



UK European Consumer Centre



Annual Report 2016

UK European Consumer Centre

In 2016 the UK European Consumer Centre dealt with 17,815 contacts from consumers, most of which were either by phone or email although a small number (just over 3%) were by letter. 2016 was an even busier year than 2015 – we dealt with 10,078 UK consumer cases, an increase of 18.2%.

So although every year UK consumers find themselves in dispute with EU companies over problems with purchases such as transport (including air travel and car rental), recreation and culture (including ‘sold-out ticket’ events) and timeshares and discount holiday clubs, more and more people are seeking our help.

Most of these concerned a proven cross-border element, while the remainder were information requests – these may be advice on an aspect of consumer law, issuing of a leaflet or referral to another specialised organisation.

We handled 6,190 information requests, 3,117 advice cases and 771 assistance cases (which needed further help from the European Consumer Centres Network) on behalf of UK consumers. Our advice and information in all cases is based on consumer laws which are grounded in ‘basic consumer principles’ to which all EU consumers are entitled.

The UK ECC plays a vital role in empowering consumers, helping them to gain a better awareness of their rights and take full advantage of the internal market. We are part of the European Consumer Centre network: a practical manifestation of the single market for consumers. Our strength is in numbers: the UK ECC is part of the European Consumer Centre Network – 30 centres covering Europe, plus Iceland and Norway.

So here’s the deal: the UK ECC’s service is FREE and we usually get involved when consumers have exhausted their own efforts to resolve a dispute directly with the trader. We are essentially an advisory service, which means that there’s a lot we can do, but there are limits. We have no enforcement powers, which means that we cannot force traders into a particular course of action if they ignore our communication or disagree with our point of view. We have counterpart offices in most European countries and are often able to contact the trader through them. This avoids the logistical and language difficulties consumers often face.

The aim of the UK ECC is to help as many UK consumers to achieve a positive result as possible: a refund, replacement, repair or cancellation of their contract. Our core purpose is to help consumers.

Customer satisfaction surveys have influenced how the UK ECC service has developed, giving us an insight into what our customers want and enabling us to use lessons learned to shape our service. For example, they led to us extending our opening hours in 2016 to 9am to 5pm.

In 2016, 89% of our customers were happy with the service they received from us, up from the 2015 level of 84%.

And our lost call rate in 2016 was just 7%, meaning that we answered a lot more calls than in 2015 when our opening hours were shorter and our lost call rate was 19%.

One important target met in 2016 was that we retained our Customer Service Excellence Standard, the UK Government’s standard on customer service. In order to keep this CSE certificate for a third year, we had to clearly demonstrate our customer-focus and our quality management in all of our interactions with customers and stakeholders. Our contact handling processes, our online customer satisfaction surveys, website access and complaint recording process are all scrutinised as part of the CSE assessment.



Susan Tolman
Information and Communications Officer



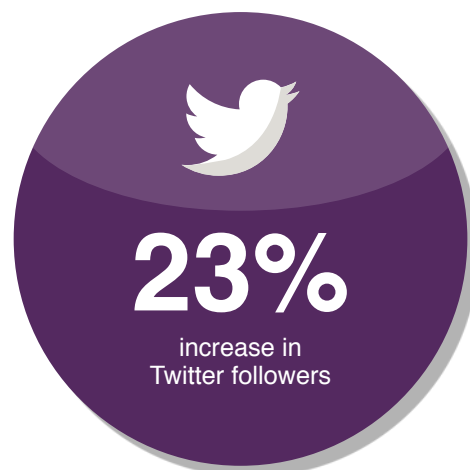
ASSISTANCE TO CONSUMERS



MAIN PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED (UK CONSUMERS)



COMMUNICATIONS



Every year UK consumers find themselves in dispute with EU companies over problems with purchases such as timeshares and discount holiday clubs (and the resale of both), transport (including air travel and car rental) and recreation and culture (including 'sold-out ticket' events).

In 2016, the UK ECC dealt with 10,078 consumers. Nearly 40% of these related to cross-border complaints, whereas the other 60% were requests for information.

