

Customer satisfaction with OfTel's complaint handling

Wave 1, April 2002

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Oftel's Consumer Representation Section (CRS) is responsible for answering and where possible dealing with or referring business and residential consumer complaints or enquiries. On average, CRS receive around 8,000 contacts per month. Around 80% of these are from residential consumers and 20% businesses. Most contacts are complaints (90%) and 10% are enquiries. Approximately three-quarters of Oftel's contacts are received by phone and a quarter in writing.

1.2 The survey was designed to assess how satisfied customers are with the way in which Oftel handled their complaint or enquiry, and how Oftel's performance compares with other companies and organisations. Further waves of research will be conducted allowing Oftel to monitor performance over time and identify areas where improvements could be made and whether any such improvements have had an impact.

1.3 This report is based on the key findings from the first wave of research of business and residential consumers' perceptions of Oftel's complaints handling procedure. The survey was conducted over a six-month period between October 2001 and March 2002, amongst 510 consumers. The total base includes data from a pilot study conducted in September 2001.

1.4 The sample was drawn at random from Oftel's database of consumers and comprised customers who had contacted Oftel during the preceding month.

1.5 To ensure a representative sample was achieved, quotas were applied to the type of customer (business/residential), method of contact (phone/letter/e-mail/fax) and type of contact (complaint/enquiry). Business consumers were also over-sampled and then re-weighted to their natural proportion.

1.6 The results are subject to an error margin of about 3-4%, this is slightly higher amongst smaller subgroups. Results referred to as 'significantly' different, have been tested at the 95% level of confidence, please see footnote for further sample details¹.

1.7 The survey was conducted on behalf of Oftel by Continental Research during October 2001-March 2002. This report has been prepared by Oftel² based on the results provided by Continental Research.

¹ The survey was conducted amongst a sample of consumers contacting Oftel with a complaint or enquiry. As businesses make up around 20% of contacts to Oftel these were over-sampled in the survey to produce a sufficiently robust sample to allow analysis of the results and then re-weighted back to their natural proportion. The error margin for this survey of 510 consumers is about 3-4%, but is higher amongst smaller subgroups. Results referred to as 'significantly' different, have been tested at the 95% level of confidence and hence are outside of the error margins and therefore can be considered real changes. All data shown is weighted data. Unweighted base sizes are shown on charts and tables to show the number of consumers who were asked the question.

² The report should not be seen as recommended best buys and should not therefore be relied upon when making purchase decisions. Oftel has conducted its own checks on the data in this report and whilst we consider it to be correct, Oftel accepts no liability in respect of any of the results provided to it by Continental or any decisions taken by any person in reliance on the report.

1.8 The report covers:

- method and type of contact;
- time taken to respond;
- satisfaction with complaint handling;
- comparisons with other companies; and
- suggestions for improvement to procedure.

1.9 A copy of the questions is attached in Appendix 1.

Chapter 2 – Summary

Most consumers whose complaint/enquiry was handled by Oftel were satisfied with the overall handling

2.1 70% of consumers were satisfied with Oftel's overall handling of their complaint/enquiry. This figure rises to 85% amongst those contacts dealt with in-house.

2.2 Overall satisfaction was significantly higher amongst residential consumers (72%) and those who contacted Oftel by phone (74%), than businesses (60%) and written contacts (60%).

2.3 Around 7 in 10 consumers remembered being given a reference for their contact, this was highest amongst those contacting Oftel by phone.

Oftel's complaint handling appears on the whole better than other companies'

2.4 Around 4 out of 5 (77%) consumers who had recently contacted another company or organisation to complain or make an enquiry said that Oftel's handling was about the same as, or better than, the other company contacted (40% a lot better, 11% slightly better and 26% about the same).

2.5 Consumers who phoned Oftel were significantly more likely to think that Oftel was better than other companies, compared to those who contacted in writing.

Half of consumers are receiving responses within Oftel's target timescales

2.6 Around half (47%) of all contacts claimed to have received a response within the relevant timescales which Oftel set itself. E-mail responses were best at 77%, 45% phone contacts claimed their call was answered in less than 30 seconds and 32% of written contacts claimed they received a full response within four days. However, caution should be applied to these results as they are based on opinion and rely on the consumer remembering a very precise time frame from a contact which could have been made up to six weeks previously.

