

Postal Redress Service (POSTRS): Independent Complaint Reviewer Report For 2020.

1. Introduction

This is my eighth report on POSTRS - which deals with disputes between postal operators who are members of the Service and their customers. Together with my interim report¹ of 12 August it covers the full calendar year 2020.

The Coronavirus pandemic continues unabated, and I'm very aware of the continued disruption to POSTRS' and CEDR's (the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution) operations. The office has been closed since late March 2020, with staff working from home. Against this demanding backdrop I remain impressed with the overall standard of complaint handling maintained by CEDR; and I again commend their success in maintaining continuity of service throughout. I have also taken into account the extraordinary circumstances when assessing CEDR's complaint handling performance.

2. My Role

I am an independent consultant and am not based at CEDR, nor am I part of that organisation. There are two aspects to my role.

Firstly, I can consider individual complaints about certain aspects of the level of service provided by POSTRS. Under my terms of reference² and the rules of the Service³ I can only consider points concerning POSTRS' or CEDR's quality of service in respect of alleged administrative errors, delays, staff rudeness or other such service matters. Other than referring to them where appropriate, I cannot comment on the content or validity of the Service's rules.

¹ <https://www.cedr.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/POSTRS-interim-review-Jan-June-2020-FINAL.pdf>

² <https://www.cedr.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Independent-Reviewer-TOR-v2.pdf>

³ <https://www.cedr.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/POSTRS-rules-2017-v2.pdf>

I can review cases where a user of the Service has complained to POSTRS or CEDR and, having been through CEDR's complaint process, remains dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint. I cannot consider the merits or otherwise of decisions made by CEDR's adjudicators; nor can I investigate, consider or comment on the substance or outcomes of cases or applications made by claimants. Where appropriate, I may make recommendations based on my findings.

The second aspect of my role is to conduct overall reviews of service complaints and produce reports accordingly. These are based on findings from my reviews of individual complaints; and by examining and analysing as I see fit all or some of the service complaints that POSTRS have handled.

3. CEDR's Complaints Procedure

The complaints procedure⁴ covers POSTRS; it explains the scope of the procedure along with the two internal stages of review that take place before, if necessary, a complaint is referred to me.

The procedure is articulated clearly with timescales and information about what can be expected. In brief, if after the first stage response to a complaint customers remain dissatisfied they can ask for escalation to stage two of the process, where a senior manager or Director will review the complaint. Where this does not resolve the matter, the complaint can be referred to me for independent review.

4. This Report

My report reflects my overall review of how well CEDR handled complaints about POSTRS in 2020. My quantitative findings incorporate those from my interim report and cover from 1 January to 31 December, as do my findings on timescales. The rest of my qualitative findings focus on the second half of the year; my interim report dealt with the first half. I had one complaint referred to me under POSTRS' complaints procedure during 2020, which I covered in my interim report.

⁴ <https://www.cedr.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CEDR-Complaints-Procedure-Jan21.pdf>

5. My Findings

(a) Quantitative

Total applications to POSTRS were down from 694 to 642 year on year - a decrease of 7.5%. Complaints about POSTRS' quality of service remain low with six being received this year, which is one fewer than last year and represents 1.1% of applications.

Of the 642 total applications handled in 2020, 40% (259) received a final decision from an adjudicator. The remaining 60% were either outside POSTRS' investigative scope, or were settled without progression to an adjudicator. This is a shift from 2019, when the respective percentages were 61% and 39%.

Of the 259 adjudicated claims, POSTRS found wholly for the claimant in three (1.2%) cases; partly for the claimant in 34 cases (13.1%); and wholly for the postal operator in 222 cases (85.7%). These proportions are broadly consistent with 2019, although a slightly higher percentage was found partly for the claimant (13.1% this year, against 6.9% last year).

It's not for me to comment on claims and their outcomes; I include these data only to provide a useful context in which to view complaints made about POSTRS itself. However, POSTRS may like to explore the 21 percentage point reduction in claims receiving a final decision and satisfy itself that there are no barriers to adjudication. Let me stress that I found no complaints in this respect, nor is there any evidence to suggest this is the case.

