



**Consumer
Focus**
Campaigning for a fair deal

The police service

Consumer experiences with the police

Alison Hopkins



About Consumer Focus

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

We operate across the whole of the economy, persuading businesses, public services and policy makers to put consumers at the heart of what they do.

Consumer Focus tackles the issues that matter to consumers, and aims to give people a stronger voice. We don't just draw attention to problems – we work with consumers and with a range of organisations to champion creative solutions that make a difference to consumers' lives.

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We would like to thank Liz Coll who led the project and our advisory group for their invaluable contribution to the report.

Foreword

Now perhaps more than ever, people judge services by their experiences; whether that is in the private or public sector, at home or abroad. It is critical that all public service providers understand the public experience of that service. In the police service we need to understand the effects, including the unintended ones, of what we do and don't do, and how that impacts on the public's psyche.

Gone must be the days of arrogance and a belief that 'we know best'. The police service must routinely consider 'what best looks like' from the individual citizen's viewpoint and aim to meet, and exceed, that standard.

A responsive and bespoke service which enhances public confidence is the lifeblood of policing and justice in a civil society. A confident public is more ready to give information and act as witnesses, without whom justice is impossible.

I welcome Consumer Focus's decision to examine this critical aspect of the police service. This report adds to the increasing evidence base regarding what drives public confidence and acts as a wake-up call. Constabularies do themselves, and their local communities, a disservice if they don't read it and make public satisfaction a cornerstone of their organisational development and service delivery.



Julie Spence, former Chief Constable,
Cambridgeshire Constabulary

Executive summary

'Let us know so we're not hanging around and we're not then having to call back. Just tell us what you're going to do, and just try and look at it from our point of view as well'.

Wiltshire, ABC1, 18 - 44 years

'I finally reported it after calling the station for an hour – I reported it, a day passed, the morning, nobody there, the afternoon, the evening, no-one. Three days later the community officer came – very nice man – but he said he wasn't [there] about the crime – he said he was there for the after-care! So I said "well there is no after-care as you're the first person to turn up".'

South Wales, ABC1, 18-44 years

This report is about people's experiences of the police in England and Wales, how satisfied people are with the service they receive and how constabularies respond when people are dissatisfied or want to give feedback. It focuses on how local constabularies can improve their responsiveness to local people and their needs, a key principle of policing and the foundation for building trust and confidence in the police. The findings are highly relevant to the coalition Government's plans to improve policing and local accountability for the police, outlined in Policing in the 21st century: reconnecting police and the people.

The police provide vital services to individual members of the public as well as to society as a whole. Many of us depend on them for information and advice and for help when we are victims of crime; and in turn the police depend heavily on the active support of the general public in the fight against crime.

Understanding of the importance of delivering good customer service has grown within the police in recent years, much as it has in many other public services, with the introduction of a number of instruments such as Citizen Focus measures and until recently, the National Policing Pledge with its focus on service standards.

However, assessments by her Majesty's Inspectorate of Police (HMIC)¹ and research such as the 2009 British Crime Survey (BCS) show that the service performs poorly against measures around handling dissatisfaction. The Policing Pledge, introduced in 2009, provided a foundation to build on to address this by setting out ten national service standards including one on dealing with dissatisfaction. Although the Pledge was abandoned in 2010 under Government aims to free forces from 'top-down' central control, the Home Office's recent consultation on policing in the 21st century has as its central theme 'reconnecting the police and the people'². It sets down as one of the key challenges 'We want [the public] to trust the police and to know that they will be there when they need them.'

Consumer Focus has investigated what happens when people complain about the service they receive from the police and what can be done to improve redress and feedback processes. Our two stage research focuses on everyday experiences of customer service. The qualitative stage involved 12 focus groups with a range of people who had reason to call on the services of the police but were dissatisfied by the quality of service or the response they received.

¹ Responsive Policing, Delivering the Policing Pledge, HMIC, 2009

² <http://bit.ly/dkIsla>

The quantitative stage involved a telephone survey of 1,000 adults, representative of the population in England and Wales.

We found that consumers are often in the dark about what to do if they are dissatisfied or want to give feedback to the police. They need clear information about the standards they should expect around customer service, including how the police deal with redress and feedback. They also need clear information about what to do when they are dissatisfied, and easy access to the people and processes involved in handling feedback and complaints.

Key findings

Customer service and being responsive to local needs is important to the way people perceive the police. People want to feel the police do a good job, and it is important that the public has confidence in the service.

People accept that the police's enforcement role makes the service different to other public services or high street shops and services. But in terms of customer service the police have the same responsibility to get things right first time and to put things right when something goes wrong.

Poor customer service response

People don't expect anything exceptional from the police in terms of customer service and responding to dissatisfaction. Around three quarters of consumers (75 per cent) want to be treated with dignity and respect, and to be listened to (73 per cent). Over half (57 per cent) also want the police to get things right first time so they don't need to complain in the first place. In practice, however, there is a wide gap between consumers' expectations and their experiences of the police.

Consumer experiences and dissatisfaction

Our research shows that customer service in the police falls below expectations of good practice in public services and elsewhere. Nearly a third (30 per cent) of consumers who have contact³ with the police are dissatisfied.

Most dissatisfaction stems from frustration about poor access to the police in the first place, and the unhelpful attitude of the police when they do respond, often making people feel their concerns are a low priority. There was a strong feeling among consumers that they are wasting their effort or time in trying to contact the police or pursue a complaint.

³ For the purpose of this research, contact includes reporting a crime, anti-social or suspicious activity, being a victim of crime, and seeking information from the police.

Barriers to complaining

Of those who are dissatisfied with their contact, just over a quarter (28 per cent) complain about it. Other consumers do not complain because they see no point, they don't think it would be treated as important or taken seriously and don't know what to do or who to contact. A small number of people are also concerned about possible repercussions if they do complain.

Complaint handling is poor

Only 18 per cent of those who complain are happy with the way the police deal with their complaint. Around two-thirds (63 per cent) are unhappy, rating the police response as bad at:

- keeping them informed throughout the process
- making it easy to understand how to give feedback
- publicising how to give feedback
- making it clear what would happen at each stage of the process

Tackling the barriers and encouraging feedback

Consumers want the police service to publicise their feedback and complaints handling process, to make it more accessible and generally easier to use. They would feel more encouraged to give the police feedback if they were confident that:

- their point will be taken seriously
- their feedback will be dealt with in confidence
- they can talk to someone independent
- the police are open to listening
- and that they will be treated impartially

Our focus groups highlighted three interrelated issues that create barriers to feedback and which need to be addressed to improve customer service and complaint handling:

1 Access and accountability

Consumers want to be able to contact the police quickly and easily, with more access to police stations or other local access points. They want more continuity and consistency of service which doesn't depend on the availability of the officer they contacted initially.

2 Attitude and culture

Consumers want the police to be more approachable and open to complaints and feedback instead of making people feel they are wasting police time when they contact the service. They want the police to listen to what they have to say and to be treated respectfully rather than abruptly.

3 Making consumers feel they, and their priorities, matter

Consumers want to feel their concerns are taken seriously, and that their concerns are investigated willingly and not trivialised, however minor they may seem to police officers. They want the police to show they value consumer input, and that it is worthy of their time. Consumers also want the police to communicate with them more effectively. For example, when the police specify they will come round within a certain timescale and then are unable to do so they should let the consumer know. And when they report an issue or make a complaint, consumers want the police to keep them informed about what is happening as a result.

Summary of our recommendations

Our research is highly relevant to the coalition Government's plans for policing reform, outlined in *Policing in the 21st century* and our recommendations⁴ are made against the backdrop of its proposals⁵.

The police service in England and Wales is made up of 43 independent police forces. Each force is led by a chief constable who is ultimately responsible for all operational policing decisions in the force area. Our recommendations acknowledge that chief constables need a degree of local autonomy to meet identified local needs but there are some common principles we think all constabularies should be following. The removal of the Policing Pledge makes the adoption of such principles, and their effective implementation in different local contexts, all the more important.

Customer service strategy

All police forces should implement a comprehensive customer service strategy in line with best practice principles. This will underpin the new Police and Crime Commissioners' strategic plans to meet the policing needs of local communities.

Benchmarking

Police and Crime Commissioners, with their chief constables, should learn from and adopt best practice in customer service, benchmarking their service against other areas and sectors.

Culture change

The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) should continue to develop professional standards on citizen focus in the interests of 'reconnecting police and the people' and establish a minimum level of service which the public can rely on across England and Wales, with scope for local autonomy to meet local needs.

At the local level individual forces should make sure their workforce (officers and civilians) is trained to deliver a high quality of customer service, as well as recognise and reward customer service excellence at individual level.

Governance

Police and Crime Commissioners, when in place, should take the lead in driving and supporting the development and implementation of effective customer service strategies in local forces, and hold the chief constable to account for delivering high quality.

Consumer engagement

Police and Crime Commissioners should adopt and drive best practice in effective service user involvement and engagement in their role to identify local policing needs.

⁴ Our recommendations can be seen in full on page 35.