Oftel's strengths appear to be politeness and ease of contact

2.7 94% of consumers who contacted Oftel were satisfied that the advisor was polite and paid attention. 89% were satisfied with the ease of getting hold of someone. This is supported by the fact that 80% of callers spoke to an advisor the first time they rang.

2.8 Consumers were less satisfied with the actual *process*. Being kept informed of progress throughout the enquiry was the least satisfactory aspect with 45% satisfied. This is reflected in the suggestions for improving the process – mentioned by 17% and consistent with the 4 in 10 of the contacts dealt with by Oftel who are under the impression that their complaint/enquiry is *still* being dealt with. Consumers interviewed are all drawn from closed cases.

2.9 Written contacts were significantly less satisfied with the explanation of action to be taken (57%) than those who phoned Oftel (75%), this was the only aspect where satisfaction varied significantly according to contact method. This may be due to the fact that letters are a time consuming, one way dialogue, whereas speaking on the phone allows the consumer to ask questions and clarify what is being said.

Chapter 3 – Method and type of contact

Complaint/enquiry

3.1 Are most of the consumers contacting Of tel to complain or to make an enquiry and how are they being dealt with?

3.2 During March 2002, Of tel's Consumer Representation Section received over 7,000 complaints or enquiries. The top five issues that consumers complained about during March were:

- complaint ignored or no action taken (by phone companies);
- difficulty contacting telephone company;
- failure or time taken for phone company to repair service;
- phone company charging for service that has been cancelled; and
- telephone company fails to meet customer request (eg copy of bill).

3.3 According to statistics from Of tel's Consumer Representation Section, most consumers contact Of tel to make a complaint. Almost 9 out of 10 (86%) of the consumers who had contacted Of tel between October 2001 and March 2002 did so to complain while the remaining 14% were making an enquiry. Three-quarters of complaints/enquiries were received by phone (74%) and a quarter in writing (26%), this includes letter, e-mail/website and fax.

3.4 Consumers aged 55+ were significantly more likely (22%) to contact Of tel by letter than younger consumers, 11% of those aged 15-34 and 10% of those aged 35-54.

3.5 According to the consumers interviewed, Of tel was able to deal with approximately half (49%) of all complaints/enquiries during this period. The remaining half (51%) were either referred to their telephone supplier (30%), or someone else (8%), and some mentioned their complaint/enquiry was handled in an alternative way (12%), as shown in figure 3a.

Figure 3a: Percentage of contacts handled by Of tel

Base: All consumers contacting Of tel, Oct '01-Mar '02 (Base: 510)

Of tel handled Referred to telephone company Referred to someone else None of these



Resolving complaints/enquiries

3.6 Half of consumers spoken to said that their complaint/enquiry had been resolved³. The average number of resolved complaints rises to almost 6 in 10 (59%) amongst those handled by Oftel which means that around 4 in 10 of these consumers are under the impression that Oftel is still dealing with their complaint/enquiry when in fact it has been resolved.

Contact reference number

3.7 It is Oftel's policy to ensure that all consumers who contact them are given either a contact name or a reference number. Almost 7 out of 10 (69%) said that they remembered being given this information. The remainder either said they were not (20%), or did not know (11%).

3.8 Residential consumers were equally as likely as business consumers to remember being given a reference for their contact (69% and 71% respectively). There was a slight difference in the proportion of phone contacts remembering a reference versus written contacts (71% and 65% respectively), however this is not a statistically significant difference. Perhaps as telephone contacts are asked to make a note of the reference, this may make it more memorable.

³ Interviews were conducted during the month following contact with Oftel, therefore contacts which had been resolved would have taken between one day and a maximum of six weeks.

Chapter 4 – Time taken to respond to initial contacts

4.1 Oftel's complaint handling team has targets with regard to the length of time it should take to respond to initial enquiries or complaints. According to consumer perceptions, is Oftel reaching these targets?

