

SPSO decision report



Case: 201802629, Business Stream
Sector: water
Subject: incorrect billing
Decision: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mrs C, an MSP, complained on behalf of her constituent (Mr A) that Business Stream had unreasonably failed to provide Mr A with an accurate bill for his water usage. Mrs C also complained that the handling of her complaint by Business Stream was unreasonable.

Mr A owns a farm which shares the same water supply with five other properties and historically the meter readings for the usage of all the properties were taken from the main meter sited at a neighbouring farm. Scottish Water installed a new meter at the farmhouse, however, they subsequently stated that the new meter was installed in error and could no longer be used. Billing reverted to the original meter and sub-meters were installed in the five properties.

Mr A complained to Business Stream as his licensed provider. They liaised with Scottish Water who confirmed that the initial instruction to install a new meter outside the farm was the wrong action. Business Stream outlined that Mr A had two options presented, and proceeded to set up the billing based on the option to deduct the usage on the five domestic sub-meters from the readings on Mr A's meter. There were further billing issues which exacerbated Mr A's concerns and he took practical action to remove his meter from the non-domestic water market. Mr A remained unhappy that his bills had been inaccurately calculated and Mrs C brought his complaint to us.

We found that Business Stream's shared supply policy set out only three options when a shared supply has been identified. These were that the pipework is altered to remove the domestic property from the supply at the cost to the customer, to remove the meter and charge unmeasured services, or that the customer is billed fully and can then recoup the charges from the domestic customers as a private arrangement under water re-sale rules. We noted the option progressed by Business Stream was not in their policy. Business Stream explained they were following a briefing note from Scottish Water issued years before which included a wider range of options for customers in shared supply scenarios. They said that they were following this briefing note as it was in the best interests of the customer.

We found that Business Stream had not clearly explained to Mr A all the appropriate options available to him in order to resolve the shared supply situation. We found their communication had been unclear and, while well intentioned, the briefing note they referred to was not a policy document but described the process Scottish Water hoped to move to. We also did not see evidence that all options set out in the briefing note were fully explained to Mr A. We therefore upheld Mrs C's complaint. However, we noted that wider changes regarding shared supply meters are anticipated to be implemented across the non-domestic water industry in Scotland in 2020 and therefore, did not make any recommendations in this respect.

In relation to complaint handling, we found that Business Stream failed to properly acknowledge and investigate the complaints and that there was an unreasonable delay in responding to correspondence. Therefore, we upheld this aspect of Mrs C's complaint.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise Mrs C and Mr A for the failures identified that they did not set out options available nor did they clarify the basis of Scottish Water's actions to resolve the metering/billing issue. The apology should meet the standards set out in the SPSO guidelines on apology available at www.spsso.org.uk/information-leaflets.
- Apologise to Mrs C and Mr A for failing to properly action and process Mrs C's complaint in line with their complaint handling procedures and for the resulting unreasonable delay. The apology should meet the standards set out in the SPSO guidelines on apology available at www.spsso.org.uk/information-leaflets.

We have asked the organisation to provide us with evidence that they have implemented the recommendations we have made on this case by the deadline we set.