



Enquiries and Complaints Report 2020 - 21

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Foreword

Our enquiries and complaints report for 2020-2021 summaries one of the most challenging periods that many consumers will have experienced.

The Consumer Council serves many functions under the umbrella of being the consumer advocacy body for Northern Ireland. One of our key roles is complaint handling. We have a statutory complaints role in relation to energy, transport, postal services, and water and sewerage in Northern Ireland and we are a designated super-complaints body.

Set against the backdrop of Covid-19, 2020-2021 was an extremely busy year for the Consumer Council's complaints team. Our volume of contacts increased by 88%, we helped over 10,000 citizens with independent advice, guidance, redress and investigations, and we helped to return £1 million back into the pockets of Northern Ireland households. Due to the efforts of our team, we achieved a customer satisfaction score of 99.8% and a net promoter score of 99 out of 100.

The work of our complaints team and front line staff during 2020-2021 truly reflects that of our vision, mission and values. When times were challenging and uncharted in Northern Ireland, our team were committed to helping consumers and resolving issues in order to drive positive outcomes. Their hard work and resilience is reflected in our achievements during the year.

While managing a huge volume of consumer contacts, our focus on providing excellent customer service was unwavering. We maintained our Customer Service Excellence (CSE) award for the fourth time, a standard which was developed to place the customer at the heart of service provision. The Consumer Council also achieved the British Standard 18477 accreditation for Inclusive Service provision in February 2021, the first organisation in Northern Ireland to do so. This accreditation ensures that organisations provide a service that is available, usable, and accessible to all consumers – it truly embodies what the Consumer Council is passionate about.

Our complaints and enquiries report provides an overview of the current and emerging issues faced by people in Northern Ireland as it allows us to look across the customer landscape as a whole and identify where pressures are being felt. We know that 48% of our enquiries and complaints in 2020-2021 were relating to air travel, 22% to private car parking, and 8% regarding electricity. The rest is made up by postal services, water, travel, and any other areas where customers needed support.

The takeaway from the enquiries and complaints report for 2020-2021 is that when times were challenging in Northern Ireland, with increased uncertainty and detriment, the Consumer Council was there to help. As a comparatively small organisation with finite resources, we are immensely proud of what we have achieved and the work carried out by our excellent staff who worked tirelessly to bring resolution for consumers in Northern Ireland, regardless of circumstance.



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 2020 to 31 March 2021.

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

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



Section A: Enquiries and Complaints

Analysis of enquiries & complaints 2020/21¹

Table 1: Total contacts 2020/21

General Referrals & Requests for Information	Enquiries & Complaints	Total	Financial Return to Consumers
3,213	6,971	10,184	£1,069,287.01

The Consumer Council received 10,184 contacts in 2020/21, increasing by 88% compared to 2019/20. We investigated 6,971 enquiries and complaints, and assisted 3,213 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 2020/21 compared to 2019/20.

In 2020/21, the overall number of enquiries and complaints received increased by 68% compared to the previous year. This can mainly be attributed to a 105% increase in enquiries compared to 2019/20.

Table 2: Comparison of enquiries & complaints 2019/20 v 2020/21

Categorisation	2019/20	2020/21	Percentage Increase/Decrease
Enquiry	1,882	3,852	+105%
Stage 1 Referral	85	63	-26%
Stage 1 Investigation	39	26	-33%
Stage 2 Complaint	2,152	3,030	+41%
Total	4,158	6,971	+68%

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 accounts for 7% of the total contacts received (Table 15).

Chart 1 highlights that almost half of all enquiries and complaints (49%) were in relation to airlines following the mass cancellation of flights due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Chart 1: Analysis of total enquiries & complaints received 2020/21 (n = 6,971)

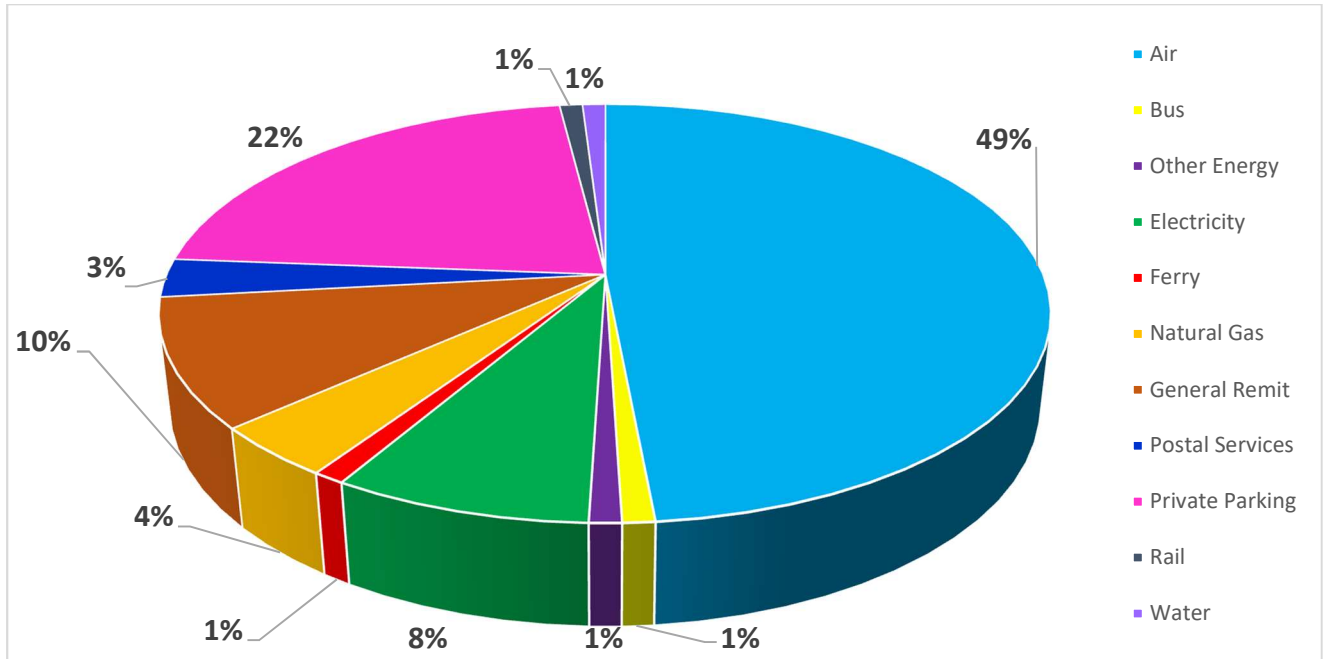
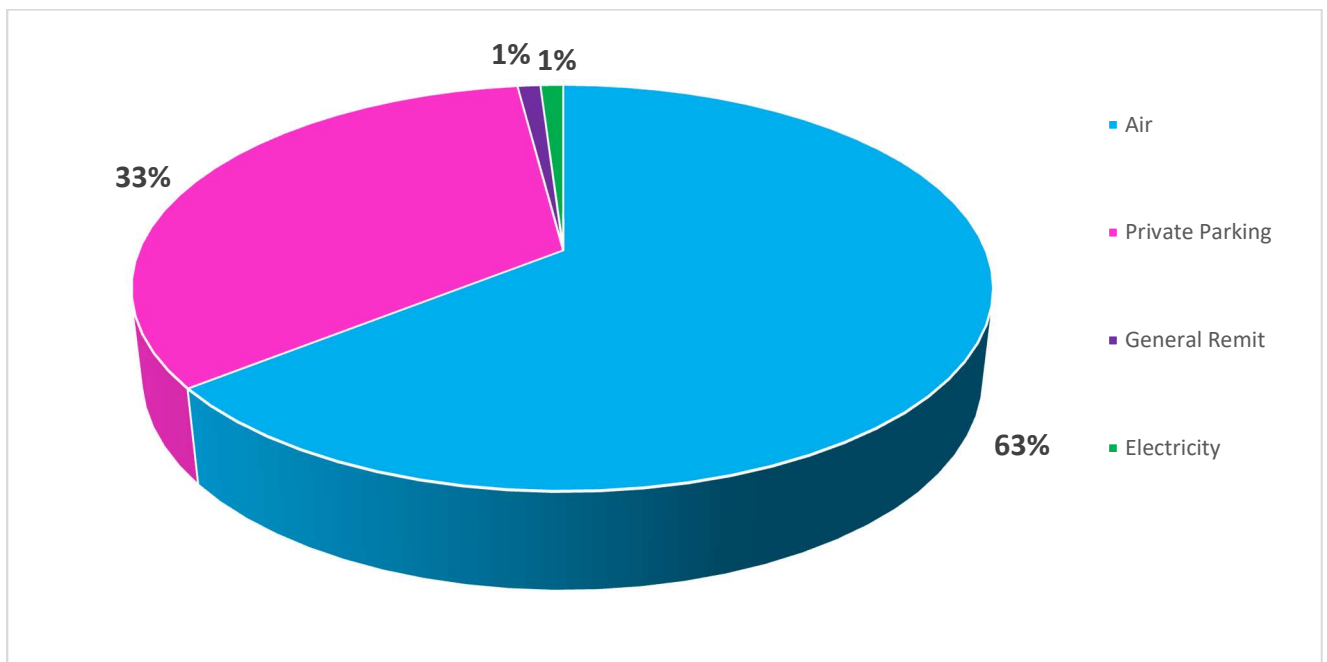


Chart 2 highlights the breakdown of Stage 2 complaints in 2020/21. In the areas of ferry travel, natural gas, postal services, bus, rail and water, the number of Stage 2 complaints received was less than 1% of the total number received, so these are not plotted on the chart below.

Chart 2: Analysis of Stage 2 complaints received in 2020/21 (n = 3,030)



In 2020/21, Stage 2 complaints increased by 41% compared to 2019/20 (3,030 vs 2,152). Stage 2 complaints typically require a greater level of investigation as they involve gathering information and evidence from both parties, reviewing all the correspondence and communications, which can include telephone calls, bills, emails and other information; and considering relevant legislation, codes of practice, and terms and conditions specific to the complaint. All of the above are taken into account to ensure a full investigation of the complaint and propose a resolution for the consumer.

The increase in Stage 2 complaints can be attributed to the 541% increase in airline contacts, following the mass cancellation of flights due to the Covid-19 crisis (3,411 vs 532). From March 2020, we received an increase in contacts from consumers who were struggling to obtain refunds from airlines following the cancellation of their flights.

Over the past 37 years we have established excellent working relationships with all of the airlines which operate in and out of Northern Ireland. This positive working relationship enabled us to directly assist consumers who were having difficulties contacting airlines to seek advice on existing bookings or request refunds/vouchers for cancelled flights.

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, 15 working days for transport cases and 35 working days for private parking cases), how complex the case is, and how quickly the consumer provides information or feedback on responses.

The average complaint resolution time in 2020/21 was 20 days compared to 36 days in 2019/20. The decrease in throughput can mainly be attributed to the number of airline cases investigated and the fact that the large majority of these contacts was requests for refunds, which required less investigatory work, resulting in the case being completed in a shorter period of time. However, there has been a reduction in the throughput for all areas with the exception of general remit, which stayed the same as last year (11 working days).

In 2020/21, we decided to separate the private parking cases from our general remit, and Table 3 reflects this change.

Last year we reported a 22% reduction in the investigation time for water complaints. This year, throughput has continued to reduce with the average water complaint now taking 33 working days to complete, compared to 78 working days in 2018/19, a 58% decrease over two years.

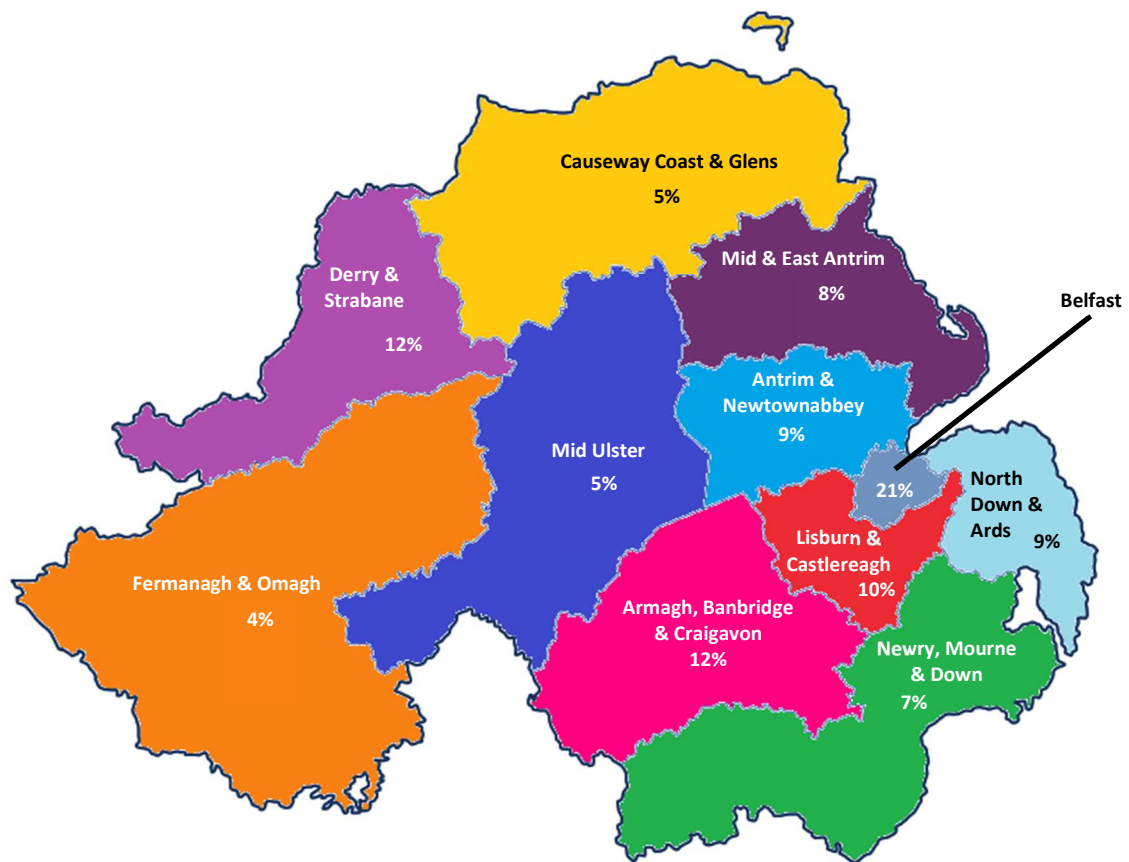
We welcome the reduction in investigation time across all areas and will continue to work with all service providers to ensure that our investigations are investigated and responded to in an efficient and thorough manner.

Table 3: Comparison of average complaint resolution time by area from 2019/20 to 2020/21³

Area of Contact	Completed Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2 complaints 2019/20	Completed Stage 1 investigations and Stage 2 complaints 2020/21	Average number of days in 2019/20	Average number of days in 2020/21	% Increase/decrease in resolution time
Transport	325	1,937	28	14	-50%
Energy	59	55	44	34	-23%
Water	11	7	61	33	-46%
Post	11	26	38	19	-50%
General Remit	1,758	33	11	11	N/A
Private Parking	-	989	-	11	N/A

³ Table accounts for Stage 1 Investigations and Stage 2 complaints opened and closed within the reporting period of 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

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 ⁴	Percentage of total contacts received by the Consumer Council per Council area (%)	Percentage Difference (%)
Antrim and Newtownabbey	8%	9%	+1%
Ards and North Down	9%	9%	-
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	12%	12%	-
Belfast	20%	21%	+1%
Causeway Coast and Glens	8%	5%	-3%
Derry and Strabane	9%	11%	+2%
Fermanagh and Omagh	7%	4%	-3%
Lisburn and Castlereagh	8%	10%	+2%
Mid and East Antrim	8%	8%	-
Mid Ulster	8%	5%	-3%
Newry, Mourne and Down	10%	7%	-3%
Total	100%	100%	

As Table 4 above shows, there is a proportionately higher volume of complaints from Belfast and a proportionately lower volume of complaints from Fermanagh and Omagh, Mid-Ulster, and Causeway Coast and Glens. All 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 fewest contacts from consumers. In 2020/21, due to the Covid-19 pandemic we were unable to meet consumers and stakeholders face to face and had to therefore adapt our outreach work by embracing a more digital approach to how we communicate and educate consumers.

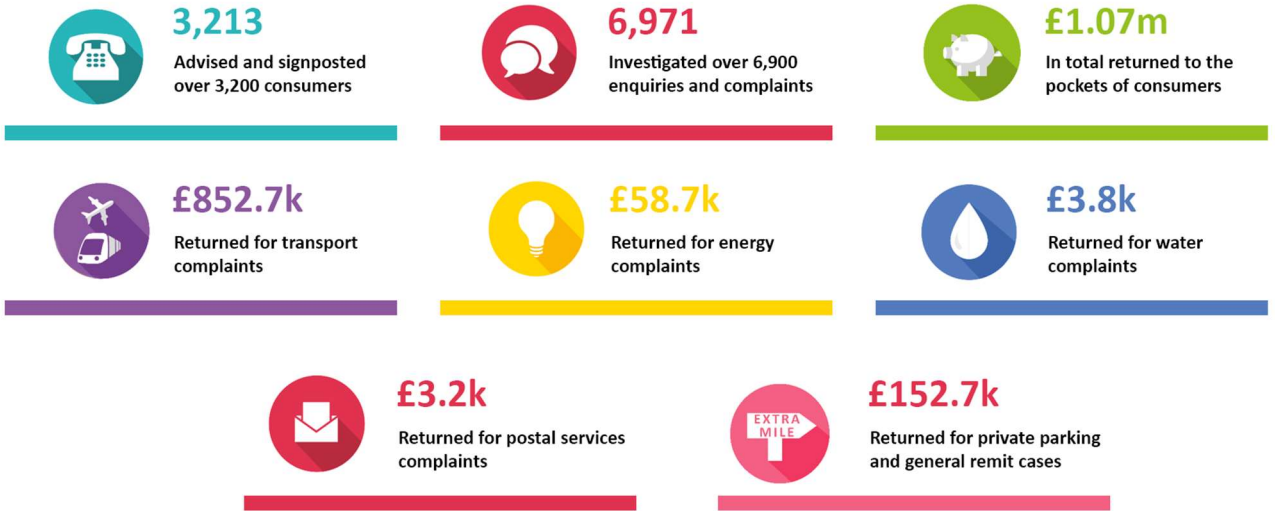
We have more information on how we adapted our education role during the pandemic in Section B of the report.