⁵ See page 39

Background

Public service reform over the last 20 years has seen the consumer play a bigger role in the design and delivery of services they receive. Consumers now expect reasonable levels of accountability, redress, representation and, where appropriate, choice.

The police service has recognised the importance of delivering good customer service in order to improve both visibility and public confidence. This has manifested itself in standards and accreditations which focus on things like the performance of contact centres, front desk facilities and communication.

Policing in Britain is underpinned by the principle of public consent. The police need public support and willingness to report crimes and incidents or share what they know about local problems and tensions to help them operate effectively. Gaining and maintaining this consent is reliant upon the levels of confidence that the public have in the police, both locally and nationally. Improving public confidence is therefore a key challenge facing the service in a rapidly changing environment.

Measures to help build confidence include neighbourhood policing, introduced across England and Wales in 2008, and the National Police Improvement Agency (NPIA) work on how Citizen Focus⁶ can be used to improve service quality.

A new performance assessment framework called Analysis of Police and Community Safety (APACS) was introduced in 2009. Although APACS included 36 indicators the only one with a Home Office target was to increase public confidence⁷, with an emphasis on dealing with anti-social behaviour and crime in the local area.

However, this overall measure was targeted for removal by the proposals outlined by the coalition Government in the Home Office consultation *Policing in the 21st century* as part of a package of measures to reduce central control and regulation⁸. The coalition Government remains committed to the principle of improved accountability and it is likely the reform package, when complete, will include elected commissioners. These, in turn, will need a clear framework for ensuring policing is responsive to local needs and delivered professionally.

Policing pledge

The National Policing Pledge was introduced in 2009 as a result of the Crime and Communities Review⁹. It set out, for the first time, 10 national commitments on the minimum standards consumers could expect from the police service at a local level, ranging from information on how to contact local police to service standards such as response times and general principles such as 'being treated with dignity and respect'. Local forces had the option of adding their own specific pledges.

⁶ Citizen Focus links policing activity, standards and values with public confidence and satisfaction. See <http://bit.ly/bLS9J6>

⁷ Referred to as the 60 per cent confidence measure

⁸ <http://bit.ly/dkls1a>

⁹ Crime and Communities Review Engaging Communities in Fighting Crime, Cabinet Office, 2008

Point 10 of the pledge related specifically to dissatisfaction, which is to 'Acknowledge any dissatisfaction with the service you have received within 24 hours of reporting it to us. To help us fully resolve the matter, discuss with you how it will be handled, give you an opportunity to talk in person to someone about your concerns and agree with you what will be done about them and how quickly'.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) carried out a review on the progress of the Policing Pledge in October 2009¹⁰. Out of the 43 police forces none was judged as excellent overall while eight were judged as good, 33 as fair and two as poor. As the 'fair' rating indicates a service judged as 'falling short of the required standard and requiring remedial action' the overall performance against the pledge was poor.

On dealing with dissatisfaction, only four were assessed as good, 35 as fair¹¹ and four as poor. Overall, this was the worst performing pledge commitment with the highest number of forces judged 'poor' and the least judged 'good'. As a result, HMIC recommended police forces change the way they handle dissatisfaction as a matter of priority, and set in place measures that would ensure that the causes of dissatisfaction are recognised alongside the value of learning from consumer input.

Complaint handling

The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), established in 2004, is responsible for overseeing the complaints system for England and Wales. Their main role is to increase public confidence in the police complaints system but they also deal with serious complaints about police conduct. They can also consider appeals about the way the Professional Standards Department has handled formal complaints at the level of individual forces. It is possible to make any complaint direct to the IPCC who normally forward it to the relevant police force to be dealt with.

Although a majority of people have heard of the IPCC, qualitative research into police complaints shows those who had heard of the IPCC associate it with high level investigations into serious breaches of conduct¹².

The research presented here focuses on dissatisfaction and low level complaints that are often dealt with informally at the local level¹³. They tend to involve matters of 'direction and control' which means the operational and policy decisions of local forces, including general policing standards and deployment. The Home Office guidance on direction and control complaints states that they should be recorded but there is no requirement to investigate or feedback to complainants. Constabularies and police authorities decide on the local provisions for handling this kind of complaint.

¹⁰ Responsive Policing, Delivering the Policing Pledge, HMIC, 2009

¹¹ The fair rating means 'falling short of the required standard and requiring remedial action'

¹² Public perceptions of the police complaints system, Ipsos-MORI/IPCC, 2007

¹³ See box on page 12 for the definition of complaints used in the context of this report

Complaints about police conduct are assessed and, where appropriate, recorded under the Police Reform Act 2002. Many of these complaints can be dealt with by the local resolution process which requires records to be kept and reported and is intended to be quick and flexible¹⁴.

However, research has shown that local resolution is not well understood by consumers¹⁵ and the distinction between complaints about conduct and those about direction and control can be confusing. In addition the focus on conduct inevitably makes these complaints feel personal and tends to put officers on the defensive.

The IPCC leaves it to local forces to develop appropriate procedures and deliver resolution in a way that is transparent and enables forces to learn lessons from each complaint. This process is not audited but the IPCC recently revised its statutory guidance to emphasise the need to deal with complaints in a proportionate and speedy way, and learn from complaints rather than looking for individual blame¹⁶.

Other published research shows that a significant number of people are dissatisfied with their contact with the police but do not seek resolution. The British Crime Survey (BCS) shows that nearly a third (27 per cent) of people say contact with a police officer has left them 'really annoyed' yet only one in 10 of them made a complaint. The majority did not try to make a complaint as they saw no benefit or point in doing so¹⁷.

Consumer Focus research

It is against this background – a body of evidence showing that a significant number of people are dissatisfied with the police but few go on to complain – that we undertook this research. We wanted to find out more about what happens when consumers are dissatisfied with the police service and what can be done to improve feedback, complaints handling and redress processes. And in turn to improve the quality of people's experiences.

The research is timely. Our survey captures people's experiences of customer service and how the police service is performing against the background of the former Policing Pledge and the Home Office confidence target¹⁸. While the Pledge and the confidence measure have now been discarded, which may lead to more differences between forces, the need for accountability and assessment measures will continue, as recognised in the coalition Government's proposals¹⁹. Our findings provide a useful benchmark for future studies against this background. The findings also allow us to provide a strong steer on practical steps to improve customer service and responsiveness in the police service.

The research looks into:

- Consumer experiences of the police service, and what causes dissatisfaction
- Why consumers don't report dissatisfaction
- What happens when consumers try to report dissatisfaction
- What would encourage them to speak up more
- What redress processes and outcomes consumers want from the police service

¹⁴ <http://bit.ly/9ypR8G>

¹⁵ Local Resolution: The Views of Police Officers and Complainants, IPCC, 2007

¹⁶ <http://bit.ly/a7odhm>

¹⁷ British Crime Survey, Home Office, 2009; Public annoyance and complaining about the police, IPCC, 2009
<http://bit.ly/cTtaD8>

¹⁸ See footnote 7

¹⁹ Policing in the 21st century, Home Office, 2010

Throughout the report we use a broad definition of complaint that includes other expressions of dissatisfaction.

The research method

The research was conducted in England and Wales in two stages between January and March 2010. The study includes an initial phase of qualitative research using focus groups and in-depth interviews. This explored the experiences of consumers who were dissatisfied with their contact with the police, and captured their ideas on how to improve customer service in the police. It was followed by a quantitative survey of the general public to investigate specific aspects of customer service and complaint handling in general, as well as with regard to the police.

The 12 focus groups involved consumers who were dissatisfied with their contact with the police. Some groups were held with consumers who had followed up by reporting their dissatisfaction and the rest involved those who did not. The seven in-depth interviews were with individuals selected from the focus groups.

The telephone survey was undertaken with a sample of 1,000 members of the general public in England and Wales aged 18 and over. Just over half of the sample had contact with the police in the last two years.

Further details are in the research report at <http://consumerfocus.org.uk/g/4mm>.

