
RAC Service and Repair Code of Practice Approved Consumer Code Audit September 2023

Background information

The RAC Service and Repair Code of Practice has 1267 members. The members of the code are mainly smaller independent garages. The code has members spread across the UK. RAC Accredited Repairers come under the same regime as Approved Garages.

Members of the code are judged not just on their ability to carry out the service and repair work, but also on the wider breadth of their services including such things as customer service reception areas, customer car-parking facilities etc.

Audit Process

The audit was carried out on-site on behalf of the Chartered Trading Standards Institute by a Chartered Trading Standards Practitioner on 26th September 2023.

The audit focused on the following areas:

1. Member application process including checks carried out on prospective members
2. Member auditing-content and process (including general compliance with the code, staff training and dealing with consumer complaints)
3. Sanctions for non-compliant members
4. Marketing and advertising by member businesses - terms and conditions and pre-contractual information (including cancellation rights, deposits, delivery times and guarantees and warranties)
5. Customer service provisions (including support for vulnerable consumers).
6. Consumer complaints process (including ADR)
7. Customer satisfaction, information/complaints from enforcement agencies, and how this information is used to develop and improve the code.

Audit Summary

The audit examined:

- The application process for new members
- The records of audit of existing members
- Complaint procedure including Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)
- Process for unauthorised use of the RAC logo/membership

Member Application Process

RAC has a comprehensive member database, with all records kept electronically.

Since the last audit an additional 193 garages have joined the RAC and there is a waiting list, 230 members have left. RAC don't accept garages for membership if there is already coverage in the area.

The application process remains unchanged, some additional requirements have been added e.g. servicing of electric vehicles, technician training records, customer facilities (inc toilets).

All areas of the business are assessed before their application is considered. This includes assessment of the 'retail' aspects of the business and the overall customer experience. Initially premises are visited to ensure garage is suitable and that they meet RAC's requirements for consumers (including customer facilities) then the application can be submitted by the garage. RAC completes it's due diligence checks including credit history checks and Companies House.

Upon joining, the garage is asked to complete a self-declaration questionnaire and upload documents and images including copies of their insurance certificates, waste consignment notes, H&S risk assessments, fire risk assessments and training records.

New members are assigned an account manager and an onsite audit is carried out to ensure that the garage meets requirements. The garage is visited initially monthly to ensure that any changes recommended prior to acceptance for RAC Code membership are implemented and that standards are being upheld.

Details of two applications were reviewed from June 2023. The self declaration and first audit were reviewed for the two new members. These were found to be comprehensive and thorough. The websites of both garages were examined. The RAC logo was present on both.

New requirements have been added to membership in relation to the service and repair of electric vehicles, this is in readiness for when more EVs are on the road. Also the requirements in relation to the records kept in re the training of technicians have been made more stringent.

Existing Members Inspections/Audit

The RAC aim to carry out an onsite audit of each garage, once a year. Over the last 12 months 98% of the network has been audited.

RAC member garages/repairers are finding that more people are driving used vehicles and the age of the vehicles is increasing, year on year. This is increasing work volumes so garages are struggling to cope with the volume of repair requests and recruiting technicians.

Although Covid-19 restrictions have ended, RAC engineers are still following some Covid guidelines e.g. minimal hand contact, sharing of pens, to ensure their safety and that of the garages.

RAC Inspection Services carried out 1632 inspection audits of RAC Approved Garages within the last 12 months. Visits are carried out by an RAC engineer. Any garage scoring below the benchmark score of 80% are set up with an action plan within the week to ensure improvements are quickly made, 303 action plans were issued within the last 12 months. The action plan details the changes or amendments that are needed. Some audit items, such as insurance, are minimum compliance requirements, so would trigger an action plan even if the overall score was high. Where any areas are identified of the garage is failing to meet the standards, RAC engineers will carry out training on site where possible.

The average score of these inspection audits was 90% against a benchmark of 80%. There were 5 garages who failed to meet the standards agreed and once results were reviewed, RAC took the decision to remove them from the scheme.

Two audits were examined in their entirety. Both were found to be satisfactory.

All garages have access to the RAC portal. This contains the Code of Conduct and details of what is expected from them as a code member in each aspect of the code. The RAC portal also contains briefings and acts as a point of reference for members.