2. Our Year in Review

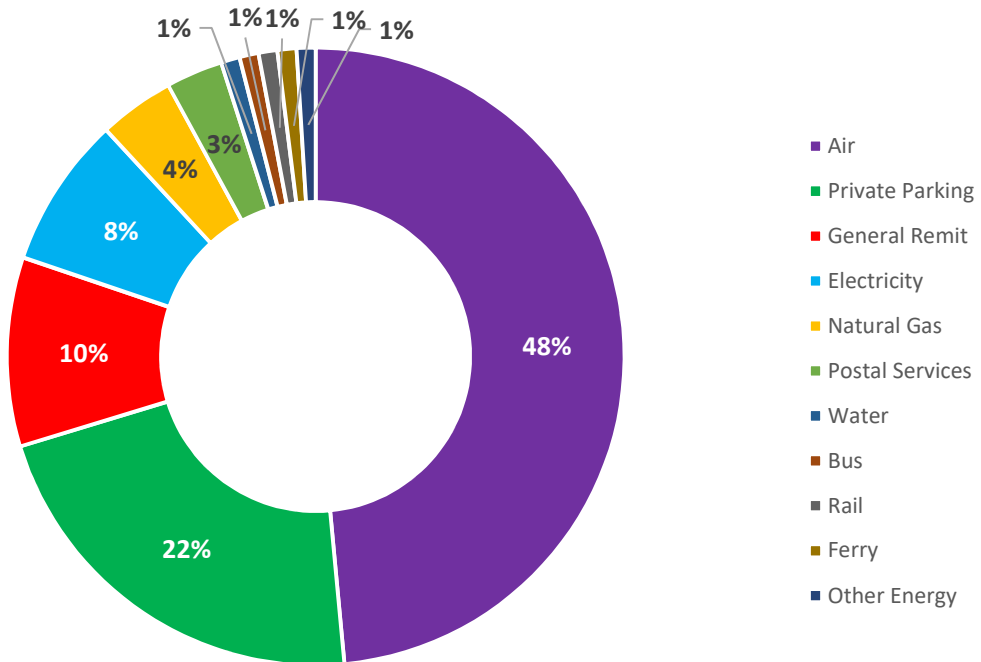
Overall, 2020/21 was an extremely busy but successful year. Contacts increased by 88%, and we returned over £1 million to consumers, whilst achieving a 99.8% customer satisfaction rate and a Net Promoter Score (NPS)⁵ of 99, which have both improved from last year (99.4% and 98 respectively).

⁴ NISRA – June 2020

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



Breakdown of Enquiries & Complaints Received



Customer Satisfaction



Top Issues



1. Coronavirus Airline Refunds



2. Private Parking Charges



3. Requests for general
advice & information

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

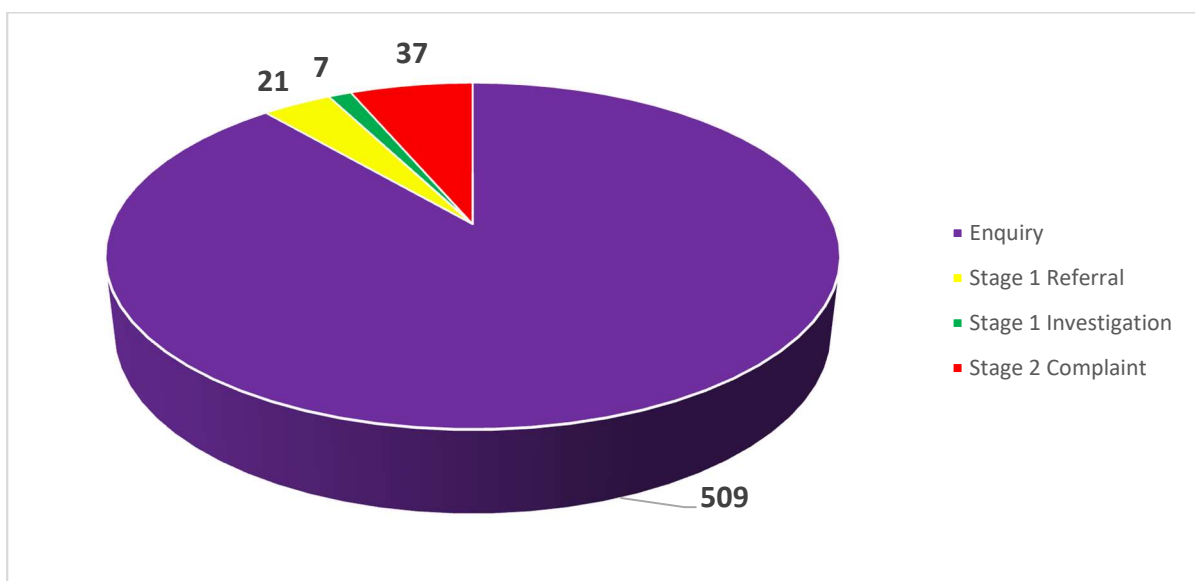
Energy contacts are made up of Electricity, Natural gas and other energy sources such as Coal, Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG) and Home Heating Oil. In 2020/21, energy contacts accounted for 13% (n=914) of the total enquiries and complaints received, with electricity comprising 63% of these.

Electricity

In 2020/21, the Consumer Council received a total of 574 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 = 574)



The total number of electricity contacts received in 2020/21 (574) has increased by 22% compared to 2019/20 (470). This increase can be attributed to a 34% increase in enquiries (381 vs 509). Stage 1 and Stage 2 contacts have decreased compared to last year by 44% and 5% respectively.

Chart 4: Electricity issues investigated by the Consumer Council in 2020/21 (n = 574)

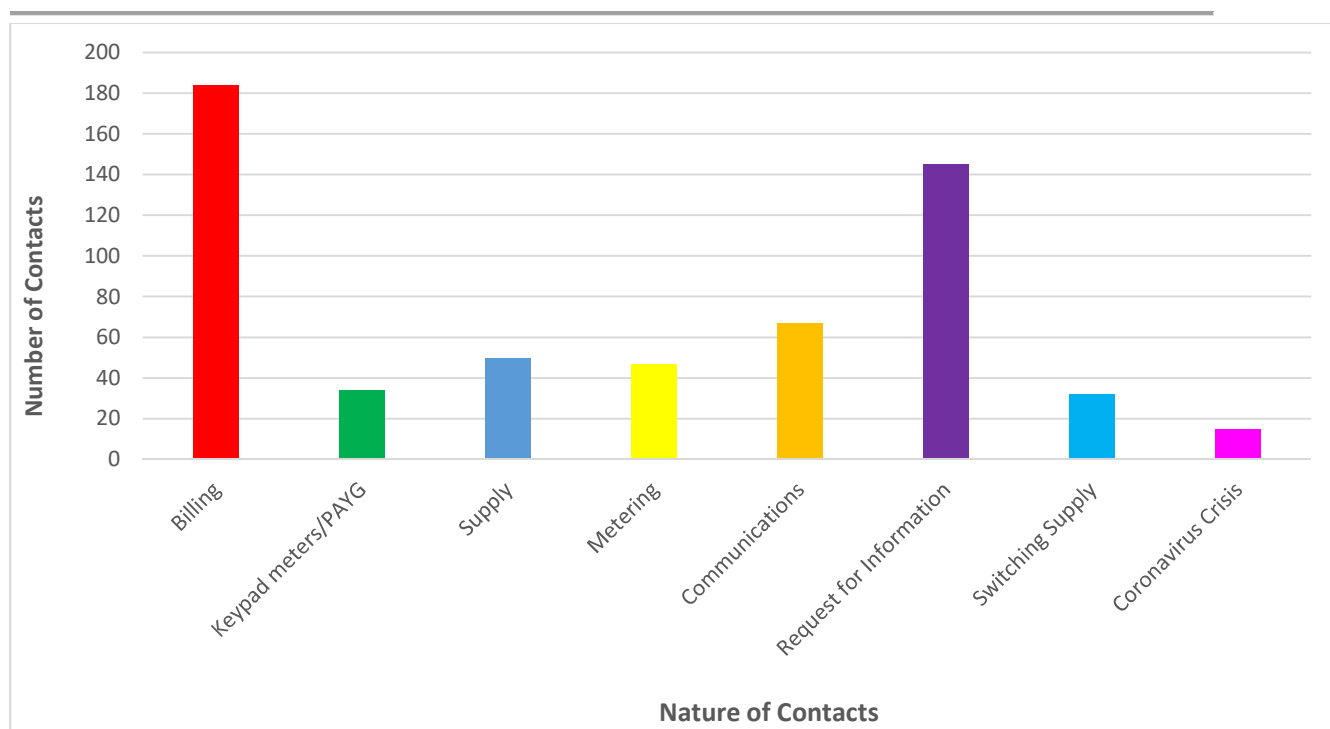


Chart 4 shows the most common electricity issues received by the Consumer Council in 2020/21. There has been no change from last year, as enquiries and complaints about billing, and requests for information on electricity account for the majority of electricity contacts received.

Billing contacts (184) accounted for 32% of the electricity contacts received (574) this year and for almost 60% (22) of the Stage 2 electricity complaints received (37).

The most common types of billing contacts received were in relation to disputed bills (55), disputed liability of bills (34) and back dated bills (33).

Back-Billing

Back dated bills have long been a cause for concern amongst consumers and businesses alike. This is because energy suppliers were able to back date accounts for up to six years to collect outstanding amounts related to previous energy use. This would often lead to debt and financial hardship, as the consumer/business would have to pay arrears on top of their ongoing usage.

The Consumer Council has been working with the Utility Regulator (UR) and energy suppliers to highlight real life examples of the detriment caused to consumers and businesses as a result of back dated bills.

Following a consultation involving stakeholders and energy suppliers across NI in October 2020/21, UR introduced a new back-billing policy. The new rules prevent energy companies from back dating

consumers' bills for outstanding amounts beyond 13 months in instances where there has been a supplier fault in calculating the correct amount the consumer has to pay.

The Consumer Council welcomes this new policy as it provides similar protection for consumers in NI as exists for consumers in Great Britain. We will continue to work with energy suppliers to ensure that the new back billing policy is pro-actively applied and to highlight any further issues caused by back dated bills not covered within the scope of the new policy.

General requests for information was the second most common electricity issue in 2020/21, accounting for 25% of the electricity contacts received (145). Contacts of this nature have increased by 34% compared to last year (108 vs 145) and cover requests such as supplier contact details, information on switching suppliers and queries around company policies.

In 2020/21, we also received an increase in contacts in relation to pre-payment meters (89%) and communications (103%) compared to last year.

With regards to pre-payment meters, similar to last year, consumers contacted us in relation to pre-payment card issues, issues transferring credit from a meter and lost top ups. However, we also identified some new emerging pre-payment meter issues affecting consumers, such as failure to obtain keypad incentives from suppliers and problems with tariff change codes not being issued to consumers.

These issues were raised with the supplier in question to not only investigate the matter and ensure the appropriate resolution was provided, but to also ensure that measures were put in place to prevent similar problems from arising in the future.

As previously noted, contacts relating to communication increased by 103% compared to last year (33 vs 67). Similar to last year, enquiries and complaints about customer service remained the most common issue accounting for 58% of the 67 contacts received (39), with contacts relating to sales and marketing and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) issues also making an appearance this year.

Covid-19 Pandemic

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many consumers suddenly found themselves in financial hardship as a result of job redundancies, being furloughed or simply because staying at home resulted in an increase in energy use/costs. We received a number of contacts from consumers seeking advice on obtaining financial support and assistance in paying their electricity bills or purchasing top ups for their meters.

In these instances we contacted the supplier on behalf of the consumer to request emergency support, as well as putting them in contact with other advice agencies such as Advice NI, to carry out a benefit check to identify any additional support that they may be entitled to.

As NIE Networks (NIEN) had to suspend all meter reading, this led to bills being estimated where the consumer was unable to provide a reading. As a result, some consumers contacted us to query their bills and upon identifying that the bill had been estimated, we obtained an actual reading from the consumer and passed this on to the supplier so that the bill could be re-calculated.

On some occasions, we identified vulnerable consumers who were unable to read their meter due to issues including mobility difficulties or the location of the meter restricting ease of access. We were able to raise these specific cases with NIEN and request that the meter be relocated or, if this was not possible, request that the consumer be placed on a priority list to have the meter read as soon as meter reading services resumed.

Table 5 below shows the breakdown of electricity contacts received in 2020/21. The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into electricity enquiries and complaints was £51,186.

Table 5: Electricity contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Budget Energy	43	2	0	8	53
Click Energy	10	0	0	0	10
Electric Ireland	57	7	4	18	86
Energia	0	0	0	2	2
GB Referral	3	0	0	0	3
Go Power	4	0	0	0	4
NIE Networks	135	3	1	2	141
UR Referral	1	0	0	0	1
Power NI	98	0	0	0	98
SSE Airtricity	158	9	2	7	176
Total	509	21	7	37	574

Chart 5 shows the number of complaints⁶ received in 2020/21 by the four major electricity supply companies in Northern Ireland against their respective percentage of market share⁷. Similar to previous years, there does not appear to be any correlation between market share and volume of contacts received, with Power NI having no formal complaints recorded against it despite it having the largest market share.

⁶ Stage 1 Investigation & Stage 2 complaints received.

⁷ Utility Regulator - Retail Market Monitoring, Quarterly Transparency Report, Quarter 4: October - December 2020.

Chart 5: Analysis of complaints received by the top four electricity suppliers against total market share

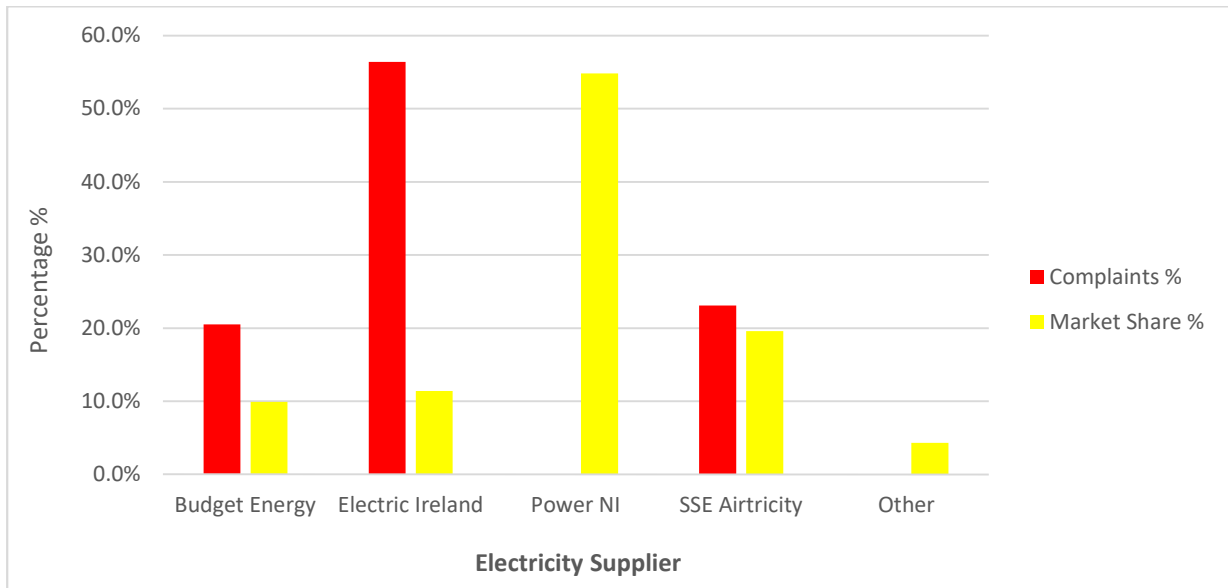
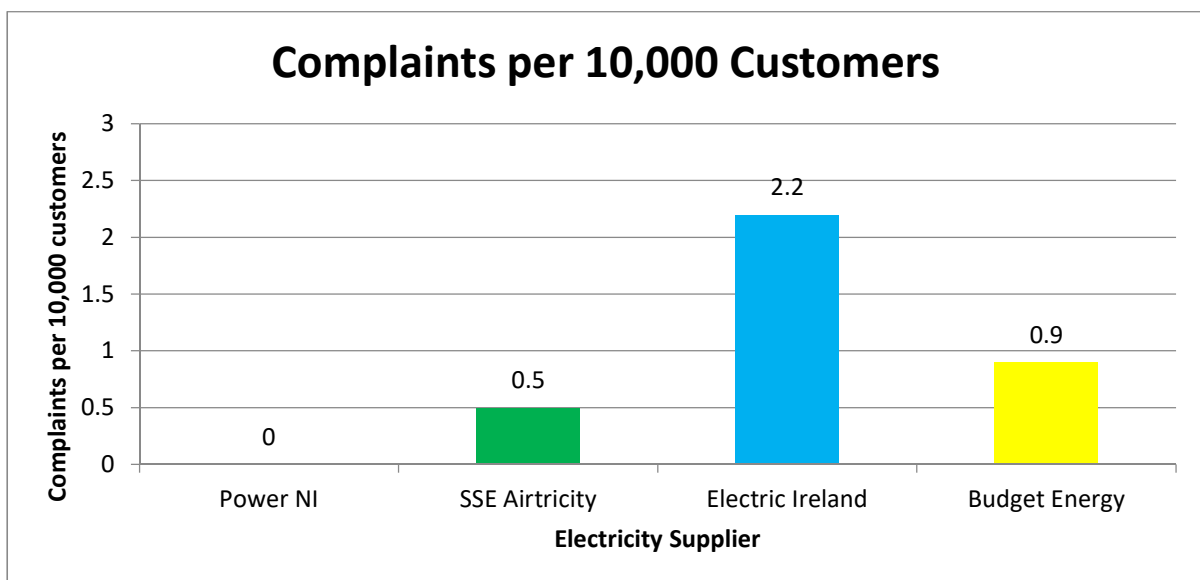


Chart 6 below shows the number of complaints⁸ received by the top four suppliers per 10,000 customers. Despite Power NI having the largest market share of customers, it received no complaints in 2019/20.