As has been the case in previous years, even though most claims were found in favour of the postal operator the fact that only six complaints were made about POSTRS suggests that its quality of customer service is good.

Table 1 below gives a breakdown of the service complaints about POSTRS for 2020:

Table 1

In Scope	Partly in Scope	Out of Scope	Total
0	4	2	6

Table 2 below gives a breakdown by outcome for those complaints that were fully or partly in scope:

Table 2

Upheld	Partly Upheld	Not Upheld	Total
0	2	4	6

There was one classification error, which occurred during the first half of the year.

I cannot identify any trends or themes from such low numbers. However, the small number of complaints suggests an absence of any systemic or underlying issues.

(b) Qualitative

(i) Timescales (2020 full year)

Complaint handling times improved; acknowledgment speed did not.

CEDR handled all six complaints within the prescribed 30 working day timescale. The average completion time for the year was 17.5 working days, with a range of four to 30 working days. The performance in the second half of the year was better than the first.

Overall this is an improvement on 2019, when the average timescale was 22.7 working days, and one complaint went beyond the 30 working day target.

CEDR's average time to acknowledge complaints was 2.6 working days compared to two working days in 2019. No acknowledgements took longer than three working days.

I remain of the view that for a service with so few complaints, acknowledgements could be a bit quicker. (In 2018 POSTRS acknowledged all complaints within one working day.) But taking into account the pressures caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, 2.6 days is not bad and I'm not minded to make any recommendations.

(ii) Casework and Outcomes (1 July to 31 December 2020)

For this review I examined the three complaints received between 1 July and 31 December 2020. (My interim report provides a qualitative analysis of those complaints received during the first half of the year.)

The outcomes of all three cases were in my view correct, and replies to complainants were of a good standard.

One complaint was “partly in scope”. Although it was almost entirely about the adjudication decision, a small element was about POSTRS’ professionalism in that someone had signed off an email to the customer with a first name only. It was good to see CEDR pick this up, and they responded with an apology and confirmation that staff would be reminded to use full names.

The other two complaints were “out of scope”. Both were clear-cut cases of the claimant being unhappy with aspects of the adjudication itself, or the decision. There were no customer service issues involved.

No cases were escalated to Stage 2 of the process.

6. Conclusion

The picture with POSTRS has been consistent since I began reviewing the service in 2016. This year is no exception and in the context of POSTRS’ overall volume of claims in 2020 the frequency of complaints about customer service levels remains low (at 1.1%). So I’m satisfied that there is evidence of a sustained good performance.

All cases except one were correctly classified (a human error in the first half of the year), and in my view CEDR reached correct and fair outcomes on every complaint it reviewed. Replies were of a consistently good standard, for which POSTRS is to be commended.

CEDR improved its end-to-end handling time by about five working days compared to last year, which is a good achievement. I would like to see acknowledgement speed improve from the current 2.6 working average but the current performance is sufficient, and I’m mindful of the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on CEDR’s operations. I’ve also taken into account the absence of any customer comments in relation to the speed of acknowledgment. For these reasons I am not making a formal recommendation.

Whilst outwith my remit, by way of observation CEDR may like to explore the reduction in claims going through to adjudication.

7. Recommendations

I have no recommendations.

Acknowledgements

I conducted my review remotely and I'm grateful for CEDR facilitating this, and providing technical support. CEDR provided me with the same level of open and unrestricted access to all the systems and records that I needed as if I'd been in their offices. As usual, I therefore had carte blanche in respect of conducting this audit as I saw fit.

I've also had the customary high level of assistance with any queries that came up as I conducted my review and I appreciate in particular the responses from the Head of Consumer Services and the Complaints Manager to the occasional points that I raised as I examined the casework.

Chris Holland

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CA Holland'.

Independent Complaint Reviewer

24 January 2021