

Half Year Report

2023-24

Buckinghamshire&Surrey
trading standards

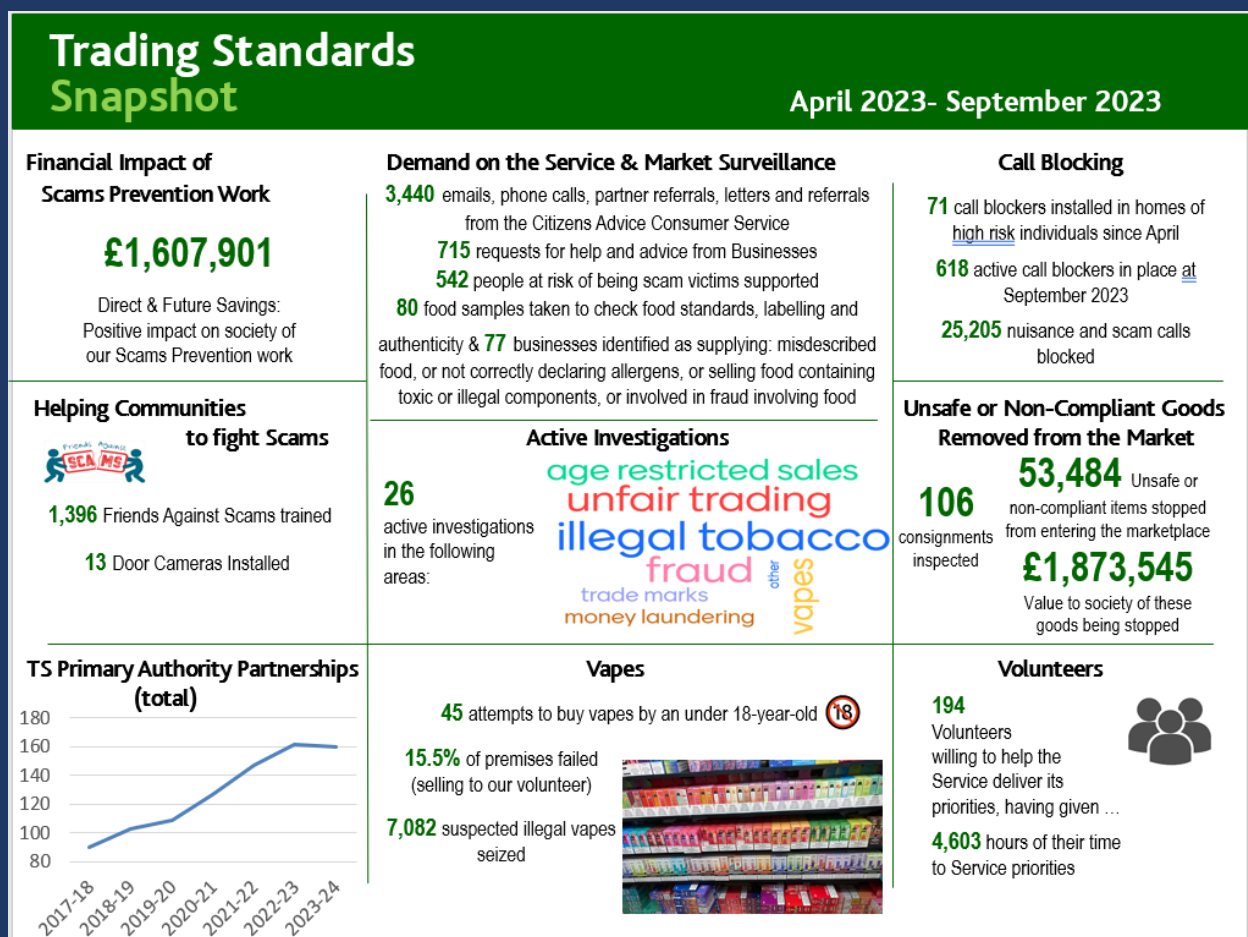


Summary

The Trading Standards service exists to:

- protect individuals, communities and businesses from harm and financial loss
- help businesses to thrive by maintaining a fair trading environment
- improve the health and wellbeing of people and communities
- fulfil our statutory responsibilities to deliver consumer and public protection services across Buckinghamshire and Surrey

Supporting communities through significant increases in the cost of living became a priority in the middle of last year and has remained a priority into this year, alongside vapes enforcement which remains a concern and is subject to a separate paper. Highlights of the first half of the year include an increasing impact of our prevention work, reaching over £1.6m money saved for residents. The Service worked with the Communications Teams of both Councils to encourage the take up of call blockers as a tool for vulnerable residents to avoid phone fraud, and we have installed 71 so far this year.



