



# Enquiries and Complaints Report

2016-17

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## Foreword

In Northern Ireland, The Consumer Council has a statutory role to investigate consumer (both domestic and business) complaints relating to energy, transport, post, and water and sewerage. In addition, we have the powers to consider any complaint relating to consumer affairs; whilst having regard to other complaint remedies that are available.

We understand that making a complaint can often seem like a frustrating and time-consuming process. However, it is the aim of The Consumer Council to individually work with both domestic and business consumers and support them to ensure their voice is heard, and that they get their issue resolved.

This complaints report, for the year to the end of March 2017, shows and explains the work we have undertaken in regards to our statutory complaints role. During this period, we have helped 3,968 (almost 4,000) consumers, and managed to gain £278,863 in redress for them. In addition to the various facts and figures this report contains, we have also included a selection of case studies, which explain the individual human stories behind some of the complaints we have received during this year.

In addition, during this year, to support the quality of our work, we have achieved Customer Service Excellence Standard. This is the UK Government's standard for a customer focused organisation. The Standard has tested The Consumer Council's work in the areas of delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism, and staff attitude. Through this assessment we have developed our own standards of service, which you will find at the end of this report.

All consumer feedback, whether positive or negative, is really valuable in improving the services available to consumers here in Northern Ireland. Through listening to and learning from consumers' experiences, we can develop an evidence base to encourage companies and organisations to continue to improve their services.

A well-handled complaint will make a consumer feel valued. We will continue to work with organisations to help them understand that by positively learning from complaints, they can strengthen their relationship with consumers.

John French  
Chief Executive

## 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 (NI).

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 an NI department 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 for the year to 31 March 2017.

### 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 them the opportunity to resolve the complaint. The complaint is therefore forwarded to the

service provider directly and they are asked to respond to the consumer in accordance with 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 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**.

## Our Year in Review

### Complaints Overview



**1,409**

Advised and signposted  
over 1,400 consumers



**2,559**

Investigated over 2,500  
enquiries and complaints



**£278.8k**

In total returned to the  
pockets of consumers



**£68.1k**

Returned for transport  
complaints, ranging from:

**£1-£7,793**



**£32.2k**

Returned for energy  
complaints, ranging from:

**£10-£11,648**



**£172.7k**

Returned for water  
complaints, ranging from:

**£62-£93,125**



**£1k**

Returned for postal services  
complaints, ranging from:

**£20-£1,000**

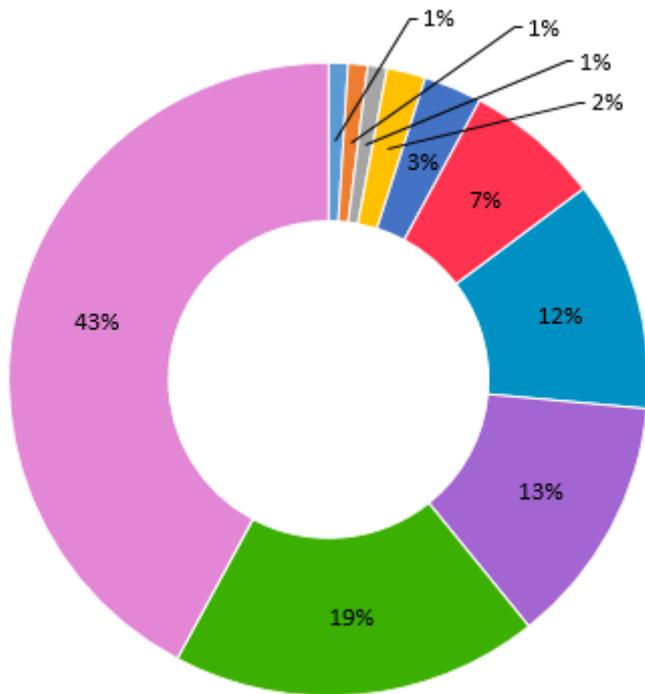


**£4.7k**

Returned for complaints within  
our general remit, ranging from:

**£26-£2,100**

## Breakdown of Enquiries & Complaints Received<sup>1</sup>



- Ferry Travel
- Rail
- Other Energy
- Postal Services
- Bus
- Natural Gas
- Water
- Air Travel
- CCNI - Request for information
- Electricity

## Customer Satisfaction



**99%**

Customer Satisfaction  
with our service

**84**

Net Promoter Score <sup>2</sup>

## Top Issues



Electricity Bills



Water Bills



Gas Bills



Air Travel Cancellations  
and Delays



Customer Service and  
Communication Issues

<sup>1</sup> Percentages in this report may not total 100% due to rounding.

<sup>2</sup> See page 44 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 that we represent and assist consumers across all of NI and in particular those from disadvantaged areas.

The map above shows the percentage of contacts received within each of the 11 Council areas across NI.

## Analysis of Enquiries & Complaints 2016-17<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: Total contacts 2016-17**

General Referrals & Requests for Information	Complaints & Enquiries	Total	Financial Return to Customers
1,409	2,559	3,968	£278,863

The Consumer Council helped a total 3,968 consumers in 2016-17. We investigated 2,559 enquiries and complaints, and assisted 1,409 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 2016-17 and 2015-16.

**Table 2: Two year comparison of enquiries & complaints 2015-17**

Categorisation	2015-16	2016-17	Increase/Decrease
Enquiry	2,838	2,166	-24%
Stage 1 Referral	41	88	+115%
Stage 1 Investigation	52	54	+4%
Stage 2	204	251	+23%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,135</b>	<b>2,559</b>	<b>-18%</b>

In 2016-17, the overall number of enquiries and complaints received has reduced by 18% compared to the previous year. This can mainly be attributed to a reduction in the number of enquiries, which has decreased by 24% compared to 2015-16.

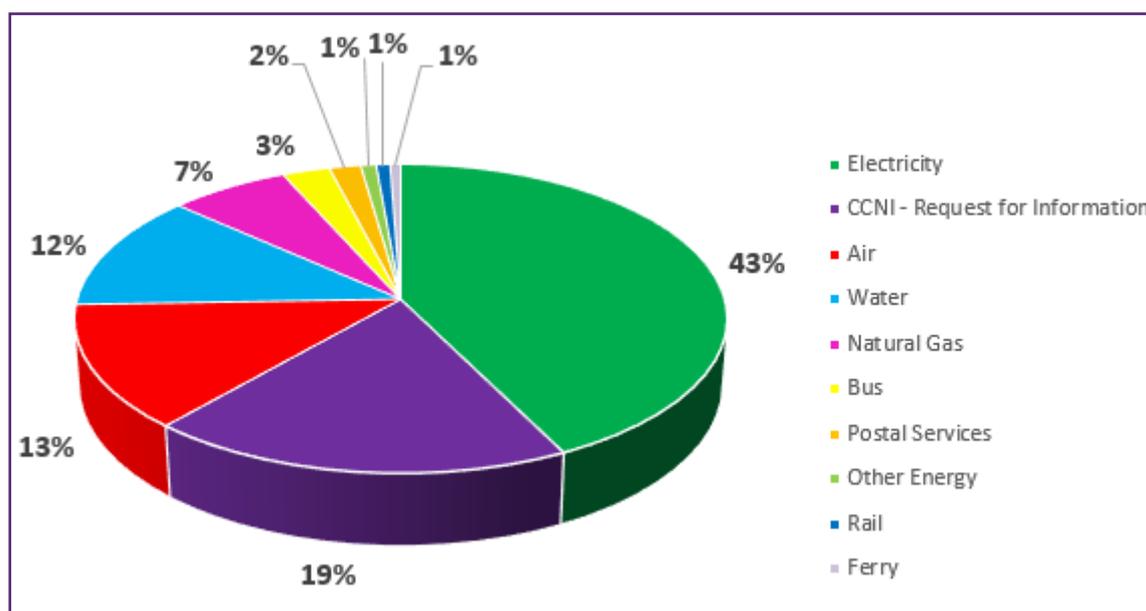
Whilst the reduction in enquiries has been evident across all areas of our remit, it has been particularly notable in relation to airline enquiries, which have dropped by 60% compared to 2015-16.

Throughout 2014-2015 there were several high profile court judgements supporting passenger entitlement for compensation in instances of delays and cancellations which led to an increase in the number of contacts received by The Consumer Council. Following this period of growth, airline enquiries have been reducing year on year and are returning back to the levels that we received pre 2014-15.

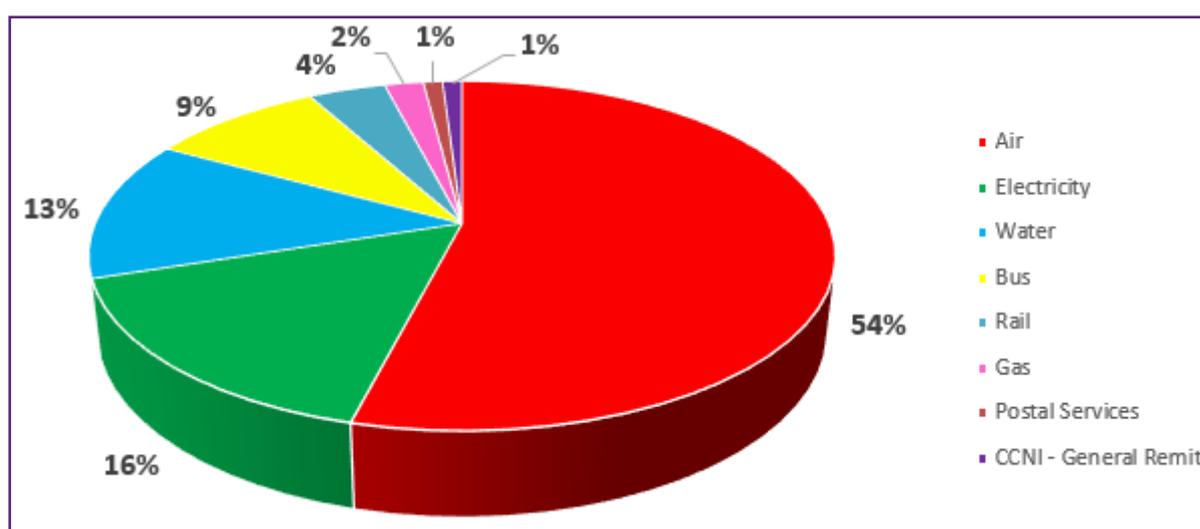
The reduction in enquiries may also be attributed to the fact that consumers are using The Consumer Council's website to directly access information rather than contacting us via telephone. This is particularly relevant to energy enquiries, as our interactive Energy Price Comparison Tool and 'Switch On' publications have been in the top three most downloaded publications and webpages visited since June 2016.

<sup>3</sup> All figures in this report are correct as of 31 March 2017.

**Chart 1: Analysis of Total Enquiries & Complaints received 2016-17**



**Chart 2: Analysis of Stage 2 Complaints received 2016-17**



In 2016-17, Stage 2 complaints increased by 23% compared to 2015-16 (251 vs 204).

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 is required in order for us to fully investigate the complaint and propose a resolution for the consumer.

In 2016-17, the number of Stage 2 complaints increased across almost all areas of our remit. The most notable increase in Stage 2 complaints was recorded in airline complaints which increased by 33% in 2016-17 compared to the previous year (138 vs 104). Rail complaints also more than doubled in 2016-17 compared to 2015-16 (10 vs 4).

## Complaint Resolution Times

Table 3 shows the average time taken to investigate Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2 complaints across each area within our remit. The average complaint resolution time in 2016-17 was 32 days<sup>4</sup>. Water complaints typically take longer to investigate taking on average 55 days to resolve.

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.

Due to the varying complexity of complaint investigations some complaints can take longer to investigate than others. These may involve numerous exchanges between The Consumer Council, service provider and consumer and can even require site visits or roundtable meetings to discuss the individual case.

