

Member Paquerette Uranie is awarded £2,780 compensation

Claim against PPI policies

FINANCE

Which? members who have been mis-sold payment protection insurance (PPI) are being called on to claim compensation.

As part of our campaign, increasing numbers are receiving compensation for the policies that aim to cover loan or card repayments when holders can't work.

We believe thousands of policyholders were not asked sufficient questions about whether they needed or were eligible for PPI when signing up. Also, many weren't warned they'd pay interest on the insurance.

One Which? member, Paquerette Uranie, was awarded £2,780 after we helped her claim against NatWest over policies attached to a personal loan.

Following an original £10,000 loan, £1,200 of the £1,913 PPI charge was refunded when she increased her borrowing. A £3,722 PPI policy was added to the new loan of £19,100.

It was only later that Paquerette realised she was paying interest on both the loan and the insurance policies, substantially increasing her monthly payments.

Paquerette said it was never properly explained that the insurance cost was in addition to the loan and would attract interest, nor, she says, was she told about the policies' exclusions.

NatWest had no copies of the original papers so offered a £700 refund for the



We believe many people were mis-sold PPI policies

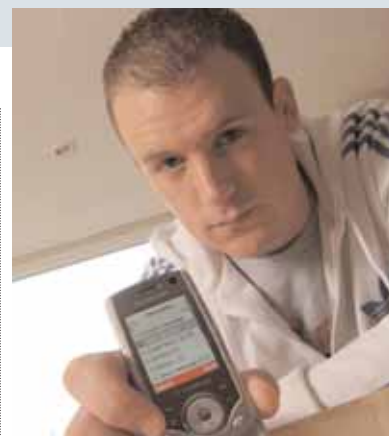
first policy. But it refused to pay for the second policy as she had made a claim on it.

We disagreed that a successful claim is proof that a policy was sold correctly, and asked NatWest to reconsider, with a deduction, of course, for the claim paid out.

As a goodwill gesture, NatWest agreed. A spokesman said: 'While we're satisfied that we're fully compliant with the rules on this, and that our staff are trained to explain what this product covers and how it's repaid, given the circumstances we were prepared to make an exception and refund Ms Uranie.'

TAKE ACTION!

■ If you have a personal loan, you're likely to have PPI. Go to www.which.co.uk/ppi to check whether this was sold properly and whether you have grounds for complaint.



Text complaints take the lead

PHONE SERVICES

Complaints to the premium-rate watchdog PhonepayPlus about text messaging services have outnumbered complaints about landline services for the first time. Last year, more than seven out of ten complaints were about text services.

In a recent case, chatline company Transact Group was fined £10,000 for breaching the regulator's code of practice after sending text messages to users that hadn't requested them.

One victim was soldier Matthew Cox (above), who was deluged with texts and faced a £700 bill when his service changed overnight. He had received messages from two text services last summer and was happy exchanging texts with others at first. But the number of incoming messages increased, reaching 250 in one day, until Vodafone cut off his mobile in September.

His father, Paul Cox, contacted Transact Group and then PhonepayPlus, which had received other complaints about this service.

Matthew told us: 'I sent "stop" messages, but continued getting texts. I would be wary of signing up for anything like this again.'

A PhonepayPlus spokeswoman added: 'The public needs to read the terms and conditions of these services very carefully.'

TAKE ACTION!

■ Watch out for promotional text messages and, if you don't want to receive a text service, reply with 'stop'. To check details of a provider and the cost of a service, visit www.phonepayplus.org.uk or text the number in question to 76787.



Football triumph

Manchester United fan Scott Pearn collects his £20 refund from JJB Sports, thanks to Which? legal action.

Scott is one of hundreds of fans short-changed by the company's role in fixing the prices of certain England and Manchester United shirts in 2000 and 2001.

Fans who paid up to £39.99 for affected shirts and joined our campaign will get £20 back.

If you didn't join our campaign, visit www.which.co.uk/footballshirts to find out if a shirt you bought is affected. If so, you can still get a £10 refund by presenting proof of purchase or the shirt at a JJB store.

