



# Postal Complaints:

## Improving the complaints experience for consumers

---



December 2019

# Contents

---

Executive Summary	3
Background	4
Our research	5
Findings	6
Conclusions & Recommendations	10

# Executive Summary

---

**Our findings suggest that existing complaints processes in the post and parcel sector are not meeting the needs and expectations of consumers and may be creating barriers that make it more difficult for consumers to complain.**

The aim of this research was to improve our understanding of the complaints landscape in the postal sector<sup>1</sup> – looking specifically at the complaints procedures post and parcel operators currently have in place, how they are used by the industry, and if they are meeting the needs and expectations of the consumer.

We commissioned Progressive Partnership to undertake two strands of research to achieve this objective: a quantitative consumer survey and in-depth, qualitative interviews with post and parcel operators.

We found that consumers want a complaints process that is clear, easy to find and accessible – with easily contactable staff, who are empowered to resolve issues on first contact whenever possible. As part of a ‘good’ complaints process, consumers told us that it is very or fairly important for the operator to be contactable by e-mail (90%) or have a dedicated telephone line which ensures people are not kept on hold (83%) when dealing with complaints and a majority of consumers (77%) told us that they look for details of the complaints process on the operator’s website.

While the post and parcel operators we spoke with value the feedback they receive from consumer complaints, the attributes of a ‘good’ complaints process – as identified by consumers – are not well developed across the industry. For example, most of the operators we spoke with (seven out of nine) said they didn’t have a specific complaints policy on their website and some operators either don’t offer a dedicated phone line for dealing with complaints or they intentionally make it difficult for consumers to contact them via telephone.

We also found that the lack of a ‘good’ complaints process potentially creates barriers that put consumers off complaining and that this is particularly true for young people (aged 18-24). We found that 62% of young people think the complaints process can be very complicated (compared to 44% of consumers overall) and 68% think that making a complaint could take a long time (compared to 45% of consumers overall).

We want post and parcel operators to review their complaints procedures, looking specifically at how they can make their complaints processes more visible, transparent and easy to use for all consumers. We will be working in partnership with the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and Citizens Advice (England & Wales) to produce best practice guidance that operators can use to improve their handling of consumer complaints.

We will also be sharing our findings with Ofcom, the regulator, and asking them to review and strengthen the consumer protection conditions associated with complaints in the postal sector so that they are more in line with the requirements followed by Royal Mail, the Universal Service Provider. This would ensure consumers are adequately protected and create consistency in the complaints landscape across the industry.

---

<sup>1</sup> Our research focused on ‘senders’ in the C2X market – single piece post sent by consumers to other consumers or businesses. This also includes individuals or microbusinesses that sell items in online marketplaces and then use postal services to send their goods.

# Background

---

Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) puts consumers at the heart of policy and regulation in the energy, post and water sectors in Scotland by researching and gathering evidence, which we use to improve outcomes for consumers.

Information around total complaints volumes in the postal industry is limited. Numerous conditions and obligations are attached to the Universal Service Provider, Royal Mail, but just one sentence regulates all other complaints in the industry. Consumer Protection Condition 3.2 states that all postal operators “*shall establish, make available and comply with transparent, simple and inexpensive procedures for dealing with complaints of consumers of postal services, which facilitate the fair and prompt settlement of disputes.*” As a result of this, robust accessible data on complaint volumes, trends and resolutions is thin on the ground.

For a market to function effectively, consumers need to be able to make informed choices about the goods and services they purchase, and businesses need to have credible mechanisms for feedback to allow them to improve their offering.

Our Consumer Tracker Survey has found that around 1 in 7 Scottish consumers have experienced problems with postal services in the past 12 months, and less than half of those make a complaint, often as they do not think it is worthwhile to do so. Of those that complain, around 4 in 10 are dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint, suggesting that the market may not be working as efficiently as it could be and that complaints procedures in the postal industry could be improved.<sup>2</sup>

Working in partnership with Citizens Advice (England and Wales) and the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland to improve our understanding of the complaints landscape in the postal sector, CAS commissioned research to determine if the complaints procedures post and parcel operators have in place match the needs and expectations of consumers.

