

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by Acting Director of Housing, Regeneration and Environmental Services (Land and Environmental Services)

Community Safety and Environmental Services committee: 7 February 2007

Subject: Call Diversion to Consumer Direct Scotland

1. Purpose

- 1.1** To seek Committee approval to continue to divert telephone calls for consumer advice to Consumer Direct Scotland.

2. Background

- 2.1** Consumer Direct Scotland (CDS) is a government-funded call centre which provides free consumer advice to callers. The call centre refers complex cases and vulnerable consumers to Trading Standards so that Trading Standards can investigate the complaint and take appropriate action to support consumers. This is known as 'casework' and it can involve investigations lasting from a couple of days to several months.
- 2.2** When CDS was launched in July 2004 many Councils chose to divert all their existing incoming calls for advice to the new call centre as the Department of Trade and Industry had requested. Trading Standards in West Dunbartonshire did not divert calls at that stage because of concerns that it might not be in the best interests of consumers. A report was submitted to the CoSLA Leaders meeting on 26 August 2005 expressing concern that some Councils had not diverted calls to CDS. The CoSLA leaders agreed to "note progress, and request councils to review their current level of participation (in CDS)". Subsequently, in 3 May 2006 the Community Safety and Environmental Services Committee agreed (page 2432 of minutes refers):
- (1) trading Standards diverting calls for consumer advice to Consumer Direct Scotland; and
 - (2) to note that a further report would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee providing information on the evaluation exercise undertaken.
- 2.3** That earlier report outlined the advantages and disadvantages of call diversion. On the one hand it was predicted that call diversion should allow Trading Standards advisers to spend less time dealing with simple advice calls so that they can concentrate on complex cases. The government also hoped that call diversion would allow local authorities to free up time to develop more consumer education, outreach and enforcement programmes.

On the other hand, a call centre located outwith West Dunbartonshire might not be able to address local need and might not be how local consumers would prefer to access advice.

- 2.4** Although the Committee approved call diversion, concern was expressed about its impact on consumers and the committee requested a further report to evaluate the impact after a period of bedding-in.

3. Main Issues

- 3.1** Trading Standards started to divert calls to Consumer Direct on 19 June 2006 and it is now appropriate to inform the committee of Trading Standards' experiences to date.

- 3.2** In the statistics which follow, the data for the five whole months from July to November 2006 have been used as the basis for projections of estimated annual statistics for the year 2006/07. These are compared to the average annual data for the five years preceding the launch of Consumer Direct in July 2004.

- 3.3** Since the start of call diversion the total number of consumer complaints handled by Trading Standards has reduced from an average of 1338 per year to the equivalent of 552 per year. This is broadly as expected.

- 3.4** When that overall figure is broken down, the number of simple advice requests (completed on day of receipt) has reduced from 1006 to 151. This reduced figure consists mainly of those who call in person at the Council Offices but also increasingly those who email Trading Standards for advice. Again, this is broadly as expected bearing in mind Trading Standards no longer gives simple advice over the telephone.

- 3.5** Based on the first five months of call diversion, the number of 'casework' complaints (i.e. those which Trading Standards investigate in detail, including referrals from Consumer Direct) The expected annual figure will be 401. This compares to an average of 514 cases per year in the five years preceding the launch of Consumer Direct.

- 3.6** The reduced volume of casework could mean that Consumer Direct is not offering Trading Standards assistance to consumers in as many cases as Trading Standards did themselves. This could mean that some consumers are being offered less support in their disputes with traders than previously. However the number of cases investigated by Trading Standards in each of those five years ranged from 414 to 599. It is therefore also possible that the figure of 401 investigations per year is simply at the lower end of what will turn out in future years to be a wide range.

- 3.7** When Consumer Direct was launched the Department of Trade and Industry said that local authorities should notice an overall increase in the volume of casework and this does not appear to have happened in West Dunbartonshire.