Definition of contact used in the research

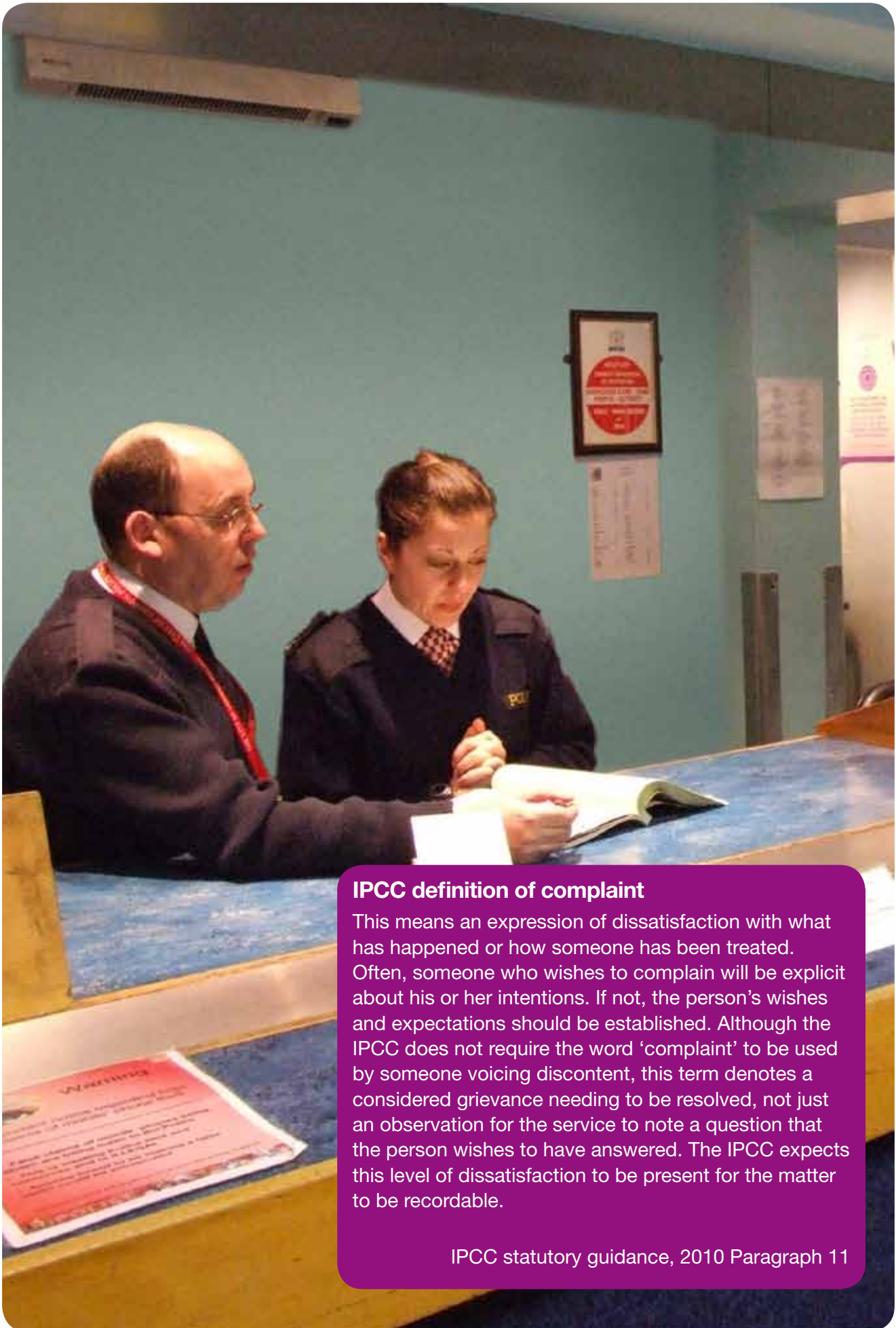
The research includes all types of contact with the police service over the last two years, except unfinished/ongoing complaints and contact that resulted in a conviction. We also filtered out people who were dissatisfied with the criminal justice system rather than with their contact with the police.

Contact includes reporting a crime, anti-social or suspicious activity, being a victim of crime, and seeking information from the police.

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. The research included dissatisfaction with customer service issues such as misinformation, rudeness or incivility, poor information, lack of follow up and administrative problems.



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

Findings

1 Customer service

The quality of customer service is important to people, and to the police. As the Home Office consultation Policing in the 21st century recognises, people do want to think the police do a good job, and it is important that the public has confidence in the service. Without it the credibility and authority of the police is undermined, making it harder for them to do their job.

Consumers in the focus groups told us they want the same kind of treatment from the police as they expect from other services. They spoke of wanting to be listened to and of mutual respect, with trust and confidence as a two-way street.

'My son had his bike stolen, so I made him go to the station himself and they didn't take him seriously – they didn't even give him a crime-number – they weren't interested.'

Suffolk, ABC1, 45+ years

People accept that the police's enforcement role makes the service different to high street shops or other services. But in terms of customer service the police service has the same responsibility to get things right first time and to put things right when something goes wrong.

'We have a saying in our bank 'you matter to me' so we just want to be treated as an individual, that each case is different, you're not just a nuisance'.

South Wales, ABC1, 18-44 years

Being listened to and treated with respect are the top two issues in the survey too, with a total of three quarters (75 per cent) saying the most important factor for customer service is being treated with dignity and respect and a similar number (73 per cent) saying listening to what you have to say. (See Figure1)

Figure 1 What makes good customer service

Q: From the following list, can you tell me which is the most important to you in terms of good customer service? And the second? And the third?

	Most important %	Second most important %	Third most important %	Aggregated total %
Treat you with dignity and respect	27	26	22	75
Listen to what you have to say	26	29	19	74
Get things right first time	25	14	17	56
Act on comments and feedback	11	18	21	50
Have clear standards so you know what to expect	11	13	22	46

Base: All (1,000)

Getting things right first time (56 per cent) and acting on what people say (50 per cent) are also important as we heard in the focus groups and in-depth interviews. These findings are in line with consumers' views on customer service in other public services.

Some people also feel that as the police are public servants who receive public funding they should be accountable to the public, an issue the coalition Government proposals are attempting to address, for example through elected Police and Crime Commissioners.

'I mean if you look at your council tax it says police service and how much you're paying – so really we're paying for them but I tell you what, I don't feel like it.'

West Midlands, C2DE, 18-44 years

'I am contributing to your wages [...], so I'd appreciate a little bit of respect and a little bit of empathy, to be honest with you.'

South Wales, ABC1, 18-44 years

However, there is a wide gap between the standard people generally expect of customer service and their actual experience of the police, especially in the way they handle dissatisfaction.

2 Consumer experiences of the police

Although most people who come into contact with the police (62 per cent) are content with the way the police deal with them, almost a third (30 per cent) are dissatisfied²⁰.

Satisfaction

Three key elements feature in people's descriptions of positive experiences:

- easy access to the police, being able to get hold of someone who can deal with their concerns
- getting a constructive and helpful response to their concerns
- feeling the issue is resolved effectively

'The two community support officers they sent were lovely, they talked to me – they were canny and they explained how they felt from their side – it was followed up and I was a bit happier.'

Cumbria, C2DE, 45+ years

'I own a garage in town and we had a series of break-ins, the police came to see us, we had a meeting with them, they suggested some good practical measures, they came and patrolled the area for a while and I thought they were very good on that particular occasion.'

North Yorkshire, C2DE, 18-44 years

²⁰ The remaining 8 per cent are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the way the police deal with them

Dissatisfaction

When those who had a poor experience explained why they were dissatisfied, three underlying causes emerge:

- poor access, which includes being able to get hold of and keep in touch with someone as well as ‘bobbies on the beat’
- poor attitude
- being made to feel a low priority

Some consumers have a strong sense they are wasting their effort or time in trying to contact the police, report dissatisfaction, get feedback or pursue a complaint. Consumers talked about being unable to get in touch with officers or go to a police station to find out what is happening.

‘They’re inaccessible. They’re easy enough [to get hold of] on the phone but when you need them to deal with “the hands on” they’re not.’

Wiltshire, ABC1, 18-44 years

‘I tried to go to a police station to ask about this parking ticket... I couldn’t even get in there, it was totally locked up.’

West Midlands, C2DE, 18-44 years

People described being left waiting and ended up feeling offended, belittled or dismissed.

‘I had two separate burglaries and I was guaranteed that they would be up and down the road. Then two days later ‘where were they?’... I wrote to the MP and they didn’t like that, the police...I made a complaint to my MP and the next day the police turned up on my doorstep! [...] I expected the MP to get back in touch with me – I didn’t expect the police to be on my doorstep the next day saying ‘you’ve been in touch with your local MP’. Well, initially when they came to the door I felt like a naughty schoolgirl and I’d stepped out of line and gone to the headmistress sort of thing [...] but he only came round because someone from the MP’s [office] said you’ve got to go round and sort this woman out and make sure she’s happy...’

West Midlands, C2DE, 18-44+ years

‘But he was just so rude. I just think it goes back to basics, and knowing how to speak to people. Like I said you’re not asking to be wrapped up in cotton wool but you are asking for a bit of respect, you know.’

South Wales, ABC1, 18-44years

‘The one on the desk, she was very, very rude to me. I said I’m not prepared to talk about it in the foyer – I wanted some privacy – some kids came in and she said she was going to deal with them first.’

Wiltshire, C2DE, 45+years

Those who felt they or their concerns were seen as a low priority for the police understood that the police have many – possibly more urgent – demands on their time. At the same time, what the police may see as minor incidents have a serious impact on individuals, leaving them feeling upset and insecure.

'Well, I think they're the minor crimes to them, aren't they? But they cost us a lot of money. You know, a window for a car: £140. Do you know what I mean? [...] So it might be minor to them...'

North Yorkshire, ABC1, 45+ years

'I don't call them for nothing, and when I do call them it's important to me.'

Wiltshire, C2DE, 45+ years

Follow up and feedback is important to consumers. They know they may have to wait but want the police to acknowledge their concerns and frustrations too.

'All it needs is a phone call to say what's going on; 'sorry we are very busy.'

West Midlands, ABC1, 44+ years

The most common cause of poor service is the lack of, or very late response, with consumers describing having to wait days for a police officer to come and see them.

