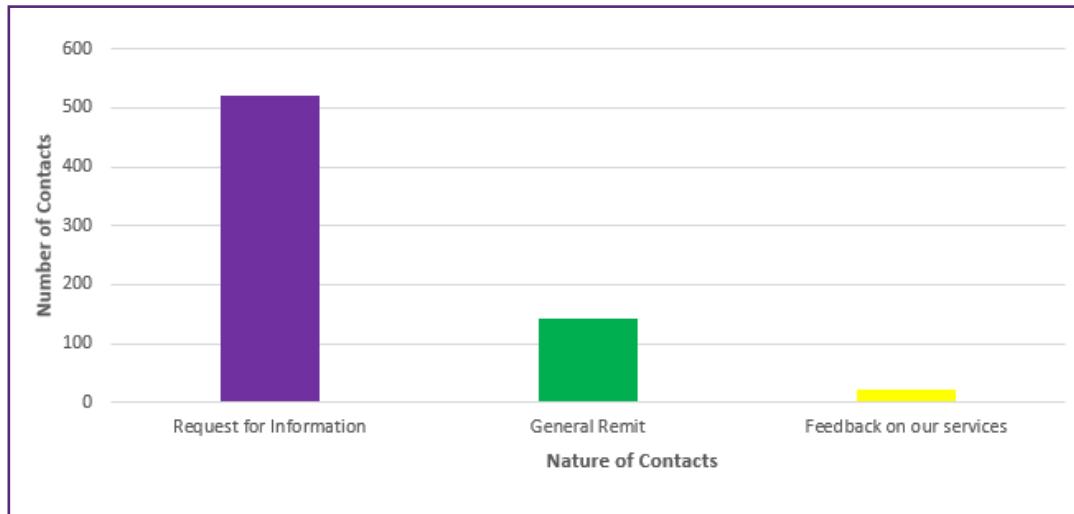
Requests for information accounted for 76% of these contacts and included requests for copies of our publications and guides such as 'Plane Facts' or 'Switch On' energy guides, requests for presentations by our Outreach Team, and general information on energy, water, transport and postal services.

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 2017-18, we assisted 143 consumers with issues of a more general nature such as complaints about private parking fines, tour operator issues and providing consumers with information on bank closures.

In 2017-18, The Consumer Council was contacted by 22 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 21: Breakdown of The Consumer Council contacts received in 2017-18 (n=687)



Private Parking Fines

Over the last year The Consumer Council has noticed an increase in private landowners, such as shopping centres, supermarkets and retail parks, sub-contracting their parking facilities to private parking companies, who can charge for parking.

This has led to an increase in calls from consumers to The Consumer Council complaining about the parking tickets or 'fines' that have been issued. Private parking tickets or 'fines' 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. No appeals service body was set up in Northern Ireland because the PoFA was not introduced in Northern Ireland (or Scotland). There is therefore no independent process by which consumers can challenge unfair charges.

On this basis, and in view of the increase in consumer contacts, The Consumer Council decided to use our general remit to represent consumers' interests in the area of private parking fines, as there was no other statutory body operating in this area.

In 2017-18, The Consumer Council investigated 75 private parking fines on behalf of consumers and successfully overturned fines to the value of over £6k.

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.

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 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.

