



An Coimisiún
um Rialáil Fóntas
**Commission for
Regulation of Utilities**

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Commission for Regulation of Utilities

Customer Care Team Annual Report 2019

Annual Report

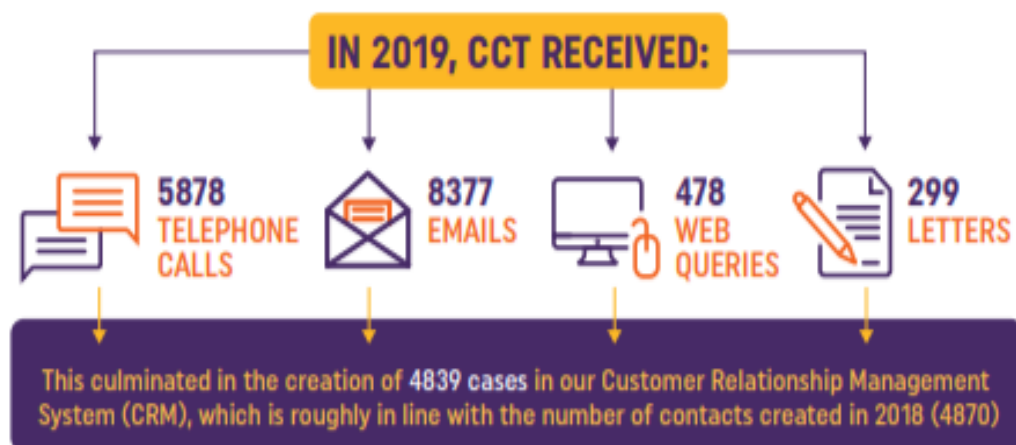
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www.cru.ie

The Exchange, Belgard Square North, Tallaght, Dublin 24, Ireland
T +353 1 4000 800 | F +353 1 4000 850 | www.cru.ie



CUSTOMER CARE TEAM Annual Report 2019



316 complex complaints, increase of 7% compared to 2018

87 average complaint resolution time was 87 days, decrease from 93 days in 2018

33% of complaints investigated (energy and water combined) were upheld in favour of the customer

ENERGY CONTACTS AND COMPLEX COMPLAINTS

4544 customer contacts received in relation to energy, in line with the volume received in 2018 (4546)

282 energy complex complaints opened, increase of 3% from 2018

34% of energy complex complaints investigated and closed were upheld in favour of the customer



Key driver for energy contacts and complaints were billing and account issues



IRISH WATER CONTACTS AND COMPLEX COMPLAINTS



295 contacts received in relation to Irish Water, 9% decrease compared to 2018

34 complex complaints received in relation to Irish Water, 62% increase from 2018

31% of water complex complaints investigated and closed were upheld in favour of the customer, 69% were not upheld

Executive Summary

The CRU Customer Care Team (CCT) provides a range of free and easy to access services for energy and water customers. Two of the CCT's primary services are:

- The provision of a free dispute resolution service to customers with an unresolved complaint against an energy supplier, network operator or Irish Water; and
- The provision of information for customers about energy or water services, including information on consumer rights and obligations.

The CRU is required under S.I. 463 2011¹, and the Water Services Act 2014² to produce an annual report on its dispute resolution service.

The first section of the report introduces the CCT and details the role of the team.

The second section of this report examines the overall level and type of **customer contacts** made to the CCT (energy and water related). In 2019, the CCT created 4839 contact cases which is roughly in line with the number of contacts created in 2018 (4870).

The third section of this report examines the **overall number of complaints** received by the CCT in 2019 and outlines the team's process for investigating complaints. In 2019 the CCT opened 316 complex complaint investigations, an increase of 7% compared to 2018. Common complaints noted across both energy and water sectors included billing and account issues, customer service and metering problems.

The fourth section of this report focusses on **energy complaints** investigated in 2019. The CCT opened 282 complaints in the energy sector in 2019; a 3% increase compared to 2018.

The fifth section of this report looks at both complaints and contacts in the **water sector**. The number of complaints opened relating to Irish Water increased by 62%, while the level of contacts decreased by 9%.

Section six of the report looks at complaints that are outside the scope of CRU.

The final section of this report includes **case studies** based on actual complaints investigated by the CRU in 2019. The case studies include important consumer messages

¹ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2011/si/463/made/en/pdf>

² <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/44/enacted/en/print>

such as the importance for customers in carefully reading and reviewing their bills. A large portion of complaints to the CRU are as a result of catch up bills/bill shock, this is mainly due to a history of bills based on estimated meter readings rather than actual meter readings obtained by a networks meter reader, or a customer's own meter reading.

All energy suppliers, energy network operators and Irish Water have a Customer Charter, guaranteeing their Codes of Practice, setting out the services provided to customers and service quality levels offered. The Customer Charter must also set out compensation and refund arrangements which apply if service quality levels are not met. Suppliers/Network Operators shall award customers the amount of payment set out in their Customer Charter where it is found that the guarantee has been broken. Codes of Practice or Customer Charters are displayed on each supplier or network operator's website. The CRU encourages customers become familiar with these key documents.

Further helpful information on consumer rights can be found on '[Customer Information](#)' section of the CRU website.

Public/ Customer Impact Statement

The purpose of this annual report is to inform consumers, industry and other interested stakeholders on the level and type of contacts and complaints from energy and water customers to the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) in 2019. The annual report assists the CRU in its mission to protect the public interest in water, energy and energy safety.

The Customer Care Team (CCT) provide an independent complaint resolution service within the CRU. This complaint resolution service is for customers with an unresolved dispute with their energy supplier, network operator or Irish Water. The CCT have powers to issue determinations and directions to suppliers, network operators or Irish Water, which can include instructions to issue a refund or proportionate compensation.

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1. The CRU Customer Care Team

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) is Ireland's independent energy and water regulator. The CRU was established in 1999 and has a wide range of economic, customer protection and safety responsibilities in energy. The CRU is also the regulator of Ireland's public water and wastewater system. Our mission is to protect the public interest in water, energy and energy safety.

The CRU has a statutory responsibility to provide a dispute resolution service to customers with an unresolved dispute with an energy supplier, network operator or Irish Water. The independent dispute resolution service is transparent, simple and free, and is provided by the CRU Customer Care Team (CCT).

The CRU is committed to providing a high-quality service to all customers who contact it. The CRU's Customer Charter sets out the standards of service that customers contacting it are entitled to receive. A copy of the Customer Charter can be found on our website³.

The CRU's Customer Care Team offer customers:

- an information resource for queries or information in relation to rights and obligations of energy and water customers;
- a free and transparent complaint resolution service for domestic and small business customers, with an unresolved complaint with their energy supplier, network company or Irish Water;
- a customer section on the CRU website which provides information tailored for domestic and small business customers;

Other duties of the Customer Care Team:

- The CCT use information from customer contacts and complaints is to promote the interests of customers in CRU policy;
- Consumer engagement with the CRU is facilitated through a quarterly Consumer Stakeholder Group meeting, managed by the CCT;

³ <https://www.cru.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/CRU-CCT-Customer-Charter.pdf>

- The CCT engage with suppliers, network operators and Irish Water to continually improve customer service levels and complaint handling;
- The CCT provide access officers to assist persons with disabilities in accessing our services.

CCT contact details:

- **Email:** customercare@cru.ie
- **Telephone:** 1890 404 404
- **Writing:** The Customer Care Team, The Grain House, The Exchange, Belgard Square North, Tallaght, Dublin 24, D24 PXW0
- **Webform:** <https://www.cru.ie/need-assistance/customer-care-team/>

1.1.1 Purpose of this report

The CRU is required by S.I. 463 2011, the Water Services Act, 2014 and the European Union (Alternative Dispute Resolution for Consumer Disputes) Regulations 2015 to report annually on our complaint resolution service. This annual report outlines the number and type of complaints made to the CRU in 2019, including detail on the number of complaints per supplier, network company and for Irish Water. The report also details the level and type of contacts. The final section of this report includes case studies based on complaints investigated in 2019.

2. Customer Contacts

2.1.1 Overview

The Customer Care Team groups customer contacts into a variety of 'Contact Types'. There are currently five contact types namely:

- **Information Requests:** These contacts generally involve customers asking for information on aspects of how the energy market works (for example how to switch energy supplier), or queries in relation to CRU energy or water policy.
- **Return to Supplier or Network Operator:** This type of contact is from a customer who has either mistaken the CRU for their supplier/network operator or who has contacted the CRU for advice regarding a complaint prior to completing their supplier or network operators' complaints handling process.
- **Standard Complaints:** These are complaints which are forwarded to the CCT which do not require a formal investigation by the team - they may be in relation to broader CRU policy or tariff decisions.
- **Refer to Third Party:** From time to time a person may contact the CRU regarding an issue that is not inside the CRU's remit. In these instances, the person is referred to the most appropriate body.

Complex Complaints: These are complaints formally sent to the CRU for investigation. The customer must first have exhausted the supplier/network operator's full complaints handling process (a legislative requirement before we can investigate the complaint).

