



Enquiries and Complaints Report 2019-20

Contents

	Page
Foreword	3
Introduction	4
Enquiries & Complaints	7
Our Year in Review	14
Energy	16
Transport	26
Water and Sewerage	38
Postal Services	42
The Consumer Council - Requests for information and General remit	45
Getting in Touch	49
Customer Feedback and Satisfaction	53

Foreword

As the working year for 2019/20 drew to an end, The Consumer Council had little time to reflect upon its success in helping Northern Ireland consumers become more empowered, with greater confidence and an understanding of their rights. No sooner have we put pen to paper on our Enquiries and Complaints Report 2019/20, when we are again championing the needs of consumers impacted by the unforeseen and unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic. We are committed as always to providing strong advocacy and representation for consumers in these difficult times, which we look forward to showcasing when we report again next year. But for the moment, we will focus on the year 2019/20.

To provide context around our report for 2019/20, The Consumer Council has specific statutory complaints roles in relation to energy, transport, postal services, and water and sewerage in Northern Ireland. We also support consumers by investigating any complaint relating to consumer affairs.

“Promoting and safeguarding the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland” is our mission statement, but it’s also our passion.

Consumers tell us that complaining often causes them unnecessary stress and anxiety. It is therefore important that The Consumer Council provides a voice and can make strong representation on their behalf, to alleviate these concerns. We actively pursue amicable resolutions that are fair and reasonable, but also educate the companies involved to help them learn from their mistakes and improve customer service experience for all.

Customer Service Excellence is a key focus for The Consumer Council. During this year, we have continued to improve our own standards as we have recertified against the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) Standard. In providing the award the CSE Assessor, Paul Hindley said, “This was an excellent assessment which showed the high degree of commitment by staff to the process. Five additional compliance plus elements were added this year and there are no areas of partial compliance. This is a commendable result. It was abundantly clear during the assessment that improvement in customer service was at the heart of everything that the staff undertake. The assessor recommends that the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland should retain its accreditation to the CSE Standard. This is very well deserved.”

In addition to this, The Consumer Council has been awarded silver in the Best Customer Service category at the UK Complaint Handling Awards 2020.

The Covid-19 pandemic will undoubtedly be a top concern for consumers in 2020/21. The Consumer Council is resolute and committed to ensuring Northern Ireland consumers continue to receive first class protection in these difficult and uncertain times. We will work closely with UK and local government departments, partner organisations and of course the companies that we work with to obtain successful resolutions for consumers. Working together is key to ensuring Northern Ireland consumers have more than just a voice, it allows them to make a real difference.



Introduction

1. Introduction

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

The main statutory functions of The Consumer Council are to:

- Consider any complaint made to it relating to consumer affairs and, where it appears to The Consumer Council to be appropriate having regard to any other remedy which may be available to the complainant, investigate the complaint and take such further action in relation thereto as The Consumer Council may determine;
- Carry out, or assist in the carrying out of inquiries and research into matters relating to consumer affairs;
- Promote discussion of, and the dissemination of information relating to consumer affairs; and
- Report to a government agency in Northern Ireland on any matter relating to consumer affairs which is referred to The Consumer Council by that department.

The Consumer Council has specific statutory duties in relation to energy, postal services, transport, and water and sewerage. In these areas, we are to have particular regard to consumers:

- Who are disabled or have a long-term health condition;
- Of pensionable age;
- With low incomes; or
- Who reside in rural areas.

The Consumer Council is a designated consumer body under the Enterprise Act 2002 and the Financial Services and Markets Act Order 2013.

This report covers all contacts received from consumers from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020.

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.



Enquiries and Complaints

Analysis of enquiries & complaints 2019/20¹

Table 1: Total contacts 2019/20

General Referrals & Requests for Information	Enquiries & Complaints	Total	Financial Return to Consumers
1,249	4,158	5,407	£317,542

The Consumer Council received over 5,400 contacts in 2019/20. We investigated 4,158 enquiries and complaints, and assisted 1,249 consumers by providing general advice and signposting them to other organisations².

The table below shows a comparison between the number of enquiries and complaints received in 2019/20 compared to 2018/19.

In 2019/20, the overall number of enquiries and complaints received increased by 10% compared to the previous year. This can mainly be attributed to a 123% increase in Stage 2 complaints compared to 2018/19.

Table 2: Comparison of enquiries & complaints 2018/19 v 2019/20

Categorisation	2018/19	2019/20	Percentage Increase/Decrease
Enquiry	2,701	1,882	-30%
Stage 1 Referral	81	85	+5%
Stage 1 Investigation	35	39	+11%
Stage 2	965	2,152	+123%
Total	3,782	4,158	+10%

Chart 1 below highlights that almost two thirds of all enquiries and complaints (62%) were contacts under our general remit, which is mainly private parking charges and contacts in relation to our electricity price comparison queries.

¹ Percentages in this report may not total 100% due to rounding.

² Total contacts received includes consumers who have contacted us on more than one occasion which account for 7% of the total contacts received (Table 15).

Chart 1: Analysis of total enquiries & complaints received 2019/20 (n = 4,158)

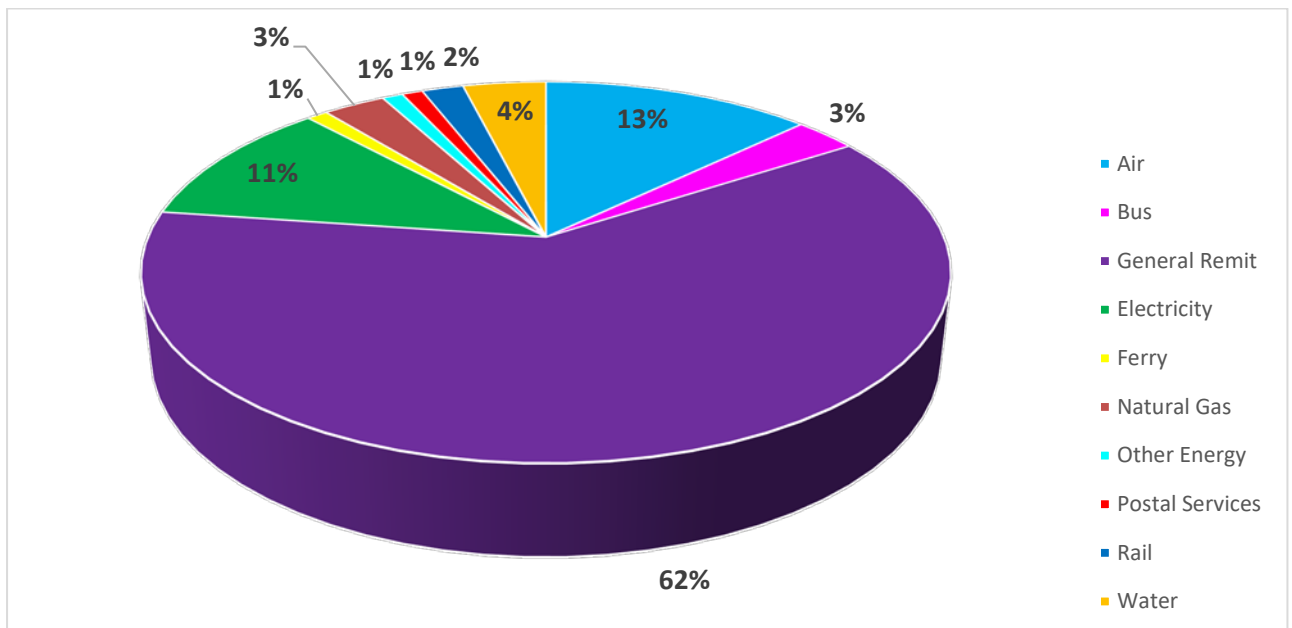
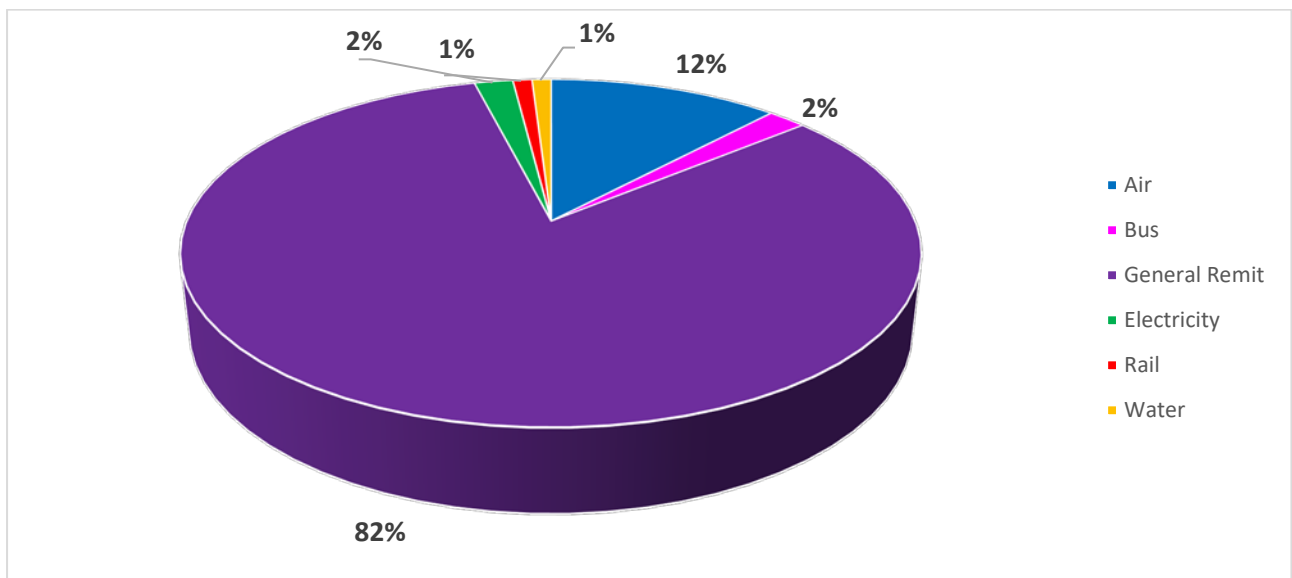


Chart 2 highlights the breakdown of Stage 2 complaints in 2019/20. In the areas of ferry travel, natural gas and postal services, the number of Stage 2 complaints received was less than 1% of the total number received, so these are not plotted on the chart below.

Chart 2: Analysis of Stage 2 complaints received in 2019/20 (n = 2,152)



In 2019/20, Stage 2 complaints increased by 123% compared to 2018/19 (2,152 vs 965). 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.

In 2017/18, we saw the introduction of private parking charges in Northern Ireland, whereby private landowners, such as shopping centres, supermarkets and retail parks sub-contracted their parking facilities to private parking companies who can charge if the terms and conditions of the car park are contravened.

This led to an increase in contacts from consumers who had received Parking Charge Notices (PCN) from private companies. In light of the increase in calls, The Consumer Council decided to use our general remit to represent consumers' interests in private parking charges, as there was no other statutory body responsible for this area.

Since then, we have continued to assist consumers in this area and contacts of this nature have increased in 2019/20, resulting in a 148% increase compared to 2018/19 (2,062 vs 831), and 85% (1,756) of these contacts were categorised as Stage 2.

Complaint Resolution Times

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

The length of time taken to investigate a complaint will vary depending on several factors, such as the type of complaint, 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 2019/20 was 36 days compared to 40 days in 2018/19. The decrease in throughput can mainly be attributed to the number of private parking cases investigated, as these cases do not always require the same level of complex investigation compared to other complaints and therefore are completed in a shorter period of time.

Last year the average complaint investigation time for transport cases had increased significantly (24%) due to delays in Bulgaria Air responding to a number of airline cases. However, these cases are now closed and we have not had any further delays this year, so the response time for transport cases has returned to normal.

The average complaint investigation time for water cases has dropped by 22% this year compared to last year. Water cases tend to be more complex in nature and therefore can take longer to investigate. We welcome the reduction in investigation time and will continue to work with all service providers

to ensure that our investigations are investigated and responded to in an efficient and thorough manner.

Table 3: Comparison of average complaint resolution time by area from 2018/19 – 2019/20

Area of Contact	Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2 complaints 2018/19	Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2 complaints 2019/20	Average number of days in 2018/19	Average number of days in 2019/20	% Increase/decrease in resolution time
Transport	287	325	41	28	-32%
Energy	65	59	41	44	+7%
Water	10	11	78	61	-22%
Post	8	11	28	38	+36%
General Remit	647	1,758	10	11	+10%

Geographical Analysis of Contacts by 11 Council Areas



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

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

The table below shows a comparison between the populations residing in each of the Council areas compared to the percentage of contacts we received from each Council area.