It should be noted that our research focused on ‘senders’ in the C2X market – single piece post sent by consumers to other consumers or businesses. This also includes individuals or microbusinesses that sell items in online marketplaces and then use postal services to send their goods. While consumers can also experience delivery related problems when they receive items by post – for example, when shopping online – in these circumstances the contract is between the consumer and the on-line retailer so complaints should be directed to the retailer rather than the delivery operator.

---

<sup>2</sup> Citizens Advice Scotland (2019) Utilities Tracker Survey: 2019



# Our research

---

The aim of this research was to improve our understanding of the complaints landscape in the postal sector – looking specifically at the complaints procedures post and parcel operators currently have in place, how they are used by the industry, and if they are meeting the needs and expectations of the consumer.

We commissioned Progressive Partnership to undertake two strands of research to achieve this objective: a quantitative omnibus consumer survey and in-depth, qualitative interviews with post and parcel operators.

An online omnibus survey of 1,019 adults in Scotland was conducted in partnership with YouGov to improve our understanding of the needs and expectations of consumers<sup>3</sup>. The survey focused on finding out what consumers think complaints processes should be like – looking at what consumers expect to achieve when they make a complaint, where they would go to find information about making a complaint, what barriers make them less likely to complain and what their preferred methods of contact are (e.g. telephone, e-mail, social

media, etc) when making a complaint. The methodology used, described in more detail in the technical report produced by Progressive Partnership<sup>4</sup>, guaranteed that a representative sample of the Scottish population was achieved.

To better understand the complaints procedures post and parcel operators currently have in place and how complaints are used within the industry, in-depth interviews were conducted with a range of operators<sup>5</sup>. The participants were senior managers from delivery companies operating in the UK and the interviews sought to draw out how operators present their customers with the opportunity to complain, the information they provide publically about the complaints process and how complaints are used within the business.

---

<sup>3</sup> Fieldwork undertaken 4-11 October 2018. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Scottish adults.

---

<sup>4</sup> Progressive (2018) Postal Complaints: Analysing and improving information, handling and redress

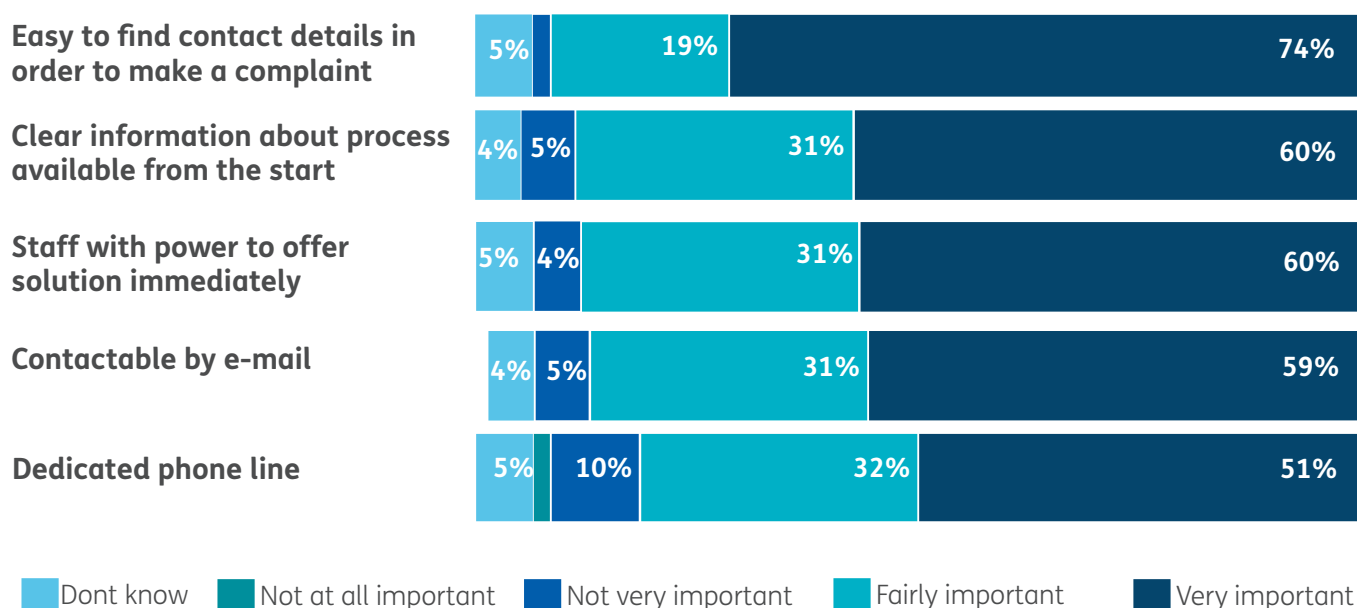
<sup>5</sup> Fieldwork dates 3 October - 9 November 2018