The Consumer Council has agreed actions with NI Water to try to reduce the complaint resolution times for water complaints by streamlining processes and procedures to make these more efficient.

We hope that by making these changes we will see a reduction in the complaint resolution time for water complaints as we understand that protracted investigations may have financial implications for businesses.

**Table 3: Average complaint resolution time by area in 2016-17**

Area of Contact	Average number of days
Transport	36
Energy	27
Water	55
Postal Services	9

<sup>4</sup> Complaint resolution times are calculated in working days.

# Energy

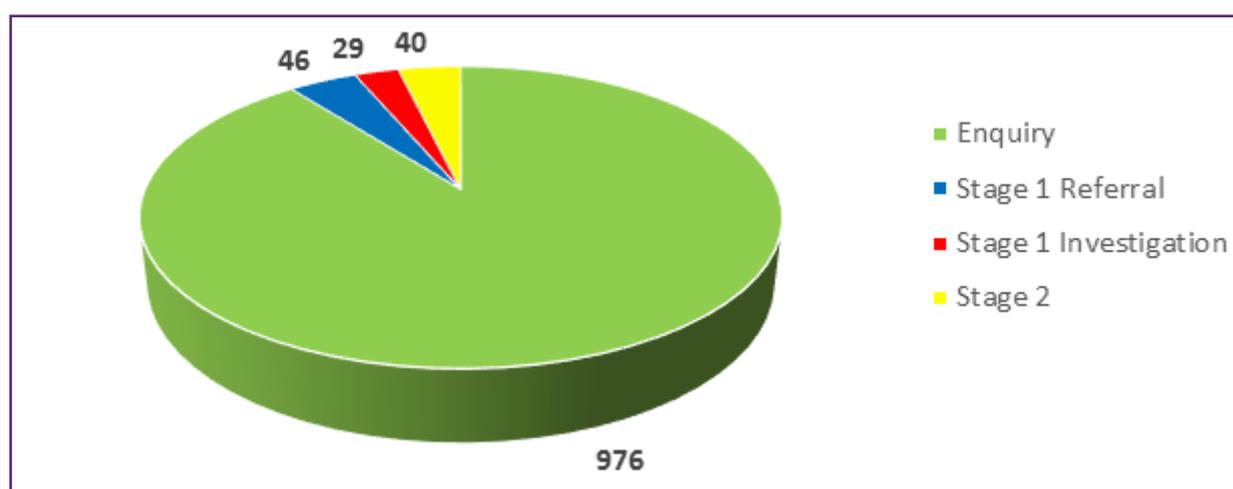


Energy related issues are typically the most common type of enquiry or complaint received by The Consumer Council. In 2016-17 energy contacts accounted for almost half of all consumer contacts (43%), with electricity responsible for 85% of this figure.

## Electricity

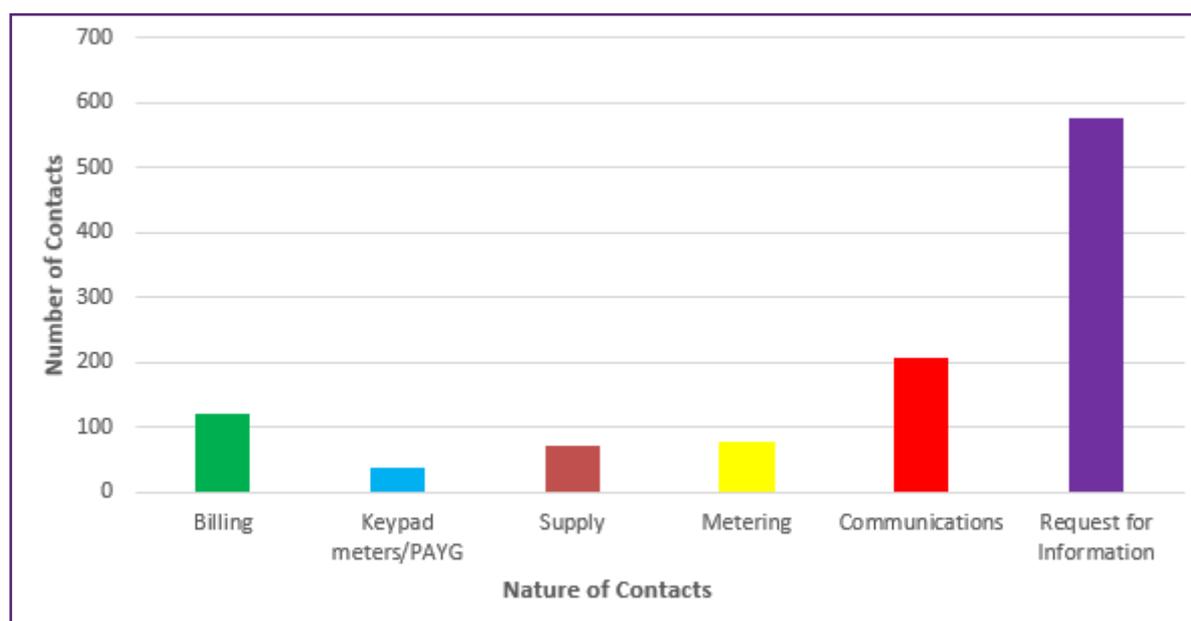
In 2016-17, The Consumer Council received a total of 1,091 enquiries and complaints from consumers about a range of electricity issues including billing, metering, problems with supply, and poor customer service. The chart below shows the breakdown of these contacts by classification.

**Chart 3: Breakdown of electricity contacts by classification**



The total number of electricity contacts received in 2016-17 (1,091) has reduced by 14% compared to 2015-16 (1,263). This reduction in contacts can be mainly attributed to an 18% drop in the number of enquiries received in 2016-17 (976) compared to the previous year (1,192). Through analysis of our website hits we have noted that in 2016-17, both the Electricity Price Comparison tool and the energy '*Switch On*' publications have been in the top three most visited and most downloaded publications for most of 2016-17. This could be a contributing factor to the reduction in enquiries received, as consumers are accessing our website more readily to obtain information on switching suppliers and electricity tariff prices, rather than contacting us directly.

In 2016-17, Stage 2 complaints about electricity (40) have increased by 21% compared to 2015-16 (33). Chart 4 shows the most common electricity issues received by The Consumer Council in 2016-17. Requests for general advice and information on electricity accounts for 46% of the total electricity contacts received. Requests of this nature include contact details for electricity suppliers, information on tariff prices, advice on switching, and information regarding company policies.

**Chart 4: The top electricity issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2016-17**

### Domestic Electricity Market in 2016-17

The electricity network in NI is owned and maintained by NIE Networks with a variety of suppliers available to domestic and commercial customers.

Until 18 December 2016, domestic customers in NI had a total of six electricity suppliers to choose from: Power NI, SSE Airtricity, Budget Energy, Electric Ireland, Click Energy NI and Open Electric.

Open Electric ceased trading at this time and its licence to supply electricity was revoked by the Utility Regulator. In order to avoid any interruption to supply, all 1,100 Open Electric customers were automatically transferred to Power NI, the nominated supplier for this kind of situation, known as the 'Supplier of Last Resort' process.

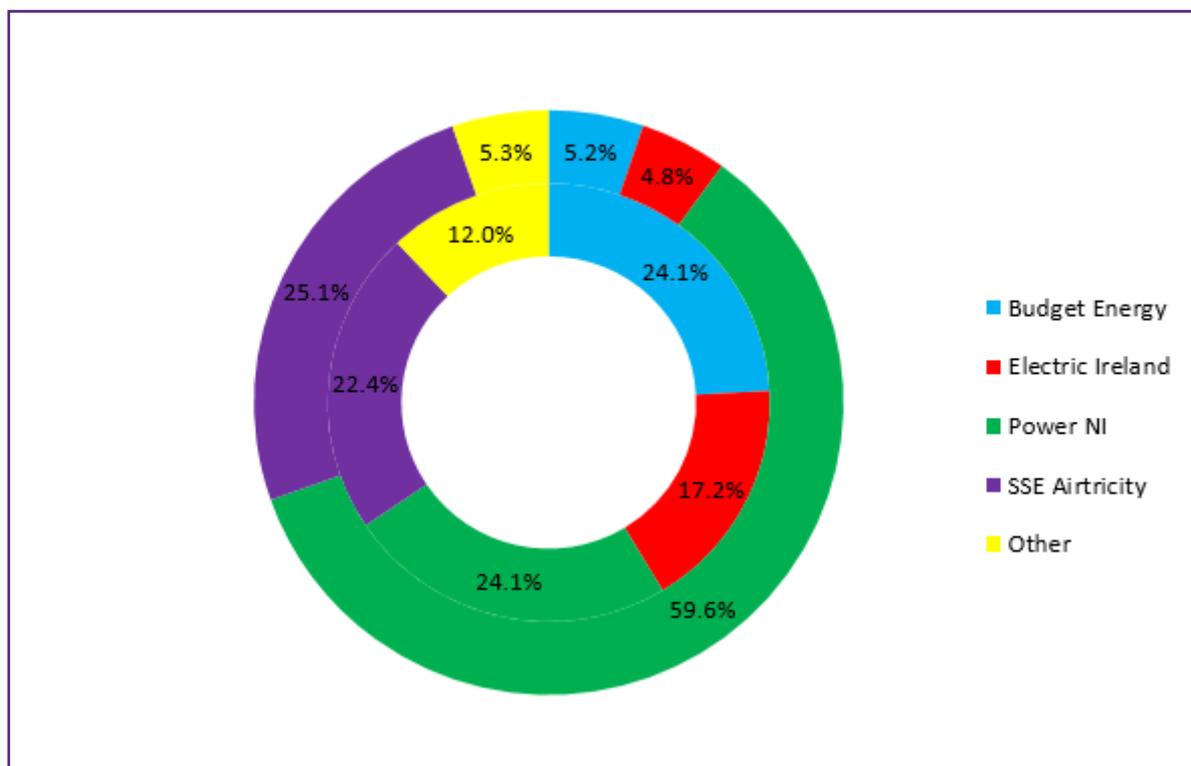
The Consumer Council worked with the Utility Regulator and Power NI to ensure that Open Electric customers were informed about the process to claim any remaining credit, and to advise when they were able to switch to an alternative supplier.

**Table 4: Electricity contacts by service provider**

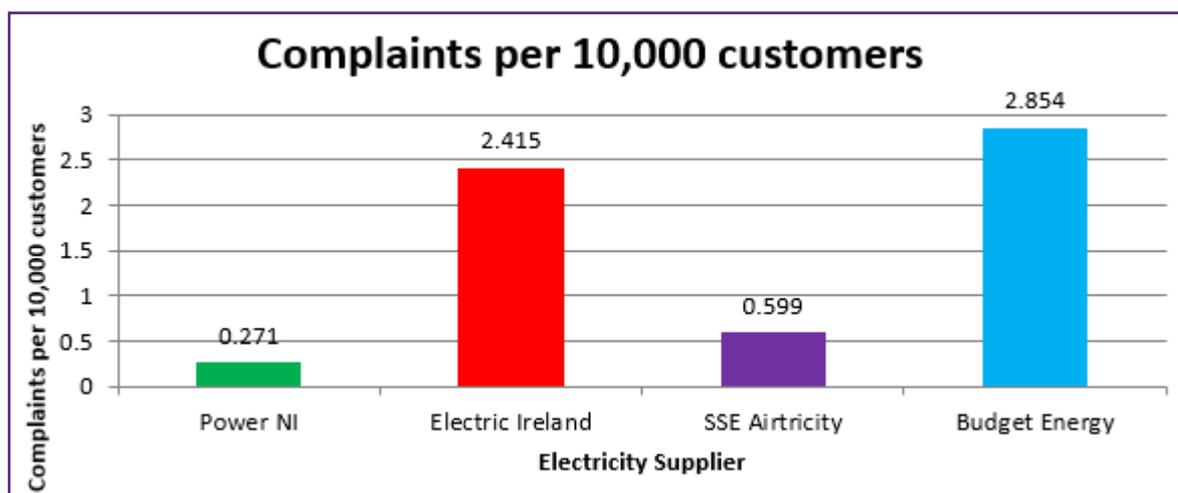
Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Customers
Budget Energy	75	2	8	12	97	£1,281
Click Energy NI	12	0	6	0	18	£0
Electric Ireland	31	3	5	7	46	£2,269
Energia	26	1	1	4	32	£3,062
Go Power	1	0	0	0	1	£0
NIE Networks	168	10	7	2	187	£1,145
Open Electric	21	0	0	1	22	£136
Power NI	457	10	8	4	479	£6,194
SSE Airtricity	185	3	11	10	209	£5,178
<b>Total</b>	<b>976</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>1,091</b>	<b>£19,265</b>

Chart 5 shows the number of complaints<sup>5</sup> received in 2016-17 by the four major electricity suppliers in NI against their respective percentage of market share<sup>6</sup>. This shows that there is no direct correlation between market share and the number of complaints received.