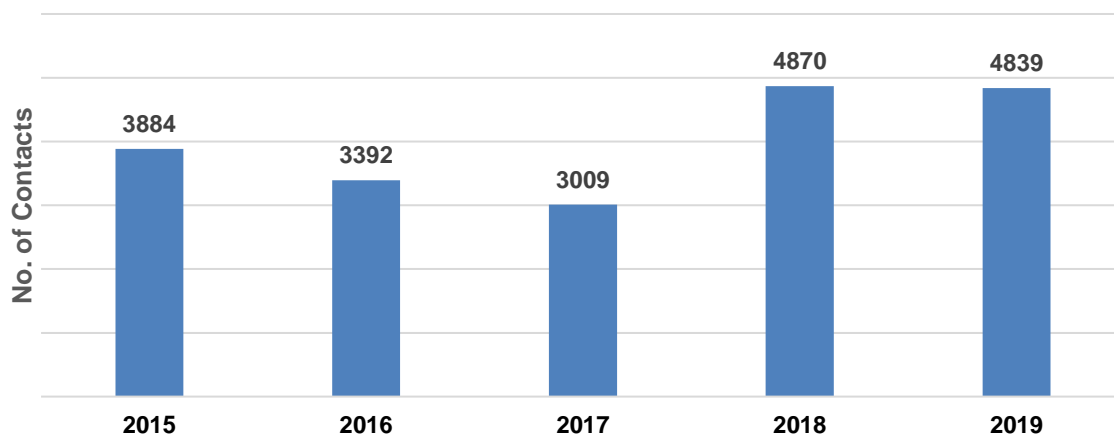
Customers can contact the CCT via the following channels:

- Webform located on the CRU's website
- Email (customercare@cru.ie)
- Telephone (1890 404 404)
- Letter

In 2019, the CCT received 5878 telephone calls to its Customer Care Phone Line (1890 404 404), 8377 emails to the CCT's dedicated email address (customercare@cru.ie), 478 web queries (www.cru.ie) and 299 letters. The above culminated in the creation of 4839 cases, which is roughly in line with the number of contact cases created in 2018 (4870).

In 2018 the CRU launched a consumer awareness campaign which may have played a key role in increasing CCT contact levels as compared to earlier years. The CRU continued to promote the CCT's services for water and energy customers throughout 2019.

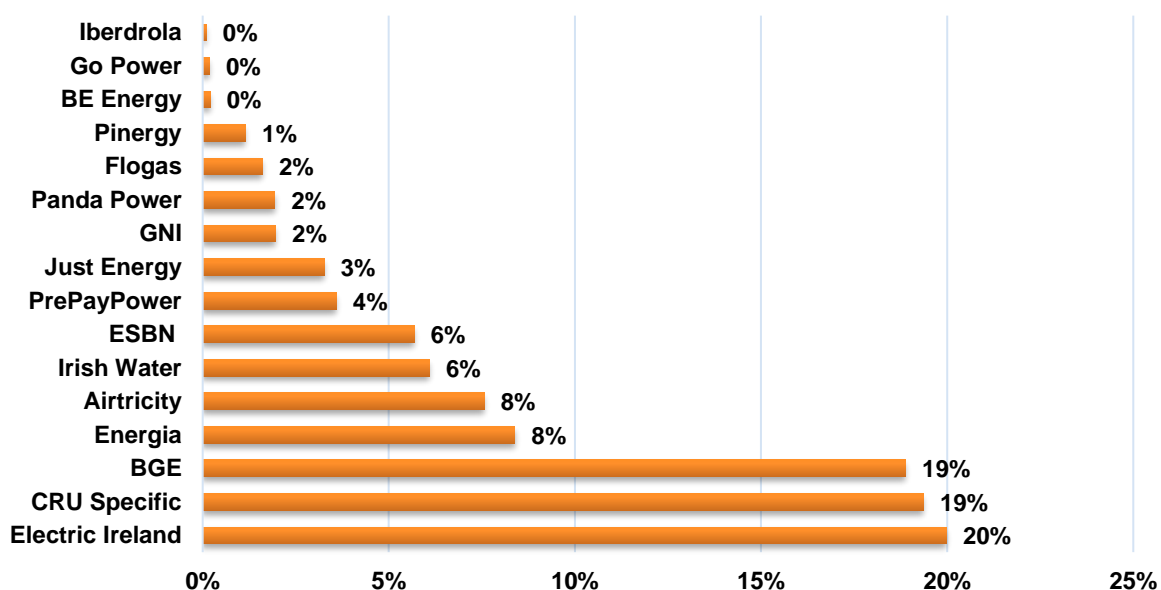
Chart 1: Customer Contacts Logged - CRM



Of the 4839 contact cases created, approximately 59% of customer contacts were received by telephone, 29% by email, 10% via the CRU website, and 3% by letter.

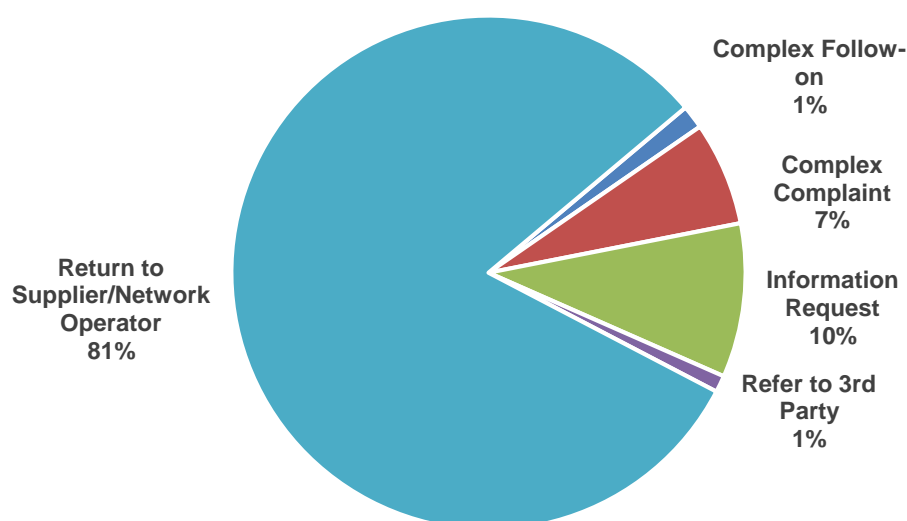
Chart 2 details the percentage of customer contacts related to each energy supplier, network operator and Irish Water. The ‘CRU Specific’ category refers to general information requests specifically directed at CRU, for example a customer may query how to switch energy supplier, how to compare energy offerings or obtain information on their consumer rights and obligations, it also includes contacts where the customer did not wish to disclose the name of their supplier.

Chart 2: Percentage of Customer Contacts to CRU - 2019



Most customer contacts (81%) were referred back to the customer’s energy supplier, network operator or to Irish Water for further information or action, such as completing the supplier/network operator complaint handing process. Many customers contact the CRU having viewed our contact number on the back of a bill and have mistaken CRU for their supplier. This ‘Return to Supplier/Network Operator’ figure is broadly similar to 2018, when 84% of contacts were returned to the supplier, network operator or Irish Water. Only 7% of customer contacts escalated into a complex complaint requiring full investigation by the CRU. Information requests accounted for 10% of contacts.

Chart 3. Customer Contact Type 2019



2.1.2 Market share and customer contact volumes

Chart 4 looks at the eight largest suppliers and compares the proportion of customer contacts against their respective market share (combined electricity and gas market). The share of customer contacts for each of the eight largest suppliers is broadly in line with their market share, except for BGE and Electric Ireland. The level of contacts made regarding BGE (28%) is notably higher than its market share (22%) while contacts levels regarding Electric Ireland (30%) are lower than its respective market share (44%).

Chart 4: Market Share and Customer Contacts - Energy Suppliers - 2019

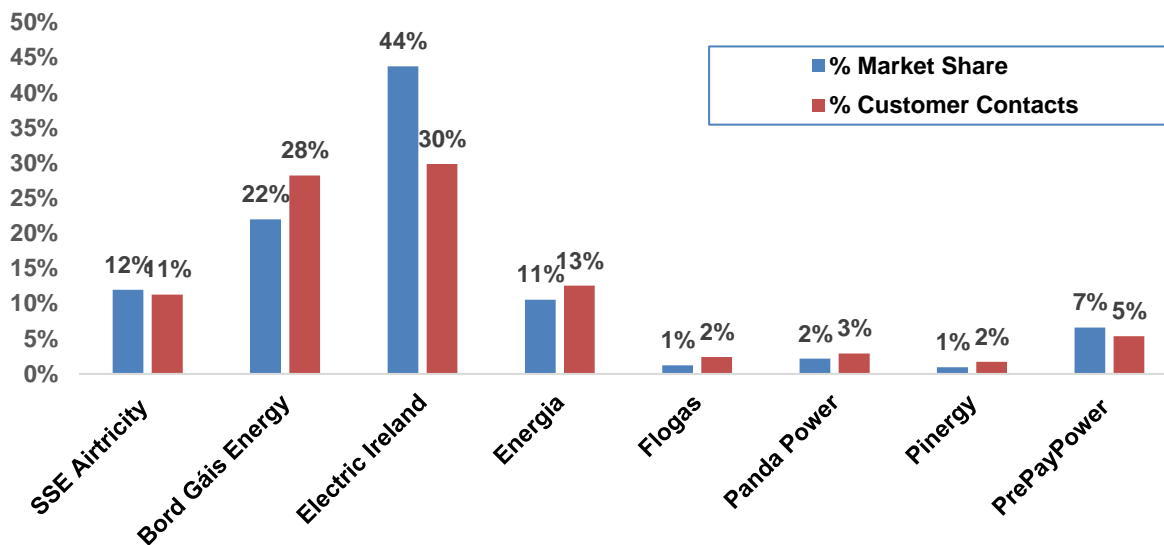
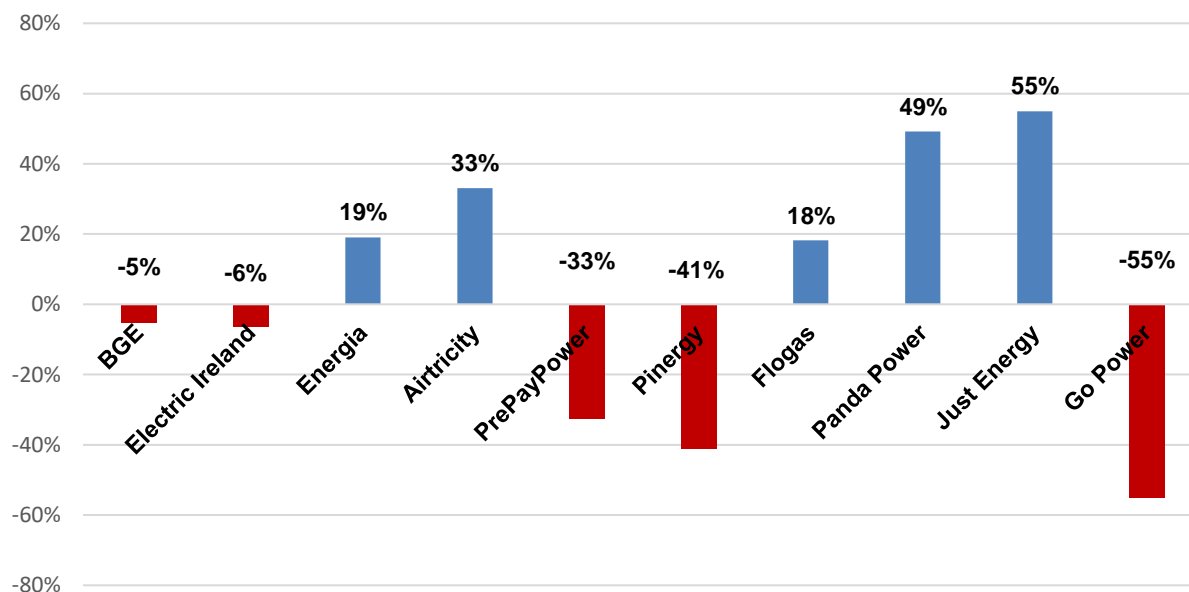