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

District Council	Percentage of total Population per council area ³	Percentage of total contacts received by The Consumer Council per council area (%)	Percentage Difference (%)
Antrim and Newtownabbey	8%	7%	-1%
Ards & North Down	9%	7%	-2%
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	11%	17%	+6%
Belfast	18%	18%	-
Causeway Coast and Glens	8%	1%	-7%
Derry and Strabane	8%	6%	-2%
Fermanagh and Omagh	6%	5%	-1%
Lisburn and Castlereagh	8%	9%	+1%
Mid and East Antrim	7%	9%	+2%
Mid Ulster	8%	5%	-3%
Newry, Mourne and Down	10%	10%	-
Total	100%	100%	

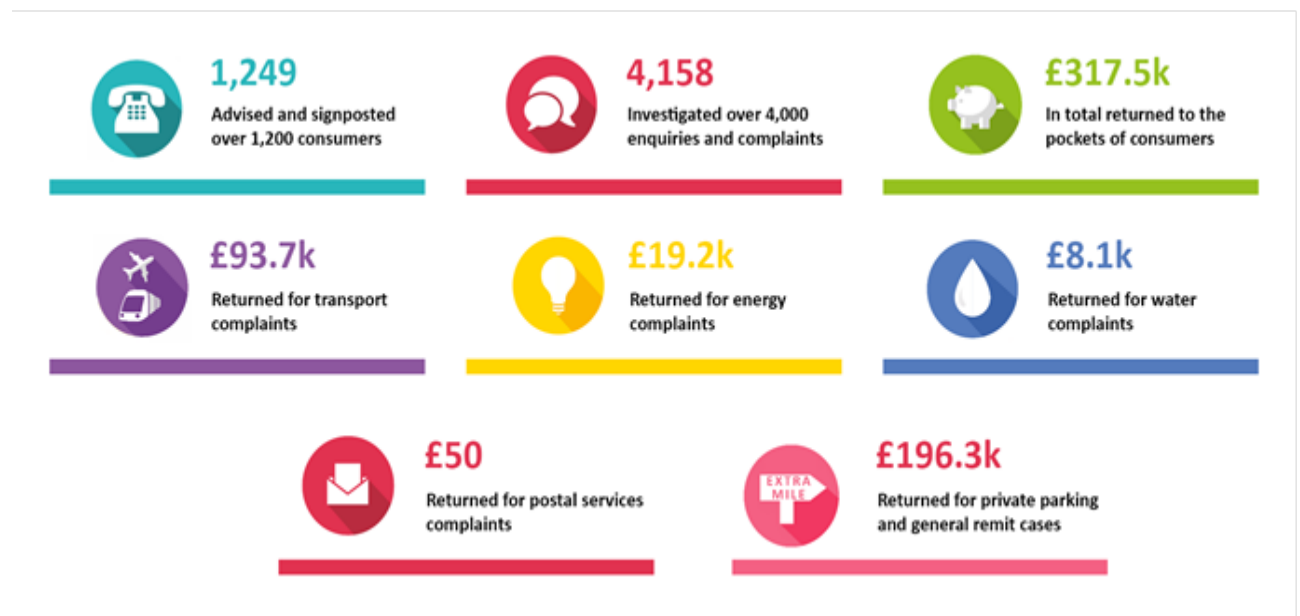
As Table 4 above shows, there is a proportionately higher volume of complaints from Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, and a proportionately lower volume of complaints from Causeway Coast and Glens. Compared to last year, the number of contacts from Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon has increased by 7%, whereas contacts from Causeway Coast and Glens have reduced by 5%. All other council areas are within +/-3% and thus complaints are reflective of population.

The Consumer Council uses this information to help target our Outreach work in the areas where we receive least contacts from consumers. In 2019-20, we hosted regional Consumer Parliaments in Omagh, Enniskillen, Coleraine and Newry to boost awareness of the work of The Consumer Council in these areas.

³ NISRA – June 2020

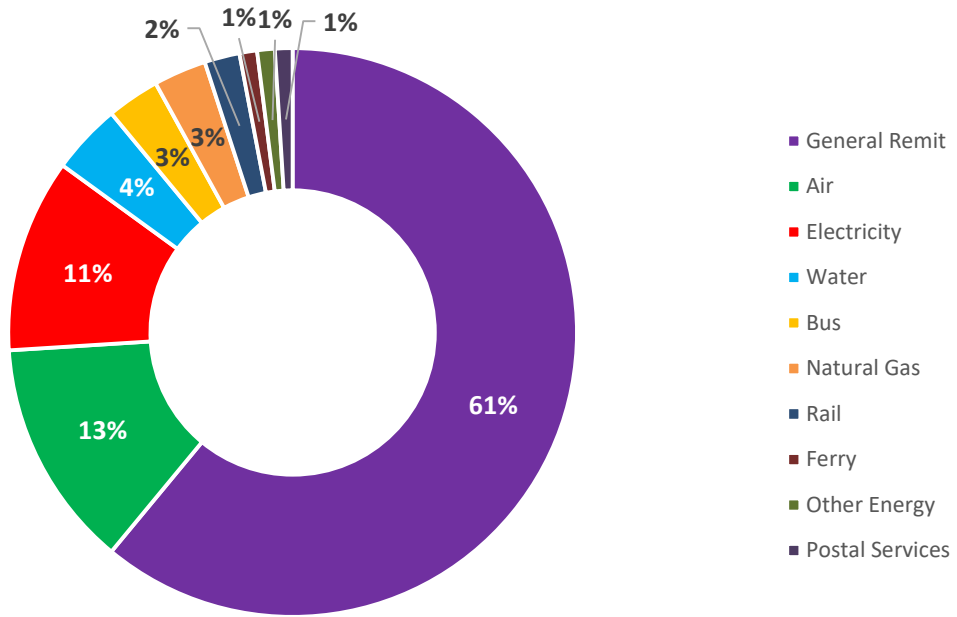
2. Our Year in Review

Overall, 2019/20 was a successful year, with a 10% increase in enquiries and complaints, returning over £317k to consumers, achieving a 99.4% customer satisfaction rate and a Net Promoter Score (NPS)⁴ of 98, which has improved from last year (95).



⁴ See page 54 for explanation of Net Promoter Score (NPS)

Breakdown of Enquiries & Complaints Received



Customer Satisfaction



Top Issues

-  **1. Private Parking**
-  **2. Air Travel Cancellations & Delays**
-  **3. Energy Issues**

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



3. Energy

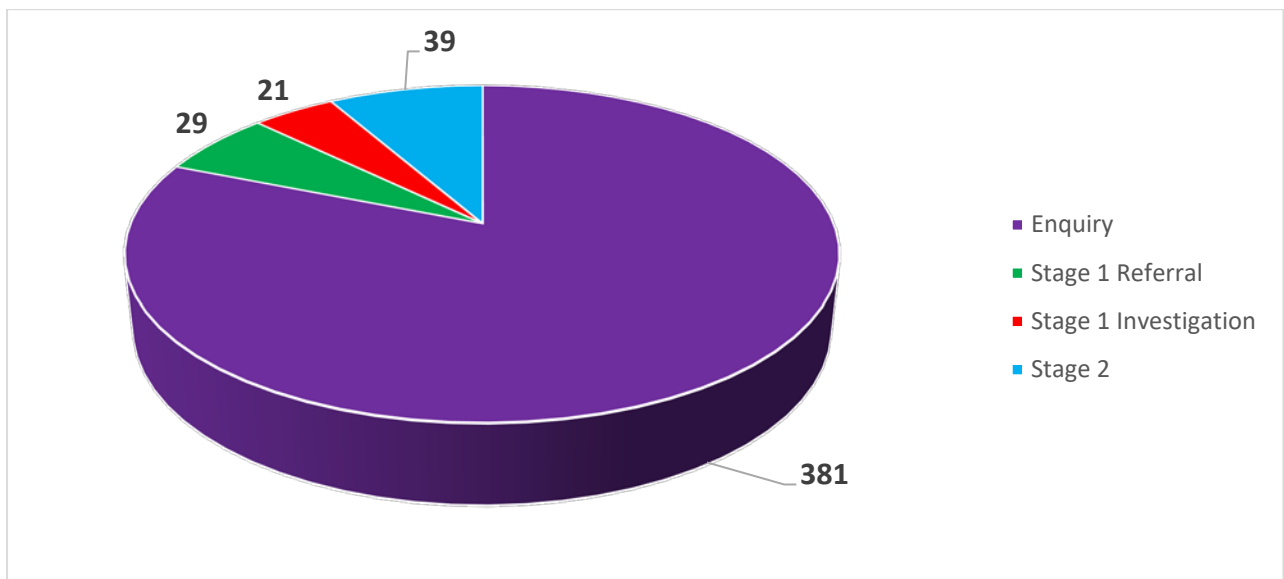
In 2019/20, energy contacts accounted for 15% (n=628) of all consumer contacts, with electricity comprising 75% of these.

Electricity

In 2019/20, The Consumer Council received a total of 470 enquiries and complaints from consumers about a range of electricity issues including billing, metering, problems with supply and poor customer service.

Chart 3 shows the breakdown of these contacts by classification.

Chart 3: Breakdown of electricity contacts by classification (n = 470)



The total number of electricity contacts received in 2019/20 (470) has decreased by 60% compared to 2018/19 (1,176). This can be mainly attributed to a decrease in the number of general requests for information about electricity, which last year accounted for 56% of the total electricity contacts received (658 vs 108).

We have also witnessed a decrease in contacts across all aspects of electricity, with the exception of metering issues, which increased by 14% compared to last year (48 vs 42).

We have seen a steady decline in electricity contacts, specifically enquiries since 2016. This decline has coincided with an increase in hits to The Consumer Council's website and in particular, the energy section of the website where consumers can access our Electricity Price Comparison tool and information on the switching process, suppliers available and the tariffs.

Whilst the number of electricity enquiries has decreased in 2019/20 by 65% compared to 2018/19 (379 vs 1,078), the number of visits to The Consumer Council's website has continued to increase in 2019/20 by 46.1%. (269,050 visits in 2018/19 compared to 393,141 visits in 2019/20).

Similar to last year, the Electricity Price Comparison Tool, Home Heating Oil and the Switching Supplier web pages were in the top three most visited pages of The Consumer Council’s website. We received 142,995 visits to these pages in 2019/20, down slightly from 146,325 in 2018/19. However, downloads of our two most popular resources, the Electricity Price Comparison Table and Gas Price Comparison Table, were up 40.9%, from 21,863 in 2018/19 to 30,806 in 2019/20.

In 2019/20, The Consumer Council also created a new Energy Price Comparison Tool for Business customers. The tool allows businesses to track electricity tariffs with available suppliers so they can identify savings that can be made by switching supplier.

Chart 4: Electricity issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2019/20 (n = 470)

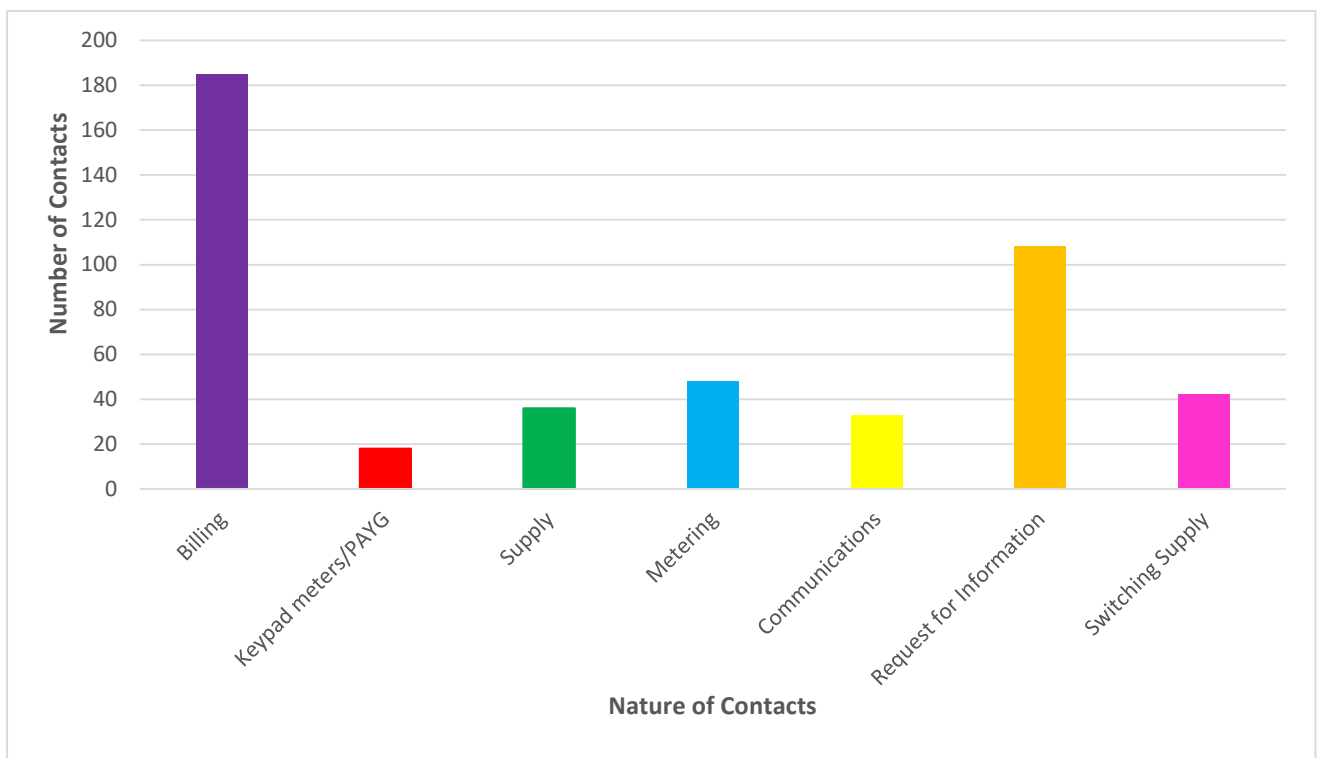


Chart 4 shows the most common electricity issues received by The Consumer Council in 2019/20. Enquiries and complaints about billing, and requests for information on electricity account for the majority of electricity contacts received.

The most common types of billing contacts received were in relation to disputed liability of bills and billing amounts, back-bills and issues regarding direct debits.

The number of Stage 2 complaints about electricity (39) dropped slightly by 5% compared to last year’s figures (41).

Table 5: Electricity contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to consumers
Budget Energy	34	4	4	5	47	£315
Click Energy	8	0	0	0	8	£0
Electric Ireland	45	9	7	20	81	£3,804
Energia	3	0	0	0	3	£0
Go Power	5	0	0	1	6	£3,550
NIE Networks	75	4	5	2	86	£1,161
Power NI	88	4	0	1	93	£1,676
SSE Airtricity	123	8	5	10	146	£6,858
Total	381	29	21	39	470	£17,364

Chart 5 shows the number of complaints⁵ received in 2019/20 by the four major electricity supply companies in Northern Ireland against their respective percentage of market share⁶. Similar to previous years, there does not appear to be any correlation between market share and volume of contacts received.

⁵ Stage 1 Investigation & Stage 2 complaints received.

⁶ Utility Regulator - Retail Market Monitoring, Quarterly Transparency Report, Quarter 4: October - December 2019.

