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 Department: Trading Standards
 13/11/2003

PRG/***/MP/03

ROUNDING UP THE COWBOYS ON YOUR DOORSTEP

Trading Standards unveils new plan to tackle rogues costing £10 million a year

Each year doorstep cowboys rip off Surrey residents to the tune of £10million.

The smooth-talking conmen turn up out of the blue and target the elderly and vulnerable, persuading them to pay for building work that is shoddy or never finished. In some tragic cases victims are fleeced of their life savings and have even been marched to their building sites.

Now Surrey Trading Standards - the team that brought you the *10* **Horrors** using secret surveillance cameras to trap cowboys - has taken action on the crooks with a bold new plan to protect consumers.

Potential victims can now call our special hotline and our **Rapid Response Team** - or Doorstep Busters - will leap into action and zoom around their home to try to catch the culprits red-handed.

The scheme follows a successful two-week trial this summer which saved Surrey residents from being conned out of £65,000 by doorstep

During this period we received 33 calls from people who were being harassed, pestered or pressurised by unscrupulous traders. One intervention by Trading Standards officers saved a 75-year-old man £8,875 after his concerned son called to say his father had already paid uninvited

£9,000. They had initially quoted £200 for some basic work but on to frighten him into thinking there was a major roofing crisis would cost a staggering £17,875 to put right.

In another case two, Trading Standards officers saved an 88-year-old woman £950 when they challenged workmen at her home after she got suspicious about what they were doing to her drive. The company was quizzed about its dubious practices and advised on their obligations to their customers and appeared quite co-operative at the time. But a week later some 5 miles away the same company were up to their old tricks. When officers approached the workmen they just walked away leaving and abandoning their van unlocked with the key in the ignition.

But some others weren't so lucky - in a nine-month period this year we received 235 complaints about doorstep sales with a total value of £600,000. And we know that less than 10% of people actually contact us when they experience a problem, usually out of embarrassment and an even smaller proportion of most elderly and vulnerable victims of crime.

Some real-life cases:

- Earlier this year a 93-year-old widow, Mrs M, spent £33,000 on a series of visits by conmen who said she needed her roof-re-tiled but they didn't, but they even took her to her bank to withdraw the money. Since then she has been repeatedly targeted by their associates since reporting the problem to Surrey Trading Standards but she has not been able to persuade her to hand over any more cash.
- Another elderly man, Mr G, has been ripped off by more than £55,000 on unnecessary work to his home in repeated visits by a dodgy trader. On a single occasion he was driven to his bank and forced to take out £28,000.
- And an 81 year-old Mr W, lost £5,000, after a single conman showed up on his doorstep in August. He called Trading Standards after the rogue's visit after seeing an newspaper article about Trading Standards Action pilot. Since then the conman's associates have paid for another visit to try and get money but have thankfully failed.
- Another elderly couple. Mr and Mrs F were only just prevented from being ripped off by a neighbour's timely notification to us. The conmen who visited them were particularly nasty, making them pay for several thousands of pounds for poorly resurfacing their driveway without even seeking the agreement of the couple. They tried to reason with the conmen and succeeded in getting the price down to £2,000. However, encouraged by the immediate intervention

Surrey Trading Standards in the end they paid nothing even though they had been intimidated with threats to torch their house. At the time a young accomplice was sent around to try and elicit information from Mr and Mrs F but unfortunately for him Trading Standards and the Police were still at the property. The police were last seen checking out the van's cracked windscreen, bald tyre – and inside that the driver insisted was not his.

- And in August this year our rapid intervention saved Mr P from having to pay £7,500 for his driveway, which a gang had dug up. They'd lulled the victim into a false sense of security by telling him to believe they were associated with some nearby road works. Concerned when the initial price quoted rose sharply from £7,500 the resident called in Trading Standards. When our officers arrived, the gang boss drove off at high speed.

Surrey County Council's Executive Member for Community Safety, Sam Smith said: "The two week-trial was a great success with Trading Standards managing to save Surrey residents money whilst sending a message to these dubious traders that we will not allow them to prey on our customers'. The project has confirmed that the elderly are active targets by these ruthless criminals and therefore continues to be a great success for Surrey which is why we are extending this project full time and working with other agencies to ensure that the vulnerable are protected. The trial has also shown that companies who cold call often continue to do poor work and people are still being talked into having unnecessary work done and are then being massively overcharged."

County Trading Standards Officer Peter Denard added: "These are heinous crimes carried out by ruthless individuals who have no regard for our society. We will continue to root them out and deal with them to the fullest extent of the law."

Consumer Minister Gerry Sutcliffe who today (11 Nov) attended the launch of the Rapid Action Team Doorstep Busters, said: "People are justifiably appalled when they hear stories of criminals targeting the elderly and vulnerable in their homes. I whole-heartedly endorse this Surrey Trading Standards scheme which takes such a direct no-nonsense approach to driving these rogues off the streets of Surrey."

If you are under pressure or feeling threatened by an uninvited salesperson give Surrey County Council Trading Standards a call on 01483 371717 and they will talk through your problem and visit your home to discuss the problem.

if necessary.

ENDS

Notes to editors

- Surrey County Council's Trading Standards team was the first to use 'House of Horrors' undercover cameras to trap cowboy traders. To date we have prosecuted more than 40 rogues, resulting in tens of thousands of pounds, in a bid to protect the Surrey people.
- The Rapid Reaction Doorstep Busters Team is a spin-off of the Trading Standards team targeting conmen who turn up on the doorstep to prey on householders.
- The Consumer Protection (Cancellation of Contracts Concerning the Supply of Goods from Business Premises) Regulations 1987 - If a person does not want to invite a seller or workman (unsolicited visit) to call at their home, generally there is a seven day cooling off period, as long as the goods or services cost more than £35. At any initial cold call the seller/workman must give a person written details of their offer and how to cancel. It is a criminal offence to fail to give this notice.
- An "*unsolicited visit*" - this is a visit by a trader, which does not take place at the express request of the consumer, and includes following an unsolicited telephone call.
- In April the Trading Standards Institute called for a complete ban on cold calling after receiving an overwhelming response from consumers following a major national survey.
- Nearly 9,000 householders from all over the UK were randomly polled, with 95.7% saying they did not want doorstep selling at all.
- 61.5% said they had received a cold call in the previous 3 months.
- As many as 25% had had a bad experience with cold callers in the past two years.
- The highest level of problems were in relation to property repairs, maintenance and improvements - 9.7% said they had had a bad experience with property repairs.
- As well as the financial cost, such crimes can be seriously harmful to the emotional and physical health of victims - especially the elderly.

elderly and most vulnerable.

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