As power companies charge more, Which? can help you save

Beat energy bill hikes

UTILITIES

Energy bills are rising above inflation once again, and gas suppliers have started charging according to where you live – but you can take steps to avoid extra costs.

Our experts at Switch with Which? are reminding consumers to switch suppliers and choose certain deals.

Npower has started varying gas prices to reflect the different costs of piping it around the country. Customers in some regions have seen gas bills rise by 15 per cent, while others in London and the East Midlands have had a 23.8 per cent price hike.

Scottish Power and Scottish and Southern Energy also have similar systems, and British Gas has said that it won't rule out regional pricing.

But Switch with Which? spokesman Mike Stevenson said: 'When tariffs are changing, preparation is key. Get the best deal by gathering together your bills and looking at all tariffs. We have a "save a

Switch with Which? can update quotes when prices change

quote" option that automatically updates your previous enquiry according to price changes – so you don't have to search again.'

It's estimated that around 40 per cent of consumers are on standard tariffs when they could save by switching deals.

For example, online tariffs are often cheaper because energy companies save on paperwork.



Or you could avoid future price rises by switching to capped or fixed tariffs. Capped deals guarantee that the unit price of your electricity or gas won't rise beyond a certain level for a set period, while a fixed deal guarantees that your unit price won't rise at all for a certain period.

But these tariffs can be pricier per unit than standard tariffs, and may have early-exit fees, so check out any deal with Switch with Which?.

TAKE ACTION!

■ Visit www.switchwithwhich.co.uk to find a cheaper energy deal.

ANNUAL GAS COSTS ACROSS THE REGIONS AND TARIFFS			
SUPPLIER	LONDON (£)	WALES (£)	YORKSHIRE (£)
BRITISH GAS standard	1,044	1,070	1,056
BRITISH GAS online	740	777	731
NPOWER standard	1,076	1,050	1,080
NPOWER online	873	915	944

Tariff: medium user, dual fuel. Online paid by Direct Debit. Prices correct on 28 Jan.

The way we were

25 years ago, March 1983

How to pay lower rates was certainly a hot topic in 1983 after we found that the average person in the UK had a £275 annual bill for their home, whether owned or rented.

Disturbance from footpath users or a milkman's yard were both reasons for claiming a lower bill, we advised.



50 years ago, spring 1958

Buying goods on hire purchase was a popular subject in our early years, as it allowed people to get their hands on products ranging from TVs and radios to furniture and cars.

We found that consumers often paid a heavy price for the credit; a typical annual interest rate for bicycles was 40 per cent, for example.

SHOPPING GUIDE

■ If you found last month's *Buying Guide* sent out with *Which?* useful, you'll be pleased to hear it will be updated at www.which.co.uk/onlineguides every month from 1 March. With all our current Best Buys, including prices and ratings, it should prove invaluable on the high street.



CHEQUED OUT

■ Leave your chequebook at home when visiting Tesco and Marks & Spencer because they won't be accepting cheques from 25 February and 1 March, respectively. They follow Boots, Currys, Morrisons and Asda in banning this form of payment.

DRIVING PENALTIES

■ While most people surveyed for our February article (p5) think penalties for uninsured drivers should be stiffer, we've learnt that some motorists who kill while uninsured or disqualified could face community sentences only. The Sentencing Guidelines Council has said that community service could be ordered if there are no aggravating circumstances, such as failing to stop after a fatal accident. Otherwise, it recommends sentences of up to two years.



REFUND SUCCESS

■ MFI has refunded reader David Bogard £521, whose story appeared last month (p6). His Diplomat oven from MFI exploded twice, sending glass across the kitchen. Originally, MFI told him it would replace the glass only.



COUNCIL ELECTIONS

■ In elections to our council held in December, Anthony Burton, Sue Leggate and Gary Waller were re-elected, and Natalie Macdonald was also elected. John Bevan was not elected. Those elected usually sit for three years; one third of council members retire each year.