



OFFICER REPORT TO LOCAL COMMITTEE (REIGATE AND BANSTEAD)

REPORT ON SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL TRADING STANDARDS SERVICE 5 DECEMBER 2011

KEY ISSUE

The services provided by Trading Standards during 2011 and key activities in the Reigate and Banstead 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 been approved by Cabinet and we are now implementing all recommendations including restructuring of the service (effective from November 2011) and making savings of approximately £0.5million.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS

The Local Committee:

The Local Committee is asked to note 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.

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, 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' (PAPs), 'Home Authority' advice, and business advice, including chargeable business advice.
- b. **Partnership and Licensing.** Responsible for delivering and expanding the trader approval schemes namely '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 standards, metrology, fair trading, product safety, credit, environment, underage sales and animal health.

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. 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. Two notable cases bringing confiscation orders of £44,0000 and £61,000 (some monies outstanding).
- 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. Our officers also ‘starred’ in two episodes of the BBC programme ‘Dirty Tricks of the Tradesmen’, highlighting some excellent work tackling rouge traders.
- 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 over 125 test purchases of alcohol and cigarettes with volunteer young people, 16 of which were in the Reigate and Banstead Borough. There were 3 sales –all for alcohol. Two traders were issued with £80 fixed penalty notices and the other may lead to a prosecution. 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 450 members of which 59 are in the Reigate and Banstead 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 (including financial advisors, solicitors, disabled adaptations, plumbers and cleaning companies), 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. There are a total of 34 members, 5 within Reigate and Banstead.
- 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 Reigate and Banstead the zones in Hooley and Horley encompass 33 roads and over 1400 households.
- 3.5 **‘Super Stickers’.** This new initiative (started October 2011) 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. Over 3000 stickers have been distributed throughout the Borough at libraries, police stations, help shops and the town hall. This is a County-wide

initiative which we are asking residents to register their sticker with us – to date over 300 residents have signed up.

- 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. It is worthy of note that we are aware of a couple of ‘rogue families’ working their cons on the vulnerable in the area and we are working with Surrey Police to bring a stop to their practices. Since 1st April 2011 we have received 29 incidents of doorstep crime in Reigate and Banstead Borough. Cold Calling by telephone is of an increase throughout the County, particularly aimed at the elderly and specialising in the selling of alarm systems, insulation, solar panels and drain clearing equipment (often with the ‘victim’ being told that the company is working with Surrey Police and/or the council or is a neighbour with adjoining drains).
- 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 across the county, with 10 in Reigate and Banstead. 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.

4 CONSULTATION

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

Annual savings of £257,000 were identified in the Public Value Review. When these are combined with earlier cost reductions of £268,000, it means trading standards will be making savings of £525,000 each year.

This will involve generating more income as well as looking at ways to work more closely with other organisations, such as borough and district councils through, for example, sharing managers or combining licensing operations.

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.

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.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS: None

Report written: 22 November 2011

