



Surrey Trading Standards Annual Report

**Local Committee For Woking
14 October 2004**

KEY ISSUE:

The service provided by Trading Standards in Woking 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 Woking.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Local Committee for Woking:

- (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

1. Introduction and background

1.1 Trading Standards is a small service in comparison to others in the authority but we have a wide remit ranging from civil advice to the safety of consumer products to animal health and on to 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, for example, our direct intervention ('Doorstep Busters' team) when consumers are pressurised from 'unsolicited tradesmen' has shown we can provide real assistance to consumers saving them in some cases thousands of pounds.

1.2 In 2003/4 our Consumer Advice Team dealt with 13558 complaints and enquiries.

From the complaints and enquiries received 556 were considered to have a criminal content and were investigated further.

In 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.

We carried out 5044 visits to businesses to advise them on and enforce consumer legislation.

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.

Visits over the last three years 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.

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

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

- Prosecuted 53 companies or individuals
- Gave 13 Home Office Cautions
- Gave written warnings

1.3 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.

2. Analysis and commentary

2003/04

- 2.1 A major area of concern is the number of cases where elderly people, many living on their own, are being 'ripped off' by uninvited workmen who persuade them that work is urgently required on their property. In some cases consumers have lost their life savings. To fight this menace we established our 'Doorstep Busters' team (please see Appendix 1 press release) two officers on standby who on receiving a telephone call will go out and challenge the uninvited workman.

We have taken 20 calls from concerned Woking residents and the total cost of the work to these residents was conservatively £20,000 (please see Appendix 2 for examples of how we have attempted to help victims of these 'rip offs').

In June (2004) we launched the "Bank Job", a training DVD / video at the Woking branch of Lloyds TSB (please see Appendix 3 for more details). Subsequently all the banks and building societies in the borough have received the resource that demonstrates the problems vulnerable consumers have when faced with an uninvited workmen. It urges these institutions to be on the 'look out' for potential victims who are making unusual withdrawals and request that they call trading standards or the police to allow us to intervene if appropriate.

We have leaflets, posters, door stickers and bookmarks that are available to help inform those most at risk from these uninvited "tradesmen".

This is an area which is often overlooked when consideration is given to community safety issues but the effects on the victims can be quite devastating. For us to be more effective in this area of work we need to develop better links with a wide range of services and agencies and we hope the Local Committee can help with this process.

2.2 Reducing the incidence of the sale of age-restricted products to underage teenagers was one of our main targets. Alcohol was and remains a major concern with the anti-social connotations that are associated with it. Since April 2003 we have carried out a range of test purchases of age-restricted products with the help of volunteer under age teenagers. These included

- Eight attempts to buy alcohol – just one sale was made and the company was sent a warning letter.
- Five attempts to buy cigarettes – no sales were made.
- Two attempts to buy aerosol spray paints – one sale was made and the company received a warning letter.

We are currently offering our help to representatives of the borough and district councils in the drafting of their alcohol licensing policies. In 2005 they are due to take over the responsibility for licensing of alcohol sales from the magistrate's courts. Trading Standards are trying to influence these policies in order to ensure that off-licences

- Make training for staff a priority so that they are capable of identifying and dealing with underage teenagers
- Ensure records of, for example, 'refusals to sell' are kept up to date.

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.

We carried out 390 visits. The greatest number of visits 228 were carried out by our Food and Agriculture Team to inspect risk assessed premises as required by the Food Standards Agency. Our visits to food premises ensure correct composition plus accurate labelling and ultimately that our food is safe. During these visits 185 food samples were taken.

2.3 We dealt with 592 complaints regarding Woking based companies with a total recorded cost to the consumer of £626,000. (Please see Appendix 4, which gives some indication of how Woking compares with the other ten borough/districts regarding visits, complaints, samples and service requests).

