

Summary of Investigation Report

Complaints about Water Meter Mix-up

Introduction

The following two complaint cases are about delay on the part of the Water Supplies Department (“WSD”) in handling water meter mix-up problems.

The Complaint

Case 1

2. In January 2009, the complainant received a water bill for her flat in an estate demanding a charge for \$900. As the flat had been vacant for about six months, she suspected that there was a mistake. She, therefore, went to check the water meter of her flat, only to find that the number of the meter was different from the one stated on her water bill. Also, the reading on the water meter was 936 units less than that on the bill. She subsequently called the WSD hotline and asked for follow-up action. WSD agreed to send a staff member to inspect and cross-check. Meanwhile, the amount of water charge would be suspended.

3. In March, WSD staff carried out a site inspection and checked the water meter. It was confirmed that the meter of the complainant’s flat and that on the lower flat (“Flat A”) had been mixed up. The complainant called WSD to enquire about the progress of her case in March and April. The Department wrote to her only at the end of April to confirm that the meters had been mixed up. Nevertheless, WSD had rectified the record and there was no need for the complainant to pay any water charge for the period concerned. On the other hand, WSD had notified the registered consumer of Flat A of the adjusted water charge.

4. WSD received the complainant’s letters in May and September, alleging that the Department was sluggish in handling her case and did not explain clearly how it would solve the problem of overcharging as a result of meter misreading over the years. She also queried who should be held responsible for the mistake. WSD wrote back to her in June and November respectively to explain the progress and apologised for taking a longer time to process the case. However, the complainant considered that the replies fell short of addressing her queries. She, therefore, complained to this Office.

Case 2

5. In 2009, the number of persons living in the complainant's flat decreased from four to two. However, there was no significant change in the water charges. The complainant thus lodged a complaint with WSD in mid-September about the high water charges. After a site inspection in early October, WSD staff verbally told the complainant that the meters had been mixed up. However, the complainant did not receive any written reply afterwards. Three months later, WSD replied to the complainant and confirmed that the meters had been mixed up. It also revealed that between December 2008 and December 2009, the complainant had been overcharged by nearly double on his water bills. Dissatisfied that WSD had delayed in handling the meter mix-up and overcharging, the complainant lodged a complaint with this Office.

Our Findings

Case 1

6. WSD could not figure out why the meters had been mixed up or who should be held responsible. It merely attributed the incident to errors when meter numbers were being recorded or during data upload into the computer system. The complainant did not accept this explanation. We checked the meter installation records upon completion of the estate in question and found that such records had been submitted to WSD in early 1996 by the developer, who then submitted an amended version in December that same year. According to the amended version, all the flats within the estate had been renamed and the water meters re-arranged. The meter number of the complainant's flat in the original installation records was in fact the one that was later found to belong to her flat. However, her meter number was changed in the amended records. The problem was that the complainant's original meter number then became the new meter number of Flat A. In fact, we noticed that for some other flats in the estate concerned, the meter numbers in the amended installation records were also different from those in the original records.

7. We believed that WSD had not conducted a site inspection to cross-check the amendments before uploading the data to its computer system. Otherwise, it should have discovered that the meter numbers of the two flats in question were different from those in the installation records.

8. On the other hand, upon receipt of the complainant's dispute about water charges on 7 January, WSD did request its Customer Services Section within two weeks to arrange a site inspection. However, due to heavy workload, an inspection was not conducted until early March and a reply to the complainant only made at the end of April. There was a lapse of more than three

months and WSD still could not explain why the water meters were mixed up or who should be held responsible for the mistake. We are of the view that WSD's delay in handling the case inevitably caused anxiety to the complainant. It also caused unfairness to the consumer at Flat A who had to pay the adjusted water charge.

Case 2

9. In mid-February 2009, WSD hired a contractor to conduct a routine meter replacement project at the complainant's building. The Department believed that the complainant's meter had been mixed up with that of the flat below since the replacement work. It claimed that on completion, the contractor had filled out the serial numbers of the new meters of various flats in the building on a Meter Installation Table but mistakenly swapped the number of the complainant's meter with that of the flat below. As WSD staff only updated the meter information in its computer system according to the installation data submitted by the contractor without cross-checking them, the mistake in WSD's meter records occurred. Since the mix-up happened after 16 February 2009, WSD adjusted the water charges between 16 December 2008 and 15 December 2009 for the two consumers. After adjustment, the amount payable by the complainant was reduced from around \$1,000 to some \$500.

10. The complainant raised the water charges dispute in September 2009. After a site inspection in early October, WSD staff discovered that the complainant's meter had been mixed up with that of the flat below. Although WSD immediately issued a letter to the registered consumer of the flat below to arrange for an inspection, no reply was received. And WSD did not actively follow up. After three months of procrastination, WSD conducted an inspection at the flat in question in January 2010 and confirmed that the meters had been mixed up. To the complainant, it was indeed very frustrating and unfair as he was well aware that the meters had been mixed up but still had to wait for many months before he got the result. Moreover, this incident unavoidably brought unfairness and inconvenience to the consumer at the flat below.

11. We also found that six months after the replacement work, WSD had yet to input the new meter data and update the records in its computer system. As a result, it could not conduct any meter-reading or calculate the water charges for various consumers in the building according to their actual consumption but had to resort to estimation, making it even more difficult to resolve the water consumption dispute arising from the meter mix-up. That was indeed undesirable.

Conclusion

12. This Office considered that whilst entrusting the developers or hiring contractors for installation or replacement of water meters, WSD should verify and ensure the accuracy of all meter data. It must not shift its responsibilities to others.

Recommendations

13. With regard to these two cases, The Ombudsman recommended that WSD:

- (1) review its current practice of cross-checking meter installation and replacement, strengthen the monitoring of contractors and ensure the accuracy and validity of records submitted by contractors and developers (Cases 1 and 2);
- (2) set a timeline for handling cases of water meter mix-up (Cases 1 and 2);
- (3) cross-check the meter numbers of all flats in the estate/building in question and take remedial measures to rectify errors, if any (Cases 1 and 2);
- (4) review its internal monitoring mechanism to ensure that its staff follow established procedures and give timely response to the public (Case 1); and
- (5) review the procedures for updating computer records and formulate improvement measures to avoid delay (Case 2).

Follow-up Action by WSD on Our Recommendations

14. WSD has accepted our findings and recommendations. The current implementation actions are as follows:

- (1) WSD has reviewed the timeline for handling cases of meter mix-up and amended its guidelines. As from August 2010, its Customer

Services Section will take follow-up action within 21 days upon receipt of a complaint.

- (2) As at mid-December 2010, WSD has inspected 257 out of the 328 flats regarding Case 1 and inspected 136 out of the 138 flats regarding Case 2. Apart from these meter mix-up cases involving the two complainants and the two affected flats, no similar mistakes were found in other flats so far.

15. Other recommendations are being followed up.

**Office of The Ombudsman
December 2010**