The figure of 6,190 information requests makes us the busiest centre in the European Consumer Centre network for such requests. It represents a 53% increase. In some instances, consumers may have just wanted some guidance on consumer law, to be referred to another relevant organisation, or be supplied with brochures or leaflets. It is thought that a significant amount of this increase was caused by the introduction of the Online Dispute Resolution platform on February 2016.

We handled 3,117 advice cases (where a consumer lodged a complaint against a trader based in another European country and we provided tailored advice to help the consumer resolve their complaint). That compares to 3,659 advice cases in 2015 and so represents a 14.8% reduction.

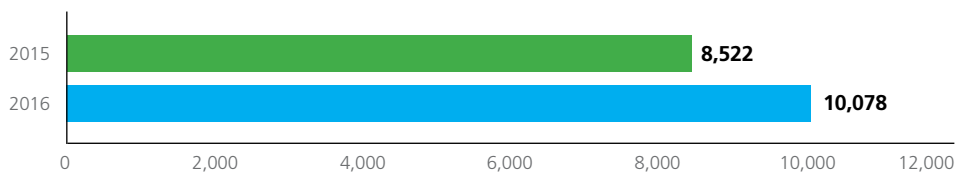
There was also a large number of consumers who required further assistance and the intervention of our ECC-Net counterparts in other EU/EEA countries, with a view to contacting the trader in the country in question on behalf of affected consumers.

The UK ECC dealt with 771 such assistance cases, a drop of 5.7%. These cases take longer to deal with, as our consumer advisors delve deeper into the individual details of the problem and look at specific paperwork relating to the case.

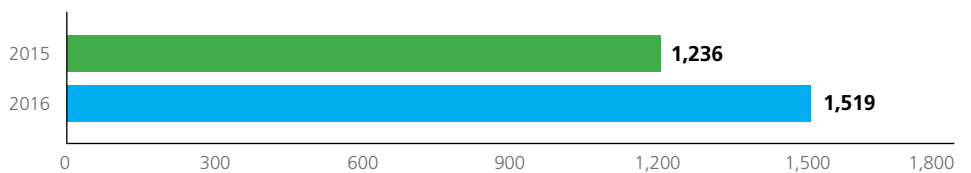
Whilst there has been a reduction of 13.3% in the number of advice and assistance cases combined, the huge increase in the number of information requests (53%) still represents a significant rise in the number of consumers helped by the UK ECC.



UK consumer cases



Cases about UK traders



Whereas in 2015, we helped 8,522 UK consumers, this figure had risen by 18.2% to 10,078 in 2016.

Most cross-border complaints involved consumers from the UK about traders based in other European countries, but the collaborative nature of ECC-Net (we operate in 30 countries) means that we also receive cases from European consumers who have problems with UK traders. We worked with our European

counterparts on 1,519 such cases - every effort is made to contact the trader in order to resolve the complaint.

E-commerce played a bigger part in the way many consumers bought things in 2016 compared to the year before. In 2016, 59.9% of UK consumers who brought a problem to us chose e-commerce as their preferred method for making their purchases. In 2015 that figure was 44.2%.



UK CONSUMER CASES

So what type of problems do consumers face? In order to gain a better understanding of the complaints dealt with in 2016, we provide in this section an analysis of the 771 UK consumer cases which needed further assistance through ECC-Net. The bar chart shows cases sorted by category. We have only drawn attention to the top 10 categories.

Our analysis shows that transport was responsible for 37.4% of all assistance cases, meaning that it causes UK consumers the biggest number of headaches and therefore retains its position as the most complained about sector by UK consumers asking for in-depth help. This compares to 42.8% of such cases in 2015.

Included within the transport category are such subjects as passenger transport by air, car rental and luggage transport by air.

The category of recreation and culture accounted for 17.4% of assistance cases in 2016, that's up from 13.3% the previous year. Included within this category are package holidays and audio-visual, photographic and information processing equipment.