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



⁸ Stage 1 Investigation and Stage 2 Complaints.

⁹ Utility Regulator – Retail Market Monitoring, Quarterly Transparency Report, Quarter 4: October - December 2020.

Case Study – Electricity

A consumer from County Down received a large back-bill of over £2,000 for electricity charges.

The consumer had been paying her electricity bills in full every quarter and therefore couldn't understand how the arrears had accumulated. When she contacted her supplier to raise concerns, she was advised that her previous bills had been based on estimated usage, resulting in her paying less than what she had actually used.

The consumer advised us that due to the location of her meter she had been unable to provide regular readings.

When NIEN had obtained an actual reading for the property this was then used by the supplier to re-calculate the usage which in turn created arrears on the account.

The supplier offered a repayment plan to spread the cost of the arrears but the consumer remained dissatisfied with this resolution and sought assistance from the Consumer Council.

We investigated the issue on behalf of the consumer with both the supplier and NIEN and identified that the usage at the property was higher than what would be expected. This led to a meter check being completed by NIEN. During this visit NIEN identified that the meter had been read incorrectly due to its location, as it was situated high up near the ceiling of the property, making it very inaccessible.

The correct reading was obtained by NIEN and sent to the supplier so the account could be re-calculated.

NIEN also offered to replace the meter for the consumer and installed it in a different location, making it more accessible for the consumer to obtain regular reads.

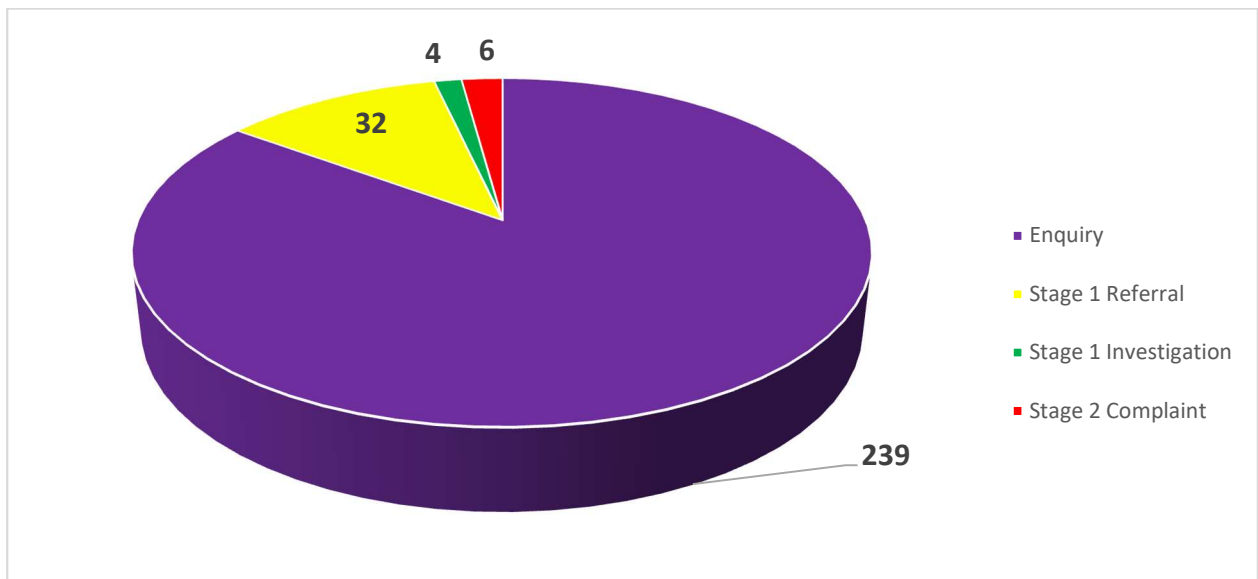
As a result of the account re-calculation, the large back-bill was removed and the arrears reduced by £1,800. The consumer was very satisfied with the outcome.

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 Distribution Ltd; 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 2020/21, the Consumer Council received a total of 281 gas contacts which accounted for 4% of the total enquiries and complaints handled in this period.

Chart 7: Breakdown of gas contacts by classification (n = 281)



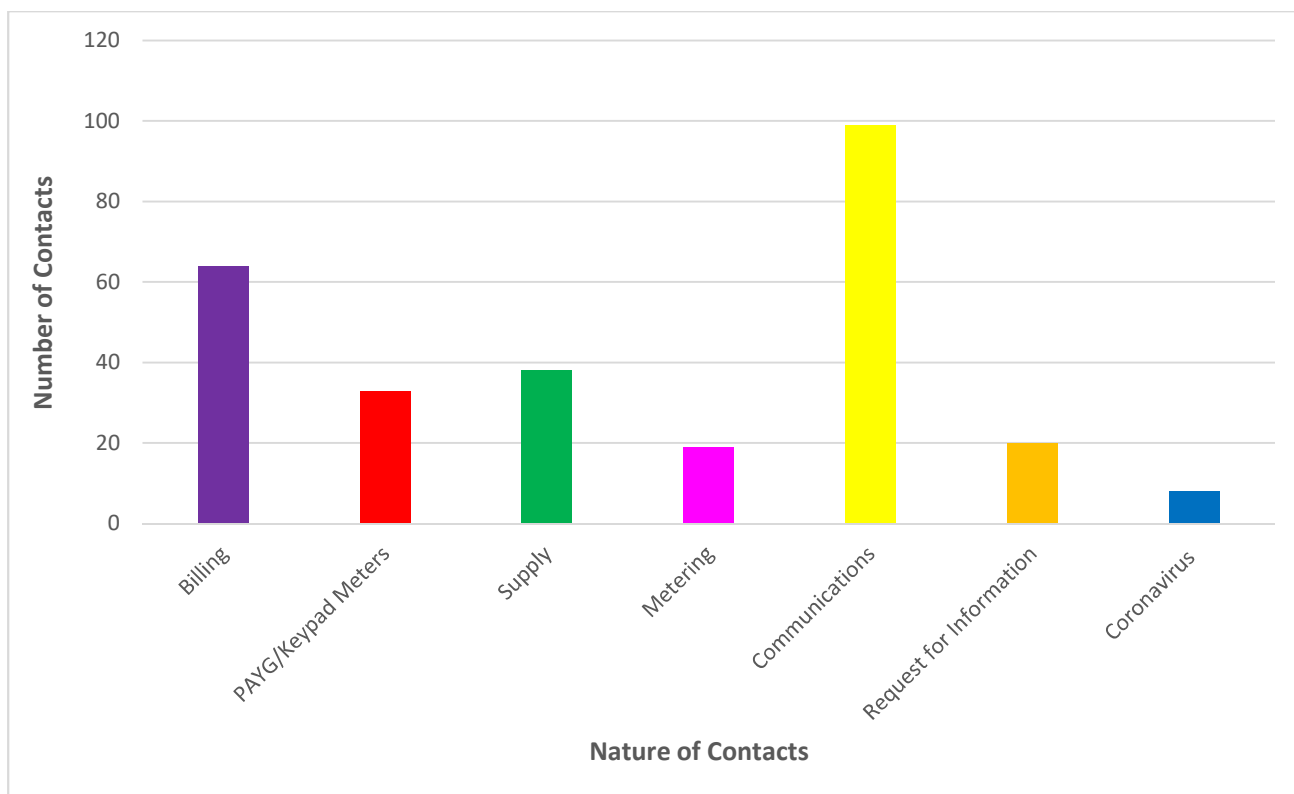
Overall, gas contacts received in 2020/21 (281) increased by 108% compared to 2019/20 (135) with enquiries and Stage 1 referrals in particular, increasing by 99% and 300%, respectively.

The overall increase in gas contacts can mainly be attributed to a 162% increase in SSE Airtricity Gas contacts compared to last year (71 vs 186). Unfortunately, service delivery was impacted by a number of factors including the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, increased numbers of consumers were contacting SSE Airtricity Gas via telephone, which then had a knock-on effect with its response times via email and in writing, as consumers chose alternative contact methods to get in touch.

This increase in response time led to consumers contacting the Consumer Council to seek assistance with their accounts and billing queries, as they may have historically relied on the contact centre as their main method to contact SSE Airtricity Gas.

The Consumer Council supported SSE Airtricity Gas customers during this difficult period and worked closely with the company to ensure that any enquiries and complaints were addressed and resolved appropriately. SSE Airtricity Gas has addressed the matter by putting both long-term and short-term measures in place to improve customer service delivery by reducing response times for its customers.

Chart 8: Gas issues investigated by the Consumer Council in 2020/21 (n = 281)



As a direct result of the issues mentioned above, the most common type of gas contact received in 2020/21 was Communications, increasing by 482% compared to 2019/20 (17 vs 99) and accounting for 35% (99) of the total gas contacts received. Contacts of this nature include trouble getting through via the contact centre, customer service issues, and sales and marketing.

Billing was the second most common gas contact, accounting for 23% of the total gas contacts received and included issues such as disputed bill amounts, disputed liability and estimated bills. Of the six Stage 2 gas complaints received, 50% of them were specifically billing related.

In 2020/21, consumers also contacted us with enquiries and complaints about their gas supply and pre-payment/PAYG (pay as you go) meters. With regards to gas distribution, the most common issue raised by consumers was in relation to their request for a gas connection and the associated costs. These types of queries are raised with the gas network operator responsible for that area to obtain an explanation and breakdown of the connection costs quoted.

Similar to electricity, the most common queries raised by consumers in relation to pre-payment/PAYG gas meters are issues with their top up cards, such as lost cards or cards not working and also refund requests for top up credit on a PAYG meter.

Gas suppliers will as a rule, discourage PAYG customers from building up large amounts of credit on their meters, as obtaining a refund of the built-up credit incurs a charge. Unfortunately, due to the types of meters used in Northern Ireland, refunds of credit on PAYG meters involve engineers removing the meter, the cost for which is charged to the supplier by the network operator. This charge is then passed on to the consumer and can on occasions outweigh the credit being refunded.

Unfortunately, in 2020/21 we were contacted by a number of vulnerable consumers who had built up credit on their PAYG meters with the intention of using the gas. However, due to health or

personal issues they had to move out of their property without prior notice, leaving large amounts of credit in their PAYG meter.

We have acted on behalf of these vulnerable consumers to obtain the refund of their credit whilst requesting the meter removal fee to be waived as a gesture of goodwill.

The table below shows the breakdown of gas contacts received in 2020/21 by service provider. The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into gas enquiries and complaints was £7,521.

Table 6: Natural Gas contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Firmus Energy*	47	0	1	1	49
Flogas	1	0	0	0	1
Phoenix Natural Gas	41	1	2	1	45
SSE Airtricity Gas	150	31	1	4	186
Total	239	32	4	6	281

* Firmus Energy includes gas distribution and supply.

Covid-19 Pandemic

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, we were contacted by PAYG gas customers who encountered a number of issues when it came to purchasing gas. Some consumers had been faced with sudden redundancy or a reduction in earnings due to being furloughed and therefore required financial support to maintain a gas supply to their home. Others, who were shielding and didn't have support from family and friends, found themselves with no way to top up their meter as they couldn't leave their home to purchase gas.

The Consumer Council worked closely with the gas suppliers and advice agencies to assist consumers who needed both practical and emotional support. Depending on the circumstances, we were able to obtain emergency top ups for vulnerable consumers and even assisted consumers in getting an emergency change from PAYG to credit meter, to ensure a constant gas supply was available.

Case study – Natural Gas

A consumer from County Down contacted the Consumer Council to seek help in resolving an ongoing complaint with his gas company regarding damage caused to his driveway when his gas connection was undertaken.

The consumer advised that damage had occurred at the pavement at the front of the house caused by a contractor's vehicle. As a result of the damage, flooding had occurred on his property. The consumer had made a complaint directly to the gas company, which attended the property to assess the damage. However, a few months had passed without any further contact or resolution.

The Consumer Council raised a formal complaint on behalf of the consumer. Through our investigations it transpired that whilst the complaint investigation had been initiated by the gas company, due to the contractor being furloughed throughout the pandemic, the complaint was missed due to an administrative error.

The gas company apologised for this oversight and agreed to pay £100 in line with its Guaranteed Standards of Service. Further investigations were undertaken in relation to the damage on the pavement, which resulted in a further £500 being paid to the consumer, which they duly accepted in full settlement of the complaint.

Coal, Oil & Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG)

The Consumer Council does not have a 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 59 enquiries in relation to LPG and Home Heating Oil, a 168% increase compared to last year (22 vs 59) with queries about the cost of oil and LPG continuing to be a cause for concern amongst consumers.

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

Case Study – Home Heating Oil

The Coronavirus pandemic brought new challenges for many home heating oil customers who lived in terraced housing with no external access to their oil tank. Due to social distancing rules, oil suppliers were not delivering oil to houses that required the supply to be delivered through the house. This led to consumer detriment as those affected struggled to purchase oil and had reduced choice when it came to getting a good deal and shopping around.

To assist consumers who found themselves in this predicament, we worked alongside the NIOF to identify a number of oil suppliers across Northern Ireland willing to deliver oil to terraced houses.

We shared this information on our Covid-19 website, so that other consumers affected could use it.

Table 7 shows the breakdown of these contacts by service provider. There was no financial return for these contacts in 2020/21.

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

Service Company	Enquiry	Total
Calor Gas	14	14
Flogas	18	18
NI Oil Federation	27	27
Total	59	59



4. Transport

The Consumer Council investigates enquiries and complaints about airlines, public transport and ferry travel in Northern Ireland. In 2020/21, transport contacts accounted for 50% (3,510) of all enquiries and complaints received by the Consumer Council. This is an increase of 366% compared to the previous year and can be wholly attributed to the increase in airline contacts as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

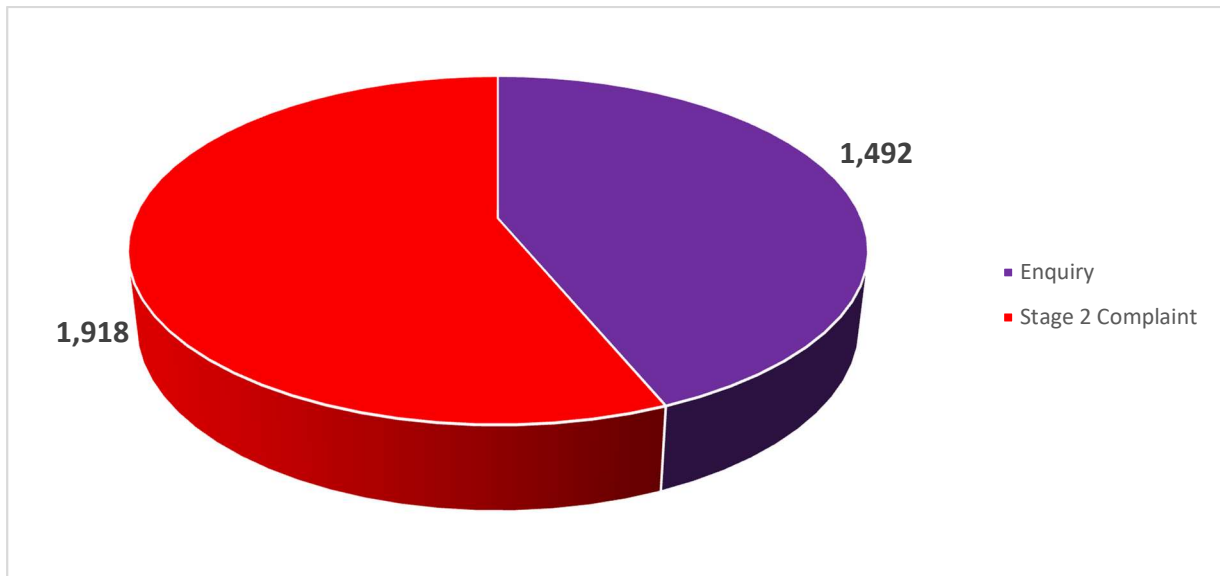
Air Travel

During the pandemic, the travel industry came to a standstill as flights and holidays across the world were cancelled due to lockdowns and travel restrictions. Under EU Regulation 261/2004, if a flight is cancelled by the airline, the passenger is entitled to a monetary refund or a re-route.

The Consumer Council was inundated with calls and emails from consumers who had been affected by the mass cancellations and were struggling to obtain a refund from their airline.

The impact this had on consumers is evident as contacts about air travel (3,411) accounted for 97% of the total transport contacts received and 96% of these were specifically Covid-19 related (3,275). In comparison to last year, airline contacts increased by 541% (532 vs 3,411) making it the most common complaint raised by consumers in 2020/21.

Chart 9: Breakdown of airline contacts by classification (n=3,411)



The number of airline enquiries received in 2020/21 increased by 485% compared to the previous year (255 vs 1,492), with Stage 2 complaints also increasing by 616% (268 vs 1,918). We also received one Stage 1 Investigation which has not been plotted on the chart above.

Covid-19 Airline Contacts

Chart 10 below shows a breakdown of the Coronavirus airline contacts received in 2020/21 and the main issues encountered by consumers.

Of the 3,275 Covid-19 airline contacts received, 2,882 were specifically in relation to refunds (88%) as throughout the pandemic consumers encountered a number of issues when trying to obtain refunds from airlines.

One of the main problems consumers faced at the beginning of the pandemic was contacting their airline. Due to the unprecedented number of cancellations and the fact that airline customer service staff were working from home, all airlines experienced increased call volumes and longer response timeframes, adding to consumers' frustration, especially those who don't have access to the internet and rely on telephone contact. .

