



Officer Report to Local Committee (ELMBRIDGE)

TRADING STANDARDS ANNUAL REPORT

28 November 2011

KEY ISSUE

The services provided by Trading Standards during 2011 and key activities in the Elmbridge area.

This report is for information only.

SUMMARY

The vision for the service is “Confident Consumers – Trusted Traders”, with wide ranging functions protecting residents, supporting reputable businesses, tackling rogue traders and contributing to the reduction of crime and disorder in Surrey. A Public Value Review commenced in December 2010 aimed at repositioning and redesigning the service to meet the Council’s objectives and the needs of the most vulnerable, taking in to account the Big Society agenda and changes proposed to the Office of Fair Trading and the Citizens Advice Bureau. This PVR has resulted in a restructuring of the service, effective from November 2011.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Local Committee is asked to note the activities of the Trading Standards Service and to provide any feedback to help us enhance our understanding of, and response to, local needs and issues.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 We have responsibility for dealing with unsafe or unfair trading practices and applying regulations in relation to quality, quantity, safety, description and price. We also enforce regulations covering the composition, labelling and advertising of food and ensuring animal health and welfare on farms, minimising the risk of spread of animal disease.
- 1.2 We support and educate reputable businesses, providing information and advice on consumer and regulatory issues.
- 1.3 We tackle rogue traders and deceptive business practices, protecting all Surrey residents, particularly the most vulnerable, and businesses from anti social behaviour, doorstep deception, scams and other illegal practices

ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

- 2.1 Latest analysis from the Office of Fair Trading shows that the economic impact of our fair trading work alone saves local Surrey residents £6.6 million per year. For every £1 spent on Fair Trading activities it benefits residents by more than £6.
- 2.2 Sales of alcohol to young people have been driven down from 35% to 8% across Surrey.
- 2.3 Satisfaction indicators compare well with other authorities. Business satisfaction is 83% and consumer satisfaction 92%.
- 2.4 Our appointment of an Accredited Financial Investigator in 2009 continues to reap rewards in seizing criminal assets under Proceeds of Crime legislation.
- 2.5 A dedicated Intelligence Officer also continues to reap rewards as we utilise information from a wide variety of sources to ensure that interventions and investigations are targeted where there is greatest need, greatest likely impact and hence greatest benefit for local residents and businesses. A monthly Tactical Assessment enables us to identify priority issues and allocate resources.
- 2.6 We continue to attract and deliver frequent and strong media coverage for the Council on both national and local TV/radio and in the press. For example, Steve Playle, our Investigations and Enforcement team leader, appeared on ITVs current affairs programme "Tonight" twice in September 2011 talking about doorstep crime, and again on energy mis-selling.
- 2.7 No Cold Calling Zones continue to be successful, and we have now persuaded the energy retailers to respect the wishes of residents in the zones. Evidence showed that signs and zones were routinely ignored and that nearly half of all people who switched as a result of their high pressure and aggressive sales tactics actually ended up with a worse deal. Following on from this, in May 2011 we successfully prosecuted one of the big six energy suppliers, Scottish and Southern Energy, for misleading consumers in to switching supplier. This is the first successful prosecution of this nature.
- 2.8 Some 89% of residents in a No Cold Calling Zone say that they feel safer as a result of the zone.
- 2.9 Recent successful prosecutions (September 2011) include an importer of dangerous electrical goods. Several thousand dangerous electrical products have been removed from the market and the company prosecuted, fined, and ordered to pay local authority costs, a total of £24,000

3 LOCAL INITIATIVES AND CURRENT ISSUES

- 3.1 **Underage sales.** Since April 2011 we have attempted 161 test purchases of alcohol and cigarettes with volunteer young people, 14 in Elmbridge, with a sale of alcohol made on one occasion. Sellers are issued with £80 fixed penalty notices and business owners given detailed advice about precautions to prevent further illegal sales. In addition, 12 attempted purchases of

cigarettes from vending machines resulted in 3 sales being made, none in Elmbridge. Licensees in Elmbridge are generally good on compliance

