



**Consumer
Focus**
Campaigning for a fair deal

Consumer Focus response to Policing in the 21st century: reconnecting police and the people

September 2010

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Introduction

Consumer Focus is the consumer champion for England, Wales, Scotland and (for postal consumers) Northern Ireland.

We operate across the whole economy, persuading businesses and public services to put consumers at the heart of what they do. Consumer Focus gives a strong voice to consumers on the issues that matter to them and works to secure a fair deal on their behalf.

We work with consumers and a range of organisations to tackle the problems consumers face and to achieve creative solutions that make a difference to people's lives.

Summary and recommendations

We welcome the Home Office aim to reconnect police and the people, making the service more responsive to local need. We note that 'at the heart of that vision is a radical shift in power and control away from government back to people and communities'.

Consumer Focus and our predecessor bodies, in particular the National Consumer Council (NCC), have long argued that people should be much more involved in decisions on how public services are designed and delivered.¹ We also have a long-established interest in good practice in complaints and redress mechanisms and improving responsiveness.²

Our response draws on our research conducted earlier this year looking at people's experiences of the police service and how forces respond to dissatisfaction. We will send a copy of our report when it is published in October.

We recommend the proposals for improving accountability in the police service focus on effective customer service and feedback handling that will deliver increased accountability, value for money and more responsive local policing.

¹ <http://bit.ly/cFuALB> (PDF 611KB), <http://bit.ly/aFlq3r> (PDF 1.9MB)

² <http://bit.ly/cV7rYG> (PDF 407KB)

Response

Barriers to connecting police and the people

Consumer Focus research³ shows that people want good customer service from the police, just as they would from other public services, but they don't always get it. This is especially true when people try to raise their concerns because the police are generally not good at handling dissatisfaction. These findings are similar to research conducted by others, for example the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), and in the British Crime Survey.⁴ The lack of responsiveness undermines public trust and confidence in the police. Consumer Focus believes that making the police more responsive through improved customer service feedback would help them to connect with the public.

The research identified three key issues that stand out as barriers to improving police responsiveness and the opportunity to connect with the public:

- Poor access to the police: this goes much wider than 'visible policing' or a single national number (such as the proposed 101) and includes how the police respond
- Poor attitude: rude and unhelpful behaviour of police officers and other police staff
- Mismatch in priorities: people feel the police do not take their concerns seriously

This is partly because of the particular way complaints are defined, processed and recorded in the police service. In short, the public do not understand the police complaints process and many are deterred from raising concerns as a result.

The current system, introduced in 2008, is an important part of the checks and balances on the police. However, the word 'complaint', and the procedure for dealing with complaints, has a distinctive meaning in the police service. Complaints tend to be treated as major grievances about a particular officer, rather than a complaint about the service in the sense that other public services – and most consumers – would understand. The conclusions from our research suggest that one of the unintended consequences is that the system ends up serving neither the public nor the police well. In some circumstances this creates a barrier between the public and the police.

Improving customer service, feedback and dissatisfaction handling are essential building blocks for a responsiveness service. Consumer Focus believes that addressing the barriers identified in our research will go a long way to help forces and the proposed Police and Crime Commissioners meet the aims of Policing in the 21st century.

We recommend:

- one of the keystones for the Home Office proposals to increase responsiveness and accountability in the police should be delivering good customer service, providing an accessible and effective complaints route, and effective management of feedback data

³ The research report will be published in October 2010

⁴ British Crime Survey, Home Office, 2009; Public annoyance and complaining about the police, IPCC, 2009

Customer service, feedback and complaints handling

Consumer Focus supports the Home Office proposals to improve the accountability of local forces to their communities, and we recognise that the new Police and Crime Commissioners will have an important role in making sure the public and police are much better connected. Improving customer service, feedback and complaints handling in the police would be a cost-effective way of:

- improving the efficiency and effectiveness of local forces
- making local forces more responsive to people
- collecting intelligence about local issues to drive service improvements
- helping forces to build links with individuals and with communities
- raise local awareness of the service and how it responds to local needs

Investing in customer service need not be a burden for local forces, and is more likely to be value for money. They will recoup efficiency gains as well as more intangible benefits such as increased trust and confidence. As a public-facing service local forces already deal with feedback and complaints so will not be adding to their duties or to 'red tape'.

It is important to point out that when we talk about complaints we mean the usual usage of that word, not a complaint as specifically defined by the Police Reform Act. Consumer Focus believes that there needs to be a much more effective and consistent way of separating out complaints that fall under the Act and therefore automatically become 'recordable' and reported, from the kind of dissatisfaction and complaint that is best dealt with much more immediately and informally. Police forces should make the distinction clear to consumers, and fully explain the associated routes for redress so that people can make an informed decision about which option to take. Some forces already do this well but others classify all complaints as needing to be investigated under the statutory procedure.

Consumer Focus definition of complaint

Consumer Focus defines a complaint as any expression of dissatisfaction that needs a response.