Service Priority Area 1

Protecting the most vulnerable. Tackling fraudulent, illegal and unfair trading practices.

Key Performance Indicator:

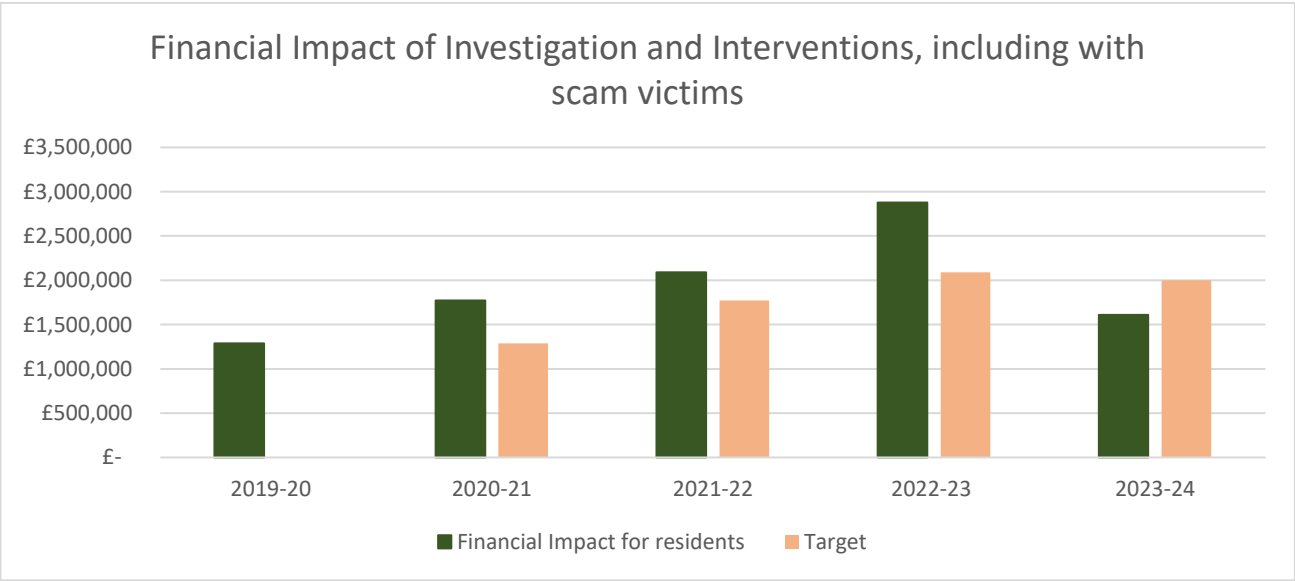
To increase the financial impact of our investigations and interventions including with scam victims.

Status Green



Comments:

Work to prevent and tackle scams and consumer frauds is a high priority for the Service. In the first half of 2023-24 **£1,607,901** has been saved for residents as a results of Service interventions compared to £2,878,557 in the full year 22/23.



Some examples of our financial impact in the first half of the year include:

- An investigation and subsequent prosecution for unfair trading offences and fraud. The two victims received compensation of their direct losses voluntarily paid by the defendant mid way through the court process, totalling just over £80,000. The defendant has pleaded guilty to the unfair trading offences but has pleaded not guilty to fraud and is awaiting trial.
- Installing call blockers in the homes of 71 people particularly vulnerable to phone fraud this year (compared to 110 installed last year). Call blockers installed by the Service have stopped over 25,000 nuisance and fraudulent calls (compared to over 50,000 last year). On average this saves a vulnerable resident nearly £9,000 per

year and improves the householders wellbeing. The cost: benefit ratio of the call blockers is 32:1 i.e., every £1 spent saves £32.