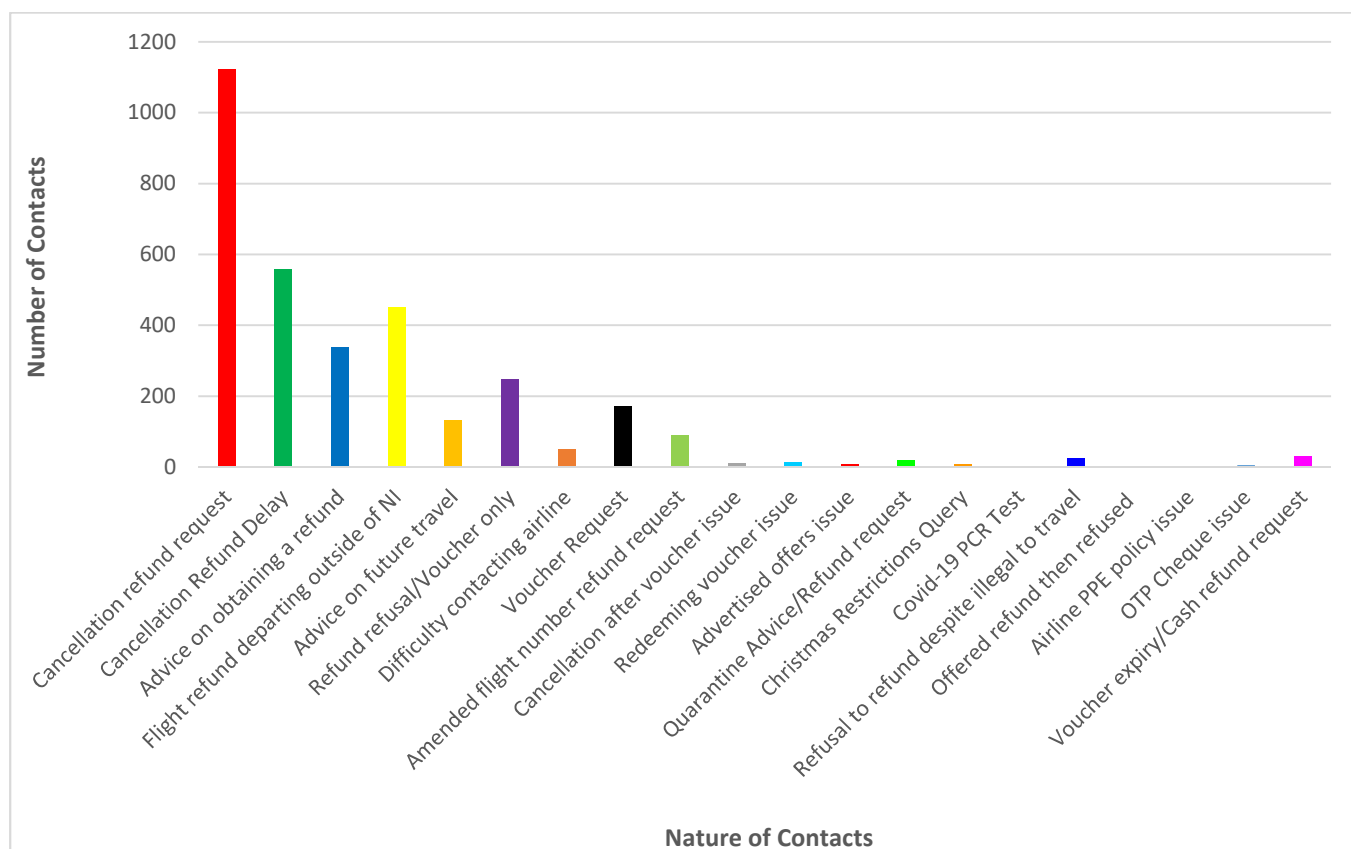
One issue that we identified early on in the pandemic which added to the increased call volumes, was easyJet's removal of the refund option from its website. From reviewing easyJet's correspondence to its customers to notify them of a cancellation, we noted that it failed to clearly offer a monetary refund option. EasyJet offered its customers two options: to request a voucher or re-schedule the flights. If a customer wanted a refund they were requested to contact easyJet's Customer Services department via telephone to specifically ask for a refund.

Apart from causing increased call volumes, this also created a barrier to obtaining a refund and caused unnecessary consumer detriment, as customers had no easy access to obtain a refund and had to go to great lengths to get back what they were rightfully entitled to under EU Regulation 261/2004.

The Consumer Council liaised with easyJet as well as the United Kingdom (UK) Airline Regulator, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), to make them aware of the issue and highlight our concerns around the detriment this was causing to consumers. Following the feedback provided, easyJet implemented a web-based solution to allow its customers to request a refund online, therefore reducing unnecessary contact via telephone and making it easier for consumers to obtain a refund.

British Airways customers encountered a similar issue during the pandemic, as it too failed to make a refund accessible, directing passengers to its Customer Services via telephone if they wanted a refund.

Chart 10: Covid-19 Air issues investigated by the Consumer Council in 2020/21 (n = 3,275)



Consumers who booked with Ryanair also encountered issues in obtaining monetary refunds. Ryanair was automatically issuing vouchers to those customers affected by cancellations and in order to receive a refund in place of the voucher, the customer had to reject it and request a refund. This again created a barrier, preventing consumers from easily accessing a refund. Many consumers were not aware of their rights under EU Regulation 261/2004 and accepted the voucher, not realising that they were in fact entitled to a monetary refund.

The Consumer Council again liaised with Ryanair, the CAA and also the Irish Aviation Regulator, the Commission for Aviation Regulation (CAR) to highlight our concerns and point out the frustration and potential detriment this was causing Ryanair customers.

We assisted consumers affected by these issues by contacting the airlines on their behalf to request a monetary refund, successfully returning over £852k in refunds to consumers.

Refund Delays

Another issue encountered by consumers throughout the pandemic was the length of time it was taking airlines to process refunds. In line with EU Regulation 261/2004, airlines should process refunds within seven days once requested. However, due to the unprecedented number of cancellations and the fact that staff were working remotely, airlines struggled to meet this timeframe resulting in delays, with some consumers waiting months before receiving their money.

The Consumer Council was on standby to assist consumers who were impacted by the delays and we worked with all of the airlines to have our cases processed in an efficient and timely manner, ensuring that refunds were processed quickly for consumers.

Local Restrictions

As the pandemic progressed, new issues emerged, as local restrictions across the UK impacted consumers' ability to travel. In December 2020, different parts of the UK had individual restrictions put in place to mitigate against the spread of the virus, preventing consumers from taking flights or travelling within the Common Travel Area (CTA).

When it came to providing assistance to passengers affected by local restrictions, there was a varied response from airlines. At one end of the scale we had airlines such as easyJet, which had put measures in place to protect customers affected by local restrictions, by offering refunds, vouchers or the chance to re-schedule free of charge.

Some airlines refused to offer refunds, but were providing vouchers or re-scheduling, and airlines such as Ryanair refused to offer refunds or vouchers, limiting those affected to only re-scheduling their flights.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) undertook an investigation into this specific issue to identify if airlines breached consumer law by not providing refunds. We were able to assist the CMA with its investigation by providing evidence and case studies based on specific complaints we had received from consumers affected in Northern Ireland. The CMA has announced that both British Airways and Ryanair are assisting them with their investigations which are ongoing at present.

Case Study – Covid-19 Airline

The Consumer Council was contacted by a local youth group from Belfast that had booked a number of flights with Ryanair to travel with its youth members from Dublin to London. Due to the pandemic the flights were all cancelled, leaving the youths and their parents out of pocket.

The youth club leaders had tried contacting Ryanair on numerous occasions to request a refund but received no response. Due to the financial implications caused by Covid-19 in terms of people being furloughed or made redundant, obtaining a refund in a timely manner was paramount.

We contacted Ryanair on behalf of the youth club and requested a full refund for all of the flights that had been cancelled. We also asked that the case be prioritised as it was a substantial refund and many families had been out of pocket due to Ryanair's failure to process the delay in a timely manner.

Ryanair responded to us within three working days to confirm that a full refund had been processed to the value of over £3,000. The youth club was delighted that the refund had been processed so quickly and was satisfied with the efficient service provided by Consumer Council staff.

Refund Vouchers

Due to the unprecedented number of cancellations in 2020/21, airlines in particular were financially impacted by the pandemic and struggled to pay out refunds, offering vouchers in place of refunds where possible.

The Consumer Council noted that the terms and conditions of the vouchers differed depending on the airline. In order to ensure that consumers were aware of the differences, we created a table on our Covid-19 website to provide key information on the vouchers issued by each airline, so that these could be considered before accepting them in place of a refund.

One of the main differences was the validity period of the voucher, with some only being valid for 12 months, whilst others were valid for up to five years. Another main difference was the right to request a refund if the voucher was not used within the validity period. Most of the airlines were very strict on this point and refused to offer any cash alternative in place of the voucher once issued. However, Ryanair offered its customers the right to request a refund if the voucher was unused, which will be beneficial for many consumers as the travel restrictions continue to impact travel in 2021, allowing those who still have a voucher to exchange it for a refund.

In February 2021, we received contacts from consumers who had accepted easyJet vouchers back in 2020 hoping to use them in summer 2021. However, as travel restrictions remained in place preventing consumers from booking holidays across Europe, consumers were anxious that the vouchers were due to expire and they had not been able to use them.

The Consumer Council contacted easyJet which was aware of the issue and was working to implement a solution to assist customers affected. In light of the restrictions still in place, easyJet agreed to extend the validity period by six months for those customers who had a voucher due to expire by the end of June 2021. EasyJet was proactively contacting all passengers affected to inform them of the extension on the voucher.

Case Study – Covid-19 Airline

The Consumer Council was contacted by a number of consumers who had booked to travel with Ryanair from Dublin to Paphos in July 2020 to attend a family wedding. They had all received an email from the airline to advise that the departure time of the outbound flight had been amended. They were offered a number of options including a refund or voucher if the new times did not suit. All of the party opted for a refund and consequently cancelled their hotel in Paphos as they wouldn't be travelling.

The party received no further contact from Ryanair until a few days before the flight was supposed to depart, they received an email from the airline requesting that they check- in for their flight. The party tried to contact Ryanair via phone but couldn't get through, so they used the webchat facility on its website to query the email they had received. Ryanair informed the party that the outbound flight to Paphos was now operating as originally scheduled and therefore no refund would be applicable.

The consumers were unhappy with the customer service provided by Ryanair as they had not received any emails advising them that the flight had been reinstated to its original time, nor had they received any notification that their refund request had been denied. As Ryanair was refusing to honour their refund request, the passengers contacted the Consumer Council for help in obtaining the refund.

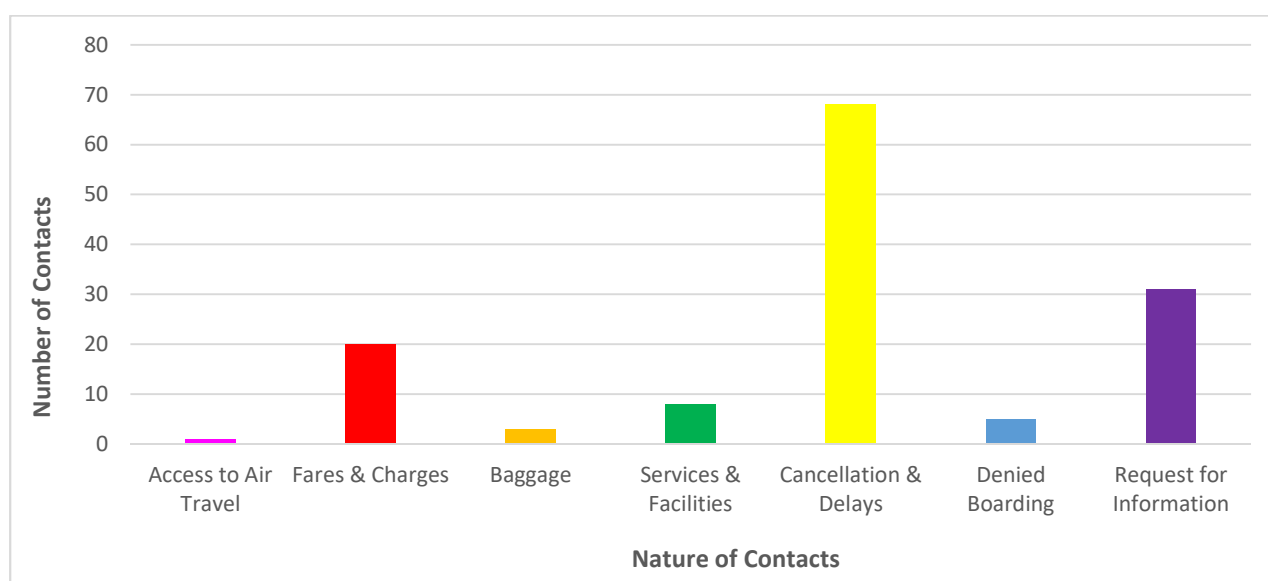
We contacted Ryanair to investigate the issues raised by the party and highlight its failure to contact the passengers regarding the changes to the outbound flight. In light of the failures identified and the poor customer service provided, we asked Ryanair to honour the refund for all those affected.

As a result, Ryanair apologised for not notifying the passengers about the flight changes and agreed to refund all passengers who had requested a voucher or refund.

The party received a total refund of £2,747 and was satisfied with the outcome achieved.

In 2020/21, we received 136 airline contacts that were not Covid-19 related; of these 136 contacts, 50% of them were in relation to delays and cancellations (68). The chart below shows the breakdown of the contacts received. Requests for Information accounted for 23% (31) of the contacts and encompass requests for contact details for airlines, information on company policy and also advice on security breaches that occurred.

Chart 11: Non-Covid-19 air issues investigated by the Consumer Council in 2020/21 (n=136)



Case Study – Airlines

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer who after receiving a promotional email from easyJet offering one way flights for £29.99 booked flights to travel to Manchester. When the consumer checked his booking confirmation, he realised that easyJet had charged him full price for the flights and not the reduced rate as advertised in a promotion.

The consumer had tried to contact easyJet via telephone but couldn't get through due to large call volumes. He therefore contacted the Consumer Council to seek assistance in resolving the matter.

We contacted easyJet on his behalf to investigate the charging error and requested that the difference in fare price be refunded to the passenger.

EasyJet advised that the promotion was subject to availability and therefore not guaranteed to all passengers, and this was highlighted in the terms and conditions of the promotion. However, as a gesture of goodwill it agreed to honour the promotional fare price and refunded the customer a total of £248.

Table 8 below shows the breakdown of airline contacts in 2020/21 by airline and service provider. The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into airline enquiries and complaints was £852,396.

Table 8: Air contacts by service provider (n = 3,411)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Referral	64	0	1	65

Aegean Airlines	5	0	0	5
Aer Lingus	131	0	174	305
Belfast International Airport	3	0	0	3
British Airways	73	0	46	119
Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) Referral	45	0	0	45
Commission for Aviation Regulation (CAR) Referral	46	0	0	46
easyJet	555	0	1,022	1,577
European Consumer Centre (ECC) Referral	79	0	2	81
Flybe	13	0	1	14
Heathrow Airport	1	0	0	1
Jet2.com	47	0	12	59
KLM	8	0	16	24
Loganair	11	0	12	23
Lufthansa	6	0	3	9
Norwegian Air	1	0	0	1
Oman Air	1	0	2	3
Ryanair	359	1	620	980
Thomas Cook Airlines	4	0	0	4
Thomson Airways (TUI)	6	0	4	10

United Airlines	2	0	0	2
Virgin Atlantic	22	0	1	23
Vueling	7	0	2	9
Wizz Air	3	0	0	3
Total	1,492	1	1,918	3,411

Bus Travel

During 2020/21, the Consumer Council received a total of 45 contacts regarding bus services, a reduction of 68% compared to the previous year (142). The drop in contacts can be wholly attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic as Northern Ireland went into lockdown on 23 March 2020, resulting in a reduced service timetable across all of Translink’s bus services in response to passenger numbers significantly reducing.

As a result of the reduced passenger numbers, complaints (Stage 1 Referral, Stage 1 Investigation and Stage 2) about bus services also dropped compared to last year (62 vs 15), with the majority of contacts being logged as enquiries (67%).

Chart 12: Breakdown of bus contacts by classification (n = 45)

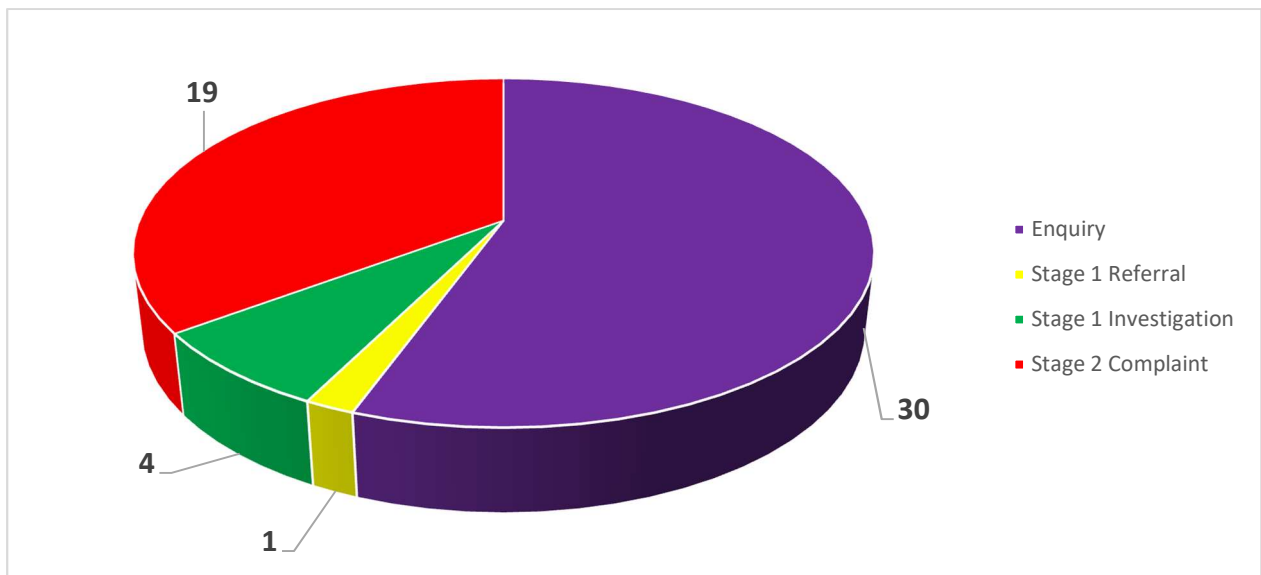


Table 9 below shows the breakdown of bus contacts received in 2020/21 by service provider. The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into bus enquiries and complaints was £45.

