

# **Biennial Activity Report**

July 2021 – June 2023



In June 2015, Ombudsman Services: Communications (OS:C) was approved by Ofcom to provide alternative dispute resolution under the Alternative Dispute Resolution for Consumer Disputes (Competent Authorities and Information) Regulations 2015 (the Regulations). Services/products that fall within the jurisdiction of OS:C include those provided to domestic and/or small business customers within the scope of "electronic communications services" as defined under Section 32(2) of the Communications Act 2003.

During 2023, Ombudsman Services officially made the transition to Trust Alliance Group (TAG). The change provided the business with a broader objective to support the trust agenda as well as the opportunity to develop diverse capabilities with a connected purpose, rather than only resolving disputes.

The move to a group also offered the ability to demonstrate a clearer separation of the two ombudsman schemes (Communications Ombudsman and Energy Ombudsman) and its other work streams. Transparency is also improved for stakeholders making it easier to identify what the business offers and the value of its services.

As part of Ofcom's approval, under Schedule 6 of the Regulations, OS:C is required to produce a biennial activity report containing the information below:

**a) The number of disputes received by the ADR entity and the types of complaints to which the disputes related.**

OS:C received 69,910 disputes during the reporting period. A dispute is defined as a request from a complainant notifying OS:C of an unresolved complaint for investigation.

Of these cases 32,328 fell within the scope of what OS:C can deal with.

In the table below, the types of complaints referred to OS:C within the reported period that came within the scope of the service, can be found:

Complaint Type	Number of Complaints	% of Complaints
Billing	7633	23.61%
Service Quality	8741	27.04%
Contract Issues	3535	10.93%
Customer Service	4789	14.81%
Mis-Sell	2807	8.68%
Equipment	2920	9.04%
Security	1114	3.44%
Other	539	1.67%
Unknown	250	0.77%
Grand total	32,328	100%

**b) The percentage share of alternative dispute resolution procedures which were discontinued before an outcome was reached.**

During the reporting period, OS:C discontinued a total of 0 cases.

**c) The average time taken to resolve the disputes which the ADR entity has received.**

The average time taken to resolve disputes within the reporting period was 41 days.

**d) The rate of compliance, if known, with the outcomes of its alternative dispute resolution procedures.**

The table below shows the rate of compliance with the remedies confirmed within OS:C decisions during the reporting period:

Status Reason	% share
Remedies implemented within 28 days	94.48%
Remedies implemented outside of 28 days	4.08%
Remedies not implemented	1.44%

**e) Any recommendations the ADR entity may have as to how any systemic or significant problems that occur frequently and lead to disputes between consumers and traders could be avoided or resolved in future.**

With the cost-of-living crisis many consumers are still facing, we have seen a growing number of complaints about annual price increases. Budgets are already stretched, and consumers are facing the rising cost of being digitally connected.

Annual price rises are generally linked to inflation, and in the last few years, this has been set higher than it ever has been before, meaning the cost of keeping connected has increased significantly.

On a 24-month contract, there will be two Retail Price Index/Consumer Price Index related price increases for the consumer to absorb. Monthly costs of £50 at the start of a contract might have significantly increased by the end of the contract.

In a competitive market, communications providers are entitled to increase prices, but it is important that consumers receive clear communication about when and how their prices will rise, both at the inception of the contract and as increases happen. From the complaints we receive, it is evident that consumers are often left confused.

The use of the RPI/CPI increases often leaves consumers unsure about just how much they will pay when each April comes around. The illustrations that providers should give to a consumer are based on the most recent year's rate of inflation, and not on those forecast for the following 12 or 24 month period as these are unknown.

On that basis, while the consumer can be sure of a percentage added by the provider (3.9% plus CPI in the terms and conditions, for example) there is an ever-unknown increase that the consumer cannot budget for, even more so for the remaining 12 months of a 24-month contract.

To reduce complaints of this nature, it would be beneficial to explain clearly exactly what RPI and CPI increases are, to ensure that they are well understood and what this might mean in monetary value. It would be helpful to make clear that, in a contract for a 24-month duration, the prices will increase twice.

There are providers who choose not to increase their prices at all during the duration of the contract. With such contracts, the consumer knows at the point in which they take out their contract, that they can budget for the full 24-month period and have some peace of mind that this will not increase.

**f) Where the ADR entity is a member of any network of ADR entities which facilitates the resolution of cross-border disputes, an assessment of the effectiveness of its co-operation in that network.**

OS:C has not investigated any cross-border disputes during the reporting period. OS:C is a member of the Telecoms-Net group of European ADR entities. The group shares best practice relating to ADR in the sector.

**g) Where the ADR entity provides training to its ADR officials, details of the training it provides.**

Since the last reporting period, not only have we changed our branding, but we have also changed our operating model, which improves our accessibility and our relationships with consumers and traders alike.

As part of this change, we have rolled out an extensive training programme and fine tuned our processes to ensure that all of our people are in the best position to provide a best in class service.

The training included sector specific information, to ensure that the people carrying out our work feel supported in making confident and robust decisions.

In the reporting period, training was given on the following topics:

- Case acceptance
- Disputes
- Updates and amendments on the Automatic Compensation Scheme
- Communications sector overview and refresher training, including
  - Service quality
  - Sales
  - Contract issues
  - Equipment
  - Business products and services
  - Customer service
- Detailed case study sessions following training to ensure best practices are embedded
- Mindset training

**h) An assessment of the effectiveness of an alternative disputes resolution procedure offered by the ADR entity and of possible ways of improving its performance.**

In the reporting period, on average, it took 41 days to handle a dispute through the OS:C procedure.

The ADR Regulations stipulate that Communications Ombudsman must notify the parties of the outcome of the ADR procedure within a period of 90 days from the date on which the complete complaint file has been received. The procedure operated by Communications Ombudsman has proven effective in handling disputes within this time frame.

In the previous reporting period, on average it took 71 days to handle a dispute, so OS:C is pleased that we have reduced the time it takes to navigate our process. Part way through this reporting period, we have changed our operating model to ensure swift resolutions and improve consumer engagement. We hope this is reduced further in the next reporting period.



## Getting in touch

☎ 0330 440 1614

📍 Communications Ombudsman ✉ [enquiry@commsombudsman.org](mailto:enquiry@commsombudsman.org)  
P.O.Box 730  
Warrington WA4 6WU

## Additional support:

We are committed to treating everybody with fairness and respect. Our commitment includes providing additional support to consumers needing help to access our services fully.

Please see below some of the services we can help with:

- Speaking to us in a foreign language & translation services
- Visual impairments (including Braille)
- Hearing impairments (including Sign language)
- Accessibility

If you need any more information or would like to request access to any of the services above, you can do this over the phone, online or in writing.

**[www.commsombudsman.org](http://www.commsombudsman.org)**