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

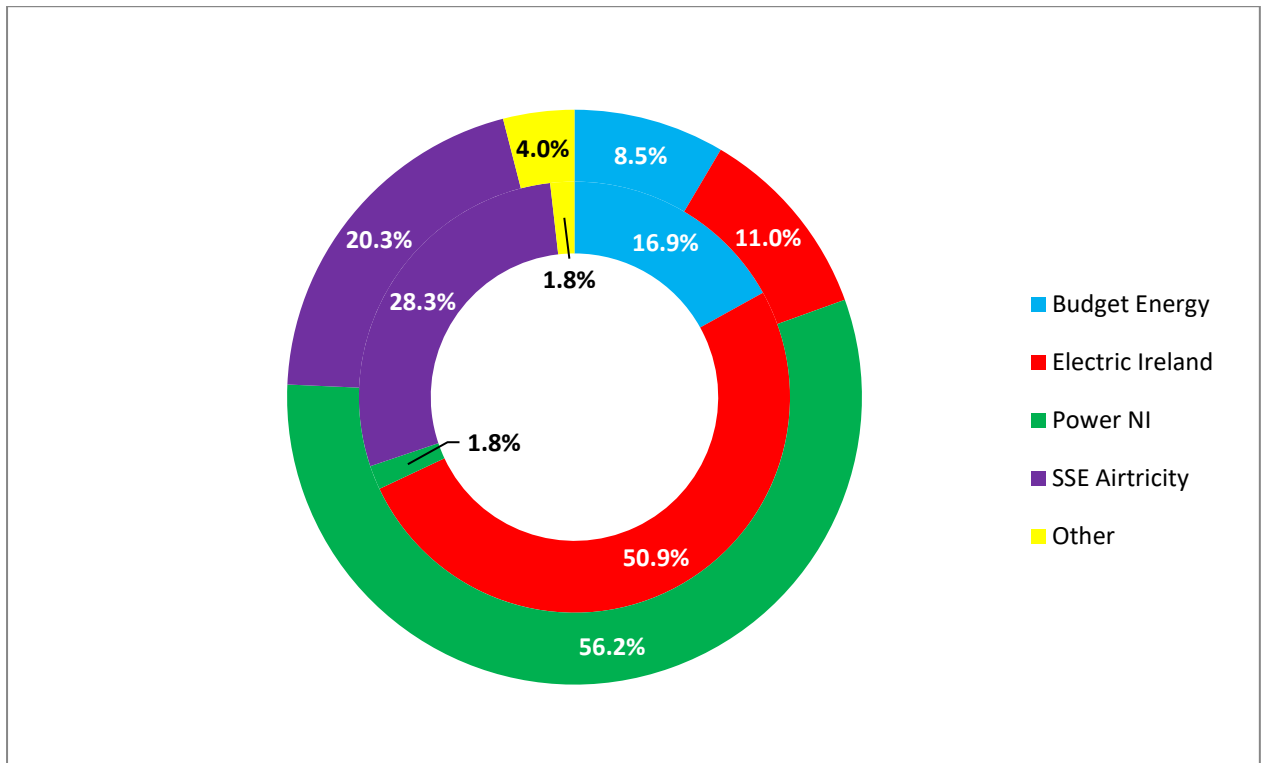
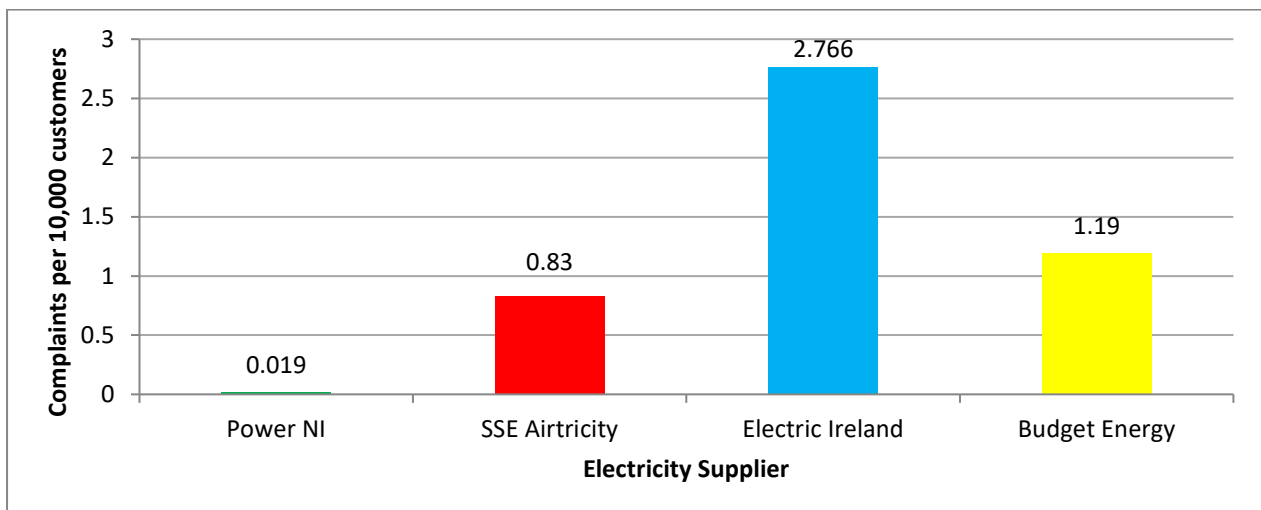


Chart 6 below shows the number of complaints⁷ received by the top four suppliers per 10,000 customers.

Chart 6: Complaints received by top four electricity suppliers per 10,000 customers⁸



⁷ Stage 1 Investigation and Stage 2 Complaints.

⁸ Utility Regulator – Retail Market Monitoring, Quarterly Transparency Report, Quarter 4: October - December 2019.

Case Study – Electricity

A consumer from County Tyrone received a large electricity bill for over £800.

When she had switched to her new supplier, she had provided copies of her previous electricity bills. The sales agent estimated that her new direct debit amount would be £54, almost £20 less than what she had been previously paying. The customer had also agreed to receive her bills and all correspondence via email.

The direct debit was paid monthly as agreed and it was assumed that the payments were covering the electricity usage as there had not been communication from the supplier to highlight otherwise. The consumer then unexpectedly received a letter from her supplier advising that she was in arrears of over £800.

The consumer contacted her supplier to query the large arrears and was given assurances that the issue would be investigated. However despite assurances, the supplier attempted to lift a payment of £567 from her bank account. The consumer proactively contacted her bank to have the payment stopped and contacted us to seek assistance in resolving the complaint.

The Consumer Council contacted the electricity supplier to investigate how the arrears had accumulated and its failure to communicate with the customer since the account was set up in 2018. Our investigation identified the following supplier failings:

- The direct debit was set too low at the time of registration, therefore it was insufficient to cover electricity usage, causing arrears;
- There was a three month delay in setting up the monthly direct debit payments due to a staff error; and
- The supplier had failed to carry out an automatic annual review on the account due to a system error that had been identified.

The supplier confirmed that bills had been issued and were available to the consumer via her online account. However, the consumer had not accessed her online account and as such was unaware of the arrears that were accumulating.

In light of the failings, the supplier offered a reduction in the bill to reflect the various failings made, totalling £514. The supplier also agreed for the remaining balance to be paid over a period of three months.

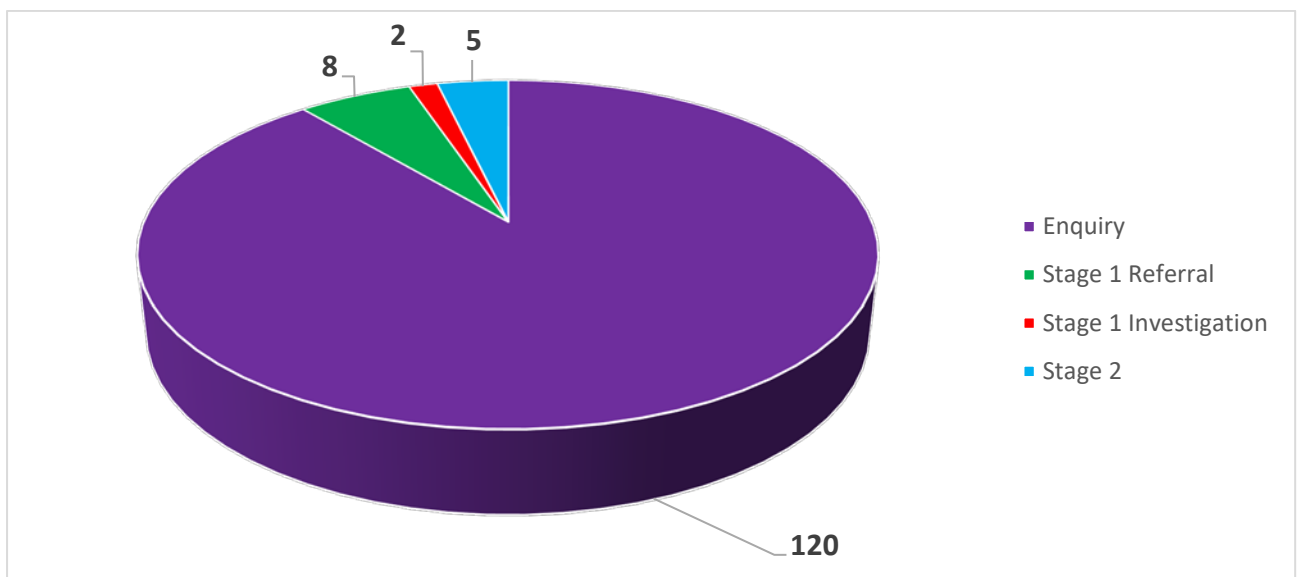
Following discussions with the consumer regarding the repayment plan, we returned to the supplier and negotiated a further three months to pay the arrears. The consumer was satisfied with the outcome and was thankful for our assistance in resolving the matter.

Natural Gas

The natural gas network in Northern Ireland is divided into three distribution areas; the Greater Belfast, Larne and East Down area where the network is owned and managed by Phoenix Natural Gas; the Ten Towns area, which comprises Armagh, Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Craigavon, Newry, Portstewart, Londonderry/Derry and Limavady, which is owned and managed by Firmus Energy; and the west of Northern Ireland, which is currently being developed by SGN Natural Gas and will cover Coalisland, Cookstown, Derrylin, Dungannon, Enniskillen, Magherafelt, Omagh and Strabane.

In 2019/20, The Consumer Council received a total of 135 gas contacts which accounted for 3% of the total enquiries and complaints handled in this period.

Chart 7: Breakdown of gas contacts by classification (n = 135)



Overall, gas contacts received in 2019/20 (135) decreased by 25% compared to 2018/19 (181). As with electricity contacts, billing was the most common type of gas contact received accounting for 24% of the total gas contacts. Contacts about gas supply and general requests for information both accounted for 20% of the gas contacts received. General requests for information include advice on supplier tariffs, information on company policy, supplier contact details and information about switching.

Chart 8: Gas issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2019/20 (n = 135)

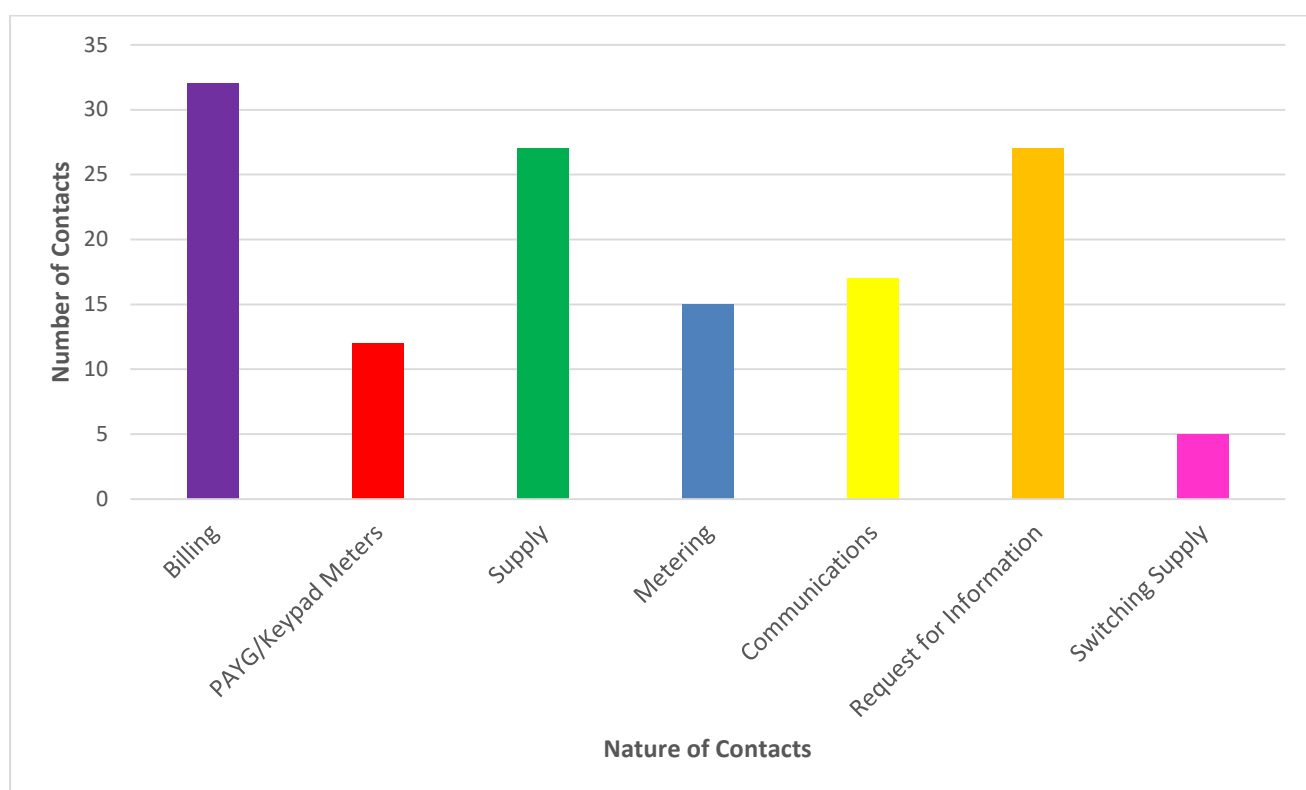


Table 6: Natural Gas contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to consumers
Firmus Energy*	24	1	1	2	28	£190
Phoenix Natural Gas	33	1	0	2	36	£0
SSE Airtricity Gas	63	6	1	1	71	£1,721
Total	120	8	2	5	135	£1,911

* Firmus Energy includes gas distribution and supply.