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



**Chart 6: Complaints received by electricity supplier per 10,000 customers**



<sup>5</sup> Stage 1 Investigation & Stage 2 Complaints received.

<sup>6</sup> Utility Regulator - Retail Market Monitoring, Quarterly Transparency Report, Quarter 1: January-March 2017.

## The Consumer Council's Energy Price Comparison Tool

In June 2016, The Consumer Council launched NI's first independent and interactive energy price comparison tool. It provides consumers with an independent source of information to help them shop around for a better deal.

The interactive price comparison tool allows consumers to:

1. Confirm the tariff they are currently on and how much they're paying;
2. View a list of tariffs and suppliers they could switch to, and the money they could potentially save, including any available incentives; and
3. Click through to the new supplier's website to make the switch.



**John French, Chief Executive, The Consumer Council,  
with Jenny Pyper, Chief Executive, Utility Regulator**

## Case Study - Electricity

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer from Belfast who was having difficulties with their electricity supplier regarding non-receipt of bills for a period of two years.

The consumer had moved house in 2014 and had contacted their supplier to register for supply at the new address. The consumer had been registered with the same supplier at his previous address, and paid monthly by Direct Debit. He therefore believed the Direct Debit would continue as before without interruption.

Two years passed before the consumer realised no Direct Debits had been made from his account to his supplier, so he contacted them to have the issue investigated. Only then was it discovered that due to an administration error caused by the electricity supplier, the consumer was not registered for supply and had not been billed for usage at the property.

The Consumer Council contacted the supplier on behalf of the consumer and our investigations identified numerous customer service failings. In recognition of this, the electricity supplier offered the consumer a £250 goodwill gesture.

With regard to the unpaid charges at the consumer's address, we identified which supplier was registered for the supply and therefore responsible for billing the property from 2014. The registered supplier advised us that the property had been listed as vacant and the account had been closed when the previous tenant moved out.

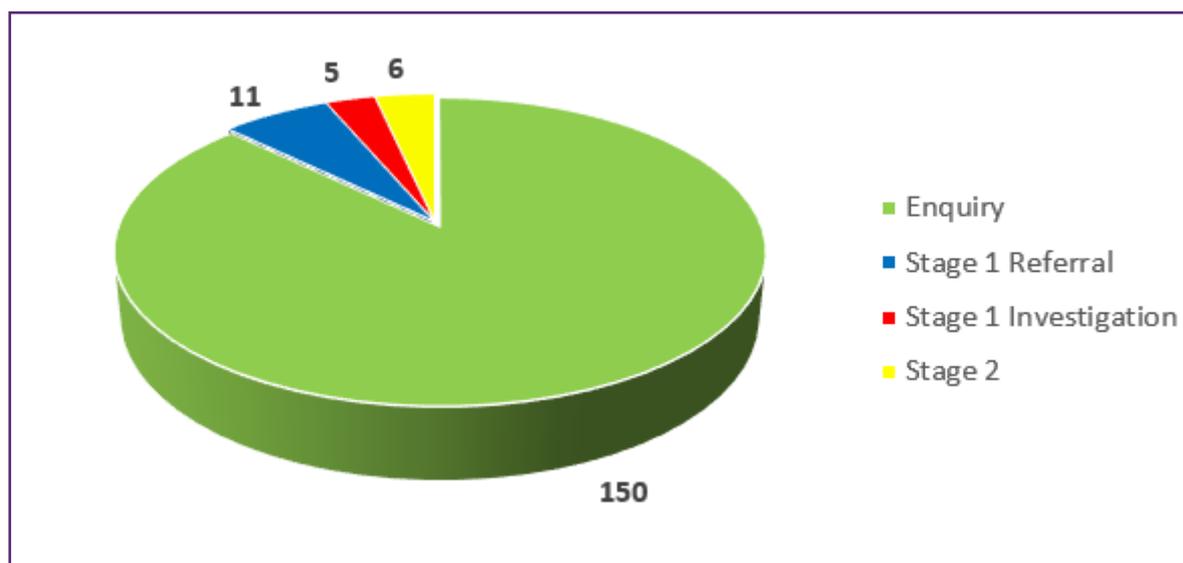
Despite the electricity supplier being in receipt of meter readings for the property which showed that electricity was being used, it had failed to communicate adequately with the occupier since 2014. In light of this, the electricity supplier agreed to reduce the bill from £2,223 to £974, and also agreed an 18 month repayment plan with the consumer.

## Natural Gas

The natural gas market has significantly fewer customers (230,718<sup>7</sup>) than electricity (866,075<sup>8</sup>) and there are fewer competitors. Therefore, customers have less choice when it comes to choosing a gas supplier.

In 2016-17, The Consumer Council received a total of 172 gas contacts, accounting for only 7% of the total enquiries and complaints received in this period (2,559).

**Chart 7: Breakdown of gas contacts by classification**



Overall, gas contacts received in 2016-17 (172) have dropped by 29% compared to 2015-16 (241). This is mainly attributed to a reduction in the number of gas enquiries received this year (150) compared to last year (230), which we believe is due to consumers using a range of tools via our website, such as the interactive gas price comparison tool and the 'Switch On' publications to get the information they require without contacting us directly.

However, gas contacts across all other categorisations (Stage 1 Referral, Stage 1 Investigation & Stage 2) increased in 2016-17.

## Extension of Gas Network

In December 2015, Phoenix Natural Gas was granted a licence extension by the Utility Regulator allowing it to expand the gas network into East Down. The Consumer Council welcomed this news as it brings greater choice for the 25,000 consumers and 6,000 small businesses across the 13 towns within County Down.

In February 2017, The Consumer Council attended a two day public information event in Ballynahinch organised by Phoenix Natural Gas to promote energy saving, inform consumers about the benefits of natural gas, and inform attendees about the plans to extend the network in the area.

During the event, The Consumer Council provided consumers with independent advice on the benefits of switching to natural gas and showed them how they could save money on their energy bills by using our interactive price comparison tool.

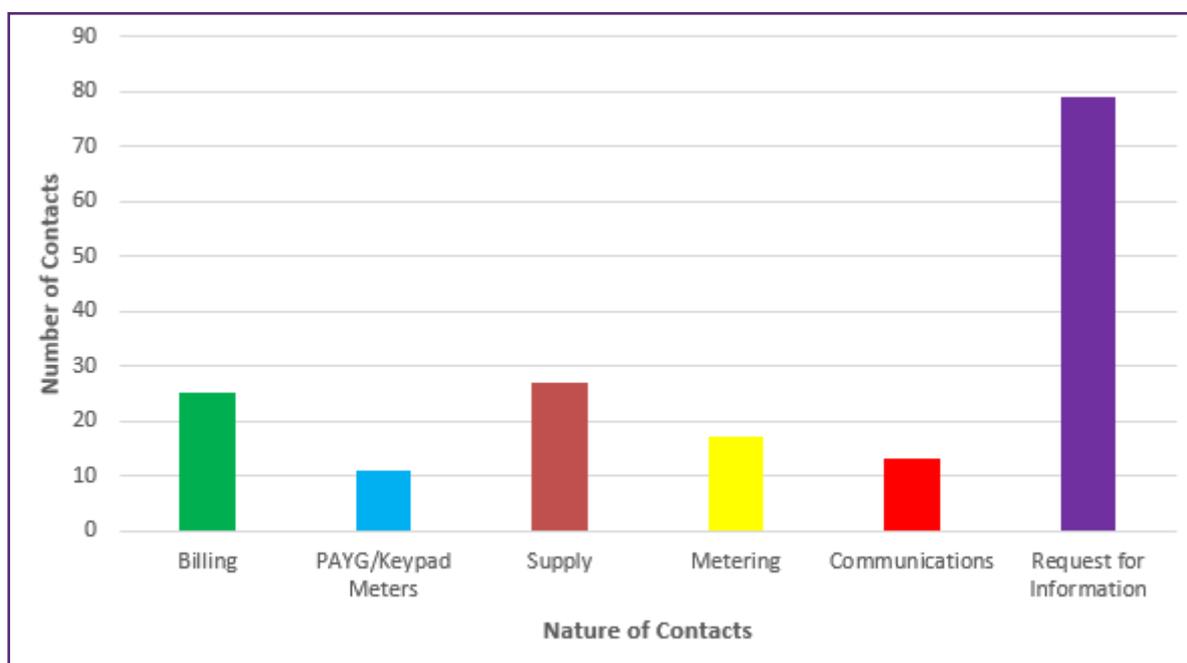
<sup>7</sup> Utility Regulator - Retail Market Monitoring, Quarterly Transparency Report, Quarter 1: January - March 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

**Table 5: Natural Gas contacts by service provider**

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Customers
Firmus Energy	63	0	1	0	64	£20
Phoenix Natural Gas	37	2	4	5	48	£86
SSE Airtricity Gas	50	3	6	1	60	£12,903
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>£13,009</b>

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.

**Chart 8: The top gas issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2016-17**

### Case Study - Natural Gas

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer from Belfast regarding receipt of a large bill for almost £600 from his gas supplier. The consumer contacted his supplier to query the large bill and was advised that due to an admin error his account had been set up for annual billing instead of quarterly billing.

In recognition of the error, the gas supplier offered 10% off the arrears and a repayment plan of 12 months. However the consumer remained dissatisfied so he contacted The Consumer Council for help.

The Consumer Council contacted the gas supplier on behalf of the consumer to negotiate a satisfactory resolution. As a result, the gas supplier agreed to increase the goodwill gesture to £120 with a repayment plan of 10 months to pay the remaining balance.

### Coal, Oil & Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG)

The Consumer Council does not have a specific statutory remit to look at Oil and LPG complaints, but we have developed a partnership with Calor Gas, Flo Gas and the Northern Ireland Oil Federation (NIOF) to support their consumers with enquiries and complaints.

**Table 6: Coal, Oil & LPG contacts by service provider**

Service Company	Enquiry
Calor Gas	12
Coal Advisory Service	2
Flogas	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>

Contacts from consumers in relation to coal, oil and LPG remain consistently low and are comparable with previous years. Overall the Consumer Council received 22 enquiries with 91% of these in relation to LPG.

Concerns about the cost of LPG remains the most common type of issue raised by consumers.

