

Marcus Clements
Head of Consumer Policy
Directorate of Economics, Markets & Strategy
Office of Rail and Road
25 Cabot Square,
London E14 4QZ

Chris Atkinson
Head of Communications
Trenitalia c2c
2nd Floor, Cutlers Court
115 Houndsditch
London EC3A 7BR

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Dear Marcus,

Thank you for your letter dated 15 December regarding complaint handling satisfaction. This letter sets out the action we have taken over the past year to improve satisfaction levels among those of our customers who have cause to complain about the service they receive from c2c.

We are disappointed with the low satisfaction levels with both the process and outcome of complaints made by c2c customers. Sadly however, these results are not surprising. As you are already aware, c2c faced a number of challenges in 2019/20 relating to our handling of customer complaints. As per the Recovery Plan we submitted to the ORR in November 2019, we have made staffing and process changes that have improved both the process and quality of complaints handling at c2c, and we have also successfully addressed the key issues at source. Despite the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, we have successfully returned to a sustainable position with our approach to handling complaints. As a result, the complainant satisfaction scores for the first six periods of 2020/21 have improved notably for both the complaints process (23% versus 11% in 2019/20) and complaints outcome (27% versus 23% in 2019/20), even though during this time our Customer Relations team faced an unprecedented challenge handling thousands of unexpected refund requests and complaints while working remotely. We expect that the satisfaction levels for the second half of 2020/21 will be even higher, and in line with industry averages.

The main issue we have identified that has driven low complainant satisfaction scores was our slow response times. As c2c Commercial Director Clare McCaffrey set out in her letter to you on 8 November 2019, a combination of internal staffing issues and the difficult implementation of a new ticketing system resulted in a significant backlog of customer complaints building up in summer 2019. By the end of Period 6 2019/20, we had 6,376 open customer complaints that required addressing. In contrast, at the equivalent point in 2020/21, we had fewer than 500 customer complaints open. At the time of writing, we have fewer than 10 customer complaints open.

This has been achieved by bringing in additional staff and restructuring the Customer Relations team. During 2019/20, we brought in a number of additional heads on a temporary basis to increase our capacity for complaints handling and clear the backlog. This was achieved at the start of February 2020. However the huge influx of refund requests following the start of the Coronavirus pandemic meant we again had to bring in additional temporary staff to handle the unprecedented customer demand, once lockdown rules allowed us to do so. This approach enabled us to return to compliance with the 20-day working target again, by July 2020. We have maintained compliance with our target since this date, and this will remain the case for the foreseeable future.

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We have now made permanent appointments which mean we are no longer dependent on temporary staff. The current team that handles cases on a daily basis has 6 FTE, comprising of three Senior Customer Relations Executives and three Customer Relations Executives. For most of 2019/20, we only had 4 FTEs in post, all of whom were Customer Relations Executives with no staff in a senior role. In the event that there is a surge of customer complaints again, we have budget in place to bring in additional staff to augment this expanded permanent team as required.

The second key set of actions we have taken is addressing the key issues causing most complaints. In 2019/20, the top category for complaints was Fares and Retailing/Smartcards. More than 6,600 complaints were made, at an average of over 500 complaints per period. This reflected the difficult migration to a new ticketing system, that resulted in system instability and regrettably several incidents where the system failed completely and customers were unable to either buy or collect their Smartcard tickets.

c2c has invested heavily in the new ticketing system, improving both its reliability and the purchasing options it provides to customers. Most recently, this includes releasing a new app which enables customers to download their tickets to their own Smartcard before they travel, rather than collecting at the station. We have also provided extensive advice and troubleshooting tips to customers, to help them avoid some of the most common problems that were frequently complained about.

This has successfully contributed to a significant reduction in the number of complaints about c2c's Smartcard system. So far in 2020/21 there have been just over 1,000 Smartcards complaints, which equates to 115 per period on average. While passenger numbers have fallen heavily during the pandemic, that factor alone does not fully account for this reduction: c2c passenger numbers are down by 2/3rds, but Smartcard complaints have been reduced by nearly 80%. Meanwhile the proportion of our customers using Smartcards has increased this year, as more people move away from using paper tickets during the pandemic.

This approach also contributed to large reductions in complaints in related areas, such as Fares and Retailing/Ticket Buying Facilities and Fares and Retailing/Ticket Buying Facilities – Other. Combined these two categories averaged 150 complaints per period in 2019/20, but only 23 complaints per period so far this year, which is an 85% reduction.

Our improved retail systems have also helped address complaints in the second most-frequent category in 2019/20: Company Policy/Ticketing and Refunds Policy. We received over 4,600 complaints in this category last year, averaging 360 per period. Failed transactions and delayed payments because of system instability were the primary drivers of these complaints.

So far in 2020/21, this category has become the most-frequent source of complaints, but the reason for complaints has been very different. Rather than complaints about our retail systems, the issues have been around the refund policy set that was set by the Department for Transport for c2c and all other operators during the pandemic. Despite the emergence of this new one-off issue, we have again recorded a significant drop in total complaints in this category with 117 complaints per period on average: a reduction of two-thirds.

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Having delivered our Recovery Plan and achieved a steady and sustainable position both within our Customer Relations team and with our retail systems, we are confident that we will not return to the challenges we faced in 2019/20. We want to reduce the issues that cause complaints further, and to continue resolving issues effectively when they do arise. As we plan for the post-pandemic future of the c2c service with the Department for Transport, we will ensure that we maintain our focus on these objectives and deliver an ongoing improvement in our performance.

I hope the information provided in this letter has been helpful and reassures you of the importance c2c places on providing an effective process that resolves customer complaints effectively and appropriately. If you would like any further information, please do not hesitate to get in contact.

With best wishes,



Chris Atkinson
Head of Communications, Trenitalia c2c