

SPSO decision report

Case: 201302717, Business Stream
Sector: water
Subject: incorrect billing
Outcome: some upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mrs C complained that Business Stream delayed in issuing their first bill to her. Mrs C had been in her property for nearly five years before she received her first water bill. During this time she thought that her water charges were covered by business rates, for which she had a small business exemption. Mrs C did not have a water meter and Business Stream calculated her bill for the five-year period based on the rateable value of her property. When she received the bill, Mrs C applied for a meter and this reduced her charges. She considered that her bill for the initial period would have been lower if she had been billed earlier, as she would have applied for a water meter earlier.

It was clear from the evidence that Business Stream had not been aware that Mrs C had moved into the property, and only identified that it was no longer vacant when they carried out an audit. We found that they should have had a better process in place during this period for them to identify premises that were no longer vacant. Although we consider that there is at least some onus on the customer to notify Business Stream that they have moved into or occupy a property and that they have a duty to ensure that bills are paid, on balance, we upheld the complaint. Business Stream had apologised for the delay in contacting Mrs C and had confirmed that they now have a process in place to identify occupied properties that were previously vacant.

Mrs C also complained that Business Stream refused to use average meter readings to calculate her charges for the backdated period. We were satisfied that Business Stream assessed her charges in line with their policy on this. They also told Mrs C that she could pay the arrears back over 48 months. Having carefully considered the matter, we did not uphold this aspect of the complaint, although we made a related recommendation.

Recommendations

We recommended that Business Stream:

- review the outstanding arrears when the new policy on backdating arrears is published.