



Annual Report 2017

In 2017 the UK European Consumer Centre was exceptionally busy, dealing with a very high number of contacts from consumers; mostly either by phone or email. In fact, we received 16% more phone calls from consumers in 2017 compared to the year before (10,291 compared to 8,852).

Overall, 2017 was a much busier year than 2016 (and that, in turn, was busier than the year before). We dealt with 15,240 consumer cases (including information requests) in 2017, that's a whopping 51% increase.

Every year it seems that more and more UK consumers are seeking our help, people who 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.

Many of these had 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 10,005 information requests, 4,286 cases where the consumer just needed advice and 949 cases where the UK consumer needed assistance to resolve their case. 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 story: 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.

With that in mind, customer satisfaction surveys influence how the UK ECC service develops, giving us an insight into what our customers want and enabling us to use lessons learned to shape our service. Although in 2017 84% of our customers were happy with the service they received from us, we are always striving to be better.

Our lost call rate in 2017 was just 3%, a vast improvement on our 2016 rate of 7%. And most of our calls were answered within 20 seconds too, meaning that you had less time to wait for us to be able to help you.

But we realised that we could do more. So from September 2017, with our number of cases increasing, we changed our emphasis from working to increase case volumes to reducing the timeframe of cases we already had. As a result, we estimate that we cut our case-handling times in that period by up to a third.

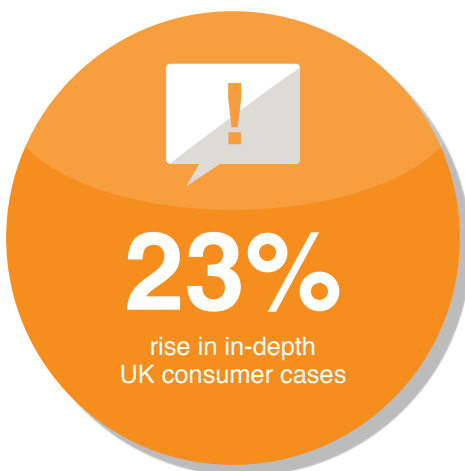
One important target met in 2017 was that we retained our Customer Service Excellence Standard, the UK Government's standard on customer service. In order to keep this CSE certificate for a third year, we had to clearly demonstrate our customer-focus and our quality management in all of our interactions 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



HELP TO CONSUMERS



MAIN PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED (UK CONSUMERS)



OTHER STATISTICS



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 2017, the UK ECC dealt with 15,240 UK consumers. Nearly 35% of these related to cross-border complaints, whereas the other 65% were requests for information.

A figure of 10,005 information requests makes us amongst the busiest European Consumer Centres in the network for such requests. It represents a 61.6% 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 this has increased significantly as a result of supporting the new Online Dispute Resolution platform (which was introduced in 2016)

We handled 4,286 UK consumer 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 3,117 advice cases in 2016 and 3,659 in 2015, so we handled far more advice cases than either of the two previous years.

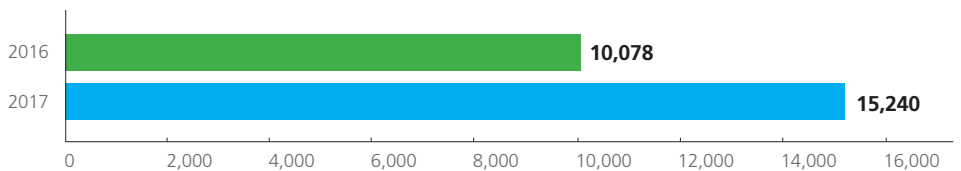
However, increasingly consumers need further assistance and the intervention of our ECC-Net counterparts in other EU/EEA countries, with a view to contacting the trader in the country in question on behalf of affected consumers.

The UK ECC dealt with 949 such cases where the UK consumer needed assistance to resolve their case in 2017, a 23% rise over the previous year. These cases take more resources: they take longer to deal with, as our consumer advisors delve deeper into the problem's details, look at specific case paperwork and liaise with our counterparts in the trader's country.

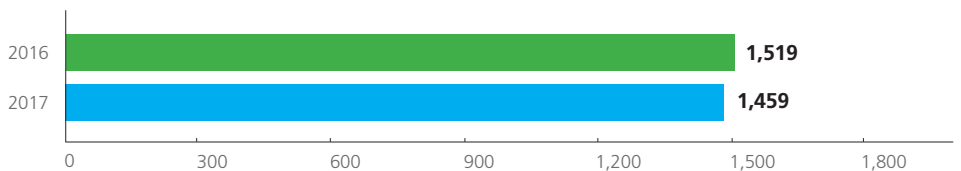
So overall there has been an increase of 34.6% in the number of advice and assistance cases combined, along with a huge increase of



UK consumer cases



Cases about UK traders



61.6% in the number of information requests. This gives a picture of a significant rise in the number of UK consumers helped by the UK ECC in 2017.