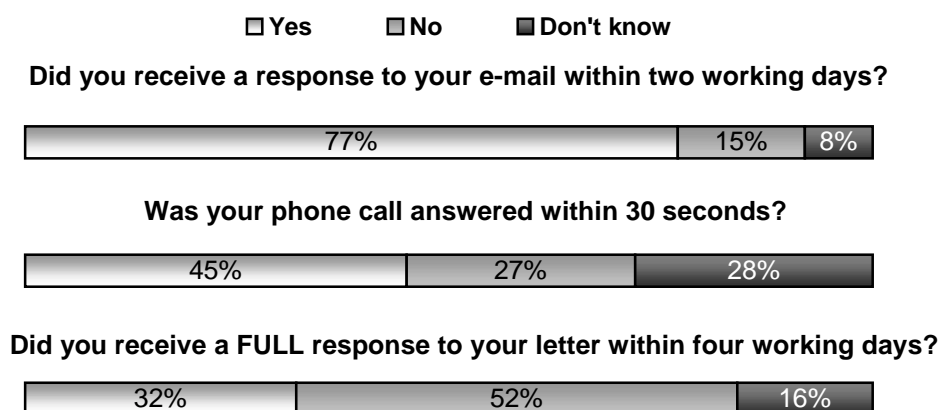
Written complaints/enquiries

4.2 Most (77%) e-mail enquirers said they had received a response within the allotted 2 working days timeframe, as shown in figure 4a. This figure is broadly similar to the most recent Oftel statistics which show that 75% of all e-mail enquiries were responded to within two days.

4.3 Statistics also show that 72% of letters were sent out within four working days, and this survey shows that a third (32%) of consumers who complained by letter had actually *received* a full reply within those four days.

Figure 4a: Percentage of consumers received reply within Oftel's target

Base: All consumers contacting Oftel, Oct '01-Mar '02 (Base: e-mail *61, phone 377, letter *71)



* apply caution as base size less than 100

Phone complaints/enquiries

4.4 Just under half (45%) of those contacting Oftel by telephone said their call was answered in less than 30 seconds. Around 3 in 10 (28%) did not know how long it took for their call to be answered and a similar proportion (27%) said their call took more than 30 seconds to be answered. Due to the time lapse between making the complaint/enquiry and the time of interview, consumers may have had difficulty estimating how long their call took to be answered.

4.5 Overall, around half (47%) of all contacts were responded to within the relevant target time frame.

Telephone queuing system

4.6 Oftel uses an automated queuing system which consumers will be forwarded to if an advisor is unavailable. Consumers were asked whether they were transferred to the automated system and if so, whether they waited to speak to an advisor – the results are summarised below:

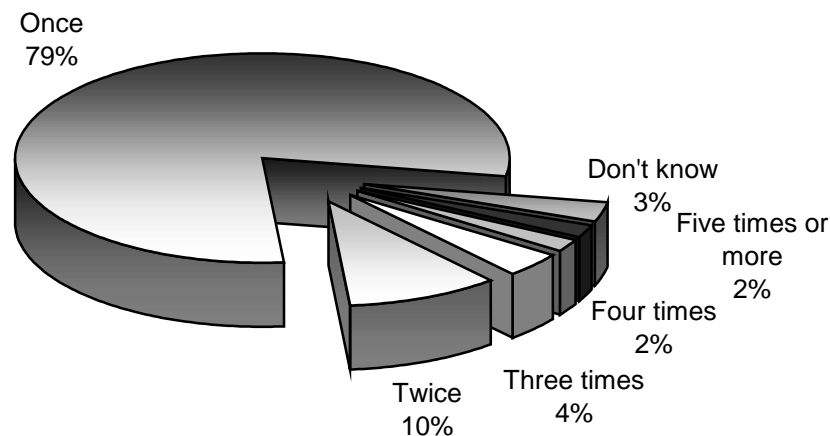
Of the consumers who contacted Oftel by phone:

- almost half spoke to someone immediately (**46%**);
- a quarter, were asked to hold in a queue (**25%**):
 - most of these remember being told which queue position (**77%**)
 - almost a quarter claim they were not informed of this (**23%**)
 - the majority held on to speak to an advisor (**86%**); and
- the remainder were unsure, or could not remember (**29%**).

4.7 Being asked to hold in a queue does not appear to be a barrier to consumers wishing to contact Oftel. The majority (86%) of these consumers said they held on until they managed to speak to an advisor. Only one in 10 said that they either hung up immediately or held on for a while before hanging up – which equates to two per cent of all phone contacts.

