

Troubleshooting Telecoms

**Troubleshooting the broadband
and mobile phone markets:
insights from the Citizens
Advice frontline**



**citizens
advice**

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Executive summary

Reliable and affordable digital connectivity is central to people's economic and social participation, as well as the UK's wider prospects for economic growth.

But the experiences of consumers in the telecoms market lag behind other essential services. This is having an impact on both consumers' ability to access and engage with the market, and on the sector's growth and development.

Citizens Advice helped nearly 35,500 people with telecoms problems last year - more than double the number we saw 5 years ago.¹ Our recent survey research found more consumers had issues with their telecoms services than with energy, water, financial services or post.²

Left unaddressed, high rates of consumer detriment stand in the way of realising the full benefits of the digital economy, limiting growth and preventing the proceeds of digital innovation being shared across society.

If the Government is to realise its aims around boosting growth and tackling digital exclusion, the telecoms market needs upgrading. This should start with a **modernisation of consumer standards** in telecoms and the introduction of a dedicated **statutory advocate** with responsibility for providing **advice** to consumers.

The top 5 issues encountered by people coming to our Consumer Service with telecoms problems are³:



Technical issues (21%): faulty equipment, poor service, outages



Billing problems (20%): disputed bills, price increases, charges for products not received



Cancelling (14%): difficulties cancelling contracts, termination fees



Fraud and scams (12%): fake provider calls, scam offers



Mis-selling and marketing (11%): consumers given wrong information or directed to the wrong offer

Introduction

The broadband and mobile markets have many strengths. Network coverage and internet speeds have improved rapidly and prices are competitive. However, consumers continue to struggle with finding the telecoms services that best meet their needs, resolving problems with providers, and accessing the most competitive prices. Our research has found that telecoms services see higher rates of issues compared to other essential markets (16% of consumers had issues worth complaining about compared to 12% in energy, 9% in postal services, and 5% in water).⁴ A recent NatCen study found the total cost of consumer detriment in telecoms was £5 billion in 2024, more than electricity and gas (4.5 billion) or public transport (4.7 billion).⁵

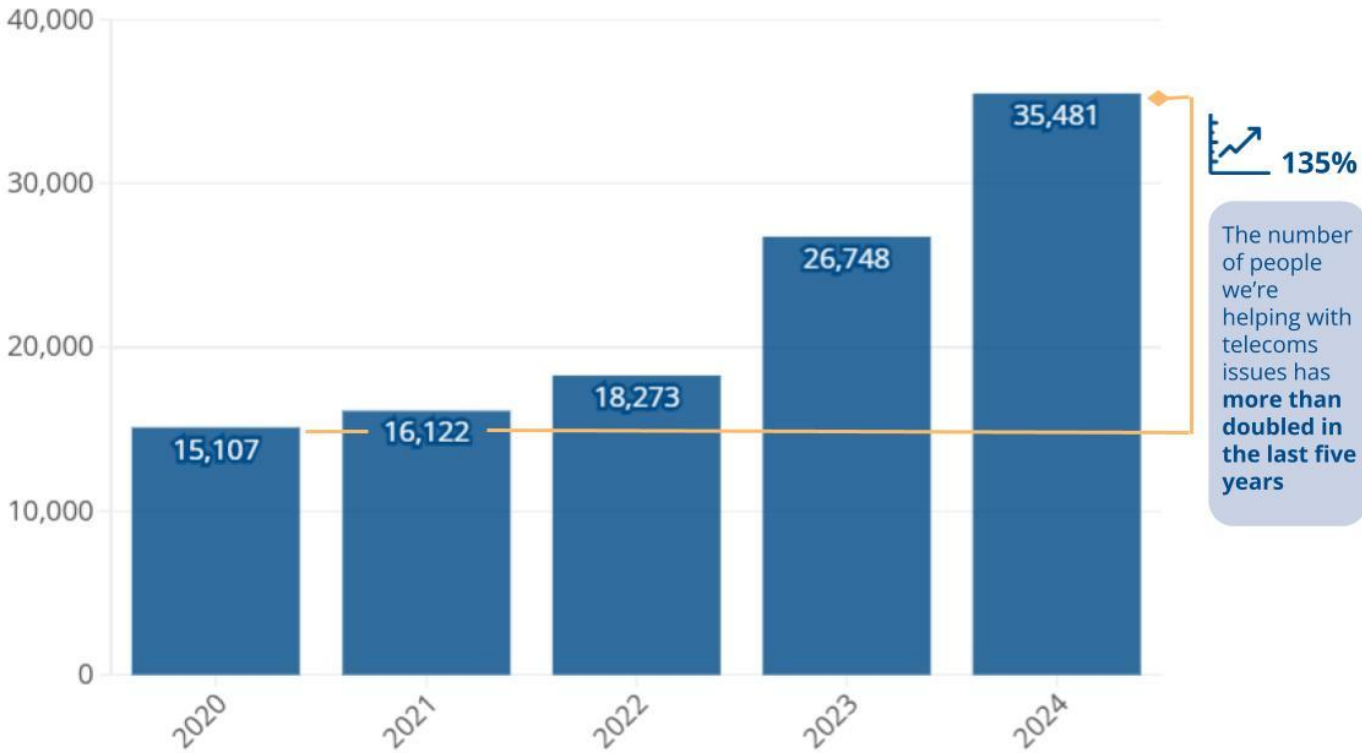
Compared to other essential services like energy and water, consumers also have minimal representation and fewer protections. If we are to fully realise the benefits of a digital future, the telecoms market needs mechanisms to ensure that consumer issues are identified and resolved as quickly as possible.