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

Case study – Natural Gas

A consumer from Belfast received an unexpected large back-bill from her gas supplier. The consumer advised that due to the location of her gas meter, which was at the back of her property, she had to physically give access to meter readers and therefore the account had gone without an actual reading for more than three years.

At the time of receiving the bill the consumer did not make a complaint or query the large bill. The consumer had paid a large lump sum towards the arrears and the remaining balance was to be paid back using a pay as you go meter, which meant that the consumer would purchase gas at a PayZone outlet and for every purchase added to the meter, 40% would go towards the debt.

The Consumer Council contacted the gas supplier and asked that it liaise with the consumer to investigate and resolve the matter satisfactorily, as it had not been given the opportunity to investigate prior to our involvement.

The gas supplier confirmed that the meter had not been read for three years as access was prevented when meter readers would attend the property. Cards were left on each occasion asking the consumer to provide a meter reading. Unfortunately, no reads were provided by the consumer, therefore the bills were estimated.

Upon reviewing the account the gas supplier identified a billing error which was rectified, resulting in the consumer's gas account being in credit by over £1,500. The gas supplier apologised for the error and arranged for the gas meter to be reset so the 40% recoup rate was removed.

The consumer was delighted with the outcome.

Coal, Oil & Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG)

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

Overall, The Consumer Council received 22 enquiries in relation to LPG and Home Heating Oil and of these contacts, queries about the cost of oil and LPG was most common.

Consistent with 2018/19, The Consumer Council did not receive any enquiries about coal this year.

Table 7 shows the breakdown of these contacts by service provider. There was no financial return for these contacts in 2019/20.

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

Service Company	Enquiry	Total
Calor Gas	4	4
Flogas	6	6
NI Oil Federation	12	12
Total	22	22



4. Transport

In 2019/20, transport related enquiries and complaints accounted for 18% (753) of all contacts received by The Consumer Council. This is consistent with the transport contacts received in 2018/19. Transport contacts cover air, public transport and ferry travel in Northern Ireland.

Air Travel

Contacts about air travel (532) accounted for 71% of the total transport related contacts received.

Of these 532 air contacts received, 75% related to delays and cancellations. This has been the most common airline issue since 2011. Passengers who experience a cancellation or delay may be entitled to claim compensation under European Law. The Consumer Council consequently helped return over £92k to air passengers in 2019/20.

Chart 9: Air issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2019/20 (n = 532)

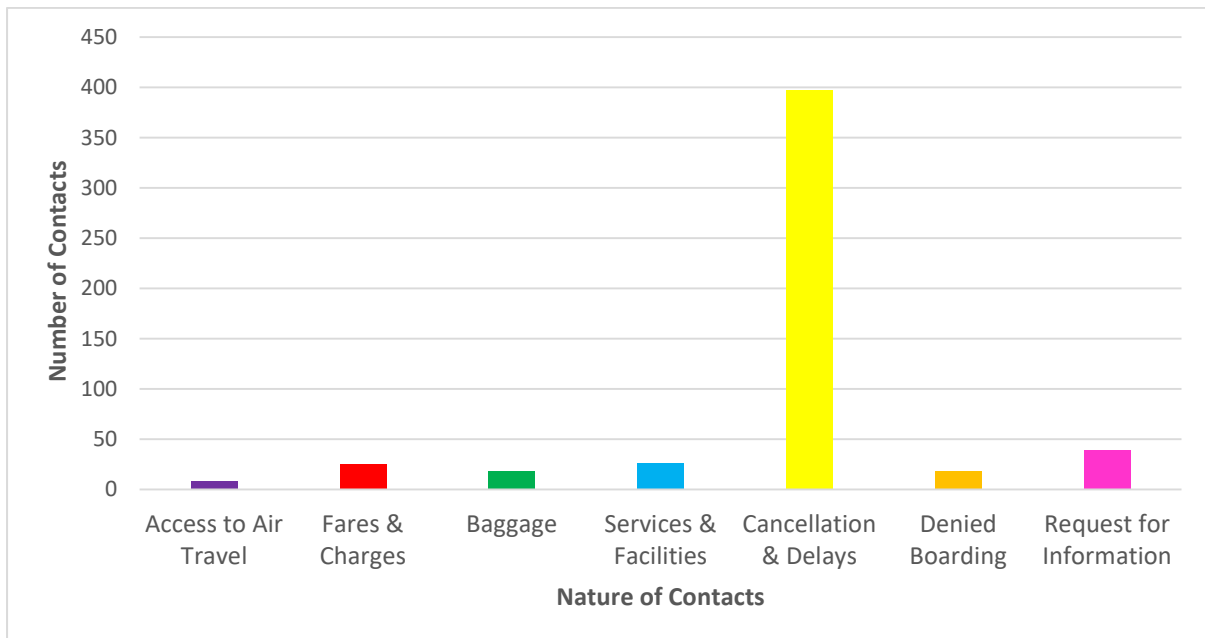
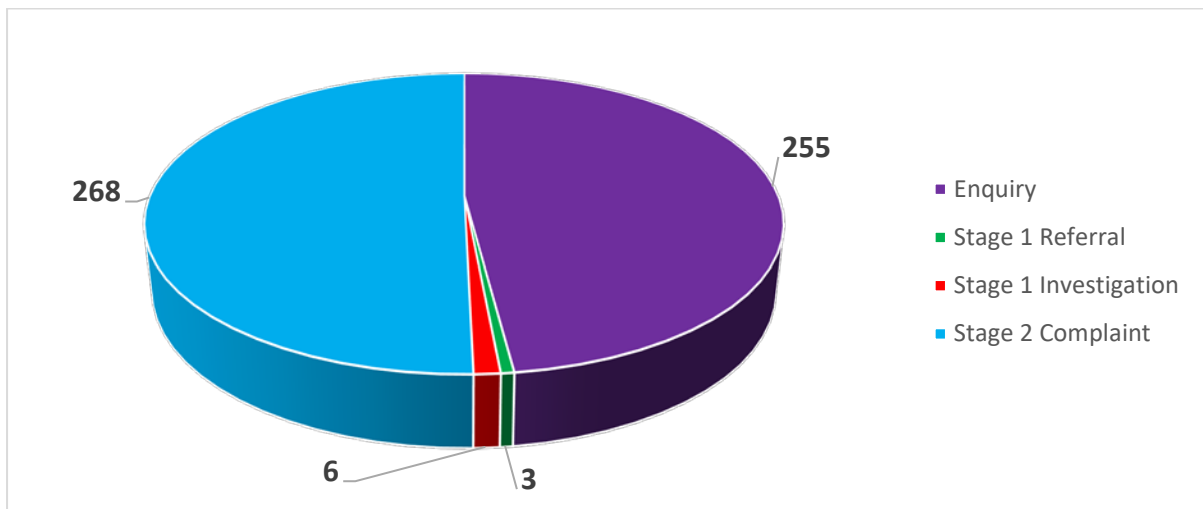


Chart 10: Breakdown of air contacts by classification (n = 532)



In 2019/20, the number of Stage 2 airline complaints increased by 21% compared to last year (268 vs 222) with enquiries dropping by 14% compared to the same period.

Thomas Cook & Flybe Collapse

During 2019/20, two well-known airlines collapsed causing disruption to passengers across the UK.

On 23 September 2019, Thomas Cook went into administration after negotiations to save the airline failed, leaving approximately 150,000 UK holidaymakers stranded abroad.

As a result of the collapse, the Government and UK Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) launched the largest repatriation in peacetime history to charter stranded passengers back to the UK. The CAA also set up a dedicated website for Thomas Cook customers providing advice and guidance on the process for claiming refunds.

On 5 March 2020, Flybe also entered administration causing further travel disruption for passengers who had booked flights with the airline. Following the announcement, The Consumer Council received an influx of enquiries and complaints as many passengers affected by the cancellations sought advice on how to obtain a refund.

Case Study – Airlines

The Consumer Council was contacted by a family of six who were booked to travel from Valencia to Belfast with easyJet in July 2019. Unfortunately, their flight was cancelled by the airline and there were no available easyJet flights back to Belfast within 48 hours, therefore the airline rep at the airport advised them to seek an alternative flight with another airline.

The family had trouble securing flights from Valencia and therefore had to book two different flights, one of which was departing from Alicante to Dublin and the other was from Lisbon to Dublin. This meant that the family incurred not only additional airline costs but also train fares to get from Valencia to Alicante and Lisbon. The additional travel costs incurred by the family came to over £1,200 and they also had additional hotel and food expenses.

The family had tried submitting an online claim to easyJet via its website but the flight details were not recognised which prompted them to contact us for help.

The Consumer Council raised a complaint with easyJet on behalf of the family. In its response to The Consumer Council, easyJet apologised for the cancellation of the flight and confirmed that each passenger was entitled to €400 compensation as the cancellation was due to a technical issue with the aircraft.

EasyJet also agreed to reimburse the additional travel and out of pocket expenses giving the family a total refund of over £4,300.

Table 8: Air contacts by service provider (n = 532)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to consumers
Aer Lingus	21	0	1	16	38	£7,990
Belfast City Airport	1	0	1	0	2	£0
Belfast International Airport	4	1	0	0	5	£0
BMI	0	0	0	1	1	£0
British Airways	16	0	0	7	23	£6,119
Bulgaria Air	5	0	0	0	5	£
CAA referral	3	0	0	0	3	£0
Cathay Pacific	2	0	0	0	2	£0
EasyJet	79	0	0	98	180	£36,224
ECC referral	2	0	0	0	2	£0
Flybe	38	2	0	52	92	£8,565
Heathrow Airport	0	0	0	1	1	£72
Jet2.com	3	0	0	14	17	£7,075
KLM	3	0	0	1	4	£517
Loganair	1	0	0	0	1	£453
Manchester Airport	1	0	0	0	1	£0
Ryanair	56	0	1	61	118	£15,460

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to consumers
Thomas Cook Airlines	10	0	0	0	10	£0
Thomson Airways (TUI)	7	0	0	16	23	£9,867
United Airlines	2	0	0	0	2	£0
Wizz Air	1	0	0	0	1	£0
Total	255	3	3	267	532	£92,342

Bus Travel

During 2019/20 the number of contacts regarding bus services (142) increased by 53% compared to 2018/19 (93). Of these contacts, 99% were in relation to Translink. Chart 11 below shows the breakdown of bus contacts by classification.

Chart 11: Breakdown of bus contacts by classification (n = 142)

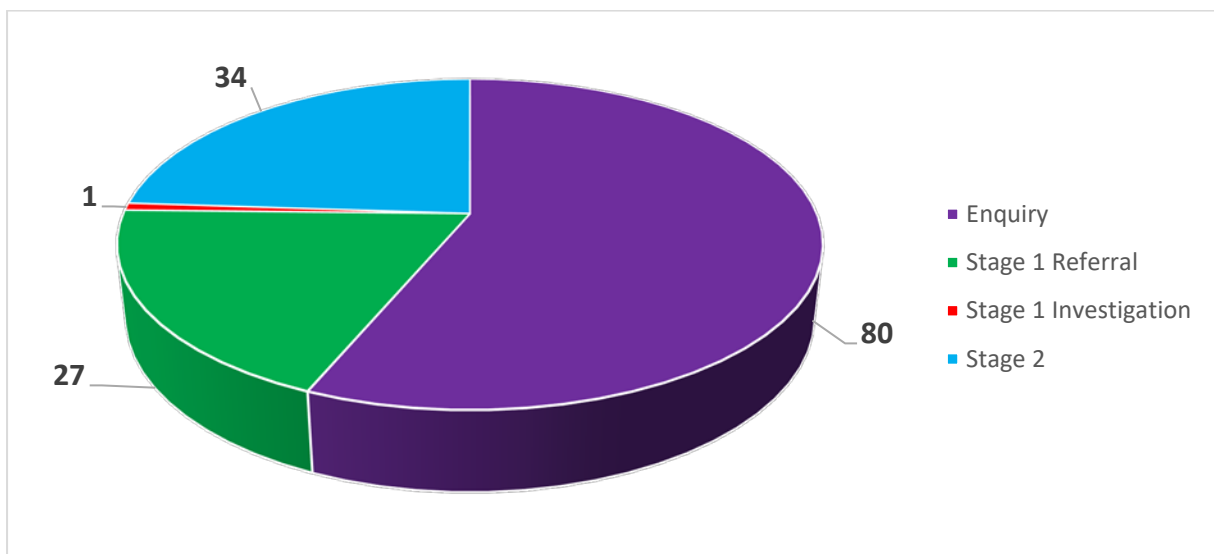


Table 9: Bus contacts by service provider (n = 142)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers
Translink	79	27	1	34	141	£710
Aircoach	1	0	0	0	1	£0
Total	80	27	1	34	142	£710

Translink bus contacts have increased across all categorisations with the exception of Stage 1 Investigations, which dropped slightly from three contacts in 2018/29 to one in 2019/20. Enquiries have increased by 61% (49 vs 79), whilst Stage 2 Complaints have increased by 26% (27 vs 34).

However, the increase in Translink bus contacts can mainly be attributed to a 108% increase in Stage 1 Referrals (13 vs 27). The increase was a direct result of Translink amending its 'Contact Us' webpage which directed consumers to complete its online web-form to make a complaint and also included our complaints email address further down the page. Consumers were using our email address to make a complaint instead of contacting Translink in the first instance.

Upon noticing the influx in contacts, we worked with Translink to identify the issue and suggested amendments that would make the complaints process easier for consumers.

Consistent with the past two years, in 2019/20 bus passengers most commonly contacted us in relation to poor customer service issues, accounting for 35% of the total bus contacts received. These include complaints about staff attitude, failure to respond to complaints and inadequate customer service in general. However, compared to last year issues of this nature have increased by 43% (35 vs 50).