3.8 As predicted, the percentage of total complaints which require active and often time-consuming investigation has increased. In consequence, the percentage of complaints completed within 14 days (which is a statutory performance indicator) has reduced from an average of 77% over the five years prior to the launch of Consumer Direct to a projected 63% this year. This effect has been experienced by most Scottish local authorities and is not unique to West Dunbartonshire.

3.9 There have been some quality issues which have had to be addressed during the first six months of call diversion. The main examples are as follows:

3.9.1 Occasionally it can take over a minute to get an answer from CDS when attempting to divert a call. For this reason, Trading Standards reception staff have now been instructed to pass the call through to the Trading Standards duty officer after 30 seconds or to ask the caller to call CDS themselves later.

3.9.2 Increasing call volumes to CDS mean that occasionally they need to promise to phone the caller back within 24 hours. Trading Standards is aware of a small number of instances where the caller claims not to have been called back within the promised time although this might not be the fault of Consumer Direct.

3.9.3 Consumer Direct advisers have on occasion not spotted that a complaint could allege a criminal offence which should be referred to Trading Standards for investigation.

3.9.4 There have been occasions where self-help advice has been provided by Consumer Direct when intervention would have been more appropriate.

Consumer Direct Scotland has generally been responsive to any quality issues which Trading Standards has had to raise with them and it has normally taken appropriate remedial action. It is hoped that this positive relationship can be maintained. These issues have been very small in number compared to the total volume of diverted calls.

3.10 In January 2006, Consumer Direct Scotland commissioned research into the opinions of those who have used their service. The key results are as follows:

3.10.1 58% of callers were 'very satisfied' with the overall service and 29% were 'fairly satisfied'. Compared to previous surveys this does show a slight shift from 'very' to 'fairly' satisfied.

3.10.2 91% of callers said they were given clear, practical advice. The same percentage also said they got information specific to their needs, and they got a better understanding of their rights

- 3.10.3 53% said that after receiving the advice they managed to resolve the issue they were calling about. 26% said that the matter was still ongoing, and 18% said that they had not managed to resolve the issue they called about.
 - 3.10.4 When asked what other benefits they had received, the main benefit (reported by 68% of callers) was 'reduced worry or stress / made life easier / convenient'.
 - 3.10.5 68% said the advice had helped 'a lot', 14% said it had helped 'a little', 3% said 'not very much', and 11% said 'not at all'.
 - 3.10.6 78% of callers said they were more able to deal with similar issues in future.
- 3.11** When a caller is adamant that they do not want to be diverted to Consumer Direct, Trading Standards will still provide advice. However, although a small number of callers have expressed disquiet about some aspects of call diversion, the Council has received no formal complaints.

4. Personnel Issues

- 4.1 There are no personnel issues.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 There are no financial implications.

6.1 Risk Analysis

- 6.1 There are no risks associated with the content of this report.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 Overall, call diversion has allowed consumers to continue to access free, practical legal advice over the telephone in the same way they used to get from Trading Standards. This has allowed Trading Standards to concentrate on more complex cases at a time of reducing resources. Whilst there have been a small number of quality issues to be addressed, Consumer Direct has responded positively to the Council's feedback.

8. Recommendation

- 8.1 The committee is asked to approve the continuation of diversion of telephone calls for consumer advice to Consumer Direct Scotland.**

Ronald M. Dinnie
Acting Director of Housing, Regeneration and Environmental Services
(Land and Environmental Services)
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Person to Contact: Graham Pollock
Manager of Environmental Services, Council Offices,
Clydebank, G81 1TG
Tel 01389 738593
graham.pollock@west-dunbarton.gov.uk

David McCulloch
Section Head (Trading Standards), Council Offices,
Clydebank, G81 1TG
Tel 01389 738286
david.mcculloch@west-dunbarton.gov.uk

Appendices: None

Background Papers: Report to Community Safety and Environmental Services committee dated 3 May 2006 entitled Diversion of telephone calls to Consumer Direct Scotland.
Results of consumer research carried out by Consumer Direct Scotland (January 2006)
Minutes of CoSLA Leaders meeting 26 August 2005

Wards Affected: All