# Findings

**Consumers want a complaints process that is clear, easy to find and accessible – with easily contactable staff, who are empowered to resolve issues on first contact whenever possible.**

We asked consumers to rank elements of a complaints process in terms of importance to determine what makes for a ‘good’ complaints process. We found that the most important components are:



Related to this, we found that the majority of consumers (77%) said they would look on a delivery company’s website for information about how to complain – which suggests that consumers have a basic expectation that this information will be provided on a company’s website.

Consumers also said that the methods available for contacting an organisation – in particular, email and a dedicated phone line – are key components of a ‘good’ complaints process. It was seen as very or fairly important for an organisation to be contactable by e-mail (90%) or to have a dedicated telephone line which ensures people are not kept on hold (83%) compared to only 57% of consumers who thought it fairly or very important for the company to be contactable via letter. Given the growing prevalence of social media in our daily lives, it is interesting to note that only 39% of consumers thought it very or fairly important for an organisation to be contactable via social media.

When we asked consumers who are likely to complain what their preferred methods of communications are when making a complaint to a post or parcel operator, the most popular channels are e-mail (46%) and telephone (34%). Only 15% of those surveyed told us they preferred to complain using the company's website, for example using web chats, on-line forms and 'contact us' pages and 2% said they would prefer to use social media when making a complaint.

The main reason consumers gave for preferring e-mail was to have proof of their complaint and linked to this were views that an e-mailed complaint was more likely to be dealt with. Speed, ease of use and convenience were also given as key reasons for preferring e-mail. Several respondents said e-mail made it easier to explain the complaint to the company and that e-mail was less stressful for them than other methods of raising a complaint.

“ **‘More liable to reply and address problem than a letter, as they could just say they didn't receive it’** ”

“ **‘Because it would allow me to be honest and straightforward without being made to feel uncomfortable or feel that I am wrong’** ”

---

The main reason consumers gave for preferring to use the telephone was to speak to a 'real person'. Some people said they found it much easier to explain the issue in person. Speed and ease of use were also key considerations in preferring telephone contact and a number of consumers chose the phone because they felt their complaint would be resolved more quickly.

“ **‘I prefer talking to someone direct as sometimes what is said in written form can be misinterpreted’** ”

“ **‘I find it easier when I can speak to someone directly. Emails going back and forward can take forever. Webchats are infuriating’** ”

---

While consumers may have a personal preference for using e-mail or telephone to make a complaint, the underlying reasons for these preferences all relate to convenience and ease of use and the feeling that their concerns will be taken seriously and will be resolved quickly. This further underscores the importance of ensuring complaints processes are clear, easy to find and accessible and that staff are empowered to resolve issues as quickly as possible after first contact.

### **While all operators value the feedback they receive through consumer complaints, the attributes of a 'good' complaints process are not well developed across the industry.**

All post and parcel operators we spoke with monitor their performance carefully. Customer contacts, customer satisfaction and customer complaints are seen as key indicators of performance.