Chart 12: Bus issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2019/20 (n = 142)

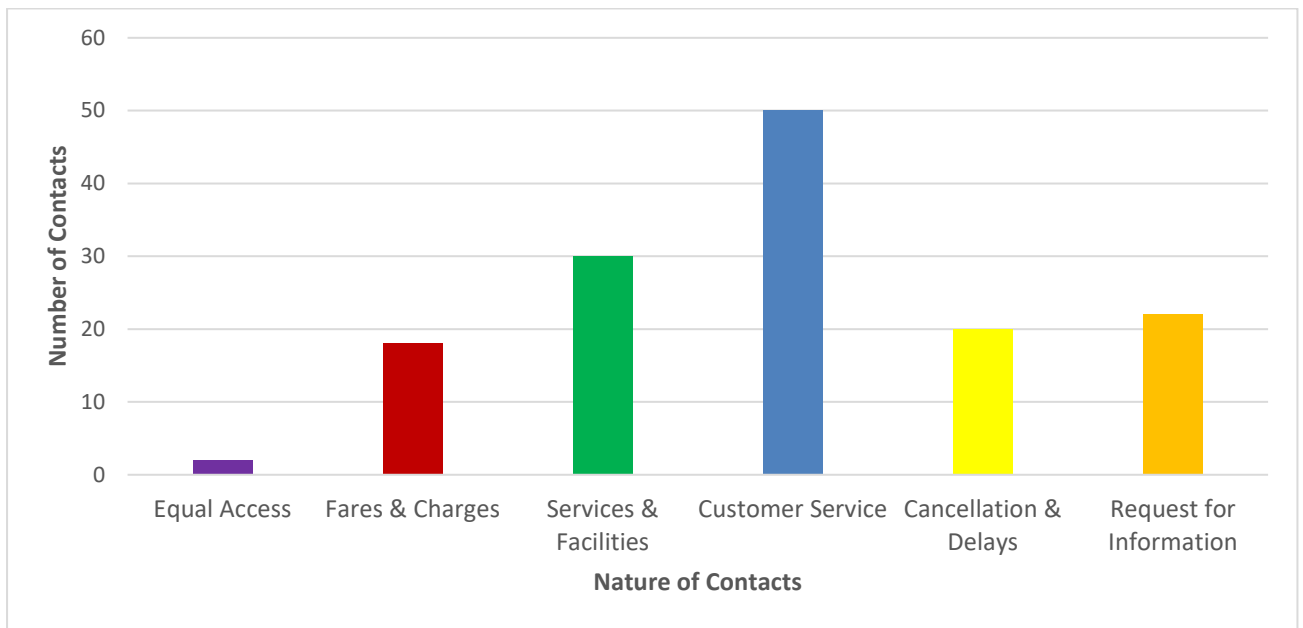
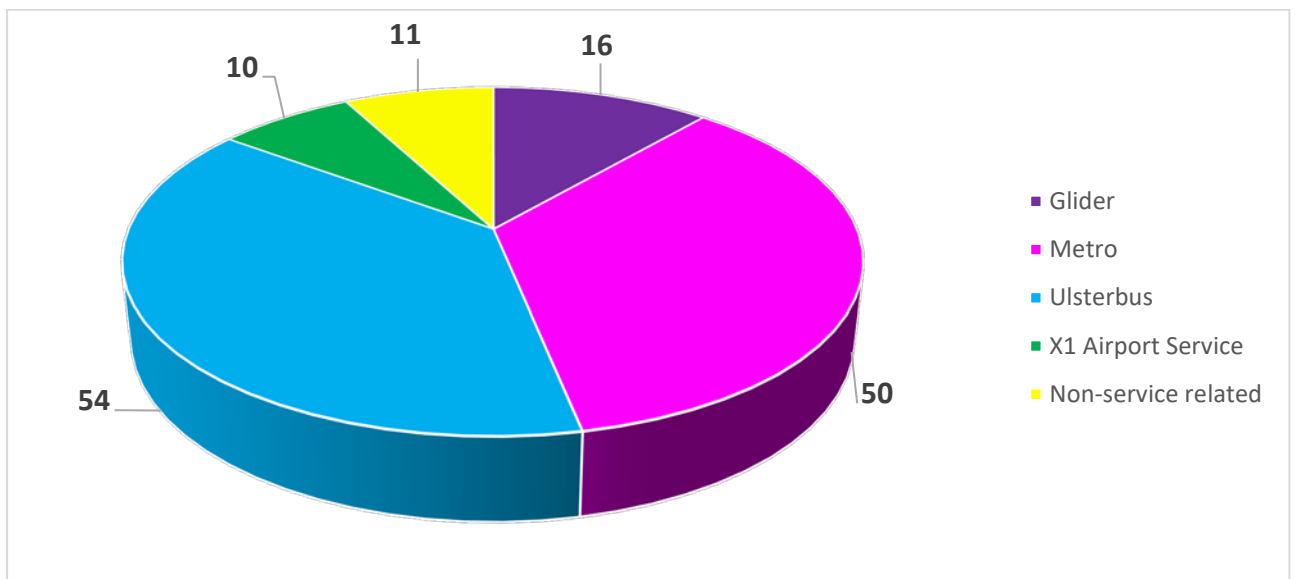


Chart 13 shows the breakdown of bus contacts by Translink service. Consistent with last year, enquiries and complaints about Ulsterbus services were most common, accounting for 38% of the Translink contacts received, followed by Metro with 35% of the overall contacts received.

This year we also received enquiries and complaints about the X1 Airport bus which is operated in conjunction with Bus Eiréann. Enquiries and complaints about the X1 service accounted for 7% of the total contacts received.

Chart 13: Breakdown of contacts by Translink Service⁹



⁹ 'Non-service related' refers to contacts about Translink facilities rather than an actual bus service.

Case Study – Bus

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer regarding the X1 Airport service that is operated by Translink and Bus Eiréann between Belfast and Dublin Airport.

The consumer had booked six return tickets for her family to travel from Sprucefield to Dublin Airport. On the return journey home, the family was waiting at the designated bus stop in the early hours of the morning, however the bus drove past them displaying a 'FULL' sign in the window. The family was left stranded at the bus stop with two young children. The consumer was very unhappy as she had assumed their seats would be reserved having made the booking in advance.

The family had to arrange alternative transport home and was able to secure seats on an Aircoach at a cost of £72 one way. The family had the added inconvenience of having to then arrange travel from Belfast back to Sprucefield which is where they had intended to travel.

The consumer made a complaint to Translink and despite providing the receipts as requested, had not received a satisfactory response nor reimbursement of the additional costs incurred.

The Consumer Council issued a formal complaint to Translink to investigate why the family was unable to travel on the Ulsterbus service despite having reserved and paid for seats in advance.

Translink confirmed that the family had reserved seats on the X1 service which was being operated by Bus Eiréann. Translink advised that when you purchase seats on the service, this should reserve the seat and ensure that the customer has a seat on the service.

On this occasion, the Bus Eiréann driver had failed to check his hand-held device to confirm the number of seats reserved resulting in the family not being held seats. Whilst Translink agreed to refund the amount paid for the booking which came to £25, it refused to pay the additional costs as the issue arose as a result of a Bus Eiréann failure.

The Consumer Council returned to Translink to point out that the consumer should not be left out of pocket and that as best practice it should issue the refund to the consumer and then liaise with Bus Eiréann to recoup this.

Following our contact with Translink it agreed to issue a further refund of £72 to the consumer to cover the costs of the Aircoach. The consumer received a total refund of £97.

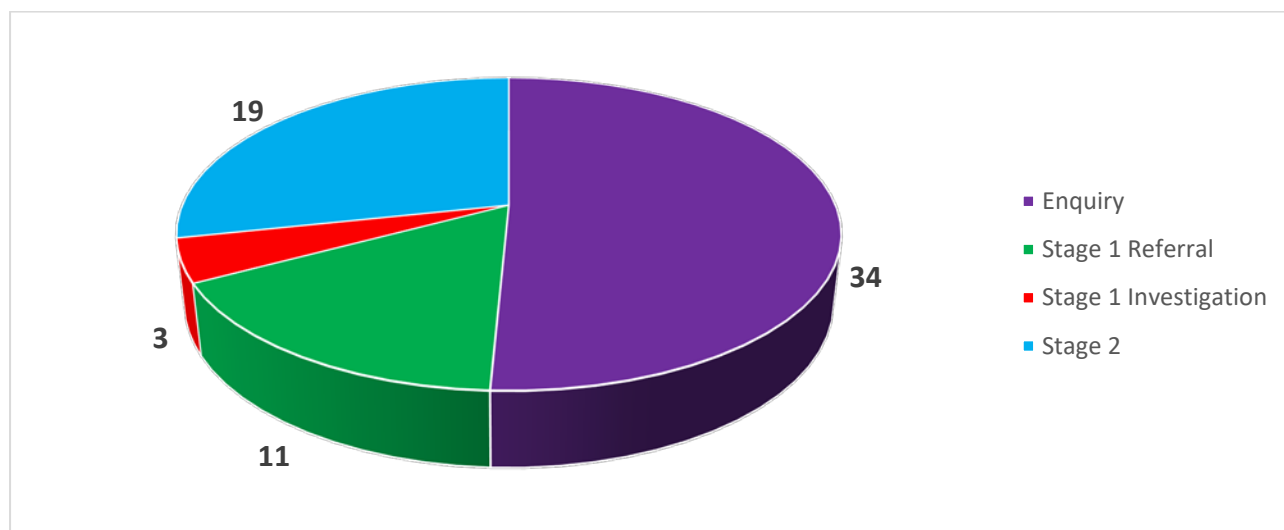
Rail Travel

In 2019/20, The Consumer Council received a total of 67 rail contacts, which was a 131% increase compared to 2018/19 contacts (67 vs 29). There was an increase across all categorisations with the exception of Stage 1 Investigations which remained the same as last year. Both enquiries and Stage 1 Referrals increased by 143% (14 vs 34) and 267% (3 vs 11) respectively.

Similar to the increase in Translink bus contacts, the increase in enquiries and Stage 1 Referrals can also be attributed to the changes made by Translink to its 'Contact Us' page which resulted in consumers contacting The Consumer Council to complain in the first instance, instead of directly to Translink.

Stage 2 complaints also increased by 111% compared to last year (9 vs 19) as consumers raised complaints regarding customer service issues both in relation to staff behaviour and attitude, and also Translink failing to respond to complaints within its Passenger Charter.

Chart 14: Breakdown of rail contacts by classification (n=67)

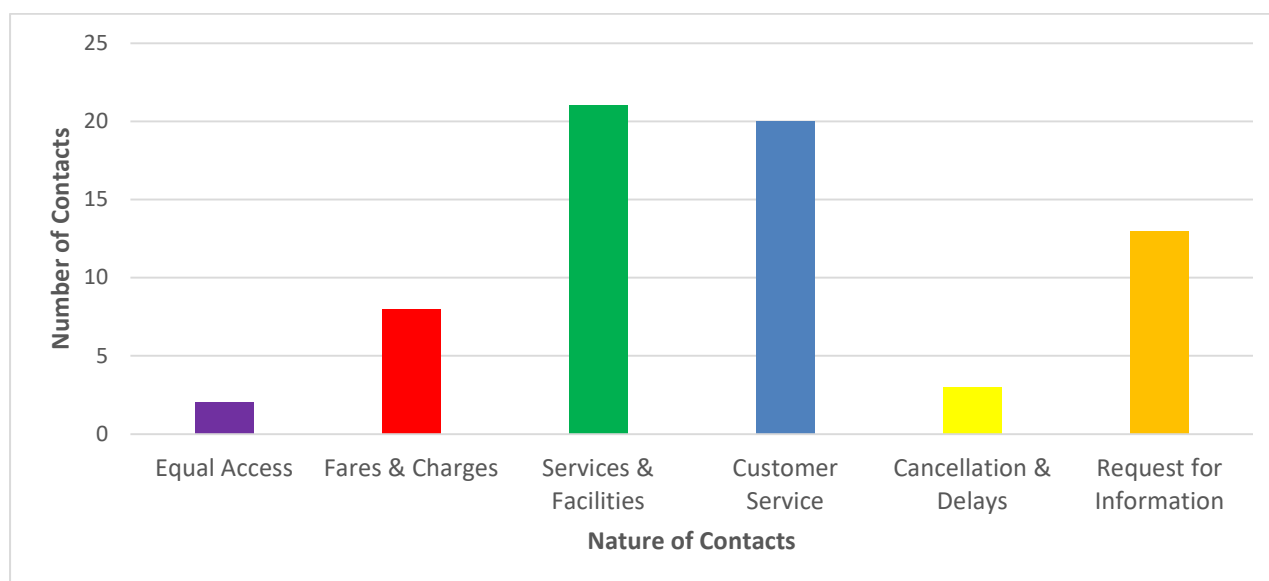


Issues about services and facilities and general customer service remain the most common types of rail contacts received in 2019/20, this is consistent with last year. These include enquiries and complaints about staff attitude, and Translink’s failure to respond to complaints in a timely manner.

Table 10: Rail contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers
Translink - Rail	34	11	3	19	67	£571

Chart 15: Rail issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2019/20 (n = 67)



Case Study – Rail

The Consumer Council investigated a complaint on behalf of a consumer who had booked five first class return tickets on the Enterprise train from Portadown to Dublin costing £185.30.

The consumer was dissatisfied with the customer service provided as there was a lack of gluten free breakfast options on the journey down to Dublin and on the way home, and the train broke down, resulting in all the passengers having to travel on a replacement train and the party having to sit on the floor as there were no seats.

The consumer felt that the service she had paid for had not been provided and was dissatisfied with the lack of management available on the service to assist passengers. The consumer complained to Translink but did not receive a response, therefore escalated the complaint to us for investigation.

We contacted Translink on behalf of the consumer to highlight the customer service issues encountered on the train and Translink’s failure to respond to the complaint in line with its Passenger Charter response timeframe.

