

# Supporting communities during cost of living crisis 2022-23

Buckinghamshire & Surrey  
trading standards



# Summary

High inflation puts households and businesses under immense strain, the most vulnerable and disadvantaged are affected the greatest.

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.

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.

# Product Safety

Ensuring products are safe, regardless of their cost.

## Market surveillance

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.

This included small fan heaters and 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”.



### Recommended Usage

Use One (1) Voltbox unit for every up to 700 sq.ft of space. Maximize the results and help Save As Much as 90% on your Electricity Bill.

## The Most Innovative Electricity Management Device on the Planet:

Stabilize Your Current, Remove Dirty Electricity, Slash Your Power Bill Today!

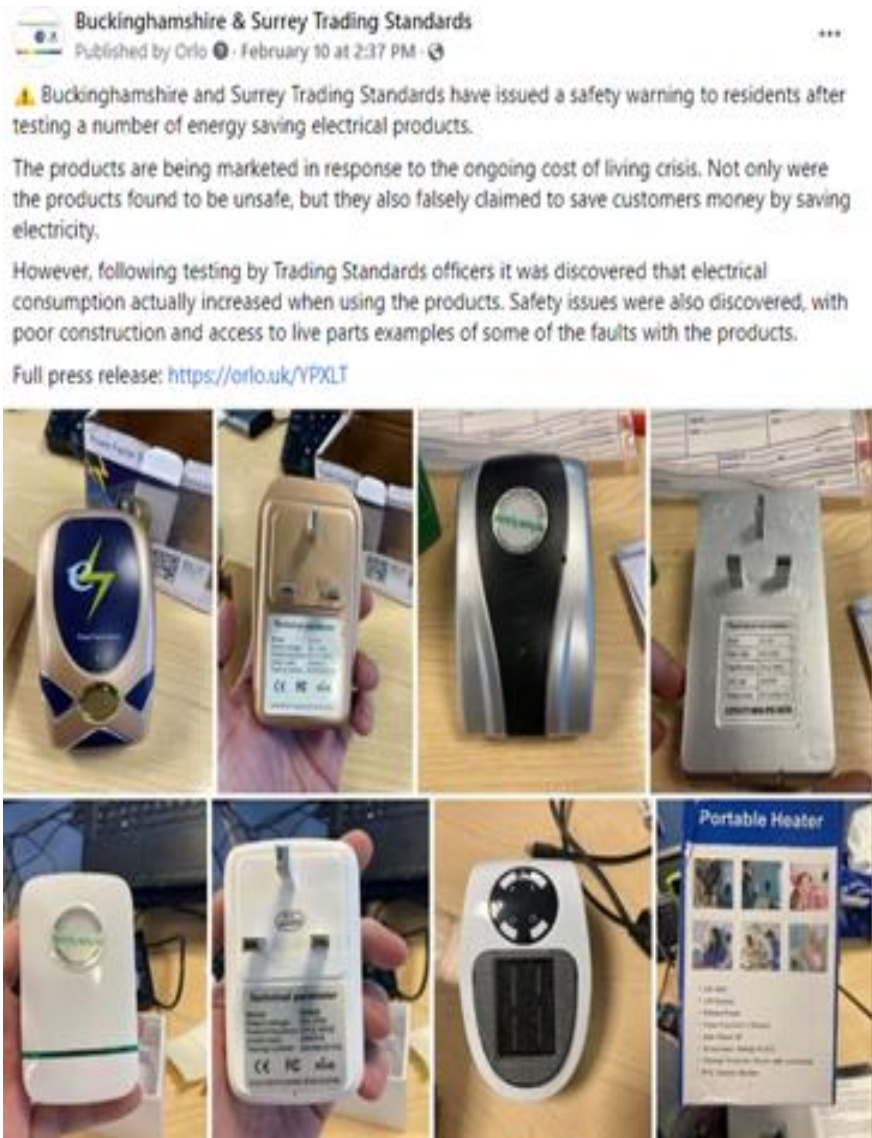
Of **16** different products bought and tested **13 (81%)** failed. Another 3 products have been bought and submitted for testing but the results of testing remaining outstanding. Almost none of the claims being made were true and some of the products were also dangerous.



In one example a small heater (see picture left) failed as there was a risk of electrocution and the Service is working to ensure it is removed from sale from a multitude of platforms including eBay and Amazon as well as alerting other Trading Standards Services of the risk and encouraging the Office for Product Safety and Standards to take a national approach to the risks posed.