When consumers report an incident or raise a concern they want to know if and when the police are going to respond. But people also need to be able to rely on the police to turn up when they said they would rather than failing to tell consumers that they wouldn't be able to attend.

The Policing Pledge tried to address this through setting national standards for responding to the public, making it clear for consumers and the police service what is expected of them. Without the Pledge and its focus on consumer experience, it will be important to find alternative ways to establish and maintain standards for the service.

'There isn't any follow up. If they'd just email you and just say, just to let you know, even to inform you that there isn't anything to say would be nice, because at least you'd know they're thinking about your case.'

Wiltshire, C2DE, 45+ years

'Yes and at the end of it I would like them to get back to me with a closure rather than me getting back to them all the time.'

North Yorkshire, C2DE, 18-44 years

'My daughter was attacked, walking home from the park last summer [...] I rang that police station every day for maybe a fortnight to get hold of the policeman dealing with it and oh yes he'll get back, yes he'll get back and to this day I still haven't been told what's happened with that case.'

Cumbria, C2DE, 45+ years

'A lot of times you just want somebody to reassure you that something is being done and to keep you informed.'

Wiltshire, C2DE, 45+ years

These themes are echoed in other research. The IPCC found that most complaints about the police were about neglect or failure in duty, including a failure to keep interested parties informed, incivility and impoliteness²¹. The 2009 BCS found that nearly a fifth of adults recalled being 'really annoyed' with a police officer, often due to their manner²², and Home Office research found many examples of police officers being rude or abrupt, or asking what seemed to be unnecessary questions²³.

In a recent Consumer Focus survey comparing overall customer satisfaction across a range of public services, the police service is toward the lower end of the range, ranking 17th out of the 23 services we looked at²⁴.

This suggests that, although there are examples of good practice in individual forces, there is room for improvement in others²⁵. Our findings indicate that consumers often lose confidence in the police when they fall short on customer service and consumer responsiveness.

Reduced public spending will require chief constables to deploy policing resources effectively and efficiently²⁶. But improving responsiveness need not be costly. People don't ask for the world – they just want to be treated with some understanding. They ask for simple steps, and want the police to have better communication skills, to follow up and close the feedback loops. People do not want costly procedures, red tape and bureaucracy.

Investing in simple steps to improve service responsiveness can save time and money in the long run. It takes longer to put things right and deal with dissatisfaction than it does to get it right first time. The potential benefits for the police are considerable as positive experiences of staff-customer contact are often linked to increased satisfaction and confidence in services²⁷.

²¹ Public Annoyance and Complaining about the Police, IPCC, 2009

²² Arrested Development, IPPR, 2009

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Public services satisfaction index, Consumer Focus, forthcoming 2010

²⁵ Evidence from the 2009 BCS suggests confidence decreases when people have contact with the police: people who had actually experienced crime in the last 12 months had far lower confidence levels in the police overall (57 per cent compared to 70 per cent).

²⁶ Valuing the police, policing in an age of austerity, HMIC, 2010

²⁷ See for example; <http://bit.ly/a4IKUG>; <http://bit.ly/9hWDBT>; <http://bit.ly/csXnNs> getting it right and righting the wrongs

Case study

Andy contacted the police when his car was vandalised but it took two weeks for an officer to come round. He had a look at the car but said 'there's not a lot we can do, there's no forensic evidence; we will just keep it on file'. Andy felt angry because of the slow response and the dismissive attitude. He was left feeling that the police did not really want to know and the incident was not important to them.

'We're paying for the police to investigate things and the disappointment was that I was violated and because recently unemployed, it caused lots of problems paying for repairs'.

Interview, Wiltshire, C2DE, 45+ years

Case study

Tracey's 13 year old son sustained facial injuries in an assault. It took a while to get through to the call centre to report the incident, and a further five days before the police came round. She was upset that it took so long and that her child, who had a history of being bullied, was left very frightened.

Tracey could not fault the police when they arrived; she said they were unbelievably supportive and she felt much more confident that something would happen. They were very good at following up and letting her and her son know how things were progressing.

But then she was left in limbo because the local officer was on leave so 'it means you have to fit in to their schedule' because there is no cover. She was frustrated the 'job just gets left' with no sense of urgency or anyone being asked to take over. Although she understood things can go wrong she felt 'it's what you do to make it better that leaves a lasting impression'.

Interview, Suffolk, ABC1, 45+years

Success story: Engaging with local people – Leicestershire Police Authority²⁸

In December 2008 the chair of the Police Authority asked the chief constable to use the policing pledge targets to support the authority's goals of improving access to policing and delivering local priorities. The authority

- held the chief constable to account for delivering the pledge and measured its impact through its performance scrutiny role
- used their representatives at the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and Local Strategic Partnerships to promote the delivery of the policing pledge
- undertook a road show with local authorities and partners to promote understanding and delivery of the policing pledge
- introduced new ways of engaging with local people such as text messaging, using youth councils and a 'voice your views' website
- invested in monthly surveys to capture real-time satisfaction with neighbourhood policing and allow the force to tailor a response to the needs of local communities
- supported investment in customer-facing services, including longer opening hours for police stations, piloting community resolutions and mobile data handsets for officers

These measures helped Leicestershire to be rated among the five best performing forces for the delivery of the policing pledge, with improved satisfaction and confidence ratings.

²⁸ <http://bit.ly/9NVe8M>



Figure 2 Why people don't complain to the police

Q: Why would you do nothing if you were annoyed or dissatisfied with the way you have been treated by, or about the service you received from the police

Reason for not complaining	%	Number
No point	33	51
They wouldn't treat it as important	23	35
They wouldn't take it seriously	21	32
I don't know what to do or who to contact	16	25
It would take too much time/effort	13	20
They don't welcome complaints	9	14
Done it before and nothing happened	7	11
Process is too long and complicated	7	11
Might be used against me	5	7

Base: All who would do nothing if dissatisfied with police (154) Weighted data

3 Barriers to complaining

Just over a quarter (28 per cent) of those who are not content with the police go on to complain²⁹. This means that of the 154 people in our survey who thought the police were not good at handling their initial contact, 43 went on to report their dissatisfaction³⁰.

When we asked consumers why they would not go on to complain even if they were dissatisfied, most said there would be no point. Some think their issue would not be seen as important or treated seriously, others do not know what to do or who to contact. In addition a few feel the police do not welcome complaints, or that there may be repercussions. (See Figure 2, page 21³¹) All these factors emerged in the focus groups too.

People in the focus groups expressed an overriding feeling that it would be a waste of time to complain, with many individuals saying they would never consider complaining to the police.

Some feel the police are already inundated with paperwork and complaining would only make matters worse. Others are concerned that their dissatisfaction might seem trivial in comparison to the volume and the serious nature of other work the police have to do, or that complaining could be used against them.

'My daughter is a student and she's petrified of the police – if she sees a policeman she thinks it's her that's done something wrong – the police think they are untouchable – and they pretty much are.'

South Wales, ABC1, 18-44 years

'It's the scariest thing walking into a police station. I don't like it – they make you feel like... they intimidate you.'

Cumbria, C2DE, 45+ years

Some worry they will not be taken seriously by officers – even if they did register dissatisfaction, the letter may well end up in the bin – or that individual police officers are no longer personally accountable. They suspect that senior managers are more concerned with achieving targets than with complaints from consumers.

'I've never really taken it any further because of the attitude they had. [It] was basically because I just didn't think they were going to do anything about it anyway.'

Wiltshire, C2DE, 45+ years

'There's a stigma attached to complaining now – you say 'I'm going to ring up and complain to the police' and people say 'oh there's no point doing that.'

North Yorkshire, ABC1, 45+ years

²⁹ Consumer Focus defines a complaint as any expression of dissatisfaction that needs a response

³⁰ The margin of error on a sample of 154 is +/- 7.9 per cent at worst

³¹ These are small numbers but are consistent with the figures in the BCS which are based on a larger sample: See BCS surveys and <http://bit.ly/cTtaD8>



Success story: Making it easy to contact the service in Hertfordshire³²

Confidence and satisfaction are high in Hertfordshire, where the force has set priorities based on citizen focus criteria such as getting it right first time, and introduced a performance assessment system to help embed citizen focus into the culture. A 'one stop' call centre handles all calls, with staff trained to multi-skill and deal with calls promptly and effectively. The force responds to feedback on an ongoing basis and reacts immediately when negative trends appear.

Hertfordshire is one of only three forces assessed by HMIC as 'Exceeding the Standard' in the Citizen Focus category.

³² <http://bit.ly/9NVe8M>

Case study

Jo's car was vandalised. When she reported the incident she got a crime number and was told someone would come and look at the car within 24 hours. She rang again on the next two evenings and e-mailed as no-one had been round. About a week later an officer turned up unannounced on her doorstep. It was only by coincidence that she was in at the time.

The officer told her they had arrested the individual responsible but the next day she had a call to say they did not have enough evidence to bring charges.

Jo felt let down – partly by the poor response by the police – but mainly because she wanted some closure. As it was she was left feeling there was nothing to stop it happening again.

'The police were pretty disinterested. I know this sort of thing happens all the time, they were just going through the process and not filling me with confidence, a bit disheartening.'