# Transport



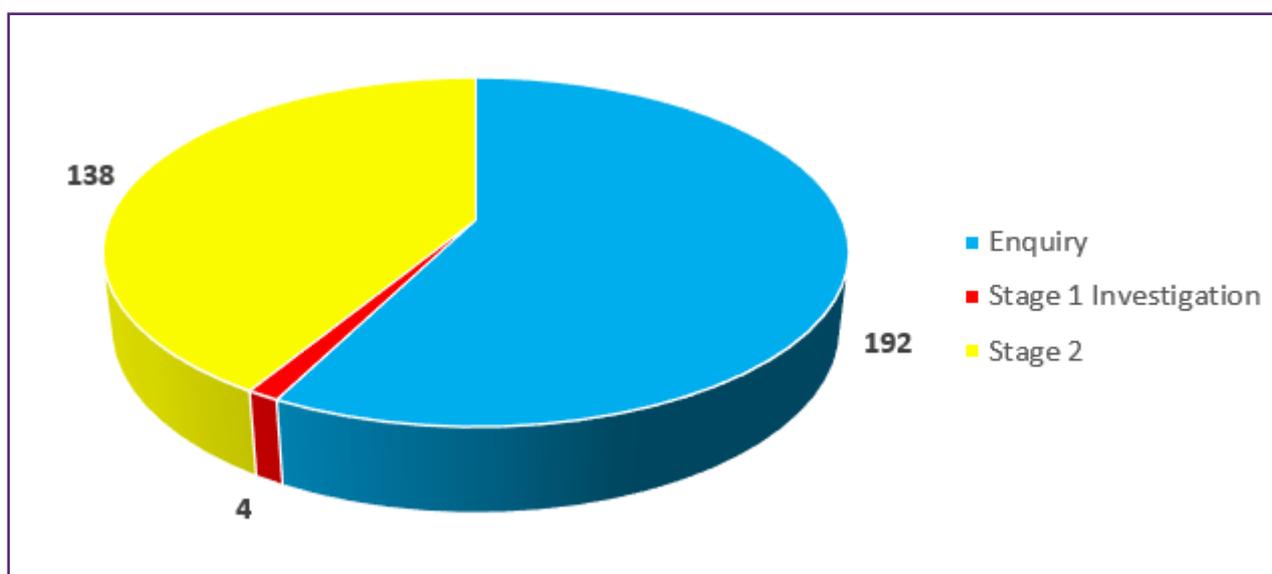
In 2016-17, transport related enquiries and complaints accounted for 17% (437) of all contacts received by The Consumer Council and includes issues regarding planes, trains, buses and ferry travel in NI.

### Air Travel

Contacts about air travel (334) accounted for 76% of the total transport related contacts received.

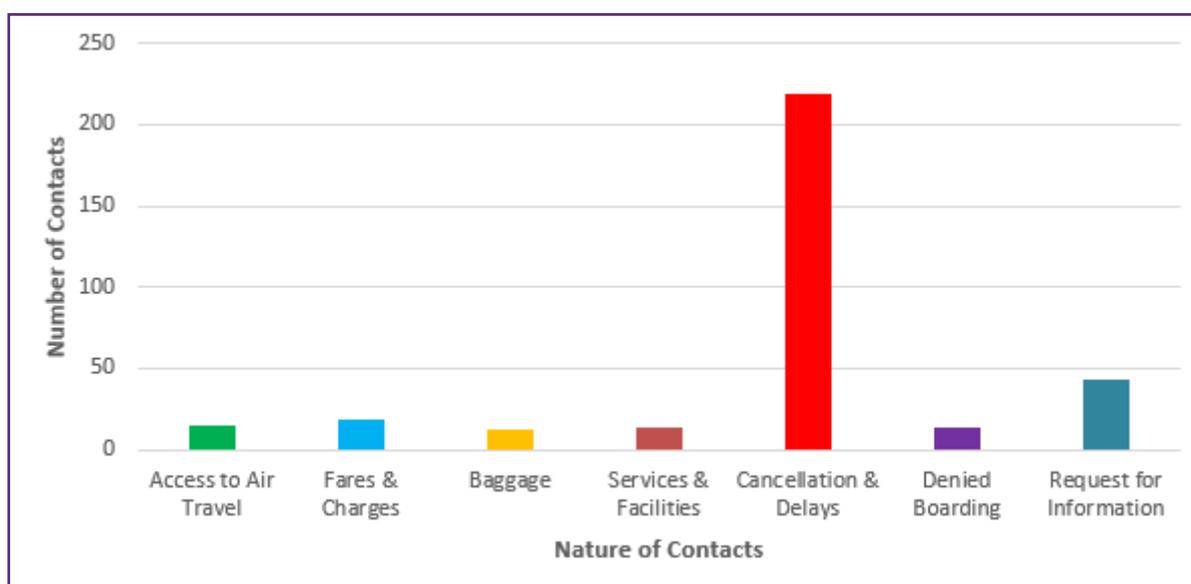
Of the 334 air contacts received, 65% related to issues with delays and cancellations. Passengers who experience a cancellation or delay may be entitled to claim compensation under European Law and The Consumer Council has subsequently helped return over £67,500 to air passengers in the last year.

**Chart 9: Breakdown of air contacts by classification**



In 2016-17, the number of Stage 2 airline complaints (138) increased by 33% compared to 2015-16 (104). Chart 10 shows the top air issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2016-17.

**Chart 10: The top air issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2016-17**



## Know your rights - Annual Summer Campaign

Every June and July, The Consumer Council undertakes a 'Summer Getaway' campaign to inform consumers about their passenger rights when travelling by air and sea. We have a range of travel guides to help consumers understand their rights including *Plane Facts*, *Plain Sailing* and *Access to Air Travel and Sea Travel* for passengers with reduced mobility.

### Case Study - Airlines

The Consumer Council's advice on passenger rights proved invaluable for passengers last summer who were travelling to France for the Euro Football Tournament in June 2016.

Unfortunately due to a series of customer service errors their flight departed without many of the passengers on board, resulting in them missing the Northern Ireland football match.

When easyJet refused to pay compensation, some of the passengers affected contacted The Consumer Council for assistance and with our help, €250 per passenger was secured, resulting in a total compensation pay out of over €7,500.

Table 7: Air contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Customers
Aer Lingus	24	0	6	30	£3,152
Belfast City Airport	3	1	1	5	£0
Belfast International Airport	5	0	1	6	£0
British Airways	12	0	8	20	£2,431
CAA (referral)	44	0	0	44	£0
City Wing	3	0	1	4	£0
easyJet	52	2	87	141	£33,607
ECC	3	0	0	3	£0
Flybe	11	0	8	19	£1,975
Jet2.com	7	0	3	10	£2,108
Ryanair	12	0	7	19	£11,143
Thomas Cook Airlines	5	1	0	6	£0
Thomson Airways	3	0	11	14	£5,620
United Airlines	5	0	5	10	£7,490
Volotea	2	0	0	2	£0
Wizz Air	1	0	0	1	£0
<b>Total</b>	<b>192</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>334</b>	<b>£67,526</b>

## Special Assistance Provision at City of Derry Airport

In July 2016, The Consumer Council took a group of passengers with a disability or reduced mobility to visit the City of Derry Airport to review the special assistance services available. This builds on the work we have previously carried out with the two Belfast Airports and the NI ferry operators.

There were 18 participants from a range of organisations including Guide Dogs NI, Prosthetics Users Forum, IMTAC, North West Forum for People with Disabilities, Disability Action, Action on Hearing Loss and Age Sector Platform, as well as a passenger who had a child with autism.

The group was complimentary about the services offered, and made a number of suggestions on how these could be further improved. Where practicable, the City of Derry Airport has implemented the suggestions made.



**The Consumer Council staff pictured alongside participants who attended the special assistance audit at the City of Derry Airport in July 2016**

## Case Study - Airlines

The Consumer Council was contacted by Annalong Rovers Under-12 youth football team regarding the cancellation of their return flight from Liverpool to Belfast with easyJet. The football team was returning in high spirits from a successful tournament in the Blackpool Cup, only to find out at the airport their flight home had been cancelled. The group had to spend the night in the airport until their flight departed the next day.

The Consumer Council contacted easyJet on behalf of the football team and established the cancellation had not been caused by extraordinary circumstances. In total, The Consumer Council helped the group of 28 passengers to receive over £6,000 in compensation.

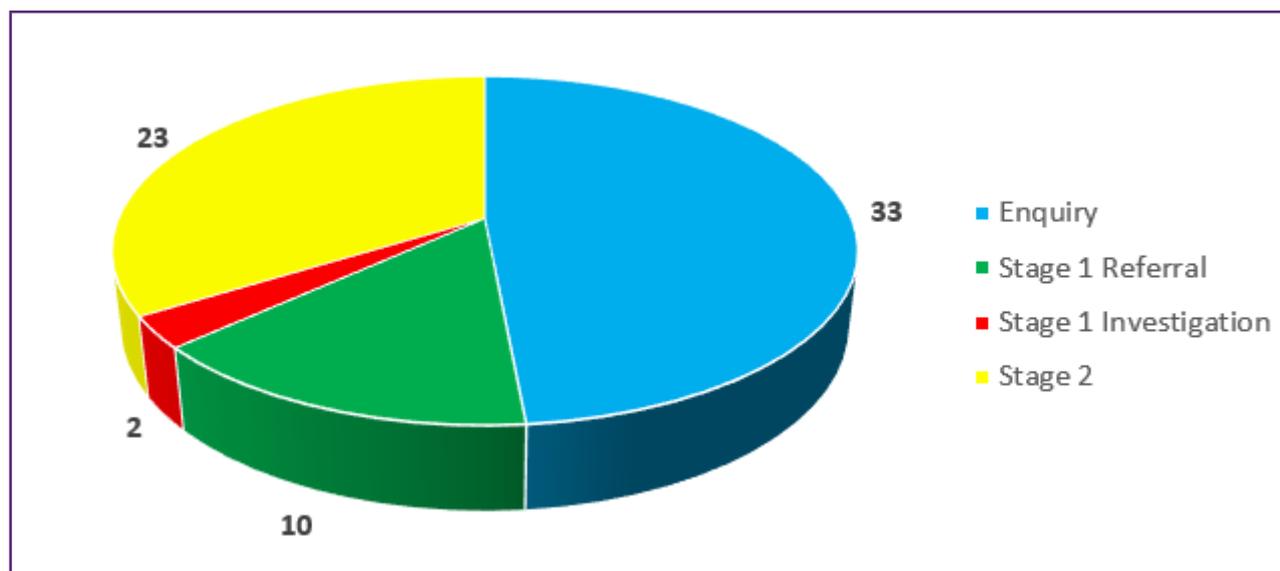


**Members of the Annalong Rovers Under 12 football team who received compensation from easyJet following the cancellation of their flight**

## Bus Travel

During 2016-17 the number of contacts regarding bus services (68) reduced by 25% compared to 2015-16 (91). Again, this can be attributed to a decrease in enquiries as all other classifications remained consistent with 2015-16.

**Chart 11: Breakdown of bus contacts by classification**

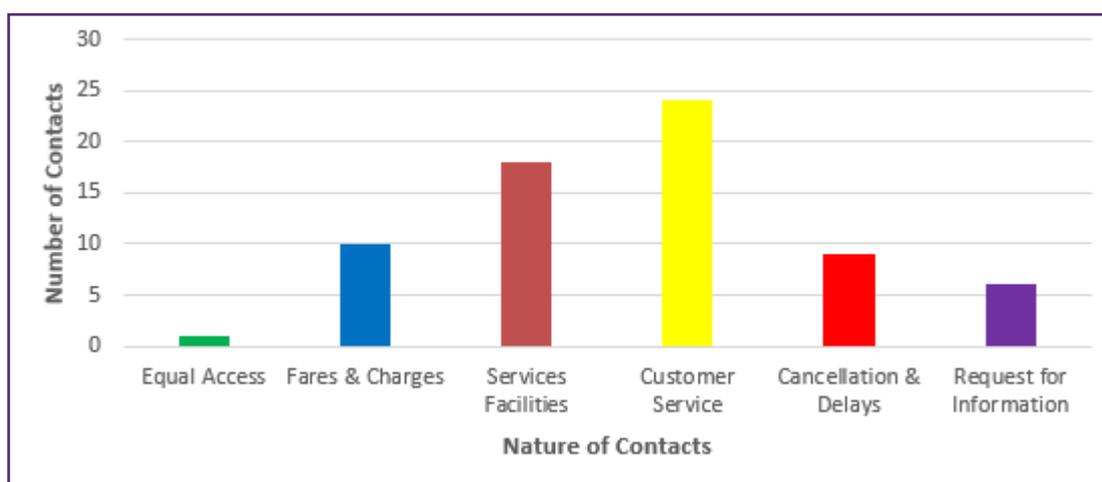


**Table 8: Bus contacts by service provider**

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Customers
Air Coach	1	0	0	0	1	£46
Disability Action Transport Scheme	1	0	0	0	1	£0
Translink	31	2	10	23	66	£118
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>£164</b>

Consistent with 2015-16, bus passengers most commonly contacted us in relation to poor customer service, and issues regarding services, facilities and fares.