- Installing door cameras in the homes of 13 people particularly vulnerable to doorstep fraud (compared to 31 last year). In the pilot these cameras reduced the household losses to doorstep fraud on average £18,300 and increased the householders wellbeing. The cost: benefit ratio of the pilot project was 39:1 i.e. every £1 spent saves £39.

Call Blockers



Call blockers are an extremely effective way of stopping criminals accessing vulnerable residents by telephone giving residents peace of mind and preventing the fraud. Buckinghamshire and Surrey Trading Standards provides and installs call blocking technology free of charge to people being plagued by nuisance and scam calls.

If a local resident feels either they or a relative may benefit from a call blocker they can email this request to us at trading.standards@surreycc.gov.uk. A Prevention Team officer will contact the resident and discuss how the call blocker works and assess whether it is an appropriate solution for the resident. A simple

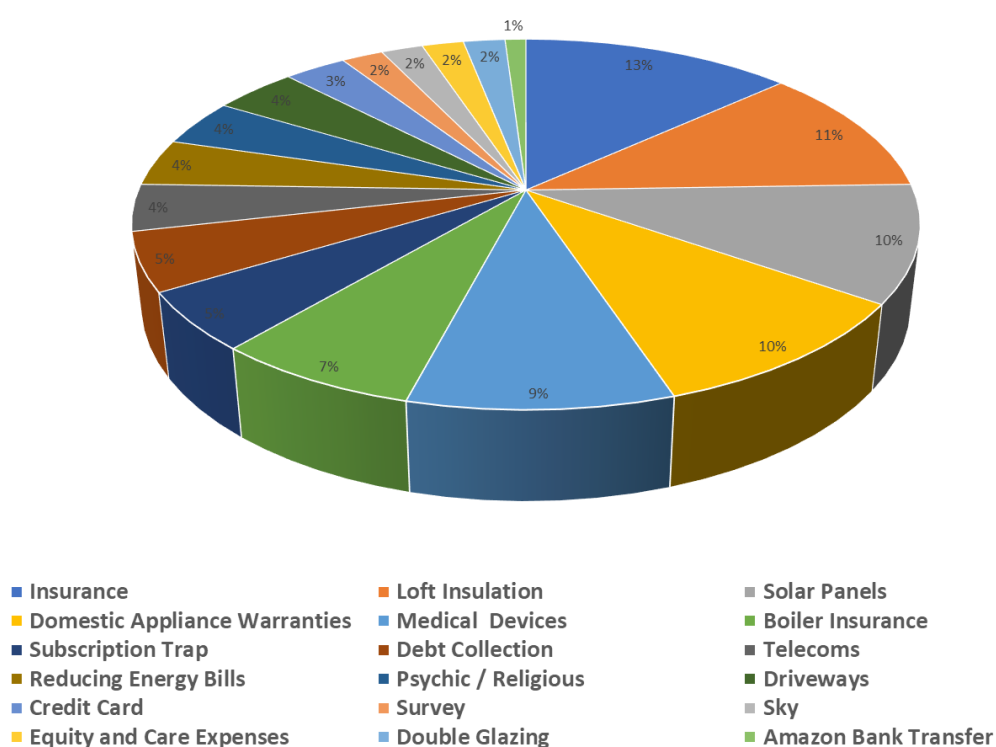
form will be completed, and the fitting of the call blocker arranged. In urgent cases our officers are trained to install the units there and then.

