



# **Annual Report from Surrey Trading Standards**

**Local Committee for Woking  
22 October 2003**

## **KEY ISSUE:**

To report on the service Trading Standards provided in Woking during 2002/03, and provide an opportunity for members to influence our plans for 2004/05.

## **SUMMARY:**

We are relatively few in numbers compared to other services within the authority, so we provide a countywide service. But there is a tangible local element to our work. The work we do with rogue traders and underage sales will help to protect consumers, especially the vulnerable, and will produce benefits for consumers and businesses in Woking.

## **OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS:**

That the Local Committee for Woking:

- (i) Note the report and consider how our Service can contribute further to community safety in Woking:
  - In relation to doorstep crime and vulnerable people
  - In relation to underage sales
- (ii) Consider how the Local Committee can better influence our service planning process to meet the needs and concerns of Woking consumers and businesses

## Introduction and Background

1. Trading Standards is a small service in comparison to others in the authority. Our cost per head of Surrey's population in 2002/03 was calculated at £2.67. We strive to give value for money and, as an example, our contribution to highlighting the problems with rogue traders has been recognised both locally and nationally. Locally our initiatives, such as our express reaction to consumers under pressure from doorstep callers (5), have shown we can provide real assistance to consumers and to the majority of businesses that trade fairly.
2. In 2002/3 Consumer Advice Team dealt with 15,339 complaints and enquiries countywide. We received feedback from 244 customers thanking us for the advice we gave. The amount of refunds or compensation involved was recorded as £176,000.

From the 15,339 complaints and enquiries received 700 were considered to have a criminal content and were investigated further.

We carried out 4993 visits to businesses to advise on and enforce consumer legislation.

Coming out of the complaints received and the visits carried out we:

- Prosecuted 56 companies or individuals
- Gave 28 Home Office Cautions
- Gave 121 written warnings

The Office of Fair Trading have advised us that we are ranked in the top five in the U.K. for taking criminal proceedings.

3. In our Best Value Review (March 2002) key areas for improvement were noted as:
  - Reviewing inspection targets to ensure high risk inspection targets and food standard inspections targets were achieved (see 13)
  - Improving outreach to business (see 25)
  - Improving consumer awareness, education and access (see 20-24)
  - Improving the quality of the business database
  - Further developing partnership working (see 16-18)
4. This is the second year in which we have provided the Local Committee for Woking with information on the work we have carried out and plan to carry out. We would like to forge better links with the Local Committee and to include its suggestions and or ideas for aiding Woking consumers and businesses in our business plan for the forthcoming year.

## Analysis and Commentary

5. We are extremely concerned with the number of cases where elderly people, usually living on their own, are being 'ripped off' by uninvited workmen who persuade them that work is urgently required on their property. On many occasions it is found that no work was actually carried out or no work was ever needed. The trader then intimidates the 'customer' into paying substantially more than was originally quoted. In some cases the consumer is bled dry of their life savings. We strive to be innovative in fighting the practices of these 'rogue traders'.
6. During July 2003 a two-week period we piloted a rapid response initiative (please see press release – Annex 1) where we set up a hotline to enable us to take calls from consumers who were under pressure from uninvited workmen. We received thirty-three calls from concerned Surrey consumers including one from a Bisley resident.
7. This pilot has now been built into our everyday work and from the end of our original pilot until now we have been involved in six incidents in Woking. In one case a Woking resident employed an uninvited roofer to reposition a few roof tiles for which he was charged £40. He was then persuaded that other work was needed. The roofers took a £500 deposit in cash with no receipt and did not return.
8. We want to do more to protect vulnerable people from the increasing menace of these uninvited workmen. To be more effective we need to develop better links with a wide range of services and agencies and we hope the Local Committee can help with that process.
9. Reducing the incidence of the sale of age-restricted products to underage teenagers is one of our main targets. Currently our emphasis is on the sale of alcohol. In December 2002 in partnership with the police we targeted off-licences in Woking and found five out of six sold alcohol to a 15 year old teenager. Subsequently one St. John's licensee was prosecuted for the sale of an alcopop to the teenage volunteer (Annex 2). One other case is yet to be heard.
10. The Local Committee along with Safer Woking (the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership) provided us with £5000 to carry out a comprehensive programme of visits to the 51 off-licenses in Woking Borough. In July 2003 each off-licence was visited and given advice plus a comprehensive information pack on age restricted products and a free video that can be used for staff training purposes. After a time lapse we visited 13 of these off licences helped by a volunteer underage teenager who attempted to buy alcohol. One sale was made and is the subject of ongoing investigation.
11. We are currently working with representatives of the borough and district councils to prepare for the radical change in alcohol licensing in April 2004 when they will takeover the responsibility for licensing from the magistrate's courts.

12. We maintain a presence in Woking through the visits we carry out to ensure businesses are aware of both their obligations in law and to the consumer.
13. In 2002/03 we carried out 433 visits. The greatest number of visits, 215 , was carried out by our Food and Agriculture Team to ensure high levels of food standards are maintained as a priority following our Best Value Review and demands from the Food Standards Agency. During these visits 210 food samples were taken. One Woking publican was prosecuted for substituting Gordons gin with a lesser brand.
14. We deal with the labelling and composition of food whilst our colleagues in Woking Borough's Environmental Health Department deal with food hygiene matters.
15. In 2002/03 we dealt with 671 complaints from consumers regarding Woking based companies.

