

Postal Redress Service (POSTRS): Independent Complaint

Reviewer Report For 1 July 2023 to 31 December 2023

1. Background

This is my first report on the Postal Redress Service (POSTRS) for the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution (CEDR) as the newly appointed Independent Complaints Reviewer (ICR). I am an independent consultant working remotely and I specialise in complaints handling. I have been appointed for an initial 3-year term.

This report covers the period from 1 July 2023 to 31 December 2023. The next review period for POSTRS will be 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024. CEDR has extended the timeframe for the report to reflect the small number of complaints received. I confirm that I was consulted about this and I agree with the decision.

2. Introduction

CEDR is a registered charity and is non-profit distributing. It provides independent dispute resolution for consumers when they experience problems with a company and have exhausted their internal complaints procedure. CEDR's aim is to provide society with skills and solutions for effective dialogue and to bring about sustainable change. POSTRS is approved by Ofcom, the regulator for telecommunications and postal services.

This is one of three stand-alone reports, the others being the Communications and Internet Services Adjudications Scheme (CISAS) and the Aviation Adjudication Scheme.

A complaint should have exhausted a company's complaints process before it is brought to CEDR. If a complainant has a service complaint about CEDR, then there is then a two-stage resolution process before an eligible complaint would be referred to the ICR. The ICR's role is therefore to review individual complaints about certain aspects of the level of customer service provided by CEDR which have been escalated to Stage Three of CEDR's complaints procedure. As ICR, I therefore provide the final review for complaints where a user of CEDR's schemes or services has been through the complaints procedure and remains dissatisfied with the outcome at Stage Two.

It is not my role to review, amend or overturn decisions, awards or determinations made on cases by CEDR's adjudication officials or to consider complaints about the decision-making process used by an adjudication official in a particular case. I can review cases where a user of the Service has complained to POSTRS or CEDR and, having been through the complaint's procedure, remains dissatisfied with the outcome. I may also make recommendations based on my findings. CEDR provides me with relevant statistical information to help with my analysis.

The second aspect of my role is to review complaints about the service generally. These are based on my findings from any individual complaints that I have reviewed, examining and analysing all, or some, of the service complaints about POSTRS as I consider appropriate.

As part of my role, I am also asked to review preferably all, but as a minimum a sample of no less than 80% of formal complaints about CEDR (at Stages One, Two and Three) and produce a set of four reports. There are three standalone reports covering the Communications and Internet Services Adjudications Scheme (CISAS), the Postal Redress Service (POSTRS) and the Aviation Adjudication Scheme. A further report covers CEDR's "other schemes".

3. CEDR's Complaints Procedure

CEDR's complaints procedure² includes POSTRS. It explains the scope of the procedure and the two internal review stages that take place before, if appropriate, a complaint is referred to me.

The process is articulated clearly, with timescales and information about what can be expected. In brief, if after the Stage 1 response to a complaint a customer remains dissatisfied, they can ask for escalation to Stage Two of the process, where a senior manager will review the complaint. Where this does not resolve the matter, it can be referred to me for an independent complaint review.

4. My Findings

My report reviews how well overall CEDR handled complaints about POSTRS in the six-month period from 1 July 2023 to 31 December 2023.

No complaints were referred to me for investigation during the review period and all were resolved at Stage 1.

(a) Quantitative

CEDR received 403 applications to POSTRS and received 7 complaints during this review period.

163 Adjudication decisions were issued during this period. Of the 163 adjudicated claims, POSTRS found for the claimant in part or in full on a small number of claims (approximately 5%). Although the vast majority of claims found in favour of the postal operator, there were very few complaints about POSTRS itself. This suggests that the quality of customer service is good.

It's not my role to comment on claims and their outcomes, rather, I include the above data for contextual purposes only.

² <https://www.cedr.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CEDR-Complaints-Procedure-November-2023.pdf>

Table 1 below gives a breakdown of the completed service complaints about POSTRS for the review period. Those 'Out of Scope' are where the complainant was challenging the Adjudicators' Decision and there were no customer service failures. The names of all complainants have been redacted:

Table 1

| In Scope | Partly in Scope | Out of Scope | Total |
|----------|-----------------|--------------|-------|
| 4 | 0 | 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 |
|--------|---------------|------------|-------|
| 1 | 0 | 5 | 6 |

I found no identifiable trends from such small numbers. One new complaint remains outstanding as it was received in late December and this will be reviewed in the next report.

(b) Qualitative

(i) Timescales

All complaints were acknowledged within 2 working days. The average complaint handling time was 25 working days and this was within the 30 working day target outlined in the Complaints Procedure. The range during this review period was 16 to 29 working days.

(ii) Casework and Outcomes (1 July to 31 December 2023)

I examined all of the POSTRS complaints received between 1 July and 31 December 2023 by printing off all of the correspondence and scrutinising it.

Overall, the outcomes of all cases, including those deemed Out of Scope, were in my view correct and replies to complainants were of a high standard, written in plain English and consistent with the principles of good complaints handling in terms of fairness, respect, equality, dignity and autonomy.

No complaints were escalated to Stage 2 of the complaints' procedure. Compensation levels were low but consistent with those paid by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO). In the complaint that was upheld, CEDR

acknowledged service failings. The case was rejected incorrectly, even though the complainant had been in dispute with Royal Mail for more than 90 days. They were also not advised that their application to POSTRS had been rejected and sent several letters which were not responded to. The customer was offered £40 in full and final settlement of the complaint. Of note is a complaint where POSTRS did not feel able to adjudicate on the fairness or otherwise of Royal Mail's commercial scheme which involves swapping stamps and the issue of potential fraud and was considered to be 'Out of Scope'.

5. Conclusion

I am satisfied that CEDR's performance in respect of handling complaints about POSTRS is very good. In the context of POSTRS' total claims, the frequency of service complaints remains low at 1.7%.

As noted above, Stage 1 responses were consistently of a high standard, for which I commend CEDR.

6. Recommendations

I understand that complaints can be stressful for complainants and an observation was made in one case where the complainant displayed unacceptable behaviour. CEDR does have an Unacceptable Behaviour Policy, and whilst it was not used in this case, the policy is in place to protect staff from aggression; abuse; threats; harassment, excessive levels of contact; and unreasonable demands.

7. Acknowledgements

I conducted my review remotely and I am grateful to CEDR for facilitating this with the necessary technical support. I had open and unrestricted access to all the systems and records that I needed and the ability to conduct the audit as I saw fit. I also had assistance with the various queries that came up as I conducted my review, including examining the casework.

Andrea Cook OBE
Independent Complaints Reviewer
8 January 2024