4.8 The number of times called before speaking to an advisor appeared to be more memorable amongst consumers. The vast majority of consumers (79%) phoning Oftel called just once before speaking to an advisor as shown in figure 4b

Figure 4b: Average number of calls made by consumer before speaking to advisor
Base: All consumers contacting Oftel by phone, Oct '01-Mar '02 (Base: 510)



Chapter 5 – Satisfaction with complaint handling

5.1 Half of consumers claim they received a response within Oftel's targets, however, were most consumers left feeling satisfied?

Overall satisfaction

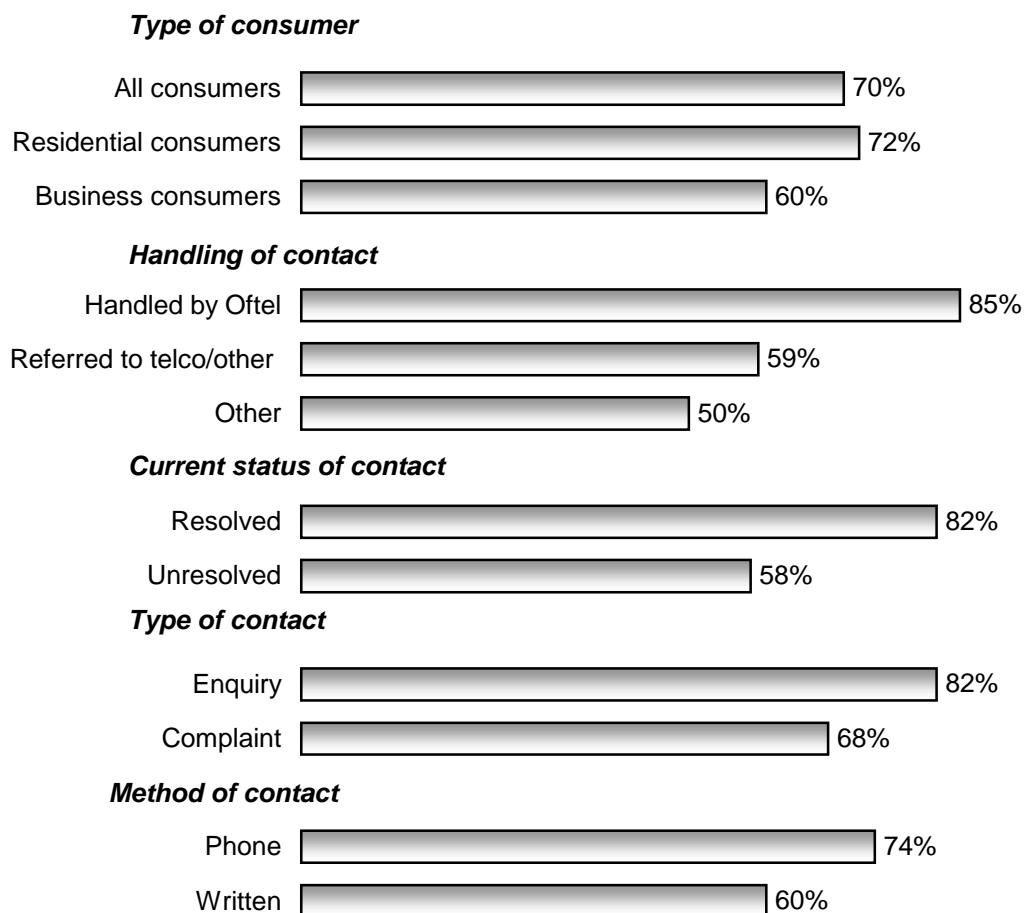
5.2 7 out of 10 consumers were satisfied with the overall handling of their complaint/enquiry, this figure rises to 85% amongst consumers whose complaint/enquiry was dealt with in-house, and falls to around 6 in 10 (59%) amongst those referred elsewhere, as shown in figure 5a.

5.3 Satisfaction also rises amongst those consumers who are aware that their contact has now been resolved (82%) compared to those who's complaint/enquiry is still being dealt with (58%).

5.4 Residential consumers and those contacting Oftel with an enquiry were significantly more satisfied (72% and 82% respectively) than business consumers (60%) and those contacting Oftel to make a complaint (68%). Satisfaction amongst residential consumers varies with age – lowest amongst older consumers aged 55+ (68%) and highest amongst those aged 15-34 (75%).

