

Resolution is in the air

IPCC Chief Executive Jane Furniss (right) wants the service to cut complaints by resolving them at a local level. She talks to Carol Jenkins about the reasoning behind this and the IPCC's role in this process.



It has been 15 months since Jane Furniss became Chief Executive of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), and she admits she has enjoyed every minute of a career she describes as being about “the business of death, destruction and complaints”.

“People who are in the business think that it’s really odd that I enjoy it so much,” she admits. “I’ve worked all my adult life in the criminal justice system and I’ve always been committed to making it work better for people. One of the things that has always fascinated me is the point at which the state or a state institution and the citizen are in conflict.”

She describes it as “vital” to protect the citizen from any alleged unfair treatment from organisations such as the police. But at the same time she admits this is always going to be contentious by its very nature.

Mrs Furniss is used to working in areas that could be considered contentious. She spent her early career in the probation service, reaching the position of HM Deputy Chief Inspector of Probation. More recently she inherited the poisoned chalice of being responsible for the policy, legislation and delivery of criminal justice reform across three government departments.

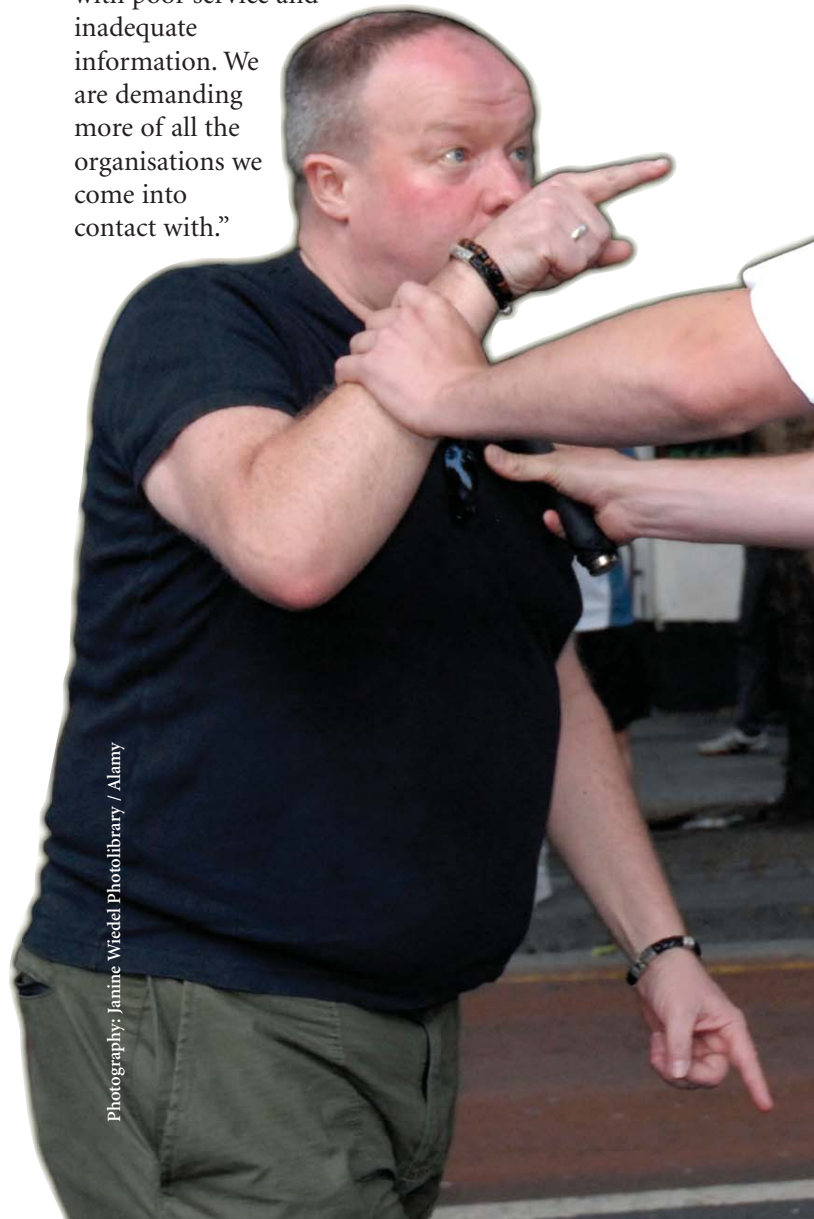
With this track record, she is obviously used to a challenge and is very clear about which direction she wants to take the IPCC in the coming years. Speaking recently to barristers at Lincoln’s Inn, she emphasised how important it is that the IPCC as an organisation doesn’t simply accuse the police service and officers of wrongdoing, but tries to establish why an incident ended in a complaint and what lessons can be learned from it.

“The first thing we are trying to do in most cases is to search for the truth. One of the things we are working hard at as an organisation is to shift the culture that complaints against police are about blame and punishment. Our main aim is to establish what went wrong and determine how it can be put right.”