- 3.2 **Buy With Confidence approved trader scheme.** There are now 460 members of which 26 are in the Elmbridge borough. There was a significant membership increase during the year.
- 3.3 **Support With Confidence.** Launched during 2010 it provides a list of care and support services who have undergone appropriate training and background checks and enables residents to select care using funding under the new national regime of Self Directed Support.
- 3.4 **No Cold Calling Zones.** A 'No Cold Calling Zone' is a defined area, often linked to Neighbourhood Watch, in which residents have stated they do not wish to receive unsolicited visits to their homes from businesses. The zones are set up by Surrey Trading Standards working with the local Police and the local Borough or District Councils. The main aim of the zones is to reduce the number of unwanted and uninvited callers to households soliciting services or selling goods, which in turn reduces the number of offences committed against Surrey residents. The zones also serve to educate householders and empower them to say "no" to cold callers. There are three zones in Elmbridge covering areas of Claygate, Cobham and Hersham.
- 3.5 **Super Stickers.** This new initiative (launched 17th October) takes no cold calling zones one stage further by providing "do not call" stickers to individual households, rather than just those in a zone. Legislation makes it an offence for a trader not to leave such a house or to return to it.
- 3.6 **Rapid response to doorstep crime.** We operate a "Rapid Action Team" who can attend resident's homes if they feel they are being ripped off by someone who has been to their home. The officers will intervene, dealing with the traders or conmen to ensure the resident is being treated fairly, and give them support and advice. One big case involved Mark Cooper, a predatory cold calling rogue based in Surrey who would undoubtedly have targeted Elmbridge residents. He eventually pleaded guilty at Guildford Crown Court to 18 counts of conning £143,000 from elderly victims and was sentenced to prison for 5 years 3 months, the longest sentence ever imposed for a Surrey Trading Standards case. A Proceeds of Crime investigation realised £43,200, divided between the five victims on which the case was based. In another recent case, a cold calling trader, Hughie Smith from Chertsey was sentenced to prison for 3 years for offences of fraud, money laundering and threats to kill. Since the 'Rapid Action Team' started operating in 2003, it has passed the £1m mark of direct savings for the residents of Surrey.
- 3.7 **Food Standards.** The "Eat Out Eat Well" initiative was launched during 2009 to encourage restaurants etc to offer healthier choices and healthier cooking practices. Businesses are assessed to bronze, silver or gold standards dependent on their levels of hygiene and menu choice. There are currently 121 members across the county, with 29 in Elmbridge. The problem of fake and sometimes dangerous alcohol continues to be a problem with seizures of whisky, vodka and wine from retailers around the county.
- 3.8 **New Issues** - Rogue traders are constantly finding new ways to persuade people to part with their hard earned money. The latest problem is with telephone cold calling selling intruder, fire and personal alarm systems,

targeted at the over 60s. The telephone sales tactic is to claim, falsely, that the company is working with Surrey Police. Residents who agree to a home visit are subject to high pressure selling tactics and can be persuaded that they are getting a free alarm system, but the true costs can add up to £10,000 over 5 years for a monitoring service. Similar practices in the past have had the companies behind them pocketing the cash before going into liquidation and providing no ongoing promised service

- 3.9 **The Olympics** is already generating opportunities for new cons such as online ticket sales from unauthorised suppliers where large sums are charged for non-existent tickets.

Public Value Review of the service

- 3.10 The service has been subject to a Public Value Review. The service is being reshaped with a new structure and significantly reduced management posts. Two important areas for development are local relationships and the potential for Shared Services.

- 3.11 **Local links.** One important feature of our new structure will be a specific lead officer for each District and Borough with a remit to build links and relationships to better understand and respond to local needs.

- 3.12 **Shared Services.** The service is continuing to explore opportunities to share services to improve the service on offer to customers and to reduce costs. One particular approach is a partnership with Mole Valley Environmental Health service. A range of service improvements are underway including creating a new joint licensing service covering both Trading Standards and Environmental Health Licensing services. There are clear opportunities to develop this approach further.

4 CONSULTATION

- 4.1 There have been no consultations in relation to Elmbridge Borough.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Trading Standards is a relatively small service, serving all 11 Districts and Boroughs within Surrey from its Reigate office with 54.8 full time equivalents and a budget for 2011/2012 of £2.47M. Efficiency savings have seen the overall cost fall significantly in recent years, and further significant savings will flow from the current Public Value Review and the service restructure.

6 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 We enforce legislation to minimise packaging and ensure the appropriate labelling of energy efficiency information on a range of products. We are currently involved in a project to assess excessive food packaging and a project to assess compliance with performance statistics of new cars which enable buyers to make a better/more informed/greener choice. We are also involved in a two year project assessing the accuracy of weighbridges used at waste disposal sites, critical to ensure that Councils are not being over charged. Year one tests revealed them to be generally in a very poor condition with a high level of inaccuracy. Year two tests will demonstrate whether or not the contracted weighbridge maintenance firm now has them under better control.

7 CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The main areas that impact on community safety are age restricted sales and tackling doorstep crime and deception. We protect local residents in a range of ways and help reduce the fear of crime.

8 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Equalities impact assessments have been carried out in relation to key areas of the Service that are customer facing. Advice and education about doorstep crime is provided to vulnerable groups and, although we cannot continue to provide talks to local groups and associations, we do provide talks for professional groups who can cascade our community safety messages to members of the public.

8.2 We have a Vulnerable Persons Officer, created from within existing resources, to specifically address the needs of those demographic groups who tend to be targeted by doorstep criminals and we have referral protocols with Adult Services and the Fire and Rescue Service.

9 CONCLUSION

9.1 The service provides a wide range of services for residents and businesses, protecting local people from local, regional and national threats. We work closely with partners in Surrey and outside. We use intelligence from a huge range of sources to ensure that our actions and interventions are focused on those issues which will have the most impact. We need to improve our understanding of and response to local needs and we welcome any feedback to help us in that.

10 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 The Committee is recommended to note the report. Members views on how the service can better understand and respond to local needs are especially welcome as are suggestions on how the service can improve communication with Members in the future.

11 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 Not applicable.

12 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

12.1 The new service structure was launched on 1st November. Members views on how the service can better understand and respond to local needs are welcomed and also suggestions on how the service can improve communication with Members in the future.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS: None