Table 9: Bus contacts by service provider (n = 45)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Translink	29	1	4	10	44
Disability Action Transport Scheme	1	0	0	0	1
Total	30	1	4	10	45

Consistent with the past three years, in 2020/21 bus passengers most commonly contacted us in relation to poor customer service issues, accounting for 27% of the total bus contacts received. These include complaints about staff attitude, failure to respond to complaints and inadequate customer service in general.

Aside from significantly reducing the number of public transport services, the pandemic also raised new concerns amongst the public when travelling on buses. These were mainly in relation to the adherence around wearing facemasks and social distancing on-board buses, and the frequency of services. Contacts relating to the pandemic accounted for 24% of the total bus contacts received (11).

Chart 13: Bus issues investigated by the Consumer Council in 2020/21 (n = 45)

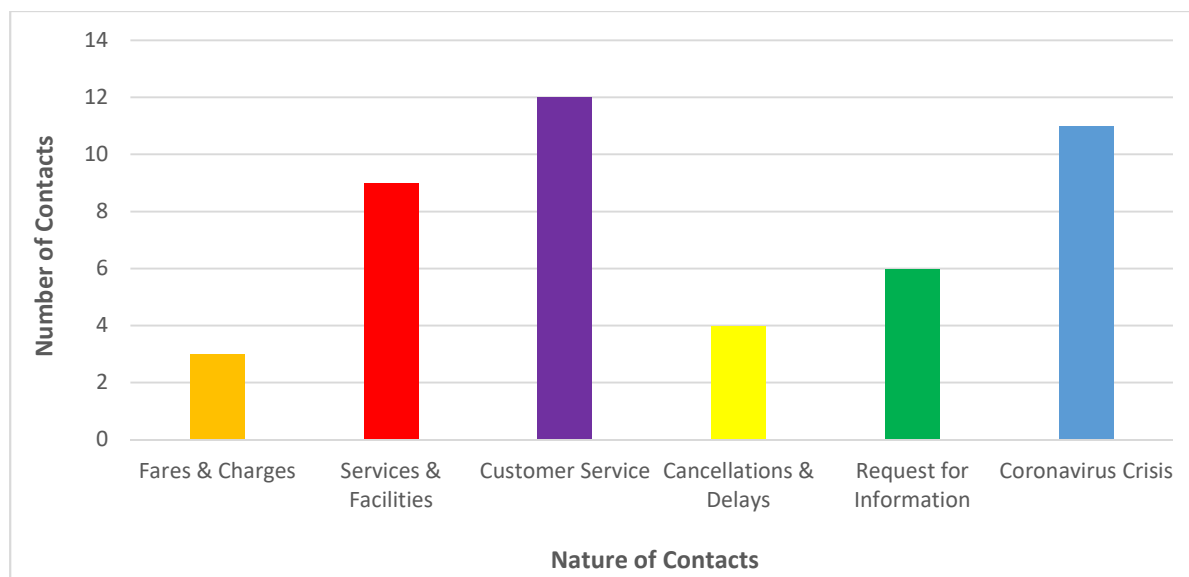
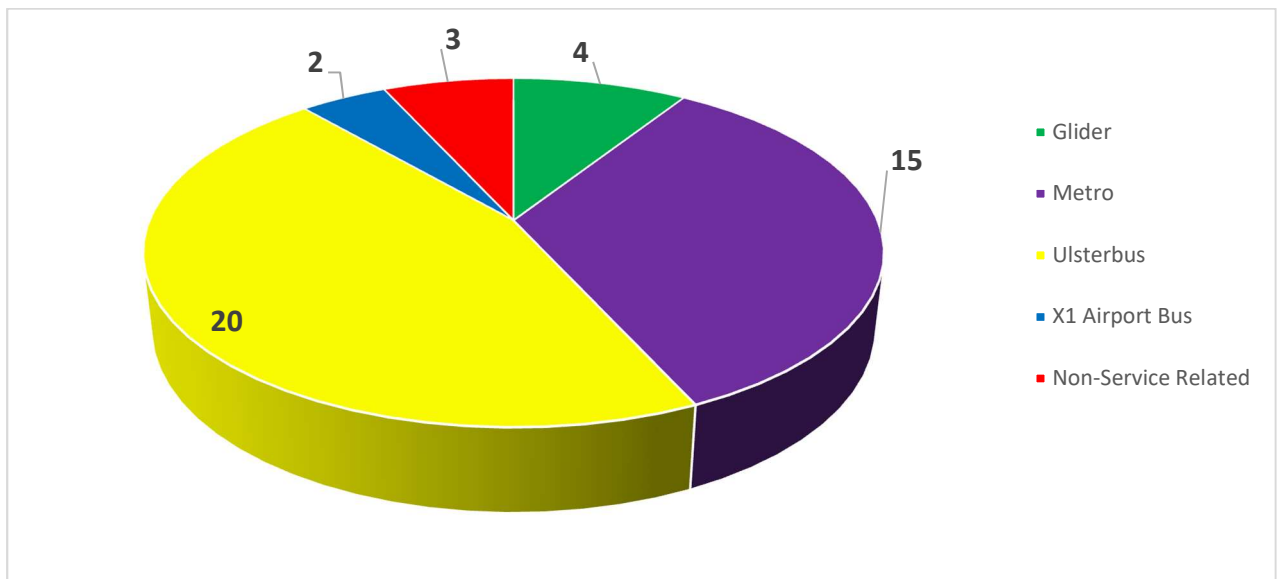


Chart 14 shows the breakdown of bus contacts by Translink service. Consistent with last year, enquiries and complaints about Ulsterbus services were most common, accounting for 45% of the Translink contacts received, followed by Metro with 34% of the overall contacts received.

Chart 14: Breakdown of contacts by Translink Service (n=44)¹⁰



Case Study – Bus

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer on behalf of their vulnerable, disabled relative who had encountered issues when using the Glider service. The consumer had on three separate occasions requested to stop at a specific location by pressing the bell, but the driver failed to stop. The repeated failure to stop had negatively impacted the consumer, leaving him anxious about travelling on the Glider service.

The consumer had made a complaint to Translink but was unhappy with the response received, so asked the Consumer Council for assistance.

As part of our investigation we requested Translink to review CCTV footage of all three incidents, where it was confirmed that on two occasions, the bell had been pressed and the driver failed to stop as requested. On the third occasion, it was confirmed that the bell had not been pressed properly, resulting in the driver not being notified of the request to stop. All three incidents involved different drivers.

Following the investigation, Translink made a formal apology to the consumer and agreed to review its Complaints Protocol for disabled passengers. Translink also advised that it would complete refresher Customer Service training with all its staff and that Inspectors would be travelling on Glider services to ensure bus drivers were stopping when requested by passengers.

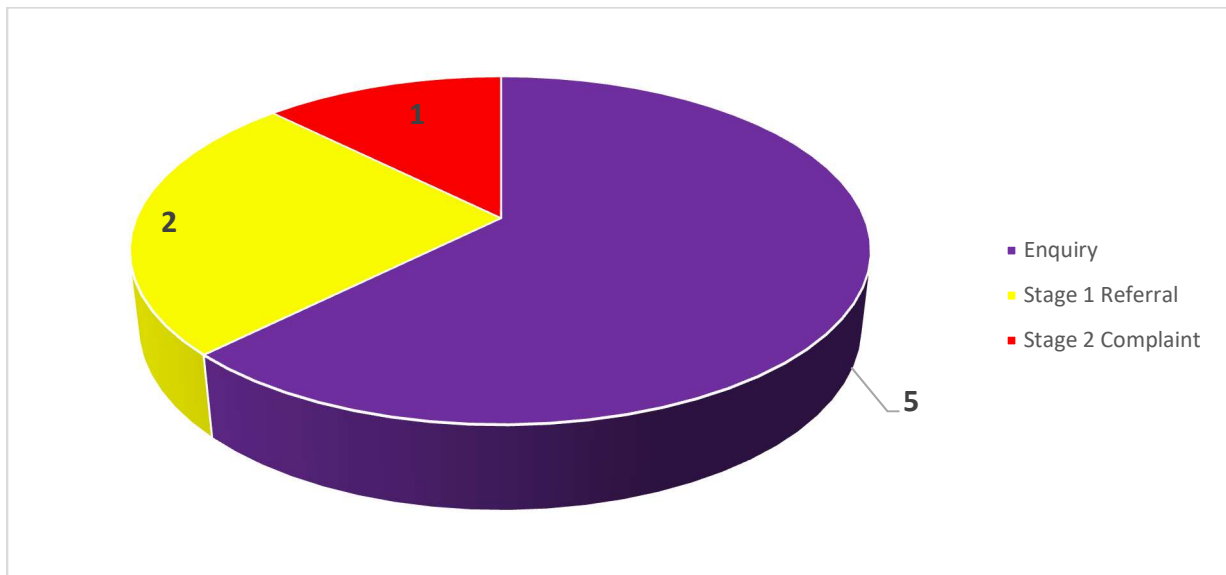
¹⁰ 'Non-service related' refers to contacts about Translink facilities rather than an actual bus service.

Translink also offered a £20 goodwill gesture to the consumer and put them in contact with its Disability Manager to help and encourage the consumer to travel on-board the Glider service again.

Rail Travel

In 2020/21, the Consumer Council received a total of eight rail contacts, which was an 88% decrease compared to the year previous (67 vs 8). Similar to bus contacts, the significant reduction in rail cases can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, as NI Railways, cross-border coach and Enterprise services operated a reduced timetable.

Chart 15: Breakdown of rail contacts by classification (n=8)



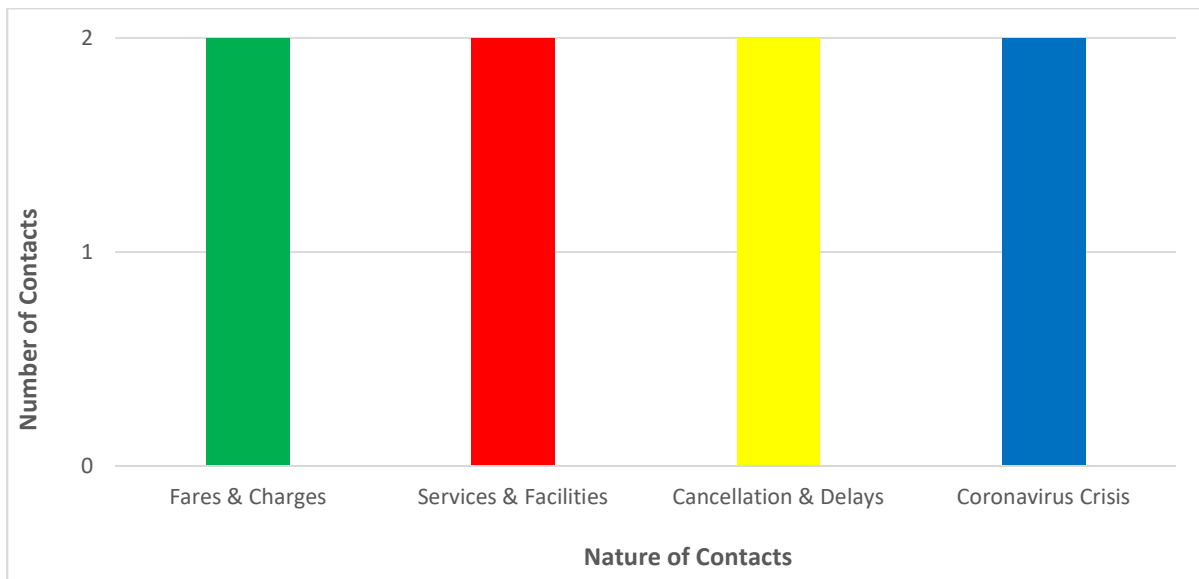
In 2020/21, consumers contacted us about a range of rail issues including fares and charges, services and facilities, and cancellation and delays. Similar to bus contacts, the Covid-19 pandemic also raised new concerns amongst rail passengers who contacted us about enforcement rules around wearing face masks on board rail services.

The table below shows the breakdown of rail contacts received in 2020/21. The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into rail enquiries and complaints was £50.

Table 10: Rail contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Translink - Rail	5	2	1	8

Chart 16: Rail issues investigated by the Consumer Council in 2020/21 (n = 8)



Case Study – Rail

The Consumer Council investigated a complaint on behalf of a consumer who had received a penalty fare whilst travelling by rail with Translink.

The consumer had an active rail ticket which she had purchased via Translink. Unfortunately, her phone had become damaged a few days prior to travelling. The consumer was having her phone collected and replaced by a courier on the day of travel, therefore she was not able to display her ticket when on the rail service. The consumer explained this to the Inspector on the day in question but was issued with a penalty fare.

The consumer appealed the penalty fare but received no response so contacted the Consumer Council to seek assistance.

We contacted Translink on her behalf and provided evidence of the valid mLink ticket purchased by the consumer for the day of travel. We also provided evidence of the courier service that the consumer was using to have her phone picked up and replaced with a new handset.

Translink apologised for its failure to respond to the consumer's initial appeal and confirmed that having reviewed the evidence, the penalty fare had been rescinded.

Ferry Travel

Consistent with the previous three years, less than 1% (46) of all contacts received by the Consumer Council in 2020/21 relate to ferry travel. However, compared to last year, ferry contacts increased by 223% (12 vs 46). This increase again can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic as ferry travel was impacted by travel restrictions and consumers sought advice in relation to their rights to a refund.

Ferry contacts relating to the pandemic accounted for 80% of the total ferry contacts received (37) and of these, 81% were in relation to refund requests (30) as ferry services across the UK and Europe were cancelled.

Of the 30 contacts in relation to refunds, 70% specifically concerned ferry travel operating outside of Northern Ireland (21). Consumers who contacted us about ferry travel departing/arriving outside of Northern Ireland were given advice on their passenger rights and signposted to the designated body set up to investigate ferry complaints within the relevant jurisdiction.

Chart 17: Breakdown of ferry contacts by classification (n = 46)

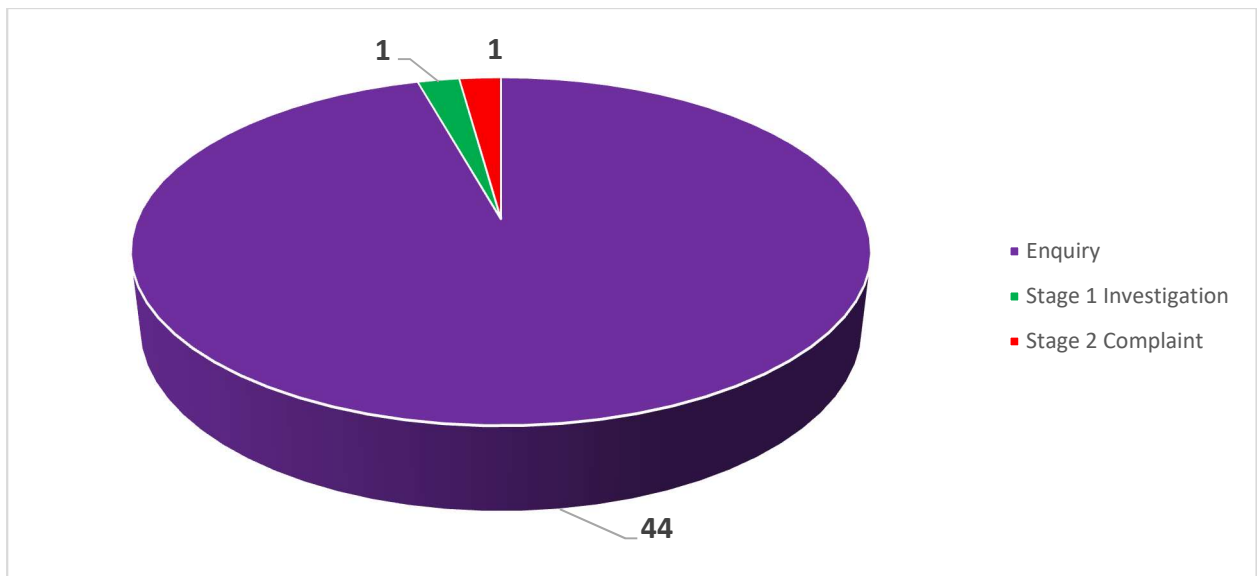


Chart 18: Ferry issues investigated by the Consumer Council in 2020/21 (n = 46)

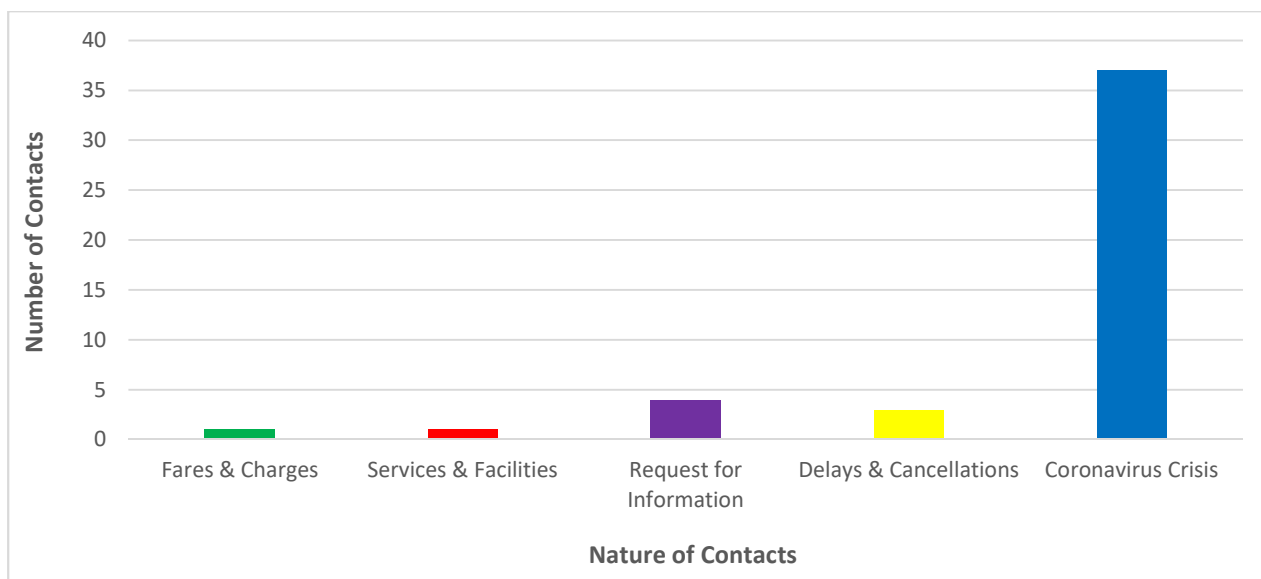


Table 11 below shows the breakdown of ferry contacts received in 2020/21 by service provider. The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into ferry enquiries and complaints was £264.