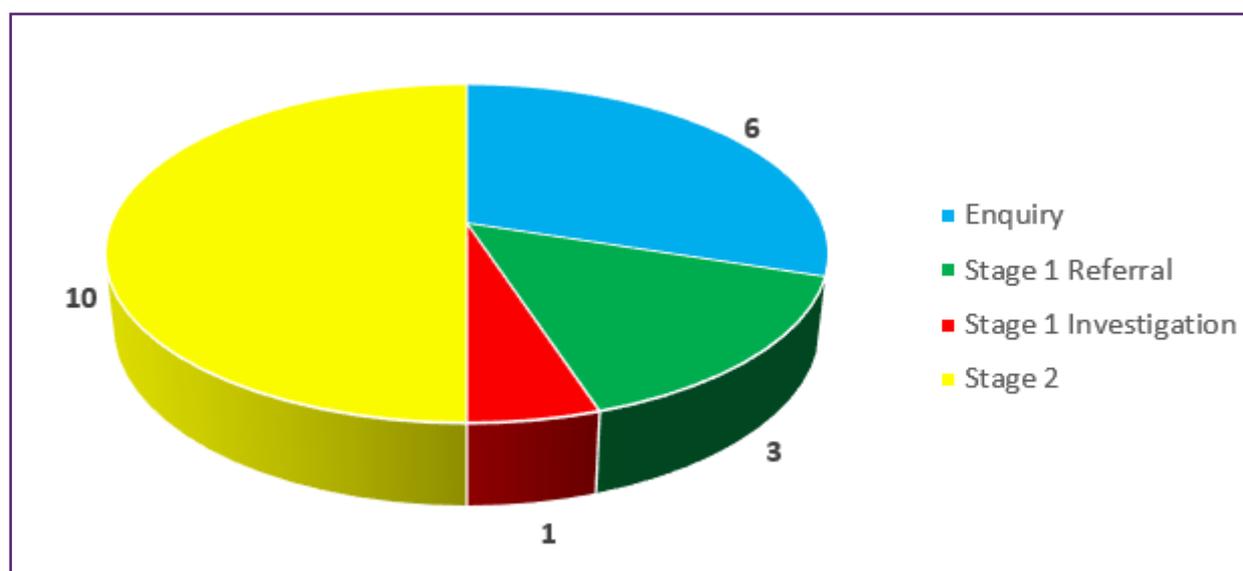
**Chart 12: The top bus issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2016-17**



### Rail Travel

Translink is the only rail provider operating in NI. In 2016-17, The Consumer Council received a total of 20 rail contacts, this was a slight decrease in contacts compared to 2015-16 (23). However, Stage 2 complaints about the Enterprise rail service have more than doubled in 2016-17 (10) compared to the previous year (4).

**Chart 13: Breakdown of rail contacts by classification**

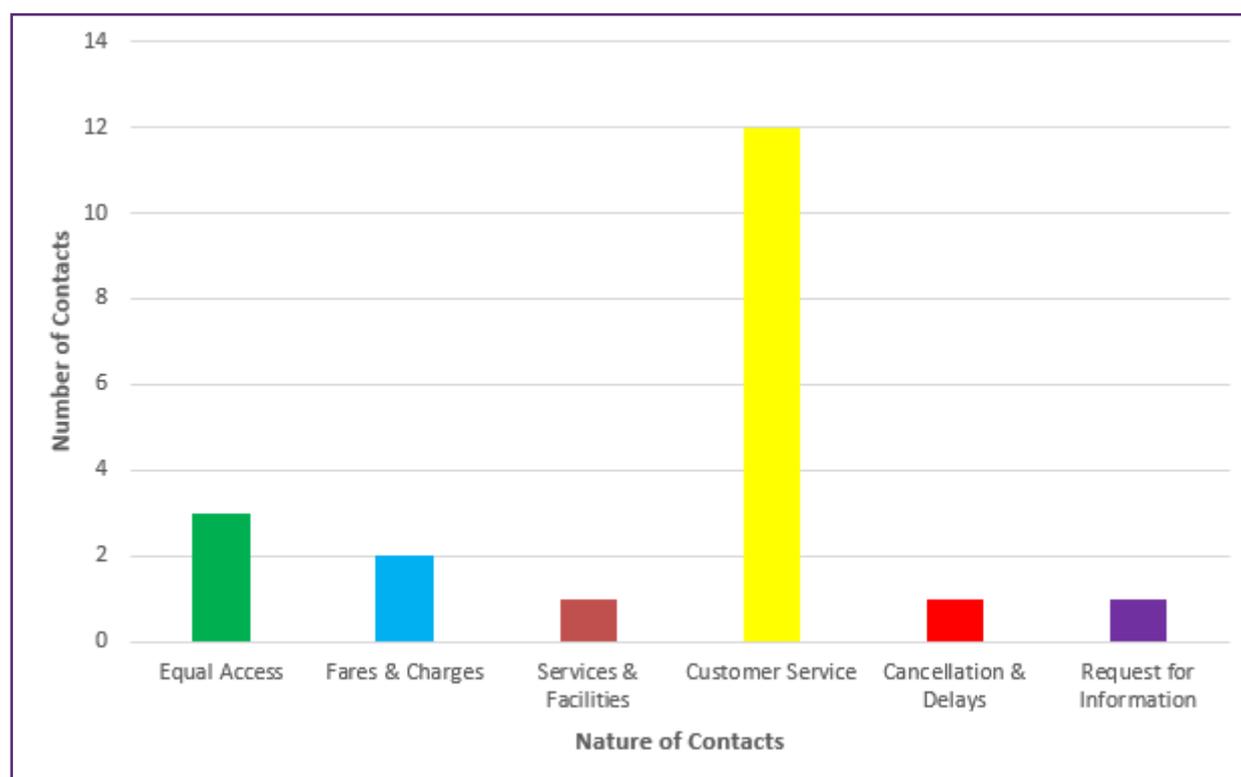


Issues about customer service was the most common type of rail contact received in 2016-17, including issues such as complaints about staff attitude and Translink’s failure to respond to complaints.

**Table 9: Rail contacts by service provider**

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Customers
Translink - Rail	6	1	3	10	20	£336

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



### Case Study - Rail

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer from Newtownabbey regarding poor customer service he had experienced from Translink following submission of a complaint about the Enterprise service.

Due to a lack of seats available, the consumer had to stand for the majority of the journey from Dublin to Belfast. He wrote to Translink to complain but felt that the company did not handle his complaint in the most appropriate way.

The Consumer Council investigated the complaint on behalf of the consumer, and from reviewing the responses, we agreed that the complaint had been dealt with unsatisfactorily.

We contacted Translink highlighting the inefficiencies in both its handling of the complaint, and the responses issued to the consumer.

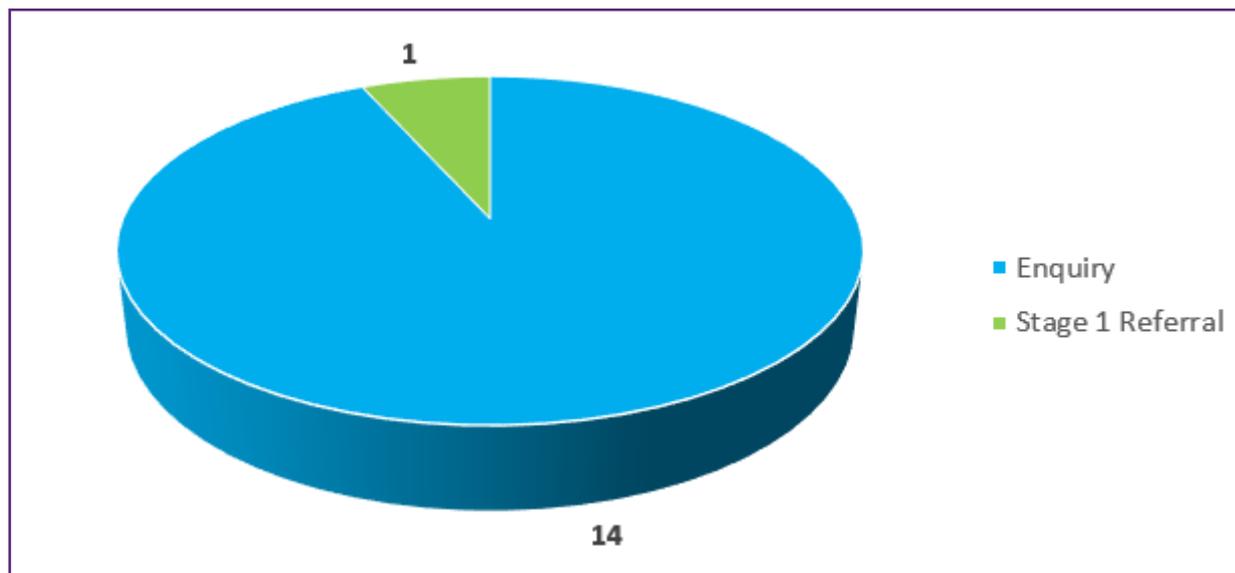
Translink undertook a full review and accepted the complaint had not been investigated and responded to in an acceptable manner.

In light of this, Translink offered the consumer a £30 Enterprise voucher and a complimentary upgrade to first class on his next journey to Dublin.

## Ferry Travel

Consistent with last year, less than 1% (15) of all contacts received by The Consumer Council in 2016-17 related to ferry travel. In 2016-17 issues about fares were the most common concerns raised by ferry passengers (5). This is consistent with the previous year (5).