Jo did not complain to the police.

'...in all honesty, I think it would have fallen on deaf ears and when dealing with someone like the police you don't want to give yourself a bad name.'

Jo felt the police could do more to create an environment where people are not scared of registering their concerns. She also felt they could take more of an interest in 'you' rather than implying 'just let us get on with proper crimes'.

Interview, Wiltshire, ABC1, 18-44 years

Case study

Sarah reported a break-in to her garage. Nothing was stolen but she wanted to alert the police because 'if things are happening in the neighbourhood at least the police know about it and they can compile the relevant information'. She was told someone would come out but she was left hanging about waiting.

In the end she was more annoyed by the fact that the police had said they would come and then failed to appear than the incident but didn't complain because she felt there was nothing the police could do.

'There's no point, there is nothing that they could do and it's just wasting their time.'

Interview, North Yorkshire,
C2DE, 18-44 years

The four recurrent issues emerging from the groups are similar to the survey findings about barriers to complaints:

- low awareness of how to register dissatisfaction
- fear of the issue being trivialised or not being seen as important
- discomfort and concern about the negative impact, for example the potential for repercussions or victimisation
- a belief that ultimately it would have no impact.

These issues paint a similar picture to IPCC research which identified barriers to complaining. These included concern about how the police would react, perceptions of the amount of bureaucracy for complainants and feeling that it is not worth the effort because there is little scope for a positive outcome³³.

³³ See for example: <http://bit.ly/cTtaD8>; <http://bit.ly/aN9hI3>; <http://bit.ly/a2Jo9e>

Public perceptions of the complaints system (Mori) Confidence in the Police Complaints System, A survey of the general population, IPCC, 2009. Police Complaints: Statistics for England and Wales, 2008/9, IPCC, 2009. Public Annoyance and Complaints about the Police, IPCC, 2009

4 Handling feedback

The research shows that when consumers do go on to register their dissatisfaction, the police response is not good. Around two-thirds (63 per cent) of consumers are unhappy with the way the police deal with their complaint, including one third who are very unhappy. Under a fifth (18 per cent) are happy with the way the police responded. (See Figure 3)

'I tried to complain to the chief constable. It was an exercise in futility. I didn't want anybody to be sacked. I didn't want anybody to run round with a bouquet of flowers for me. I just wanted an explanation.'

Wiltshire, C2DE, 45+years

Most of the difficulty for consumers who want to give feedback or make a complaint stems from lack of information and understanding of what the process is for registering dissatisfaction. (See Figure 4, page 27)

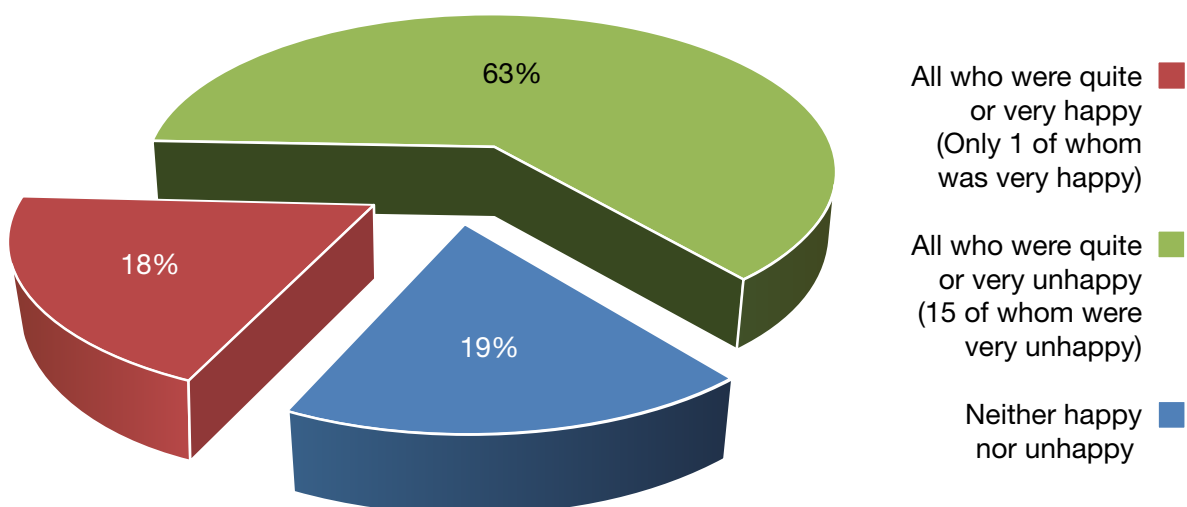
'There's nowhere to go and complain. [...] They should tell you personally, if you're not happy with your service from us then complain.'

Wiltshire, ABC1, 18-44 years

Consumers who took up a complaint say the police were bad at making it clear what to do, how to contact them or who to contact to make a complaint. The police also failed to explain what would happen at each stage of the process. Over half (58 per cent) of those who registered a complaint said the police are very bad at making what would happen at each stage of the process clear, and a further fifth (19 per cent) said they were quite bad.

Figure 3 Satisfaction with how police deal with complaints

Q: Overall, how happy were you with the way the police dealt with your complaint?



Base: Those who took up their complaint with the police³⁴ (43)
Weighted data

³⁴ The margin of error on a sample of 154 is +/- 7.9 per cent at worst

The focus groups also highlighted the difficulty of finding out about the complaints process and who to go to. Consumers feel relatively knowledgeable about their general 'high street' customer rights and how to complain to services they use regularly but many don't have much contact with the police to draw on. This is exacerbated by the absence of a public profile for local complaints and feedback handling procedures.

'You need to be able to know about it – like in the surgery which has a big poster telling you what to do if you have a complaint – you need know it can be done'.

Suffolk, C2DE, 18-44 years



Figure 4 Quality of police response to complaints

Q: Thinking about your complaint to the police service, how good or bad do you think they currently are at the following?

	Quite/very bad		Neither good nor bad		Quite/very good	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
Keeping people informed about what's happening throughout the process	79	34	6	3	15	6
Making clear what would happen at each stage of the process	77	33	14	6	9	4
Publicising how to give feedback	70	30	13	6	18	8
Making it easy to understand how to give feedback	62	27	23	10	14	6
Making it clear what will happen as a result of the feedback	61	26	11	5	28	12
Making it clear who to contact	60	26	24	10	17	7
Making it clear how to contact them	59	26	20	9	21	9

N = number Weighted data
Base: Those who took up their dissatisfaction with the police³⁵ (43)

³⁵ Note that the margin of error on a sample size of 43 is very high and these findings are consequently accurate to within +/- 14 per cent

Low awareness is a deterrent

Limited awareness about how to give feedback or make a complaint features strongly in the research. People know from media reports of high profile cases that the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) has authority to deal with complaints about the police. But this public profile leads people to assume that the IPCC does not deal with the comparatively minor problems described in the focus groups³⁶. As we have reported, many people had difficulty in getting hold of someone in the local police who could deal with their concerns. This left them unsure about where to go for advice on the process for low level complaints.

'I wouldn't have the first idea how the police complaints procedure works. I understand that for more serious things you've got the Police Complaints Commission.'

North Yorkshire, C2DE, 18-44 years

'I get the impression that the Police Complaints [Commission] is for issues that are really important, you know, big things, not like they [the police] didn't turn up or the car was broken into.'

South Wales, ABC1, 18-44 years

'The Police Complaints Commission, my interpretation of them and my expectations of them is that they're there to deal with the really big things [...] not somebody like me who's saying why could you not at least have cautioned the man that threw me on the floor and kicked me in the ribs.'

Wiltshire, C2DE, 45+ years

Although consumers can report all types of complaint to the IPCC, who then refer the information to the relevant constabulary, our research showed this does not always happen.

'Then I just thought well I'll ring the Police Complaints Commission, and they said has anybody died. I said no, and then I felt really silly. You know there are people being mistakenly shot and killed and then there's me, and you think, oh I won't bother then.'

Wiltshire, C2DE, 45+ years

This lack of information and profile about handling feedback, dissatisfaction and local resolution sends out a negative message about how open and accountable the police service is. It discourages comment and feedback from members of the public at a time when constabularies are trying to build links with local communities.

The short-lived National Policing Pledge provided an impetus for chief constables to begin to address this information gap as happened in Leicestershire, for example (see page 20 for more detail). Just over half (53 per cent) of consumers in our survey say they had heard of the Policing Pledge, but this was shortly after a national advertising campaign which was reinforced by local leafleting.

Now the Pledge has been discontinued it is important that the principles it embodied in relation to customer service continue to be fully recognised by local forces³⁷. Otherwise consumers may find it even more difficult to find out where and how to contact the police or about the processes they need to use.

³⁶ Public perceptions of the police complaints system, Ipsos-MORI/IPCC, 2007

³⁷ Government proposals for accountability are outlined in Policing in the 21st century - see page 39

Why feedback is important

Turning to why consumers generally give feedback or complain when something has gone wrong; in the survey just over half (55 per cent) say it would be to stop the same thing happening again. Around four in ten consumers want the service to acknowledge that it had done something wrong (41 per cent) with a small additional number saying it's important to get an apology. Just under four in ten think it's important to complain simply to get the problem put right (38 per cent). And people in the focus groups feel these issues are equally important in relation to the police.