Feedback from residents who have had a call blocker installed (and their families) is consistently positive. The most recent feedback included the following comments:

- “The ... device has made such a difference to my elderly mother (98) and my disabled sister (70) as they can now answer the phone with confidence. As their carer I have peace of mind knowing that nobody can get through who they don't know. They were victims of a scam and the phone is now one thing I do not have to worry about. Thank you”
- “This ... device is one of the best pieces of equipment we have ever had. We are most grateful for this device and it has solved the problem with nuisance callers - virtually overnight!”
- “I am grateful you are checking on my mum, thank you”
- “My husband & I are much happier now that we have the ... device. We don't feel threatened now when we answer the phone.”
- “I am no longer worried when the phone rings since the device has been installed.”
- “The device has eliminated nuisance calls completely. I feel much safer having it”

Through access to the call blocker data we can see the origin of failed calls enabling us to understand the causes and themes behind nuisance and fraudulent calls which helps us to ensure that our communications on scams are current and topical. The most recent data showed:

Call Blocker Nuisance/Scam Calls Data 2022/23



Working with the Communications team, we are planning this years Christsmas campaign to be encouraging suitable residents to have a call blocker installed, by reaching out to their friends and families through the campaign. The materials will be released in the coming weeks.

Door and doorbell Cameras

Doorstep crime (fraud) refers to rogue traders, bogus callers, and distraction burglary. These crimes can have a huge financial impact on their victims and lead to both psychological and physical damage. Home Office research shows the majority of victims of this type of offending are over 65 and are two and a half times more likely to be in care or die within two years as a result of victimisation compared to their non-defrauded neighbours.



The use of door cameras is now part of our standard practice with suitable households, although we have (and continue to try) a range of products as each is slightly different and meets different residents needs. One of the more used products we use is a camera that moves with the door, enabling interactions when the door is open to be recorded as well

as when the door is shut. Feedback from residents who have had the cameras installed this year includes:

- It's been really useful for dealing with pest door interactions as mum is so frail.
- I find it useful although I sometimes have difficulty finding my phone to see who is there.
- Thank you for doing such a good job and providing valuable information.
- Extremely grateful and were not expecting that level of service.
- 'Nottingham Knockers' and other undesirable types have been deterred by the ring doorbell.

Other Preventative Interventions

Stopping residents from becoming repeat victims of fraud and scams requires putting in place a mix of interventions that are personalised to them which relate back to the reason(s) they are vulnerable to fraud. As described above there are some technological interventions that help but, in many cases, social isolation is a key factor, with victims having developed relationships with the scammers because they are the only people they regularly speak to or believing that they are friends. Fraudsters are adept at cultivating these relationships to maximise their exploitation. Social isolation needs to be addressed alongside technological interventions to enable residents to live more happily in their own homes for longer.

Re-connecting people with their local communities, in activities that genuinely interest them can be key to reducing that social isolation. We are fortunate to have a strong group of volunteers who can assist with this work, by befriending people and accompanying residents to local activities until they feel confident to go alone.

Being alert to other needs of the individual and connecting them to charitable and other Council services that can assist to overcome challenges they might experience is also vital, and the service has excellent links to enable this. For example a person who has been subjected to years of mail fraud where they have been buying excessive quantities of products may also be a hoarder and support is available through the fire service and adult social care to manage that.



The Scam Marshal scheme is for individuals who have been targeted by scams and now want to fight back. We empower these people to share their own experiences, helping others to report and recognise scams and by sending any scam mail that they receive to the National Trading Standards (NTS) Scams Team so that it can be utilised as evidence in future investigative and enforcement work. This refocuses their connection with the frauds into something positive and with purpose which can be useful in improving their wellbeing and helping them feel like they are taking back control.

As well as working with individuals most vulnerable to fraud, the Service also acts with the wider community to raise awareness of fraud and scams and reduce the chances of anyone becoming a victim. One example is that the Service runs monthly “Friends Against Scams” webinars where people can learn how to protect themselves and their loved ones from scams and help raise awareness throughout their own community. The webinars can be booked on this link: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/594737645307>. Those who are willing can become Scam Champions where they run Friends Against Scams training sessions themselves. In May, to tie in with Deaf Awareness Week the Friends Against Scams webinar was run with British Sign Language and subtitles and recorded for future use. Thames Valley Police supported the webinar by providing additional advice on protecting yourself from cyber-crime. This webinar was particularly popular, with over 100 attendees, and as a result we will be running similarly signed sessions from time to time in the future.



These sessions have contributed to us being the lead TS Service nationally for people signed up through the Friends against Scams initiative through us, with 1,396 new Friends Against Scams recruited in the first half of this year, adding to the 25,000 already trained in our areas.