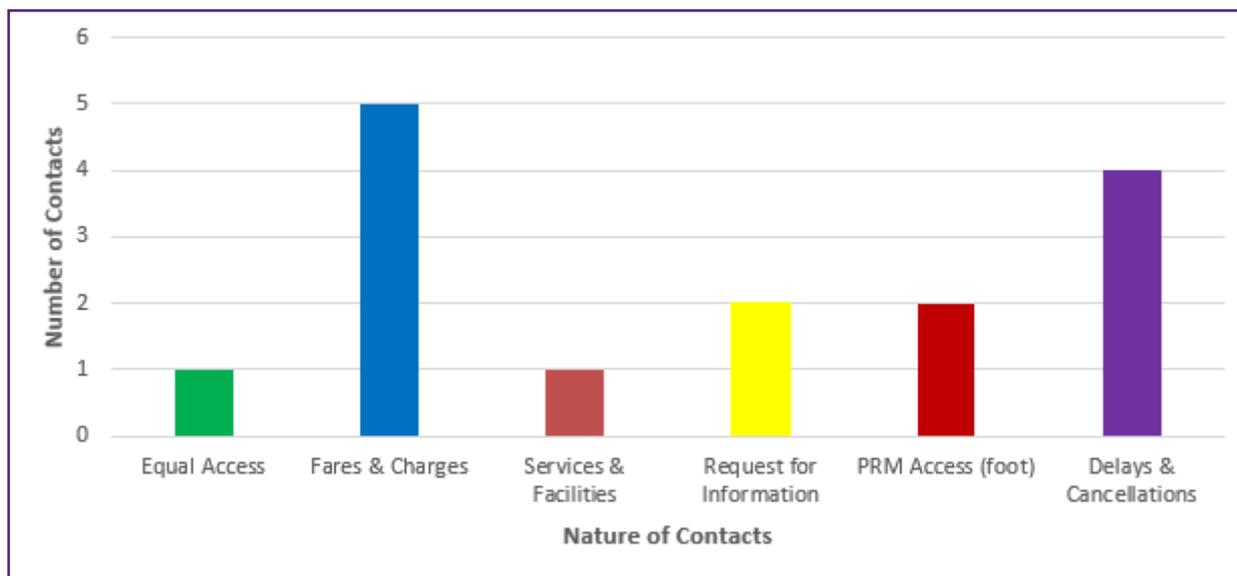
**Chart 15: Breakdown of ferry contacts by classification**



**Table 10: Ferry contacts by service provider**

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Total	Returned to Customers
ABTA Referral (Ferry)	3	0	3	£0
P&O Ferries	1	0	1	£0
Stena Line	7	1	8	£86
Strangford Lough Ferry Service (Strangford - Portaferry)	2	0	2	£21
The Consumer Council - Request for information	1	0	1	£0
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>£107</b>

Chart 16: The top ferry issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2016-17



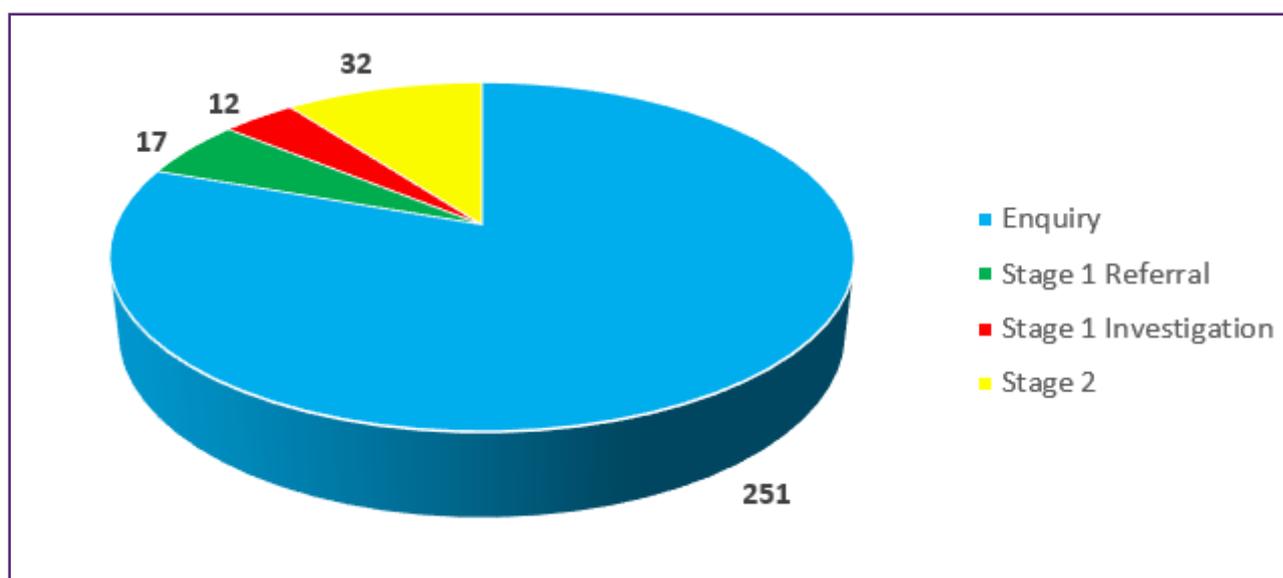
## Water & Sewerage



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

Water and sewerage issues equated to 12% (312) of all enquiries and complaints received by The Consumer Council in 2016-17 (2,559). This is consistent with 2015-16. Issues about non-domestic water bills remains the most common type of water complaint received, accounting for 49% of the total water contacts received. The types of billing issues we receive from consumers include inaccurate bills, disputed liability, non-application of allowances, and retrospective billing.

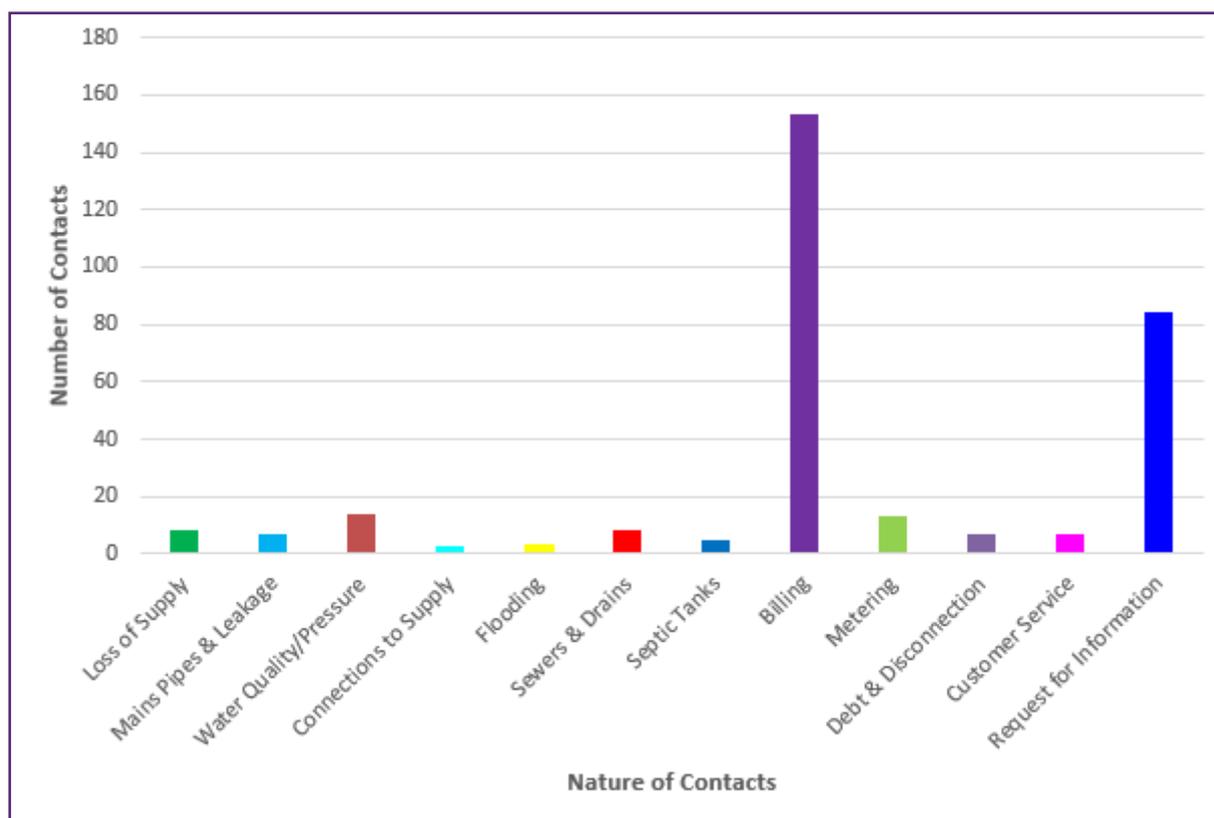
**Chart 17: Breakdown of water contacts by classification**



**Table 11: Water and Sewerage contacts by service provider**

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Customers
Northern Ireland Water	251	12	17	32	312	£172,719

Chart 18: The top water issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2016-17



### Retrospective Billing

For a number of years, The Consumer Council has dealt with complaints from consumers who had received retrospective water bills for water/sewerage services dating back up to six years. As the complaints became more prevalent, the issue was escalated as a policy review with NI Water.

The Consumer Council has been working with NI Water, the Utility Regulator and the Department for Regional Development – DRD (now the Department for Infrastructure – DfI) to have the policy about retrospective billing amended.

As a result in November 2016, the DfI Minister, Chris Hazzard, approved the adoption of an 18 month period for retrospective billing by NI Water. This was a significant alteration to NI Water's financial rules and represents a 75% reduction in the timeframe for which NI Water is able to back-bill.

The Consumer Council worked with the stakeholder billing working group<sup>9</sup> to agree the detail of implementing this new policy. In April 2017, the back-billing policy was amended and included in NI Water's Scheme of Charges.

<sup>9</sup> The Consumer Council, NI Water, Utility Regulator & DfI.

## Case Study - Water

A businessman from Ballynahinch contacted us regarding issues with his commercial water bill. His business moved into the premises in 2014 and at that time he requested a water meter to be installed so he could receive metered bills.

NI Water advised it was not possible to have a meter fitted and instead offered the business to pay for water charges via Assessed Charging. The businessman preferred to pay for the actual water the business used and continued to push for a water meter.

In the meantime the business paid unmeasured charges based on the Net Annual Value (NAV) of the property. However, in August 2015 NI Water agreed to carry out a further site visit at the premises, and as a result a water meter was installed.

Following installation of the meter, the business asked NI Water if it would consider re-calculating its usage from 2014, based on the Annual Daily Consumption (ADC) recorded via the meter. However, this request was refused.

The Consumer Council contacted NI Water on behalf of the business and raised concerns as to whether or not the benefits and features of Assessed Charging had been fully explained to the business. Had the business taken up this option, it would have been paying water charges relative to metered charges dating back to 2014.

The Consumer Council also pointed to it being NI Water's responsibility to have knowledge of its own infrastructure, and therefore the fault for not identifying these connections during the initial site visit in 2014 should not result in financial disadvantage to the business. On this basis, we requested NI Water consider re-calculating the charges based on the ADC of the metered supply.

NI Water agreed to adjust the charges for the period prior to the meter installation and as a result the bill was reduced by almost £300.

## Postal Services

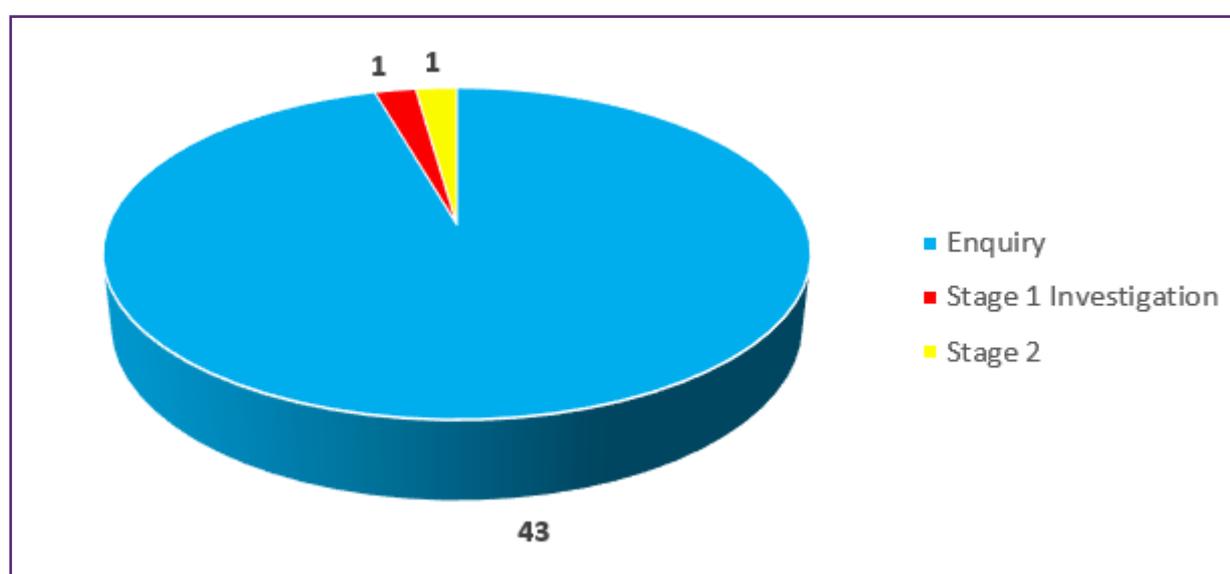


In 2015-16, The Consumer Council assumed responsibility for promoting and protecting the interests of postal consumers across NI. This role involves providing consumers with independent advice and guidance on postal service complaints.