Getting in Touch

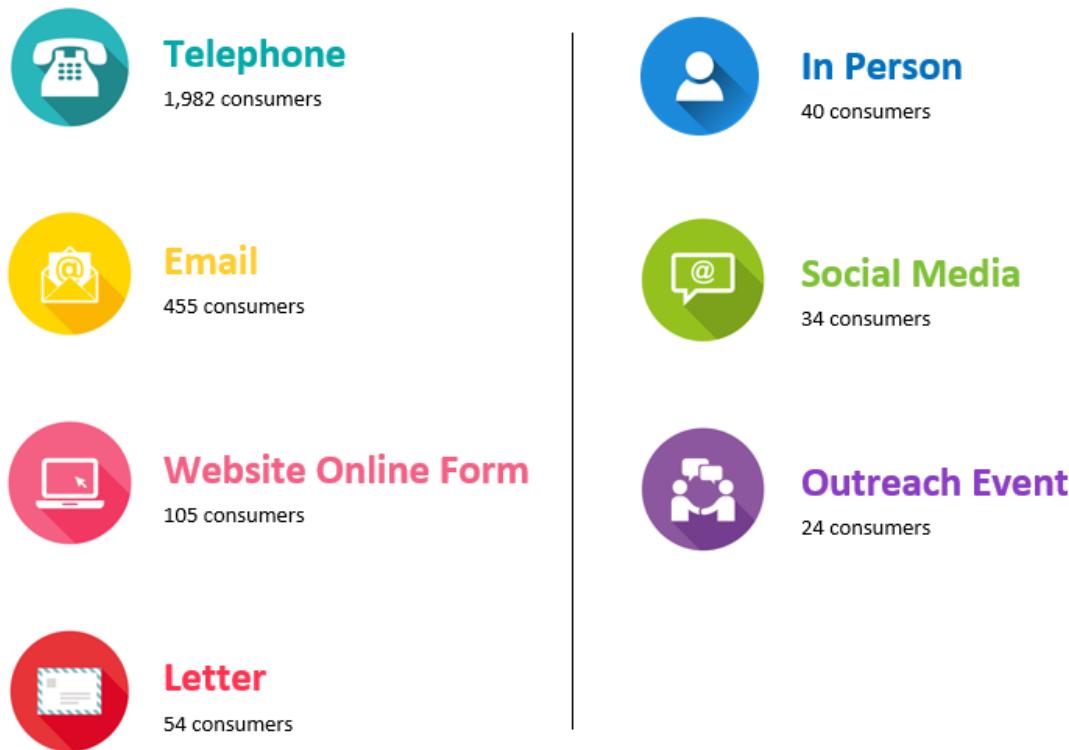


The Consumer Council can be contacted via telephone, email, website, letter, social media or in person by visiting our offices. We have a dedicated free phone number and email address specifically for enquiries and complaints, as well as an online complaints form which can be completed via our website.

In 2017-18, telephone was the preferred communication method when contacting The Consumer Council, accounting for 75% (n = 4,040) of the total contacts received.

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.

The following infographic shows a breakdown of the enquiries and complaints received in 2017-18 by communication method.



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

In 2017-18, the majority of consumers (29%) who contacted us found out about us using search engines such as Google.

Table 14 shows a breakdown of the different ways consumers hear about our services.

Table 14: How consumers heard about The Consumer Council in 2017-18

How did consumers find out about The Consumer Council?	Total
Search engine e.g. Google	1,172
Not disclosed	713
The Consumer Council's details on the back of a utility bill	580
Used our services before	363
Friend/Relative	355
Outreach presentation/event	130
Referred by Advice agency	121
Radio	116
Referred by service provider verbally	113
The Consumer Council website	106
The Consumer Council advertisement in airport	88
Social Media	59
Newspaper	45
Referred by constituency office	25
Referred by service provider in writing	18
Television	17
The Consumer Council's details on service provider website	15
The Consumer Council advertisement in bus station/bus	4
Total	4,040

Customer Feedback & Satisfaction



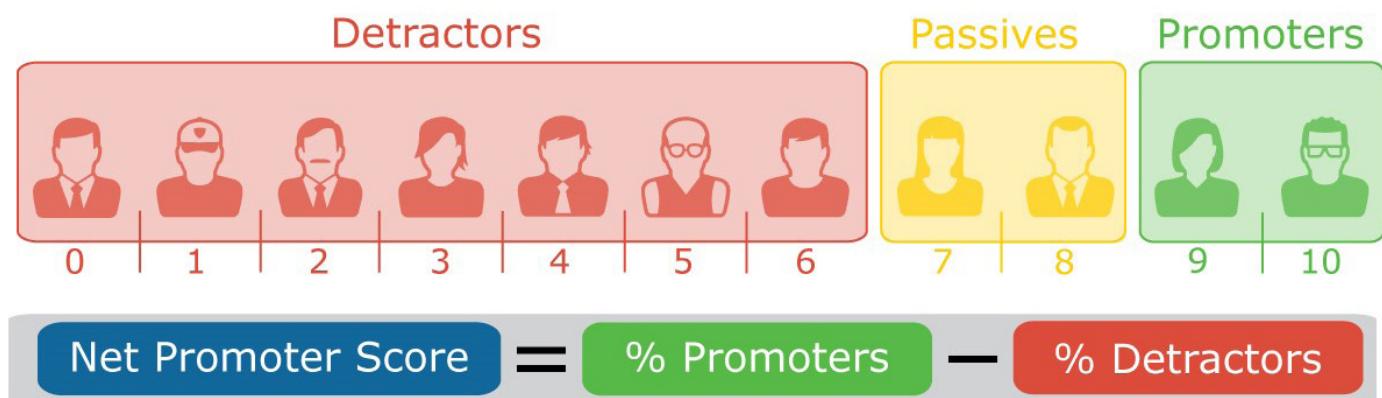
Consumer feedback is an essential part of The Consumer Council's learning and development process, adding particular value to our complaints handling service.