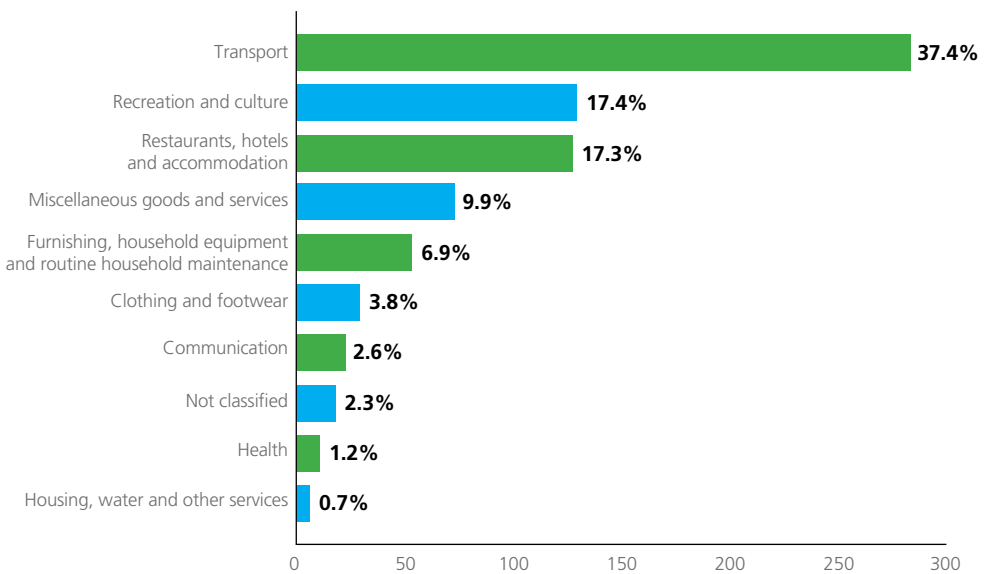
And the third top spot in the most complained about categories was occupied in 2016 by restaurants, hotels and accommodation at 17.3%. Timeshares and discount holiday clubs (and the resale of both) come under this third category.

The fourth most complained about category was miscellaneous goods and services, which accounted for 9.9% of complaints, and the fifth most complained about category was furnishing, household equipment and routine household maintenance, which accounted for 6.9% of complaints.

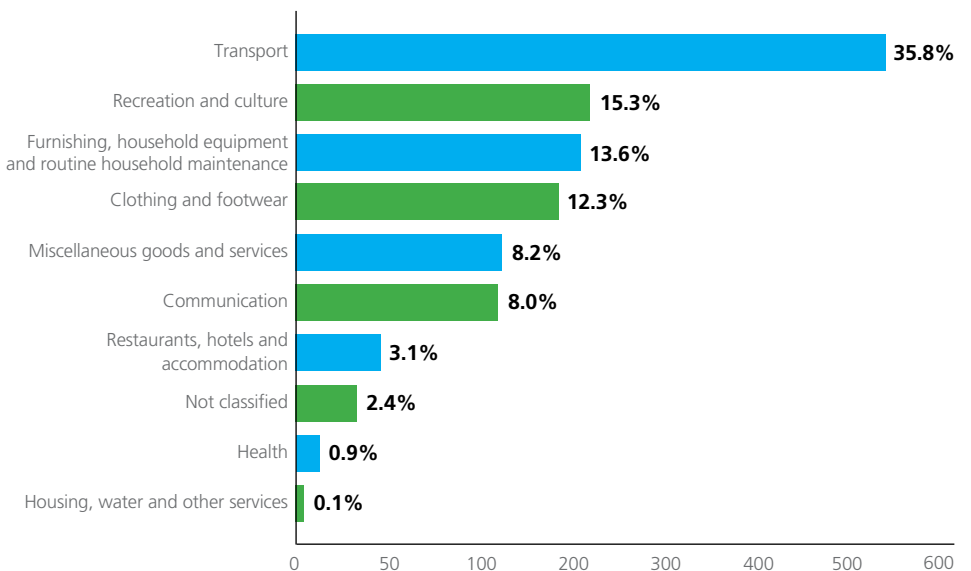
UK TRADER CASES

And what about the type of problems EU consumers face with UK traders? We also analysed all 1,519 cases in which the UK ECC was actively involved (these are cases which concerned UK traders). The bar chart gives the breakdown for the top 10 categories.