Table 11: Ferry contacts by service provider (n = 46)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
P & O Ferries	7	0	1	8
Stena Line	8	1	0	9
DFDS Ferry	1	0	0	1
Irish Ferries	16	0	0	16
Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) Referral	11	0	0	11
Department for Infrastructure (Dfi) Referral	1	0	0	1
Total	44	1	1	46

Case Study – Ferry

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer who had booked a sailing with P&O Ferries via a Saver Ticket.

The consumer had received an email from P&O advising that the departure times of both the outbound and inbound sailings had been re-scheduled. The consumer had contacted P&O Ferries to seek confirmation on why the times had changed and if he was entitled to a refund. P&O advised that no refund was applicable as the ferry had been re-scheduled, not cancelled.

The consumer was unhappy with the response and asked the Consumer Council to investigate the matter.

P&O Ferries responded to us and confirmed that as the sailings had been re-scheduled by more than 90 minutes, passengers were entitled to a full refund. The consumer received a full refund for £264 and was satisfied with the outcome.



9. Water and 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 1% (101) of all enquiries and complaints received by the Consumer Council in 2020/21 (6,971). In comparison with last year, water and sewerage contacts have reduced by 31% (146 vs 101). Similar to public transport contacts, the reduction in water contacts can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic as the majority of businesses across Northern Ireland were forced to close as the country went into lockdown on 23 March 2020.

In an effort to assist businesses with paying their water bills during the pandemic, NI Water put in place a number of measures, such as;

- Deferred water bills due to be issued between March 2020 and July 2020.
- Delayed the price increases due in April 2020 until October 2020.
- Softened its debt recovery procedures and extended repayment timescales for businesses that requested it.

Chart 19: Breakdown of water contacts by classification (n = 101)

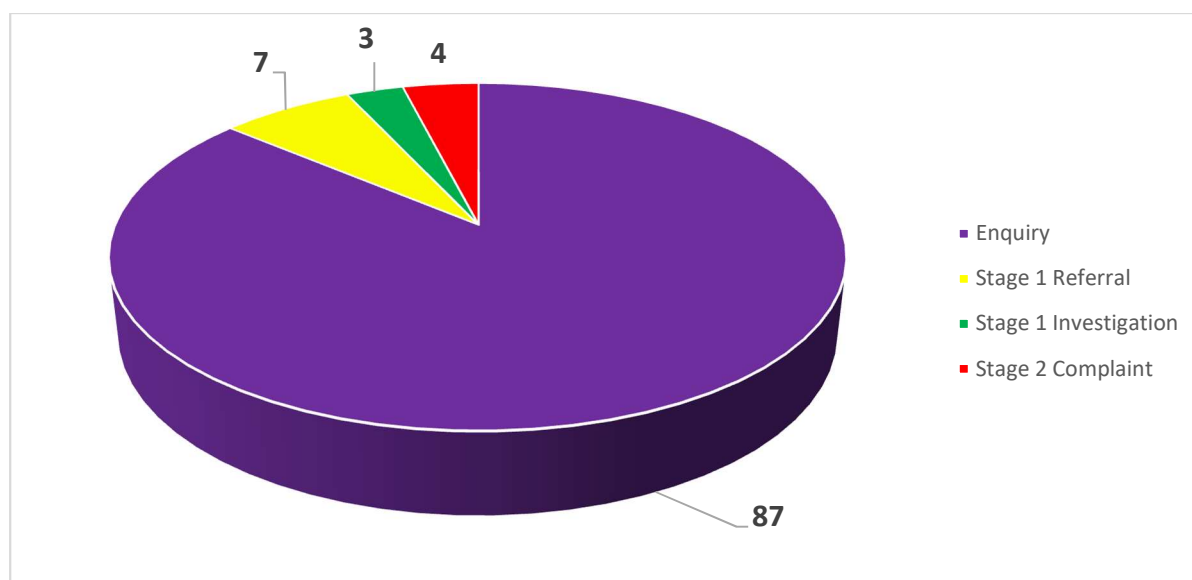


Table 12 below shows the breakdown of water and sewerage contacts received in 2020/21. The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into water and sewerage enquiries and complaints was £3,861.

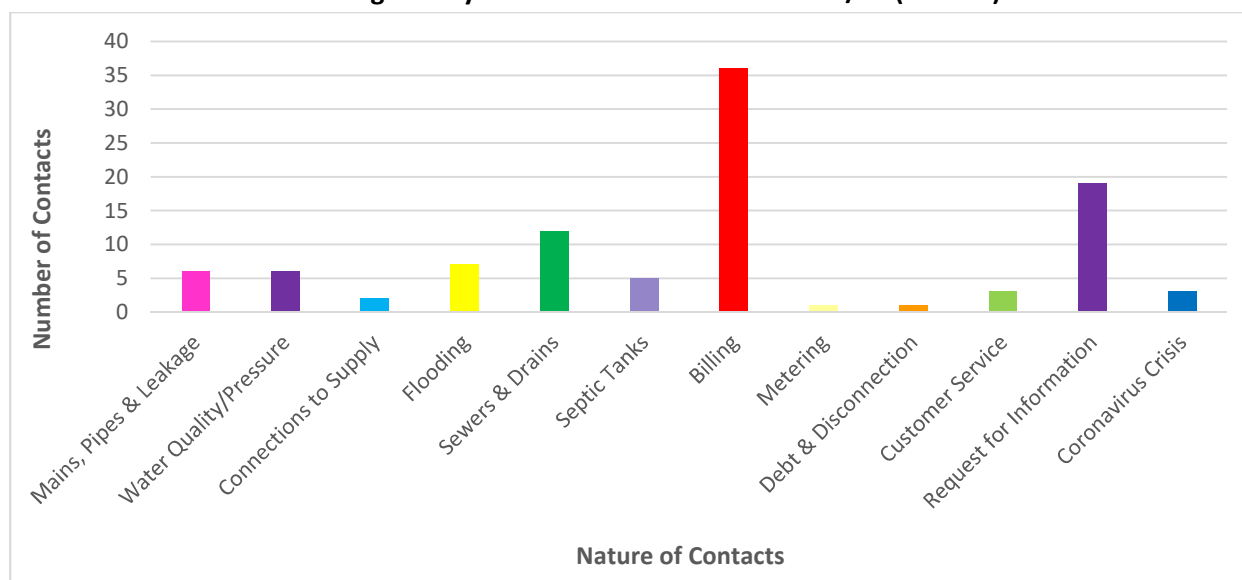
Table 12: Water and Sewerage contacts by service provider

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
NI Water	77	7	3	4	91

Consumer Council for Water (GB) Referral	10	0	0	0	10
Total	87	7	3	4	101

Chart 20 shows the types of water and sewerage issues that we received from consumers in 2020/21. Consistent with previous years, billing remains the most common type of water contact received, accounting for 36% of the water contacts received (36). Billing concerns raised by businesses include issues such as clarity of bill, disputed bills and liability of bill.

Chart 20: Water issues investigated by the Consumer Council in 2020/21 (n = 101)



Case Study – Water

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer who had received a large water bill for £1,091 for use dating back to 2017. The property was a mixed use account supplying a farmyard and a domestic dwelling. The consumer had been in contact with NI Water to query the large bill but was not making progress towards a resolution.

We reviewed the water bills provided by the consumer and noted that they were being charged VAT, so we contacted NI Water to request that the VAT be removed and also sought advice on refunding any VAT previously paid. This reduced the bill from £1,091 to £867.79.

The consumer was also able to provide an invoice for a leak repair that was completed back in 2017 which coincided with the period of high usage. We completed a leakage form and submitted this to NI Water on behalf of the consumer.

We also noted that the account was in receipt of a domestic allowance, however, as the meter potentially served more than one dwelling we asked NI Water to confirm which property was in receipt of the allowance and if a second allowance could be added. NI Water confirmed that the meter served both domestic dwellings and therefore added a second domestic allowance. This was backdated to 2016.

Following the approval of the leakage allowance and the application of the backdated domestic allowance, the arrears went from £867.79 outstanding to £66.97 in credit.

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 which encourages 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 2020/21, the Consumer Council undertook 164 water bill health checks across the country and saved businesses £81,817, with an additional annual saving of £55,161 on future water bills.

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 2017-2021

	Total 2017/18	Total 2018/19	Total 2019/20	Total 2020/21
No of WBHC enquiries	97	114	142	164
No of WBHCs completed	71	107	136	164
No of correct bills reviewed	42	57	107	144
No of bills requiring adjustment	29	50	29	20
Financial savings obtained in this year	£14,933	£57,275	£89,417	£44,008
Annual savings made for future years	£6,028	£27,731	£4,050	£17,352

Savings carried forward to next financial year	£6,028 to 18/19	£33,759 to 19/20	£37,809 to 20/21	£55,161 to 21/22
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Water Efficiency Programme

The Consumer Council has been delivering a Water Efficiency Programme for District Councils. This programme encourages Councils to manage their water use effectively and efficiently and identifies opportunities to achieve beneficial environmental and financial savings. To date we have presented our programme to all the District Councils and completed our assessment of three of these Councils. We have achieved year one savings of £81,280 and future annual savings of £37,493 for these Councils.



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 2020/21, we received a total of 202 contacts relating to Postal Services. This represents a 288% increase in contacts of this nature compared to 2019/20 (52).

Consistent with previous years, mail delivery was the primary postal issue raised by consumers, accounting for 61% of the total postal contacts received. These include concerns about damaged or lost mail. Compared to last year, contacts regarding mail delivery have increased by 186% (43 vs 123).

Chart 20: Breakdown of postal services contacts by classification (n = 202)

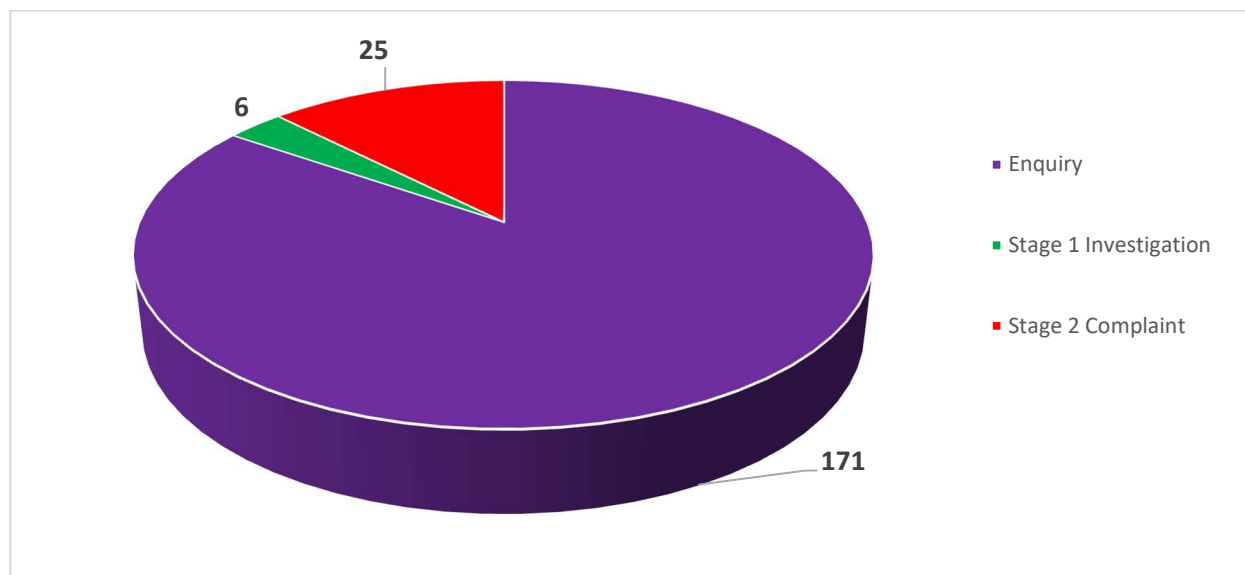


Table 14 below shows the breakdown of postal contacts received in 2020/21 by service provider. The overall amount of money returned to consumers through our investigation into postal enquiries and complaints was £3,258.

Table 14: Postal services contacts by service provider (n = 202)

Service Company	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Royal Mail	79	2	15	96
Parcel Force	9	1	4	14
Post Office	11	2	3	16

UPS	6	0	0	6
DHL Express	4	1	0	5
Other	11	0	0	11
Hermes	12	0	1	13
Yodel	0	0	1	1
Pacel2Go	0	0	1	1
The Consumer Council ¹¹	39	0	0	39
Total	171	6	25	202

EU Exit

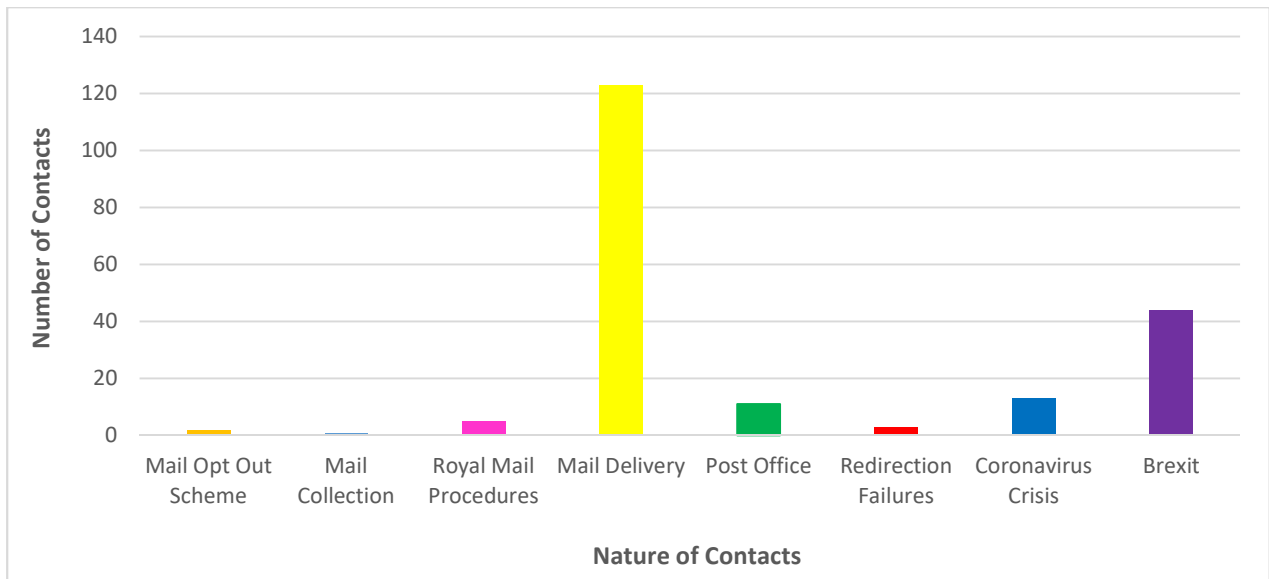
As of 1 January 2021, the UK left the European Union (EU) resulting in a number of changes taking effect with various implications for consumers in Northern Ireland. One area that was immediately impacted was postal services, as many online retailers suspended deliveries to Northern Ireland due to uncertainty around post-Brexit custom checks, despite a grace period being introduced.

Consumers contacted us to report issues with online retailers not delivering to Northern Ireland and to report delays in deliveries. Consumers were also contacting us to seek advice on how the changes would affect them posting/ordering goods to and from Great Britain and Europe.

To prepare and advise consumers on the changes, the Consumer Council created an EU Exit section on our website covering new rules that might apply in areas such as shopping, food, travel and driving abroad, energy, and postal services.

Chart 21: Postal Service issues investigated by the Consumer Council in 2020/21 (n = 202)

¹¹ These are general postal queries that we receive and are therefore logged against the Consumer Council as requests for information.



Case Study – Postal Services

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer on behalf of her elderly mother regarding a Post Office Budget Card that had expired. The consumer had been using the card to save and budget for her household bills and had accumulated £1,440 in savings.

The card had expired and therefore they were seeking full reimbursement of the monies.

The consumer had contacted Post Office directly to request a refund but despite being given assurances that a cheque had been sent, no refund was received. They had written to Post Office but had not received a response.

The Consumer Council contacted Post Office on behalf of the consumer and asked them to investigate the account and issue full reimbursement of the monies.

Post Office investigated the matter and confirmed that two cheques had been issued to the consumer, however due to delivery issues the previous cheques were not received. Post Office apologised for the issues and for the delay in reimbursing the monies.

To resolve the complaint, a new cheque for £1,440 was processed and delivered to the consumer.

Case Study – Postal Services

The Consumer Council was contacted by a consumer who had encountered issues with a courier company he paid to deliver a laptop.

