

SPSO decision report

Case: 201203100, Business Stream
Sector: water
Subject: incorrect billing
Outcome: some upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mr C complained that Business Stream did not tell him when his water meter was replaced. He said that after this the water meter was not read in accordance with the relevant service standards and for an extended period, unnoticed by him, all his water bills were estimated. Mr C said he only discovered that the meter had been replaced and that his bills had been estimated when he received a large catch up bill. Mr C told us he believed that the new meter might have been faulty for a period as his metered water usage was higher than he had expected. He said that his bill could have been updated earlier when actual meter readings were first taken, which would have alerted him to the problem earlier. Mr C was also dissatisfied with the handling of his complaint. He felt that it had taken Business Stream too long to respond and he was not offered compensatory payments in line with stated service standards.

We found that the meter was the property of Scottish Water and had been replaced as part of their rolling replacement programme. We did not uphold Mr C's complaint about this as our investigation found that there was no obligation on Business Stream to tell Mr C about the exchange. They had also offered to carry out a meter accuracy test when Mr C queried the accuracy of his catch up bill. Mr C had declined this because he said he believed the meter was now recording water usage accurately and because Business Stream would levy a charge if the meter was tested and found to be accurate.

We did, however, uphold Mr C's other complaints. We agreed that under the terms of their licence Business Stream should have ensured that two actual meter readings were taken each year, one of which could have been provided by Mr C. However, they failed to do so for a period of around two years. We noted that they had already offered Mr C an apology and a compensatory payment of £100 in recognition of this failing.

Our investigation also found that it took around fifteen months from the date of the first reading for Mr C to receive a bill which reflected his metered usage. Business Stream told us that they had difficulties entering the actual reading because the computer system of the Central Market Agency, which it was beyond their control to update, did not accurately record Mr C's meter details and supply identification. However, they provided no evidence to suggest that on discovering this they pursued the matter with the Central Market Agency at the earliest opportunity, as they should have done. Nor did they alert Mr C to the difficulties they were having.

We found that there was an unreasonable delay in handling Mr C's complaint. Business Stream failed to acknowledge or apologise for the delay when it was brought to their attention and they took too long to apply the £20 credit that was due to Mr C in recognition of the delay (in line with their service standards). We also identified that Mr C was owed a further £20 credit.

Recommendations

We recommended that Business Stream:

- investigate the sequence of events that led to the errors identified in relation to the meter exchange and

supply identification number, and identify any opportunities for improvements to business processes;

- make a further payment of £20 in acknowledgement of the delay in making the original £20 credit in line with Service Standards as is the complainants entitlement. Business Stream should consider in the circumstances whether the credit applied to the account should exceed their standard £20 payment; and
- apologise for delays in handling the complaint and for failing to award compensatory payments in line with service standards.