



OFFICER REPORT TO LOCAL COMMITTEE (REIGATE AND BANSTEAD)

SURREY TRADING STANDARDS SERVICE UPDATE

3RD DECEMBER 2007

KEY ISSUE

To provide the Local Committee with updates on specific Trading Standards Service activities.

SUMMARY

The Buy With Confidence trader approval scheme was introduced in order to support other initiatives within Trading Standards. The scheme provides a list of traders who have been assessed and approved by the service, the list can be found at www.buywithconfidence.gov.uk or by calling 01372 371666. The membership has been growing since 2004 and this year a membership fee was introduced.

The House of Horrors is an initiative organised by Trading Standards whereby a house is rented for a period of time and certain controls faults introduced. Traders from a variety of sectors are then asked to diagnose and repair the faults in a normal transactional environment. The activities are recorded by concealed cameras and the findings reported. Various outcomes are possible in the form of press releases or formal action. The project planned for 2007-8 has been cancelled.

No Cold Calling Zones are developed in partnership with the Police and work towards a goal of helping consumers feel safe. One of the main areas of responsibility for the Services Community Safety Team is tackling the problem of doorstep crime, (often also linked to distraction burglary) particularly the Cold Calling activities of home maintenance traders.

The department has been successfully operating a Rapid Action Team since the summer of 2003. Officers are available each weekday to intervene when consumers get into difficulties with cold calling traders. Interventions are usually very successful and the householder is helped out of potentially difficult situations. Large sums of money have been saved where these rogues have targeted vulnerable consumers.

Surrey Trading Standards felt that to maintain the essential work of the Rapid Action Team it should look at ways of giving uninvited callers a clear message that they were not welcome, so a No Cold Calling Project was proposed. The initial No Cold Calling project commenced in areas of Guildford in September 2005.

It is estimated that another £3,000 would be needed in 2008 to continue the work and positively make an impact on setting up new NCC areas in Reigate & Banstead. .

OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS

The Local Committee (Reigate and Banstead) is asked to agree that:

- (i) They continue to support the development of the Buy With Confidence Trader Approval Scheme by Surrey Trading Standards Service.
- (ii) The No Cold Calling Zones initiative is continued and expanded through Reigate & Banstead as interest and resources allow.
- (iii) Where possible Trickster should be used in promoting new No Cold Calling areas and sending out the message effectively.
- (iv) The Community Safety Team continues to be represented at relevant community safety meetings / groups throughout Reigate & Banstead with the view to advising, encouraging and assist in setting up No Cold Calling areas.

1 INTRODUCTION

Buy with Confidence

- 1.1 The service does a lot of work educating the elderly and vulnerable in relation to doorstep callers, disrupting activities of rogue traders and highlighting formal action taken against individuals or companies. This scheme gives the service the ability to provide an alternative “safer route” to support Surrey consumers in making a purchasing decision.
- 1.2 A membership fee for the scheme was introduced in April 2007 with an ultimate aim over the coming years, of reaching membership levels which can both support such a large geographical area of consumers and be self financing as an enterprise.
- 1.3 The scheme itself with the same terms and logo is also being launched in Trading Standards services across the South East of England. This year it was launched in the West Isles, Nottingham and Nottingham City and the London Boroughs have now committed to introducing it over the next few years. In this way consumers and traders who live close to or on County boundaries are also supported.
- 1.4 Promotion of the scheme to residents and traders is a key issue, which we intended to tackle this year but which has been hampered by pressures on the communications team and the Foot and Mouth outbreaks handled by the service.

House of Horrors

- 1.5 The house of horrors projects are resource intensive initiatives spanning up to 6 months. For 2007/08 this has been cancelled due to a lack of resources both financial and appropriately experienced staff following restructure, combined with the impact of the resource requirements of the two foot and mouth outbreaks.

No Cold Calling Zones

- 1.6 The No Cold Calling Campaign is a joint initiative between Surrey Trading Standards, Surrey Police and the Neighbourhood Watch Support Group.
- 1.7 The initial scheme started in Guildford Borough between 2005 and March 2006. In Guildford to date the scheme encompasses 236 Roads covering 9000 households.
- 1.8 In February 2007 the scheme was launched in Horley (the Garden Estate), which includes 22 roads covering approximately 3000 houses. More recently it has been extended to Woking in the Maybury area with approximately 600 homes.

- 1.9 The initiative has been launched through existing Neighbourhood Watch schemes. This can be seen as a success for increasing the pro-activity of Neighbourhood Watch and promotion of community engagement in crime reduction throughout the areas.
- 1.10 The police statistics are encouraging and do suggest a reduction in distraction burglary.
- 1.11 Surrey Trading Standards have seen an increase in the number of reports to Consumer Direct and this also indicates a greater awareness by the public.

2 BUY WITH CONFIDENCE

- 2.1 Surrey Consumers receive a lot of information on scams, problems and where not to go. Over the years consumers have asked Trading Standards for pre-shopping advice and recommendations. Previously the services database did not contain such traders and the legislation enforced prohibited us from revealing negative information to individual enquirers. The service had even received accusations of “tarring” traders “with the same brush”.
- 2.2 This scheme enables us to make recommendations, discuss the member companies, promote good practice and compliance and give more comprehensive support to victims of crime. It helps the local economy, raising the standard of service from members and uses one recognised logo, which is also used regionally.
- 2.3 The scheme currently operates with 0.5 fte administrative support and 1 fte officer across the year, although peaks and troughs in demand mean a flexible approach to staffing is adopted.
- 2.4 We have achieved a membership figure of 274 (16th November 2007). This is slightly below target as we aimed to reach 350 by April 2008. The reasons for this are threefold:
 - (i) The introduction of a membership fee caused some members to resign from the scheme even though they knew this was always intended for April 2007.
 - (ii) The promotion intended for 2007 has not happened, it was delayed due to pressures on the communications team and the Trading Standards Service.
 - (iii) Promotion and staffing availability for processing membership application has been hampered by the two foot and mouth outbreaks, which required a service-wide response.