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 2016-17, we received a total of 45 contacts relating to Postal Services. Contacts of this nature have increased by almost a third compared to last year (34). Consistent with 2015-16, mail delivery was the primary postal issue raised by consumers, accounting for 58% of the total contacts received, and includes concerns such as damaged or lost mail.

**Chart 19: Breakdown of postal services contacts by classification**



### Customs Charges and Postal Operator Handling Charges

Many more consumers are now choosing to shop online and purchase items outside the UK, including countries such as China and America. Many of the items received from overseas (apart from another EU country), can incur customs charges and postal operator handling charges. This is a growing source of complaints for many consumers, as these charges and fees can turn a seemingly good bargain into an expensive purchase.

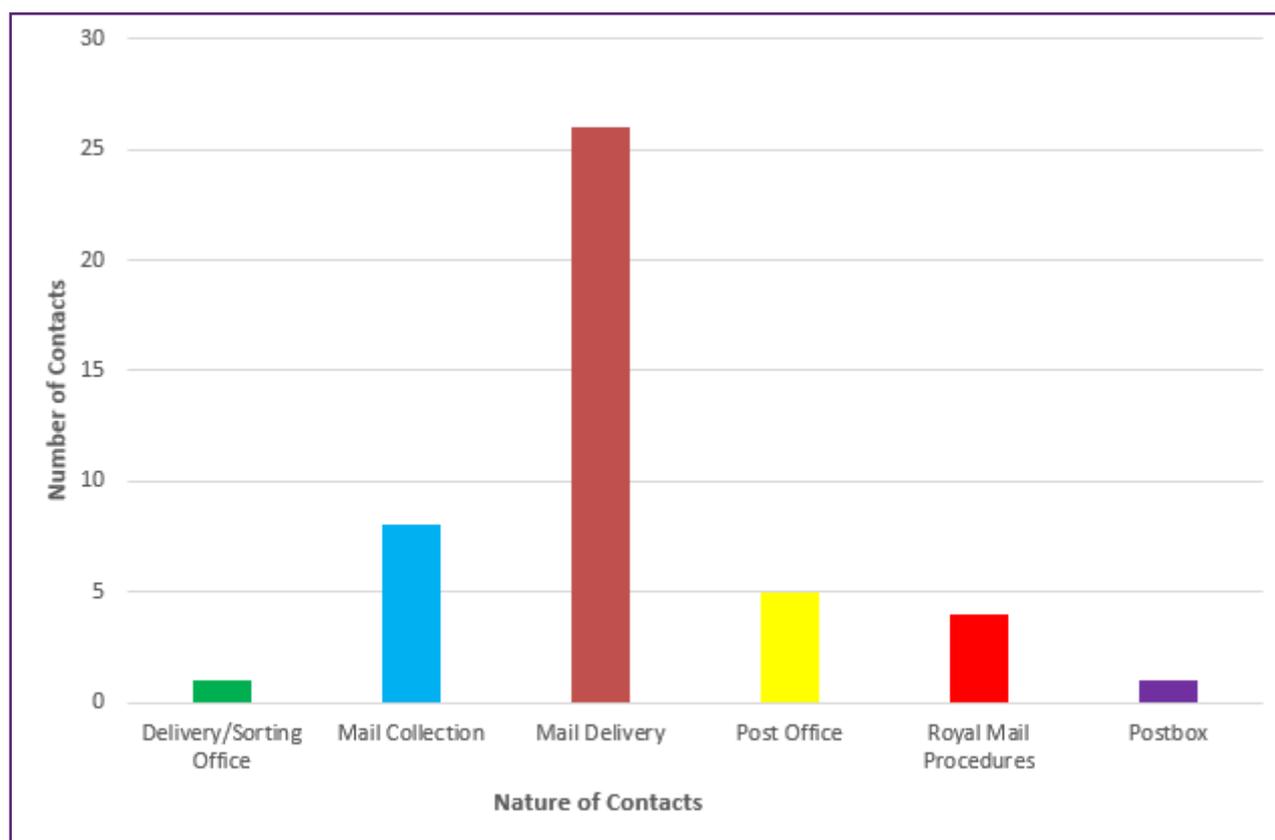
It is a legal requirement for parcel operators to segregate packets arriving from overseas (non-EU countries) and to present to HM Revenue and Customs those items that are liable for import duty/tax under current customs regulations.

Any package assessed by HM Revenue and Customs as being liable for customs charges (import duty/tax) will also incur a Parcel Operator handling fee, which can range from £8 - £15 depending on the service and parcel operator used. This handling fee covers costs for staff time, facilities and handling cost of presenting the item to customs.

We recently received an enquiry regarding customs charges and this has prompted The Consumer Council to create a factsheet to inform consumers about custom and handling charges when purchasing goods online from outside of the EU.

**Table 12: Postal Services contacts by service provider**

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2	Total	Returned to Customers
Royal Mail	27	1	1	29	£20
Parcelforce	4	0	0	4	£0
Post Office	7	0	0	7	£0
Other (Postal Service)	5	0	0	5	£1,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>£1,020</b>

**Chart 20: The top postal service issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2016-17**

## Case Study - Postal Services

A couple from Belfast contacted us regarding an undelivered item of mail to their new address despite a mail re-direction being put in place for a year.

They had received a postcard from Royal Mail advising they had received a package with insufficient postage. Despite paying the remaining postage, and being advised that the parcel would be delivered in due course, no parcel was delivered.

When the couple contacted the Post Office to query the non-delivery of the item, they were advised to go to the sorting office at Tomb Street to retrieve the item, as they had no way of tracing its whereabouts.

Unfortunately due to mobility issues, the couple could not travel to Tomb Street. However, when the consumer explained the difficulty in getting to Tomb Street, the Post Office advised that there was no other option, and that they could not assist any further.

The Consumer Council contacted Royal Mail on behalf of the couple and asked that they investigate the matter. Royal Mail established there had been an admin error and apologised to the couple for the failure to deliver the package to their new address.

In recognition of the failure and for the stress and inconvenience caused, Royal Mail offered the couple an apology and a £20 goodwill gesture.

## The Consumer Council - Requests for Information



In 2016-17, The Consumer Council received 480 contacts from consumers requesting general advice and information across all areas of our remit and providing feedback on our services.

Requests for information accounted for 95% of these contacts and included requests for copies of our publications and guides such as '*Plane Facts*' or '*Switch On*' energy guides, requesting contact details and general information on electricity suppliers, and queries relating to company policies.

Aside from our specific statutory duties to investigate complaints in relation to energy, transport, water and postal services, The Consumer Council also has a statutory function to investigate general consumer affairs issues. In 2016-17, we assisted 20 consumers with issues of a more general nature as they were vulnerable or required extra assistance. Issues of this nature included complaints about private car parking fines, tour operator issues, and providing consumers with information and advice on bank branch closures.

### Case Study - General Remit

A consumer contacted us regarding flights she had booked with Etihad to Australia with an online tour operator. Due to poor health the consumer could not travel and contacted the airline to explain her circumstances and request a refund of the £700 flights. The airline only offered to refund her £100 and claimed that the remaining £600 would be retained to cover the cancellation fee.

The consumer contacted the online tour operator and also the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) for help but was unable to get a resolution.

Although The Consumer Council's remit does not cover flights organised by tour operators, we raised an enquiry with the airline to request that a full refund be provided due to the mitigating circumstances of this particular case.

The airline re-considered the consumer's circumstances and agreed to refund the full cost of the flights totalling £700.

## Customer Feedback & Satisfaction



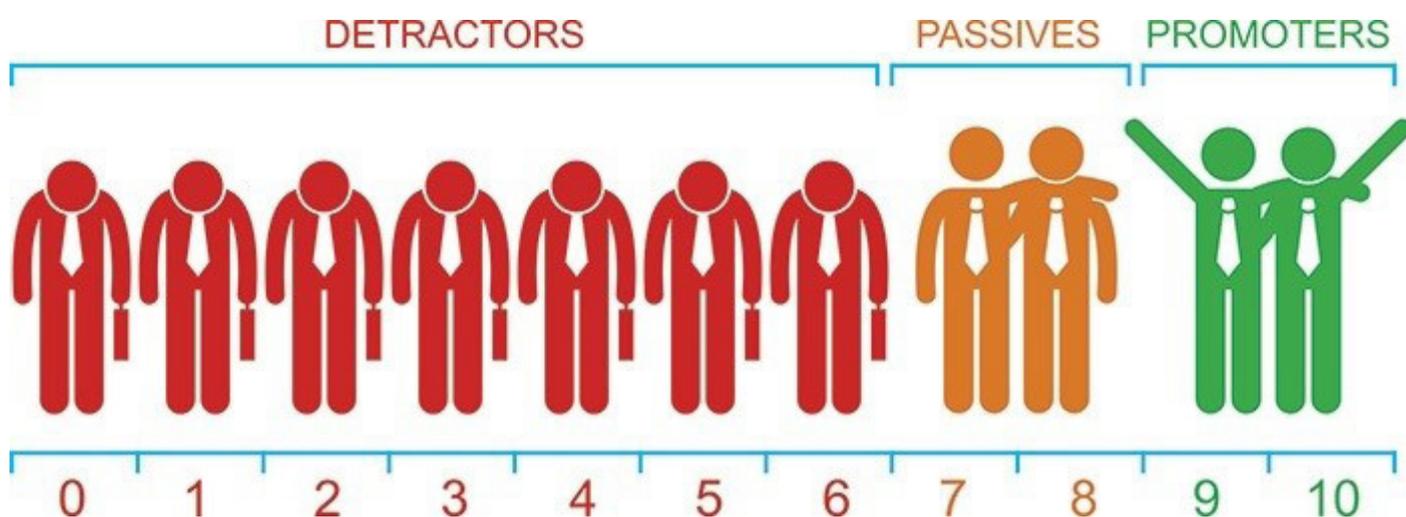
Consumer feedback is an essential part of The Consumer Council's learning and development process, adding particular value to our complaints handling service.

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 both 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. 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 respondent's scores are grouped as follows:



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

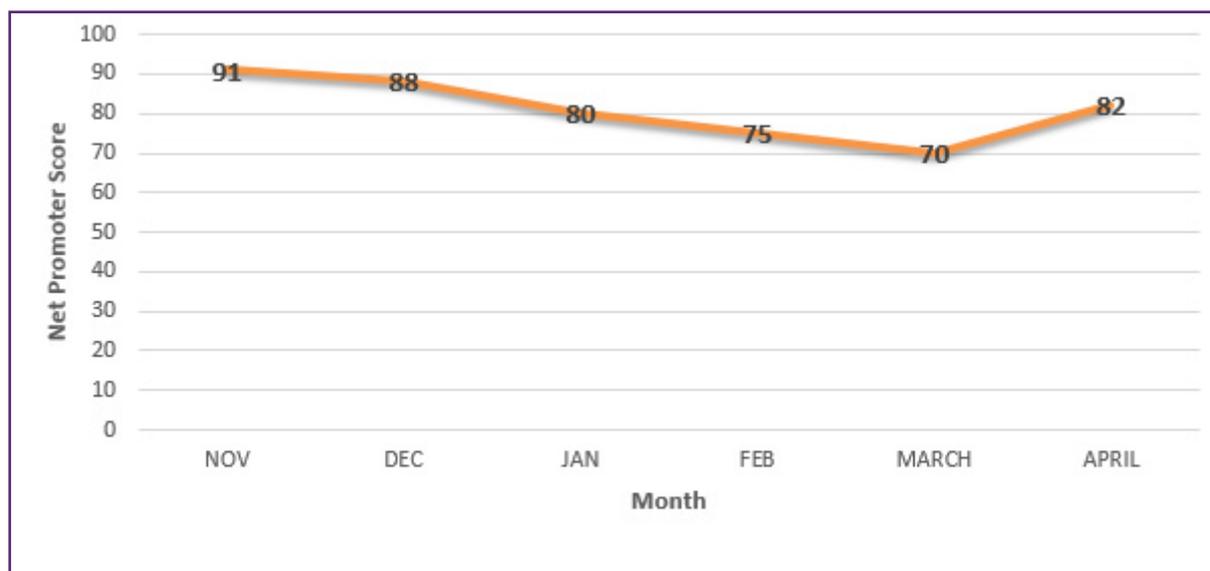
The NPS subtracts the percentage of Detractors from the percentage of Promoters, which can range from a low of -100 (if every customer is a Detractor) to a high of 100 (if every customer is a Promoter).