Whereas most of our cross-border complaints involved consumers from the UK about traders based in other European countries, the collaborative nature of the ECC-Net (we operate in 30 countries) means that we also act on

behalf of European consumers who have problems with UK traders. This means that we worked on 1,459 cases from European consumers in 2017 with our ECC-Net counterparts (a comparable number to 2016). Again, these cases can take significant resources as our consumer advisors look at the specific case paperwork in depth and in such cases, every effort is made to contact the UK trader in order to resolve the complaint.



UK CONSUMER CASES

So what type of problems do consumers come up against? In this section we take a closer look at the 949 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 41.2% of all such cases, meaning that it causes UK consumers the biggest number of headaches and therefore retains its top spot as the most complained about sector by UK consumers asking for in-depth help. This compares to 37.4% of such cases in 2016.

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

The categories in second and third top spot swapped places in 2017.

Although the actual number of recreation and culture assistance cases was virtually the same in 2017 compared to 2016 (130 in 2017, but 134 in 2016), recreation and culture dropped from the second most complained about category to the third. This was due to the overall larger number of cases, meaning that its percentage dropped down (from 17.4% in 2016 to 13.7% in 2017). Included within this category are package holidays and audio-visual, photographic and information processing equipment.

Taking over the second top spot in the most complained about categories was restaurants, hotels and accommodation at 16.4% of complaints. This actually reflects a larger number of complaints – from 133 in 2016 to 156 in 2017. Timeshares and discount holiday clubs (and the resale of both) come under this second category.

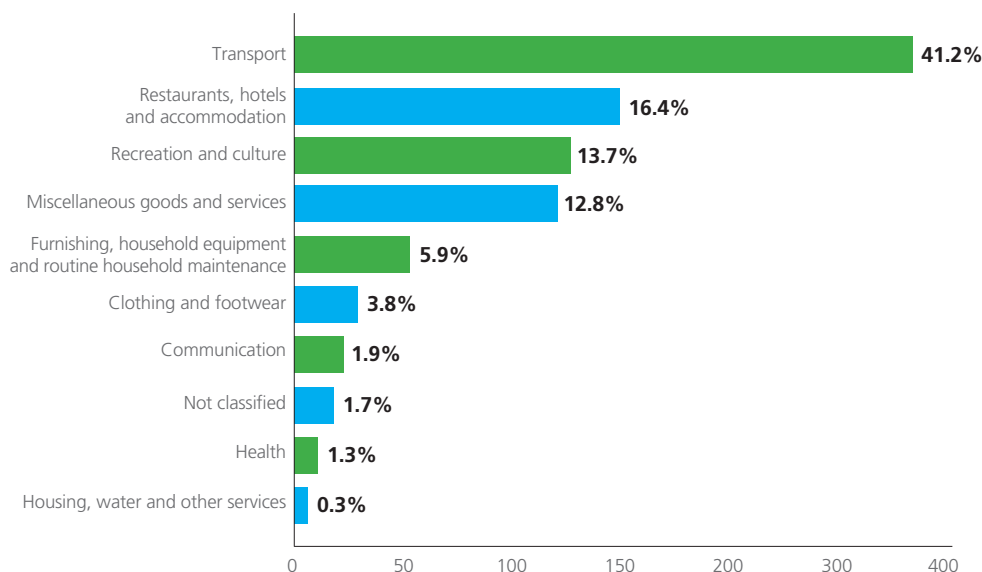
The fourth most complained about category was miscellaneous goods and services, with 12.8% of the assistance case complaints. Coming in fifth was furnishing, household equipment and routine household maintenance, which accounted for 5.9% of complaints.

UK TRADER CASES

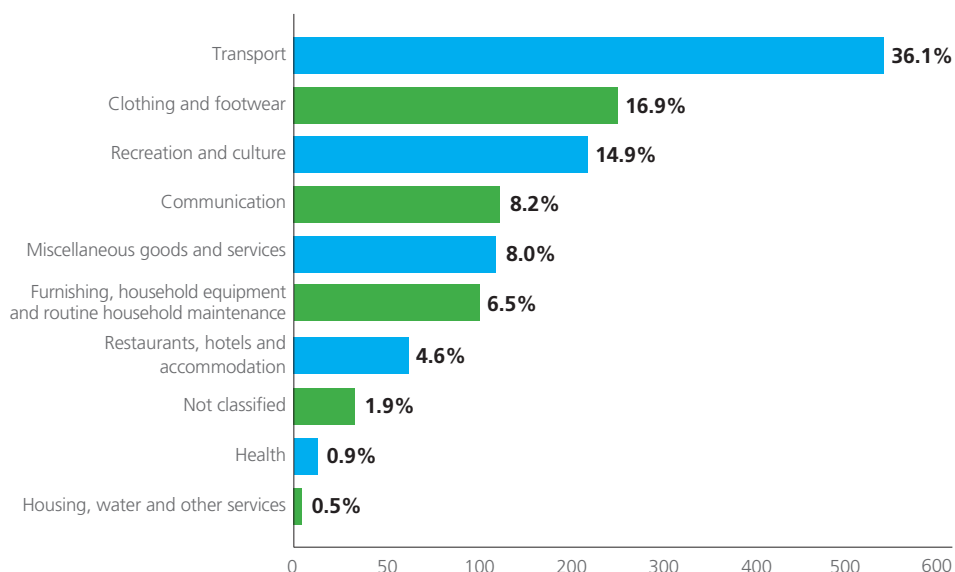
And what kind of problems do EU consumers face with UK traders? We also analysed all 1,459 cases in which the UK ECC's consumer advisors were actively involved in resolving the case for a consumer elsewhere in the EU. The bar chart gives the breakdown for the top 10 categories.