'I would expect an apology as well. I would have expected whoever she complained to, to take all the details and then somebody to ring her back [to say what has happened].'

Cumbria, ABC1, 18-44 years

'An acknowledgement from whoever you've spoken to that it's been dealt with.'

South Wales, ABC1, 18-44 years

Compensation is not a key motive for reporting dissatisfaction, with a very small number of respondents (1 per cent) saying this is an important reason to give feedback when things go wrong. Other reasons are to contribute to improving services in the future (5 per cent), or to make sure services know the users' point of view (2 per cent). And some consumers think it's important to report dissatisfaction so they can 'get it off their chest' (4 per cent)³⁸. (See Figure 5, page 30)



'I felt better after I said what I wanted to say.'

Cumbria, C2DE, 45+ years

'I hope my complaint has led them to emphasise that they must be polite to members of the public.'

South Wales, C2DE, 45+ years

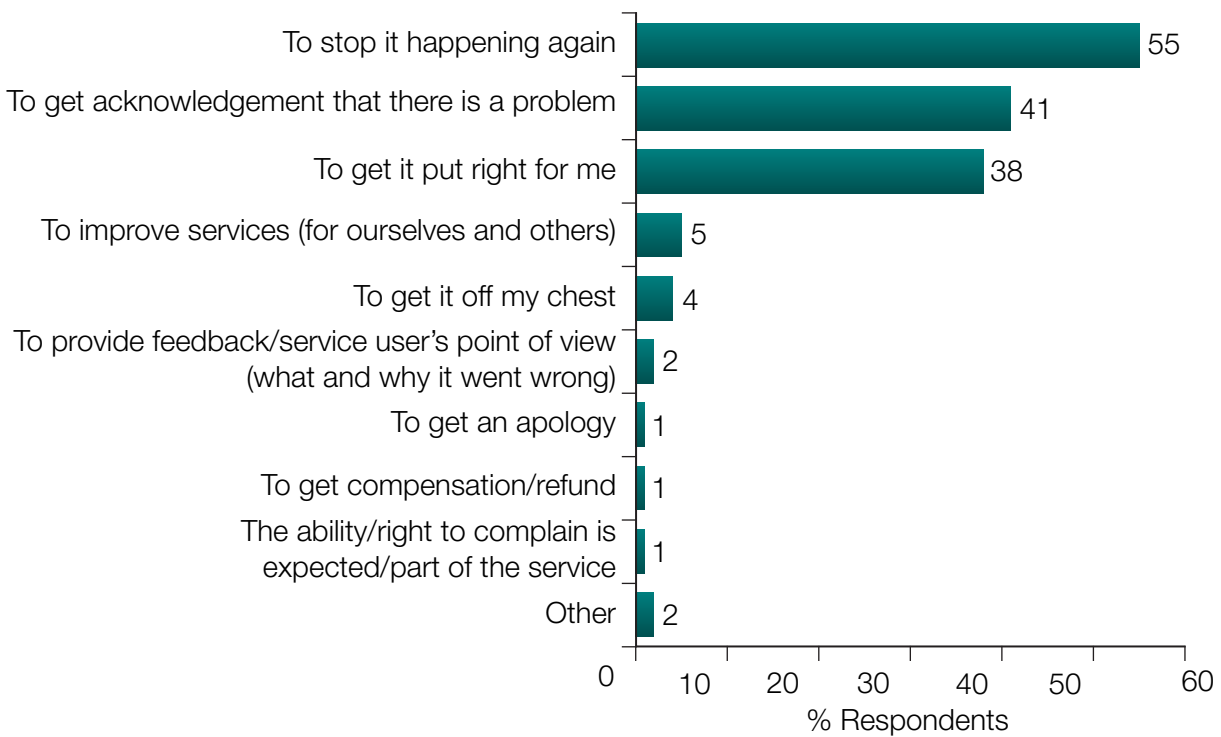
'Well they should just be approachable. And they're not approachable. You're made to feel so stupid. Sometimes you just need someone just to say that was really handled badly, it's unfortunate, I hope that it's not going to happen again. That's enough. Just an acknowledgement.'

Wiltshire, C2DE, 45+ years

³⁸ These figures are consistent with the IPCC's research: <http://bit.ly/c5g7cQ>

Figure 5 Why it is important to give feedback

Q: In your view, why is it important to tell service providers when something has gone wrong, or when something could be improved?



Base: All respondents (1,000)

Case study

Barbara was working in a hostel when one of the female residents was attacked. She immediately reported the incident and the police came to take a statement. But she heard nothing more until a letter arrived saying no further action would be taken, which made her feel the police had just dismissed the issue without telling her. She expected the police would be more proactive, perhaps taking a photo of the injury, checking CCTV footage and maybe a piece in the local newspaper appealing for witnesses.

'You would think somebody is going to come to do something about it'.

She also thought that the police would come back to see the victim in person and reassure her by explaining what they were doing. Acknowledging the incident would have helped to alleviate some of the stress and anxiety. They could have said:

'I know what's happened, it's awful, we've done this, this and this but we just can't find anything'.

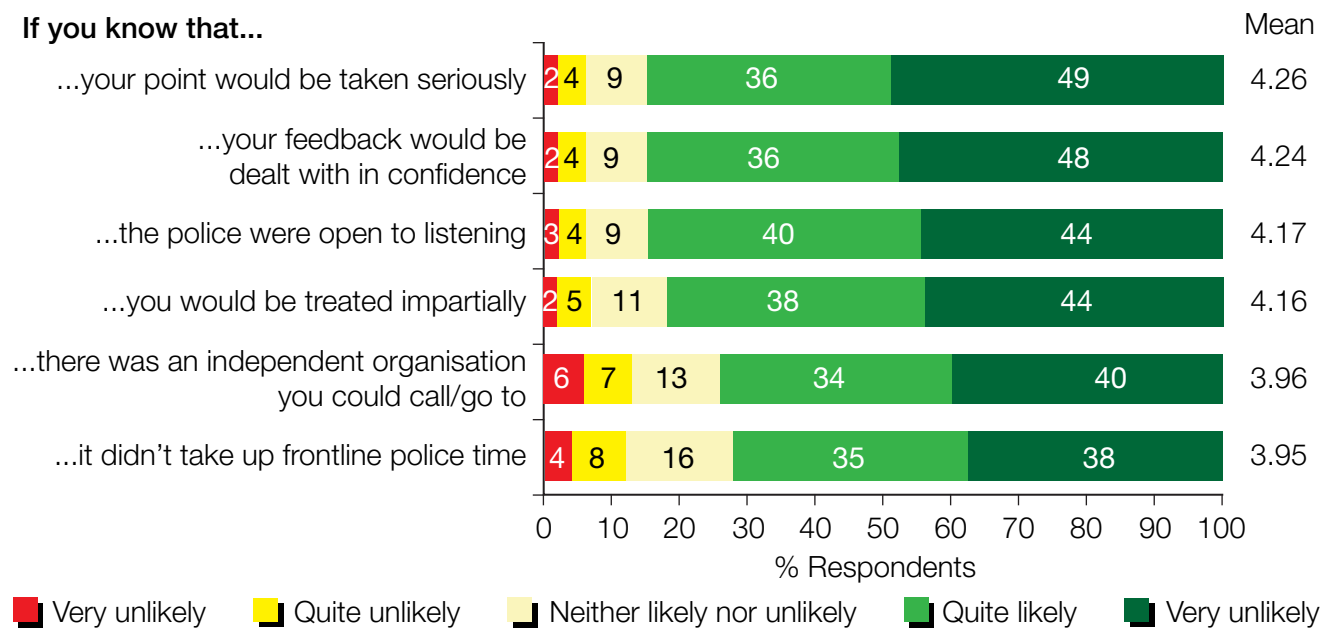
All she wanted was for them to be honest. If they are under-resourced 'there's no harm in them explaining that they are the only ones in the area'. But she was left with a sense that everything was too hard for the police and that the assault did not really matter to them.

'I'm not expecting them to say we're going to do this and this, I just want them to do their job, that's what I pay my taxes for'.

Interview, Cumbria, ABC1, 18-44 years

Figure 6 Giving feedback to the police

Q: If you were dissatisfied with the police, how likely would you be to let them know you were dissatisfied if you knew the following?



Base: All (1,000)

5 Tackling the barriers

The research looked at what police forces need to do in order to encourage feedback and complaints. Consumers are much more likely to get in touch if they know their point will be taken seriously (85 per cent altogether said this), if they know their feedback will be dealt with in confidence (84 per cent), and if the police had a listening culture (also mentioned by 84 per cent). Impartial treatment (82 per cent) comes next, along with having an independent body to go to (mentioned by 74 per cent). Not taking up frontline police time (mentioned by 73 per cent) is also an issue that consumers care about, as we heard in the focus groups. (See Figure 6)

Consumers appreciate the demands on police time, especially for officers on the frontline. At the same time, they expect to receive a good level of service when they have reason to call on the police and have views on how that can be achieved. Again, people have modest expectations. For example they suggested police services having a regular presence ‘at a desk in the town hall’, or a set up a central help desk to deal with customer care issues, as happens in some constabularies and many other services in the public and private sectors. Some people think training officers and staff could be part of the solution.