Chart 5 below looks at the change in contact volumes between 2018 and 2019. It can be seen that contacts to the CRU regarding Go Power, Pinergy and PrePayPower greatly reduced. While contacts regarding Just Energy, Panda Power and SSE Airtricity significantly increased.

Chart 5: Change in contact volumes 2018 - 2019



3. Complex Complaints

3.1.1 The CRU Customer Care Team complaints investigation process

The CCT can only investigate a complex complaint if a customer has exhausted the supplier, network operator or Irish Water internal complaints process. Irish Water customers must also confirm that they were a registered customer of Irish Water at the time the cause of the complaint occurred.

As a result, although many customers contact the CCT with queries and complaints, the CCT only carries out a full investigation on 'complex complaints' i.e. when a customer cannot resolve their complaint with a supplier, network operator or Irish Water. While complex complaints only accounted for 7% of the number of customer contacts received in 2019, they represent a major part of the CCT's work.

As well as resolving complaints for customers, the investigation of complex complaints provides the CRU with useful insights into the issues that customers are experiencing with energy undertakings and Irish Water and helps inform the CRU's consumer protection policies.

Each complex complaint is carefully investigated. The investigation includes gathering of information, correspondence and communication between the parties involved in the complaint. This can include a review of call recordings, bills, letters, emails, photographs, meter reads, and any other useful information. During the investigation the CCT consider relevant legislation, Codes of Practice⁴ and the guidelines in the Electricity and Natural Gas Supplier Handbook⁵ or the Irish Water Customer Handbook⁶ as well as any other relevant documentation.

Once these steps have been completed, the CCT issue a proposed decision to the relevant parties and seek their comments. The CCT's final decision is made following a review of all

⁴ Suppliers are required to produce Codes of Practice which provide minimum service guarantees to customers in the following areas: Marketing and Sign-Up, Billing and Disconnection, Complaint Handling, Vulnerable Customers, Pay As You Go Metering, and Budget Controllers

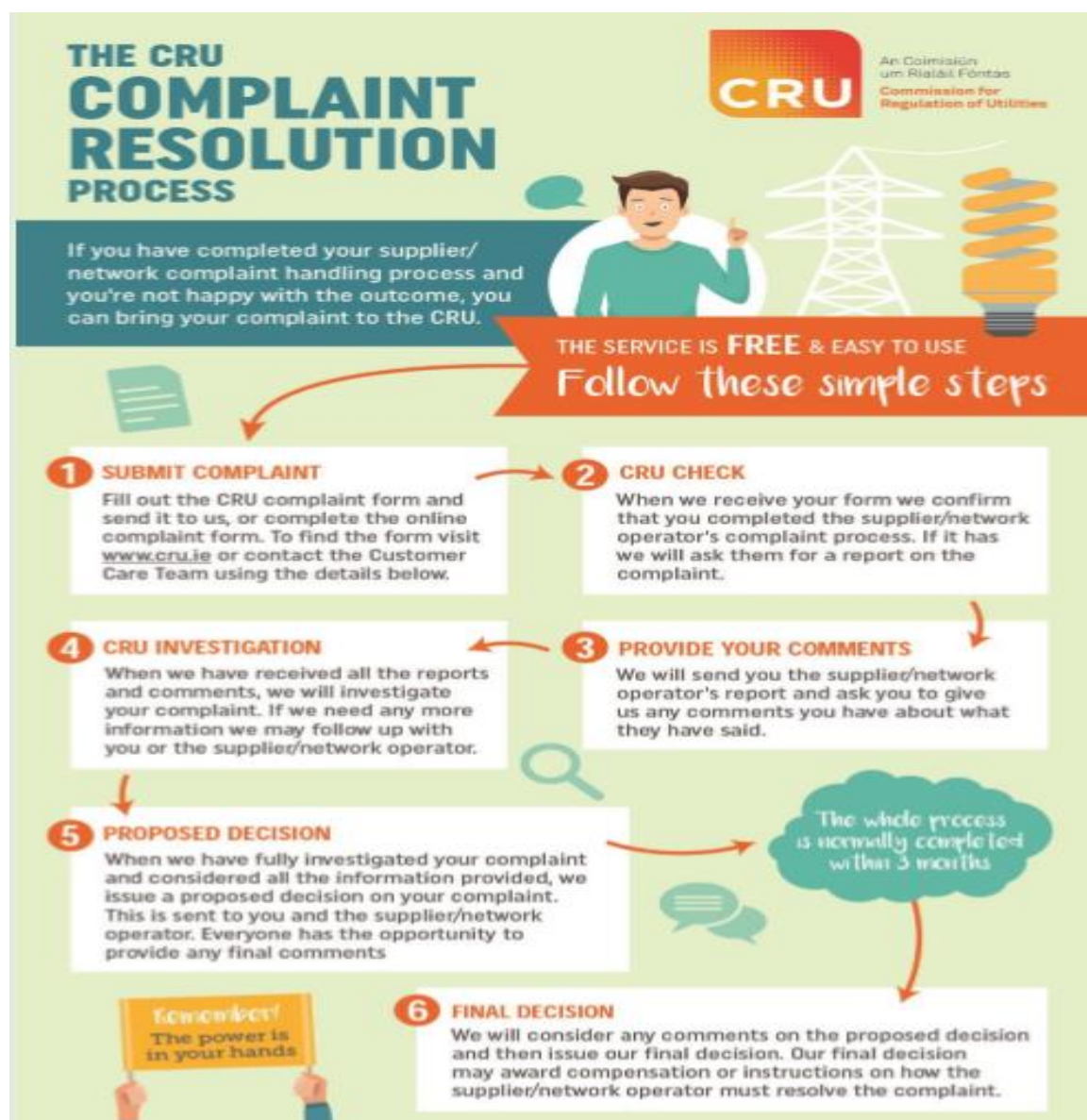
⁵ [The Electricity and Natural Gas Supplier Handbook](#) (CRU/19/138) details what the energy suppliers and network operators are required to include in their Customer Charters and Codes of Practice

⁶ [The Irish Water Domestic Customer Handbook](#) (CRU/17/139) and the [Irish Water Non-Domestic Customer Handbook](#) (CRU/17/318) provide guidelines to Irish Water for required levels of customer service for Irish Water customers.

comments on the proposed decision. The CCT have powers to direct suppliers, network operators or Irish Water to issue refunds, award proportionate compensation or to resolve the complaint in a particular way.

The CRU's Customer Care Team decision is not subject to appeal and is binding on the supplier, network operator or Irish Water. CRU decisions are not binding on a customer. Customers may refer the matter to another forum, such as the Small Claims Court, if they are unhappy with the decision.

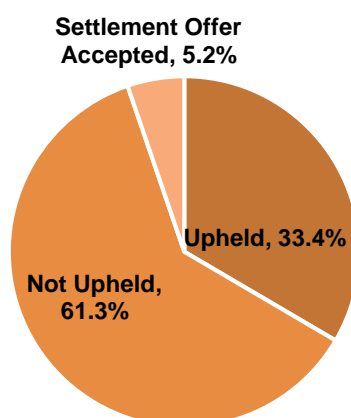
For more details on this process, or for details on how to raise a complaint with the CRU, please visit the Customer Care section of the CRU website: <https://www.cru.ie/need-assistance/customer-care-team/>



3.1.2 Overview of Complex Complaints 2019

In 2019 the CCT opened 316 investigations against energy companies and Irish Water, a 7% increase compared to 2018. The CCT closed⁷ 305 investigations, an increase of 3% from 2018. In 33% of the cases investigated the CCT found in favour of the complainant. A further 5% of cases were settled by early settlement offer. An early settlement offer is an offer given by the supplier or network operator during the investigation process. The number of cases resolved by settlement increased in 2019⁸. The CRU encourages energy suppliers, network operators and customers to consider the early settlement offer route as an option for speedier resolution of a dispute, where this is appropriate.

Chart 6. Complaint Resolution Profile - 2019



3.1.3 Average complaint resolution timeframe

In 2016 the CCT set a target to resolve complex complaints in less than 90 days⁹. The average complaint resolution time in 2019 was 87 days, down from 93 days in 2018.