- 2.5 Within Reigate and Banstead there are currently 43 member companies and we only lost 1 member this year, in this instance the trader had ceased trading as an independent company and become an employee elsewhere.

3 NO COLD CALLING ZONES

- 3.1 The problem of unsolicited doorstep calls by traders preying on the elderly, vulnerable or sometimes gullible householders is difficult to accurately assess.
- 3.2 Research completed by the Home Office Bogus Caller Task Force suggests that only 10% of all offences committed against householders are reported to the police or Trading Standards. It is estimated that countrywide the number of offences committed each year is in the region of 200,000.
- 3.3 From 1st July 2003 to 1st October 2007 Trading Standards received 1398 calls relating to unsolicited doorstep callers. 118 of these calls originated from the Reigate and Banstead area.
- 3.4 The aim of No Cold Calling Zones is to reduce the number of unsolicited traders calling at households to solicit sales, services or goods. The implementation of the “No cold Caller” policy will reduce the number of criminal or civil law offences committed against householders.

4 CONSULTATIONS

Buy With Confidence

- 4.1 No recent consultation has been carried out with stakeholders. Companies are provided with feedback cards for their customers, which are returned to Trading Standards. Customers also have the opportunity to return comments via the website. Feedback remains generally good, with the main concerns relating to them not being able to find a trader in the sector they require yet (such as loft insulation or solar panels).
- 4.2 Member companies were surveyed in July 2006 and all respondents were happy with the scheme with the only marked comments relating to the need for publicity.

No Cold Calling Zones

- 4.3 Before each campaign commences all residents involved are consulted through the Police and Neighbourhood Watch Coordinators.

- 4.4 The last evaluation for the Guildford area was carried out in October 2006:
- 92% felt more confident about sending doorstep sellers away since the NCC signs were put up.
 - 86% felt the 'No Cold Calling' signs could have or had deterred uninvited salespeople.
 - 94% knew whom to contact for advice or assistance.
 - 80% felt safer in their homes since the 'No Cold Calling' signs were put up.
 - 96% felt the 'No Cold Calling' scheme should be expanded to other areas in the County.
- 4.5 The Horley evaluation is currently being undertaken.

5 FINANCIAL AND VALUE FOR MONEY IMPLICATIONS

Buy With Confidence

- 5.1 The Scheme fits within the Trading Standards Services planned budget. Increasing membership numbers combined with membership fees will move the scheme towards a self-funding status.
- 5.2 The scheme does represent good value for money for the Authority and supports Government principles of prevention and working with businesses. It provides further potential in the future for partnerships, cross service working and income generation.

No Cold Calling Zones

- 5.3 To date the expenditure in the Horley area has been around £3,350.
- 5.4 The total cost includes a successful Trickster event held in Reigate to promote the campaign, which approximately 100 people (mainly elderly) attended.
- 5.5 The costs of the project are minimal in relation to the number of people taking part in the scheme and the potential savings based on the cost of crime data far outweigh the initial costs. It should therefore be seen as a good investment for encouraging an increasing greater community involvement and reducing crime.

6 EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 An equality impact assessment has been completed for the Buy With Confidence scheme. Confidence impacts equally on all sections of the community, the list is available and accessible to all, with additional mechanisms in place for the vulnerable. For example all care staff within the authority have been made aware of the scheme and provided with information to help them with their customers. The membership terms apply to business and compliance criteria and do not exclude or treat any business person differently.
- 6.2 All businesses are offered support to help them to meet the criteria where this is possible.
- 6.3 No cold calling zones are available to all residents within the designated zones.

7 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

Buy With Confidence

- 7.1 The Buy With Confidence Scheme supports work conducted in Surrey to prevent doorstep crime and distraction burglaries. It provides our rapid action teams with alternative traders to redirect vulnerable consumers and victims of crime to.
- 7.2 The scheme supports small local businesses in ensuring they are compliant with legislation and promoting good business practices. Anecdotal evidence from Members indicate that some of them have experienced a substantial increase in turnover, good reputation and can see clear business benefits to membership. The scheme also promotes appropriate waste disposal by members and has promoted other topics such as diversity through the quarterly member newsletter.

No Cold Calling Zones

- 7.3 No Cold Calling areas aim:
- To empower the public so they have the confidence to deal with unsolicited callers.
 - To educate the public to deal effectively with unsolicited callers.
 - To reduce the number of criminal offences reported to the police.
 - To reduce the number of complaints made to Surrey Trading Standards.
 - To reduce fear of crime in participating roads.
 - To promote the use of Surrey Trading Standards approved trader's database Buy With Confidence.

8 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 The Buy With Confidence trader Approval Scheme is an integral part of a holistic approach to enforcement by Surrey Trading Standards Service. It balances the enforcement and educational activities undertaken under other initiatives. The scheme continues to grow in popularity with both consumers and businesses in Surrey, although it is recognised that I 2007 promotional activities have been limited by other pressures this year.
- 8.2 It is estimated that another £3,000 would be needed in 2008 to continue the work and positively make an impact on setting up new NCC areas in Reigate & Banstead. .

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9 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

- 9.1 This paper is for information to update members on three separate initiatives. It is intended the Service will continue to develop both No Cold Calling Zones and Buy With Confidence. It is likely both will be included in the 2008-9-business plan for the Trading Standards Service.

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