



## **OFFICER REPORT TO LOCAL COMMITTEE (REIGATE AND BANSTEAD)**

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

**6 DECEMBER 2010**

#### **KEY ISSUE**

The services provided by Trading Standards during 2009/2010 and key activities in Reigate and Banstead.

#### **SUMMARY**

The vision 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.

#### **OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS**

**The Local Committee (Reigate and Banstead) is asked to note the activities of the Trading Standards Service.**

#### **1 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.

1.4 There are four front line service delivery teams:

- a. **Economy and Environment.** Providing advice to all Surrey businesses, from small start-ups to large multinationals, on wide ranging legislation. This team is also responsible for discrete areas such as explosives, poisons and petroleum and also runs the “Buy With Confidence” trader approval scheme. It also leads on “Home Authority” and “Primary Authority” relationships with business.
- b. **Health and Well-being.** Ensures that food meets legal compositional standards and is honestly labelled and advertised. The team also promotes healthy eating and the safety of the human food chain and runs the “Eat Out Eat Well” approval scheme for restaurants. The Animal Health Section enforces legislation regarding animal feeding stuffs composition and labelling, and farm animal health and welfare, its key role being disease prevention and traceability of farm livestock.
- c. **Investigations.** Intelligence led, this team protects residents from illegal trading practices and scams through a wide range of criminal and civil investigations. It is also the lead team for actions to stop trading malpractices using the Enterprise Act and the Consumer and Business Protection Regulations, and also tackles pirated/counterfeit goods.
- d. **Safer and Stronger Communities.** Tackles doorstep crime, cold callers and rogue traders whilst supporting vulnerable victims. The team also works to prevent the illegal sale of age-restricted products such as alcohol and cigarettes. Working closely with the Police and Borough Licensing Officers this involves advice to business, dealing with complaints and conducting test purchase operations. A key activity is the implementation of No Cold Calling Zones to help reduce doorstep crime and distraction burglary.

1.5 We also host the **Regional Fraud Unit** (previously known as Scambusters). This cross boundary unit focuses on those traders who often take steps to conceal their identity, who identify vulnerable residents and who trade across local authority boundaries, using deception and high pressure selling to defraud consumers

## 2 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.
- 2.2 Sales of alcohol to young people have been driven down from 35% to 12% 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 is beginning to reap rewards in seizing criminal assets under Proceeds of Crime legislation.
- 2.5 The appointment of a dedicated Intelligence Officer also reaps rewards as we now 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. On 19 and 20 July 2010, the Service was featured prominently on BBC television to highlight the success of the 'Rapid Action Team' and warn viewers of the dangers of dealing with cold callers. Officers have also appeared on BBC 'The One Show' in respect of our work on cold calling traders.
- 2.7 A major success was achieved in relation to No Cold Calling Zones when, at a meeting with OFGEM attended by team manager Steve Playle, all of the "Big 6" energy companies 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. Steve Playle subsequently appeared on The One Show.
- 2.8 Some 89% of residents say that they feel safer in No Cold Calling Zones.
- 2.9 Some targets were not achieved or we stopped carrying them out during 2009/2010:
  - a. We did not reach our challenging target of 450 Buy With Confidence members but still managed a significant increase to 380 despite an extremely difficult economic climate.
  - b. We cut back and then, in April 2010, stopped giving consumer advice. Consumer Direct continues to provide this service.
  - c. We cut back the availability of the business advice line to 3 days per week from 5.

### **3 LOCAL INITIATIVES**

- 3.1 **Underage sales.** In Reigate and Banstead during 2009/2010 we made 65 test purchase attempts for age restricted products using volunteers.

There were 58 made for alcohol resulting in 4 failures and 7 for fireworks resulting in no sales. Since 1 April 2010, there have been 11 attempted purchases of cigarettes resulting in no sales plus a further 11 test purchases made for alcohol with just one sale which shows that licensees in Reigate and Banstead are generally good on compliance. In the case of the alcohol sales, the sellers were issued with £80 fixed penalty notices and business owners were given detailed advice about the steps that should be taken to prevent illegal sales taking place. In relation to tobacco sales, there has been little intelligence so low levels of test-purchasing activity but Head Teachers were contacted with a request that information be passed to Trading Standards. Trading Standards Team Manager Steve Playle also 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 over 435 members of which 55 are in Reigate and Banstead. There was a significant membership increase during the year with membership fees meaning that it will soon be self-financing. Our 2010/2011 target is 460 members.
- 3.3 No Cold Calling Zones.** A 'No Cold Calling Zone' is a defined area, often linked to Neighbour 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 two no cold calling zones in Reigate and Banstead (Hooley and Horley).
- 3.4 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' 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 to ensure the householder is being treated fairly, and give them support and advice. One big case involving a Surrey based trader called Mark Cooper went to trial in September and residents of Reigate and Banstead would undoubtedly have been targeted by him. He eventually pleaded guilty to 18 counts at Guildford Crown Court and was sentenced to prison for 5 years 3 months, the longest sentence ever imposed for a Surrey Trading Standards case. 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 recently passed the £1m mark of direct savings for the residents of Surrey.

- 3.5 Food Standards.** The 'Eat Out Eat Well' initiative was launched during 2009 to encourage restaurants 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. So far there are 80 members across Surrey with 8 in Reigate and Banstead. Our 2010/2011 target across Surrey is 100 members. During routine inspections of food premises, officers have encountered many examples of counterfeit champagne and spirits. In recognition of this work, the Service was presented with a special award by the International Federation of Spirit Producers at this year's Trading Standards Institute conference in Edinburgh and received training vouchers as a prize.

#### **4 CONSULTATION**

There have been no consultations in relation to Reigate and Banstead.

#### **5 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Trading Standards is a relatively small service, serving all 11 Districts and Boroughs within Surrey from its Leatherhead office with 60.5 full time equivalents and a budget for 2010/2011 of £2.5m. Efficiency savings have seen the overall cost fall significantly in recent years. The Service relocates to the East Surrey Area Office, Reigate on the 13 December 2010 as part of ongoing cost reduction exercises.

#### **6 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS**

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.

#### **7 CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

The main areas that impact on community safety are age restricted sales and tackling doorstep crime and deception. We work very closely with Surrey Police and other agencies and contribute to NI21 actions to tackle anti social behaviour. In particular, Trading Standards contributed enormously to the 'Quake' series of operations organised by Surrey Police, particularly during the last Halloween and Christmas periods.

#### **8 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

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.

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 and the Fire and Rescue Service.

**9 CONCLUSION**

We shall strive to provide excellent value for money and to outperform every other county council. We shall use intelligence to deliver the right service to the right people locally at the right time and to enable a safer Surrey through protection, prevention and intervention.

**10 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Committee is recommended to note the report.

**11 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

Not applicable.

**12 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT**

Not applicable.

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**BACKGROUND** None

**PAPERS:**