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.

In November 2016, we amended our Customer Satisfaction survey to include a Net Promoter Score (NPS) question. NPS 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.



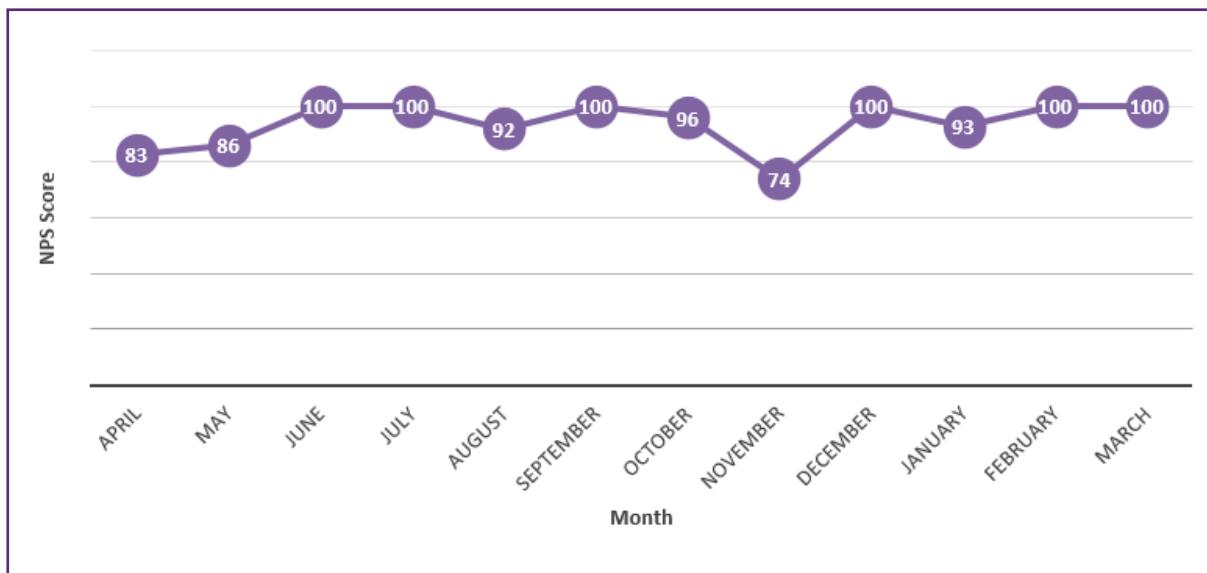
- Promoters (score 9-10)
- Passives (score 7-8)
- Detractors (score 0-6)

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 2017-18, our NPS was 94.

Throughout 2017-18, we have noticed our NPS levels change from month to month. This fluctuation in score is due to receiving three detractor scores since April 2017. However, these scores have given us the opportunity to identify dips in performance, and to put measures in place to improve and enhance our service. Chart 22 shows our NPS from April 2017 to March 2018.

Chart 22: Net Promoter Score received by The Consumer Council from April 2017 - March 2018

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 2017-18 was 99.6%. This represents an average of all the measures above.

