

Listening to your feedback

We're always trying to make our service better. View examples of feedback that we have received from our service users and how we improved our service as a result.

How we have improved our services based on your feedback

Assisting vulnerable consumers

Following feedback from vulnerable consumers, we have amended our new CRM database to include a vulnerability section that will allow us to record specific information relating to the case such as if consent was provided by the consumer to share their vulnerabilities, if they are registered on the Critical Care list for utilities and if they need us to request bills or other evidence on their behalf from the service provider.

This ensures a consistent approach to recording important information on our CRM database and also protects the privacy of the consumer if they do not wish to disclose details of their vulnerability throughout our investigation with third parties.

Adapting our investigation process

We received feedback from a consumer who had used our complaints handling service and felt that the closure of his case did not provide a complete overview of our findings or recommendations going forward. Upon receipt of the feedback, we reviewed the handling of the complaint and noted that the case had spanned a period of over 12 months and was very complex as a lot of information had been obtained and shared throughout the course of the investigation. We concluded that for complex cases that spanned a long period of time, it would be beneficial to the consumer if we summarised the findings gained and provided information on any recommendations or next steps when closing the case.

As a result, we have introduced this as part of our investigation process going forward.

Multiple contact methods

A consumer contacted us to provide feedback about the handling of her complaint with an energy provider. The consumer was unhappy that her complaint had been closed and felt that we had not afforded her sufficient time to provide a response, prior to closing the investigation. We reviewed the case and noted that whilst we had sent

numerous emails to the consumer requesting feedback and then alerting her to the fact that we were closing the case due to no response, we had not tried to contact the consumer via an alternative method other than email.

We used this as an opportunity to improve our process by requesting that staff ensure that they have more than one contact detail for consumers, such as an email address, telephone number and postal address. If a consumer doesn't respond via one method, then our staff will use a variety of contact methods to communicate with the consumer, before closing an investigation.

Transport Knowledge Hub

In February 2022, we launched our Transport Knowledge Hub, which gives consumers the information they need to consider their travel options by looking for the best value. Due to the rise in fuel prices in 2022 which impacted households across Northern Ireland, we saw an increase in demand from consumers seeking advice on petrol prices.

We listened and in September 2022, we developed the Transport Hub further to now include an interactive calculator where consumers can check the cost of petrol or diesel for their journey, thus improving the tool and meeting the needs of consumers.

Easy Read Scamwise Champion

With the success of our Scamwise Champion resources in 2021, the Consumer Council was invited by the Scamwise Partnership to lead a team in designing resources for adults with learning disabilities, to help them learn about the different types of scams, how to protect themselves and to practice their newfound knowledge. It was important to us that the resource had input from the service users themselves to ensure that the content met their needs.

The Consumer Council worked with service users from Orchardville to design and create the new easy-read version of the Scamwise Champion resource. The service users gave input into the design process and provided invaluable feedback to help us design and create a guide for adults on scams. The resource is now available to adults with learning difficulties and will help them be informed and protected against scams.

Private Parking Self-Serve

The Consumer Council has been helping consumers with private parking charges since 2017 by providing advice and guidance on what to do if you get a PCN and directly appealing the charge on their behalf. We identified that whilst some consumers needed our support in appealing a PCN, many were happy to appeal the charge themselves and could have done so, if they had the information and tools at their disposal, without having to contact us.

We therefore developed a new and improved Private Parking Self-Serve section on our website. The new self-serve pages provide advice and guidance on the options available if you get a PCN, it offers consumers a step-by-step guide on how to appeal one and has a template letter that should be sent to the parking operator. The new section now gives consumers the information and tools to be empowered and feel confident about tackling a PCN, without having to contact us unnecessarily.

Energy Price Comparison Tool

Adding information to our online tool to explain the information better

During 2021 there have been many electricity and gas price increases, and consumers were using our energy comparison tool to check tariffs with different suppliers to identify savings they could make by switching. However, a number of consumers contacted us as they were not sure if the tariffs on the tool included the real-time price increase.

In order to make the information on the tool more accurate, we decided to add a message on both the interactive tool and the comparison tables to caveat that the tariffs are real-time and will therefore not include any price increase until the new tariff goes live. We also recommended that consumers who wants to do a comparison based on future tariffs should call our Freephone number and a member of our team can help them by providing a comparison over the telephone.

Adding information to our online tool to explain offers better

A consumer contacted us to provide feedback on our energy price comparison tool. The consumer had a keypad meter but wanted to change to direct debit payments and so used the tool to identify savings that could be made by switching. The tool identified the cheapest supplier who offered a competitive discount if they paid by direct debit. The consumer proceeded with the switch but was later advised that the tariff and discount was not applicable as it was only for credit meter customers and the meter

installed at the property was a prepayment meter. The supplier advised that in order to avail of the offer they would need to have the pre-payment meter replaced with a credit meter, which would cost approximately £75. The consumer contacted The Consumer Council stating they felt that the tool should have explained this to consumers.