'It could be to put him on a customer relations course. There must be courses out there on how to deal with the public and things like that. Just a general, 'I'm really sorry that that's how you were spoken to because you shouldn't have been made to feel like that'.

Cumbria, ABC1, 18-44 years

'It sounds like lack of the proper training doesn't it? [...] Give them the training. They should be taught to have an attitude towards people and you know when they're actually talking to someone to talk to them in the proper manner that they would like to be spoken to themselves.'

North Yorkshire, C2DE, 18-44 years

Some consumers look to other services and professions that police forces could learn from. Health and education services, for example, are seen as more open to feedback, with procedures including contact addresses and numbers more readily available and on public display. These services are perceived to have more of a culture of accountability, partly because the premises and the person in charge feel more accessible. In contrast police stations are inaccessible and chief constables remote.

Based on their experiences, the focus groups identified three interrelated barriers to feedback that need to be addressed to improve customer service and complaint handling:

1 Access and accountability

Consumers want to be able to contact the police quickly and easily through a range of channels, with more access to individuals, either at police stations or other local access points. Access is not just about visible policing and 'bobbies on the beat'. It means being able to get in touch with someone who can deal with issues there and then, and follow it up if appropriate. People want more continuity and regular feedback about what is happening, and consistency of service which doesn't depend on the availability of the officer they contacted initially.

2 Attitude and culture

Consumers want the police to be more open, approachable and encouraging about complaints and feedback instead of making people feel they are wasting police time when they contact the police. They want the police to listen to what they have to say and to be treated respectfully rather than abruptly. And consumers don't want to feel as if they are 'automatically in the wrong' when they do contact the police.

3 Making consumers feel they – and their priorities – matter

Consumers want a system that values, investigates and responds willingly to all complaints however minor they may seem to police officers. They want the police to show that consumer input is worthy of their – and of police – time. Consumers also want the police to communicate with them more effectively. For example, when the police specify they will come round within a certain timescale and then are unable to do so they should let the consumer know. And when consumers report an issue or make a complaint they want the police to keep them informed about what is happening as a result.

What can the police do to encourage feedback?³⁹

Attitude

Responsiveness would be one thing.

Reassuring as well.

Bit more compassionate.

Be more approachable, show more empathy:

'They need somebody who's got the understanding of what you're going through.'

'Change their whole image, not just their whole image but change the perception...

Access and awareness

Make it easier and clearer so people know what to do and what to expect:

'They should have a designated person [and] so you'll get a serial number for that like a crime reference number.'

'While they're giving you a crime number, give you a complaint number.'

'It needs to be simple and there needs to be some sort of informative way of them telling you how it should be done.'

Have a dedicated and memorable number specifically for complaints and feedback:

'Some form of number, so you know somebody would do something about it as opposed to a general switchboard where your call just gets logged.'

Raise awareness of the process

'If they advertise that it's all right to complain, you might feel more like doing it.'

Publish more detail on what the police do about local concerns:

'They should publicise more on complaints that have happened. [...] They don't need to put the nature of it, they could say, '15 complaints were made this week, 10 of them were dealt with satisfactorily'.

Independence

An arms-length process: Provide postage-paid cards for people to register their concerns or dissatisfaction with someone independent of the police concerned.

'I don't think you should phone the police station full-stop. I think there should be a totally independent number to ring.'

Feedback

'You just want to be kept in the loop don't you? If it's going to take 28 days but you know you'll have some sort of response, tell us, within 28 days you can have some sort of response. It's not rocket science.'

Close the feedback loop

'And at the end of it I would like them to get back to me with a closure rather than me getting back to them all the time.'

³⁹ Responses from the focus groups

Conclusions and recommendations

The research shows that consumers want the police service to be more people-focused. People are fully aware of the overriding need for effective crime prevention, and the many conflicting demands this places on police resources but they need local constabularies to be more approachable and responsive. Meeting this need will continue to be a priority for all forces, even without the framework set by the Policing Pledge, as the coalition Government acknowledges.

Consumers are often left feeling ignored or frustrated by the way the police respond to their concerns. But low awareness of existing processes and how to access them discourages consumers from giving feedback or raising complaints. This reluctance is reinforced in part by perceptions of the overall culture in the police. Crucially, direct experience of the poor response – from the police service in general and its staff as individuals – to their initial contact discourages consumers from raising concerns. Much of the dissatisfaction relates to poor communication and a lack of clear information on how to make a complaint. Low cost measures such as making sure follow up happens when it is promised, or that messages reach the right person – can be introduced quickly and easily offer solutions to many of these frustrations.

The findings indicate that the police need to change the way complaints are perceived within the service and externally, and to communicate more effectively so that consumers feel they are being listened to and their concerns taken on board. There is plenty of scope for local initiatives here, and it would be wrong to prescribe a single model for all forces and areas. As we indicate in the success stories on pages 36, 37, there are some very promising local examples of best practice to follow. But unless the objectives of improving forces' perception of complaints and their communication to consumers are met, the Home Office goal of reconnecting the police and the people will not be achievable.

Effective complaints handling and feedback systems are important for the police service. They can't do their job as effectively without good local relations or the support, trust and confidence of their local community. Investing in effective customer service has many benefits in terms of reputation, public confidence and service improvement. The resulting data on complaints and other feedback provides intelligence that forces can use to improve services and demonstrate accountability. Public reporting of complaints and outcomes raises the profile of customer service and demonstrates a more open and responsive organisational culture.

Success story: Feedback loops in Hertfordshire⁴⁰

Hertfordshire has been described as a leader in citizen focused policing by Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabularies (HMIC). It is one of the top performers for confidence and satisfaction and one of only three forces assessed by HMIC as 'Exceeding the Standard' in the Citizen Focus category.

Their strategy includes:

- Implementing a set of priorities based on citizen focus and a commitment to following up feedback through contact management
- Investing in a purpose built contact centre as the core of the force's customer service delivery. It has over 300 multi-skilled staff and a budget of £11.5 million to deal with single tier call handling, crime recording and despatch.
- Enhancing the constabulary website where the public can make a complaint or comment about a service via an electronic form. The force responds to feedback on an ongoing basis and acts when negative trends appear
- Assessing the performance of neighbourhood and intervention constables against the Citizen Focus priorities

This is partly about getting the process and procedure right and partly about organisational culture. Tackling the process is likely to be the easier part as the police service is a process-driven organisation and there are good practice examples to draw on – both within the police and in other services.

Developing an organisational culture to support the process by being open to public feedback and encouraging complaints is more of a challenge. Being consumer – or citizen – focused needs to be backed by real commitment to address the concerns consumers raise about attitude, access and priorities, making the process and the service more outward-facing and responsive.

⁴⁰ <http://bit.ly/9Nve8M>

Success story: Using feedback⁴¹

Hampshire Constabulary set up a database to record expressions of dissatisfaction and search for trends which are followed up.

Thames Valley Police logs dissatisfaction and trawls for examples from calls to the communications centre and from press articles. They have recognised that where service is poor, contacting the complainant promptly to find out what went wrong, and trying to make amends is key to repairing the situation.

In a trial in Kent, officers with Blackberries talk to local people about their concerns and automatically download the information to help inform responses and set priorities.

The police service has already made a start. There are many initiatives to improve responsiveness to local needs and priorities, including Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, Local Strategic Partnerships, as well as the introduction of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) and Safer Neighbourhood Teams. At the same time public access to information is improving through online resources such as crime maps. The coalition Government proposals for local accountability and information provision, described below⁴², emphasise putting local needs at the centre of policing strategies. Local initiatives show that some police forces are also exploring new ways of working with local communities. These include:

- 'Street Week' where one street is canvassed in order to hear residents' views
- 'Five a Day', where police staff speak to at least five local people every day
- mystery shopping to test the service and learn from results

The police service can also learn from innovations outside the force such as the MyPolice feedback site which allows people to report their experiences of the police – good or bad – and to make practical suggestions for improvements. A key benefit of this site is that people can give their feedback anonymously.

Although individual forces are already implementing some of these measures, developing effective customer service strategies requires commitment at the most senior levels. Customer service needs to be given sufficient priority across the service to make sure culture change is encouraged and supported.

This means taking a thorough approach to customer service, bringing police forces up to best practice and benchmarking standards to achieve an element of consistency between local areas and build confidence in the service. The NPIA's community of practice provides useful resources and a support mechanism for this.

⁴¹ Responsive Policing Delivering the Policing Pledge, HMIC, 2009

⁴² See page 39

Success story: Responding to local priorities in Cambridgeshire

In 2008 Cambridgeshire Constabulary commissioned a survey of local residents to find out what they value about their police service. In response to the findings, they are implementing a programme aimed at meeting people's needs.