Chart 7 demonstrates that average complaint resolution times have decreased significantly since 2013. The CCT are committed to ensuring that the team continue to meet the target in

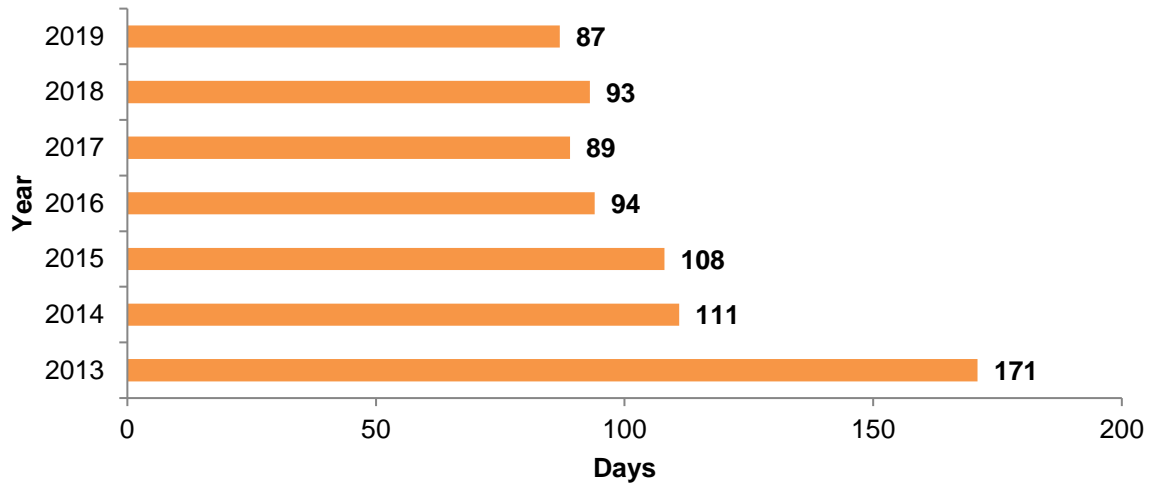
⁷ Closed complaints constitute those complaints closed within a calendar year, for example, a complaint may have been created in November 2018, but closed in 2019. This figure does not include complaints opened in 2019 that were not concluded by year end.

⁸ Complaints closed by settlement offer amounted to 12 in 2017, 8 in 2018 and 16 in 2019.

⁹ This is in line with ADR legislation - Directive 2013/11/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 May 2013 on alternative dispute resolution for consumer disputes and amending Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004 and Directive 2009/22/EC (Directive on consumer ADR)

resolving complex complaints in less than 90 days.

Chart 7. Average Complaint Resolution Time



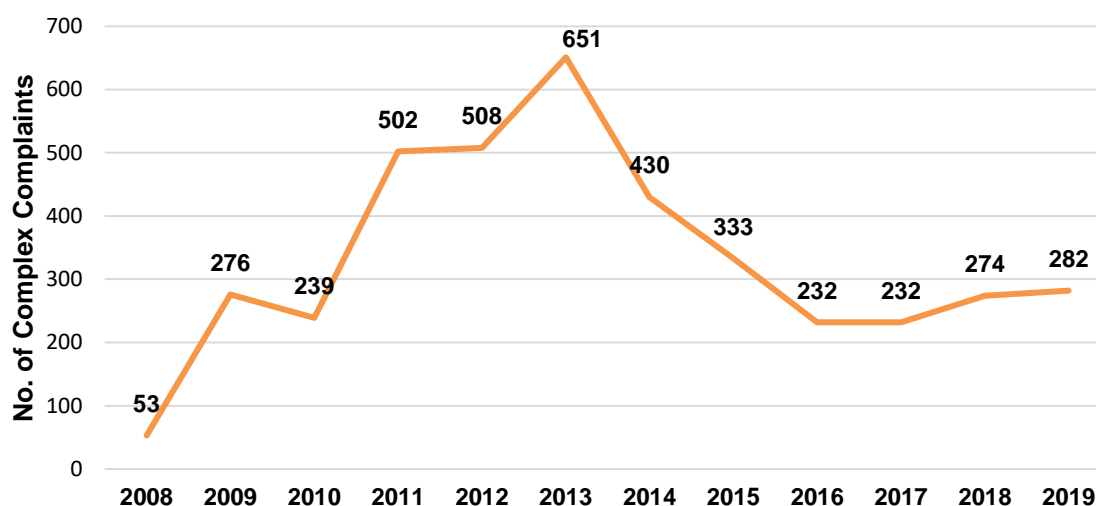
4. Complex Complaints – Energy Sector

4.1.1 Overview of complex complaints in the energy sector

In 2019 the CCT opened 282 complex complaints involving energy suppliers or network companies. This is a 3% increase on the number of energy related complaints opened in 2018. Complex complaints in the energy sector decreased significantly between 2013 and 2016, however there appears to be the beginning of an upward trend in recent years. which may be as a result of the CRU consumer awareness campaign referred to above.

The CCT will continue to work with energy suppliers and network companies to address factors driving these complaints.

Chart 8 - Energy Complaints Opened



4.1.2 Complex complaint resolution profiles – energy

The CCT **closed** 276 energy complex complaint investigations in 2019¹⁰. The resolution profile for energy complaints is broadly in line with the resolution profile for complex complaints generally; 33.7% of complaints investigated were upheld in favour of the customer, 60.5% were not upheld, and 5.8% were resolved by an early settlement offer.

¹⁰ The number of complex complaints ‘opened’ and ‘closed’ in a year can vary, as a complaint opened in one year may not be closed until the following year.

4.1.3 Cause of complex complaints – energy suppliers

The key drivers for complex complaints against energy suppliers in 2019 is displayed in Table 1 below. Billing and account problems, year on year, continue to produce the majority of customer complaints (66% and 19% respectively).

Table 1 - Complaint type – Energy Suppliers		2017	2018	2019
1	Billing (e.g. inaccurate bills, catch up bills, charges and tariffs)	71%	52%	66%
2	Account problems (e.g. incorrect details, contract terms)	15%	22%	19%
3	Customer Service issues	-	10%	6%
4	Switching (e.g. delays, incorrect switching)	4%	5%	3%
5	Disconnections	3%	6%	3%
6	Marketing and sign-up (e.g. misleading information)	1%	2%	1%
7	Other (Miscellaneous issues)	5%	4%	2%

4.1.4 Cause of complaints – energy networks

All natural gas customers are served by Gas Networks Ireland (GNI), and all electricity customers are served by ESB Networks (ESBN). Services provided by GNI and ESBN include the operation of the gas and electricity networks, installation, maintenance and reading of meters, and restoration of supply. The majority of complaints against GNI and ESBN related to metering issues (67% and 45% respectively).

Table 2 - Complaint type – Energy Networks - 2019		GNI	ESBN
1	Meter issues (faulty meters, issue with meter reading etc)	48%	34%
2	Network charges	19%	21%
3	Connections (problems with connection/ disconnection, delays)	14%	11%
4	Customer service	10%	11%
5	Disconnection	5%	-
6	Quality of supply	-	16%
7	Other (Miscellaneous issues)	4%	7%

4.1.5 Market Share and Complex Complaints

At the end of 2019 there were 9 suppliers active in the domestic gas market and 14 suppliers active in the domestic electricity market. During 2019, one new supplier entered the domestic gas market (Iberdrola) and three suppliers entered the domestic electricity market (Iberdrola, GlowPower and Flogas (existing gas supplier)). In December 2019, Just Energy’s customers transferred to Flogas when Just Energy exited the energy market.

Chart 9 provides a breakdown of the number of complex complaints closed per energy supplier and energy network company in 2019. Chart 10 provides the breakdown of the level of complaints upheld or not upheld against each.