Figure 5a: Percentage satisfied with overall handling of complaint/enquiry

Base: All consumers contacting Oftel, Oct '01-Mar '02 (Base: 510, 'don't knows' have been excluded)



5.5 The lower level of satisfaction amongst businesses is perhaps unsurprising as the types of complaint received by these consumers may have larger repercussions on the company therefore demanding faster resolution times than residential consumers, resulting in lower than average levels of satisfaction.

5.6 It is also understandable that consumers are more satisfied with the handling of *enquiries* as these are more likely to be dealt with immediately, (67% of enquiries had been resolved at time of interview compared to 47% of complaints). Also, the outcome of a consumer complaint may have more of an effect on the satisfaction score than the outcome of an enquiry. An unsatisfactory outcome from a complaint may produce lower satisfaction scores.

5.7 Satisfaction with the overall handling also varied significantly according to the method of contact, ranging from 74% satisfied amongst those phoning Of tel compared to 60% amongst those writing, rising to 87% and 77% respectively amongst contacts handled by Of tel. These varying levels of satisfaction may be related to the time taken to respond to complaints/enquiries. Understandably phone calls are answered, and a level of consumer advice given immediately, whereas written complaints/enquiries have a longer administration process and also rely on the postal service prolonging receipt of complaint and hence receipt of reply.

5.8 Of the 3 in 10 consumers who felt that their complaint/enquiry was not dealt with satisfactorily, over half (54%) had been referred to another source. Various reasons were given by consumers who were not satisfied with their complaint handling, as shown in the list below.

MAIN REASONS FOR DISSATISFACTION WITH COMPLAINT HANDLING

1. 'Weren't able to resolve my complaint' **(37%)**
2. 'Never got back to me' **(18%)**
3. 'Have no teeth to act/disappointed they can do nothing' **(13%)**
4. 'Did nothing except pass on the message to phone company' **(12%)**
5. 'Told me to contact my telephone company' **(9%)**
6. 'Criticism of staff dealing with complaint' **(9%)**
7. 'Said they weren't able to help' **(9%)**
8. 'Not kept sufficiently informed' **(4%)**
9. 'Wasn't satisfied with outcome' **(3%)**
10. 'Took too long to resolve enquiry/complaint' **(3%)**
11. 'Other' **(9%)**
12. 'Don't know' **(18%)**

5.9 7 out of 10 reasons for dissatisfaction were out of Of tel's control, such as reason number one, '*Weren't able to resolve my complaint*'. However, the remaining 3 in 10 consumers suggested their dissatisfaction was actually related to something Of tel was able to improve. The main reason being consumers claiming that Of tel had never got back to them.

Satisfaction with various aspects of process

Contacting Oftel

5.10 Almost 9 out of 10 (89%) consumers were satisfied with the ease of getting hold of someone to deal with their complaint/enquiry, as shown in figure 5b. Residential consumers were once again significantly more satisfied with this aspect (90%) than business consumers (81%).

Advisors

5.11 Oftel's strength appears to be that advisors are polite and pay attention to callers, 94% of contacts were satisfied with this aspect of their complaint/enquiry. 81% of consumers were satisfied that the advisor was interested and keen to assist. There was no difference in satisfaction levels for these aspects according to consumer type.

