

Student **Advice** Centre

How to make an effective complaint: A self help pack



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An Advisor's story:



Joe came into the student advice centre after getting a large electricity bill. He and his housemates had been in a house for a year, they had given the company the meter reading when they moved in, but they had not had their meter read for all this time.

As they had left the readings in the windows if the reader called when they were out, they assumed the company was using the right readings. They had paid their bills based on estimated readings, but these had not been enough to cover their use. The electricity supplier was asking for £500 of debt to be paid all at once. When Joe had phoned the company they had not been helpful and he had just got frustrated with them.

We helped Joe draft a letter making a complaint, pointing out that although he had not given readings, there was some

obligation on the company to read the meter more regularly. We also reminded them that guidelines from the regulator, Energy Watch state that if someone has a debt from not having the meter read they should have the same length of time to pay it back as they ran it up in.

The company apologised and arranged an instalment plan allowing a year to pay back the debt. They also agreed to look into training the readers to ensure they did take customer readings that were left for them.

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1. Making a complaint.

The first stage in complaining about faulty goods or poor service is to contact the seller or provider. This may resolve the problem.

If it does not, companies such as utilities companies (gas, electric, telephone etc.) transport companies, and agencies such as Local Governments all have bodies that regulate their conduct. These can be used if the company has failed in its obligations, or in a contract you have with them, and your efforts to resolve the issue have failed.



2. How should I complain?

You may complain by telephone, or you may wish to write a letter. Some companies also have online complaints forms that you can fill in on their websites.

• Complaining by phone

If you are complaining by phone, it might be helpful to write down what you want to say before phoning.

Keep a pen and paper ready, and make sure you have all the information (account numbers, dates etc) that you need.

Always keep a record with dates of who you spoke to and what was said.

It's important to stay calm, and be assertive without losing your temper. Remember that the person you are speaking to

may not be able to do what you are asking them to. In this case you may be able to speak to someone else such as a team leader.

Unless the problem is resolved within a couple of calls, you will likely need to write to the company. It is often worth doing this, even if the telephone contact has resulted in the company looking into your complaint, as this provides a written record.

• Written complaints

If you are making your initial complaint in writing the first thing to do is to call and find out who you should address your complaint to.

Set out your letter clearly, stating the problem, include dates of any specific events, and send copies of any

evidence that supports your complaint.

Keep your tone firm and not emotional, and state the resolution that you want.

Make sure you include all your contact details and keep copies of everything.



3. Seven Steps to a good complaint.

There are 7 steps to making a good complaint. These are adapted with permission from www.advicenow.org.uk

1 Know what the problem is

Think about what has actually gone wrong. Has the company failed to do something? Have they treated you differently to how their terms and conditions say they should? Your complaint will be much more effective if you are clear about what has happened and, perhaps more importantly, how it has affected you.

2 Know your rights

Read through the complaints procedure for the company you wish to complain to. This should be available from them or on their website. By doing this you can make sure that your complaint is valid it is no use complaining that a company has not done something that they are not obliged to do.

3 Know what you want

Be clear about what you want as a result of the complaint. Do you want a refund, or compensation, or do you just

want the company to take note of their actions to prevent them happening again in the future.

Be realistic about what you want. If you want compensation, think about how you can justify this. You would need to be able to show a clear link between the company's actions and actual loss that you have suffered.

4 Know who to speak to

While you are checking the company's complaints procedure make sure that you are addressing the complaint to the right person.

The company's complaints department may be at a different address to other departments and contacting the wrong area can cause delays.

5 Prepare yourself

Once you know you have cause for complaint, collect together any evidence and documents relating to the situation. You can then refer to these.

6 Be Organised

Make sure you keep a clear record of everything that is discussed, with dates on which everything happened. Sometimes if a complaint takes time to resolve it is easy to forget things.

7 Know when to get help

If you have a complex complaint it may be that you will need to seek advice, either from an advisor, or by seeking help from a regulatory body.

4. Complaints to regulatory bodies

Before complaining to a regulatory body, it is important to make sure that you have followed the complaints procedure for the organisation that you are complaining about and given them time to resolve the problem. Many of the regulatory bodies' websites have information about what they consider reasonable time for this.

The different bodies have slightly different procedures for handling complaints. Before contacting them you should read the information on their websites and follow their procedures.

Regulatory Bodies

• The Local Government Ombudsman

The Local Government Ombudsmen investigate complaints about councils and certain other bodies. They can look at complaints about most council matters including housing, planning, education and social services. This includes benefits decisions.

Complaints must be about maladministration that has caused injustice. This means that the council must have done something wrong, or failed to do something, and this has affected you.

You cannot complain simply because you disagree with a decision.

They have an advice line which can advise you on whether you have grounds for a complaint. There is a complaint form on

their website that you can fill in online, or print off and send in the post.

www.lgo.org.uk/index.php
Adviceline: 0845 602 1983
(9.00am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday)

• Energy Watch



Energy watch is the consumer watchdog for energy (gas and electricity) suppliers. If you are having problems with your supplier, they can offer advice, and may be able to take on your case.

They can look at cases involving billing problems, supply problems and problems to do with transferring suppliers.

