
THE MOTOR OMBUDSMAN

Vehicle Warranty Products Code

Audit December 2023

Background information

The Vehicle Warranty Products Code was launched in 2009, and it was later endorsed by the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) in 2011.

The OFT brought in the new Consumer Codes Approval Scheme (CCAS) under the Enterprise Act 2002 following the demise of the OFT. The CCAS is now administered by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute (CTSI).

Businesses accredited to this Code cover approximately 70-75% of the extended warranty market.

The Motor Ombudsman (TMO), formerly known as Motor Codes, has been approved by the Ombudsman Association (OA) to operate as an Ombudsman since November 2016. Their four Codes have since been adapted in line with Ombudsman processes with all accredited businesses migrated over from Motor Codes. These Codes have many similarities in the way in which they are managed, and the sanctions applied to members who breach a Code.

The four Codes are:

- The Motor Industry Code of Practice for New Cars
- The Motor Industry Code of Practice for Vehicle Sales
- The Motor Industry Code of Practice for Vehicle Warranty Products
- The Motor Industry Code of Practice for Service and Repair

Many businesses are accredited to more than one Code.

The audit was carried out following the restrictions of the Covid 19 pandemic, the pandemic placed many hurdles for the motor industry, which continued to operate remotely where possible with an associated increase in remote and online sales.

The Government announcements on the ban on conventional combustion engines will, no doubt, provide further challenges to the motor industry.

There are no planned changes to the Code in 2023 on the way in which it operates although the TMO is looking to continue its development and improvement of its internal processes.

Audit process

A qualified Chartered Trading Standards Practitioner from the Chartered Trading Standards Institute (CTSI) carried out an online 'desktop', audit. The audit was based

on a conversation with relevant staff and examining associated documents. The Audit looked at the following areas:

- The accredited business application process including checks on prospective businesses
- Accredited business auditing-content and process
- Terms and conditions
- Marketing and advertising by accredited businesses
- Sanctions for non-compliant accredited businesses
- Customer service provision (including support for vulnerable consumers)
- The consumer complaints process (ADR)
- Customer satisfaction
- Training provided by accredited businesses to meet their obligations
- Any outstanding Issues from the 2020 audit

Audit summary

Summary

The Code continues to provide efficient and effective consumer protection in this sector.

New accredited businesses

In most cases, an applicant will initiate contact with TMO by e-mail or phone. They will liaise with a member of the Business Services department who will answer any questions and explain the application process. Following the conversation, an application form is issued.

Once the business has returned their completed application form a member of the Business Services department will review the information provided and conduct a pre-check of the business.

Assuming the assessment does not flag up any concerns, the application will be processed with the organisation marked as a provisional accredited business (new applicant). The applicant will then submit an evidence-based self-assessment demonstrating they meet the entry criteria of the Code.

Once the business has passed their self-assessment, they will be fully accredited to The Motor Ombudsman and will receive their Welcome Pack.

Existing accredited business inspections/audit

Following Covid the audit process is now carried out through a by self-assessments with an on-site audit being carried out every 5 years.

Businesses accredited to the Code sign compliance documents on an annual basis. They are also requested to attend at least one committee meeting a year which is an additional way to monitor industry trends, best practice and gain an insight into the outlook for the sector.

The compliance programme for the Code requires a physical audit to be carried out on an accredited business at least once every five years. To make sure this target is achieved, TMO has established systems in place to report on the audits once they are completed.

There are currently 18 members in the scheme, including 2 new members.

Due to Covid, no on-site physical audits were carried out in 2023. It is intended to maintain self-assessment with face-to-face intervention if areas of non-compliance are identified.

The annual self-assessment has now been aligned with the annual renewal documentation.

Accreditation withdrawal and sanctions for non-compliant accredited businesses

Accredited businesses receive penalty points for instances where they fail to comply with the adjudication or compliance processes. Some of these points may be awarded to the business for a relatively minor infringement, for example, failing to respond to an adjudicator within the allotted time period due to an absence from the business. In such instances, an adjudicator can opt to remove penalty points should they feel the mistake to be genuine and a one-off.

The system issues a written warning one for 30 points, written warning two for 60 points, and at 80 points the business will be referred to TMO's Independent Compliance Assessment Panel (ICAP) who will consider the appropriate sanction which could be a further warning, extended-suspension or expulsion from the Code.

Suspension can be applied at any time at the discretion of the TMO if the business refuses to co-operate and can result in automatic suspension.

One business is currently in the disciplinary process.

Marketing and advertising by accredited businesses

All new businesses to the Vehicle Warranty Products Code receive a Welcome Pack, which includes the essential information they need to know about the Code of Practice, Getting Started Guide, copies of the Code and Consumer Guides for staff training and customer awareness as well as The Motor Ombudsman documentation they need in order to be compliant.

E-Training is available to all Code members. Subjects include the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), Consumer Rights Act, Distance Selling Regulations and GDPR. All modules are specifically tailored to the motor industry.

TMO sends out email newsletters (Engage) and emails informing businesses about the latest news from The Motor Ombudsman, industry insights and developments. They also regularly include information about the importance of showing the TMO and Approved Code logo as well as best practice.

The Motor Ombudsman regularly checks its accredited business websites to ensure they are displaying the Motor Ombudsman and Approved Code logo, and receive the quarterly audit results from the Consumer Codes Approval Scheme which are acted upon for those businesses found not to be displaying the logo.