We help someone with a telecoms problem **every 3 minutes and 24 seconds**

That's **nearly 35,500 people a year**⁶

Total Citizens Advice telecoms contacts per year, 2020-2025



In 2024, 9,575 people contacted our [consumer service](#) and 25,906 people contacted their local Citizens Advice branches looking for help on telecoms issues. Our analysis is based on those contacting the consumer service.⁷

Our research and data

10,195 consumers contacted our Consumer Service about telecoms issues between 1st September 2023 and 31st August 2024.⁸ We extracted and analysed an equal number of cases for each of the 12 months in this period, adding up to **2,000 cases** in total). From this research, we found:

- Key issues and consequences
- Wider impacts on consumers' lives
- Examples and case studies
- Co-occurring issues

All case studies in this report have been given different names and certain details have been omitted or changed to preserve their anonymity.

Methodology

To select the sample for the data coding exercise, we extracted 10,195 cases which was the total number of consumers who contacted the consumer service about telecoms issues from 01/09/2023 to 31/08/2024. An equal number of cases were taken from each of the 12 months in this period until 2,000 cases total were extracted.

We conducted a pre-coding exercise (open coding) on the case notes of a total of 300 cases in order to develop a code book. The code book included both primary and secondary codes.

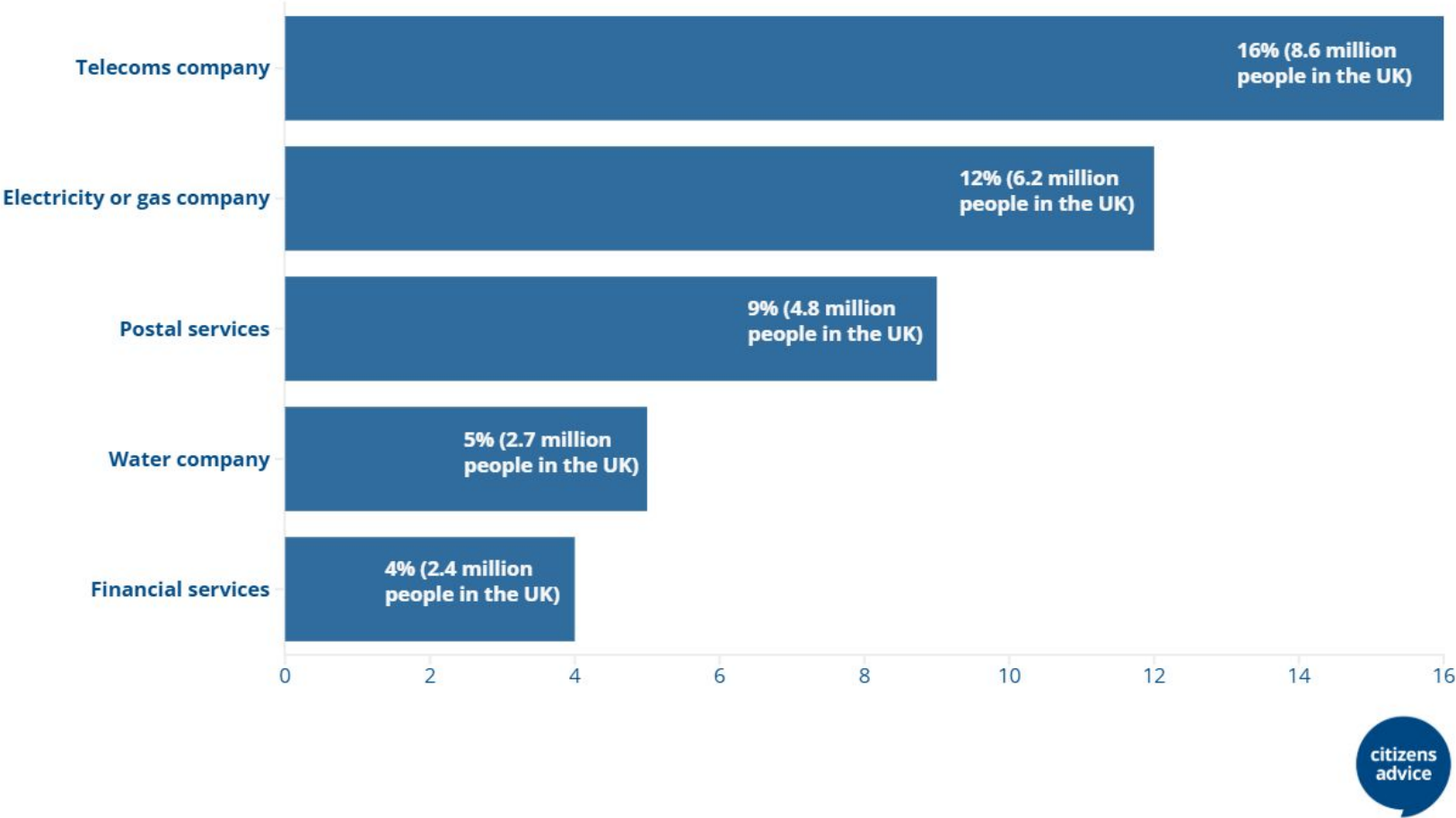
Once the code book was established, we conducted a closed coding exercise on the case notes of 2,000 cases to determine primary and secondary themes of each case. We also recorded when there was more than one issue and where a wider impact on a person's life beyond the presenting issue was present. We then used a quantitative analysis to draw out the key areas of detriment for consumers. This involved calculating the frequency of each primary and secondary code and percentages of the total number of cases represented by each code.

A further qualitative analysis was then conducted on the most prominent codes to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues that consumers are experiencing.



Telecoms is a market out of step with other essential services

In the last 12 months, have you experienced a problem that you felt like complaining about - or did complain about - with any of the following:



Data: Survey of 2,000 UK adults, Yonder Data Solutions 7th-9th June 2024

Tech and connectivity

We found the most common telecoms issues raised by those contacting our Consumer Service were tech-related, such as service outages, poor connection/signal issues, or damaged or faulty equipment. Last year, **21% of people** calling us about telecoms had unresolved concerns around these problems.⁹

Although technological issues are in some cases inevitable, what's important is the provider's response. If the consumer is able to contact their provider and determine where the fault lies, arrange a replacement or fix as necessary, and be sufficiently compensated following the rules of the automatic compensation scheme, then the consumer would likely never approach Citizens Advice.



More than 1 in 5 consumers with telecoms issues have tech problems

The consumers we help are those where this process has failed to work. We see examples where consumers have attempted to cancel services due to technical problems and found they are charged termination fees, even though the cancellation was no fault of their own. Many need support from our advisers to help them resolve these challenges with providers, ideally without resort to higher dispute resolution mechanisms.

