

Consumer Direct: National Call Centres For Consumer Advice

RECOMMENDATION

- 1.1 To support the Regional “Consumer Direct” Call Centre.
- 1.2 To recommend Council to appoint a director to the limited company, which will run the Call Centre.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

2. The “Consumer Direct” Call Centres are being established by the DTI, who are making initial funds available to Trading Standards Services to run the Centres.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) is setting up seven regional Call Centres to give first tier consumer advice. The service will be called Consumer Direct and will operate by means of an 0845 telephone number.
- 3.2 The Call Centres will be fully funded by the DTI. Bids have been invited from Trading Standards Services to operate the Call Centres. Bids will not be accepted from individual services.
- 3.3 The East Midlands Regional Authorities have been invited to make a joint bid through their liaison body known as the East Midland Co-ordinators of Trading Standards (EMCOTS). The proposed process of setting up the Call Centre has been agreed by the DTI and is now underway.
- 3.4 In outline the process is as follows:
 - Two East Midland Authorities have declared their interest in hosting the Call Centre. A selection process is in progress to decide which should be the East Midland host. Those two authorities are Lincolnshire and Leicester City. They are to make bids to be selected as host on behalf of EMCOTS.
 - Once they have prepared their bids they will make presentations to a selection panel. The Cabinet member for the Environment and Direct Services will be a member of the selection panel.

- After a host has been selected, a bid will be made to the DTI to operate the East Midlands Call Centre.
- The successful bidder will set up the Call Centre on behalf of EMCOTS. Once it is established it will be taken over by the EMCOTS region.

- 3.5 The DTI will not provide funds to an individual local authority to operate the Call Centre. They will only fund partnerships of Trading Standards services. To enable the funding to be provided EMCOTS to become a limited company, each of the member authorities of EMCOTS, (Derby City, Derbyshire, Leicester City, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottingham City, Nottinghamshire and Rutland) is being asked to support the limited company. Preparations are now being made for the creation of the limited company under the working title of EMCOTS Limited.
- 3.6 Each member authority will be able to appoint a director for the limited company. The Council will have to decide whether the director should be an elected member or an officer.
- 3.7 The Call Centre will be fully funded by the DTI for five years.
- 3.8 The Council's Consumer Advice service will continue, although there may be some adjustment needed in the service it provides. Consumer Direct will provide first tier (self help) advice to telephone callers. Where complex advice is needed Consumer Direct will refer the caller to the appropriate local service.
- 3.9 It is anticipated that the national advertising of Consumer Direct will significantly increase the overall demand for consumer advice and this should increase the demand for service to be provided by our Consumer Advice Section. A significant proportion of the demand will relate to complex enquiries where paperwork, such as contracts, has to be given detailed consideration at the local level. Local services will also receive calls from consumers who have contacted Consumer Direct, but have been unable to resolve their complaints based on the advice given. Consumer Direct will not give advice to traders. The local service will continue to deal with written complaints and personal callers.
- 3.10 Consumer Direct Call Centre for the East Midlands region should be operating by early summer 2005.

OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

4. None. The setting up of the Call Centre is controlled by the DTI.

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Background papers:	None
List of appendices:	Appendix 1 Implications

IMPLICATIONS

Financial

1. The Call Centre will be fully funded by the DTI. An exit strategy will be put in place should the funding cease in five years time.

Legal

2. The articles of association of the limited company will be agreed with the Council's Legal Officers. The Council's liability will be limited to £10 as part of the limited company.

Personnel

3. 1 Consumer advisors will be recruited to run the Call Centre in the area where it is set up. Their terms and conditions of service will be in line with local government.
- 3.2 Existing staff will not be affected by the Call Centre other than the bias of their duties might be affected.

Equalities Impact

4. National and local advertising of the Call Centres will make more people aware of the availability of consumer advice. Raising awareness will encourage consumers to seek advice and protect them against faulty goods or services and unscrupulous traders.

Corporate Objectives and Priorities for Change

5. Enhance our community leadership at strategic and neighbourhood level through partnership working and listening to, and communicating with, the public.