Follow up work on the products that failed has included having products withdrawn from sale (both voluntarily and through web site take downs), requiring businesses to remove the untrue claims from advertising, advising to businesses on changes that were needed to labelling to make the products safe in use, and sharing information with other regulators nationally through the Product Safety Database.

One of our Facebook posts warning residents about the devices and linking to the press release was the most engaged with post in February:



With funding from the Office for Safety and Standards, surveillance activity on products being imported through Heathrow has continued this year. The Service has found, and stopped, over 71,000 unsafe and non-compliant products. With the exception of covid years where unsafe PPE was a particular problem, this is higher than in previous years illustrating the increasing supply of dangerous products and the importance of preventing them reaching the marketplace. The products stopped have included unsafe new electric blankets and dangerous heaters of a similar style to those sampled above.



## Electric Blanket Testing

With energy saving advice for the many struggling with energy bills to 'heat the person not the home' likely to lead to increased use of electric blankets, and around 43 fires a year nationally being caused by unsafe blankets prior to this cost-of-living crisis, the Service applied for a grant from Electrical Safety First to test electric blankets.

Electric Safety First funded the testing; one of our Primary Authority Partners, Dreams, provided new electric blankets that could be used to replace ones which failed, and we worked with partners including the libraries services of both Councils to get suitable venues in the heart of communities.

Of **71** blankets tested across **6** days, there was a staggeringly high failure rate of **80%**.

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**FREE**  
**Electric Blanket Safety Checks**

Old, damaged, or improperly used electric blankets pose a risk for fire or burns.

Bring your blanket to these libraries:

December  
10am-12pm  
1pm-3pm

12th Redhill  
13th Ewell (Bourne Hall)  
14th Staines  
15th Aylesbury  
16th High Wycombe

FUNDED BY  
**Electrical Safety First**

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FUNDED BY  
**Electrical Safety First**

**Free Electric Blanket Checks**

86% of blankets we tested recently were a fire risk.

27 February  
Fairfield Centre, Leatherhead

28 February  
St Mary's Community Centre, Byfleet

1 March  
Buckingham Community Centre

Bring your blanket for testing: from 10am to 3pm.  
Replacement blankets issued if yours fails.

In one instance a 90-year-old blind lady was brought in by her friend with an electric blanket that was approximately 45 years old and was found to be unsafe. In another instance the blanket already had scorch marks indicating even prior to testing that it was likely to be unsafe (see picture). Both of these owners were very happy with the new and safe replacements that they were given.



# Keeping vulnerable consumers safe from scams

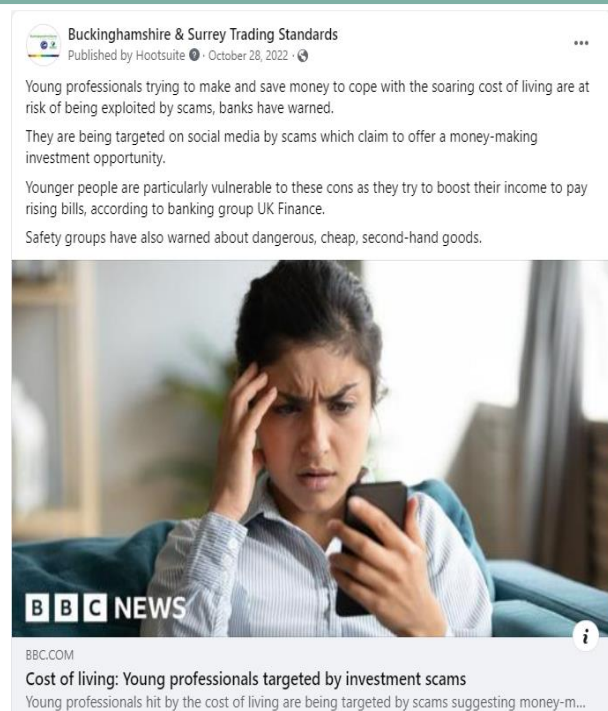
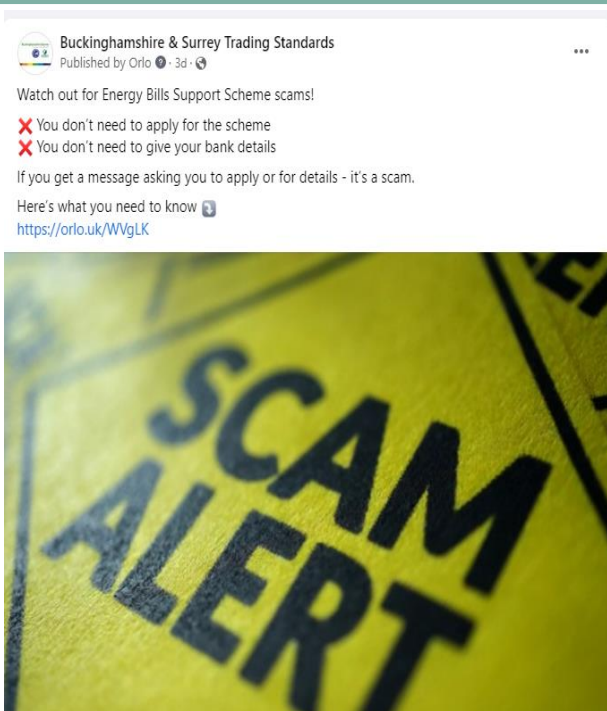
## Keeping people safe from financial loss or harm to their wellbeing