Technical questions and challenges are likely to be an increasingly significant element of our advice work, given the widespread infrastructure development underway in the sector. Understanding the interaction between these plans and consumer needs will be vital - the switch-off of the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) has had to be delayed due to challenges ensuring continued access for certain groups, such as those who rely on telecare products.



Case study: Casey

Casey took out a broadband package but was disappointed when equipment sent to her didn't work from the outset. When she contacted her provider to ask for help, she was sent a new router which didn't work either. Additional replacement equipment she was sent did work, but only for a few days, by which time Casey was fed up and ready to cancel her contract in hope of finding a provider who would deliver the service she had been promised. When Casey called her provider to cancel, she said they 'kept delaying' but she persisted. After she was finally able to cancel, she received a text saying she owes just over £400 for leaving her contract early.

Billing

Billing problems are the second most commonly raised issue in our Consumer Service data. Around **20%** of all telecoms-related calls each year are looking for advice on unexplained bills, penalties, price rises and charges for services not received.¹⁰

Affordability is a significant issue across the telecoms market. In January 2025, Ofcom reported that just under a quarter of UK households were struggling to afford communication services.¹¹ Our own research has uncovered the gaps in affordability and issues with existing social tariff offers. In this context, it is essential that billing issues are ironed out before they spiral into problems with affordability or debt. Digital inclusion and social and economic engagement is dependent on access to the internet, which in itself depends on being able to afford broadband and mobile contracts.

Because of the wide array of products and services available in the mobile and broadband markets, the pricing and billing landscape can be complicated. Bundling of services, payment for hardware, the potential for price increases mid-contract or 'loyalty' penalties, where bills rise sharply out of contract, can all lead to consumer confusion or overpayment.

Our advisers work with people experiencing these challenges to help resolve them wherever possible. However, clear communication on the part of telecoms providers, particularly when supporting vulnerable consumers, is crucial. Many of these communication challenges can be tackled through the provision of appropriate advice.

Our referral pilots

In 2021 we partnered with two major communications providers to establish and pilot a referral pathway, providing their customers that called us with access to escalations in the provider's customer care team. The evidence from the pilots, while small in scale, was compelling. Consumers received significantly better outcomes through our escalations, where **three times as many clients** were able to resolve their issues without deadlock, than those who were not referred. More pilots could help to establish whether this scheme, which works well in the energy sector, is more broadly applicable to telecoms customers.

Cancelling

An effective market relies on consumers being able to change products to find those most suitable for them. However, consumers in the telecoms market continue to face barriers to switching providers or contracts. Around **14%** of the people who contacted our Consumer Service last year about telecoms needed help with issues related to cancellation. Of those, the most common problem raised was termination fees, which make up more than 5% of all telecoms issues on their own.¹²

In other industries, like insurance, termination fees must be set at a 'reasonable' level, determined by provider costs.¹³ For example, car insurance providers often allow you to cancel and get a rebate on the unused portion of your contract if you paid up front. Or you can stop paying your monthly fee with a cancellation charge of around £50.¹⁴ In telecoms, expectations are very different. Our data shows individuals and businesses can be asked to pay anywhere from £90 to £25,000. The costs of setting up new telecoms connections might explain these higher fees, but without systematic data collection it's difficult to say whether they are proportionate.

Due to the complexity of contracts, it can be difficult for consumers to know what to expect with termination. This, coupled with the large sums involved, means exit fees can block people from engaging with the competitive pricing available and bind them into contracts that no longer work for them.

Equally, many consumers came to us with issues switching broadband suppliers. Ofcom introduced "One Touch Switch" at the very end of our data collection period, which is designed to tackle many of the issues consumers had spoken to us about, such as losing broadband connection during a switch, or paying for both services.¹⁵ We will be monitoring whether this change has an impact on the switching issues being brought to our advisers.



Case study: Sandra

Sandra is a pensioner who took out a mobile phone contract, but cancelled it a few days later within the cooling off period. But Sandra received a letter stating there was a debt of around £250 for the contract. When our adviser questioned this debt, the provider conceded the contract was cancelled within the cooling off period but that this cancellation hadn't been processed until a month later. Sandra had been given an 'early termination' fee of just over £200 and a bill for the time covered, making a total debt of around £250. When our adviser made it clear we'd complain on Sandra's behalf, the customer service agent first offered to waive around third of the debt, then the majority of the debt until finally the agent waived the entire debt.