Breakdown of 2016 UK consumer assistance cases by category



Breakdown of 2016 UK trader assistance cases by category



We view our work of reaching out to consumers as essential in keeping consumers informed of their rights and the work that we do.

During 2016, the UK ECC used a range of leaflets, promotional items, media activity and promotional events to promote the service and keep consumers informed of how we help them with cross-border consumer/trader problems.

Journalists and researchers for a range of national, regional and online media made a significant number of interview and media requests to the UK ECC throughout 2016. Our consumer advisors took part in regular media interviews for print, radio, TV and online press and assisted the PR team in providing media statements and key messages for press releases.

We released 14 press releases on a vast range of subjects in 2016 to the media in order to generate interest on a variety of consumer

topics: from car purchase and transport, to hotels and villas, subscription traps and finally the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

As well as being active in the media, we also sent Your Update consumer e-newsletters (four in 2016) to subscribers, made improvements to our website, produced several consumer rights information leaflets and expanded our social media activity. Consumers can request their own copy of the newsletter by signing up to the distribution list via the UK ECC website, where copies are also posted.

In 2016 we achieved a 19% increase in the number of visitors to our website, compared to the year before – in 2016 there were 354,832, compared to 298,037 in 2015.

Our move into social media is really starting to pay off now, meaning that we reach a broader spectrum of ages. We now have a strong



social media presence, with our Twitter profile in particular being a useful communications channel. In 2016 we made more than 100 Facebook posts and did over 200 tweets. We now have more than 400 Twitter followers.

One of our key goals is to raise awareness amongst consumers about their rights and duties under EU laws when buying goods and services within the EU's single market. One way we did this in 2016 was by producing leaflets on various aspects of consumer rights: the Role of the UK ECC; Trains, Planes, Cars and Boats; Buying Something in the EU; the European Small Claims Procedure; Car Hire Across the EU; and Shopping Online in the EU, as well as our Annual Report. All of these publications are downloadable from our website.

Our aim in all of this is to increase consumers' understanding of consumer rights, increase the profile of the UK ECC and the ECC network and its work.

Our consumer rights promotional events in 2016 included a series of advice desks on P & O Ferries' sailings from Dover to Calais, which we run with our sister organisation the European Consumer Centre for Services (ECCS).

In order to maximise our engagement with enforcement agencies and other consumer advice providers, we provided delegates at the 2016 Chartered Trading Standards Institute with advice, leaflets and other promotional materials. The conference was attended by around 2,000 enforcers, people who can cascade information about the UK ECC through to the public. Attendance at this event also helped maintain the UK ECC's positive relationship with the CTSI – the UK's national enforcement member-led organisation (made up of local authorities' trading standards officers).

Selected coverage - newspaper/magazine/online articles

Daily Express - ADR - Independent Football Ombudsman
Good Housekeeping Magazine - Consumer rights app for when abroad
Mature Times - subscription traps
Guardian newspaper - leisure credits
Good Housekeeping magazine - car hire
Daily Mail - EU seeks to make buying online abroad easier
Good Housekeeping magazine - ECC-Net Travel app article
The Guardian - Low Cost Holidays collapse advice
Daily Telegraph - car hire
Daily Telegraph - deposits
Press Association - Low Cost Holidays collapse advice
Sunday Sun - Low Cost Holidays
Daily Express - ADR - Removals Industry Ombudsman
BBC News website - UK and the EU: consumer affairs
Daily Express - buying gadgets from Europe
BBC Rip-Off Britain Holidays (TV) - price differentiation
BBC Rip-Off Britain Holidays (TV) - rules and regulations when driving abroad
BBC Radio 5-Live breakfast show - Low Cost Holidays
BBC Radio 4 Money Box Live - ADR one year on
BBC Rip-Off Britain Holidays (TV) - bond certificates

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