Prior to requesting the service the consumer had tried to contact the courier to make sure that it transported items such as laptops. Unable to locate a contact number, they proceeded to check the website via their smart phone and noted pictures of items that the courier would transport but not insure – as laptops were not included in the pictures, the consumer went ahead and purchased the service.

When ordering the service the consumer opted to receive the company's 'Full Cover' insurance which covered them for £300 compensation should anything go wrong.

Unfortunately, the laptop was lost in transit and therefore the consumer had cause to seek compensation for the laptop via the insurance they had paid for at the time of booking the service. The courier service refused to reimburse the consumer advising that laptops were not insured by the company, as per its terms and conditions.

The consumer was extremely dissatisfied with the response as they had checked the website prior to making the booking and could not see laptops included in the pictures of goods not insured. The courier highlighted that there was a full list available under the pictures detailing all different items not insured, including laptops.

The consumer remained unhappy with the outcome and contacted the Consumer Council for assistance.

We contacted the courier company to firstly identify if the item could be located. The second issue raised was the fact that the consumer was able to purchase 'full cover insurance' for an item that the courier service did not insure. We asked if the courier service would consider reimbursing the consumer as a goodwill gesture.

The courier company apologised for the loss of the laptop and advised that it would be compensating the consumer £300 plus an additional £30 for goodwill. The courier company also advised that it would be making changes to its website following the case to avoid a re-occurrence of the issue and make it clearer for consumers to identify items not insured.



7. Private Parking

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 the 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 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 2020/21, the Consumer Council received 1,528 contacts regarding private parking charges. Of these contacts we acted on behalf of 894 consumers who had received a PCN and successfully appealed £110.3k in charges.

In comparison to last year, the number of private parking contacts has decreased by 28% (2,124 vs 1,528). This reduction could be due to a number of factors, the main one being that Northern Ireland went into lockdown on 23 March 2020, closing the majority of retail and shopping outlets across the country. As consumers were advised to stay at home, many resorted to online shopping or shopped locally to buy groceries and essential goods, therefore avoiding the need to drive or use private car parks.

Another factor could be that consumers are becoming more aware of private car parks and know how to avoid getting a PCN in the first place.

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 worked in a retail park and used the car park when he attended his shifts.

The consumer's employer had a list of all its employees' car registrations and this was shared with the parking company to prevent PCNs being issued. Unfortunately, the consumer had given the employer the incorrect registration by one digit, resulting in PCNs being issued in error.

The consumer immediately contacted his employer to raise the issue but unfortunately the car registration error was not corrected and therefore the PCNs continued to be issued on a weekly basis. This resulted in PCNs to the value of over £3,000. The consumer was receiving debt collection agency letters and was being threatened with court action.

Despite the employer eventually correcting 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 employer advised the consumer that nothing more could be done.

The Consumer Council became involved in the case and we contacted the private parking company to appeal the charges on the basis that the consumer was in fact employed at the site and therefore should not have been liable for any charges.

We provided evidence from his employer to confirm that he was working at the site on the dates that the PCNs were issued and explained that the wrong registration had been given in error.

As a result, the private parking company agreed to waive all of the charges to the value of £3,230 and all debt collection action was ceased.



**8. Requests for
information and
general remit**

In 2020/21, the Consumer Council received 716 contacts from consumers requesting general advice and information across all areas of our remit or to provide feedback on our services/staff.

Requests for information accounted for 75% of these contacts (537) and included requests for copies of our publications and guides such as 'Plane Facts', 'Switch On' energy guides, budget planners and general information on energy, water, transport and post.

Consumers contacting us to enquire about energy tariffs and switching supplier accounted for 51% of these contacts (274).

True Cost Campaign

In 2020/21, we launched our 'True Cost' campaign, an information campaign to promote awareness of lending alternatives to illegal and high cost lending, and to promote awareness of free debt advice.

The campaign kicked off in March 2020 when a leaflet was delivered to approximately 60,000 households primarily in the Belfast and Derry/Londonderry areas. Taking into consideration the financial impact that the Covid-19 pandemic may have had on many households, it was decided to run the campaign again. The leaflet and messages were adapted slightly to reflect the Covid-19 pandemic and the second campaign ran for three weeks from 31 August 2020 and saw leaflets distributed to every household in Northern Ireland (c. 811,000 homes).

For this campaign we worked with Advice NI (membership organisation for the independent advice sector in NI) and Christians Against Poverty (CAP).

The True Cost campaign was promoted on social media via a Facebook advertising campaign, and social media messages were also posted by the Consumer Council on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram.

Following the campaigns we received contact from consumers seeking additional advice and information in relation to managing debt and we were able to provide a list of organisations that could provide support and guidance.

Need cash fast?

What's the

true cost?

If you're worried about your finances during COVID-19 or need to borrow money fast, The Consumer Council's website can help with:

- Getting debt advice;
- Borrowing money;
- Knowing your household budget; and
- Shopping around for a better deal.

For further information and help, please visit:
consumercouncil.org.uk/truecost

The Consumer Council is authorised and regulated by The Financial Conduct Authority to act as a credit broker.

Tour Operator Complaints

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 2020/21, we were contacted by 76 consumers regarding issues that we investigated under our general remit. One issue in particular that became particularly prevalent during the Covid-19 pandemic was online tour operators. Following lockdown and travel restrictions across the world, many tour operators were forced to cancel holiday bookings. Unfortunately, many consumers struggled to get a refund from online tour operators such as OPODO, eDreams and TravelUp, with many of them removing telephone contact numbers, causing frustration amongst consumers who had to rely on email contact.

From researching the tour operators that we were being contacted about, we noted that many were not registered members of the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) and therefore consumers had no specific association or body to escalate their complaint to if they didn't get a response or were unhappy with the outcome.

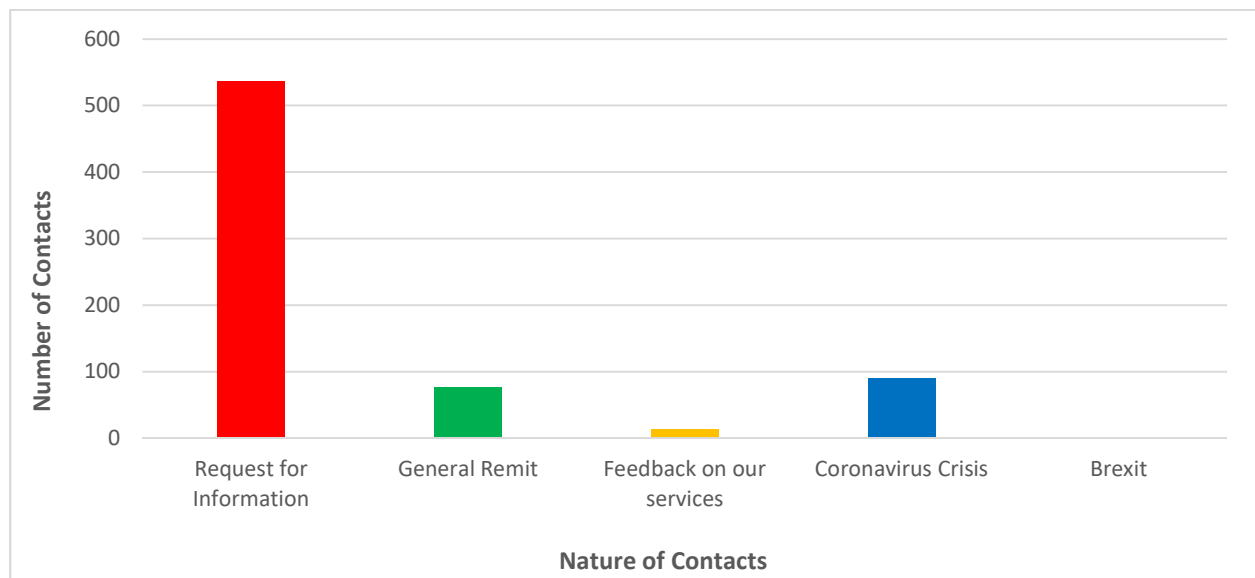
To assist consumers who found themselves in this situation, we successfully established customer service contacts within several tour operators and were able to raise formal complaints and requests for refunds on their behalf.

In 2020/21, we assisted 59 consumers with tour operator complaints and successfully returned £42.3k in refunds.

We also received 89 contacts from consumers requesting general advice and guidance in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. These included queries about travel within the Common Travel Area (CTA), questions about quarantine and advice on Lateral Flow Tests (LFT) and Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests.

The Consumer Council was also contacted by 10 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 2020/21 (n=716)



Case Study – General Remit

The Consumer Council was contacted by a local school requesting help in securing the refund of a £7,800 deposit from a tour operator. The school had booked two trips for its students via the tour operator which unfortunately could not proceed as planned due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The tour operator was retaining the deposits paid and refusing to give this back as per its terms and conditions.

We contacted the tour operator on behalf of the school and explained the financial impact that the pandemic had had on parents and teachers alike and how the school could not afford to absorb this amount of money in order to reimburse parents.

The tour operator responded to explain that a full refund could not be given as some aspects of the booking had gone ahead as planned i.e. some flights operated as scheduled and therefore would not be applicable for a refund. The tour operator proposed a refund of £3,000 with the remaining £4,800 as credit to be used for future bookings made by the school.

The school accepted the proposal and we arranged for the refund to be returned to the school and the credit to be confirmed in writing by the tour operator.



9. 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.

In March 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic our organisation had to adapt to working from home as Northern Ireland went into lockdown. As consumers across Northern Ireland faced unprecedented and challenging times, it was paramount now more than ever that our services were accessible and available to all consumers.

All of our services remained operational throughout the pandemic, with telephony services being provided via the internet and our postal service redirected, allowing our Freepost and Freephone services to operate as normal.

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.

In order to ensure that information is up to date and accurate, we liaise with NI Direct on a regular basis to provide updates on the areas that we cover and to inform it of any changes that need to be made to the information held on its systems.

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 2020/21, NI Direct received 4,729 calls on behalf of the Consumer Council, of which 65% (2,756) were transferred to the Consumer Council. The remainder of calls were signposted to other organisations, such as utility companies and Trading Standards Service NI (TSS NI).

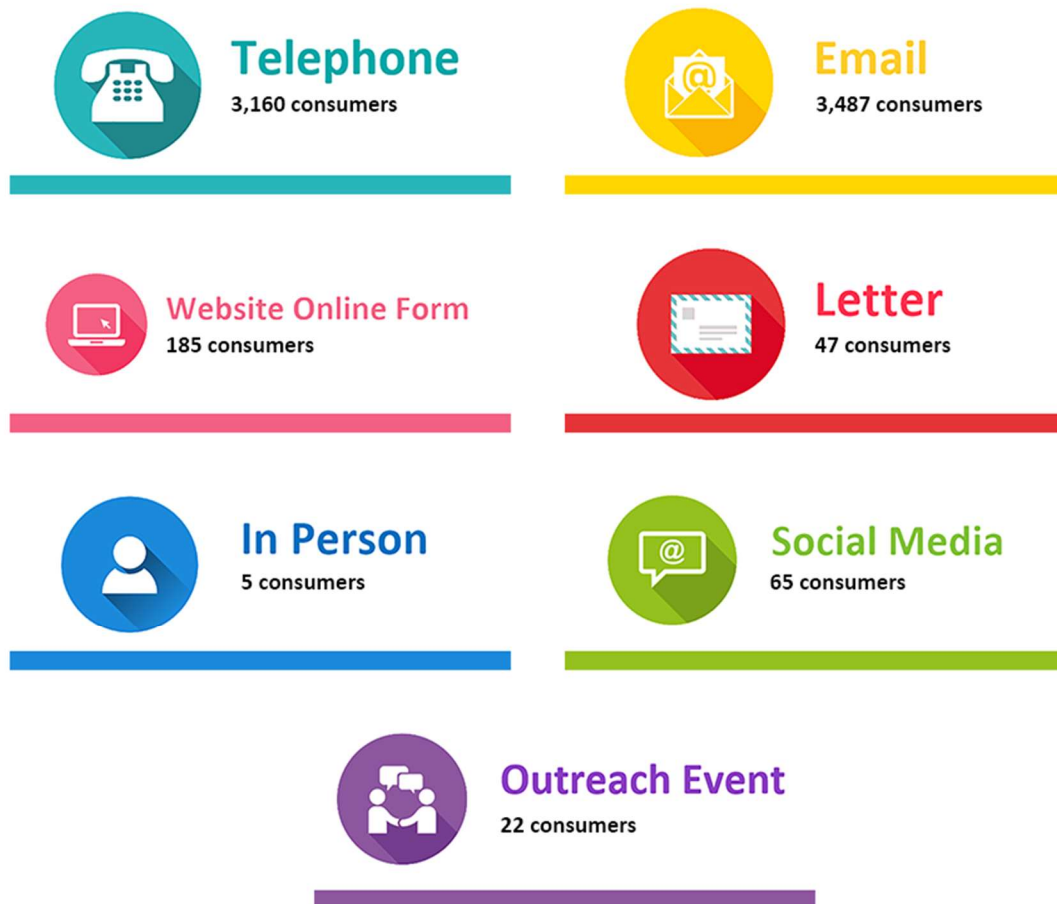
Method of Contact

In 2020/21, email was the preferred communication choice when contacting the Consumer Council, accounting for 50% (3,487) of the total enquiries and complaints received (6,971), with telephone contact following close behind, accounting for 45% of the contacts received (3,160).

This differs from last year as telephone was the most common communication choice. The increase in email contact can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, as consumers from across the globe were contacting us for help in obtaining refunds, some as far as India and America.

The pandemic also affected the number of consumers who contacted us in person in 2020/21, as our offices have been closed to the public since 23 March 2020, preventing consumers from meeting us face to face (62 vs 5). In contrast, the number of consumers who contacted us via social media increased in 2020/21 compared to last year (18 vs 65).

The infographic below shows a breakdown of the enquiries and complaints received in 2020/21 by communication method.



Helplines NI

In March 2020, the Consumer Council became a member of Helplines NI, a membership-led organisation consisting of over 30 different helplines across NI.

The helplines provide a variety of vital support services including, information, advice, counselling, a listening ear and be-friending, and offer immediate support to those with a wide-range of health and wellbeing needs, often for those who are the most vulnerable in our community. Many of the services take place over the phone, but some can help via email, text and in some cases with live web-chat.

Consumers can access the Helplines NI website to find out information about a range of agencies available in NI to help them with an issue. There are a large number of key words that have been built into the website which when used will signpost the consumer to us for help.

All of the organisations within Helplines NI meet every quarter to share best practice and to highlight emerging issues facing vulnerable consumers in Northern Ireland.

 NSPCC 0808 800 5000 8am – 11pm weekdays 9am – 6pm weekends 365 days a year help@nspcc.org.uk www.nspcc.org.uk	 Parentline NI CINI 0808 8020 400 Monday to Thursday 9am – 9pm Friday 9am – 5pm Saturday 9am – 1pm Live online chat via Website www.ci-ni.org.uk	 SandsNI Helpline 077 4099 3450 Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm www.sandsni.org	 Simon Community 0800 171 2222 24/7 365 days a year www.simoncommunity.org
 Parent Support Line Parentings 0808 8010 722 Monday to Thursday 9:30am – 2:30pm Friday 9:30am – 12:30pm Live online chat via Website www.parentingni.org	 RNID 028 9023 9619 Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm Text: 07937 130 902 information.northern@rnid.org.uk www.rnid.org.uk	 Helplines NI Listen. Support. Inform. www.helplinesni.com A SINGLE POINT OF ACCESS TO NORTHERN IRELAND HELPLINE NUMBERS AND WEBSITES OVER 30 NORTHERN IRELAND HELPLINE ORGANISATIONS EASY TO NAVIGATE FIND THE RIGHT HELPLINE TO SUIT YOUR NEEDS LISTEN. SUPPORT. INFORM. @HelplinesNI	
 Rural Support 0800 138 1678 Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm (voicemail and support options available at all other times) www.ruralsupport.org.uk	 Samaritans 116 123 24/7 365 days a year Jo@samaritans.org www.samaritans.org	 Public Health Agency Project supported by the PHA www.helplinesni.com	

 Hourglass NI 080 8808 8141 Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm https://wearehourglass.org/ni	 Advice NI 0800 915 4604 Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm advice@advicecent.net www.advicecent.net	 Age NI 0808 808 7575 8am – 7pm 7 days a week 365 days a year www.age-ni.org.uk/advice	 Alzheimer's Society Support Line 0333 150 3456 Monday to Wednesday 9am – 6pm Thursday & Friday 9am – 5pm Saturday & Sunday 10am – 4pm www.alzheimers.org.uk	 Autism NI 028 9040 1729 Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm www.autismni.org	 Cancer Focus NI 0800 783 3339 Monday to Friday 9am – 1pm www.cancerfocusni.org	 Carers NI 028 9043 9843 Monday to Thursday 10am – 4pm www.carersuk.org/northernireland	 CAUSE: Helpline 0800 103 2833 Monday, Wednesday & Friday: 10am – 4pm Tuesday & Thursdays: 12pm – 8pm www.cause.org.uk
 Child Bereavement Service 028 9066 8333 Monday, Tuesday and Friday 10am – 1pm Mobile: 07867372711 www.barnardose.org.uk	 ChildLine 0800 1111 24/7 365 days a year Online 1-2-1 & Email Service Available at www.childline.org.uk	 Christians Against Poverty Debt Help 0800 328 0006 Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm www.capuk.org	 The Compassionate Friends 0345 123 2304 10am – 4pm & 7pm – 10pm 365 days per year www.tcf.org.uk	 The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland 0800 121 6022 Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm (028) 902 51600 contact@consumercouncil.org.uk www.consumercouncil.org.uk	 Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline 0808 802 1414 24/7 365 days a year help@dsahelpline.org Live online chat via website: www.dsahelpline.org	 Eating Disorders Association NI 028 9023 5959 24/7 365 days a year www.eatingdisordersni.co.uk	 Family Benefits Advice Service Employers For Childcare 0800 028 3008 Monday to Friday 8am – 5pm www.employersforchildcare.org
 HIV & Sexual Health Helpline NI 0800 137 437 Monday to Friday 10am – 4pm www.positivelifeni.com	 Housing Rights 028 9024 5640 Monday to Friday 9.30am – 4.30pm www.housingadvicecent.org	 Informing Choices NI 028 9031 6100 Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm www.informingchoicesni.org	 Kinship Care NI 0800 022 3129 Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm www.kinshipcareni.com	 Law Centre NI 028 9024 4401 Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm www.lawcentreni.org	 LGBT Switchboard Cara-Friend 0808 8000 390 Monday to Friday 1pm – 4pm Wednesday 6pm–9pm Live online chat via Website www.cara-friend.org.uk	 Crisis Telephone & Counselling Service Lifeline 0808 808 8000 24/7 365 days a year www.lifelinehelpline.info	 Make the Call 0800 232 1271 Monday to Friday 8am – 5pm Text ADVICE to 67350 makethecall@dcfni.gov.uk www.nidirect.gov.uk/makethecall

The Consumer Council also likes to learn how consumers hear about our services as this helps inform our promotional and educational work. Table 15 shows all of the different ways that consumers found out about us in 2020/21.