Translink apologised for its failure to respond to the consumer’s initial complaint as per its Passenger Charter. Translink also apologised for the poor level of service provided on the train and confirmed that the consumer was entitled to a partial refund of the first class fare as they had not travelled first class on the return journey home. This equated to a refund of £55 in total. Translink also highlighted the issues raised to Enterprise management and the staff were reminded of their conduct and the level of service expected from them at all times.

Ferry Travel

Consistent with the previous three years, less than 1% (12) of all contacts received by The Consumer Council in 2019/20 relate to ferry travel. Ferry contacts received in 2019/20 decreased by 29% compared to last year (12 vs 17).

Consistent with last year, the most common ferry issues raised by consumers centre around delays and cancellations, and also issues with services and facilities.

Chart 16: Breakdown of ferry contacts by classification (n = 12)

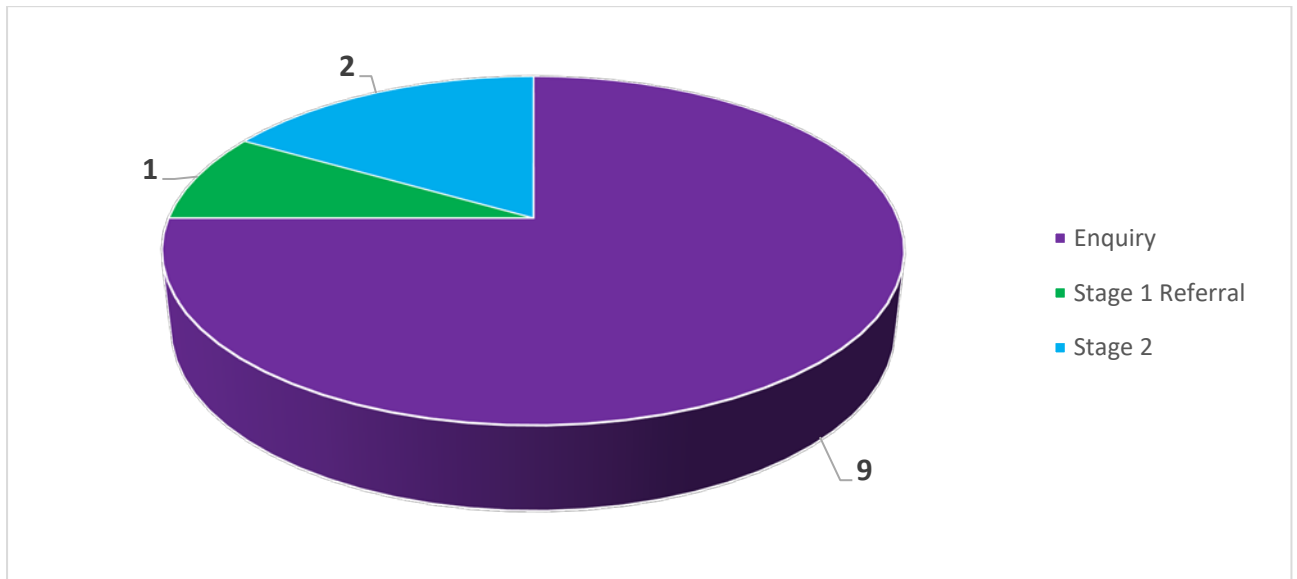


Chart 17: Ferry issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2019/20 (n = 12)

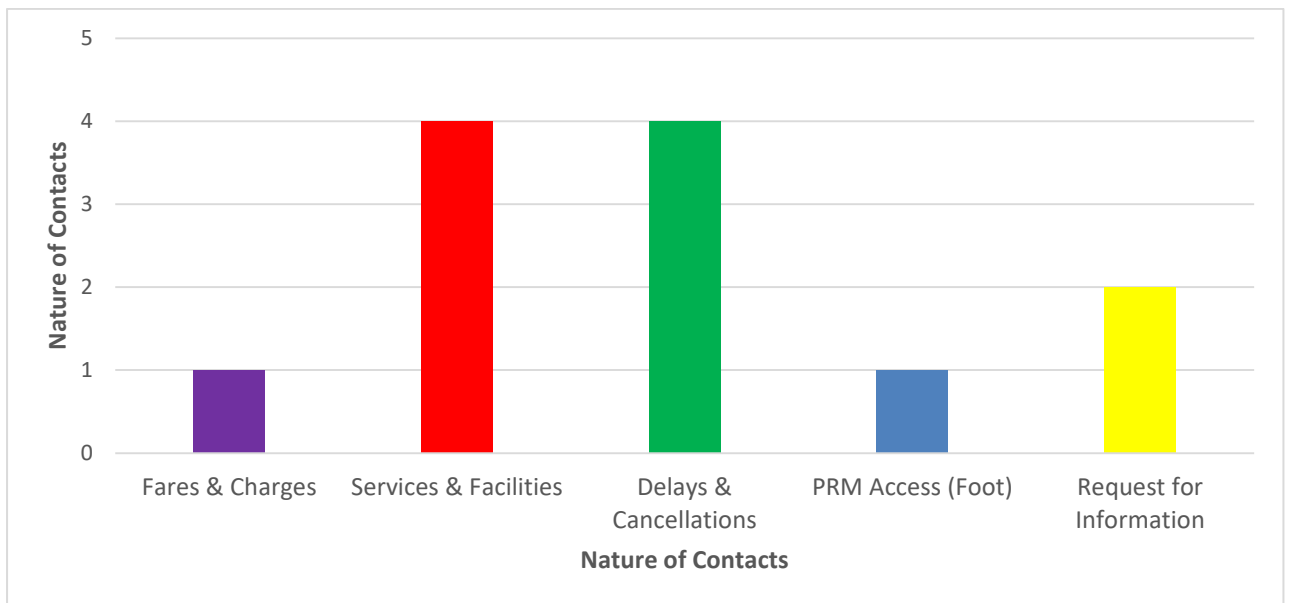


Table 11: Ferry contacts by service provider (n = 12)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers
P & O Ferries	2	0	2	4	£100
Stena Line	4	1	0	5	£0
Rathlin Ferry	1	0	0	1	£0
NTA Referral	2	0	0	2	£0
Total	9	1	2	12	£100

Case Study – Ferry

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer who despite having made several complaints to P&O Ferries about its service remained dissatisfied with the action taken by P&O to address her concerns and also its failure to respond to some of her complaints.

The consumer was a regular user of the Larne to Cairnryan route and her main concern was that its passenger service was being regularly substituted with a freight service which offers fewer facilities but charges the same price. The consumer had also complained about the poor facilities on board.

We contacted P&O and asked it to investigate the concerns raised by the consumer. P&O apologised for the impact caused by maintenance works being completed on its ships. P&O acknowledged the differences in facilities between the vessels and offered a further apology for any inconvenience caused to the consumer and her family.

In recognition of the inconvenience caused to the consumer and for its failure to respond to all of the complaints raised, P&O offered a £100 credit towards a future booking. The consumer was satisfied with the response and resolution achieved.



5. 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 4% (146) of all enquiries and complaints received by The Consumer Council in 2019/20 (4,158). In comparison with last year, water and sewerage contacts have reduced by 18% (177 vs 146). Whilst overall water contacts have reduced compared to last year, the number of Stage 2 complaints has increased by 100% (5 vs 10).

Since April 2017, NI Water contacts have steadily reduced due to NI Water amending its policy in relation to retrospective or ‘back-dated’ billing. The change in policy resulted in the maximum back billing period reducing from six years to 18 months. As a result, the number of enquiries and complaints relating to this type of billing contact has reduced year on year, impacting overall contacts received.

Chart 18: Breakdown of water contacts by classification (n = 146)

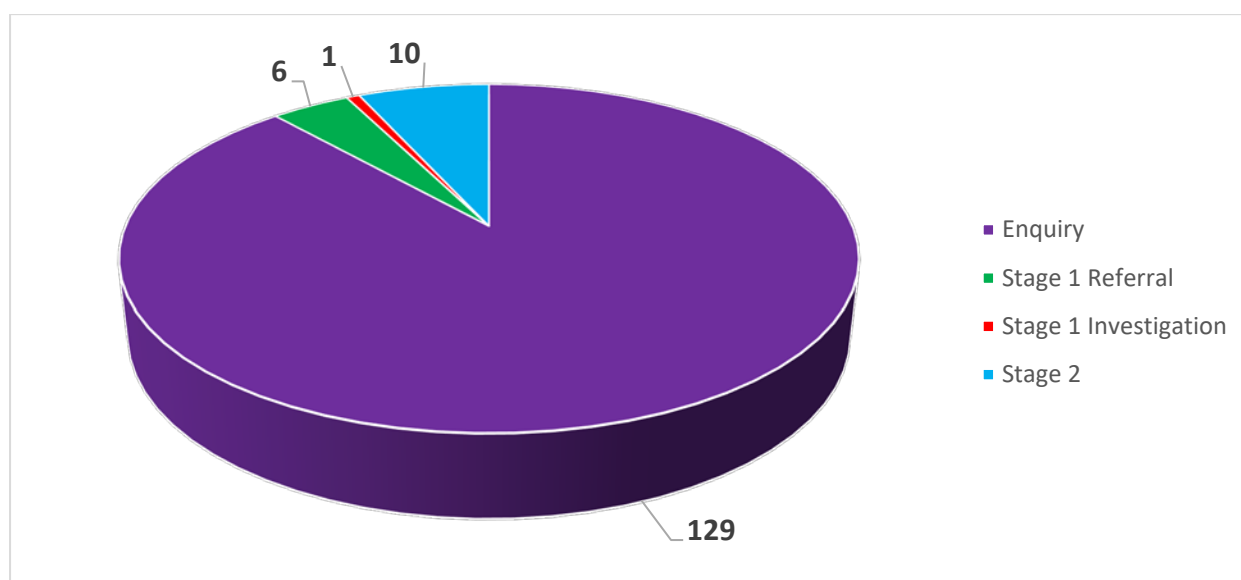
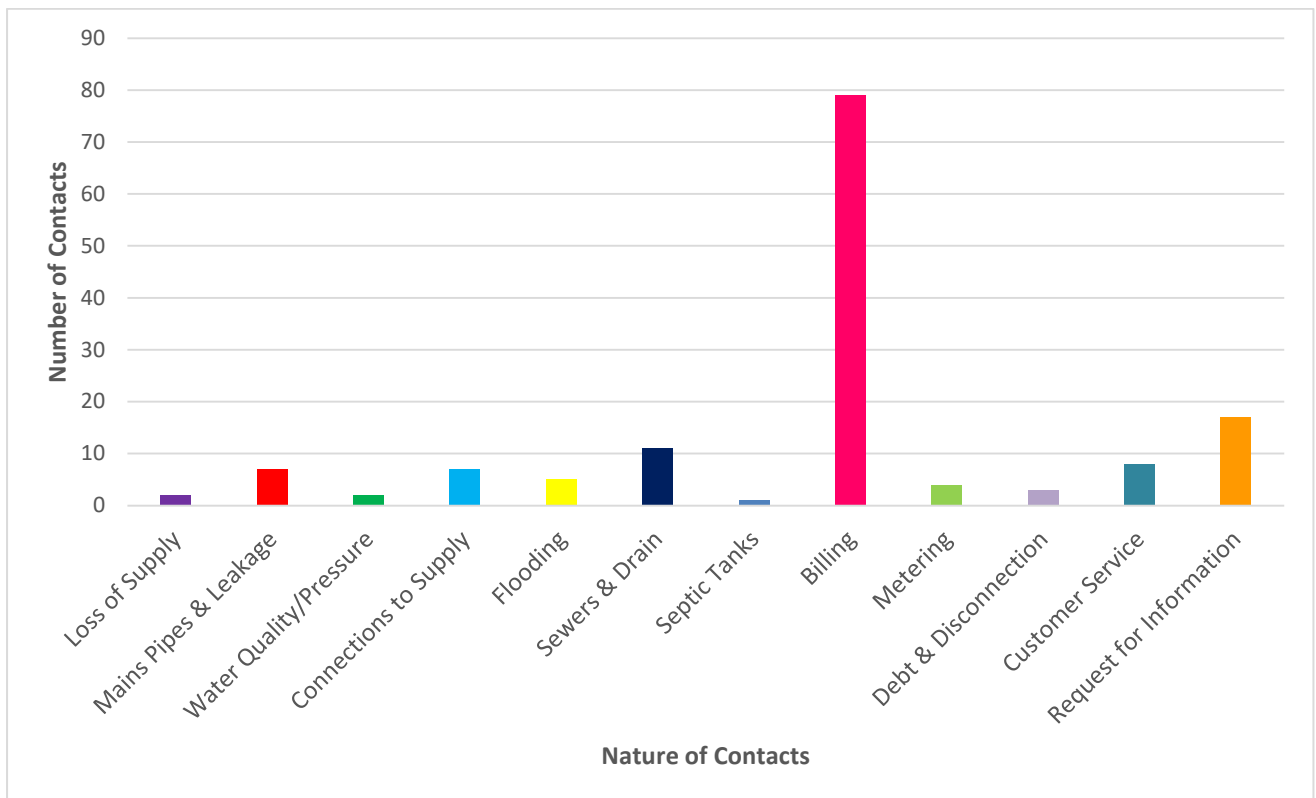


Table 12: Water and Sewerage contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers
NI Water	129	6	1	10	146	£8,129

Chart 19 shows the types of water and sewerage issues that we received from consumers in 2019/20. Consistent with previous years, billing remains the most common type of water contact received and includes issues such as clarity of bill, disputed bills and liability of bill.

Chart 19: Water issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2019/20 (n = 146)



Case Study – Water

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer who had received a back-bill from NI Water for £4,285. The property was supplied by a borewell with a mains supply as a backup. NI Water exchanged the property’s meter in November 2017. Following this a bill from NI Water, covering the consumer’s usage from the meter exchange until May 2018 registered use of 4,100m³.

The consumer found that after the meter exchange the stop tap had been left open despite it previously being closed. The consumer disputed liability for the charges on these grounds.