Process

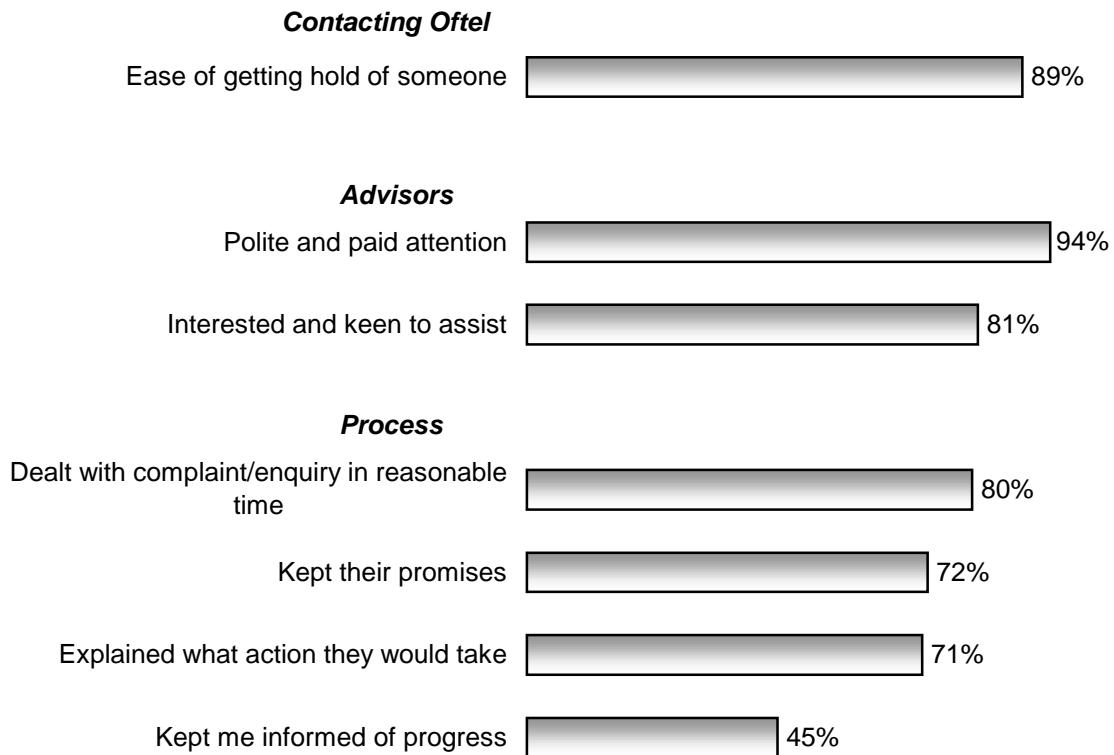
5.12 In relation to the actual complaint handling process, 8 out of 10 were satisfied with the length of time taken to deal with their complaint/enquiry while slightly less, (72%) were satisfied that Oftel had done what they said they were going to. A similar proportion (71%) were satisfied that they had been explained what action would be taken, rising to 80% amongst resolved contacts.

5.13 Consumers were least satisfied that they had been kept informed of progress throughout their complaint, this is consistent with the 'top suggestion' for improving the service – 'call me back, keep me informed of progress' – mentioned by 17% of consumers.

5.14 The only aspect of process which satisfaction differed by the method of contact was 'explained what action they would take'. A significantly higher proportion of consumers contacting Oftel by phone were satisfied with this aspect (75%) compared to those who contacted Oftel in writing (57%).

Figure 5b: % satisfied with aspects of complaint handling process

Base: All consumers contacting OfTel, Oct '01-Mar '02 (Base: 510, 'don't knows' have been excluded)



5.15 Unsurprisingly, resolved complaints/enquiries gained much higher levels of satisfaction for each aspect than those still being dealt with, perhaps the latter may change their opinion once their case is resolved. Residential consumers were generally more satisfied than business consumers. perhaps as mentioned above this relates to the potential effect the complaint may have on the business demanding higher expectations and faster results and hence lowering satisfaction levels.

Chapter 6 – Comparisons to other companies

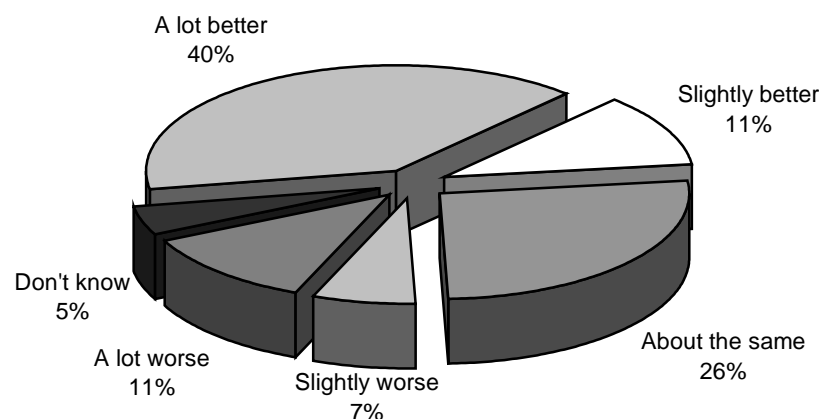
6.1 So, slightly over two-thirds of consumers are satisfied with the way Oftel handled their complaint, how does this compare to other companies?

6.2 Around half (51%) of consumers who contacted Oftel had, at some point in time, also contacted another company or organisation to make a complaint or enquiry, 51% residential and 53% of business consumers.