Using a wide definition encompasses a broad spectrum of comments and complaints under one heading. People don't always know how to categorise their problem, and may be unwilling to complain or to use the term complaint. Consumers tend to talk about queries, concerns or issues rather than complaints but they still want these points to be properly taken on board and acted upon.

IPCC definition of complaint

This means an expression of dissatisfaction with what has happened or how someone has been treated. Often, someone who wishes to complain will be explicit about his or her intentions. If not, the person's wishes and expectations should be established. Although the IPCC does not *require* the word 'complaint' to be used by someone voicing discontent, this term denotes a considered grievance needing to be resolved, not just an observation for the service to note a question that the person wishes to have answered. The IPCC expects this level of dissatisfaction to be present for the matter to be recordable.

IPCC statutory guidance, 2010, Paragraph 11

In many forces, once a member of the public mentions the word complaint, this automatically triggers the juggernaut of the police complaints investigation and recording

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system. Once that system rolls into motion it has a momentum of its own which often serves both the public and the police very poorly. The system tends toward a 'blame' approach rather than an opportunity for learning from mistakes because it focuses complaints on individual conduct rather than poor service or a process failure. The focus on individuals also deters officers from using their initiative to resolve issues in case they are held personally liable if something goes wrong. We are not suggesting the existing complaints system should be scrapped but that it is not always appropriate. Importantly the complaints system is an expensive way of dealing with problems so should be reserved for those cases for which it was designed. A simple change in terminology would go some way to differentiating the different kinds of complaint.

Some forces, Thames Valley Police for example, have a system that helps to identify the nature of people's problems and the best way to resolve them. Police staff help individuals to articulate what they want and help with resolution. This kind of approach appears to work better for the consumer and for the police. Consumers cannot be expected to know the ins and outs of how the Police Reform Act (PRA) applies, so being able to discuss issues before having to decide whether it falls into one or the other category helps to make sure people's concerns are dealt with appropriately. It enables the force to capture information about the causes of bad or unhappy experiences and other problems – and to deal with them effectively without needing a long drawn-out process that takes up officers' time. At the same time, being able to deal with issues as they arise and then report on them increases public accountability.

Improving the customer service aspects of local forces will also improve access and communications. Our research showed that access is not just about visible policing and 'bobbies on the beat', which are referenced a number of times in the consultation document. From a service-user perspective access also means being able to get in touch with someone who can deal with their issue there and then, and follow it up if appropriate. In our research, people told us that effective communication and feedback is a critical part of access. A single, national phone number such as 101 is a start but needs to be backed up with the resources to make sure issues are seen through to the end, closing the feedback loop. As already happens in some forces, this could be done by civilian staff using shared back-office functions.

According to *Policing in the 21st century*, Local Police and Crime Commissioners 'will be powerful representatives of the public in policing, with a clear mandate. They will represent and engage with the public, set local policing priorities, agree a local strategic plan, hold the Chief Constable to account, appoint the Chief Constable and where necessary dismiss the Chief Constable.' Consumer Focus believes that good practice in customer service will make an important contribution to this role.

We recommend:

- the Commissioners' remit includes responsibility for monitoring the effective implementation of local forces' complaints handling procedures to ensure that they serve the local people and community well, and meet best practice principles (see below).

National principles

Moving away from central targets makes sense if it allows local forces to be more responsive to local needs but, as the consultation document recognises, it would be folly to have 43 different ways of dealing with dissatisfaction and feedback. The policing pledge may not have had the right deadlines to fit the circumstances in every force but it was a useful tool for establishing a core set of principles or standards that the public can expect and the police can work with.

Consumer focus is pleased to see that the proposals include a role for the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) as the national organisation responsible for providing professional leadership for the police service. This includes taking a lead on setting standards, sharing best practice across the range of police activities and ensuring Chief Constables deliver value for money, which we support. ACPO will also lead in promoting and supporting the use of professional judgement by officers and staff which will be essential to being more responsive and delivering good quality customer service.

We recommend:

- the Home Office works with the Association of Chief Police Officers to establish a set of national standards or principles for handling feedback to cover all 43 forces, with scope for local autonomy to meet local needs and circumstance.

The principles should include⁵:

- accessibility: well publicised, easily accessible and understandable by officers, staff and the public
- communication: early and ongoing contact through the process
- timeliness: keeping to a clear timeline from receipt to resolution
- fairness: open-minded, impartial and clear about roles and responsibilities
- credibility: ensure standards are met; use independent review to check
- accountability: monitor, review, and publish regular public reports
- learning: use the feedback for continuous improvement

We recommend:

- the teams appointed to support Commissioners' are required to include individuals with expertise in customer service responsiveness and feedback handling
- all Chief Constables have a clear mandate to make sure local forces improve their accessibility and responsiveness by implementing an effective feedback and complaints handling system that helps local people get the most appropriate form of resolution

Engaging the public

Consumer Focus welcomes the Home Office proposals for Commissioners to engage with local people to inform their strategic plans and monitor the effectiveness of the police. We also welcome the concept of the proposed beat meetings for all forces. The important thing is to make sure these are properly planned and executed if they are to result in positive outcomes.

