

SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 12TH NOVEMBER 2012

The Citizens Advice Consumer Service

Report by Director for Social and Community Services

Introduction

1. In 2005 central government, via the Office of Fair Trading, contracted for a national service which would provide self- help consumer advice and act as a reporting site where consumers would be able to provide information about problem traders. The Service was called Consumer Direct. As well as providing advice to consumers, it also passed to Trading Standards Services intelligence about possible criminal activity by traders and the contact details of consumers needing extra assistance.
2. In 2009, Oxfordshire County Council made the decision that it would reduce its in-house consumer advice service provided by Trading Standards and formally link up with Consumer Direct from April 2012. In 2010 central government decided to transfer responsibility for the Consumer Direct service to Citizens Advice. This change and our own, formal, partnership with the national service both took place in April 2012. While Citizens Advice is new to this contract, it has engaged Agilisys, one of the previous providers of Consumer Direct call centres to deliver the service. The Service has been rebranded as the Citizens Advice Consumer Service.
3. This report summarises the engagement between Oxfordshire County Council Trading Standards Service and the Citizens Advice Consumer Service.

Exempt Information

4. None

Cooperation between Local Trading Standards Services and the National Citizens Advice Service

5. Citizens Advice work closely with local Trading Standards Services in respect of the provision of the Consumer Service. Each Local Authority provides Citizens Advice with a Protocol. This document is basically an agreement as to what we will and will not accept as case referrals, and what expectations can be given by Citizens Advice to a consumer about the time scale and nature of service they will receive from each local Trading Standards Service.
6. There are more than 200 Trading Standards Services and each has its own bespoke Protocol. The Citizens Advice Service also refers clients to hundreds

of the organisations, each of which has its own Protocol. Compliance with all of these, very disparate, protocols has been identified as a problem by the Citizens Advice Service.

7. A working group between Citizens Advice and Trading Standards was established in 2011. Kate Davies, a team leader in Oxfordshire Trading Standards Service who had overseen the transition to the new national service, joined that working group in September 2012. This has already proved to be a valuable means of keeping abreast of how other Trading Standards Services are finding the new relationship and of how the new service is performing.
8. In addition, there is also a feedback mechanism for daily use which allows us to inform Citizens Advice of any problems with specific cases and get problems resolved.

Oversight and Quality Assurance

9. Citizens Advice has a contractual relationship with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to provide the National Consumer Service. This contract includes Key Performance Indicators, some of which were relaxed for the first 6 months of the contract. Citizens Advice passes these performance indicators on to its own contractor, Agilisys, which actually runs the call centres providing the service.
10. By the end of September, demand for the national service was about 96% of that forecast. It has not been advertised or otherwise promoted. It retains the Consumer direct telephone number but its web content is now at the national Citizens Advice website: www.adviceguide.org
11. Citizens Advice carries out monthly reviews with Agilisys and quarterly audits. It reports that to September 2012:
 - 70% of calls answered within 60 seconds (meets relaxed KPI)
 - At least 80% of online requests for advice answered within 2 days (Q1) and at least 95% answered within 2 days (Q2) (meets relaxed KPI)
 - 6% of telephone calls abandoned (meets relaxed KPI)
 - Call handling time average 8 minutes 26 seconds (not subject to a KPI)
 - Service availability 100% (meets KPI)
12. One of the relaxed key performance indicators is that 70% of business partners (including Trading Standards Services) should be satisfied with the service. This was suspended until the end of September 2012 so no review of this indicator has taken place.
13. However, in response to some concerns raised by Trading Standards Services, a quality review exercise was undertaken across a number of Authorities during the summer. This review was quite rough and ready but it found that:
 - 65% of the surveyed referrals from Citizens Advice were of acceptable quality

- 21% contained some problems
- 13% were not of acceptable quality.

14. Oxfordshire was not one of the authorities involved in the review but, our experience, broadly, tallies with its findings. Everyone at the working group meeting in September agreed that this data collection and review exercise had been useful and agreed to repeat it next year, alongside Citizens Advice's own partner satisfaction surveys.

How we deal with problem referrals in Oxfordshire

15. Citizens Advice provides a feedback system. If we find a referral which is incorrect in some way, we complete a form explaining the problem and email it back to Citizens Advice. We do not keep a record of the number of referrals which require feedback but, in all but one case, we have been satisfied with the timeliness of Citizens Advice's response to the feedback. Feedback can call for additional action by Citizens Advice or can just be for information to help improve their service.

Service Improvement

16. At the working group meeting in September, Citizens Advice was very honest about the difficulties it has faced, including the number of protocols with which it has to deal and staff training / retention problems. It said that in the 2nd quarter (July to September) it had focussed on quality improvement. It had increased its monitoring of its advisors and is targeting the following areas:
 - Additional targeted questioning of callers
 - Completeness of advice provided
 - Accuracy and clarity of data recorded
 - Correct use and application of Trading Standards referral Protocols
 - Accurate classification of cases as either "referrals" or "notifications"
 - Managing consumers' expectations
17. In addition, 19 new advisors began work in September, increasing the service capacity and a number of additional briefing documents have been circulated to enhance the advisor's knowledge on specific topics such as car clamping, scams and the Green Deal
18. Citizens Advice and Agilisys have asked if Trading Standards Services which are close to their own sites will be willing to give training sessions and explain what happens with information when it is passed across.
19. Lastly, at the meeting in September, we were told that feedback from Trading Standards services had fallen off in the previous 2 weeks, which Citizens Advice hoped was an indication that its work on quality in the 2nd quarter had led to a reduction in problems.

Conclusions

20. While there have been some teething issues with the Citizens Advice Service, there have been no fundamental service breakdowns.
21. Referrals are flowing well from Citizens Advice to Oxfordshire. There have been 5201 referrals and notifications to us since the beginning of April. It is not possible to make a direct comparison between the number of matters reported to us between April and September 2011 and the same period in 2012. However, it does seem that the number of cases has, at least, remained stable and may even have increased.
22. Citizens Advice and Agilisys have committed themselves to quality improvement and the remaining consumer advisors employed by Oxfordshire are able to focus on the consumers in the greatest need: those who are vulnerable or whose disputes are too complex for self-help advice alone.
23. Monitoring and feedback needs to continue. We will keep on sending feedback on specific problem cases, will contribute to Citizens Advice own partner satisfaction surveys when these are carried out, will support the Citizens Advice and Trading Standards working group and will contribute to repeats of the Trading Standards review carried out this summer.

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Background papers: None
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