



Valuation Office  
Agency

# CHECK, CHALLENGE, APPEAL: USING CUSTOMER RESEARCH TO FURTHER IMPROVE THE SYSTEM



---

# Introduction

The Check, Challenge, Appeal (CCA) system was introduced by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) in 2017. It was designed to provide a far earlier resolution for businesses, either by confirming details of the property in question, or starting a review of the valuation where there is supportive evidence. In doing so, it aimed to deliver more timely and efficient outcomes, by providing customers with a quicker service, that is easier to use and easier to understand.

We commissioned this independent research in 2017 to understand how customers (including agents) were experiencing and interacting with CCA, compared to the previous system. It sits alongside an ongoing programme of user research and testing that has resulted in many enhancements to the digital system since its launch.

The ICF report encompasses a broad range of feedback and research, and shows that CCA been successful in resolving simple cases more quickly. Customers are also finding the process easier to interact with and feel more informed about the valuation process.

There is still work to be done. We know that our digital channel caused a number of frustrations upon launch in 2017 and whilst we have improved accessibility, we continue to make changes to improve the customer experience. These go hand-in-hand with our ambition to make our customer service the best it can possibly be. We continue to improve how we communicate with customers regarding their cases, with specialist training for call centre staff and named caseworkers. We are conducting ongoing testing to make sure we continue to cater to our customers' needs.

Overall the report shows that customers trust CCA to deliver fair outcomes in their cases and we are moving in the right direction as we continue to prioritise delivering the very best service for our customers.

---

# How CCA Works

Business rates (also known as non-domestic rates) are a national tax paid by businesses to support local services. They are paid by the occupier or owner of a non-domestic property based on its open market annual rental value.

CCA was introduced in April 2017 to offer a more simplified way for ratepayers to challenge the valuation we have placed upon their property.

**Check:** customers (or their appointed agents) confirm details about their property. Check ensures that cases regarding a dispute about the details of a property can be resolved quickly without the need to go further.



**Challenge:** to allow customers (or their appointed agents) to challenge the valuation of the assessment and/or the VOA's Check decision if they feel the facts established are incorrect. They are able to set out the grounds for the Challenge and supporting evidence. The VOA reviews the information and provides a response.



**Appeal:** customers who are unhappy with the outcome of Challenge can have their case heard before the independent Valuation Tribunal.

CCA was implemented to manage specific issues around the valuation appeals process including:

- Large numbers of speculative cases submitted for 'discussion' with little supporting evidence from customers. This created unnecessary burdens for the VOA, customers and agents and is considered the reason for a relatively low number of successful cases.
- Large numbers of speculative cases created lengthy delays in dealing with the backlog.

---

# Scope of the research report

Prior to the introduction of CCA in 2017, the VOA contracted ICF to understand how customers (including agents) were experiencing and interacting with the Agency within CCA, compared to the old system.

The ICF has used qualitative and quantitative data based on answering key questions around the CCA, finding out the success in improving timeliness, efficiency and ease.

Research with customers was completed in mid-March 2020, prior to lockdown and the major impact the coronavirus pandemic had on both our customers and our staff. Results included in the report do not cover the main pandemic period from April 2020 onwards.

---

# Key findings from the report

A full revaluation cycle under CCA will not complete until March 2023, so the findings provide a partial view of CCA part way through the first cycle of the new process.

We are pleased with many of the findings, in particular that:

- CCA has been successful in resolving simple cases more quickly and reducing average resolution times for our customers.
- CCA has been successful in improving how our customers access and understand the valuation process - which was a key criticism of the previous system.
- There is evidence the numbers of speculative cases have fallen under CCA. This was a key objective so that we can spend more time on legitimate cases.
- Overall, customers trust CCA to deliver fair outcomes.

We also recognise the research identified some concerns. We have either addressed these since the research was undertaken or are currently working to make further improvements to the system.

There were several issues with our digital channel for CCA when initially launched in 2017, causing concerns and frustrations for customers and their agents. Since 2017, we have introduced many upgrades and improved the service for customers, and make it more accessible and easy to use.

Our biggest changes include:

- Simplifying the registration process for customers and agents (2018)
  - Making it simpler to register by removing the requirement for every user to be named and validated.
  - Our “trusted helper” scheme enables customers who cannot register online to appoint an individual or organisation to do so on their behalf. This particularly helps ratepayers who are foreign nationals.

- Adding in the ability to deal with a group of properties with commonality in a less formal way and consider wider evidence before entering the Challenge phase. This is referred to as a Group Pre Challenge Review and take-up is increasing.
- Introducing an API (application programming interface) for Check (2018) and Challenge (2019) to enable large, or bulk users of the CCA service to use their own software to directly link to CCA and transfer relevant data. This has enhanced some of our customers' ability and speed in undertaking property linking, and submitting checks and challenges.
- Introducing auto correspondence in 2018 which has speeded up the process and provided greater consistency.
- Adding ability to add rent free periods into challenge submissions (2020) which will better inform caseworkers and reduce the need for follow up queries.
- Enabling customers to search across both the current and previous rating lists (2020) which allows a more holistic approach when calculating the financial impact.

For customers who cannot use the online system we have always provided enhanced support to customers via our call centre. Improvements and new features are tested for usability with customers and agents through our user research team, before being added to the service.

---

# Contacting the VOA

The report also suggests some customers and their agents have been dissatisfied in the way they access or contact the VOA, which is another issue we have been working to address.

## Telephone contact

The research told us that some customers had issues when using call centres to get their questions answered. We have made improvements in this area, setting up specialist training and guidance for call centre staff so they can resolve queries at the first point of contact, rather than being handed off to another team. We have also improved the information our call handlers have about who is working on what, so it is much simpler for them to direct a query or case to the right person at the VOA and speed up case resolutions.

## Named staff

At the start of CCA, we did not name individual caseworkers so work could be passed to the most appropriate team throughout its journey, with the aim of providing a streamlined service to the customer. The research outlined that some customers would prefer to deal with a named contact and we now encourage caseworkers dealing with Challenge cases to identify themselves in communications that require a response. We have also asked caseworkers to contact the customer by telephone rather than email to discuss specific queries directly at a more complex stage of the CCA process.

## Opting out of correspondence

Some customers and agents told us as part of the research that they would like to opt out of correspondence from us if an agent is dealing with a case on their behalf. However, as part of our legislative responsibilities and to maintain transparency, correspondence relating to a valuation or case must be copied to all parties involved.

---

# The CCA process

## Understanding how CCA works

Some customers have had difficulty understanding the CCA process and how to navigate our service. Since its introduction we have introduced many improvements and enhancements to our digital online service and have specifically made customer-focused updates improving our guidance, language and terminology.

## Terminology and methodology used in valuing properties

The valuation of a property can also mean the use of unfamiliar or confusing terminology. To deal with this we are currently reviewing the language used in both our online service and correspondence issued to customers

## Use of Group Pre-Challenge Review (GPCR)

GPCR allows groups of occupiers, owners or ratepayers to challenge the basis of valuation in respect of local, regional or national schemes of valuation. Over the past year we have encouraged the further use of GPCR and have received increased GPCR submissions. We are also undertaking work to review the cases that have gone through check to assess where there may be further classes or categories that may effectively utilise GPCR in the future.