



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

**Surrey County Council
Trading Standards Service**

1 November 2010

KEY ISSUE

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

SUMMARY

The vision of Surrey Trading Standards Service is “Confident Consumers – Trusted Traders”. The Service has wide ranging functions to protect residents, support reputable businesses, tackle rogue traders and contribute to the reduction of crime and disorder in Surrey. This report describes the key activities of Surrey Trading Standards Service over the last year and highlights initiatives in the Runnymede area.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS

The Local Committee is asked to note the activities of the Trading Standards Service.

This report is for information only.

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Trading Standards 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 but particularly the most vulnerable. By enforcing consumer protection legislation, we allow reputable businesses to thrive and seek to marginalise those that act illegally.
- 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 the problem of counterfeit goods.
 - d. **Safer and Stronger Communities.** Tackles doorstep crime, cold callers and rogue traders whilst supporting vulnerable victims. There is a ‘Rapid Action Team’ to intervene in live doorstep crime situations and close working with Surrey Police. A key activity is the implementation of No Cold Calling Zones to help reduce doorstep crime and distraction burglary. 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.
- 1.5 We also host the **Regional Fraud Unit** (previously known as Scambusters). This cross boundary unit focuses on those traders carrying out cross border crime who use 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 fair trading work alone saves local residents £6.6 million per year.
- 2.2 Sales of alcohol to young people during test purchasing operations 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 The appointment of an Accredited Financial Investigator in 2009 is beginning to make a real impact in restraining and then seizing criminal assets under Proceeds of Crime legislation.
- 2.5 The appointment of a dedicated Intelligence Officer two years ago means that 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 the team to identify priority issues and allocate resources accordingly.
- 2.6 Trading Standards continues 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 energy industry representatives and regulators initiated by Surrey Trading Standards Officers, 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.
- 2.8 Some 89% of residents say that they feel safer in No Cold Calling Zones.
- 2.9 Surrey Trading Standards has joined forces with a national project to tackle loan sharks in the County. The initiative was launched in February 2010 and intelligence on the sharks is being developed.
- 2.10 We did not manage to reach our challenging target of 450 'Buy With Confidence' members but still managed a significant increase to 380 despite an extremely difficult economic climate.
- 2.11 Due to pressures on the Trading Standards budget, the service was cut back and then, in April 2010, stopped giving consumer advice. Consumer Direct continues to provide first tier advice to consumers. We have also had to cut back on the availability of the business advice line to 3 days per week from 5.

3 LOCAL INITIATIVES

- 3.1 **Underage sales.** In Runnymede during 2009/2010, 26 test purchase attempts for age restricted products were made using volunteers. There were 21 made for alcohol resulting in 2 failures and 5 made for cigarettes resulting in no failures. Since 1 April 2010, there have been a further 21 test purchases made for alcohol with just one sale, which shows that licensees in Runnymede are very 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.** At present, there are now 430 members of which 34 are in Runnymede. There was a significant membership increase during the year and the collection of membership fees means that we are moving towards making this initiative self-financing. Our 2010/2011 target is 460 traders.
- 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 and around 10% of Surrey households are currently covered. There are not any 'No Cold Calling Zones' in Runnymede but there is a new initiative being developed to make the zones more widespread.
- 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 Surrey Heath 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 five in Runnymede. 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

- 4.1 There have been no consultations in relation to Runnymede.

5 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 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.

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 informed and 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

- 7.1 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

- 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.

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

- 9.1 We strive to provide excellent value for money and to maintain a fair trading environment in Surrey. We shall use intelligence to deliver the right service to the right people locally at the right time and contribute to making Surrey safer through protection, prevention and intervention.

10 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 The Committee is asked to note the report.

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