Chart 9: Complex Complaints Closed - Energy - 2019

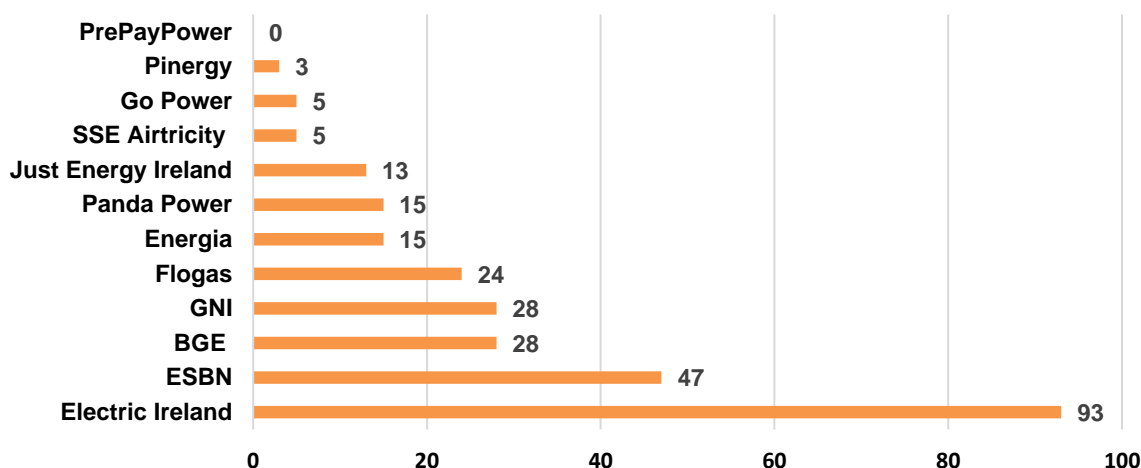


Chart 10: Complex Complaint Resolution - Energy - 2019

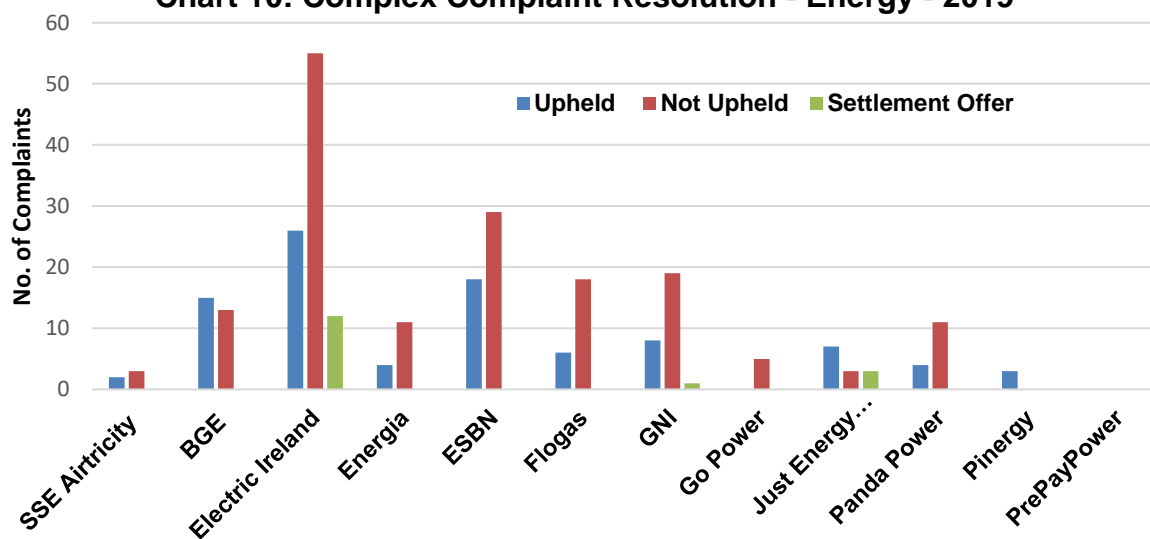


Chart 11 compares the level of upheld complaints by CRU against each supplier from 2017 to 2019. The majority of suppliers saw a decrease in the level of complaints upheld against them in 2019. The overall level of BGE complaints escalated to CRU have been steadily decreasing since 2015, similarly there has been a significant decrease in the number of complaints upheld against BGE since 2017. There were zero complaints against PrePayPower in 2019.

Chart 11: Upheld Complex Complaints - Energy

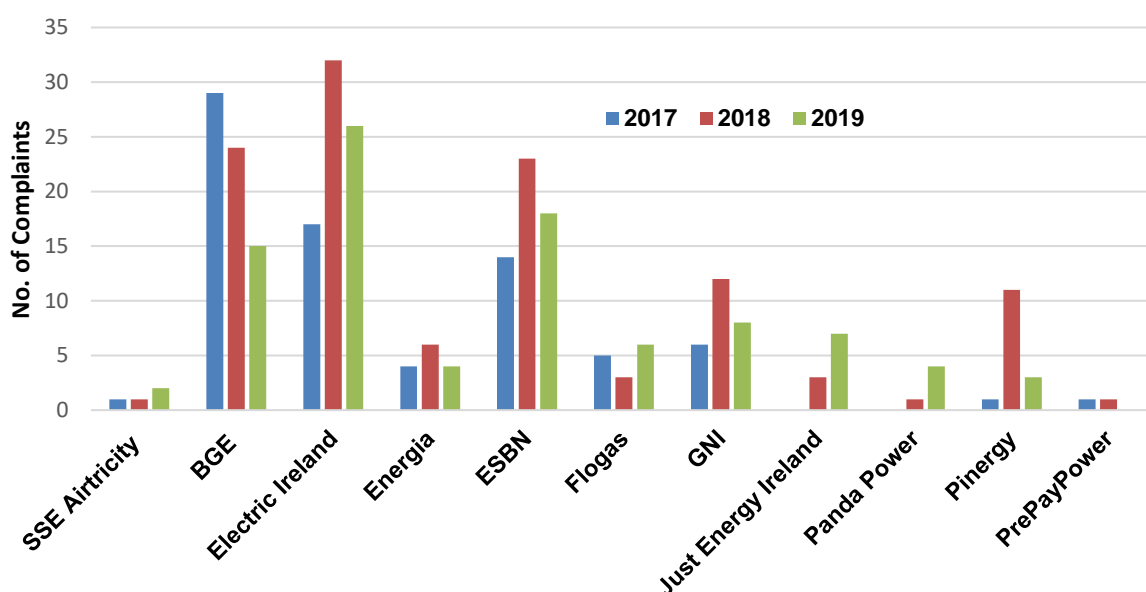


Chart 12 compares the share of upheld complex complaints **closed** in 2019 of the eight largest energy suppliers and their respective percentages of market share in 2019 in terms of customer numbers for the **combined gas and electricity** sectors¹¹. Electric Ireland held the largest combined market share (almost 44%) and largest share of upheld complex complaints (39%). The second largest supplier BGE had a combined market share of 22% in 2019 and accounted for exactly 22% of all upheld complaints against energy suppliers. SSE Airtricity had 12% of the market share and contributed to only 3% of upheld complex complaints. Flogas had a relatively high number of upheld complex complaints relative to its market share.

¹¹ Market share in this instance refers to customer numbers as opposed to MWh's. Combined market share is the total number of customers across both electricity and gas, across all customer classifications (domestic, business etc.)

Chart 12: Upheld Complaints Versus Market Share - Energy Suppliers - 2019

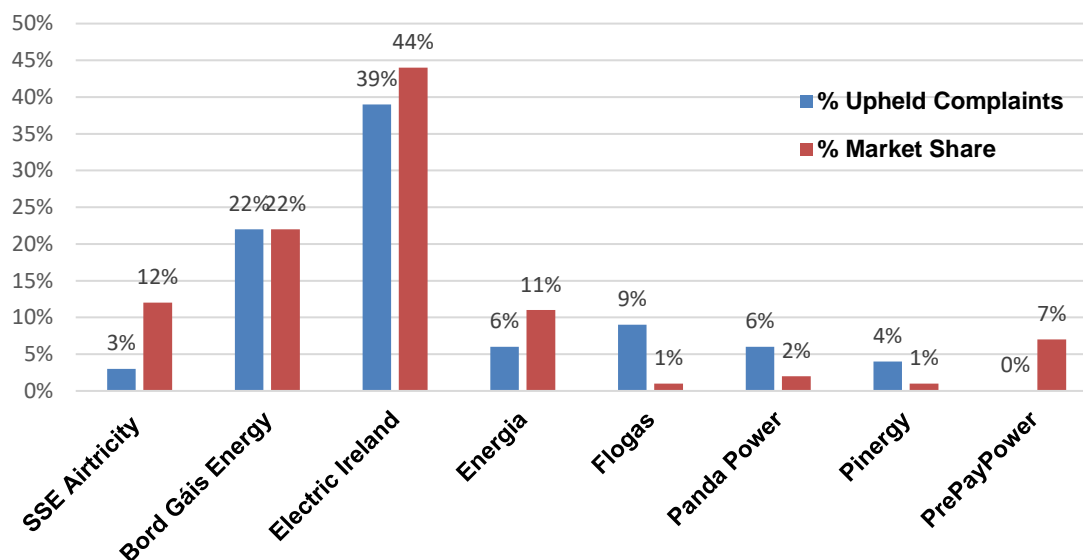
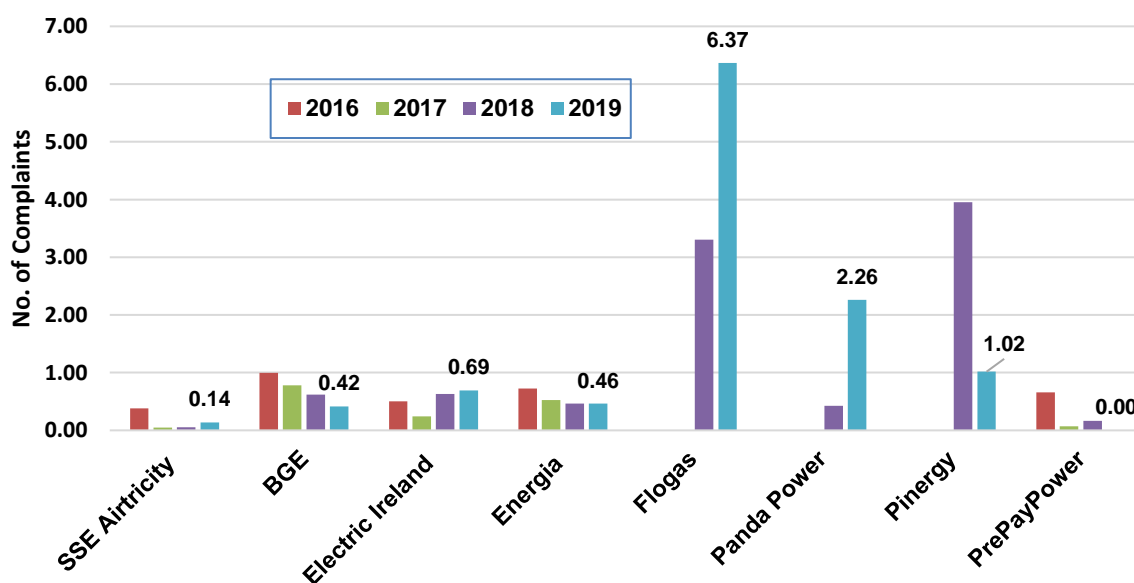


Chart 13 compares the volume of complex complaints closed per 10,000 customers for energy suppliers. It is important to note that Flogas, Pinergy and Panda Power have a low market share (customers numbers) when compared to larger suppliers such as Electric Ireland and BGE. It is also important to note that this comparison includes all complex complaints escalated to CRU (all complaints regardless if they were upheld or not upheld).

