



**OFFICER REPORT TO LOCAL COMMITTEE
(GUILDFORD)**

**REPORT ON SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL
TRADING STANDARDS SERVICE**

7TH DECEMBER 2011

KEY ISSUE

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

SUMMARY

The vision of Surrey Trading Standards Service is “Confident Consumers – Trusted Traders”. We have a wide range of functions in 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

The Local Committee is asked to note

- i. the activities of the Trading Standards Service and to provide 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, from anti social behaviour, doorstep deception, scams and other illegal practices
- 1.4 The Olympics and Paralympics will impact heavily on our workload, our prime involvement being to protect the Olympic brand through trade mark enforcement, dealing with rogue traders and protecting consumers, tourists and reputable traders. We are currently examining how best to meet those obligations, developing policies and protocols.

In the new structure there are two front line delivery teams:

1. Investigations and Enforcement

This team deals with a wide range of Trading Standards criminal and civil investigations. Intelligence driven, it includes referrals from Consumer Direct, analysis from the tasking and co-ordinating process, and other sources. There are sub-teams:

- a. Community Protection.** Particular focus on doorstep crime interventions and protecting and supporting vulnerable residents in dealing with rogue traders and other consumer issues. Includes Vulnerable Persons Officer responsibility and consumer advice and support for vulnerable residents. Also includes preventative approaches to tackle doorstep crime and protect vulnerable residents.
- b. Investigations East and West.** Intelligence led criminal and civil investigations and interventions, including referrals from Consumer Direct, and from our Tasking and Co-ordinating Group.

2. Business Advice and Compliance This team is responsible for business advice, business inspection, business partnership schemes and licensing. It also has the overall lead for Better Regulation and ensuring that the service maximises our role in supporting economic growth and improving public health. There are sub-teams:

- a. Business Advice.** Delivers 'Primary Authority Partnerships', 'Home Authority' advice, and business advice, including chargeable business advice.
- b. Partnership and Licensing.** Responsible for delivering and expanding the trader approval schemes called 'Buy with Confidence', 'Support with Confidence' and 'Eat Out Eat Well'. Also responsible for Trading Standards licensing functions.
- c. Business Inspection and Compliance East and West.** Deals with all pro-active business inspection and product sampling activities. Includes food

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standards, metrology, fair trading, product safety, credit, environment, underage sales and animal health.

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 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 in the last five years.
- 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 Surrey County Council on both national and local TV/radio and in the press. For example, Steve Playle, our Investigations and Enforcement Manager appeared on ITVs current affairs programme "Tonight" in September 2011 talking about doorstep crime relating to energy sales.
- 2.7 No Cold Calling Zones continue to be an important area of our work. Surrey officers had great success in 2010 when, at a meeting with the "Big 6" energy companies, they committed to respecting the wishes of residents who say no to cold callers. 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 6', Scottish and Southern Energy, for misleading consumers when switching supplier.
- 2.8 89% of Surrey residents say that they feel safer in 'No Cold Calling Zones'.
- 2.9 Business membership of 'Buy With Confidence' continues to make the scheme self financing and feedback from traders is very positive.

3 LOCAL INITIATIVES

- 3.1 **Underage sales.** Since April 2011 we have attempted 127 test purchases of alcohol and cigarettes with volunteer young people, with sales made on 10 occasions, 3 in Guildford Borough. Sellers were issued with £80 fixed penalty notices and business owners given detailed advice about precautions to prevent further illegal sales. Licensees in Guildford are generally good on compliance. Of 12 attempted purchases of cigarettes from vending machines 3 sales were made, none in

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Guildford. Steve Playle currently chairs the Surrey Tobacco Alliance, a multi agency group striving to reduce smoking prevalence rates.

- 3.2 **Buy With Confidence approved trader scheme.** There are now 460 members of which 61 are in the Guildford 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 Service 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. In Guildford the zones encompass in excess of 220 roads and 8500 households.
- 3.5 **'Super Stickers'.** This new initiative takes no cold calling zones one stage further by providing "do not call" stickers to individual households, rather than just those within a zone. Legislation makes it an offence for a trader not to leave such a house or to return to it where the sticker is displayed.
- 3.6 **Rapid response to doorstep crime.** By changing policies, procedures and working practices and by building improved links with partners, particularly Surrey Police, we are now able to respond immediately to incidents of doorstep deception much more effectively. We operate a "Rapid Action Team" whereby officers can attend a Surrey resident's home if they feel they are being ripped off by someone who is working at 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 Guildford 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 Act investigation realised £43,200, divided between the five victims on which the case was based. In another recent case, a cold calling trader called Hughie Smith, who lives in 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.

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There are currently 121 across the county, with 17 in Guildford, including 5 schools.

4 CONSULTATION

4.1 There have been no consultations in relation to Guildford 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 full time equivalents and a budget for 2011/2012 of £2.47m. Efficiency savings have seen the overall cost fall significantly in recent years. 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 to 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 information sharing protocols with Adult Services, Surrey Police and Surrey Fire and Rescue Service.

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9 CONCLUSION

9.1 The Trading Standards Service provides a wide range of services for residents and businesses, protecting local people from local, regional and national threats. We use intelligence from a huge range of sources to ensure that our actions and interventions are focused on those issues on which we 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 1 November 2011.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS: None

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