

SPSO decision report

Case: 201405186, Business Stream
Sector: water
Subject: incorrect billing
Outcome: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Miss C was concerned about the high water charges in her pub, which she had taken over in 2006. She said she queried her charges in 2009 or 2010 and several times since, but Business Stream had no record of contact before 2014.

In 2014, Business Stream wrote to Miss C noting her high consumption, and she asked them to check the meter. They arranged a survey and initially told Miss C the meter was serving both the pub and the two flats above, but then explained the meter was only serving her pub, although it appeared to be faulty (the numbers were jumping back and forth). Business Stream sent the meter for testing, but this showed it was under-reading (so it did not explain the high consumption). However, since installing a new meter in a new location, Miss C's water charges reduced by about two thirds, despite her not having changed anything in the pub. Miss C asked for a refund, saying that the meter must have been faulty, but Business Stream refused on the basis that the meter test had not found an over-reading fault.

After taking independent advice from a water consultant, we upheld Miss C's complaint. We found the high readings were likely caused either by a problem with the meter or with its location on the old pipework (causing air turbulence). However, it was not possible to tell whether the over-reading was caused by the installation of the meter or by a problem with Miss C's pipework. Given the possibility that Miss C's pipework contributed to the problem, and the time taken to raise this matter with Business Stream, we did not consider a full refund was reasonable. We recommended Business Stream pay a full refund from the date they first noted the meter needed to be moved, and consider paying a partial refund for the period before this.

Recommendations

We recommended that Business Stream:

- refund the difference between Miss C's total water charges and her estimated actual consumption (based on her current consumption) for a specified period; and
- consider making an ex gratia payment of 20 percent of the difference between Miss C's charges and estimated consumption for a specified period.