



Annual Report From Surrey Trading Standards

16 July 2004

KEY ISSUE

The service provided by Trading Standards during 2003/04 and a snapshot of our plans for 2004/05.

SUMMARY

We are one of the smaller Services within the Authority but we strive to offer value for money and work as innovatively as possible to give an efficient and effective service. We feel the work we are doing in tackling rogue traders especially 'uninvited workmen' will help to protect consumers, especially the vulnerable. Also our work in cutting down the incidence of age restricted goods being sold to underage teenagers will produce benefits for consumers and businesses in Tandridge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Local Committee:

- (i) help us combat the menace of 'uninvited workmen' preying on the elderly by encouraging other agencies to carry our campaign material.
- (ii) encourage other agencies / individuals to pass any information to us which may prevent the sale of age restricted goods to underage teenagers
- (iii) Members pass any information to the Service that will help achieve both our business plan priorities for 04/05 and enable us to plan our work activity for 06/07 to better reflect the needs of Surrey consumers and businesses.

INTRODUCTION and BACKGROUND

1. Trading standards is a small Service in comparison to others in the authority but we offer a wide range of front line services to the consumers and businesses of Surrey. These activities include the provision of civil advice, maintaining the safety of consumer products, animal health and welfare work and the investigation of criminal matters. In 2003/04 we had notable successes in highlighting the problems with rogue traders and food colourings both locally and nationally. Locally our initiatives have shown we can provide real assistance to consumers saving them in some cases thousands of pounds, for example, our direct intervention ('Doorstep Busters' team) when consumers are pressurised from 'unsolicited tradesmen'.
2. In 2003/4 our Consumer Advice Team dealt with 12421 complaints and enquiries.
3. From the complaints and enquiries received 556 were considered to have a criminal content and were investigated further.
4. In the five months since the launch of our 'Doorstep Busters' team we have received 289 calls for assistance and have challenged the 'uninvited trader' on 51 occasions at the consumer's home.
5. We carried out 5044 visits to businesses to advise them on and enforce consumer legislation.
6. The greatest number of complaints we receive annually concerns rogue traders in the home improvement sector. Once again we carried out a 'House of Horrors' project test purchasing tradesman called to a house to fix particular problems. Once again we found 25% are prepared to 'rip off' the consumer. Ten businesses are being investigated with a view to legal proceedings. We received extensive national coverage in January 2004 when we released video footage we had shot of the activities of some of the individuals who came to the house.
7. Visits over the last three years to Surrey restaurants have found particular problems with colourings in food and in an innovative approach we launched the Surrey Curry Club in March 2004. This launch received extensive national media attention and was shortlisted for the National Trading Standards Institute Brindley Medal award.
8. We dealt with 5,543 service enquiries (Service Requests) mainly from other trading standards departments, asking either for information from or intervention with Surrey based companies
9. Coming out of the complaints received and the visits carried out we
 - Prosecuted 53 companies or individuals
 - Gave 13 Home Office Cautions
 - Gave 113 written warnings

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10. Our key targets from our 2003/04 Business plan were:

- Tackling rogue traders - intervention when vulnerable householders are being pressurised by uninvited doorstep callers
- Reducing the incidence of underage sales
- Providing advice to consumers and businesses
- An immediate response to safety hazards (both food and non-food products).
- Carryout a programme of inspections and product sampling at business premises throughout the county.

ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

2003/04

11. A major area of concern is where elderly people; usually living on their own, are ripped off by unscrupulous traders. They are convinced that work needs to be done on their property and then charged extortionate amounts of money for work that is often not done at all or of poor quality. In Tandridge, we have received 12 enquiries from residents who were having problems with such traders on their doorsteps. Of these, only 3 have involved offenders actually being present at the victims' premises at the time of the call - so presenting us with the opportunity of making 'Rapid Action' interventions against them. (this work only began in July 03)
12. A recent example of our work in this area was in May 04 with a call from an elderly lady in Lingfield. She appears to have been repeatedly targeted by Doorstep criminals, who have exchanged her details as a soft target.
- In October 2002 she was persuaded by an unidentified doorstep offender to allow him to knock down her chimney & rebuild it to a reduced height - she paid well in excess of £1000. The work was poor quality and the chimney blocked by the rubble from the demolished structure.
 - In January 2003 she was targeted by 'E.Smith', who persuaded her to have her ridge tiles rebedded and new fascias & soffits – at a cost of £4400.
 - In May 2004, she was again cold called, by two men supposedly trading as 'Hi-Top Roofing'. They claimed to be visiting on behalf of the Federation of Master Builders, doing checks on work previously carried out by 'Mr Smith'. She was persuaded to allow the men into her home and rear garden, where they proceeded to take apart some of her guttering and fascias. In the course of their examination, they produced rotten wood infested with woodlice, together with a lump of wet insulating material (although it hadn't been raining). This, they said, was evidence of damp and her roof was in need of corrective work - which they could carry out immediately. When on several occasions, the homeowner requested a price / quote in writing, they repeatedly fobbed her off by saying "don't worry about that now".

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13. The Service was alerted by the victim's daughter and an immediate attendance was made. We requested Police attendance whilst en route and an officer visited during our discussion with the victim in her home. As the company were not at the premises the police officer departed with the arrangement that if the offenders were to re-appear (as we hoped) then we could call on immediate assistance.
14. Shortly after the police officer had left, the offenders phoned the victim, to check that 'everything was ok'. We believe the offenders were keeping the victim's house under surveillance - or that on their return, they may have seen the police car parked outside. An arrangement was made by the offenders and the home owner for them to return the following morning - at which time Surrey TSD and the Police would be waiting for them. Unfortunately, although the trap was set and the cars were hidden, the offenders have not since shown face nor attempted to contact the victim.
15. Mindful of the possibility of similar repeat scam visits by the offenders or their associates in future, we have advised the lady never to buy from doorstep callers and we have tried to get her included in her local Neighbourhood Watch scheme. We have also provided her with details of roofers approved by Croydon TSD for repair work to her fascias that were damaged by her most recent conmen in the course of their 'inspection'.
16. Whilst the figure is speculative, on the basis of the amount she 'lost' during previous visits by offenders in 2002 & 2003, we estimate that these "cowboys" would have charged in excess of £2000 - of which, they ended up getting nothing. (If you would like additional examples of our intervention please do not hesitate to contact us).

Working in partnership

17. We also work closely with the Tandridge Care and Repair Team, attending meetings and sharing information.
18. During 2002/2003, Tandridge had allocated some money from the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) for additional alcohol enforcement work.
19. This was repeated in 2003/2004 and Trading Standards wrote to all off licences in the borough (approx 50) with basic advice for licensees. This was followed up with two test purchasing sessions in February 2004 where 6 test purchases were attempted by a child who was able to purchase unchallenged on three occasions. These cases are still being investigated but it is likely that legal proceedings will be instituted in at least one of them.

Test purchasing and local visits

20. Other test purchasing activity in Tandridge included:
 - 4 knife test purchase attempts, which resulted in one sale
 - A further 2 alcohol test purchase attempts where no sales resulted.

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21. The new Licensing Act comes into force in early 2005 and responsibility for the licensing of premises that sell alcohol shifts from the Magistrates Courts to the Borough and District Councils. Each Borough or District must establish a Licensing Policy and Surrey Trading Standards are trying to influence the policies in order to ensure that training for staff is a priority and that records are kept up to date.
22. We maintain a presence in Tandridge through the visits we carry out to ensure businesses are aware of both their obligations in law and to the consumer.
23. We carried out 359 visits to trade premises in Tandridge. The greatest number of visits (48) were to carry out Food standards inspections as laid down by the Food Standards Agency, followed by Animal Health and Welfare inspections(44).