Membership Withdrawal and Sanctions for Non-Compliant Member Businesses

In many instances of non-compliance, the initial response from the RAC is to attempt to assist the garage to improve their business practices by enhancing their standards and sustaining consumer protection. In cases where this is resisted, the issues that have arisen are endemic in the business or are too fundamental to resolve, members face a range of sanctions including formal warning or expulsion.

Once three complaints are upheld against the member these are reviewed for trends and action taken if necessary. The RAC have sanctions in place to dismiss a member business within one month, with immediate dismissal from the scheme if circumstances require. The member is removed immediately from the RAC website and the list of garages that can be used by RAC patrols.

Where RAC Patrols, random checks and reports from members of the public have highlighted misuse of the RAC logo, enforcement Notices are sent by RAC Legal if the garage persists in using the RAC logo. RAC Patrols are notified about garages that have left the RAC, they will check for the use of the logo whilst in the area.

In the year since the last audit 230 members have left. Three exit letters were examined and the websites for the ex-members checked. None were found to be still using the RAC and/or CTSI logo.

No members are currently in the RAC disciplinary process.

Marketing and Advertising by Member Businesses

All approved garages have access to RAC Approved Garage branding. RAC supply the branding to garages so it's fully controlled and the RAC engineer will ensure the branding is being used correctly during the onsite annual audit. Any instances of incorrect use of branding are picked up with the garage as soon as RAC is aware.

RAC Roadside Patrols also raise any issues of garages they observe who are displaying RAC branding but aren't part of the network. RAC then follow this up with the garage concerned to ensure this branding is removed. The RAC Legal team provide assistance where necessary. This process is also followed when a consumer makes us aware of a garage advertising as RAC approved when they're not part of the Code.

There were no issues of concern with marketing and advertising by members of the code.

Terms and Conditions and other Pre-Contractual Information

Terms and conditions and other pre-contractual information is required by the code to be visible to consumer prior to contract, this is checked by RAC auditors as part of the regular onsite audits.

RAC have a set of standard terms and conditions for code members to use, these were agreed with Kent Trading Standards (previously Primary Authority for RAC). They are provided to the garage at the time of audit if they do not have suitable Ts&Cs.

Customer Service Provisions

A high level of customer service is fundamental to the RAC and it places the same high expectation of customer service on its code members.

The RAC considers that all breakdown customers are, at that point in time, vulnerable and therefore requires them to be treated by their members with due care and consideration. The code requires that no entrapments methods are used e.g. retaining of keys due to alleged issues with vehicle's brakes. Unauthorised repairs can be an issue so this is carefully monitored during visits, member audits and in the content of any complaints. If the RAC receives three or more complaints about any member this triggers a report and investigation. However, one single complaint that highlights issues about the customer care culture within the business can cause removal of the member from the RAC Code.

Consumer Complaints Process

RAC provide their own ADR, Complaints and Conciliation are managed by a dedicated customer support team within RAC. Within the last 12 months RAC ADR have assisted 57 consumers. Of these 13 were upheld against the garage, in these cases the RAC secured additional repairs or refunds for the consumers.

If any trends are identified, RAC issue recommendations to the network.

The ADR team have found that recently issues referred tend to be more substantial ones since their members have become better trained in relation to customer services.

Customer Satisfaction and Feedback

Customer feedback can be logged on the RAC website:

<https://www.rac.co.uk/approvedgarages/search>

Customers can find a garage/repairer on the RAC Garage Finder website and leave a review for the garage and view reviews that have been left by other customers.

When RAC Patrols recommend the use of an approved garage to a customer from the roadside, these customers are sent an email invitation to leave a review of the services provided by the garage. The RAC can only do this where they have the email address and correct permissions in place to contact via email. This process has been reviewed and is compliant with GDPR.

RAC use Net Promoter (NPS) to measure customer satisfaction and also ask a series of supplementary questions to gain more insight into the customer's experience of the RAC Approved Garage. Customers also have a free text field where they can leave specific feedback.

The RAC have established that the NPS score has continued to drop and they believe that this is due to less reviews being left and a larger proportion of those being negative. A method of collating reviews and scores from elsewhere e.g. Google reviews, Trustpilot etc is under development.

Conclusions

The RAC brand is an iconic name within the motoring industry and garages using the name gain instant credibility. The RAC works hard to protect its brand and this is demonstrated in their constant review and improvement in ways to ensure that the customer is treated well and fairly by its member businesses.