As a result of these complaints:

- A New Haw car repair company was found guilty of falsely stating that a cam belt had been replaced
- A Woking market trader was found guilty of selling counterfeit designer clothes
- A Pyrford resident who smuggled in 2 Siamese cats was prosecuted for failing to quarantine the cats under the rabies laws.

(Please see Annex 3, which gives some indication of how Woking compares with the other ten borough/districts regarding visits, samples and complaints).

16. We are leading on the establishment of a Consumer Support Network bringing together organisations like the Citizens Advice Bureaus (CABs) and voluntary agencies that help advise consumers. As part of the proposed action plan we are looking at:
  - Carrying out further needs assessment, concentrating on the self-reliance neighbourhoods
  - Introducing an alternative dispute resolution system
17. This Network should provide benefits for the differing communities within the Borough. We will be working closely with CABs and other satellite organisations to provide targeted advice. Although, for instance, we do not offer specific debt advice we can signpost consumers to the appropriate agency.
18. We provide support to the Woking Legal Service Partnership (CLSP) by participating in their referral network and assisting with their needs assessment work, which has centred on older people and community care. We hold the CLS Quality Mark for Consumer Advice with Casework. ([www.legalservices.gov.uk](http://www.legalservices.gov.uk))
19. Our Projects Team has a planned work schedule and we are looking to incorporate some of this in Woking:

- Identifying traders who work in the home maintenance sector and inviting them to carry out work where simple faults have been induced.
- Sale of unsafe furniture in small ads where businesses disguise themselves as private sellers.
- Testing the quality of road repairs against the agreed specification for the materials involved.

20. A key area for improvement we have identified is our work in consumer and business education. A recent NOP survey we commissioned in partnership with Buckinghamshire and Kent showed that only 53% of those people interviewed in Surrey were aware of trading standards (Kent 49% - Bucks 47%).

21. Currently we use our Mobile Advice Centre (MAC), the media and opportunities to provide talks and displays to address those consumers identified most at need:

- The elderly
- People between 16 –25
- Geographical areas identified by the authority as those needing extra input.

Our MAC visits:

- The Market Square
- The Lion Retail Park
- The Sheerwater Community Centre

22. In using the MAC we would welcome ideas on how best to promote it locally. We would also welcome contacts with other agencies that would like to make use of the MAC to provide information and advice for the local community.

23. We aim to extend our work in areas like Sheerwater and Maybury to include:

- Measuring service take-up by the local community and if low, raising the profile of the service within the area to increase take up
- Considering whether or not a trader or consumer is from the community in prioritising complaints for further investigation
- Promoting appropriate targeted projects effectively within the neighbourhood e.g. – rapid response to doorstep sales project and safety of electric blankets testing service
- Offering talks/presentations on issues of consumer concern, consumer rights etc to interested groups and organisations
- Considering how our food inspection and food sampling programme could be tailored to include issues of concern and significance to the community

24. We would welcome information from the Local Committee on any feedback it has had from the community on their greatest consumer concerns.

25. To improve our service to business we now produce a quarterly newsletter (Annex 4) and we are looking to enhance the information we provide by establishing an e-mail provision of information.

26. In both the areas of consumer and business education we would welcome input and suggestions from the Local Committee.
27. We place special emphasis on companies based in Surrey, giving a full range of advice concerning consumer law and we act as a nationwide funnel for enquiries and complaints from other trading standards departments to these businesses. Some notable examples residing in the Borough include Kentucky Fried Chicken and Jay Miller's Circus
28. We dealt with 6,281 service enquiries (Service Requests) in 2002/3, mainly from other trading standards departments, asking either for information from or intervention with Surrey companies. There were 309 requests involving companies in Woking. (Please see Annex 3, which gives some indication of how Woking compares with the other ten Boroughs/ Districts regarding Service Requests).
29. This year the Government has provided additional funding to local authorities to implement the Enterprise Act and disrupt 'rogue traders'. As a result we received £100,000 extra in our budget this year. At the beginning of the financial year we had eight vacancies to fill. That equated to 10% of our total number of staff. The additional resources along with the gradual filling of the vacant posts will go some way in helping us in our work addressing
- Rogue Traders
  - Consumer advice and education
  - Under age sales

## Consultation

30. In the recent NOP survey we commissioned of non users it was found in Woking Borough that:
- 49% of people were aware of Surrey Trading Standards – 3rd lowest in the County
  - 75% of people felt well protected from unfair trading practices.
  - The greatest single concern was electrical goods (16%)
31. 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
  - 90% were happy with the time taken
32. 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

33. Our work concentrating on rogue traders should help create a more level playing field for those businesses that trade fairly.
34. By educating and informing consumers of their rights they can help increase standards of trade in Surrey.

## Crime & Disorder Implications

35. 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.
  - By reducing the sale of age-restricted products to underage teenagers, primarily, alcohol which is aimed at cutting down anti-social behaviour.

## Equalities Implications

36. 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.
37. We will look to extend the service we can provide where the authority has identified communities where there is extra need.
38. We will respond to a request for advice from any party simultaneously involved in the same dispute.

## Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

39. We are committed to creating an environment of 'Confident Consumers and Trusted Traders' and we feel with the help of the Local Committee for Woking we can make a difference locally. Many of the initiatives that we will undertake are long term solutions but we hope that some outcomes will readily be seen and have a major impact in protecting people, helping legitimate business and increasing consumer confidence.

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