

SPSO decision report

Case: 201303016, Business Stream
Sector: water
Subject: charging method / calculation
Outcome: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Ms C complained on behalf of her father (Mr A) about a bill he received from Business Stream. Mr A owned a small chalet, which he occasionally let out. It was not used for more than a few months each year, and the water was switched off during the winter. Mr A had a water meter installed in 2008, which should have been read twice a year.

At first Mr A received estimated bills, which were very low. The first actual reading was in November 2009, and confirmed the low water usage. From then until March 2013, however, no readings were taken and Mr A continued to receive low estimated bills. The March 2013 reading suggested much higher water usage than expected but, as it was not put on Business Stream's systems, Mr A was not told. The next reading was in August 2013, after which he was billed for more than £4,000. After Mr A phoned them to complain, Business Stream acknowledged that they had not read the meter for nearly four years, and reduced his bill by about £2,000. They did not, however, investigate why there was such a high reading on the meter. Mr A had checked and said that there were no obvious leaks and no leaks had been repaired.

We upheld Ms C's complaints. We criticised Business Stream for not taking meter readings for so long, and that when they finally did take a reading it was not put on their systems. Had Business Stream applied their policies properly, the excess consumption should have been identified within six months, and could have been investigated and resolved within a further six months. We were also critical that Business Stream did not contact Mr A to explain what had happened, and that they did not investigate why the meter was showing such high water use. We made recommendations to address this.

Recommendations

We recommended that Business Stream:

- take steps to ensure that all meter readings are submitted onto their systems within four days, as stipulated in their metering policy;
- check the accuracy of Mr A's meter, cover all costs related to this check, and based on the findings of the check, apply either recommendation A or B below;
- (A) if the meter is found to be inaccurate, credit Mr A's account for the full cost of excess water consumption across the period from November 2009 to the present, and provide evidence of this; or (B) if the meter is found to be accurate, credit Mr A's account for the excess water consumption between November 2010 and August 2013, based on average consumption from November 2009 to August 2013, and provide evidence of this;
- review the clarity of their bills to ensure that it is clear when a bill is based on two estimated readings; and
- apologise to Mr A for the failings identified in our investigation.