



**OFFICER REPORT TO LOCAL COMMITTEE
(WOKING)**

**REPORT ON SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL
TRADING STANDARDS SERVICE**

26 SEPTEMBER 2012

KEY ISSUE

The services provided by Trading Standards and key activities in the Woking Borough area.

SUMMARY

The vision of Surrey Trading Standards Service is “Confident Consumers – Trusted Traders”. We have a wide range of functions in protecting residents, supporting reputable businesses, tackling rogue traders and contributing to the reduction of crime and disorder in Surrey. A Public Value Review commenced in December 2010 aimed at repositioning and redesigning the service to meet the Council’s objectives and the needs of the most vulnerable and changes proposed to the Office of Fair Trading and the Citizens Advice Bureau. This PVR has been approved by Cabinet and we are now implementing all recommendations including restructuring of the service (effective from November 2011) and making savings of approximately £0.5million.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS

The Local Committee is asked to note the activities of the Trading Standards Service and to provide feedback to help us enhance our understanding of, and response to, local needs and issues.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 We have responsibility for dealing with unsafe or unfair trading practices and applying regulations in relation to quality, quantity, safety, description and price. We also enforce regulations covering the composition, labelling and advertising of food and ensuring animal health and welfare on farms, minimising the risk of spread of animal disease.
- 1.2 We support and educate reputable businesses, providing information and advice on consumer and regulatory issues.
- 1.3 We tackle rogue traders and deceptive business practices, protecting all Surrey residents, particularly the most vulnerable, from anti social behaviour, doorstep deception, scams and other illegal practices
- 1.4 The Olympics and Paralympics impacted heavily on our workload, our prime involvement being the protection of the Olympic brand through trade mark enforcement, dealing with rogue traders and protecting consumers, tourists and reputable traders.

In the new structure there are two front line delivery teams and a total of approximately 48FTE staff covering the county.

1. **Investigations and Enforcement**

This team deals with a wide range of Trading Standards criminal and civil investigations. Intelligence driven, it includes referrals from the Citizens Advice Consumer Service CitACS, analysis from the tasking and co-ordinating process, and other sources. There are sub-teams:

- a. **Community Protection.** Particular focus on doorstep crime interventions and protecting and supporting vulnerable residents in dealing with rogue traders and other consumer issues. Includes Vulnerable Persons Officer responsibility and consumer advice and support for vulnerable residents, preventative approaches to tackle doorstep crime and protect vulnerable residents.
- b. **Investigations East and West.** Intelligence led criminal and civil investigations and interventions, including referrals from CitACS, and from our Tasking and Co-ordinating Group.

2. **Business Advice and Compliance**

This team is responsible for business advice, business inspection, business partnership schemes and licensing. It also has the overall lead for Better Regulation and ensuring that the service maximises our role in supporting economic growth and improving public health. There are sub-teams:

- a. **Business Advice and Partnership.** Delivers 'Primary Authority Partnerships' (PAPs), 'Home Authority' advice, and business advice, including chargeable business services. Responsible for delivering and expanding the trader approval schemes namely 'Buy with Confidence', 'Support with Confidence' and 'Eat Out Eat Well'. Also responsible for Trading Standards licensing functions.

- b. Business Inspection and Compliance East and West.** Deliver proactive business inspections and product sampling activities. Includes food standards, metrology, fair trading, product safety, credit, environment, underage sales and animal health.

2. ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

- 2.1 Latest analysis from the Office of Fair Trading shows that the economic impact of our fair trading work alone saves local residents £6.6 million per year. For every £1 spent on fair trading activities, it benefits residents by more than £6.
- 2.2 Sales of alcohol to young people have been driven down from 35% to 8% across Surrey in the last five years. Latest figures show that this year we are currently achieving 6%. (The years target is 10%).
- 2.3 Satisfaction indicators compare well with other authorities. Latest business satisfaction is 83% and consumer satisfaction 92%.
- 2.4 Our appointment of an Accredited Financial Investigator in 2009 continues to reap rewards in seizing criminal assets under Proceeds of Crime legislation. Two notable cases bringing confiscation orders of £44,000 (doorstep crime deception) and £61,000 (counterfeit goods). Our AFI is working closely with several District and Borough Councils in the county on cases for other services. In the most recent example in Runnymede in relation to Planning breaches a confiscation order of £250,000 has been made just this week. Under the national incentivisation scheme Runnymede will receive £62,500 and Surrey £31,000 helping to ensure that crime doesn't pay.
- 2.5 A dedicated Intelligence Officer also continues to reap rewards as we utilise information from a wide variety of sources to ensure that interventions and investigations are targeted where there is greatest need, greatest likely impact and hence greatest benefit for local residents and businesses. A monthly Tactical Assessment enables us to identify priority issues and allocate resources.
- 2.6 We continue to attract and deliver frequent and strong media coverage for Surrey County Council on both national and local TV/radio and in the press. This helps alert residents to potential problems and acts as a deterrent to potential rogue traders. Twitter and Facebook social media are also being used to reach additional audiences, with a growing number of followers.
- 2.7 No Cold Calling Zones continue to be an important area of our work. Surrey officers had great success in 2010 when, at a meeting with the "Big 6" energy companies, they committed to respecting the wishes of residents who say no to cold callers. Evidence showed that signs and zones were routinely ignored and that nearly half of all people who

switched as a result of their high pressure and aggressive sales tactics actually ended up with a worse deal. Following on from this, in May 2011 we successfully prosecuted one of the 'Big 6', Scottish and Southern Energy, for misleading consumers when switching supplier. In May 12, following a landmark decision, Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE) was fined £1.25 million in relation to their use of doorstep salesmen to mislead potential customers through their use of 'bamboozling' sales scripts designed to trick homeowners into thinking they were paying too much for their gas and electricity. It is understood this could have misled more than 350,000 people nationwide over a 10-month period. This is the first ever prosecution of its kind against a large energy supplier and yesterday's fine is believed to be the largest ever to be handed out in a trading standards prosecution.

2.8 In line with the Trading Standards PVR recommendations we have changed the way in which we give advice to businesses. Whilst we will continue to provide a limited amount of advice free of charge to all Surrey businesses, enhanced services will now be charged for, at competitive rates. At the same time we have extended access hours to our business advice line so that it is now available 5 days a week instead of 3. Early indications are that the new service is proving successful with positive business feedback.

2.9 The service is keen to develop shared service opportunities both within and outside of Surrey. In Surrey we are now working in partnership with Mole Valley District Council Environmental Health Service. We currently have a shared manager (Steve Ruddy) and are developing savings and service enhancement with plans developing for a shared database, and changes to licensing and food regulatory work.

3 LOCAL INITIATIVES

3.1 **Underage sales.** Since April 2012 we have attempted 162 (intel driven) test purchases of alcohol with volunteer young people across Surrey; 10 of which were attempted in the Borough of Woking. No sales were achieved in Woking.

3.2 **Buy With Confidence approved trader scheme.** There are now 448 members of which 37 are in Woking. We hope to increase membership further in the year to come. Feedback from traders and residents is very positive.

3.3 **Support With Confidence.** Launched during 2010 in partnership with Adults and Surrey Independent Living Council, this scheme provides a list of care and support services (including financial advisors, solicitors, disabled adaptations, plumbers and cleaning companies), who have undergone appropriate training and background checks and enables residents to select care using funding under the new national regime of Self Directed Support. There are a total of 40 members, 2 within Woking.