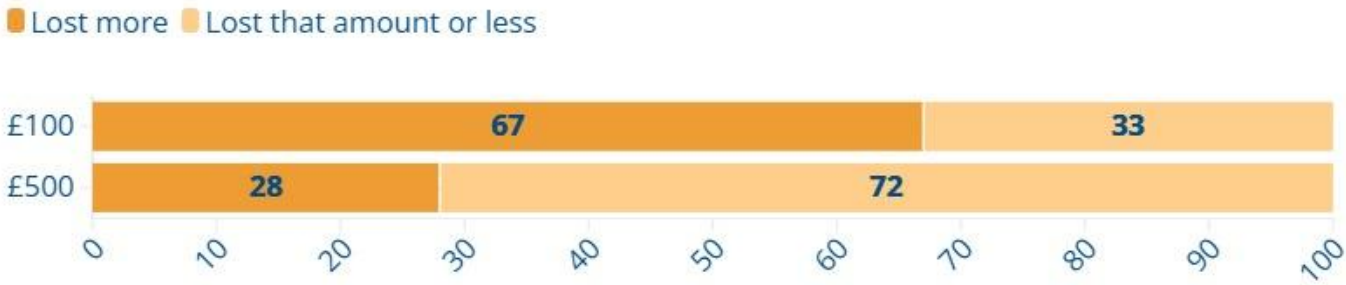
Fraud and scams

Falling victim to fraud or a scam is a particularly unpleasant experience for consumers, and is an issue which affected 12% of the people who came to us with telecoms problems.¹⁶

A review of case notes reveals that such scams commonly take the form of cold calls and emails from people convincingly claiming to be employees of their telecoms provider - sometimes presenting evidence that appears to line up with their contracts. The caller then engages the consumer with a bogus offer, free gift or upgrade. The consumer later finds out that a contract has been taken out fraudulently in their name and is liable for the monthly payments.

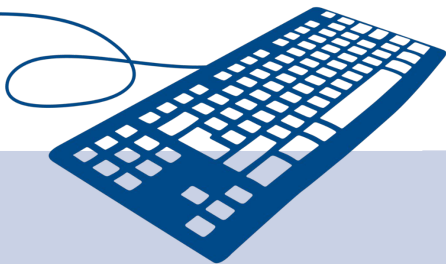
It's positive to see providers and Ofcom taking steps to block scams like spoofed phone numbers.¹⁷ Telecommunications scams are increasingly common, and our data illustrates the direct harms, as well as loss of confidence, this creates for many telecoms consumers.¹⁸

In 2020, research conducted by the Communications Consumer Panel (CCP) found that around two-thirds of people who fell victim to call scams lost more than £100, while 28% lost more than £500.¹⁹



Last year, more than 1 in 8 people who came to us about telecoms had been victims of a scam