Chart 13: Complex Complaints Per 10,000 Customers - Energy Suppliers

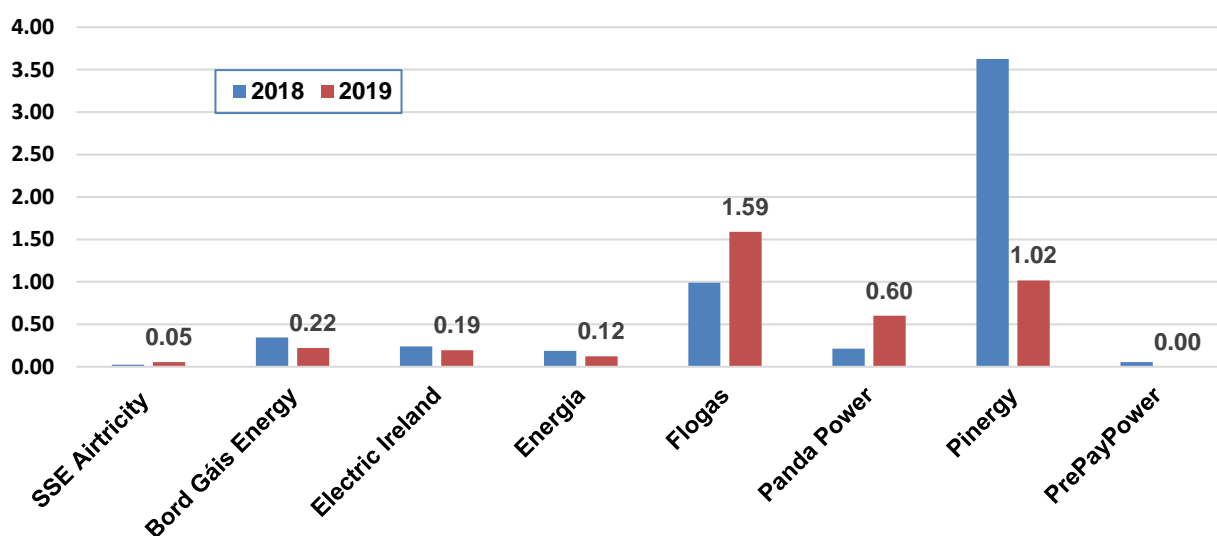


PrePayPower had the lowest volume of complaints per customer, with zero complex complaints lodged against it in 2019. SSEA had the second lowest level of complaints at 0.14 per 10,000 customers. The chart below also depicts the considerable reduction in the level of complaints against Pinergy between 2018 and 2019, which is a welcome improvement.

Flogas and Panda Power had the highest level of complex complaints referred to CRU at 6.37 and 2.23 per 10,000 customers; it is again important to keep in mind that both suppliers have a small market share when compared against the other suppliers in this Chart.

Chart 14, below, looks at the level of complaints that were **upheld** per 10,000 customers for the eight largest energy suppliers. We can see that Flogas’s result, at 1.59 upheld complaints per 10,000 customers is again higher than that of other suppliers.

Chart 14: Upheld Complaints per 10,000 customers - Energy Suppliers



4.1.6 Market share and complaints – energy networks

ESBN supplied electricity to 2.39 million sites in 2019 and GNI supplied gas to over 705,000 sites. Based on the number of complex complaints made to CRU against network operators, for every 10,000 sites, 0.20 complex complaints were logged against ESBN; a decrease from 0.28 in 2018. There were 0.41 complex complaints per 10,000 sites against GNI, an increase of 0.32 from 2018.

Chart 15: Complaints per 10,000 sites - Energy Networks

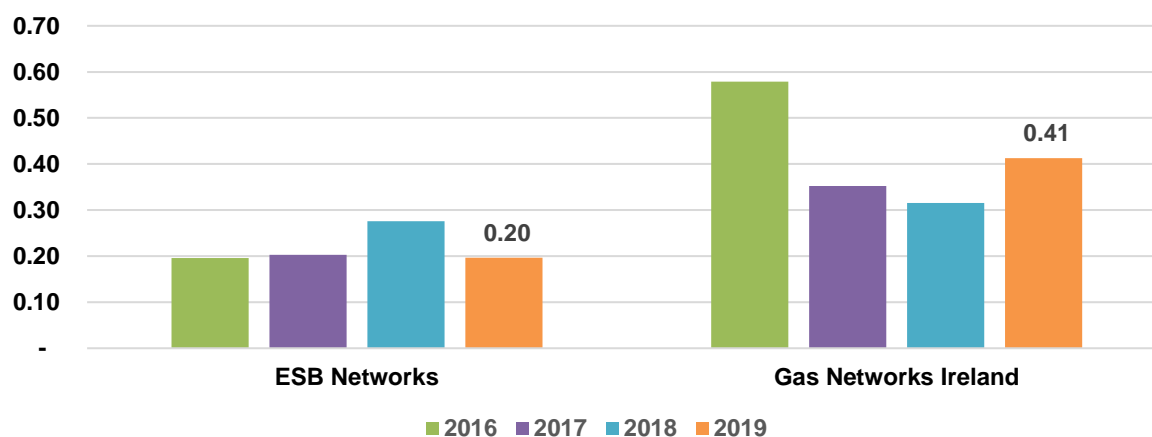
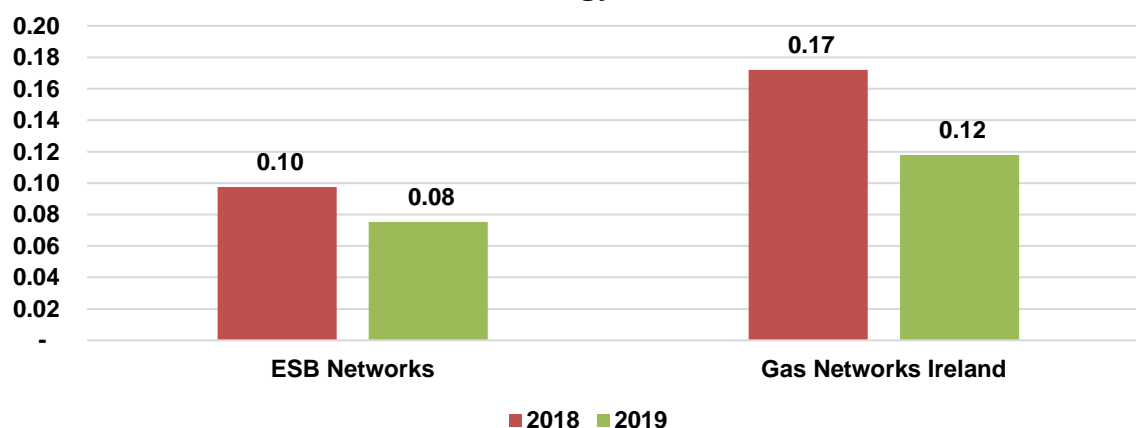


Chart 16 looks at the level of complaints that were **upheld** per 10,000 sites for ESBN and GNI. Both the total number of complaints against ESBN, and the number of complaints upheld against ESBN decreased between 2018 and 2019.

The number of overall complaints to the CRU against GNI increased between 2018 and 2019, while the number of upheld complaints against GNI decreased in the same period.

Chart 16 - Upheld Complaints per 10,000 sites - Energy Networks



5. Irish Water

5.1.1 Overview

The Water Services Act 2014 gave statutory responsibility to the CRU to provide a complaints resolution service to registered Irish Water customers with an unresolved dispute with Irish Water.

The suspension of domestic water charging in 2016 resulted in a large decrease in the volume of Irish Water related contacts to the CRU, particularly those in relation to billing and account problems. Throughout 2018, the CRU and Irish Water progressed work on the Irish Water non-domestic tariff framework policy and connections policy which led to an increase in contacts between 2017 and 2018. Contacts have remained relatively static since.

5.1.2 Irish Water Contacts

The CCT received 295 contacts in relation to Irish Water in 2019. This represents a decrease of 9% from the level of Irish Water contacts received in 2018. Similar to complex complaints, the issues raised via customer contacts were mixed reflecting the wide range of roles carried out by Irish Water (see Chart 18). The majority of contacts were in relation to billing and account problems. Customers also noted that Irish Water was failing to respond to their queries in a timely manner and/or not escalating their complaints.

Chart 17: Irish Water Contacts

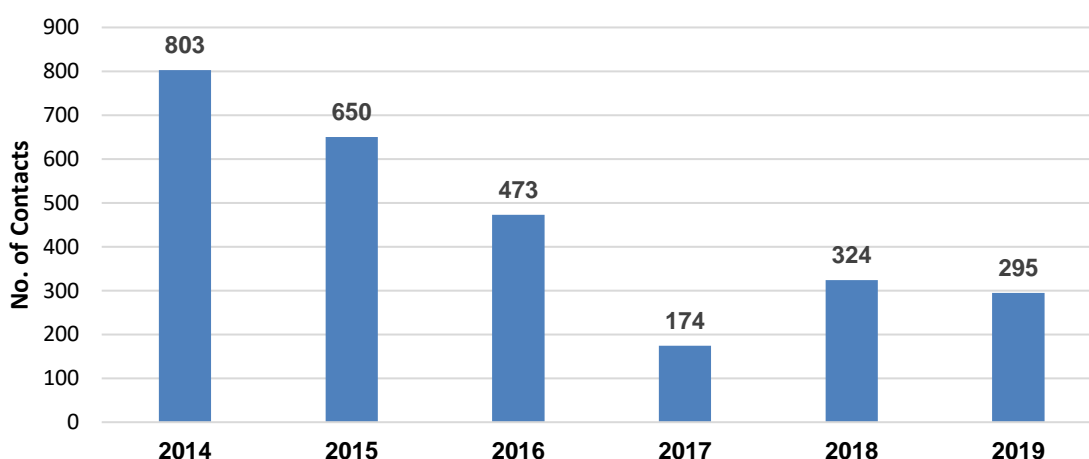
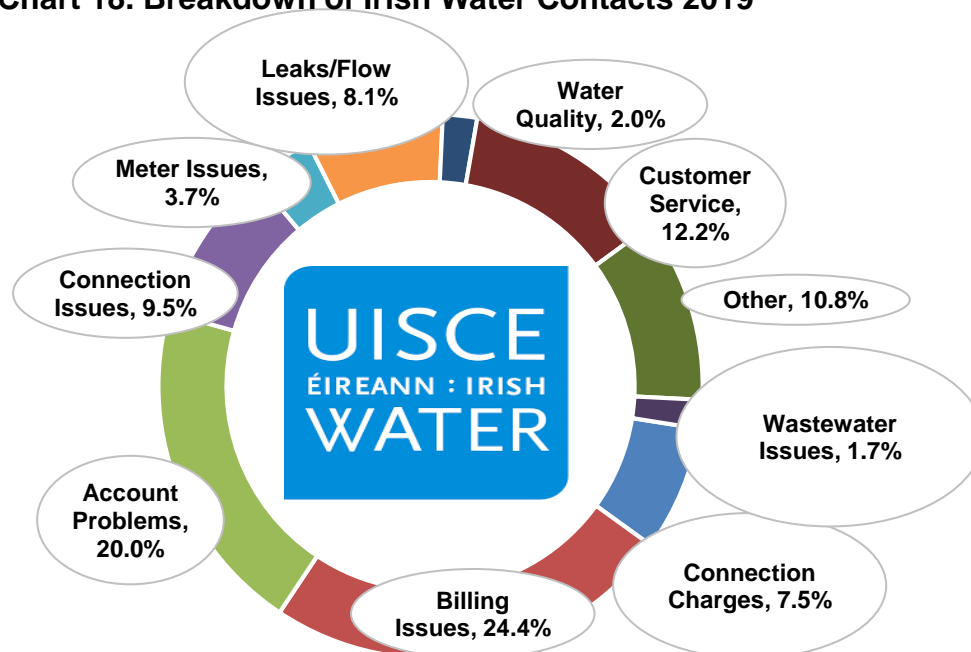