Figures show that complaints against the police in relation to incivility and neglect of duty have increased. Mrs Furniss admits the reasons for this are complex, and are due to a number of factors.

She believes that the creation of the IPCC has boosted the public’s confidence in the complaints system. It’s also her view that complaints have risen because society has raised expectations of public services.

“There is no doubt that we all expect more from our GPs, hospitals, schools and our police service,” she explained. “We are much less likely as a society to put up with poor service and inadequate information. We are demanding more of all the organisations we come into contact with.”



Photography: Janine Wiedel Photolibrary / Alamy

Despite the fact that the police service has worked hard to improve its service delivery, she admits that this improvement is failing to match public expectation.

When asked how this very complex issue can be addressed, Mrs Furniss admits there are no instant solutions, and that as a society we have stoked people's expectation of the police "in a way that is probably not realistic".

"You expect there to be a police officer there to help your granny cross the road when she needs it, or to turn up to a burglary when it happens, and even to be there to help stop the traffic jamming up," she said.

"There's an almost endless list of tasks the police are expected to have the answers to and deal with, and when you look at the many millions of interactions the police

have with the public, the number of

complaints is actually a very small proportion of this figure."

In her address to barristers at

Lincoln's Inn, Mrs Furniss argued that this

number could be even

lower if complaints were resolved quicker and at a lower level.

"One of the problems about the police complaints system is that it tends to escalate the complaint too quickly; before we know it we are into this whole question of finding out if anyone is to blame, and whether they should be punished."

In order to address this, Mrs Furniss believes that it should be the role of the station sergeant or the person who is nearest to the officer about who the complaint is made to contact the complainant, establish what happened and – if necessary – apologise.

She quoted a recent example where a force carried out a raid on premises they thought belonged to a known drug dealer. In fact the house belonged to an elderly lady who was quite rightly terrified about the fact officers forced entry through her door, only to find her in bed.

In this particular example, the chief constable visited her at home with flowers and apologised.

"Not only was the door repaired but also the potential damage to the community was fixed at the same time. It sends out a good message to the community that when we get it wrong we apologise."

Many would argue this isn't as easy as it sounds and that in a litigious society an apology is tantamount to an admission of guilt. This is something Mrs Furniss rejects quite strongly.

"A lot of public sector organisations have got themselves into this whole frame of mind where they were advised that they shouldn't apologise because it would be an admission of guilt and the next thing you know you would get a damages claim."

Recent surveys by the IPCC seem to contradict this, as the majority of those questioned said that they would be happy with an explanation and an apology rather than seek compensation.

"I share their views," she said. "Putting the problem right should be the most important priority, rather than deciding who should be punished."

If line managers are to prevent complaints from escalating then Mrs Furniss acknowledges that they need to be supported and provided with the confidence and training to deal with the complaints.

At present almost half of complaints against the police are already dealt with by local resolution – something that the IPCC wants the service to make greater use of. The Taylor reforms will help this process in that they will for the first time encourage the service to separate out matters of misconduct from gross misconduct.

The new regulations want misconduct allegations to be dealt with swiftly and at a local level – but allegations of gross misconduct should be dealt with robustly and at a higher level.

Mrs Furniss puts the increase in complaints of incivility down to the growing demands and stresses put onto officers who are often struggling to reconcile an increasingly performance-based culture with often



IPCC Chief Executive Jane Furniss admits to being "fascinated" by the point at which state institutions and the citizen are in conflict, but believes society has unrealistic expectations of the police service.



unreasonable public expectation. These words will prove refreshing for frontline officers, some of whom might see the IPCC's role as seeking to be critical of the police service in general. This is a criticism that Mrs Furniss takes on board but insists that the IPCC has "no axe to grind" and is "genuinely seeking independently to find out what has happened".

"I can assure officers that we don't have a pre-conceived agenda or a preconception of the outcome."

She calls on the service to learn lessons from the private sector in terms of their complaints system, and to see the value of the system in improving public confidence.

"The best performing private sector organisations invest heavily in customer complaints. If you walk into Tesco the first thing you see is the customer service desk. This is because Tesco want to help you and they want to hear from you. The public sector has been very slow to use customer feedback and complaints as feedback as to how the organisation can do its job better."

She puts this down to a tendency to see it as an attack on the professional integrity of the organisation which has to be

"defended at all costs rather than free consultation that provides them with a customer's view of the organisation which should be looked at, examined and taken on board".

"The fact that customers of public sector organisations like the police don't have a choice about who delivers their police service in the same way they have a choice about which supermarket to choose, puts an even greater onus on the service to take complaints seriously," she added. "That is why it is important for the police to regard the public as important customers and be prepared to hear and to listen."

Jane Furniss argues that frontline officers often face growing demands and stresses while trying to reconcile an increasingly performance-based culture with often unreasonable public expectation.