

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL AND SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL

TRADING STANDARDS JOINT COMMITTEE

DATE: 18 MAY 2023

**LEAD OFFICER: AMANDA POOLE
ASSISTANT HEAD OF TRADING STANDARDS**

**SUBJECT: WORK TO SUPPORT COMMUNITIES AND INDIVIDUALS
DURING PRESSURES CAUSED BY COST-OF-LIVING
PRESSURES**

1.0 SUMMARY OF ISSUE:

- 1.1 With high inflation putting households and businesses under immense strain, the most vulnerable and disadvantaged are affected the greatest.
- 1.2 Trading Standards helps protect residents from harm by ensuring honesty, fairness and safety across the marketplace. In a time of financial hardship, getting what you are paying for becomes increasingly vital.
- 1.3 Supporting communities through significant increases in the cost of living became a priority mid-year, causing the service to undertake activities that weren't planned at the start of the year.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Trading Standards Joint Committee notes the Service's work outlined in the report attached at Annex A to support communities through cost of living pressures.

3.0 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 3.1 The Joint Committee is required by the Inter Authority Agreement which underpins the service to:
 - a) Ensure effective performance of the Service. This includes reviewing performance by considering performance.

4.0 Cost of Living work - Details:

- 4.1 The activity of the Service in this area can broadly be divided as follows:



- 4.2 **Product Safety: Ensuring products are safe, regardless of their cost.** Marketplace surveillance activity became increasingly focused on products that residents would find more appealing and were more likely to buy in a cost-of-living crisis as inflation rose throughout the year.
- 4.3 This included tested devices claiming to save energy and electricity costs. In one example the product claimed to be able to save you “as much as 90% on your electricity bill”. Claiming it would, among other things, “remove dirty electricity”. Neither of these claims are true and we have undertaken a range of activities to remove these products from the market.
- 4.4 With assistance of a grant from Electric Safety First, the Service carried out testing of electric blankets in use, finding 80% of those tested were dangerous. All dangerous electric blankets were replaced with safe new ones provided free of charge by Dreams, one of our Primary Authority Partners.
- 4.5 **Keeping vulnerable consumers safe from scams: Keeping people safe from financial loss or harm to their wellbeing.** Financial pressures can cause people to be temporarily vulnerable in ways that they would not otherwise be, making decisions that are affected by the pressure they feel under.
- 4.6 Government grants are unfortunately frequently piggy backed off by fraudsters trying to exploit these vulnerabilities, so the Service has aimed to raise awareness of potential scams as widely as possible, through routes including social media, webinars and both Council’s literature for residents. Some examples are given in the report.
- 4.7 **Fairness of the trading environment: Providing confidence to consumers that they are getting what they paid for. Helping honest businesses not to be put at a disadvantage.** Some examples of this work include testing the accuracy of petrol pumps, working to disrupt the supply of illegal goods such as tobacco and tackling lettings agents who are not providing the required protections for their customers, for example by keeping their deposit money safe in client money protection schemes.
- 4.8 5% of petrol pumps tested were inaccurate and were taken out of use prior to them being adjusted to be accurate. Due to the elevated cost of petrol, on average these pumps would have been overcharging each consumer £1 every time they filled their tank.

5.0 CONSULTATION:

- 5.1 No external consultation has taken place.

6.0 RISK MANAGEMENT AND IMPLICATIONS:

- 6.1 All significant risks affecting the service (which include items beyond budget and performance) are regularly considered by the management team (two monthly for red and amber risks, 6 monthly for green risks).
- 6.2 Where risks become higher, these are shared with the Trading Standards Board for awareness and discussion.

7.0 FINANCIAL & VALUE FOR MONEY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no specific financial implications. This work was delivered from within existing resources.

8.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The 2015 Inter-Authority Agreement provides the legal framework within which the Service operates. As set out in paragraph 3.1 of the report, the Joint Committee is responsible for ensuring the effective management of the Service. The Service's performance is then subject to scrutiny in the participating authorities in the normal way.
- 8.2 There are no other specific legal issues that need to be drawn to the attention of the Committee.

9.0 EQUALITIES & DIVERSITY

- 9.1 Cost of living pressures will have a disproportionately high impact on communities that are already financially stretched and those with fewer support mechanisms in place. Some of the work described in the report would support all communities whereas some was specifically targeted at those most likely to be impacted the hardest.

10.0 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT:

- 10.1 The Service continues to be alert to cost of living pressures and intends to repeat some of the work outlined in this report in the coming year as a way to protect residents.

REPORT DETAILS

Contact Officer(s):

Mrs Amanda Poole, Assistant Head of Trading Standards 07984 458 679
Mr Steve Ruddy, Head of Trading Standards 01372 371730

Consulted:

Annexes:

Annex A: Cost of Living Summary Report

Sources/background papers:

N/A

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