The following case studies illustrate the various ways that problems surfaced, how they caused detriment and the types of assistance consumers sought to help resolve problems. They further detail the level and type of impact felt by consumers in these circumstances. The case studies feature installing or refurbishing of bathrooms and kitchens and the installation of a central heating system.

Key illustrations include:

Substandard work: Consumers experienced difficulties in persuading traders or suppliers to take responsibility where major problems were experienced. Choosing a well known nationwide supplier was believed to ensure a good standard of work. However, customer service departments could be difficult and intimidating.

Problems getting snags or faults sorted out after initial work: Traders tended to become less responsive towards the end of the project because they had received payment and had new projects to work on. They no longer wanted to keep clients happy and would therefore leave jobs unfinished. This meant that consumers could not use appliances or were unhappy with the finished product.

Delays: Where consumers experienced severe delays they were affected by mounting costs, inconvenience and anxiety resulting from negotiations with traders. For vulnerable consumers this could be particularly challenging, especially if it was difficult for them to leave the house.

Substandard goods: Faults with goods often went unnoticed until the product had been opened. If the consumer was not at home, tradespeople would fit faulty goods. This caused problems where suppliers refused to replace products.

Problems with plans and specifications: Even very small mistakes on the project plan resulted in major issues with the work which could be very expensive to resolve. Suppliers were reluctant to accept responsibility and although the fault was clearly theirs, it could take months to reach an acceptable compromise, unless consumers had advice and support from a third party.
### Case study 1 – Substandard work

- **Portrait:** young woman living alone, working fulltime, dreaded the idea of home improvements because she was inexperienced and anxious.

- **Project:** New bathroom (triggered by two factors; there was a leak and she also wanted to change the colour of the room), her goal was to have job finished by her birthday in three months.

- **Background:** Shopped around and was upset because most suppliers seemed not to take her seriously. She was impressed by a nationwide supplier who was particularly helpful, offered a complete service and did not treat her differently as a result of her age. They said it would take eight weeks, so it fitted in with her plans and sent out a designer who did a 3-D design on the computer.

> ‘That was brilliant, I was very, very happy, it was lovely!’

- **Problem:** The consumer experienced a six week delay because the supplier sent the wrong parts. In addition, the fitters were not reliable. She had expected fitters who worked directly for the supplier but they were sub-contractors who travelled long distances, they always arrived late (after she had left for work) and were gone by the time she came home. Three months after the bathroom was fitted there was a major leak. This took nine months to sort out because neither the supplier nor the fitters would accept responsibility and the consumer found the supplier very difficult to deal with.

> ‘The customer service was just appalling, they were so rude to me and I was really trying to be nice because it’s one of those things, you think I have to be nice, they have got my bathroom and I need them to do it properly.’

- **Short term Impact:** Customer enormously distressed by the time delays and by the way she was treated by supplier.
Resolution: The issue was only resolved after she complained and becoming extremely assertive but this took some time.

Long term impact: Would never pay by monthly payments again as it is a regular reminder of the mess they made of the whole project. Would do much more research next time about any company she employed. Would have liked guidance on know how to plan a project, perhaps a Government website if it was well publicised.
• **Case study 2 - Problems getting snags or faults sorted out**

• Portrait: Young family with minimal experience of home improvement projects.

• Project: Installing central heating system.

• Background: They found trader through using local directory.

• Problem: They paid trader in stages and happy with this arrangement. Towards the end of the job trader disappeared (without even receiving the last payment) to work on a larger job. Trader failed to come back to finish the job and ignored customers attempts at making contact.

  ‘They didn’t finish the job…. They left it at the last minute and I was 8 months pregnant and had a small child… we had no water and no heating…. They started on another job…they didn’t answer the phone….So we had to get someone else in just to finish the last few hours off just so we could have heating….they never came back or returned our calls. They had the majority of the money and just thought let’s move on to the next job.’

• Short term Impact: Family left without heating and hot water over winter for several weeks while trying to contact the trader to finish the work.

• Resolution: Family had to ask another trader to complete the work. Aware of trading standards and wanted to make a complaint but unsure of how to do this.

• Long term impact: Family now using contracts for all traders regardless of how small the job that include the schedule of work, costs, payment terms and timing.
Case study 3: Delays caused by vague timescales / lack of project management

- Portrait: Older, retired couple. Both with existing health problems and an inability to get involved in the practical work (much to husband’s frustration). New relationship, new house and new to the area.

- Project: New kitchen and bathroom at the same time with the same supplier (using his installers).

- Background: The couple were wowed by a kitchen advertisement in a local magazine. Visited the showroom and were further impressed by the salesperson and the ability of the supplier to ‘project manage’ the whole job. The couple went on vacation assuming the bathroom would be completed on their return.