- 3.4 No Cold Calling Zones.** A 'No Cold Calling Zone' is a defined area, often linked to Neighbourhood 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 Service 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.
- 3.5 'Super Stickers'.** This new initiative (started October 2011) takes no cold calling zones one stage further by providing "do not call" stickers to individual households, rather than just those within a zone. Legislation makes it an offence for a trader not to leave such a house or to return to it where the sticker is displayed. Approximately 90,000 packs of stickers have been distributed throughout Surrey. Within Woking packs were distributed via libraries, the Borough Council, Police, Woking Social Care Team and Neighbourhood Watch. This is a County-wide initiative and we are asking residents to register their sticker with us – to date 969 stickers have been registered.
- 3.6 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. We operate a "Rapid Action Team" whereby officers can attend a Surrey resident's home if they feel they are being ripped off by someone who is working at their home. The officers will intervene, dealing with the traders or conmen to ensure the resident is being treated fairly, and give them support and advice. It is worthy of note that we are aware of a couple of 'rogue families' working their cons on the vulnerable in the area and we are working with Surrey Police to bring a stop to their practices. Since 1 April 2012 we have recorded 171 incidents of doorstep crime, 11 of these were in Woking. Cold Calling by telephone is on the increase throughout the County, particularly aimed at the elderly and specialising in the selling of alarm systems, insulation, solar panels and drain cleaning equipment (often with the 'victim' being told that the company is working with Surrey Police and/or the council or is a neighbour with adjoining drains).
- 3.7 Food Standards.** The "Eat Out Eat Well" initiative was launched during 2009 to encourage restaurants etc to offer healthier choices and healthier cooking practices. Businesses are assessed to bronze, silver or gold standards dependent on their levels of hygiene and menu choice. There are currently 147 members across the county, with 3 in Woking. In addition, the problem of fake and sometimes dangerous alcohol continues to be a problem with seizures of whisky, vodka and wine from retailers around the county.

4 LOCAL ISSUES

4.1 Office move - As from 1 September 2012 Trading Standards moved from their offices in Reigate and are now based in a new SCC building called Consort House, 5-7, Queensway, Redhill RH1 1YB. However, our telephone numbers remain the same and a postal redirect is in place.

4.2 Best Bar None – Under Age Sales officers have been involved in assisting Woking Borough Council with audits as part of the Best Bar None initiative being adopted in the borough. To date 6 on licensed premises have been visited in partnership with other agencies.

4.3 Illegal Money Lending Team – The regional Illegal Money Lending Team will be focussing their attention in Surrey, starting in November in the borough of Woking and then moving around the rest of the county throughout the following year. Their energies will be spent on working with partners to raise awareness about loan sharks, gathering intel and tackling any issues they come across. Specific areas have been identified within Woking based on certain demographic data helping to highlight who is at greatest risk from illegal moneylenders. The areas identified within Woking are; Maybury, Sheerwater and Goldsworth.

4.4 – Charity Bags project part 2. This will be rolled out in partnership with the Citizens Advice Bureaux in Surrey, local volunteers and other partners and take place from 15 October to 2 November 2012. The project will continue to look at misleading tactics used by companies posing as charities or misleading consumers into donating goods under false pretences.

5 CONSULTATION

5.1 There have been no consultations in relation to Woking Borough.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Trading Standards is a relatively small service, serving all 11 Districts and Boroughs within Surrey with a budget of £1.98M.

Annual savings of £257,000 were identified in the Public Value Review. When these are combined with planned cost reductions of £268,000, it means trading standards will be making total savings of £525,000 in 2012/13 compared to the previous year.

7. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS

7.1 We enforce legislation to minimise packaging and ensure the appropriate labelling of energy efficiency information on a range of products. We are currently involved in a project to assess excessive food packaging and a project to assess compliance with performance statistics of new cars which enable buyers to make a better/more informed/greener choice.

8 CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

8.1 The main areas that impact on community safety are age restricted sales and tackling doorstep crime and deception. We protect local residents in a range of ways and help to reduce the fear of crime.

9 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

9.1 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.

9.2 We have a Vulnerable Persons Officer, created 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 with Adult Services, Surrey Police and Surrey Fire and Rescue Service.

10 CONCLUSION

10.1 The Trading Standards Service provides a wide range of services for residents and businesses, protecting local people from local, regional and national threats. We use intelligence from a huge range of sources to ensure that our actions and interventions are focused on those issues on which we will have the most impact. We need to improve our understanding of and response to local needs and we welcome any feedback to help us in that.

11 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 The Committee is recommended to note the report. Members views on how the service can better understand and respond to local needs are especially welcome, as are suggestions on how the service can improve communication with Members in the future.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS: None