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. Government grants are unfortunately frequently piggy backed off by fraudsters trying to exploit these vulnerabilities.

For raising awareness as broadly as possible, the Service has been using its' social media platforms to raise awareness of cost-of-living related scams and issues and to give people tips about staying safe at this time including by linking to other sources of information. We have also been regularly re-tweeting/posting information from the national illegal money lending team to tackle the harm from loan-sharks and raise awareness of the risks and sources of support.

Some examples of social media messages are below. The first tile below linked to an article from Citizens Advice: [What you need to know about the Energy Bills Support Scheme | by Emily Nix | We are Citizens Advice](#)

**Examples:** Tweets and Facebook posts related to cost of living scams, including some of the energy saving devices we've tested and found not to save you energy continued to be among those gathering the most impressions at the start of 2023:




**Buckinghamshire & Surrey Trading Standards**  
Published by Claire Hz · November 3, 2022 ·

For one in four (24%) UK adults, losing just £100 would tip them into serious financial crisis, unable to pay bills, buy food or buy other essentials. Please do check out this website to learn how to safeguard yourself and others from the latest scams

**Friends Against Scams**  
November 3, 2022 ·

Criminals often adapt their scams to try and target people with solutions to current problems. This is being seen at the moment with the cost of living crisis - many people are struggling financially and criminals are using this to their advantage.

We've added a page to our website about some of these scams to watch out for  
<https://www.friendsagainstscams.org.uk/costofliving> #ScamAware



FRIENDSAGAINSTSCAMS.ORG.UK  
**Cost of living scams | Friends Against Scams**  
Friends Against Scams is a National Trading Standards (NTS) Scams Team initiative, which a...

**Buckinghamshire & Surrey Trading Standards**  
Published by Hootsuite · October 31, 2022 ·

⚠️ Rise in complaints about doorstep callers knocking on doors out of the blue and telling homeowners they may be eligible for free insulation!

The rogues then use pressure selling techniques and persuasive jargon about the energy crisis to make the householders agree to remedy works being completed and to pay upfront, with reassurances they can claim the costs back from the Government.

You can deter cold callers by displaying a No Cold Calling Sticker - email [trading.standards@surreycc.gov.uk](mailto:trading.standards@surreycc.gov.uk) to request one  
<https://www.tradingstandards.uk/.../rogue-traders-cash-.../>



**BE SCAM AWARE** SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL

**Don't buy it from cold calling traders**

Get a Stop Cold Calling pack from trading standards

**Buckinghamshire & Surrey Trading Standards**  
Published by Hootsuite · December 14, 2022 at 12:02 PM ·

The cost-of-living crisis has left many people struggling to make ends meet. One consequence is that loan sharks are taking advantage of this hardship.

[Stop Loan Sharks England](http://www.stoploansharks.co.uk) can provide support if you are dealing with a loan shark



**#SleighNoToLoanSharks** **STOP LOAN SHARKS**  
Intervention . Support . Education

**Buckinghamshire & Surrey Trading Standards**  
Published by Hootsuite · November 30, 2022 ·

Borrowing from a loan shark can lead to damaging consequences for your finances and future. Let us help you learn more about them so you can avoid this risky debt trap — and find safer alternatives if needed  
<https://www.stoploansharks.co.uk/>  
[#SleighNoToLoanSharks](https://twitter.com/SleighNoToLoanSharks)



**#SleighNoToLoanSharks** **STOP LOAN SHARKS**  
Intervention . Support . Education

Join our free #webinar for advice on how to spot, report & protect yourself & others against #scams.