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

Since introducing the NPS question to our survey, we have noticed our NPS levels change from month to month. This fluctuation in score is due to receiving four detractor scores since November 2016. However, receiving these scores has given us the opportunity to identify dips in performance and put measures in place to improve and enhance our service.

Chart 21 shows our NPS from November 2016 to April 2017.

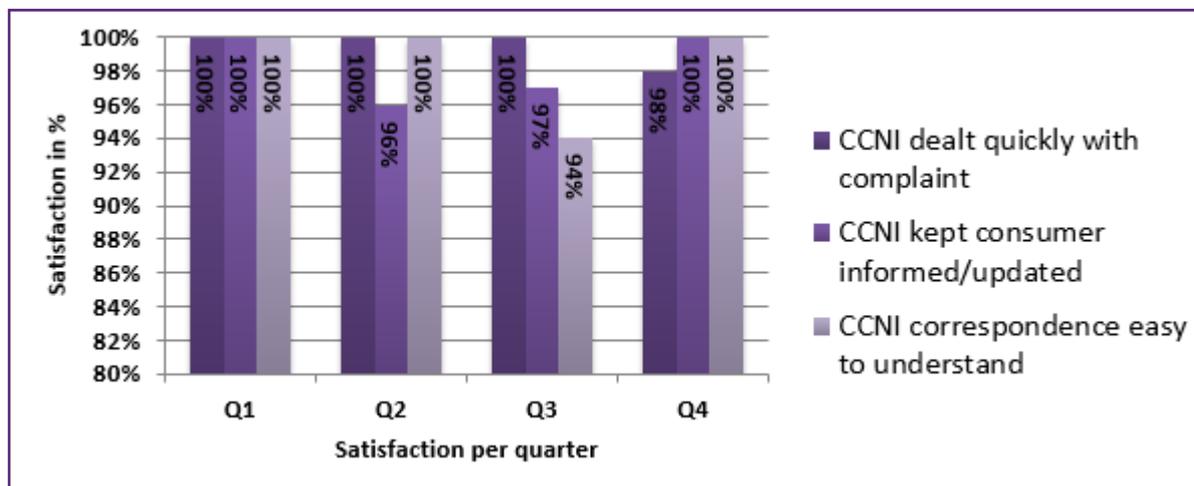
**Chart 21: Net Promoter Score received by The Consumer Council from November 2016 - April 2017**



As well as measuring the NPS, we also measure other aspects of our customer service including our efficiency in dealing with consumer complaints, our ability to keep the consumer informed throughout the complaint investigation, and how easy our correspondence is to understand.

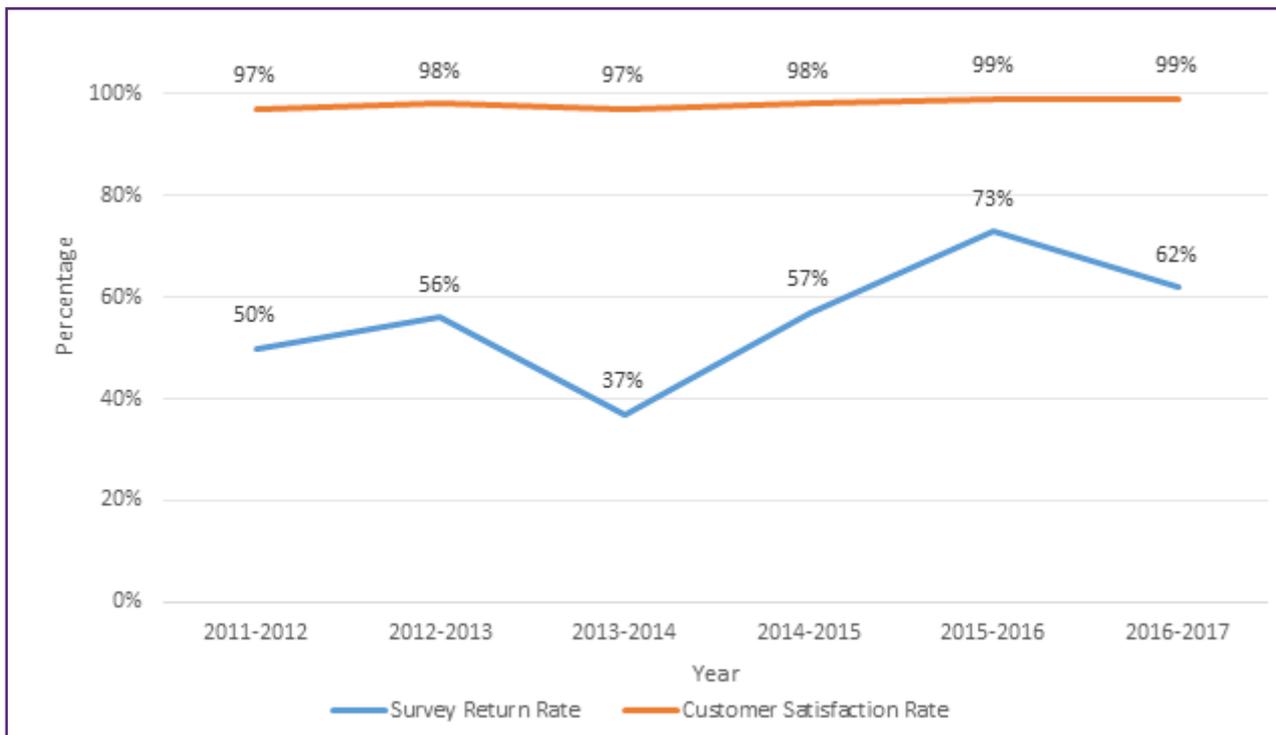
Overall satisfaction with The Consumer Council in 2016-17 was 99%. This represents an average of the three measures displayed in chart 22.

**Chart 22: Customer Satisfaction per quarter in 2016-17**



The return rate for our customer satisfaction surveys in 2016-17 was 62%. Chart 23 shows The Consumer Council's satisfaction rates and return rates from 2011 to 2017.

Chart 23: Analysis of Survey Return rate &amp; Customer Satisfaction rate from 2011-2017



### 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. These standards will be monitored and reported on every quarter on our website, and will also be used to benchmark against other similar organisations to help improve our service.

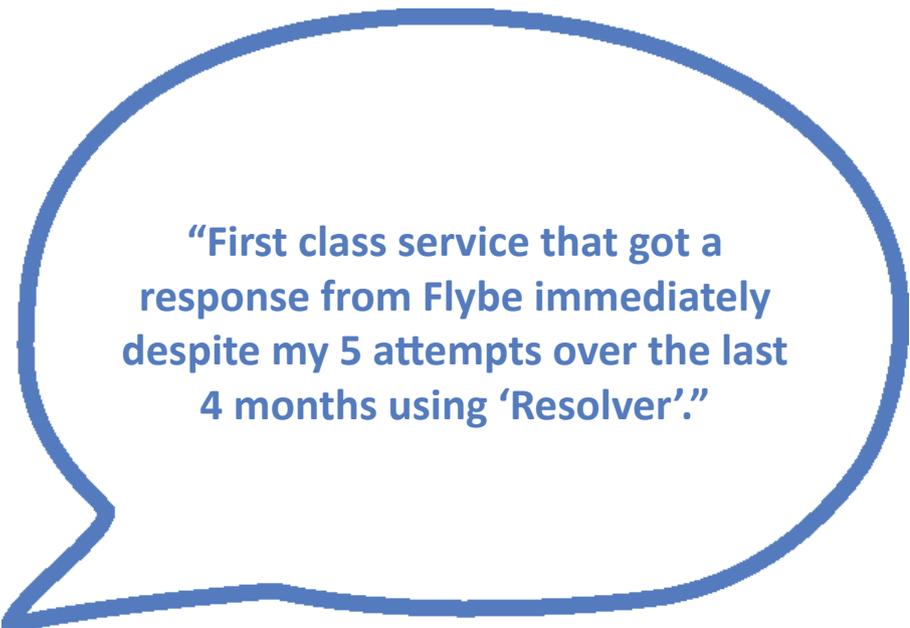
Chart 24: The Consumer Council Service Standards

## Our Service Standards to You

 <b>ANSWER CALLS</b> We aim to answer calls to 0800 121 6022 within 10 seconds	 <b>VOICEMAIL</b> If you leave a voicemail between 9am & 4pm, we will aim to return your call within 3 hours	If you have an appointment, we will aim to meet you within 5 minutes. <b>APPOINTMENTS</b> If you don't have an appointment, we will aim to meet you within 15 minutes
 <b>OUR STAFF</b> Our staff will be polite, friendly, professional and treat everyone fairly	 <b>REFERRALS</b> 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.	 <b>CONTACT</b> We will aim to contact you within 3 working days of receiving correspondence
 <b>GETTING A RESPONSE</b> We will aim to provide you with a copy of the response from the service provider within 5 working days	 <b>CORRESPONDENCE</b> Our correspondence will be easy to understand	 <b>OUR STANDARDS</b> If we fall short of the standards we aim to provide please let us know

**You can contact us:**  
**T: 0800 121 6022**  
**W: [www.consumerCouncil.org.uk](http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk)**  
**E: [contact@consumerCouncil.org.uk](mailto:contact@consumerCouncil.org.uk)**  
**Twitter: @consumerCouncil**  
**Facebook: The Consumer Council Northern Ireland; or**  
**Visit: 28-32 Alfred Street, Belfast, BT2 8EN**





**“First class service that got a response from Flybe immediately despite my 5 attempts over the last 4 months using ‘Resolver’.”**



**“An efficient service with friendly and professional staff.”**



**“Flawless service – 10/10”**

## Noted - Sorted



The Consumer Council relies on feedback from consumers to help future decision making and make improvements to our service. Below are examples of some of the feedback we have received in 2016-17 and the improvements we have put in place as a result.

**Noted**

**Sorted**

A consumer complained to us that our electricity price comparison tool did not include Economy 7 tariffs.

We created an Economy 7 Electricity Price Comparison table.

Some callers on hold would hang up because there was no hold music or tone to let them know the call was still connected.

We recently added hold music to our phone systems which has reduced the number of calls lost.

A consumer complained to us that he had not received any of our email correspondence during the investigation of his complaint.

We amended our process to ensure that a written letter is sent to a consumer if we do not receive a response to our emails.



Floor 3, Seatem House  
28-32 Alfred Street  
Belfast  
BT2 8EN



Complaints line: 0800 121 6022



Tele/Textphone: 028 9025 1600



Fax: 028 9025 1663



Email: [info@consumercouncil.org.uk](mailto:info@consumercouncil.org.uk)  
[contact@consumercouncil.org.uk](mailto:contact@consumercouncil.org.uk)



Website: [www.consumercouncil.org.uk](http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk)



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