

Item 9

Annual report on Trading Standards

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL'S LOCAL COMMITTEE (SURREY HEATH)

26th July 2007

KEY ISSUE:

The service provided by Trading Standards in Surrey Heath during 2006/07 and the challenges and issues faced in 2007/08.

SUMMARY:

Trading Standards works towards the goal of helping consumers feel safe, confident and empowered when buying goods and services. At the same time Trading Standards works to support and educate reputable businesses and tackle rogue trading practices. The service faces a range of new challenges from government whilst continuing to ensure our work meets the priorities of the County Council.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Surrey Heath Local Committee notes the initiatives being taken by the Trading Standards Service.

Contact Details

Accountable Officer: Peter Denard
County Trading Standards Officer
01372 371 710

Responsible Officer: Lucy Corrie
Enterprise Manager
01372 371 763

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Trading Standards Service is concerned with Consumer Protection and Business Regulation. It seeks to create 'Confident Consumers, Trusted Traders' (Trading Standards Vision Statement). We seek to tackle rogue traders and contribute to the reduction of crime and disorder in Surrey. Trading Standards is a relatively small service, serving all 11 Districts and Boroughs within Surrey.

PERFORMANCE SUMMARY FOR 2006/7

1. During the year to date the service received the following external recognition and awards:
 - Finalist for the Team Award – Surrey County Council Awards for Achievement
 - Finalist at the Municipal Journal Awards for Public Protection for our holistic approach in protecting local people from doorstep crime and rogue traders.
 - Daily Mirror "Hero of the Year" award, for effectively tackling rogue traders

Other highlights during the year include:

Scambusters - securing funding from DTI (now DBERR) for multi regional approach to tackling scams. This scheme is only viable if delivered through an innovative multi authority partnership (61 local authorities involved). This is by far the largest of three pilots underway nationally and we expect a national roll out later in the year based upon the excellent practice developed within the pilots. This pilot, operational since September 2006, has already saved over £800,000 for consumers and has received praise from the Consumer Affairs Minister.

Buy with Confidence approved trader scheme. Created to meet a need and in response to customer demand. Now over 275 business members and extremely popular with the public. This valuable new service is now charging for membership and as a result is moving towards being self financing. A full list of members is available from www.buywithconfidence.info and is searchable by postcode.

Rapid Response to doorstep crime - by changing policies and procedures and working practices, and in building improved links with partners we are now able to respond immediately to incidents of doorstep deception much more effectively. In this way during 2006/7 we were able to respond to 100 incidents (47 of which were physical doorstep interventions) saving Surrey residents at least £190,000. Our holistic approach to tackling doorstep crime has been recognised by being shortlisted for the 2007 Municipal Journal award in Public Protection. It also led to the service being awarded Hero of the Year for 2006 by the Daily Mirror.

No Cold Calling Zones (NCCZ's)- in partnership with Surrey Police - Zones now operational in Guildford and Horley with one about to be launched in Woking. Excellent feedback from local residents. Police stats showing very significant reductions in distraction burglary. Residents surveys demonstrate strong support and a reduction in the fear of crime. We are keen to develop further NCCZ's in areas with specific evidence of problems and where there is strong local Police support.

Surrey Together - by working more closely with the Police as part of new innovative multi agency teams we have been able to improve the targeting of premises and the numbers of test purchases we are able to carry out. This has resulted in a big increase in enforcement actions (including using fixed penalties for the first time). The outcomes have been very positive with a significant reduction in the level of illegal sales - in the first year it was over 35% and in the second it was 17.7%. The figure for Surrey Heath is slightly higher – currently 20% of targeted premises.

Innovative use of the media to get our message across. Our previous high profile work such as House of Horrors has led to massive amounts of media coverage - estimated as worth over £5M in positive publicity for the local authority. It is also an incredibly cost effective means of getting an education and prevention message across - the media effectively footing the bill for it. The most recent example of how effective we are in this field is the recent BBC 3 series **Scamsquad** which focused on the work of Trading Standards officers from Surrey and Kent. Huge amounts of publicity and a powerful positive consumer message though effective engagement with the media and at zero cost to the local authority.

All of the above have the additional benefit of contributing to corporate priorities in relation to protecting elderly / vulnerable people and as a result enhancing their ability to remain in their own homes within the community.

Examples of activity within Surrey Heath:

One current investigation of a Camberley business has resulted in the seizure of over 6,000 counterfeit items valued at over £57,000. The case will come before the Magistrates later this month.

In another case a Camberley retailer is due in court very shortly relating to the supply of several well known brands of cigarettes which were counterfeit. Almost 1,000 counterfeit packs were seized and on testing they were also found to have extremely high levels of lead and cadmium content – hence much more prejudicial to health than the genuine products.

As part of our education programme for elderly or vulnerable people we plan to run a doorstep crime musical “Trickster” in Surrey Heath on the 7th or 8th November. The musical format has proved extremely effective in engaging people and raising awareness of potential problems and how to avoid them in way which empowers rather than frightens those most at risk.

We currently have 22 Surrey Heath businesses who are members of the Buy With Confidence scheme with a 8 further applications being processed.

**ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY
CHALLENGES & ISSUES FOR 2007/08**

The service faces a wide range of challenges. The Unfair Commercial Practices directive is currently being transposed to UK legislation and this will have a dramatic impact on the work of the service widening the scope of trading practices which can be challenged by the service. This is likely to have significant resource implications which are currently unfunded.

Since April 2006 the service has a new duty to enforce intellectual property and copyright legislation – a significant increased burden and demand on the service. This year we have received additional funding from Government in recognition of this extra pressure. In future years however this additional funding will be in the RSG and as Surrey is a “floor” authority the result is that in practice no additional funding will be available.

Animal Health is a key role for the service and this year we are in the process of updating our contingency plans for handling any outbreak of animal disease including Avian Influenza and Foot and Mouth.

The Governments agenda for regulatory reform continues to have an impact with the creation of the Local Better Regulation Office which will develop a new performance framework for the service.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Overall cost of the service has fallen significantly in recent years after savings made in both the Policy and Productivity Review and the Business Delivery Review. The later led to the loss of 9 posts within the service (about 12%).

The new pressures on the service in the current financial climate have led to the service initiating a further review. During the review we will be consulting stakeholders on a range of options for the future delivery of the service.

CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

The main areas of service activity which impact on Community Safety include Under Age Sales and in tackling doorstep crime and deception – both issues discussed above.

EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

Equalities impact assessments have been carried out in relation to key areas of the Service that are customer facing. This year Trading Standards are committed to increasing access to our services by hard to reach groups and providing advice and education to businesses where English is not the first language.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS

The service enforces legislation to minimise packaging and ensures the appropriate labelling of energy efficiency information on a range of products.

CONSULTATION

None

LEAD/CONTACT OFFICER: Lucy Corrie

TELEPHONE NUMBER: 01372 371 763

BACKGROUND PAPERS: None

Number of Annexes: 1. Trading Standards Activities extract