Consistent with last year, 38% of consumers who contacted us in 2020/21 found out about us using search engines such as Google (3,867). 11% of consumers who contacted us found out about us through a friend or relative, with the same percentage of consumers being repeat customers, having used our services before.

Table 15: How consumers heard about the Consumer Council in 2020/21

How did consumers find out about the Consumer Council?	Total
Search engine e.g. Google	3,867
Friend/Relative	1,168
Used our services before	1,108
Not disclosed	908
Consumer Council website	750
Radio	513
Social Media	350
Referred by advice agency	300
Consumer Council details at the back of a utility bill	296
Referred by constituency office	237
Television	216
Newspaper	94
Outreach/Presentation event	92
Resolver referral	74
Referred by service provider verbally	66
Referred by On Your Behalf radio show	64
Consumer Council flyer	48
Referred by service provider in writing	26
Consumer Council publication	25
Food bank referral	22
Consumer Council details on service provider website	21
Referred by Trading Standards Service	10
Referred by solicitor	7
Referred by Government Department/Minister	5
Advertisement in airport	3
Electronic advertisement on bus shelter	1
NI Consumer Week 2021	1

How did consumers find out about the Consumer Council?	Total
Advertisement in bus station/shelter	1
Yellow pages/BT Phone book	1
Total	10,274



10. Consumer Feedback and Satisfaction

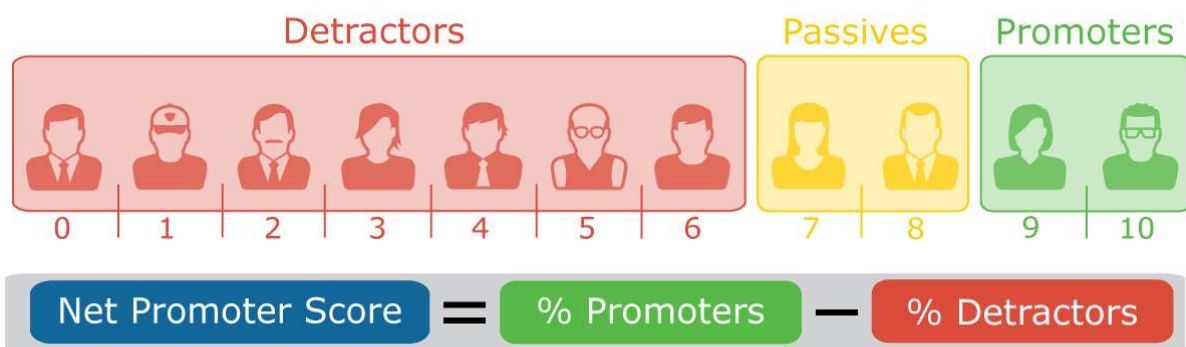
Consumer feedback is an essential part of the Consumer Council’s learning and development process, adding particular value to our complaints handling service.

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)

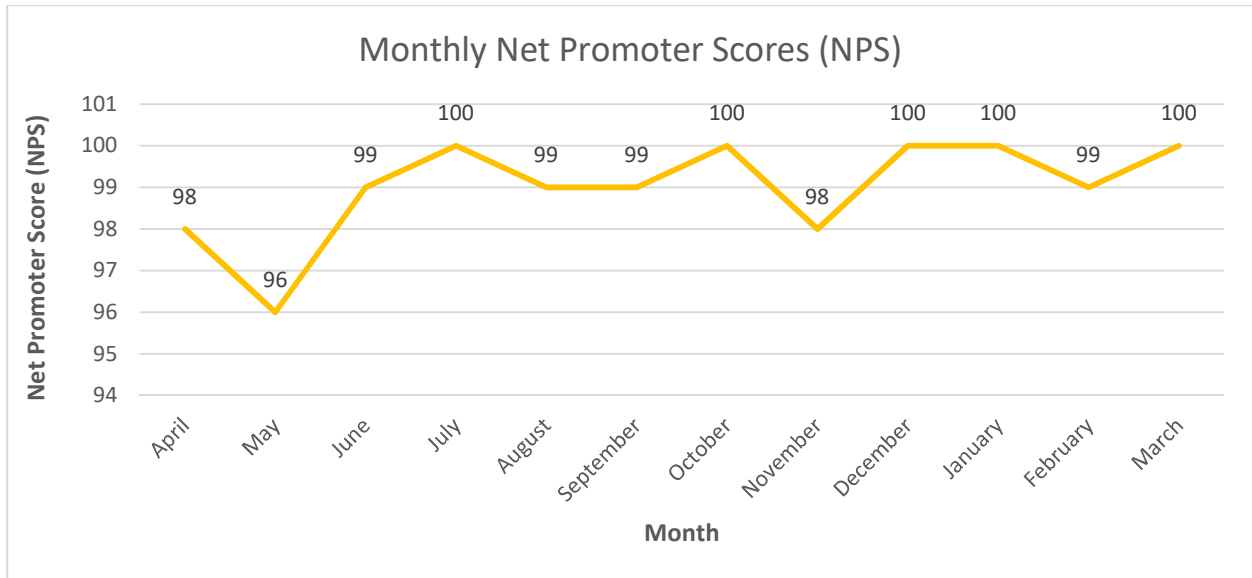
The NPS subtracts the percentage of Detractors from the percentage of Promoters, which can range from a low of -100 (if every customer is a Detractor) to a high of 100 (if every customer is a Promoter).

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 2020/21, our NPS score was 99, which has improved from 2019/20 (98).

Chart 23 shows the monthly NPS score we received from April 2020 to March 2021. The dips in NPS are caused by the detractor (0-6) scores that we received from consumers. In 2020/21, we received two detractor scores in total.

Chart 23: Net Promoter Score received by the Consumer Council from April 2020 - March 2021 (n=1,280)



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.

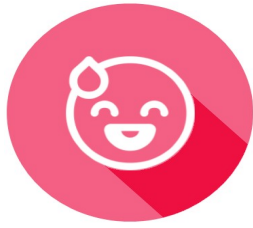
Overall satisfaction with the Consumer Council in 2020/21 was 99.8%. This represents an average of all the measures above.

In 2020/21, the return rate for our Customer Satisfaction survey was 45%, which has increased compared to last year (38%).

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 2020 to March 2021 (n=1,288).



97.4%

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



99.6%

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



99.05%

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



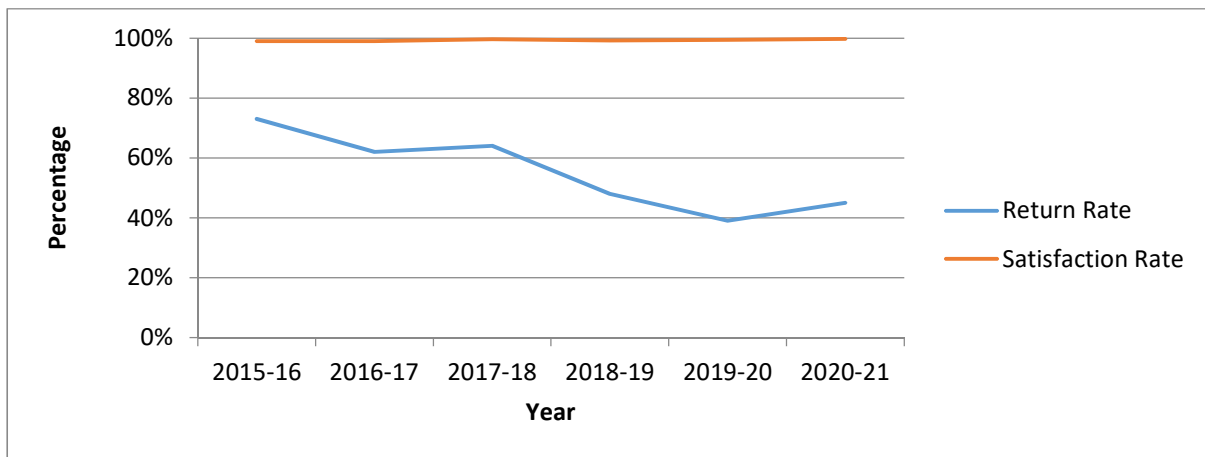
99.6%

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

Chart 24 shows The Consumer Council's satisfaction rates and return rates from 2015 to 2021.

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).

Chart 24: Analysis of survey return rate & customer satisfaction rate from 2015-2021



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.

As our staff were working remotely from March 2020, we amended our service standards to inform consumers that our offices were closed and therefore were not accessible to the public without an appointment.

In 2020/21, the Consumer Council met our 100% target by no less than 90% in all of the Service Standards, bar one. As NI Direct has responsibility for answering our Freephone number, our telephone efficiency standard is set by NI Direct and is currently 85% of calls answered within 20 seconds. This is the service standard operated by NI Direct across all sectors.

Unfortunately, NI Direct has been unable to meet the service standard again this year as call volumes increased in 2020/21 due to the Covid-19 pandemic impacting its ability to answer calls within the set SLAs.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic we were updating consumers on increased call volumes in NI Direct that may affect the ability to get through on our Freephone number and to alleviate calls to that number, we advertised our main reception number, as well as our email address, online web form and Freepost address.

Chart 25: The Consumer Council Service Standards

Our Service Standards to You

COVID-19 UPDATE:
 In line with advice from the Executive, our offices are closed and all of our staff are working from home. Due to increased call volumes, it may take a little longer than usual for your call to be answered. If you leave a voicemail, we will try to get back to you as soon as possible.
 Please note that our offices are not accessible to the public without an appointment.

 ANSWER CALLS We aim to answer 85% of calls to 0800 121 6022 within 20 seconds	 VOICEMAIL 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. APPOINTMENTS If you don't have an appointment, we will aim to meet you within 15 minutes
 OUR STAFF Our staff will be polite, friendly, professional and treat everyone fairly	 REFERRALS 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	 CONTACT We will aim to contact you within 3 working days of receiving correspondence
 GETTING A RESPONSE We will aim to provide you with a copy of the response from the service provider within 5 working days	 CORRESPONDENCE Our correspondence will be easy to understand	 OUR STANDARDS If we fall short of the standards we aim to provide please let us know

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

Chart 26: Service Standards Results 2020/21



The Consumer Council Standards of Service End of Year Report: April 2020 to March 2021

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.



*Office closed in line with government COVID-19 guidelines.

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.



*Office closed in line with government COVID-19 guidelines.

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.



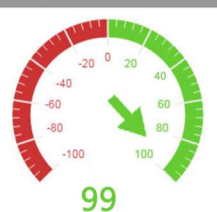
We will aim to provide a formal response to a complaint within 10 working days.



3 complaints received all 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 2019/20, we successfully completed our third rolling programme which tested 19 of the 57 criteria. Out of the 57 criteria we have been awarded 20 Compliance Plus which signifies best practice within this area, and 37 Compliant.

We are due to complete our next assessment in November 2021.

Consumer Testimonials

I have been trying from August 2020 to get my money back from easyJet with no success. I then contacted my credit card company in October 2020 but by March 2021 I still had no refund nor a response. Then within 3 days of contacting the Consumer Council I had an email from easyJet confirming that my refund was being processed and within three weeks the money was in my account.

Pleasant and effective correspondence with a knowledgeable team dramatically improved the experience of resolving the issue with the company. Instead of being continuously frustrated and getting nowhere on my own, the Consumer Council were brilliant at resolving the issue on my behalf making more progress in a couple of weeks than I had in six months!

I spent over one year trying to get a refund that I had been promised by Ryanair and despite my best efforts I could not get a response or acknowledgement for my request. Within one week of referring the matter to the Consumer Council, I got a response and shortly thereafter I received my refund from Ryanair. They took the annoyance and stress out of the equation and I am extremely thankful for the support.

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



Section B: Education and Communication

Like many organisations across Northern Ireland, the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the Consumer Council's ability to undertake some of our day to day work that would involve face to face contact. The greatest impact was felt by our Consumer Empowerment team, who educate and empower consumers and stakeholders alike by delivering presentations and attending events to provide essential information about their consumer rights, enabling them to prevent or resolve problems when buying goods and services.

The restrictions on travel and the inability to meet people face to face meant that the Consumer Empowerment team had to adapt its approach by moving to a digital delivery of our services through new, creative and innovative ways.

During 2020-21, Consumer Empowerment delivered 43 virtual presentations and seminars to various consumer groups and organisations. This included staff from the Education Authority, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT), Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT) and Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT). The Consumer Council was invited by the Department of Finance (DoF) to participate in the first virtual Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Live event in December 2020 with a further invitation in February 2021. Over 500 staff from nine government departments attended these two virtual NICS Live events. Through the 43 virtual events, the Consumer Council engaged with 3,599 consumers.

The Consumer Council hosted a live Consumer Clinic webinar in June 2020, with two members of staff answering consumer questions live. This was viewed by over 200 consumers.

The Consumer Council hosted two Facebook live events with a question and answer session from consumers. This was followed with a Facebook live event in partnership with the Mayor of Derry and Strabane, hosted on the Derry City and Strabane Council Facebook account. These three Facebook live events had a combined attendance of 4,800 consumers.

The Consumer Empowerment team continued to engage with students studying at college and university during 2020-21 with virtual presentations for students Ulster University (UU) and the College of Agriculture Food & Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) along with designing a student animation which was disseminated to colleges and universities during fresher's week.

The Consumer Empowerment team identified the need to continue to engage with consumers about their consumer rights and scams, particularly as more consumers were buying online and due to the pandemic. As a result, we designed new online family activities that were downloaded over 9,500 times as well as designing animations on scams to help consumers protect themselves which has been viewed over 36,000 times.

The Consumer Empowerment designed an information flier to inform consumers about the Consumer Council and how we can them through our complaints function and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was delivered to 700,000 households in Northern Ireland (NI).

Campaigns 2020/21	Number
Information leaflet posted	700,000
Scamwise bookmarks disseminated by financial Institutions	15,000
Covid-19 scam leaflets and bookmarks for Libraries NI	7,000
Family activities completed	9,616
Virtual events – attendees	3,599
Virtual events – hosted	43
Facebook Live and Consumer Clinic webinars – attendees	5,000
Facebook Live and Consumer Clinic webinars - hosted	4
COVID-19/Farm leaflet downloaded	1,378
Animation viewed	36,099
Online scam quizzes completed	1,800

COVID-19 Website

Following a spike in COVID-19 enquiries from consumers in February 2020, the Consumer Council set out to create a dedicated online COVID-19 resource hub to host information for consumers. The hub provided the latest information and advice across a variety of pertinent consumer rights topics including:

- Travel;
- Vulnerability;
- Home Energy;
- Personal Finances;
- Postal Services;
- Consumer Rights and Scams activities;
- Shopping & Food Safety; and
- Avoiding COVID-19 related scams.

From February 2020 to 31 March 2021 the web pages achieved over 200,000 page visits. The Travel section of this hub was the most visited page achieving over 117,000 visits. During the COVID-19 pandemic and as a result of resources and information published as part of the online COVID-19 resource, the Consumer Council has been included in various media outlets including Belfast Live, The Daily Mirror, News Letter, Belfast Telegraph, BBC Radio Foyle, Nolan Show, BBC Newsline, BBC Good Morning Ulster and U105's Frank Mitchell Show.

EU Exit website

In preparation for the end of the transition period, the Consumer Council launched a dedicated EU Exit online resource to host information for consumers. The hub provided information on a range of topics including:

- Travel;
- Shopping;
- Postal Services;
- Home Energy;
- Scams;
- Businesses;
- Telecoms;
- Water; and
- Personal Finances.

Since its launch in December 2020, until 31 March 2021, it has received 4,605 visits. The most popular topic was Travel, which received 1,120 hits.

NI Consumer Week

In March 2021 The Consumer Council launched the first ever Northern Ireland Consumer Week. The free online event contained a series of informative videos for consumers and businesses. Special guests and consumer experts discussed how the consumer landscape in Northern Ireland has changed over the past 12 months following COVID-19 and EU Exit, and provided practical tips for consumers about their consumer rights and personal finances. 42 videos were released over the week surpassing over a quarter of a million views online in just three weeks.



Pictured above are staff from our Consumer Empowerment Team with our mascot Peanut the Squirrel at NI Consumer Week

Social Media

The Consumer Council has been active on social media for a number of years. However, during 2021/21 it increased its engagement with consumers on social media. This included providing advice in text, graphic and video format, as well as using messaging functions to receive and respond to complaints and enquiries. Over the year the Consumer Council increases its social media following by 32%. By 31 March 2021, the Consumer Council had 12,708 followers across Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram.

Website

The Consumer Council's website is designed to provide consumers and businesses with information on their rights, as well as tips and advice to save money. It also has contact details and online forms to enable consumers to make complaints/enquiries without having to telephone or email the Consumer Protection Team. The website also contains a range of tools to help consumers save money on household bills and manage their budget. In 2020/21, the Consumer Council received over 609k hits to its website, a 55% increase from 2019/20.