Operators told us that they use performance information from complaints to manage performance within the business – for example to identify where drivers, depots and branches are underperforming and resolve any issues. Complaints levels are also regarded as a measure of customer satisfaction, and may be used in discussions with account customers to demonstrate the quality of services provided. This suggests that the feedback operators receive through consumer complaints is vital to their business.

“ **‘If customers don't tell us when things are going wrong, how can we improve?’** ”

---

Although operators clearly value the information they receive from consumer complaints, the attributes of a 'good' complaints process – as identified by consumers – are not well developed across the industry.

Consumers were fairly clear about where they would go for information on how to complain about a parcel/postal operator – with 77% saying they would go to the operators' website for information – but most of the operators we spoke with (seven out of nine) said they didn't have a specific complaints policy on their website.

Consumers looking for information would instead find the “how can we help you” FAQs services which address some relevant issues, but not a complaints policy. This suggests that the complaints process is not as clear, easy to find and accessible as it could be. The exception to this is Royal Mail, the designated Universal Service Provider, who have to adhere to numerous obligations and conditions related to the handling of complaints.

This generally tallies with the findings of The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland – who conducted a desk based audit of postal operator and parcel broker websites to establish what information they contain about the organisation’s complaints procedures and found that the majority of postal operators and parcel brokers provided no information about complaints procedures on their website.<sup>6</sup>

A potential explanation for why delivery operators outside of Royal Mail may not include complaints information on their website might be because the operators tend to treat complaints, at least in the first instance, as a subset of customer contacts. Operators told us that the spectrum of contacts could range from ‘comfort’ calls (clarification of delivery times/slots); to amending delivery arrangements; to queries about late deliveries, and complaints about non-deliveries, damaged goods, rude operatives, and so on.

“ **‘WIsMO – you’ll be familiar with the abbreviation – where is my order? That’s the main thing!’**

---

As such, complaints tend to fall out of service enquiries, blurring the boundary between contacts and complaints.

“ **‘Every contact into the call centre is considered a failure. People don’t call call-centres for no reason. They call because they are hacked off. So what are they calling about?!’**

---

We also found that some operators may not be as easy to contact as consumers would wish. Operators told us that the most popular channel of communication for consumers is telephone. However, offering call centre services is expensive and some operators endeavour to manage these costs through various means including automating as many calls as possible using IVR systems, restricting customer call-centre opening hours and ensuring that phone numbers are not prominent on their website. It should also be noted that not all operators provide consumers with the option of contacting them on the phone and cost was seen as a major factor in this decision. The main exception to this was Royal Mail who promote telephone as a key method of contact.

“ **‘It is extremely expensive to service a phone call – so we know that most other carriers put in place avoidance strategies to stop people phoning them – it is very difficult to find a phone number’**

---

Most operators instead encourage customers to use their electronic contact approaches, like e-mail and live webchat and while cost is certainly a factor in this approach, some operators told us that enquiries could be dealt with more efficiently by e-mail or through the website. However, we know from our consumer survey that an operator being contactable by telephone was seen as very or fairly important to the majority (79%) of consumers so the lack of a telephone service may be making it more difficult for consumers to make a complaint.

---

<sup>6</sup> Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (2018) [Stamp Out Complaints](#)



## The lack of a ‘good’ complaints process creates barriers that make it more difficult for consumers to complain – particularly young people.

We know from our regular Consumer Tracker Survey<sup>7</sup> that consumers can be reluctant to make a complaint often because they do not feel it is worthwhile to do so and that even when they do complain, many consumers are not satisfied with the outcome.

This was echoed in our consumer research where we found that almost half (49%) of consumers would be put off complaining if they felt that the personal costs (time/money) outweigh the benefits of complaining and that the outcome of the complaint process will not result in a worthwhile resolution (46%). There was also a perception amongst consumers that making a complaint could take a significant amount of time (45%) and that the complaints process can be complicated (44%).