2.4 As a result of our visits and investigation of complaints there were

- Three successful prosecutions including one for the sale of alcohol as a result of one of our covert test purchases and another concerned pricing infringements at a national supermarket.
- Twenty-eight written warnings issued.
- There were 253 service requests involving other agencies requiring information on or intervention with companies based in Woking.

2.5 In March we launched the Surrey Curry Club, to recognise and promote restaurants and catering establishments in Surrey that prepare their food within the legal guidelines and use the minimum of food colourings. The launch was covered by national TV and attracted virtually total coverage in the national newspapers in addition to the local press and radio (please see Appendix 3 press release). There are two members of the Surrey Curry Club in the borough

- Binaka, 95 High Street, Horsell
- Kyber Pass, 12 Lower Guildford Road, Knaphill

2.6 A key area for improvement we have identified is our work in consumer and business education. A recent NOP survey we commissioned, has shown only 51% of those people interviewed in Surrey were aware of our service. This figure has dropped by 6% and 2% respectively over the last two survey periods that covered a three year spread.

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 visited

- Sheerwater – 10 visitors
- Maybury – 31 visitors
- Woking Town Centre – 258 visitors

Areas we have identified for improvement include

- Targeting work in areas defined as self reliance wards
- Increasing awareness of trading standards
- Increase farm inspections as they dropped below target
- Increasing our food sampling as we only met 85% of our target

2.7 We recognise the designation of Sheerwater and Maybury as areas with different needs and our activities in these communities correspond with our Service priorities. At the moment we are unable to report against specific work in these areas as our inspection and premises database does not allow us to retrieve an accurate level of detail. We are in the process of upgrading our system so in the future we may be able to give more specific details.

2004/05

2.8 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)

Our priorities are similar to those in 2003/04. Our 'Doorstep Busters' team will answer calls from Woking residents and attend where appropriate.

We will be establishing a 'Buy With Confidence' good trader scheme highlighting reputable businesses and helping consumers have some real informed choices.

We will continue to work to cut down the supply of age restricted products 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.

We will work with colleagues in Environmental Health when we are notified of or find particular food hazards.

- 2.9 As part of our main priorities in the areas identified as self-reliance wards we would develop / tune our project, inspection and sampling programmes so they are of help to these communities. We would also like to take advantage of any facilities to make our information available in these areas. We would welcome information from the Local Committee on any feedback it has had from these communities on their greatest consumer concerns.

See attached extract from our Performance Wheel Supporting Table

Priority	Performance Indicator	Target	Accountable Manager	Frequency	Support Actions & Key Strategies
Continuously improve service delivery, particularly for the vulnerable, young & disadvantaged	The work undertaken in Self Reliance wards	To highlight the Self Reliance wards when developing the project, inspection & sampling programmes	Steve Ruddy	Quarterly	Information will be reported against other targets.

2.10 Examples of the projects we hope to undertake include

- The sale of cars from the roadside and any information regarding this problem will be followed up.
- The hotel industry and the effect they have on the safety, enjoyment and experience of both the business and private customer.

3. Consultation

- 3.1 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
- 3.2 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

4. Sustainable development implications

- 4.1 Our work concentrating on rogue traders should help create a more level playing field for those businesses that trade fairly.
- 4.2 Our 'Buy With Confidence' good trader scheme should help push up the standard of work and goods in the County and aid those businesses that trade fairly.
- 4.3 By educating and informing consumers of their rights they can help increase standards of trade in Surrey.

5. Crime & disorder implications

- 5.1 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 aimed at cutting down anti-social behaviour.

6. Equalities implications

- 6.1 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.
- 6.2 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
- 6.3 We will look to extend the service we can provide where the authority has identified communities where there is extra need.
- 6.4 We will respond to a request for advice from any party simultaneously involved in the same dispute.

7. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

- 7.1 Our recommendations we hope will aid cross working and the passing of information between ourselves and other individuals and agencies to ensure a safer community. Our aim is to have 'Confident Consumers and Trusted Traders' in Surrey and with the help of the Local Committee for Woking we can make a difference locally.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS:

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