Throughout the year TMO issues several press releases to both consumer and trade media, and regularly provides guest articles for trade publications highlighting areas of best practice and industry insights. The success, reach and impact of The Motor Ombudsman's campaigns are measured through monitoring of website hits, social media reach and PR coverage generated.

TMO also has found good success in developing seasonal campaigns to raise awareness amongst consumers and increase engagement and provide value for its accredited business.

TMO has also utilised webinars as a good medium for providing direct and personalised training to businesses who are further afield.

Terms and conditions and other pre-contractual Information

All accredited businesses must have copies of the Code of Practice and Consumer Guides on site, which they confirm as part of their self-assessment, as does ensuring that their certificate is publicly displayed within their reception area.

Additionally, all businesses must have terms and conditions. To assist businesses with ensuring that they have the required items, TMO has a range of products available to buy through The Motor Ombudsman's online Code Shop. They also have a range of signage and stickers available to purchase, which include the TMO and approved Code logo to allow businesses to promote their accreditation.

TMO requires that accredited businesses display its logo and contact information on their website, and has previously circulated (via their monthly newsletter) best practice for wording which also forms part of the Welcome Pack. To better monitor this coverage, TMO has developed a Smart Badge following guidance from CTSI that provides analytical data on how widely used it is. Another benefit of the Smart Badge is the ability for consumers to 'click to verify' a business's accreditation is still active. This provides consumers with instant peace of mind that they can turn to TMO should the need arise.

Customer service provisions

GDPR requirements have been addressed, as have changes needed by the Consumer Rights Act (CRA) 2015.

TMO has developed e-based training on key legislation such as the CRA and ADR Regulations available to accredited-businesses. These online modules have proved a popular and effective way of training staff on the core legislation affecting the industry without the need for staff to physically attend a classroom. As the training has been developed directly with TMO (in partnership with CTSI), it is automotive specific which only adds greater value to its content for TMO's accredited businesses.

As part of the self-assessment, TMO checks that all businesses have undertaken some form of ADR training. Within the self-assessment, TMO asks businesses to provide a complaints log. This, like many of the questions, includes a reference to why it is important for a business to have a complaints log and the associated benefits. TMO provides an example illustration for accredited businesses that can be downloaded directly from the assessment and kept for best practice. TMO has

recommended this to the majority of their businesses who might not necessarily have a robust complaints log in place.

Similarly, within the assessment, TMO asks the business to confirm that they have the logo referenced on the website and the certificate displayed on the premises. This not only helps to promote their accreditation to consumers, but also acts as a reminder to staff of their commitment to the Code/s. Logo usage is compulsory as part of the scheme and this checked as part of the audit process.

Furthermore, TMO has developed a policy to help assist with vulnerable customers, which has been discussed at committee meetings and later shared as an example to be adopted. If necessary, this can be tailored by businesses to best assist their staff in dealing with customer queries.

Away from fixed or planned training, TMO operates an Information Line which provides information to consumers and businesses alike on their legal rights or obligations. This Information Line is manned by TMO's customer service advisors who have all undergone automotive specific legal training, and experienced team of adjudicators.

On a similar note, TMO's adjudicators and in-house ombudsman regularly provide recommendations for training or amendments to existing business policies within their rulings. This has proved effective in highlighting how amendments to policy or further training can be beneficial to businesses, as it comes at the end of a dispute and acts as the 'case in point'. This also helps TMO to meet one of its core ambitions of always driving industry standards up by the operation of its Code. This became widespread on the back of further system developments and enhanced TMO's data capturing abilities and hopefully allow for targeted communications to businesses that promote guidance which could prove helpful to them.

Consumer Complaint Process

The ADR function at TMO is 100% in-house and the complaints process is included in the Code of Practice booklet, alongside TMO's contact details.

The consumer journey is managed by TMO throughout. Consumers will first liaise with a customer service advisor by either post, telephone or e-mail, who will assess the dispute to see if it falls within the TMO remit. If TMO cannot deal with the dispute, an enquiry is logged for monitoring purposes and the consumer is signposted to other organisations. If TMO can help, a case file is created and an enquiry form sent to the consumer. This form enables TMO to collect relevant details about the complaint – consumers will complete it and send it back with any documentation they would like TMO to consider. Upon receipt, an adjudicator will check that TMO has all the information they need, as well as verifying it does fall within remit, and will then send the complaint to the business for their response.

Once both sides of the story have been received, the adjudicator will assess the complaint and either try and find an amicable resolution or deliver an outcome. If either party is unhappy with the outcome, the complaint will be referred to the ombudsman. Both parties can submit additional information if they wish, and the ombudsman may investigate the complaint further before reaching a final decision. If the consumer accepts the final decision, it becomes binding on the accredited business.

TMO is certified as an approved ADR body under the ADR Regulations and has been since the Regulations came into force in 2015.

TMO is also validated through the Ombudsman Association.

Customer satisfaction and feedback

Consumers can leave feedback about a vehicle warranty provider on the Vehicle Warranty Products Code section of The Motor Ombudsman website. Throughout 2023, TMO held consultations with accredited businesses to discuss ways to promote satisfactions surveys as a means of gathering more consumer feedback.

Conclusions

The Motor Ombudsman is continuing to meet its obligations as a Code Sponsor in the Vehicle Warranty Products sector and provides significant consumer protection. The ongoing work on customer satisfaction feedback, will further strengthen the performance of the Code. The move to self-assessment with targeted intervention is considered to be an effective way of monitoring the Code.