New Initiatives

24. In March we launched the Surrey Curry Club, which has been established to both recognise and promote restaurants that prepare their food within the legal guidelines and which reflect tradition with the use of artificial additives and colour being restricted to the lowest levels necessary.
25. Membership of the Surrey Curry Club is restricted to restaurants where dishes have been sampled and analysed for artificial colours and have proved to be satisfactory. In addition members are required to comply with strict terms and conditions covering other legal requirements, including both Trading Standards legislation and Environmental Health hygiene regulations. This long term project aims to educate both the trade and curry-loving consumers alike.
26. Unfortunately there are no current members in the Tandridge area, as none of the restaurants sampled / inspected fulfilled all of the criteria stipulated in the terms and conditions of the "club". However, the sampling and inspection programme is ongoing Countywide, so when local restaurants achieve membership, news will be published on the Curry Club website www.surreycurryclub.co.uk and promoted in the local press.
27. May 14 2004 saw the launch of the Surrey Consumer Support Network, where all local agencies working in the field of consumer protection pledged to collaborate for the benefit of the consumers of Surrey. Trading Standards plays a major role in this initiative, already working closely with the Citizens Advice Bureaux, the Police, Age Concern and Victim Support.
28. We dealt with 223 complaints from consumers living in Tandridge.

Consumer Education

29. A key area for improvement we have identified is our work in consumer and business education. A recent NOP survey we commissioned in has shown only 51% of those people interviewed in Surrey were aware of our service. This

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figure has dropped by 6% and 2% respectively over the last two survey periods.

30. Currently we use our Mobile Advice Centre (MAC), the media and opportunities to provide talks and displays to address those consumers identified as most at need
 - The elderly
 - People between 16 –25
 - Geographical areas identified by the authority as those needing extra input.
31. Our MAC visits – Warlingham, Caterham and Oxted on a regular monthly basis.

2004/05

32. Our priorities are:
 - Tackling rogue traders,
 - Protecting vulnerable consumers,
 - Supporting reputable businesses,
 - Reducing the incidence of underage sales
 - Providing an immediate response to safety hazards (both food and non-food products)
33. Our priorities are similar to those in 2003/04. Our 'Doorstep Busters' team will answer calls from residents and attend where appropriate.
34. We will be establishing a 'Buy With Confidence' Good Trader scheme highlighting reputable businesses and helping consumers make some real informed choices.
35. We will continue to work to cut down the number of age restricted products sold to underage teenagers in the borough and the recent introduction of a ban on the sale of spray paints to under 16s is another addition to the laws that we can enforce.
36. We will continue to work with colleagues in Environmental Health when we are notified of; or find, particular food hazards.

CONSULTATION

37. Our in house survey of consumers who used our service revealed
 - 92% of customers were satisfied with the help/ advice we gave
 - 94% of customers found us helpful in handling their complaint
 - 87% felt better equipped to deal with a similar consumer type problem should one arise

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38. Our in house survey of businesses found
- 98% of respondents putting aside the reason for the visit, were satisfied with the manner in which it was carried out
 - 91% of respondents after our visit, had a better awareness of their obligations towards consumers

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS

39. Our work concentrating on rogue traders should help create a more level playing field for those businesses that trade fairly.
40. Our 'Buy With Confidence' good trader scheme should help improve the standard of work offered to consumers in the County and aid those businesses who trade fairly.
41. By educating and informing consumers of their rights they can help increase standards of trade in Surrey.

CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

42. Reducing the fear of crime by
- cutting down the activities of rogue traders especially where they prey on the elderly who are at risk of losing substantial amounts of money.
 - reducing the sale of age-restricted products to underage teenagers primarily aimed at cutting down anti-social behaviour.

EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

43. All our customers are treated equally. However we are especially aware of the effects unlawful trade practices have on those most vulnerable, notably the elderly.
44. We are exploring the best way to approach younger people as take up of our service is very low in the under 18 and 18-25 age bracket
45. We will look to extend the service we can provide where the authority has identified communities where there is extra need.
46. We will respond to a request for advice from any party simultaneously involved in the same dispute.

CONCLUSION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

47. We hope our recommendations will further improve cross-working and ease the passing of information between ourselves and other individuals and agencies to ensure a safer community. Our vision is to have 'Confident Consumers and Trusted Traders' in Surrey and with the help of the Local Committee Members we want to make a difference locally.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS: None