We're joined by guest speaker from @SurreyFRS to cover how to stay safe whilst budgeting your money this winter.

Sign up ...surreytradingstandards.eventbrite.com

#ScamAware #SaveSafely



10:01 AM - Jan 4, 2023 - 4,325 Views

**Example:** In addition to our own social media accounts we have worked closely with the communications teams in both Councils who have included some important scams messages in materials for residents.

For example Surrey included a scams warning in their Directory of Support:

**COST OF LIVING**

NO ONE LEFT BEHIND

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL

**Surrey County Council**

**DIRECTORY OF SUPPORT**

surreycc.gov.uk/welfare

For news and updates on support from across the county, please scan the QR code or follow us on social media.

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**SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES**

**Surrey Family Information Service**  
Providing advice, support and information on a range of subjects.  
**Am I eligible?** Yes, support and advice for everyone.  
Visit [surreycc.gov.uk/fis](https://surreycc.gov.uk/fis) or call **0300 200 1004** (Mon - Fri, 9am - 5pm)

**Club4**  
Free school holiday camps running during the longer school holidays, offering healthy food and fun activities.  
**Am I eligible?** For children aged 5-16 who receive benefit-related free school meals.  
Visit [activesurrey.com/community/club4](https://activesurrey.com/community/club4)

**Free school meals**  
Free school meals for primary and secondary pupils.  
**Am I eligible?** All infant pupils are entitled to free school meals. Children in Year 3 and above are eligible if their parents receive one or more qualifying benefits. If you think your child may be entitled to a free school meal, contact your school to apply or visit [surreycc.gov.uk/freeschoolmeals](https://surreycc.gov.uk/freeschoolmeals)

**School uniform**  
We have a list of local services that can support with school uniform costs.  
**Am I eligible?** If you are worried about school uniform costs, the Family Information Service provides suggestions and services that can support.  
Visit [surreycc.gov.uk/schooluniforms](https://surreycc.gov.uk/schooluniforms)

**TOP TIP** It's important for your health to heat your home to at least 18°C (65°F).

**Be aware of scams**  
Cost of living scams can include fake energy rebate texts, offers of loans, too good to be true prices, and false home improvement claims to cut your bills. Be wary of unexpected phone calls, texts, pop up adverts online, emails and knocks on the door. For more advice, to report a fraud or scam, get a free no cold calling or scams sticker pack, or enquire about a free call blocker device please visit [surreycc.gov.uk/tradingstandards](https://surreycc.gov.uk/tradingstandards) or call **0300 123 2329**

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# 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.

The Service has seen an increase in the reporting of pricing complaints, in particular where shelf-edge reductions are not being matched at the tills. Consumers are checking receipts more and are noticing the discrepancy. This has occurred in major supermarket chains and in smaller independent shops. Where appropriate conversations have taken place with the shops concerned and checks undertaken. Another area is an increase in the reporting of short measure complaints across a range of goods including fuel, fruit and fish. Increasingly consumers are weighing their purchases on their own kitchen scales.

### Accuracy of measures



The Service has tested the accuracy of 354 petrol pumps in 30 petrol stations (in Surrey 215 nozzles in 20 petrol stations, in Bucks 139 nozzles in 10 petrol stations). 18 nozzles (5%) were found to be giving incorrect measures and were taken out of use until they were adjusted to be accurate.

On average they were approximately 1% short, meaning that with current prices consumers would be paying around £1 more each time they filled up at one of those pumps than they should have been adding up to potential losses of tens of thousands of pounds.

### Business Advice

Both the business advice helpline and Primary Authority Partnerships have been supporting businesses navigate the changing economic environment. This initially manifested as supply chain issues which resulted in shortages of certain ingredients

and card for packaging and has more recently developed into acquisitions, mergers and liquidations of businesses.

Advice has related to suitability and labelling of substitute ingredients, use of printed label /packaging stocks, allergen implications and transition of primary authority relationships.