Chart 18. Breakdown of Irish Water Contacts 2019



5.1.3 Complex complaints

In 2019 the CRU **opened** 34 complex complaints in relation to Irish Water; an increase of 62% from 2018. The CRU investigated and **closed** 29 complex complaints relating to Irish Water in 2019. The drivers for these complaints varied as illustrated in Chart 20.

Billing and Account problems accounted for the majority of Irish Water complaints; primarily complaints from non-domestic customers who are receiving regular bills. Charges, such as connection charges drove 25% of complaints while customer service accounted for 22% of complaints.

Chart 19: Irish Water - Complex Complaints Closed

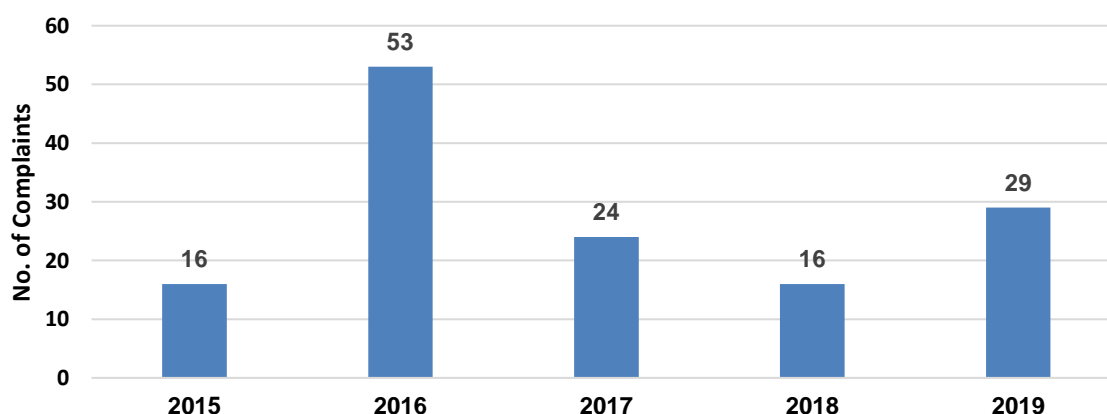
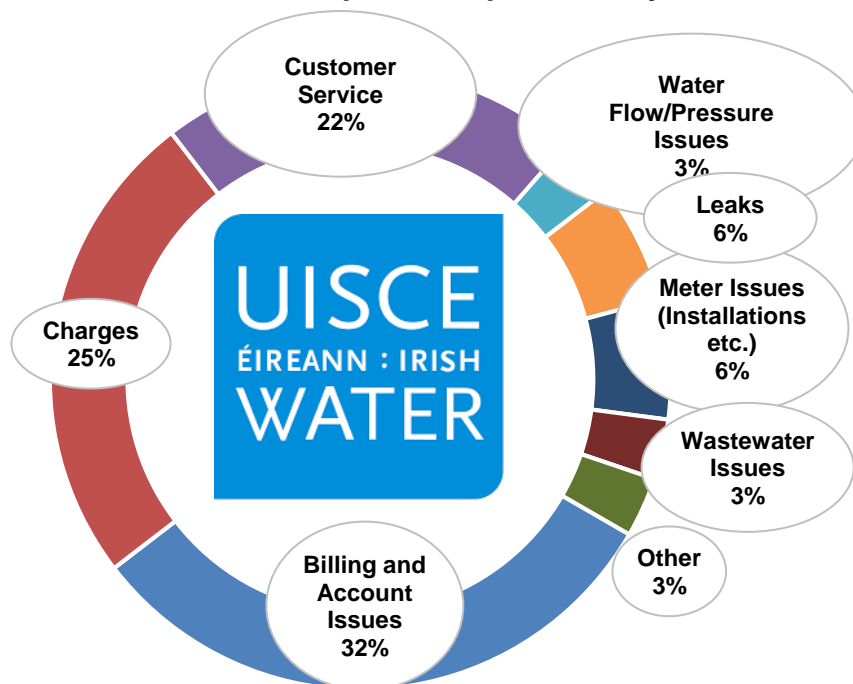


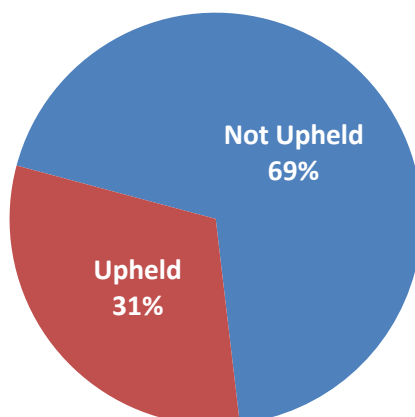
Chart 20: Irish Water - Complex Complaint Analysis - 2019



5.1.4 Complaint resolution

The CRU upheld 31% of the 29 Irish Water complaints investigated in 2019, while 69% of complaints were not upheld.

Chart 21: Complaint Resolution - Irish Water 2019



6. Complaints outside the scope of the CRU's Customer Care Team

There are instances, based on legislation, when the CCT cannot investigate a complaint. These are:

- where the complaint is, or has previously been through the Courts
- where the complaint was made six years after the cause of the complaint occurred
- where the complaint does not concern the functions or objectives of the CRU
- where the complaint is relating to Irish Water and the customer is not a registered customer of Irish Water at the time of the cause of the complaint.

In 2019 the CCT were precluded from investigating four complaints; two cases related to energy and two cases related to Irish Water.

One of the energy complaints could not be accepted as it was in relation to a boiler service (does not concern the functions or objectives of the CRU) while the other complaint was made in excess of six years after the cause of the complaint occurred.

In terms of the Irish Water complaints, both complaints could not be accepted as the customers in question (both domestic customers) were not registered customers of Irish Water at the time the cause of the complaint occurred.

7. Case Studies

7.1 Energy Complaint Case Studies

Case No. 1 Gas – Large Catch Up Bill

Complaint Not Upheld

This customer contacted the CRU's Customer Care Team as he had received a large bill of almost €7000 from his gas supplier. During the six-year period between 2013 and 2019, Gas Networks Ireland (GNI) could not gain access to the customer's meter to take a reading and, as a result, the customer was billed by his gas supplier on estimated readings rather than his actual usage.

When GNI did gain access and obtain an actual meter reading at the address in 2019, the customer received a large catch-up bill of almost €7000. The customer disputed this bill and stated that he had no means to open his meter box to obtain a meter reading.

The CRU investigated and did not uphold this customer's complaint. Both GNI and the customer's supplier followed their appropriate procedures. During the period, whenever GNI's meter readers were unable to gain access to the property they left 'no access cards' at the property, requesting that the customer contact them and submit a meter reading. If GNI cannot gain access to read the meter they must estimate a customer's usage. This estimate is then sent to the customer's supplier, so a bill can be issued. This customer, over the 6-year period, was notified on his bills that the consumption amounts were based on estimated readings, not actual meter readings. The customer was responsible for providing access to GNI to read the meter and/or to supply regular customer readings to ensure he was being billed for actual usage. The customer at any time could have requested a meter box key from GNI or could have purchased a generic key at any hardware store which would have allowed him to open the meter box and obtain a meter reading.

The CRU empathised with the customer on receiving the large catch up bill and acknowledged that he would not have budgeted for such a large amount. The CRU, however, did not uphold the customer's complaint and agreed that the catch-up bill was due and owing. In recognition of the large sum to be repaid the CRU directed the customer's supplier to place the customer on a six-year repayment plan.

Lack of access to gas and electricity meters and subsequent catch up bills is a recurring complaint to the CRU. It is clear from the cases CRU investigate that many customers do not understand that a series of estimated bills can lead to a large catch up bill. Suppliers alert customers on their bills to the fact that bills are estimated by placing “E” beside the meter readings. The responsibility is then with the account holder to provide GNI with access or a customer reading so that actual usage can be recorded and billed correctly to avoid large catch up bills

Case No. 2 Electricity – Incorrect Meter Reading

Complaint Upheld

This customer contacted the CRU advising that her supplier and ESB Networks (ESBN) were negligent in the management of her electricity account resulting in the customer receiving a large catch up bill of €4000. The customer had signed up with her supplier in 2017, however, due to access issues, no actual meter readings were obtained by ESBN throughout 2016/2017. During 2017, the customer had submitted meter readings to ESBN but had incorrectly submitted four-digit readings instead of five-digit readings. ESBN’s meter reader gained access to the property in March 2018 and obtained an actual meter reading. However, this meter reading was rejected by ESBN as the five-digit meter read obtained by the meter reader was not in line/did not correlate with four-digit readings submitted by the customer.