6.3 Half of all consumers (51%) who had previously made a complaint to another company thought that Oftel had dealt with their complaint/enquiry better than the other company they had contacted – 40% a lot better and 11% slightly better. A further 26% said Oftel's handling was about the same as the other company or organisation contacted – equating to 77% stating that Oftel's complaint handling was about the same as or better than that of other companies, these results are shown in figure 6a.

Figure 6a: Oftel's complaint handling compared to other companies

Base: All consumers contacting Oftel and ever contacted another company/organisation, Oct '01-Mar '02 (Base: 263)



6.4 About 1 in 5 (18%) consumers thought Oftel had handled their contact worse than other companies. 26% of written contacts thought this was the case compared to 15% of phone contacts. Two-thirds of consumers claiming Oftel's handling was worse than other companies or organisations were contacts which had been referred, perhaps one reason for their response.

6.5 The main areas stated as unsatisfactory amongst these consumers were 'being kept informed of progress' (96% of those who said Oftel's handling was worse also said they were not satisfied with this aspect), 'Oftel keeping their promises – ie calling back when they said they would' (mentioned by 76%) and 'explaining what action was to be taken' (71%). However, caution should be applied to these results as they have been drawn from small base sizes.

6.6 A similar proportion of business (80%) and residential consumers (77%) said that they thought Oftel handled their complaint/enquiry about the same, or better than other companies contacted.

6.7 Consumers who contacted Ofcom by phone were significantly more likely to say that Ofcom handled their complaint better (55%) than those who contacted Ofcom in writing (40%). This continues the trend of consistently lower levels of satisfaction amongst written complainants compared to those complaining by phone.

Chapter 7 – Improvements to the procedure

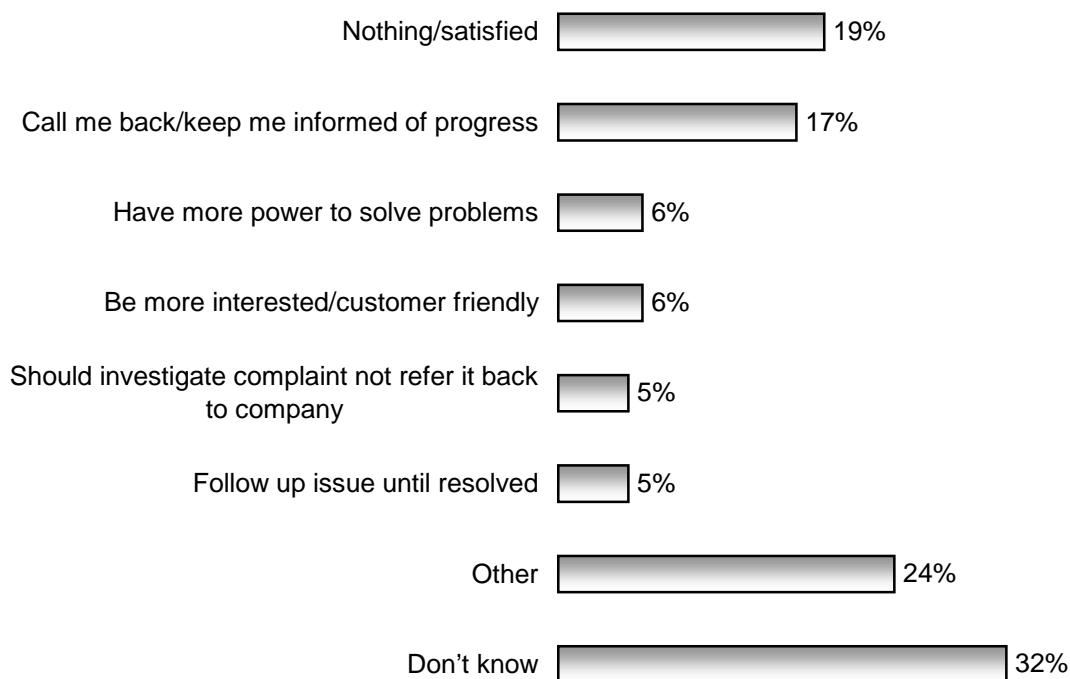
Consumers suggestions

7.1 So, most consumers who contacted Oftel thought that in their experience Oftel handled their contact on a par with, if not better than, other companies and 85% of those contacts dealt with by Oftel were satisfied with the overall handling of their complaint/enquiry. In light of these findings – did consumers have any suggestions for further improving the service?