The Putting People First programme was introduced to address the need for a professional attitude and behaviour – which was the top priority for local residents. The programme provides ongoing training, coaching, and mentoring to all police employees to make sure they deliver the best possible service to the public, resulting in a drop in the number of complaints in 2009.

www.cambs-police.co.uk/haveyoursay

But if the police service culture overall is closed – or perceived to be closed – to feedback it creates unnecessary tension, suspicion, and negative perceptions. HMIC found this to be one of the weakest areas for the service with only a few notable examples of forces such as Hertfordshire, Hampshire, Kent or Thames Valley Police using feedback to improve performance⁴³.

In removing the Policing Pledge and its centrally-set targets, the coalition Government will not wish to lose the focus it provided on the consumer experience and the positive impact on local police-community relations that resulted. Consumer Focus is willing to work with the Home Office, HMIC and others to ensure progress continues to be made in this area.

The Government's plans are still in consultation stage. However it is important that handling dissatisfaction and redress is made a priority in the role of the proposed Police and Crime Commissioners to hold local police forces to account. Redress should also be part of the HMIC's remit as it was during the Policing Pledge inspections.

Consumer Focus will work with stakeholders within and outside the police service to find effective ways of influencing the development and implementation of the Government's proposals for policing to make the police more open, accessible and responsive to consumer needs.

⁴³ *Responsive Policing Delivering the Policing Pledge*, HMIC, 2009

Recommendations

Our research is highly relevant to the coalition Government's plans for policing reform, outlined in *Policing in the 21st century*, and our recommendations are made against the backdrop of these proposals. They include:

- Increasing local accountability through the introduction of elected Police and Crime Commissioners who will hold chief constables to account⁴⁴, represent and engage local communities to identify their policing needs and make sure those needs are prioritised
- Establishing Police and Crime Panels (drawn from local councillors and lay members) with an overview role at force level to act as a check and balance to the power of the Commissioners
- Making ACPO the national organisation responsible for providing professional leadership for the police service. ACPO will take the lead on setting standards and sharing best practice across the range of police activities. Professional standards set by ACPO will establish a minimum level of service which the public can rely on across England and Wales, with scope for local autonomy to meet local needs
- Focusing HMIC's role on providing the public with information on policing outcomes and value for money to help them see how well their local force and Commissioner is performing

The police service in England and Wales is made up of 43 independent police forces, each of which is led by a chief constable who is ultimately responsible for all operational policing decisions in the force area. Our recommendations acknowledge that chief constables need a degree of local autonomy to meet identified local needs but there are some common principles we think all constabularies should be following. The removal of the Policing Pledge makes the adoption of such principles, and their effective implementation in different local contexts, all the more important.

1 Customer service strategy

Consumers need clear information up-front about what the police service can and cannot do, how to contact them and how the service deals with dissatisfaction. Public awareness of the customer service policy and procedures needs to be high, so that consumers – including people from disadvantaged and minority groups – know how to give feedback and are encouraged to do so.

Rather than adopt a defensive approach, police forces need to embrace feedback and complaints for what they are: a useful feedback mechanism, a source of management information and customer insight. They need to develop flexible and proportionate responses, recognising individual circumstances and need.

⁴⁴ Chief constables' accountabilities include: allocating budget and police resources, developing strategy, monitoring performance and responsible for delivery.

We recommend:

Local forces should make sure they have staff in-house who understand customer service and know how to respond.

All constabularies should introduce and implement a comprehensive customer service and complaints handling strategy in line with best practice principles⁴⁵, including:

- Accessibility: well publicised, easily accessed and understood by staff and the public
- Communication: early and ongoing contact through the process
- Timeliness: set clear timeline from receipt to resolution and keep to it
- Fairness: be open-minded, impartial and clear about roles and responsibilities
- Credibility: ensure standards are met; use independent review to check
- Accountability: monitor, review, publish regular public reports

We also think it is important that the Home Office and ACPO endorse a set of principles based on the above. While allowing autonomy to individual constabularies as to how they are implemented and measured, there should be as much clarity as possible over the types of outcome required to meet the public's expectations.

Having police forces that are local, which the public can identify with, and are responsive to their needs, is an important principle of policing⁴⁶. The Government proposes that Police and Crime Commissioners will hold chief constables to account to make sure that policing is available and responsive to communities. This needs to include customer service and feedback handling as effective feedback mechanisms go hand-in-hand with greater responsiveness.

We recommend:

Police and Crime Commissioners monitor compliance with good practice principles in customer service and feedback handling to ensure that local forces are responsive to local needs, and people's rights are transparent and accessible. This fits with the Commissioners' obligation to oversee the implementation of Equalities and Human Rights legislation. Commissioners need to ensure that complaints handling is an integral part of the checks and balances that forces work with.

⁴⁵ For example see <http://bit.ly/aemtX>

⁴⁶ *Policing in the 21st century*, Home Office, 2010

2 Benchmarking good practice

Authoritative customer service guidelines and award schemes in a range of services and sectors are widely available⁴⁷. Examples of good practice inside the police are available through the NPIA, HMIC and ACPO so there are many cases to draw on and learn from. The Policing Pledge provided a starting point for standard setting on specific measures such as response times. Some individual forces, such as Leicestershire, built on the pledge to address the quality of responding, developing more visible and effective ways to handle and resolve dissatisfaction.

This relates to the Home Office's commitment that 'HMIC will consider how to adapt their approach to shine a light on police performance on behalf of the public'⁴⁸ and their proposals for ACPO to lead on setting standards and sharing best practice across the range of police activities.

We recommend:

- All constabularies learn from and adopt existing best practice in customer service, benchmarking their service against other services and sectors
- Commissioners and chief constables report openly and regularly to the public on their performance on this aspect of service

3 Culture change

Although there has been an enormous degree of culture change toward openness within the police service over the last decade, it is not universal across all constabularies or consistent from top to bottom. The research clearly shows some reluctance to engage with or respond appropriately to dissatisfied consumers, some of whom experienced a defensive and unhelpful reaction to their feedback.

Doing more to recognise the importance of customer service, increasing its priority and profile internally and externally will go some way to promote and support a more open culture in the interests of 'reconnecting police and the people'. This does not require dramatic interventions – doing the same things differently or introducing change through small steps can also be effective. It can be informal – such as a monthly 'gold star' award used in some local councils and private companies – or formal – such as signing up for schemes like Customer First, Customer Service Excellence, or the Institute for Customer Service which some forces already use. Encouraging more police personnel to acquire and build up customer service skills will demonstrate how to move toward an open, flexible and constructive approach where complaints are seen for what they are. It will also give officers and other staff the confidence and autonomy to use more discretion and resolve complaints closer to their origin.

⁴⁷ See, for example, <http://bit.ly/aa10BV>; <http://www.bsigroup.co.uk/en/>; <http://bit.ly/a611CL>

⁴⁸ *Policing in the 21st century*, Home Office, 2010

We recommend:

That ACPO and HMIC work together to:

- establish a minimum level of service which the public can rely on across England and Wales in relation to professional standards on citizen focus and customer service, with scope for local autonomy to meet local needs
- ensure performance is measured and reported to local communities

We also recommend that local forces

- make sure their workforce is trained to deliver a high quality of customer service, including an understanding of how this complements crime prevention, and the importance of citizen focus to providing a rounded and effective service
- develop and implement processes to recognise and reward customer service excellence at individual level, and to openly celebrate achievements in customer service delivery
- ensure the importance of customer relations and how customer focus complements operational policing and crime prevention is communicated to all police staff

4 Governance

The support and influence of police authorities has been critical in those forces that are leading good practice such as Leicestershire, Thames Valley and North Wales Police. These forces use a range of methods to collect data to provide detailed management intelligence, allowing them to track trends and prioritise service improvements.

The Police and Crime Commissioners proposed by Government will also play an important role in driving improvement and championing customer service, giving it the profile it deserves.

We recommend

Police and Crime Commissioners:

- take the lead in driving and supporting the development and implementation of effective customer service strategies in local forces
- hold the chief constable to account for delivering high quality in customer service, and not just recordable complaints, based on the six principles set out in recommendation one

5 User involvement and engagement

Involving local people in discussions and decisions about the services they use is essential for building trust and credibility. Public engagement done effectively delivers a good return on investment. It helps to develop good communication and a better understanding of policing priorities and the way they work, simultaneously reducing barriers and generating confidence in the service.



Police forces already work with their local communities through meetings with a range of interest groups such as local businesses or young people. Neighbourhood Police teams also hold regular open meetings where local people can raise issues and influence local priorities. Some forces added to the ten national commitments in the Policing Pledge to reflect local circumstances.

But our research indicates that many people feel the police are remote and closed to comment. Whatever the reason the findings indicate a more strategic and comprehensive approach to engagement is required.

Effective user engagement takes time to plan and needs to be well managed by people who can build up expertise and local relationships over time. It needs to include feedback about how user input has been utilised and what follow up action has been taken. It works less well as a series of one-off or disconnected activities. Police forces will be required to hold neighbourhood beat meetings so that residents can hold them to account but it will be important to make sure these reach a wide and representative section of local people.

We recommend:

Police and Crime Commissioners, under their role to identify local policing need, take responsibility for ensuring chief constables and local forces adopt and drive best practice in effective service user involvement and engagement

Local forces build effective user engagement and involvement into their ongoing customer service strategies

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