Notably, young people (aged 18-24) were much more likely than others to say that these factors would put them off complaining. In particular, 62% of young people thought the complaints process can be complicated (compared to 44% of consumers overall) and 68% thought that making a complaint could take a long time (compared to 45% of consumers overall). Young people also appeared less sure about where to find information about making a complaint.

While just 1 in 20 consumers (5%) said they didn’t know where they’d look to get information on how to make a complaint, this rises to nearly a quarter (23%) for people aged 18-24.

While we don’t know exactly why young people are less likely to make a complaint, previous CAS research shows that younger consumers tend to be less confident dealing with markets and organisations across different sectors and are potentially less aware of their consumer rights than other age groups.

It is clear from this research that consumers calculate the cost of making a complaint versus the likely benefits and that more often than not, consumers believe the time and energy involved in making a complaint outweighs the potential for a satisfactory resolution. This suggests that the lack of a ‘good’ complaints process – where it is clear, quick and easy to seek redress – creates a barrier that makes it more difficult for consumers, particularly young people, to complain. This in turn may make it more difficult for operators to get the feedback they told us they value to improve their services.

---

<sup>7</sup> Citizens Advice Scotland (2019) Utilities Tracker Survey: 2019

# Conclusions & Recommendations

Consumers have clear expectations about what they want and need from a complaints process, but these expectations are not always met by post and parcel operators – particularly when it comes to information, transparency and ease of contact. For example, the majority of consumers expect to find information about the complaints process on the operator’s website, but most of the operators we spoke with told us that they don’t publish these details online. Similarly, we know that many consumers prefer to make a complaint over the telephone, but some operators don’t offer a dedicated telephone service or they intentionally make it difficult for consumers to contact them via telephone. The mismatch between consumer expectations and existing complaints processes in the post and parcel industry may be creating barriers that make it more difficult for consumers to make a complaint and as a result, post and parcel operators may not be getting the feedback they need to improve their offering.

## Recommendation:

Post and parcel operators should review their complaints procedures, looking specifically at how they can make their complaints processes more visible, transparent and easy to use for all consumers. Citizens Advice Scotland will work with the other Consumer Advocacy Bodies, the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and Citizens Advice (England & Wales), to develop and produce a best practice guide on the handling of consumer complaints in the post and parcel sector. This guide will help to show post and parcel operators how they can make complaint handling procedures easy to find on their website, transparent and simple for consumers to follow – which we believe will help to improve the consumer complaints experience and remove barriers that make it difficult for consumers to complain. Following the publication of this guide, we will work in partnership with the other Consumer Advocacy Bodies to encourage post and parcel operators to review their complaints procedures in line with our best practice recommendations.

Consumer Protection Condition 3.2 (CPC 3.2) – which represents the minimum level of protection for postal consumers – stipulates that all postal operators “*shall establish, make available and comply with transparent, simple and inexpensive procedures for dealing with complaints of consumers of postal services, which facilitate the fair and prompt settlement of disputes.*” While the post and parcel operators we spoke with ensure they are contactable, with some contact details on the website and often website facilities and/or online forms, this is framed along the lines of “How can we help?” rather than making a complaint specifically. This suggests that many post and parcel operators may not be fully compliant with CPC 3.2.

## Recommendation:

Ofcom should review and strengthen Consumer Protection Condition 3.2 so it is more in line with the requirements followed by Royal Mail, the Universal Service Provider. This would ensure consumers are adequately protected and create consistency in the complaints landscape across the sector. Once the review is completed, Ofcom should provide guidance to post and parcel operators on what they need to do to comply with the regulatory condition for complaint handling. This would provide post and parcel operators with clarity on their responsibilities and help to ensure they are compliant with CPC 3.2. We will share the findings from our research with Ofcom and ask them to review and strengthen the existing regulatory condition for complaint handling.

**[www.cas.org.uk](http://www.cas.org.uk)**



**@CitAdviceScot**



**CitizensAdviceScotland**

The Scottish Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux –  
Citizens Advice Scotland. Scottish charity (SC016637) and  
company limited by guarantee (89892)