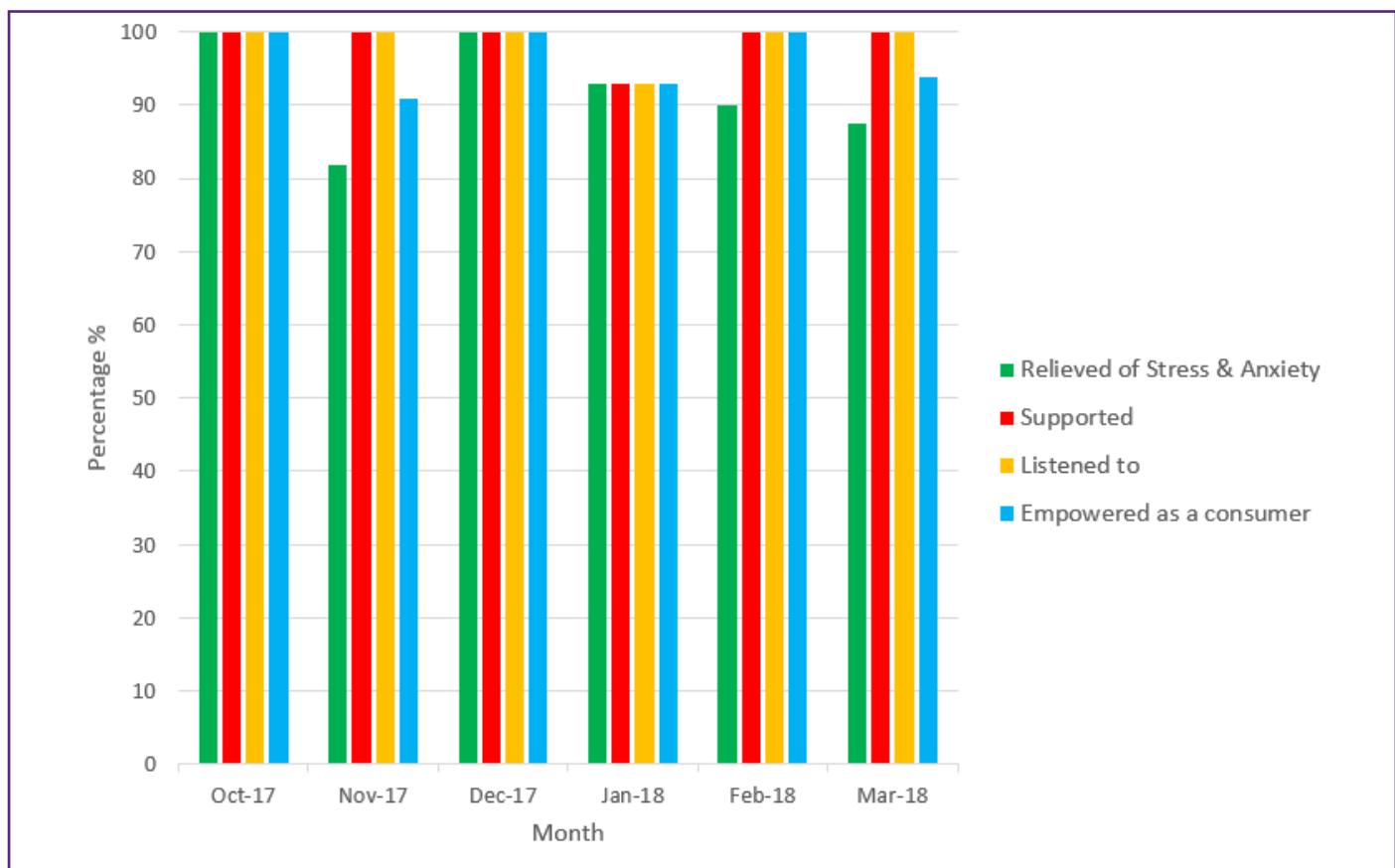
In October 2017, we added a new section to our satisfaction survey – a series of ‘wellbeing’ questions - to find out from consumers how our assistance made them feel.

Table 15 shows the responses we received to our new wellbeing questions from October 2017 to March 2018. Chart 23 provides a monthly comparison of these responses.