The Consumer Council’s investigations found that the usage recorded via the meter was from the borewell. NI Water agreed the stop tap was likely to have been left open by NI Water engineers when it should have been closed. Referencing the consumer’s zero consumption prior to the meter exchange NI Water reduced the bill from £4,285 to £102 and recommended that the consumer install his own stop tap.

Water Bill Health Checks (WBHC)

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

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

In 2019/20, The Consumer Council undertook 136 water bill health checks for businesses across the country to help them save money and ensure they were receiving any allowances they were entitled to. A total of £89,417 was returned to businesses in Northern Ireland (with an additional ongoing annual saving of £4,050 on their water bills) as a result of this work.

If a business would like to receive a Water Bill Health Check they simply contact The Consumer Council and provide us with a copy of their bill. We can then review the bill and discuss with the business any potential allowances that they may be entitled to, as well as giving advice on how the business could make water efficiency measures which in turn would reduce their bills.

Table 13: Three Year Comparison of Water Bill Health Checks 2017-2020

	Total 2017/18	Total 2018/19	Total 2019/20
No of WBHC enquiries	97	114	142
No of WBHCs completed	71	107	136
No of correct bills reviewed	42	57	107
No of bills requiring adjustment	29	50	29
Financial savings obtained in this year	£14,933	£57,275	£89,417
Annual savings made for future years	£6,028	£27,731	£4,050
Savings carried forward to next financial year	£6,028 to 18/19	£33,759 to 19/20	£37,809 to 20/21



6. Postal Services

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

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

In 2019/20, we received a total of 52 contacts relating to Postal Services. This represents a 21% increase in contacts of this nature compared to 2018-19 (43).

Consistent with previous years, mail delivery was the primary postal issue raised by consumers, accounting for 83% of the total postal contacts received. These include concerns about damaged or lost mail.

Chart 20: Breakdown of postal services contacts by classification (n = 52)

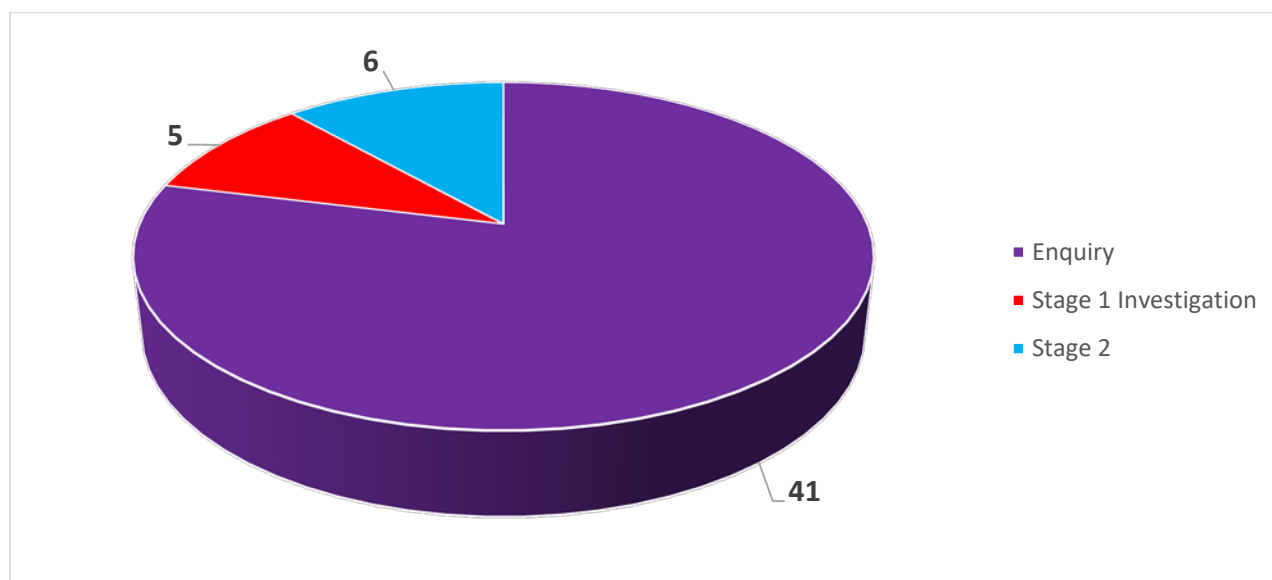
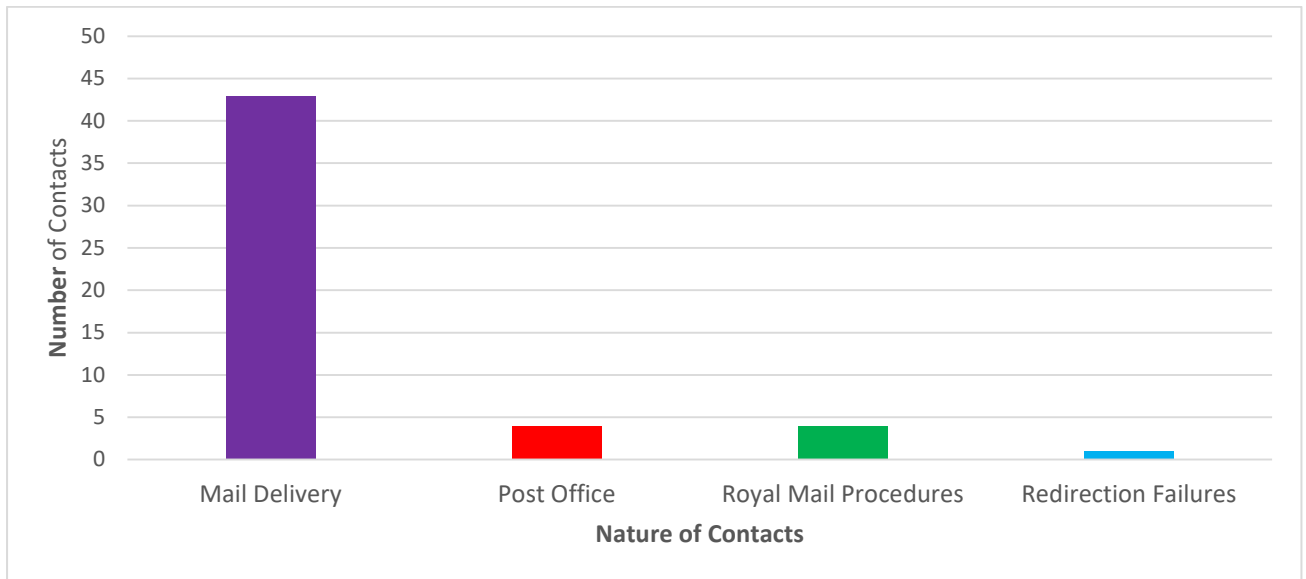


Table 14: Postal services contacts by service provider (n = 52)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total	Returned to Consumers
Royal Mail	28	5	5	38	£50
Parcelforce	2	0	0	2	£0
Post Office	6	0	0	6	£0
Hermes	4	0	0	4	£0
Yodel	1	0	0	1	£0
Collect Plus	0	0	1	1	£0
Total	41	5	6	52	£50

Chart 21: Postal Service issues investigated by The Consumer Council in 2019/20 (n = 52)



Case Study – Postal Services

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer regarding issues with Royal Mail delivering her post to a neighbour's property in error and vice versa. The issue had happened on a number of occasions causing concern for both consumers.

Royal Mail investigated the matter and identified that the errors had been caused by a postal operator who was temporarily covering the route. Royal Mail explained that the occupiers of the neighbouring properties had the same surname which caused confusion to the postal operator, especially on occasions when the mail would not be addressed to a specific house number.

Royal Mail advised that to safeguard the consumer's mail in the future, the Manager had briefed delivery staff on the correct delivery procedures and how to avoid misdeliveries. The Manager had also put in place a checking mechanism to ensure that any mail for the consumer was checked on a daily basis by the Officer in Charge, prior to being delivered.



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

In 2019/20, The Consumer Council received 2,579 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 17% of these contacts (432) and included requests for copies of our publications and guides such as ‘Plane Facts’ or ‘Switch On’ energy guides, requests for presentations by our outreach team, and general information on energy, water, transport and post.

Consumers contacting us to enquire about energy tariffs and switching supplier accounted for 38% of these contacts.

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 2019/20, we assisted 2,131 consumers with issues of a more general nature such as complaints about private car parking fines and tour operator issues. Of these contacts, 99.7% were in relation to private parking (2,124) which is covered in the next section of the report.

The Consumer Council was contacted by 16 consumers to provide feedback on our services, both positive and negative. This feedback is used to develop and improve the services we provide to consumers.

Chart 22: Analysis of The Consumer Council contacts received in 2019/20 (n=2,579)



Private Parking Charges

Since October 2017, The Consumer Council has been assisting consumers across Northern Ireland with Parking Charge Notices (PCNs) received from private parking companies. These companies are employed by landowners to manage parking facilities on private land, such as shopping centres, supermarkets and retail parks.

Parking Charge Notices are different from Penalty Charge Notices, Excess Charge Notices (issued by Transport NI, the Department for Infrastructure and local councils), or Fixed Penalty Notices (issued by Police Service for Northern Ireland).

The law about parking on private land in Northern Ireland is different from England and Wales. The Protection of Freedoms Act (PoFA) was introduced in England and Wales in 2012. Among other provisions, this legislation provided for vehicles left on land, including the right to claim unpaid parking charges from the keeper of the vehicle. In line with this new legislation, an independent appeals service was established in England and Wales - The Parking on Private Land Appeals (POPLA) service.

In Northern Ireland, it is the driver, rather than the registered keeper, who can be held responsible for any unpaid private parking charges. In May 2019, POPLA was made available to consumers in Northern Ireland, however to use the service you must accept liability for the charge and confirm you were the driver.

The Consumer Council is keen to educate consumers on how to avoid getting a PCN and offer advice on the options available to consumers if they are unfortunate to receive one. We have a dedicated section of our website on Private Parking and this includes information regarding the legislative differences in Northern Ireland compared to Great Britain, tips on how to avoid getting a PCN and a template letter for those who wish to appeal a PCN.

In 2019/20, The Consumer Council received 2,124 contacts regarding private parking charges. Of these contacts we acted on behalf of 1,756 consumers who had received a PCN and successfully appealed £195.4k in charges.

Private Pay and Display Car Parks

In our 2018/29 report we provided information on the different methods of enforcement being used by parking operators across Northern Ireland, depending on the car park.

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

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

In 2019/20, The Consumer Council noted an increase in contacts from consumers who had received a PCN because they did not input the correct car registration despite having paid for their parking and having retained the ticket as proof of purchase. In many of these instances the car registration was only incorrect by one or two digits.

The Consumer Council liaised with the British Parking Association (BPA) regarding its Code of Practice (which BPA accredited parking companies must comply with when issuing PCNs) to request specific guidance to be included regarding this issue and to ensure consistency in approach amongst private parking operators.

In January 2020, the BPA updated its Code of Practice to now include guidance to operators when a consumer inputs the incorrect vehicle registration. If a consumer receives a PCN for this error and they challenge it, the operator must cancel the PCN if the vehicle registration is incorrect by up to two errors. If there are three or more errors, the operator must reduce the PCN to £20 to cover the administration costs of issuing the PCN.

Case study – Private Parking

A consumer contacted us regarding parking charge notices (PCN) they had received from a private parking company which operated their employer's car park. The consumer had been allocated a space by his company and was therefore exempt from receiving PCNs as the employer had provided his car registration to the parking company.

The consumer had purchased a new car and on supplying the new vehicle registration to his employer, he unfortunately made an error and gave the incorrect registration by one digit.

Shortly after purchasing the new vehicle the consumer started to receive PCNs from the parking company. He contacted his employer to raise the issue but unfortunately the car registration error went unidentified and therefore the PCNs continued to be issued on a weekly basis. This resulted in PCNs to the value of almost £13,000. The consumer was receiving debt collection agency letters and was being threatened with court action.

Despite the employer eventually identifying the car registration error, the parking operator was unwilling to waive the charges as it was of the opinion that they had been issued in line with the terms and conditions of the car park.

The Consumer Council became involved in the case and our first course of action was to contact the private parking company on behalf of the consumer but unfortunately it refused to rescind the charges. In an effort to escalate the matter, we contacted the landowner of the car park and explained the genuine error that had occurred.

The landowner understood that it was a genuine error and therefore requested that the private parking company rescind all charges issued, removing all PCNs to the value of over £13,000.



8. Getting in Touch

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

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.

Accessibility of our Services

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

Our website is fully accessible and has an accessibility software called ReciteMe which enhances and improves the website making it more accessible to consumers with a range of visual impairments. Installation of this new software means web users can now translate content into multiple languages, read text aloud, and have the capacity to change formatting, colours and fonts.

This benefits people with dyslexia, learning difficulties, sight impairment, reading issues, colour blindness and other forms of neurodiversity.

Resolver Partnership

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

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

In 2019/20, we received 125 referrals from Resolver, 54% of which were in relation to airline complaints about delays and cancellations.