There are two particularly interesting pictures to come out of this analysis. Firstly, the proportion

Breakdown of 2017 cases where a UK consumer received assistance in resolving their complaint



Breakdown of 2017 UK trader assistance cases by category



of cases concerning clothing and footwear brought by EU consumers against UK traders has risen from 12.3% of the total number of assistance cases concerning UK traders in 2016 to 16.9% in 2017.

Secondly, complaints by EU consumers about UK traders in the furnishing, household equipment and routine household maintenance category dropped significantly from 13.6% in 2016 to 6.5% in 2017. This drop was largely due to a reduction in complaints about a manufacturer which moved its base to outside the UK.



We view our work of reaching out to consumers as a crucial factor in keeping consumers abreast of their rights and the work that we do.

During 2017, 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 problems.

We provided answers to media enquiries on complaint trends and general consumer rights problems to journalists and researchers on a range of national, regional and online media when they contacted us for help. Our consumer advisors also 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 10 press releases to the media on a vast range of subjects in 2017 in order to generate interest on various consumer topics:

from car hire complaints and air travel to dating websites and subscription traps, as well as marking the UK ECC's 10th anniversary with some bizarre case studies.

Not only did we undertake a programme of media activity, but we delivered valuable knowledge of consumer rights to consumers in a range of other ways. We sent out four issues of Your Update consumer e-newsletters to subscribers, produced several consumer rights information leaflets and expanded our website and social media activity.

Throughout 2017 we continued to invest time in our internet and social media presence. Always experimenting with new ways of engaging with consumers, in 2017 we held out-of-hours webchats on general consumer subjects. With an eye on future development, we plan to continue these webchats in a more focused way by concentrating on specific subjects in 2018. On social media, we now have more than 520 Twitter followers; that's a 30% increase on the number of followers we had in 2016.

For our e-newsletters, consumers can request their own emailed copy by signing up to the distribution list via the UK ECC website. Copies of the newsletter are also posted on the website.

In 2017 we saw a small reduction of 3.4% in the number of visitors to our website, but the number of visitors (342,927) still significantly outweighed the 2015 figure of 298,037.

Our leaflets, along with other publications and tools such as the Travel App, are downloadable from the website. By making all of this information available to consumers, we aim to increase consumers' understanding of consumer rights, increase the profile of the UK ECC and the ECC network and its work. We want to empower consumers as they buy goods and services within the EU's single market.

Our consumer rights promotional events in 2017 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).

We also worked 'behind the scenes' with stakeholders to promote the UK ECC service and to improve our signposting to other advice services such as The Citizen's Advice Consumer Service and the Northern Ireland Consumer Line.

Other activities included working with numerous trade bodies to ensure that they understand their consumer legislation obligations and liaising with enforcers and regulators over problem traders.

Attendance at the 2017 Chartered Trading Standards Institute conference 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). The conference was attended by enforcers who can then cascade information about the UK ECC through to the public.

Selected coverage - newspaper/magazine/online articles

BBC Business Online - air travel

Daily Mail - car hire

Mature Times - scams

BBC Radio 4 You & Yours - car hire

Daily Telegraph - villa rentals

Good Housekeeping Magazine - subscriptions

Daily Mail - subscription traps

BBC Radio 4 You & Yours - holiday accommodation

Saga Magazine - scams

BBC Business Online - loans

The New York Times - air travel cancellations

Daily Mirror - subscription traps

Travel Daily News Online - air travel

UK Health Radio - holiday travel

BBC Radio Essex - air travel cancellations

Sunderland Echo - car hire

BBC Three Counties - air travel cancellations

TS Today - UK ECC celebrates 10th anniversary

Yahoo Finance Website - subscription traps

BBC Radio Ulster - air travel cancellations

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This UK ECC Annual Report was funded by the European Union's Consumer Programme (2014-2020.)

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