

Consumer advice

Consumer issues, large or small, can affect anyone. They leave people out of pocket, negatively impacting on household finances, especially where resources are already stretched. There is often a lack of knowledge about consumer rights and responsibilities – many are not even aware that they are losing money. As the statutory consumer champion, we have an unparalleled wealth of information about the problems that consumers have, and our advice and policy work with consumer issues reinforce each other.

In 2015/16:



829,000

clients advised by our local Citizens Advice and our consumer helpline



960,000

consumer problems²



1 in 2

clients successfully resolve their consumer problems³



13.4 million

page views to our online consumer advice



£94 million in total gains for **104,000** clients, an average of **£900** value per client⁴

Managing queries about consumer rights and problems

When people encounter consumer problems, it can be unclear how they can redress the cost they've incurred for goods and services that haven't met their needs. They might have been faulty, substandard or misleadingly sold.

Products and services can include anything from one-off smaller purchases through to high-ticket items that, if faulty, prevent people from getting on with their lives. For example, 11% of consumer service calls we receive are about second hand cars. If a car is defective, it leaves the owner out of pocket and also unable to get from A to B, incurring further transport costs and potentially jeopardising employment. Our legal knowledge helps clarify individuals' rights, if they have a case for financial compensation, and how to go about resolving their problem.

Evidence suggests that our consumer helpline plays a vital role for consumers who cannot resolve their problem alone without specific support. Our helpline clients reported feeling less confident about taking action to resolve their issue - alongside evidence that their problems were more complex and of higher value - compared to individuals who had not contacted Citizens Advice about their consumer problem. 7 in 10 helpline clients had also tried using other sources of consumer help, such as information websites, before contacting us.⁵

1 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. (2014) *Consumer Detriment Survey 2014*: 22% of consumers experienced one or more problems with goods and services purchased in any year.

2 Our consumer service is a GB wide telephone helpline and email service. Figures presented here are England and Wales only.

3 Consumer helpline satisfaction surveys 2015/16: based on a sample of over 3,700 helpline clients, representative by issue type.

4 Citizens Advice. (2016) *Our value to society in 2015/16*: financial benefits to consumer clients based on management information and impact research.

5 Telephone research with 1,200 Citizens Advice clients, completed in 2015 jointly with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. 42% of helpline clients reported feeling confident in taking action compared to 70% of non-users. Problem complexity has been established based on; the nature of a client issue, the method of problem resolution and client self-reported measure of issue complexity.

Helping consumers understand their rights and supporting them to act on them makes it easier for everyone to maintain good practice. By addressing consumer complaints and detriment, Citizens Advice plays a role in maintaining consumer trust, which in turn reduces market failures and costs on businesses.

We also have the capacity to refer clients directly to Trading Standards, which helps with intelligence gathering about consumer problems and enforcement against bad practice.

Delivering as the consumer advocate for energy and post

Energy is becoming a pressing consumer issue thanks to the disproportionate cost of fuel to income. Up on the previous year, an estimated 2.38 million households were in fuel poverty in 2014, approximately 10.6% of all English households.⁶ We help consumers manage ongoing relationships with their energy supplier, such as issues with billing, information and metering. This is crucial when the alternatives are unaffordable charges or having your energy disconnected.

Alongside providing advice and preventative education, Citizens Advice is the statutory consumer advocate for energy in Great Britain and postal services across the UK, meaning that we have a number of responsibilities and unique powers in these markets.

Our responsibilities include representing consumer interest to businesses, regulators and policy makers, referring companies for breaches of licence, and collaborating with others to develop and implement practical solutions to consumer problems. For example, we're providing insight and feedback on all aspects of the Post Office branch restructuring programme, including scrutinising proposed changes to ensure they deliver for consumers.

You can read more about our research and campaigns work on consumer issues in our consumer advocacy annual report⁷ and 2015/16 impact report.⁸

⁶ Department for Energy and Climate Change. (2016) *Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics Report, 2016*: England only.

⁷ Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland. (2016) *Citizens Advice consumer advocacy: what we did in 2015/16*. This is our joint annual report that looks at what we've achieved their year against our stated aims.

⁸ Citizens Advice. (2016) *Finding a way forward: A snapshot of our impact in 2015/16*.