They have general advice on making effective complaints to suppliers on their website.

Complaints about suppliers can be made using an online form on their site.

www.energywatch.org.uk/
Helpline: 08459 06 07 08

• Consumer Council for Water

The Consumer Council for Water represents water and sewerage customers in England and Wales.

They can look at problems with billing, supply and charges and also at pressure and quality problems that the supplier has



not acted appropriately on.

They have an online complaints form on their website; you can also contact them by e-mail, phone or letter.

www.ccwater.org.uk/
National Line: 0845 039 2837

- Postwatch



Postwatch is the watchdog for the postal services Post offices, Parcel Force and the Royal Mail.

They can take on a complaint that has not been resolved and can also offer arbitration in compensation claims.

You can complain online, or in writing addressing your letter to:
Freepost Postwatch.

www.postwatch.co.uk/
Advice Line: 08456 013265

- The Financial Services Ombudsman



The Financial Services Ombudsman can look at disputes involving financial services or products bank

accounts, pensions, insurance, credit cards and mortgages, from companies registered with them.

They have an advice helpline that can give you more information on what they can take on.

You can download their complaints form from their website. This must be posted back to them.

www.financial-ombudsman.org.uk/
Consumer Helpline: 0845 080 1800

- Information Commissioners Office



The ICO regulates, amongst other things, data protection and use of information.

They can advise with problems you have about how your private data is used, about access to data from public organisations and about privacy and electronic communications (e.g. telesales calls). You can make complaints about these areas online from their website.

www.ico.gov.uk/
ICO Helpline: 08456 30 60 60

- Legal Complaints Service



The Legal Complaints Service (LCS) investigates complaints about solicitors. They deal with complaints about high fees and poor service, but cannot look at matters concerning professional conduct.

You can contact them by telephone, or write to them. The details are on their website.

They handle different complaints in different ways, so check their website for details.

www.legalcomplaints.org.uk
Helpline - 0845 608 6565

- Consumer direct



Consumer direct are not a regulatory body as such, but they can offer advice and assistance with making consumer complaints.

This includes trading standards, and you can use their site to make an online complaint to your local trading standards office.

www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/index.shtml
Helpline: 08454 04 05 06

- The Healthcare Commission



If you wish to complain about an NHS service there are a number of local levels you must go through. These are listed at www.nhs.uk/England/AboutTheNhs/ComplainCompliment.cmsx

If you are not satisfied, you can then ask the Healthcare commission for an independent review.

You can contact the Commission at:

Healthcare Commission
FREEPOST NAT 18958
Complaints Investigation Team
Manchester, M1 9XZ

Helpline: 0845 601 3012
complaints@healthcarecommis-
sion.org.uk
www.healthcarecommission.
org.uk

If you are still not satisfied you can complain to the Health Services Ombudsman.

• The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman



The Parliamentary Ombudsman handles complaints about government departments, some public bodies, and, in England, the NHS.

Full details of what they cover are on their website.

You cannot complain directly to them, but must contact your MP and ask them to make the complaint on your behalf. You can however do this via their website.

www.ombudsman.org.uk
Helpline: 0845 015 4033

• Independent Police Complaints Commission

The IPCC handles complaints against the Police, and some

serious complaints against Revenue and Customs officials.



This includes misconduct, excessive use of force, unlawful arrest and abuse of your rights.

There are various ways of starting a complaint: in person at a police station, in writing or via the website.

www.ipcc.gov.uk/index.htm
Helpline: 08453 002 002

• Office of Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education is the independent student complaints scheme for Universities.

They can look at complaints about services or programmes of study and, in some cases, can look at final decisions in disciplinary and appeals cases where it is believed the University has not acted according to its procedures.

They cannot look at matters on admissions or academic judgement.

You must have gone through the University's internal procedures before complaining to the OIA.

The Student Advice Centre can assist with complaints about the University, both at University and OIA level.

www.oiahe.org.uk/index.asp
Telephone Helpdesk:
0118 959 9813

• Office of the Telecommunications Ombudsman

Otelo exists to sort out disagreements between customers and telecommunication providers (phone, mobile and internet service providers) that have joined their scheme. Their service is approved by OfCom, the overall regulator for communications.

They can look at problems with billing and with service provision.

Complaints should be made to them in writing; they have details about this on their website.

Not all providers are signed up to Otelo for regulation, though their current members cover more than 96% of the fixed line telephone market, over 55% of the mobile telephone market and 33% of the internet service provider (ISP) market.
www.otelo.org.uk

• Communications & Internet Services Adjudication Scheme



CISAS are an independent dispute resolution service for communications providers and their customers. Similarly to OTELO not all providers are signed up to CISAS so you will need to check that your company is a member.

They have an online form on their site through which you can make a complaint.

www.arbitrators.org/cisas/index.asp

• Other Ombudsmen and Regulators:

The above are some of the main regulatory bodies. There are other bodies regulating many different services and organisations. If you need to complain to someone, their complaints procedure should make it clear who you should contact if your complaint is not resolved.

There is also an association of ombudsmen. The British and Irish Ombudsman Association. Their website has details of other ombudsmen and regulatory bodies.

www.bioa.org.uk/index.php