7.2 An encouraging 1 in 5 (19%) said they were satisfied with the service they had received and no suggestions for improvement. A further third (32%) did not know how the service could be improved – either suggesting that it couldn't be, or that they were unable to think on the spot how this could be done.

Figure 7a: Suggestions for improving Oftel's complaint handling procedure

Base: All consumers contacting Oftel, Oct '01-Mar '02 (Base: 510)



Totals add to more than 100% as some consumers made more than one suggestion

7.3 The remaining half (49%) suggested various ways for improvement, detailed in figure 7a. The most popular being to keep the consumer informed of progress throughout the complaint handling (mentioned by 17% of complainants), and frustration at the lack of power resting with Oftel in relation to specific complaints, (6% mentioned this). A similar proportion (5%) wanted Oftel to follow up issues until they had been resolved, this is likely to be related to complaints/enquiries which had been referred to another source.

7.4 Similarly to the reasons for dissatisfaction, 7 out of 10 suggestions for improving the service were out of Oftel's control, such as having more power to resolve

complaints. Amongst the 3 in 10 with suggestions for improving the service currently within Ofcom's power, the main suggestion was to keep the consumer informed of progress. Other suggestions mentioned but to a lesser extent included 'being more customer friendly' and 'following up the issue until resolved'.

Appendix 1 – Questionnaire

Q1. When you contacted Oftel was this to make a complaint or enquiry? If you have contacted Oftel more than once recently over different issues, please could you just concentrate on the most recent reason for contacting them.

complaint
enquiry

Q2. And in what month did you make that enquiry/complaint?

Q3. And how did you initially contact Oftel?

phone
letter
e-mail/website
fax

Q4. Was Oftel able to handle your enquiry/complaint, or did they refer you to your telephone company or to someone else?

Oftel handled
Referred me to my telephone company
Referred me to someone else
None of these

Q5. And has your enquiry/complaint now been resolved or is it still being dealt with?

Resolved
Still being dealt with

Q6. Overall, how satisfied were you with the way in which Oftel handled your enquiry/complaint?

Very satisfied
Fairly satisfied
Not very satisfied
Not at all satisfied

Q7. Why weren't you satisfied?

Q8. And how satisfied were you with the following aspects of your enquiry/complaint?

Very satisfied
Fairly satisfied
Not very satisfied
Not at all satisfied

a) Ease of getting hold of someone

- b) They were polite and paid attention
- c) They sounded interested and keen to assist
- d) They explained what action they would take
- e) They kept me informed of progress
- f) They kept their promises, eg contacted me when they said they would
- g) They dealt with my enquiry/complaint in a reasonable amount of time

Q9. When you contacted Ofstel by e-mail, did you receive a response within two working days?

- Yes
- No

Q10. When you wrote to Ofstel, did you receive a FULL reply within four working days?

- Yes
- No

Q11. When you phoned Ofstel, was your call answered in less than 30 seconds or more than 30 seconds?

- Less than 30 seconds
- More than 30 seconds
- Don't know

Q12. And if your call was placed in a queue, were you told what position you were in the queue?

- Was in queue and told which position
- Was in queue but not told which position
- Not in queue – got through to person immediately
- Don't know

Q13. Did you hold in the queue or did you hang up?

- Held on until got through to a person
- Held on for a bit then hung up
- Hung up immediately
- Don't know

Q14. How many times did you ring before you got through to a person?

- Once
- Twice
- Three times
- Four times
- Five times or more
- Don't know

Q15. Were you given a contact name or reference number for your enquiry/complaint?

Yes

No

Q16. Have you ever contacted any other company or organisation to make an enquiry/a complaint?

Yes

No

Q17. Thinking about the most recent time you contacted another company or organisation to make an enquiry/a complaint, would you say that Oftel's overall handling of your enquiry/complaint was better, worse or about the same as the way in which the other company or organisation handled your enquiry/complaint? Is that a lot or slightly...

Oftel a lot better

Oftel slightly better

About the same

Oftel slightly worse

Oftel a lot worse

Don't know/can't remember

Q18. What could Oftel have done to improve the way in which they handled your enquiry/complaint?