



LOCAL COMMITTEE (Surrey Heath)

Report on Surrey County Council Trading Standards Service

15 October 2009

KEY ISSUE

The service provided by Surrey Trading Standards during 2008/09 and key activities relating to Surrey Heath.

SUMMARY

Surrey Trading Standards Service 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. This report describes the key activities of Trading Standards over the last year and highlights initiatives in the Surrey Heath area.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS

The Local Committee is asked to note the activities being undertaken by the Trading Standards Service.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 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.

1.2 Trading Standards is a relatively small service, serving all 11 Districts and Boroughs within Surrey from its office in Leatherhead.

1.3 There are four front line service delivery teams:

Investigations – wide range of investigations under criminal and civil legislation using intelligence from approximately 2,400 referrals from Consumer Direct every month.

Safer and Stronger Communities – tackles doorstep crime, rogue traders and supports vulnerable victims. Works to prevent the illegal sale of age-restricted products to young people, including alcohol and tobacco.

Health and Well Being – ensures that food meets legal compositional standards and is honestly labelled and advertised. Works to facilitate and promote healthy eating

choices. Works to ensure animal health and welfare and prevent animal disease outbreaks.

Economy and Environment – supports Surrey businesses providing information and advice to help them meet their legal responsibilities. This Team also runs the 'Buy with Confidence' approved trader scheme.

1.4 The following are the top 3 issues for the service:

- Doorstep crime - we need to work even harder to protect residents, especially the most vulnerable, enhancing prevention and also bringing more criminals to justice.
- Age restricted products – drive down illegal sales to young people, thereby contributing to a reduction in anti-social behaviour in communities and reducing the damaging health implications for young people.
- Protecting residents and businesses from the impact of the recession and the increase in unfair and deceptive practices, and scams, which develop rapidly during such times.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1 PERFORMANCE SUMMARY FOR 2008/09

- Achieved savings of 5% following a restructuring of the service while at the same time undertaking additional duties.
- Created capacity to carry out more Financial Investigations, recruiting an experienced Accredited Financial Investigator to maximise the impact of Proceeds of Crime legislation in seizing criminal assets to ensure that crime does not pay.
- Recruited a full time Intelligence Officer to assist in the targeting of resources.
- Continued the downward trend of illegal alcohol sales to under 18s to 13% of test purchase attempts from 16% and 18% in the previous two years.
- Played a key role to secure additional £2m in Government funding over 3 years to continue an innovative *Scambusters* project covering 61 local authorities across the East of England, the South East, and London.
- Continued focus on protecting elderly and vulnerable residents from doorstep rogue traders producing over £165,000 in direct savings for vulnerable residents.
- Increased the coverage of homes protected by 'No Cold Calling Zones' from 3% to 5.6% of households, and received extremely positive feedback from residents in these zones
- Increased the number of approved traders in the 'Buy With Confidence' scheme to over 300 businesses.
- Assisted local businesses on 7000 occasions through inspections and providing advice and information. Among businesses, our satisfaction rating is 79%.
- Received approximately 29,000 notifications and referrals of consumer complaints from the regional Consumer Direct call centre. Among consumers, our satisfaction rating is 83%.

2.2 New responsibilities for the service relate to:

- The Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 present new challenges and opportunities in our ongoing battle against rogue traders. This legislation repeals the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 and pulls together lots of other legislation into one set of regulations.
- Intellectual Property Crime – new duties to deal with copyright infringements

- Food Hygiene and Primary producers and Feed Hygiene Regulations
- Energy Performance Certificates.
- Consumer Credit, Proceeds of Crime and Money Laundering legislation.

2.3 LOCAL INITIATIVES

2.3.1 Buy with Confidence approved trader scheme

This was created to meet a need and in response to customer demand. There are over 300 businesses of which 21 are in Surrey Heath. This valuable service is now charging businesses for membership and as a result is moving towards being self-financing. A full list of members is available from www.buywithconfidence.gov.uk and is searchable by postcode.

A 'Buy With Confidence' display has been present in Camberley library and in Camberley Town Centre during the summer.

2.3.2 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. In April 2008, the prosecution of a cold calling trader called Billy Wood was completed after offences were committed in Chobham related to some property repairs. The trader was fined £1000 and had to pay compensation to the victim of £940. In May 2009, the prosecution of a trader called Jimmy Lee was completed after offences were committed in Camberley relating to unnecessary maintenance work. The trader was fined a total of £3250 and had to pay compensation of £550 to the victim.

2.3.3 No Cold Calling Zones (NCCZs)

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 currently no 'No Cold Calling Zones' in Surrey Heath. Information about the zones and how they operate can be found on the Surrey County Council website www.surreycc.gov.uk/tradingstandards.

2.3.4 Underage Sales

We attempt to reduce the illegal sale of age-restricted products such as alcohol and tobacco. This is achieved through sharing intelligence with partners, educating traders and engaging in controlled test purchases using volunteer young people. In Surrey Heath since April 2008, we have attempted to make 65 test purchases of alcohol and on 11 occasions sales were made to young people. There were three attempts made to purchase cigarettes resulting in no sales. We work closely with the local Licensing Officer and with the Police. Trading Standards also play an active role in the Surrey Tobacco Alliance with Steve Playle, one of the Trading Standards Team Leaders, being the Chair of this multi agency group which strives to reduce smoking prevalence rates.

2.3.5 Food Standards

We have recently launched the 'Eat Out Eat Well' initiative. This is an initiative to encourage restaurants and other premises selling food to offer healthier choices. Businesses that want to sign up to the scheme will be assessed by Surrey's Trading Standards team and be accredited with a bronze, silver or gold award depending on their levels of hygiene and menu choice. The first 'Eat Out Eat Well' achiever in Surrey Heath is actually HMP Coldingley so perhaps, in this case, it should be called 'Eat In Eat Well'. Visits to food premises have been uneventful and in fact Surrey Heath has the least number of high risk tagged premises in the county. There was just one unusual issue identified when a Surrey Heath retailer was found to also be running a banking business on the side. This was referred to the Financial Services Authority who confirmed that FSA regulations were being breached and corrective action was taken.

3. CONSULTATIONS

There have been no consultations in relation to Surrey Heath.

4. FINANCIAL AND VALUE FOR MONEY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The service has 64 full time equivalents (fte) staff and a total budget of £2.59m. The overall cost of the service has fallen significantly in recent years with savings made in the Policy and Productivity Review, Business Delivery Review, and further efficiencies during 2008/9.

5. EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY 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.

The service has created the role of Vulnerable Person's Officer 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 established with Adult Services and Surrey Fire and Rescue Service.

6. CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

The main areas of service activity which impact on community safety include age restricted sales and tackling doorstep crime and deception.

7. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS

The service enforces legislation to minimise packaging and ensures the appropriate labelling of energy efficiency information on a range of products. Working with partners, the service monitors business waste disposal, particularly food and animal waste products.

LEAD OFFICER: Steve Playle
 TELEPHONE NUMBER: 08456 009 009
 E-MAIL: Steve.playle@surreycc.gov.uk
 BACKGROUND PAPERS: None

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