The issue with the incorrect four-digit meter readings was only rectified in May 2019 when another ESBN meter reader obtained a five-digit actual meter reading and the error was logged and resolved. The correct meter reading obtained in May 2019 resulted in the customer receiving the large catch up bill of €4000. The customer highlighted that the catch up was due to ESBN’s failure to use their meter reader’s actual meter reading taken in March 2018. ESBN in recognition of their error in rejecting their own meter reader’s reading offered the customer €400 compensation. The customer considered that the bill should be written off in its entirety.

The CRU investigated and upheld the complaint against ESBN, however the CRU deemed that the offer made by ESBN was fair and reasonable for their error and did not direct ESBN to award additional compensation. Throughout 2017, the customer would have benefitted from very low bills due to submitting incorrect four-digit customer readings. The electricity had been used by the customer and the balance was due and owing. To assist the customer

in repaying her debt the CRU directed the customer's supplier to place the customer on a four-year repayment plan.

Case No. 3 Gas – Level Pay/Budget Payment Plan

Complaint Upheld

This customer opened a gas account with a supplier and signed up to a level pay/budget plan where the customer's monthly bill was set at €45 per month. The customer noted a rising balance of arrears on his monthly bills and contacted the supplier on many occasions to query the rising balance. The customer was continually advised by the supplier that his payments of €45 per month would cancel out the arrears over the course of the year. A few months later, the supplier increased the customer's monthly payments from €45 to €65 per month, however this increase had little effect on covering the rising arrears on the customer's account. The customer lodged an official complaint with the gas supplier however his calls were rarely returned, and no attempt was made by the supplier in question to resolve the matter until the complaint was escalated by the customer to the CRU.

The CRU investigated and upheld the customer's complaint in relation to the many customer service issues the customer had encountered in attempting to get his complaint resolved. The monthly budget plan payment as determined by the supplier was at no time sufficient to cover the customer's actual gas usage and led to arrears accumulating on the customer's account. The total debt accumulated by the customer at the end of his contract period was €700. A budget plan is designed to even out customer payments throughout the year. However, in order for budget plans to work correctly, the plan needs to be managed by the supplier to take account of a customer's actual usage; suppliers in turn need to apply appropriate increments to monthly sums if it is noted that the monthly payments are not enough to cover usage. In this case, the supplier should have conducted a full audit on the budget plan where arrears continued to accumulate.

The CRU directed the supplier award the customer €330 in Charter Payments for its many customer service failings and for failing to manage the budget plan effectively. The supplier also agreed as a goodwill gesture to write off the balance of €360 owing on the customer's account.

Case No. 4 Electricity – Faulty Meter

Complaint Upheld

The customer noted that the bi-monthly bills for her vacant premises increased from approximately €30 to €160. The customer contacted her electricity supplier to report the issue on many occasions and various agents advised the customer they would investigate; however, no resolution or explanation was ever provided.

Many months passed and the customer noted that the meter in the premises was still recording usage even when every appliance in the property was turned off. The customer reported this to her electricity supplier who in turn logged a service call with ESNB to investigate the meter.

ESNB called to the property and replaced the meter advising it was faulty but did not initially apply a usage adjustment/credit as ESNB concluded, based on historical analysis of consumption at the address, that a debt was owing. The customer proceeded to log a complaint with the CRU. During CRU's investigation ESNB revisited their adjustment calculation based upon up to date usage patterns following replacement of the meter. It was then noted that a credit adjustment of 789 units was due to the customer.

The CRU upheld the complaint against ESNB and directed ESNB to apply the credit adjustment. The CRU also directed the customer's supplier to award the customer with €120 compensation for ordering the disconnection of the customer's account for non-payment while the matter was the subject of an ongoing complaint investigation with the CRU. The CRU further directed the customer's supplier to place the customer on a payment plan for settlement of arrears owing on the account.

Case No. 5 Gas – Meter Tampering

Complaint Not Upheld

As part of Gas Networks Ireland's (GNI's) revenue protection policy, GNI called to this customer's address to inspect the gas meter as there had been very low gas usage recorded at this customer's address for several years. GNI removed the gas meter from the customer's property and replaced the meter with a new meter. Upon examining the old gas meter GNI found that the meter had been tampered with. The examination showed that the index had been drilled which meant that the meter was not recording gas usage correctly. Scratching on the index dials also confirmed interference. From reviewing the meter reads it appeared the tampering started in 2010.

In line with GNI's revenue protection policy (approved by CRU), GNI sought payment from the customer for gas usage going back two years (to be recouped via the customer's gas supplier), a siteworks charge of €248.08, and advised the customer that a conformance certificate from a Registered Gas Installer (RGI) would be required.

The customer contacted the CRU for assistance and advised that she had not tampered with the meter. The customer advised that she had been living at the address since 2006 but maintained that she had a back boiler installed and did not use gas to heat the property. GNI did not accuse the customer of tampering, however, the meter was situated on the customer's property and the customer was availing of gas which was not being recorded on the meter.

The CRU investigated and did not uphold the customer's complaint as the meter had been visibly interfered with leading to gas being used but not recorded. The CRU, in line with GNI's revenue protection policy directed the customer to provide GNI with a conformance certificate, pay the siteworks charge to GNI, and pay her gas supplier the undercharge equivalent to two years usage. The monetary value of this usage was approximately €650. The CRU directed the customer's gas supplier to place the customer on a repayment plan for the €650.

Case No. 6 Electricity – Pass Through Costs

Complaint Not Upheld

This business customer was unhappy that his electricity supplier had increased his unit rate in the middle of his contract term. The customer believed the rate he signed up to should be applied to his account for the duration of his agreement/contract term. The supplier maintained that the increase was due to increasing regulated costs/'pass through electricity costs' and that the terms and conditions, which were provided to the customer upon sign up, clearly stated the right of the supplier to pass on such costs to the customer.

Pass through costs are set by ESB Networks/Eirgrid/SEMO and approved by the CRU – such charges include charges associated with use of the system (generation and network costs). Whilst international fuel prices are a key driver of electricity prices some of the cost components in a business customer's electricity price are directly regulated and suppliers are required to pay them. Changes to these regulated charges generally come into effect on 1st October annually. While it is the decision of each supplier whether or not to pass on such

costs to final customers, most suppliers pass on all such costs. An increase in pass through costs does not however affect any discounts a customer may have.

The CRU investigated and did not uphold the customer's complaint. The supplier's terms and conditions clearly outlined that pass through charges are subject to change. When the pass-through charges increased these charges were passed on to the customer by his supplier in accordance with the supplier's terms and conditions agreed by the customer at sign-up. It is a customer's responsibility to ensure that prior to entering into any business contract that they fully understand and agree to the terms and conditions associated with the contract.

7.2 Water Complaint Case Studies

Case No. 1 Water – Customer Service

Complaint Upheld

This customer received several letters from Irish Water in 2015 noting that there was a leak at his property and explaining Irish Water's 'First Fix Free' leak repair policy. The customer was concerned at receiving such letters and engaged the services of a private plumber to investigate the presence of a leak. The plumber could not find any leak at the customer's address. The customer, in turn, communicated to Irish Water that there was no leak. In response, Irish Water sent an engineer to the customer's address to investigate.

The engineer discovered that there were two meters in the customer's boundary box – one going to the customer's property, and one going to another address. Irish Water had mis-labelled the meters at installation stage. The engineer committed to resolving the issue however the customer never received any follow up on the matter.

Between 2016 and 2019 the customer continued to receive further leak notification letters from Irish Water and visits from various Irish Water engineers. Throughout this three-year period, the customer contacted Irish Water on numerous occasions, each time explaining the situation regarding the two meters and the mislabelling. The issue was never rectified therefore the customer referred his complaint to the CRU. The customer advised the CRU that he was worried that he would receive a bill for excess use if the matter was not resolved.

The CRU investigated and upheld this complaint due to the poor customer service received by the customer and the failure by Irish Water to escalate the matter when requested to do so by the customer. Irish Water had numerous opportunities between 2015 and 2019 to resolve this case for the customer. The CRU directed Irish Water award the customer with €340 in Charter Payments for their customer service failures, for the errors on this customer's account and for their failure in dealing with this customer's complaint in a timely manner. The CRU also directed Irish Water reimburse the customer his plumber's fee of €50.

Case No. 2 Water – Pipe Blockage and Sewage Leak

Complaint Not Upheld

This customer contacted the CRU to complain about Irish Water's handling of his complaint. This customer observed a sewage leak in his back garden, originating from a blockage at his neighbour's property, and contacted Irish Water seeking their assistance in resolving the issue. The customer was concerned for his family's health and welfare and noted that the issue was not of his making and outside his control in terms of being able to resolve it. The customer felt Irish Water should investigate, remove the blockage, and repair the pipework. The customer also noted the level of customer service he received from Irish Water, during his interactions with the utility, were not up to standard.

The CRU investigated and did not uphold the customer's complaint. The CRU did not uphold as the blockage had occurred within the boundary of private property (belonging to the customer's neighbour) downstream of the customer's pipework. The blockage and associated leak were not on the public side therefore Irish Water had no remit in determine the cause, nature or location of the problem. The pipe and blockage needed to be repaired by the private owner of the premises.

In recognition of various customer service issues in Irish Water's handling of this complaint, the CRU directed that Irish Water award the customer €60 in Charter Payments.