The cost of scams ranged from £30 to £35,000 for consumers.²⁰

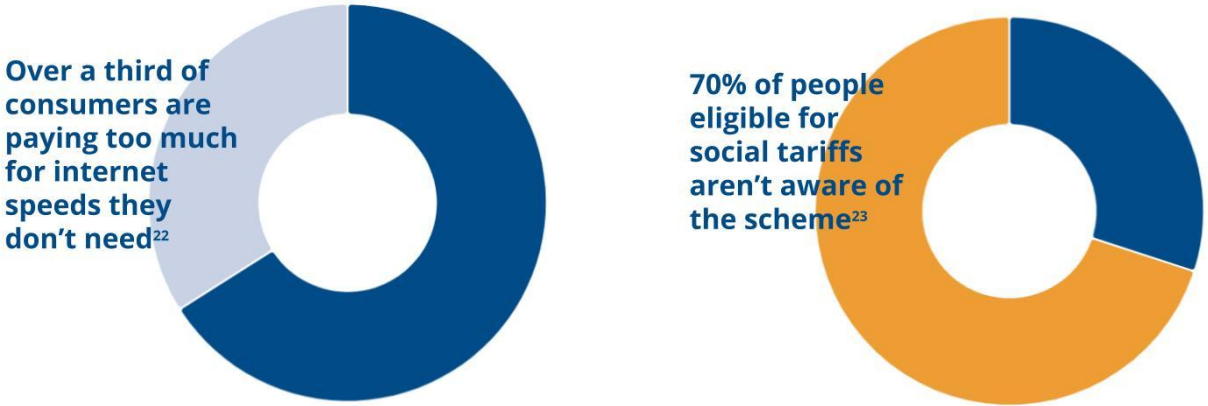


Case study: Sami

Sami was contacted by email by someone claiming to be from a telecoms provider offering her a phone upgrade which she was aware she was due. The phone upgrade was posted to her house along with a confirmation email from what appeared to be the provider. The phone wasn't the one she had been promised and the 'provider' called her to apologise about the mix up and ask her to send it back, which she did. A few days later Sami went into the store to query what had happened to the phone upgrade and was told she had been called by a third party pretending to be the provider. The third party had then got a phone and multi-year contract in her name which she had been left liable for.

Mis-selling and marketing

Our Consumer Service data shows that, of our total annual helpline calls, over 1 out of every 10 calls (11%) are from consumers having problems with the sales practices of telecoms providers.²¹ Over half of these are mis-selling cases, with many involving unclear pricing, confusion over services, and people being charged more than expected. Our own research has uncovered the systematic issues with haggling and hidden deals faced by people looking to get the best deals in the telecommunications markets.



In November 2024, Go.Compare estimated that a third (34%) of all users pay too much for their home internet, meaning they simply don't need the speeds they're paying for, and that cumulatively this means the British population overpay for broadband by around £637 million annually.²⁴

This complications created through bundling, technical detail and haggling leave these markets open to practices like upselling and cross-selling - selling a more expensive product or additional products and services to consumers when they haven't requested them.



Case study: Karl

Karl took out an expensive communications package with a provider to run for several years while he was working, then was made redundant. When Karl contacted his provider to exit his contract because it was no longer affordable he was sold additional products including a watch, that he didn't need. Karl owes nearly a fifth of his monthly income to this provider. He came for help as he felt he was unable to renegotiate or exit the contract.

Conclusion

Consumers engaging in the mobile and broadband markets face greater challenges than in markets for other essential services. In part, this is due to the rapid pace of innovation and change in the sector - how we work, socialise, shop, use government services, and so many more activities have been transformed by mobile and broadband technologies. The telecommunications industry now contributes tens of billions of pounds to the UK's GDP, and much more through the work it enables.²⁵

But this is a market which has only recently come to be recognised as essential. The scaffolding of regulation, scrutiny and - in particular - consumer protections that exist in other sectors we deem essential do not yet apply to telecoms.

This is why we believe a **modernisation of consumer standards** and the introduction of a **statutory consumer advocate** in telecoms would be useful to explore. These measures could help to bring telecoms - and rates of consumer detriment in the market - into line with other essential services. They would also feed directly into the Government's aspirations for both growth and widening participation in this sector.

Recommendations

1: Modernise consumer standards

Modernise consumer standards to help to bring telecoms in line with other regulated essential markets. In other essential markets, there have been significant changes in recent years to ensure consumers standards don't fall behind as these markets evolve. Ofgem's Consumer Interests Framework, for example, or the Consumer Duty introduced by the FCA, encourage providers to proactively assess their actions against consumer outcomes, moving away from the often slow and regulation-heavy reactive model.²⁶ In a sector as fast-moving as telecoms, this focus on outcomes might offer a more flexible and efficient approach for consumers, providers and the regulator.

2: Consumer advice and advocacy

Introduce a system of consumer advice and advocacy to the telecommunications sector, as already exists in the energy, post, transport and water markets. A strong, well-resourced, independent consumer advocate can shine a spotlight on areas of consumer detriment, represent consumers in decisions that affect the services they receive, and empower them through consumer education. If the advocate also provides advice, then they have an automatic link to consumers, can provide referrals to improve the quality of complaints that reach providers or ADR, and acts as a ready-made source of data to identify emerging issues.

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