Engagement has the potential to improve public confidence and inspire others to get more involved. Conversely – when badly designed and poorly managed – it can reduce confidence in, and support for, the local police.

If people are truly to have a say in policing, more emphasis will be needed on how to conduct effective engagement and make sure the lessons are learnt. People have seen too many examples of 'tick box' exercises or consultations that have no impact or are

⁵ Also see the response to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman on a statement of complaints-handling principles and guidance on a model complaints-handling procedure, Consumer Focus Scotland, 2010

misunderstood by the people they are aimed at, for example as our work on the Post Office network consultation indicates.⁶

It is important to use the right engagement methods for the intended outcomes, with sufficient planning, resource and communication support to carry out the exercise – and to follow it up afterwards. Critically, people need to know that their involvement has a purpose. NCC's good practice checklist⁷ included the following:

- Comprehensive strategy
- Dedicated expertise and resources
- Clear purpose
- The right methods
- Planning for diversity
- Telling people what happened as a result of their input, how it will be used
- Applying the learning

We recommend:

- Police and Crime Commissioners' include in their support team individuals with expertise in public engagement
- Chief Constables make sure local forces apply recognised good practice in engagement techniques (as in the checklist) for their beat meetings

Commissioners and accountability

Good customer service is important to the quality of people's experiences of local policing and local forces' ability to provide a responsive service. We suggest, therefore, that accountability for this aspect of policing is included in the remit of local Police and Crime Commissioners.

'Informal' complaints and feedback are an integral part of intelligence gathering and will be of critical value to Commissioners who need to check on how responsive local forces are to local need. Commissioners will need to make sure that data on feedback and complaints is part of their regular public reporting on local forces. This information will also inform local strategic plans and reporting on performance.

Commissioners will also be able to make sure that forces are operating their feedback processes effectively, and that the data is captured and taken seriously so that forces learn from it.

Commissioners can also help Chief Constables to provide the right kind of support to allow staff sufficient scope to use their initiative to solve problems and deal with mistakes when they arise. This will extend to ensuring that forces have a system for valuing all kinds of complaints for what they are – useful management information that they can use to increase sensitivity to local priorities and drive performance.

We recommend:

- customer service and complaint monitoring is built into the Commissioners' remit as part of the proposals for increased accountability

⁶ *How was it for you?* Consumer Focus, 2010 <http://bit.ly/9mZKh1> (PDF 732KB)

⁷ <http://bit.ly/cFuALB> (PDF 611KB)

Public information

The consultation proposes improved public reporting and information provision, and asks how Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) and local forces should decide what the public need. Consumer Focus feels strongly that the only way to do this effectively is to engage with the public directly in an ongoing two-way dialogue, as information 'wants and needs' vary enormously. Local forces and HMIC will not be able to second guess what information the public value or need.⁸

We recommend:

- Chief Constables in local forces, and the HMIC find out what kind of information the public want and need before deciding what to provide

Cost effectiveness

The public want better and more consistent customer-facing service from the police. This is a consistent theme that applies across service providers; people are not singling out the police. Nor are consumers asking for anything sophisticated or burdensome. They are aware of the need to use police resources effectively and intelligently but expect the police to do their job well, as they would expect of other services. They see customer service and responsive policing as part of what should already be happening – and examples of good practice in forces like Thames Valley Police, Derbyshire and Merseyside show that it can be done.

Evidence from other sectors, for example in local government, suggest that dealing effectively with the people who use services, especially when things go wrong – is also cost effective.⁹ It is much better to get things right the first time, but putting them right, at the lowest possible level, is better than imposing a complicated investigation and complaints procedure.

HMIC should take an interest in this aspect of policing as part of their responsibility for providing the public with objective and robust information on policing outcomes and value for money locally. It is also relevant to HMIC's role in making informed judgements on how well Police and Crime Commissioners and their forces are performing.¹⁰

We recommend:

- HMIC take into account customer service in their overall assessments of the performance of local forces and commissioners, and not just complaints recorded under the PRA

⁸ See the route map for action in NCC's work on involving people in inspection and regulation: <http://bit.ly/cebjUF> (PDF 360KB)

⁹ <http://bit.ly/a611CL>

¹⁰ *Policing in the 21st century*, Home Office, 2010

Consultation questions

This response is relevant to a number of the questions posed in the consultation paper, primarily:

- Question 4 How might Commissioners best engage with their communities – individuals, businesses and voluntary organisations – at the neighbourhood level?
- Question 6 What information would help the public make judgements about their force and Commissioner, including the level of detail and comparability with other areas?
- Question 8 How should forces ensure that information that local people feel is important is made available without creating a burdensome data recording process?
- Question 9 What information should HMIC use to support a more proportionate approach to their 'public-facing performance role' while reducing burdens and avoiding de-facto targets?
- Question 10 How can ACPO change the culture of the police service to move away from compliance with detailed guidance to the use of professional judgement within a clear framework based around outcomes?
- Question 14 Are there functions which need greater national coordination or which would make sense to organise and run nationally (while still being delivered locally)?
- Question 19 What more can the Government do to simplify and improve community safety and criminal justice work locally?



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