- Problem: They returned to a mess, an unfinished bathroom and a subcontractor who they had not met and did not feel comfortable with. They saw no evidence of project management. This sent them on a downward spiral of distrust and suspicion, believing that the subcontractor was a ‘rogue trader’. The cost of the work was not transparent and seemed to be increasing. They believed that trader tried to charge VAT twice. Consumers withheld the last payment.

- Short term Impact: Depression, stress, worsened health condition. The couple felt acutely vulnerable and exploited and therefore had a strong need for emotional support. Financial detriment (extending vacation), having to spend more money on eating out, inconvenience and instability of having to stay away from home, inconvenience of not having a working toilet.

> ‘At our time of life it’s a bit more critical...when you are younger you put up with it.’

- Resolution: Subcontractor worked in evenings to complete job. This only infuriated and inconvenienced them further and used his personal
assistant to project manage when communications had broken down. Used Trading Standards (via going to Citizens Advice) and used letter templates which were helpful.

- Long term impact: Couple are now wary of using traders and highly suspicious of rogue traders. They will adopt strategies to avoid risks on future projects - include timings as part of written specification, will ask about previous jobs and get more than one quote.
Case study 4: Substandard Goods

- Portrait: Couple with one son aged 12, with minimal experience having carried out two other projects in the past 20 years.

- Project: Bathroom refurbishment

- Background: Bathroom was 20 years old and looking tired. The family decided to refurbish their bathroom because they could not afford to move home. The family spent three months shopping around, they were really involved and selective, but then chose their bathroom ‘on the spur of the moment’ because the price was reduced. The supplier seemed to be a good compromise between bespoke designers, who were ‘stunning’ and unaffordable DIY suppliers, where quality was thought to be poor. The family then went on holiday, leaving a recommended tradesperson to fit the bathroom.

- Problem: When the family returned they found that the bathroom fittings were damaged, there were marks on the vanity unit, the toilet did not flush properly and the shower screen felt rough. The units also looked different to the way they did in the showroom:

  ‘It was actually the quality of the goods that was poor […] it was cheap [quality], but expensive […] it looked lovely [in the show room] but when we got it here it was terrible marked […] it feels rough, it doesn’t feel like glass.’

- Short term Impact: The supplier refused to replace the items because the protective packaging had been removed. The customer service department was felt to be rude and irresponsible, causing significant stress and upset to the family.

- Resolution: The family could not face replacing the bathroom, after several months of negotiating with the supplier. Therefore they still have the same damaged suite. They received £300 compensation after issuing a small claim (contacting trading standards).
• Long term impact: The family will only buy the cheapest fixtures they could, believing that quality is likely to be the same unless you can afford luxury items.
Case study 5: Problems with plans and specification

Portrait: Woman in her mid-forties, living alone in terraced house. The consumer felt particularly vulnerable because she felt the area where she lived had a reputation for being ‘rough’ and it was difficult to find reputable traders.

‘Everyone who ever came, they’ve all been cowboys.’

Project: Kitchen refurbishment.

Background: Consumer had wanted a new kitchen since she moved into the property 21 years previously. She thought her old kitchen was ‘a disgrace’ and worried that her friends did not want to eat in her home because they thought her kitchen was dirty. The consumer went to a large nationwide supplier who designed the kitchen but was advised by the kitchen fitter she had employed to use a local supplier who would deliver the same kitchen, preassembled, for a lower price.

Problem: At the local supplier, the kitchen designer failed to copy the design provided by the national supplier correctly which meant that the gap left for the cooker was too large. This was extremely upsetting because the consumer had hoped to finish the project quickly and she felt she would have to fight to have the dream kitchen she wanted.

‘You trust someone, I’m not a kitchen fitter, I’m not a kitchen designer, I trusted him to do the job and he hasn’t done it. He’s completely messed it up for me now and he’s ruined my dream kitchen.’

Short term Impact: Neither the trader nor the supplier would take responsibility for the mistake, which meant that the consumer spent several weeks negotiating with both parties which was extremely stressful particularly as she felt the trader was aggressive towards her.

‘I actually burst into tears […] I was devastated because I thought, here we go again, I’ve got to fight for what I want, I’ve got me mum in hospital and...’
I’m stressed out about that, and now I thought it was done and dusted and I could just get on and now I’ve got to start again, I’ve got to fight for what I want […] because I knew I wouldn’t have been able to live with the kitchen, I would’ve been upset all the time, every time I went in it would’ve upset me.’

- Resolution: Consumer finally contacted Trading Standards after the supplier reneged on an agreement to replace her cooker to fit the space. After she had a better understanding of her rights, it agreed to replace the cooker and to provide a new cupboard as per the original specification.

- Long term impact: The participant would always check specifications more carefully and would contact Trading Standards sooner to seek advice on her rights when problems arose.