NI Direct Telephony Support

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

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

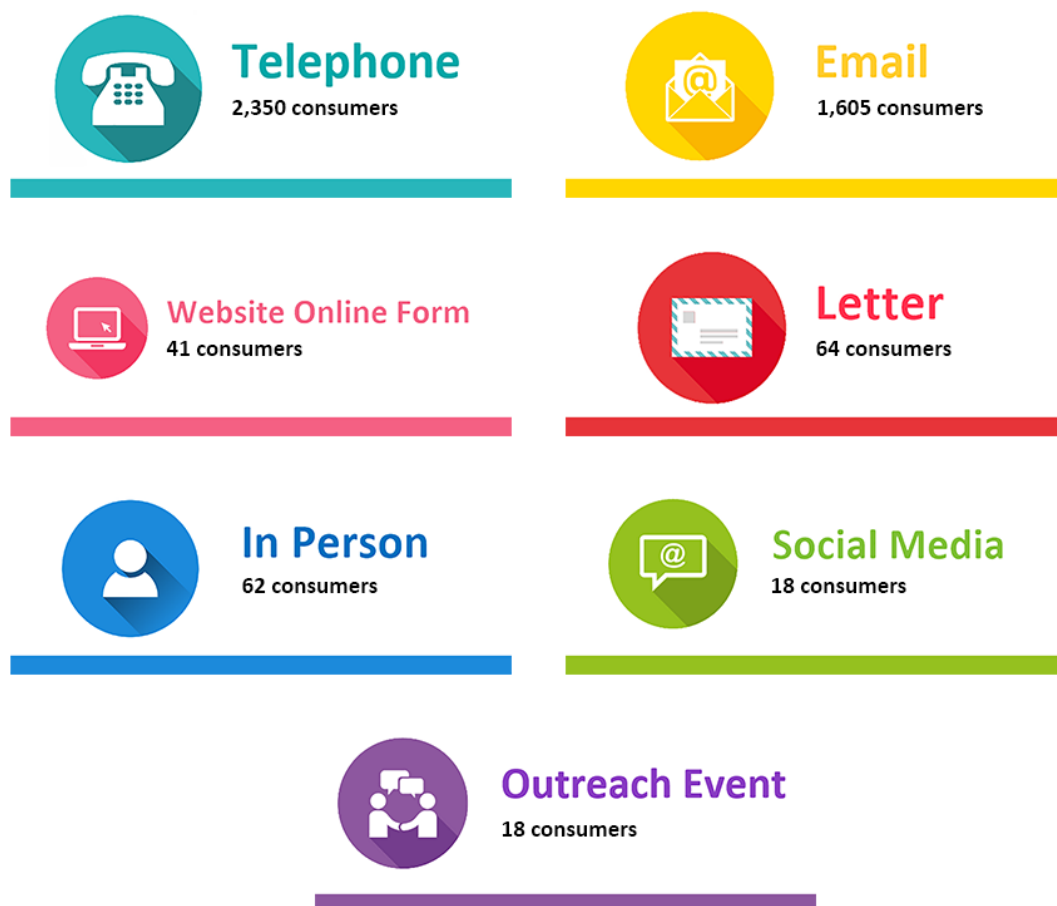
If the issue is within our remit or if the consumer is vulnerable, the call is transferred through to the Consumer Protection Team within The Consumer Council so we can investigate the issue on their behalf.

In 2019/20, NI Direct received 5,169 calls on behalf of The Consumer Council, of which 54% (2,779) were transferred to The Consumer Council. The remainder of calls were signposted to other organisations, such as Trading Standards Service NI (TSS NI).

Method of Contact

In 2019/20, telephone was the preferred communication choice when contacting The Consumer Council, accounting for 57% (2,350) of the total contacts received.

The infographic below shows a breakdown of the enquiries and complaints received in 2019/20 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 2019/20, just over a third of consumers (34%) who contacted us found out about us using search engines such as Google.

Table 15: How consumers heard about The Consumer Council in 2019/20

How did consumers find out about The Consumer Council?	Total
Search engine e.g. Google	1,852
Not disclosed	768
Friend/Relative	516
Television	374
Used our services before	370
Radio	252
The Consumer Council's details on the back of a utility bill	220
The Consumer Council website	215
Referred by constituency office	199
Outreach presentation/event	125
Resolver Referral	125
Referred by advice agency	113
Referred by service provider verbally	82
The Consumer Council's details on service provider website	68
Social Media	52
The Consumer Council publication/leaflet	18
Referred by service provider in writing	17
Newspaper	13
The Consumer Council advertisement in airport	12
Referred by solicitor	8
The Consumer Council advertisement in bus station/bus	5
Yellow pages/BT Phone Book	3
Total	5,407



9. Consumer Feedback and Satisfaction

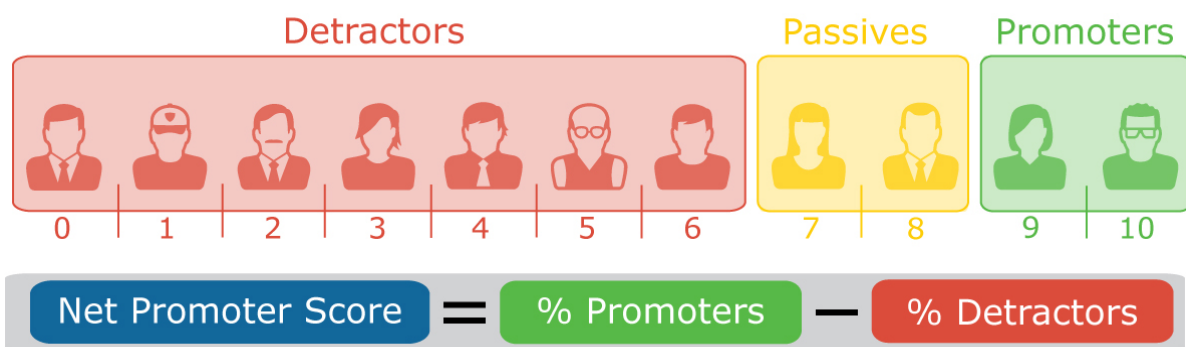
Consumer feedback is an essential part of The Consumer Council’s learning and development process, adding particular value to our complaints handling service.

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

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

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

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



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

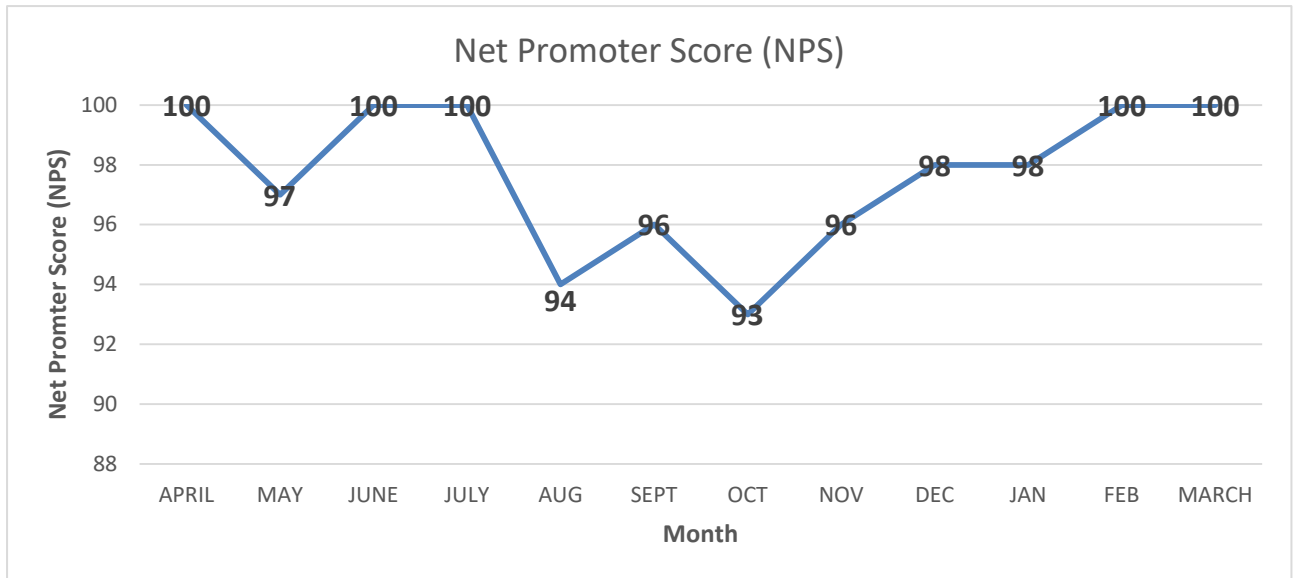
The NPS subtracts the percentage of Detractors from the percentage of Promoters, which can range from a low of -100 (if every customer is a Detractor) to a high of 100 (if every customer is a Promoter).

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

In 2019/20, our NPS score was 98, which has improved from 2018/19 (95).

Chart 23 shows the monthly NPS score we received from April 2019 to March 2020. The dips in NPS are caused by the detractor (0-6) scores that we received from consumers. In 2019/20, we received five detractor scores in total.

Chart 23: Net Promoter Score received by The Consumer Council from April 2019 - March 2020 (n=783)



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 2019/20 was 99.4%. This represents an average of all the measures above.

In 2019/20, the return rate for our Customer Satisfaction survey was 39%. This has decreased compared to last year (48%).

Emotional Wellbeing

In addition to the questions above, our survey also includes a series of what we refer to as 'wellbeing' questions - to find out from consumers how our assistance made them feel.

The infographic below shows the responses we received to our wellbeing questions from April 2019 to March 2020 (n=770).



97.5%

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



98.9%

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



98.1%

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



98.9%

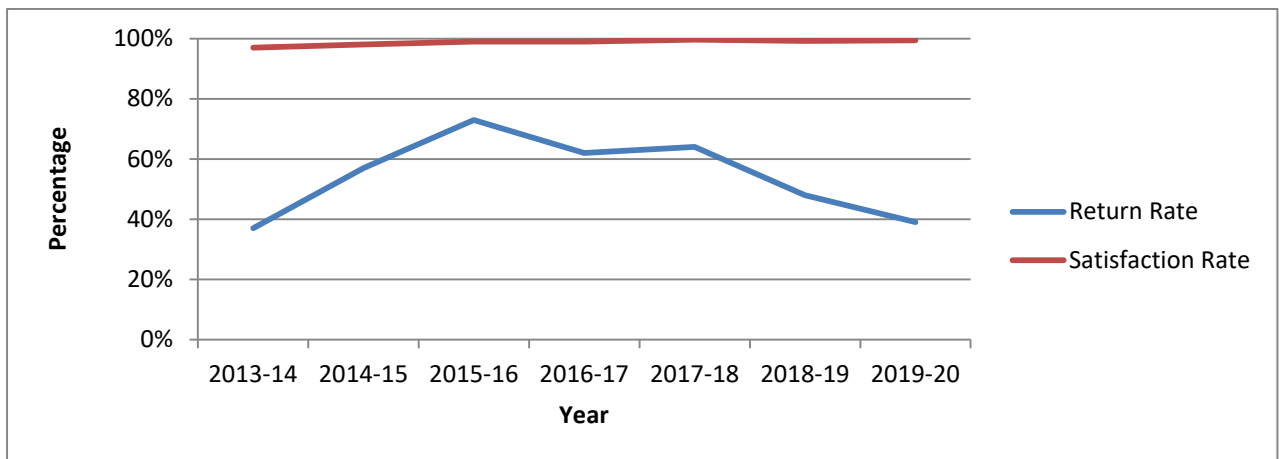
Agreed that our help made
them feel **supported**

Chart 24 shows The Consumer Council's satisfaction rates and return rates from 2014 to 2020.

As part of our Customer Service Excellence (CSE) assessment we must be pro-active in seeking and obtaining feedback from consumers about their customer journey with us. In order to obtain feedback and to identify areas for improvement, we now send two additional short surveys, one at the beginning of the investigation (to gauge how easy it was to contact us and first impressions) and a survey in the middle of the investigation (to gauge feedback on the service provided up to that point).

We have noted that there has been a reduction in the return rate of our main customer survey for 2019/20 compared to 2018/19. The reduction may be attributed to the additional surveys being issued throughout the customer journey.

Chart 24: Analysis of survey return rate & customer satisfaction rate from 2014-2020



Our Service Standards

The Consumer Council formally introduced Service Standards in 2017/18 (Chart 25) and these form part of our Customer Charter, which sets out the level of service that consumers should expect to receive from our staff.

We monitor our service standards on a monthly basis and publish the results quarterly on our website.

In 2019/20, The Consumer Council met our 100% target in 9 out of 10 of its Service Standards.

This year we amended our service standard in relation to how quickly we answer telephone calls as a result of NI Direct taking responsibility for our free-phone number in March 2019. Our telephone efficiency standard is now 85% of calls answered within 20 seconds, as this is the service standard operated by NI Direct across all sectors.

Chart 25: The Consumer Council Service Standards



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

Chart 26: Service Standards Results 2019/20



The Consumer Council Standards of Service Annual Report: 2019-2020

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

All targets are 100% unless otherwise stated.

Calling in Person:



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



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



Staff:



We will treat our customers fairly.



Our staff will act with professionalism.



Our staff will be polite and friendly.



Telephone:



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



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



Our Service:



If your enquiry or complaint is about an issue we do not cover we will give you the contact details of the organisation that can help.



We will respond to all correspondence within 3 working days.



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



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



Feedback & Complaints:



We will acknowledge all formal complaints within 3 days.



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



3 complaints received this year.

Our Net Promoter Score:

NPS score



Key:

Within 10% of set target



Within 15% of set target



Target not met



Customer Service Excellence

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

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

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

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

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

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

We were due to have our third assessment in May 2020 but due to the Coronavirus pandemic this has been postponed until late September 2020.

Complaints Handling Awards 2019/20

In January 2020, The Consumer Council was shortlisted for two categories in the UK Complaints Handling Awards. The two categories were: Best Customer Service and Resolver Vulnerable Situations.

We were up against large UK companies and organisations such as ALDI UK, Barclays Bank, EE and Co-op.

The final was held in London on 5 March 2020, where representatives from The Consumer Council had to present their entry in front of a panel of judges and answer questions from the panel.

The Consumer Council was awarded a silver award in the Best Customer Service category.



Pictured are Mark Crawford, Interim Head of Consumer Empowerment and Protection, and Noleen Charnley, Senior Consumer Protection Officer, who represented The Consumer Council at the final of the UK Complaints Handling Awards in March 2020.

Consumer Testimonials

The website was an excellent point of first contact giving information on what The Consumer Council could help with. The service they offer gives reassurance that there is an organisation you can go to for help with and they take the stress out of the situation.

I cannot thank The Consumer Council enough for helping me in my circumstance. I received an email last week on acknowledging my complaint and it was explained simply and fully on what would happen next. I received an e-mail today with good news and couldn't believe how quickly things were sorted out. Thank you so much.

My complaint was dealt with promptly and effectively, I'm very happy with the excellent service provided to me. I will be recommending this service to anyone I know with consumer issues.

The member of staff dealt with my complaint very promptly with little fuss and took the stress completely away from me. I can't thank them enough for their help and support.