Table 15: Breakdown of responses received to The Consumer Council’s new wellbeing questions (October 2017 – March 2018)

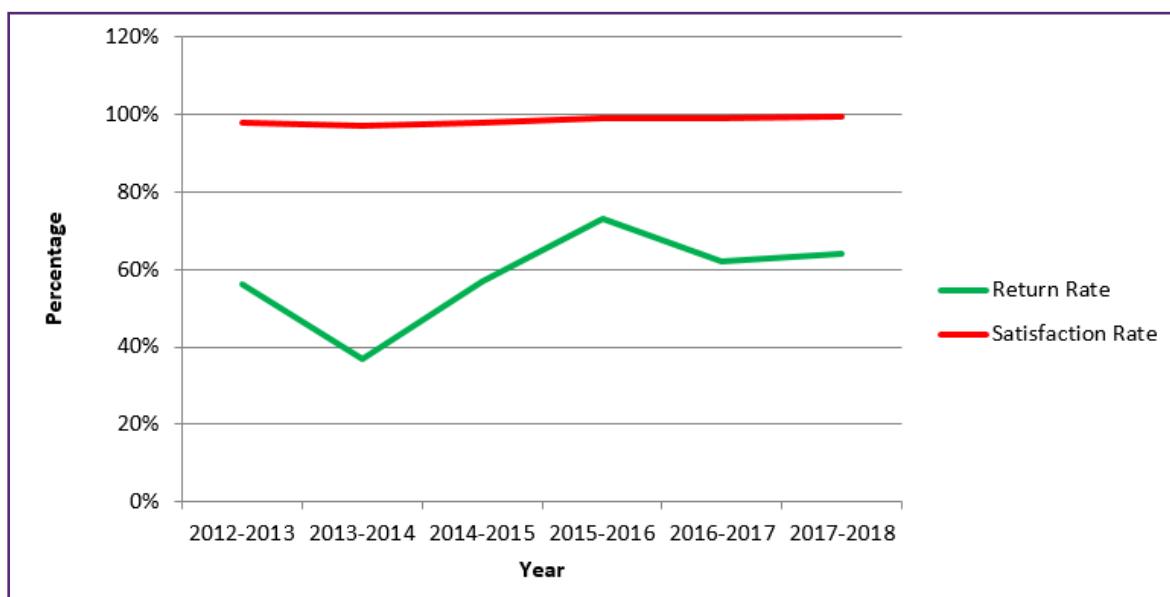
The Consumer Council helped make me feel...	
Relieved of stress and anxiety	92% agreed
Supported	99% agreed
Listened to	99% agreed
Confident as a consumer	96% agreed

Chart 23: Monthly comparison of how The Consumer Council enhanced consumer wellbeing, October 2017 - March 2018



The return rate for our customer satisfaction surveys in 2017-18 was 64%. The following chart shows The Consumer Council's satisfaction rates and return rates from 2012 to 2018.

Chart 24: Analysis of survey return rate & customer satisfaction rate from 2012-2018



Our Service Standards

In May 2017, The Consumer Council formally introduced Service Standards that make clear the level of service that consumers can expect to receive from us (see Chart 25). These standards are monitored and reported on every quarter on our website, and are used to benchmark against other similar organisations to help improve our service.

Chart 25: The Consumer Council Service Standards



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

Chart 26: Service Standards Results 2017-18



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. Out of the 57 elements, The Consumer Council was awarded Compliance Plus in 7 elements, compliance in 45 elements and partial compliance in 5 elements.

The Consumer Council will continue 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.



Photo (L-R): Paul Hindley (CSE Assessor), Noleen Charnley (Consumer Empowerment and Protection Officer, The Consumer Council) and John French (Chief Executive Officer, The Consumer Council).

"The Consumer Council responded really quickly. I felt like I had someone on my side who was fighting my corner."

"We had almost given up trying to get compensation from the airline as we had sent dozens of emails but got no response. We contacted The Consumer council and within two weeks we had received the money from the airline."

"The staff were courteous, helpful and made everything easy to understand. The outcome was positive and taught me matters concerning my consumer rights that I wasn't aware of."

"The Consumer Council made everything stress free, they were so helpful and nothing was too much trouble."

"Totally impressed with the excellent service and professionalism".



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-  **Email:** **info@consumercouncil.org.uk**
contact@consumercouncil.org.uk
-  **Website:** **www.consumercouncil.org.uk**
-  **Facebook:** **Consumer Council Northern Ireland**
-  **Twitter:** **@ConsumerCouncil**