We added added to the tool to advise consumers, who currently pay by prepayment meter but want to pay by direct debit, that a meter exchange will be required in advance.

The tool has since been amended to contain a message as suggested by the consumer. The consumer was delighted that we had listened to their feedback and had put the suggestion into practice.

Updating the tool to show projected tariffs

With the large number of price increases that took place in 2022, many consumers were utilising our energy price comparison tool to identify savings across the suppliers and decide if it worthwhile switching. Consumers raised issue that the tool did not show the projected tariff cost once the increase had taken effect, only the current tariff. This meant that they couldn't make an informed choice on who to switch to based on the new announced tariffs.

We took the consumers concerns on board and passed the feedback to our energy team, who worked with our communications team and website provider to update the tool. The tool has been updated to now inform the consumer if the supplier has announced a new tariff and it confirms the new rate. This allows consumers to see the current tariff price and the future tariff price, allowing them to make an informed decision on who they should switch to.

Energy Comparison Table accessibility

Our website has four energy price comparison tables for consumers to use to compare prices and were created in Excel format. Many consumers who have no access to the internet would call our Freephone helpline asking for the document to be printed and posted to their home address. When printed the document became unreadable and not accessible to understand.

Working with a graphic design agency, the Consumer Council created four new templates for each of the energy areas – electricity, gas and economy 7. The new templates are in Microsoft Word format making each more accessible and user friendly

for all consumers.

Investigation Planner

Following an investigation into our handling of a consumer's complaint we identified failings and agreed that our service had fallen short of the standards we would expect to provide. In reviewing how the case was investigated we decided that the team would benefit from additional guidance when dealing with more complex cases, especially at the outset when identifying the issues to be addressed.

We designed a template for staff to use to at the beginning of their investigations, to help them identify the main issues to be investigated. We also provided additional guidance and information on how investigations should be completed. This has ensured that all staff investigate complaints in a thorough and consistent manner going forward. This was also a great opportunity to take the findings from the consumer complaint on-board and use it to improve internal processes, which in turn improves the service we deliver to consumers.

Business Comparison Tool

Following the energy price comparison tool set up for domestic households on our website, we received a lot of calls from businesses who wanted advice on switching supplier but couldn't use the comparison tool as it was only for domestic suppliers. We highlighted the increase in interest to our energy policy team who set about working with the electricity suppliers to create a similar tool for businesses.

The business energy comparison tool was launched in Autumn 2019 and is available on our website. The tool enables non-domestic small businesses, charities or other small organisations to compare electricity and natural gas prices from suppliers in Northern Ireland.

Email signature issue

The Consumer Protection team were receiving emails from consumers who were not receiving our emails as they were going straight into spam folders. This was impacting our service delivery as consumers thought we had failed to respond to their emails.

We created a new email signature that now follows best practice by reducing the amount of hyperlinks and images in the body of the signature. We tested the new signature on a number of different email addresses and they were all received without issue, thus ensuring that consumers would receive our emails going forward. The new email format was shared with all staff with instructions on how to set this up. This ensured consistency across the organisation.

Flight refunds during COVID-19

Since March 2020, airline contacts have increased by over 560% compared to last year due to the impact the pandemic has had on the travel industry. Ordinarily, The Consumer Council would only investigate enquiries and complaints about airlines that depart from or arrive into Northern Ireland. However, since March 2020, we have been contacted by a large amount of consumers seeking assistance in obtaining a refund for flights departing from or arriving into Dublin. Consumers were frustrated that we couldn't help and shared this feedback with us.

We acknowledged that many Northern Ireland consumers choose to travel from Dublin for a variety of reasons and so we are now assisting consumers who flew from Dublin so long as we already have an established relationship with the airline. Since March 2020, we have successfully returned over £670,000 in airline refunds to consumers.

Mailbox automated response

When a consumer contacts us via email, they wouldn't receive an automated response. This meant that, on occasion, consumers would contact us several times in quick succession in order to have a staff member contact them. We noticed that during the pandemic this was happening more frequently.

As a result, we have added an automatic email acknowledgement to our mailbox as confirmation that a consumer's email has been received and to advise that a member of staff would be in contact within 3 working days, in line with our service standards.

Making our numbers visible

When we were contacting consumers directly via telephone our numbers were withheld. Due to concerns regarding telephone scams and a general anxiousness about answering calls from withheld numbers, some more vulnerable consumers would not answer our calls. If this was the quickest, most convenient way to contact a consumer,

this would impact our ability to speak with the consumer regarding their complaint in a timely manner.

We took the consumer feedback on board and liaised with our telephony department to have the direct numbers of all our front-line staff visible when calling externally.