## Letting agents and property issues

Around 20% of households are in the private rentals, spending<sup>1</sup> on average 26% of their income on rent, so it is vital that this sector operates fairly and doesn't put these renters at excessive risk. Trading Standards are the responsible agency for ensuring that Letting Agents for rented accommodation comply with transparency requirements to display fees that they charge to both tenants and landlords. We also ensure that those fees charged by Letting Agents and Landlords are permitted within the criteria stipulated by the Tenant Fees Act 2019. This Act stopped landlords and lettings agents from charging unfairly.

Trading Standards also have responsibility to ensure that where Letting Agents hold client money, either belonging to tenants or landlords, that money is protected by membership of one of the Government approved Client Money Protection Schemes. This ensures that their money (often the deposit paid upfront) is protected from loss. The Letting Agent needs indicate which redress scheme and client money protection scheme they belong to via websites and in their physical premises so that residents know who to approach if there is a problem. The aim of these requirements is for renters to be better protected from unfair charges and losing their money through no fault of their own.

The declared Energy Performance of both domestic and commercial premises is now mandatory upon marketing of a property as it can significantly affect the ongoing costs of living in the property and Trading Standards are responsible for ensuring that Letting Agents, Estate Agents and Landlords ensure that Energy Performance ratings and certificates are available to prospective tenants or purchasers.

Following some activity a couple of years ago which showed more than 80% of lettings agents in the South East were not fully compliant, the Service has been carrying out work to improve compliance and protection for renters.

Over the past year 64 agents have been contacted and advised to carry out corrective actions to ensure that they are compliant with the requirements above. Of these 47 (73%) have responded to the advice and are now fully compliant. We continue to work with the remainder and are optimistic that the majority will become compliant.

Where a letting agent is not moving themselves into compliance the Service can impose financial penalties, and this is considered in line with our Enforcement Policy. During the year a letting agent and a landlord were both fined (a fixed penalty amount of £200 each) for failing to ensure that an Energy Performance Certificate was available when a

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<sup>1</sup> [Private rental affordability, England, Wales and Northern Ireland - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk)

property was marketed. In that case the EPC was not commissioned for over 4 months after initially marketing and letting the property.

Work on this area, protecting vulnerable consumers in the private rental market will continue into 23/24.

## Illegal goods

This is a broad term to include counterfeit goods and illegally imported goods to avoid paying duty. Such items are often cheaper than their legal equivalents and therefore become more attractive to both consumers buying them and businesses selling them when finances are stretched.

However, there are higher risks involved in buying these goods. Not only have they not been subject to the same regulatory controls so you cannot be sure that what is in them is safe, because of their illegal routes into the country they can be a source of funding to serious and organised criminals. Many of these types of goods are not labelled correctly for our market, so may not have warnings required or may not be labelled in English, making it difficult for some purchasers to know what's in them, including whether they contain allergens.

We are beginning to see intelligence which suggests an increase in counterfeit goods in the marketplace and we have planned work to tackle this problem in the year ahead.

Illegal Tobacco is a significant problem, with the cost-of-living crisis increasing the demand for cheap goods, our work in this area is increasing. As a cheap source of tobacco, often with no health warnings in English and not in plain packaging, illegal tobacco is linked to smoking in young people and those from more deprived groups for whom price affects how much they can smoke.

Because smoking is so harmful, differences in smoking prevalence across the population translate to health inequalities, and differing smoking prevalence rates in different groups will be exacerbated by it being more likely that those with lower incomes will be more likely to purchase illegal tobacco because of its lower cost.

Following **114** unannounced test purchasing visits for illegal tobacco, **6** days of operations with the tobacco detection dogs (funded by HMRC) have been conducted. The intelligence from the test purchases assists in directing where to look when making visits with the dog. For example, if the test purchaser noticed tobacco being collected from a vehicle, we would take the dog to the vehicle. This led to **17** seizures from premises of over **85,000** cigarettes, over **7,000** illegal vapes, over **11kg** of illegal hand rolling tobacco and some potentially illegal alcohol found. The approximate value of the illegal tobacco seized was **£40,000**.

During the year we have seen a noticeable increase in the complexity of the hiding places used for illegal tobacco, including the use of electromagnets to release the entrance to the hide (in one example it was behind a shelving unit, in another the tobacco was hidden in the top of a freezer unit) and other electronic means to release hides behind false walls – see photographs below. We are also seeing a concerning trend of the same premises re-stocking with illegal tobacco after our seizures, with some premises having had multiple seizures during the year.