The Prevention Team have been nominated for two Council awards: STARS in Surrey and Proud of You in Buckinghamshire, recognising the great range of preventative work they undertake.

Case Studies: The Prevention Team work closely with scam victims to identify and act on the root cause(s) of their being victimised (often social isolation is a factor). The team also look to increase the barriers to the fraudsters (e.g. installing a call blocker). Engagement can be over a prolonged period of time and is likely to involve working with partners in other Service areas. Examples of working with scam victims are below:

Case Study 1

Mr K is a socially isolated widower residing in the Marlow area of Buckinghamshire. He received an unsolicited email from his Bank requiring him to click on a hyperlink. Unfortunately, this was a bogus email which enabled the fraudsters to access his personal and financial information.

Mr K first became aware of the scam when he discovered his Nat West account had been locked. The criminals had attempted to steal £100,000 but thanks to the quick actions of the Nat West fraud team they were able to quickly identify the fraudulent activity and put a hold on all transactions. Unfortunately, three other institutions where Mr K had investments were not so diligent. From these three separate institutions Mr K lost £99,868, £40,000 and £132,000 respectively, a total of almost £272,000.

Mr K did the right thing by reporting the incident to Action Fraud and Trading Standards are now working closely with Thames Valley Police to safeguard this gentleman and increase his resilience to future targeting (his details will have been shared with other criminals making him at serious risk of additional victimisation). The three financial institutions are currently conducting a review of the incidents and we are hopeful of securing a refund.

Case Study 2

Mr B, an Epsom resident in his early 80's with several chronic health conditions was cold called on the doorstep by four burly men. They told Mr B that they had been doing some work for a neighbour and noticed that he had some problems with his guttering and fascia. Before he could respond the men had pushed past him and put their ladders against his house. Mr B, feeling very intimidated allowed them to proceed. The men subsequently demanded £9,000.

Following unsuccessful attempts to transfer the money electronically, Mr B, whose anxiety was increasing, phoned his bank. At this point the men disappeared leaving their ladders behind and failing to obtain the £9,000 they had wanted.

It is believed the rogue traders targeted Mr B after they spotted him struggling to put his rubbish out and noticed that he was frail and walked with a stick.

His daughter reported the incident and a safeguarding intervention was undertaken. As part of the suite of preventative measures put into place by Trading Standards, Mr B agreed to have a door camera installed. This would provide piece of mind to Mr B and his daughter and also act as a deterrent to future unwanted cold callers.

Although the door camera is monitored by his daughter, Mr B wanted the ability to monitor his own front door independently, but unfortunately without access to his own a smart phone this was not possible. The TS Prevention Officer dealing with this case was aware of an initiative run by the SCC Tech Angels which aimed to address social isolation through the safe use of technology. Having worked closely with the Tech Angels previously, and following an explanation of the circumstance, they agreed to supply Mr B with an iPad from which he can access the door camera. In addition, Mr B is receiving ongoing training, support and advice from the Tech Angels to ensure he is able to make the most of his iPad and access online resources in a safe and secure manner.

Case Study 3

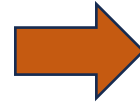
Following a complaint about an energy company cold calling a vulnerable resident which was followed up with the company by the team, the company investigated and came back stating that they would enhance the training given to specifically cover how vulnerable residents are to be interacted with, to include things such as:

- How to approach members of the public
- Avoiding doors with a clear no cold calling sign/no doorstep selling
- Being careful when speaking with the elderly and vulnerable members of the community - and if any signs of dementia or such to politely walk away.

Key Performance Indicator:

Status Amber

Actions to stop rogue traders operating in Buckinghamshire and Surrey.



Comments:

Following further trials being delayed due to a lack of available court time, **no** defendants prosecuted by us have been convicted this year (equally no defendants have been acquitted either). This compares to 11 convictions (and no acquittals) last year. Delays in the court system are continuing to cause significant disruption to the Service and are having a detrimental effect to witnesses and defendants waiting to give evidence or for their trial to be heard.

The Service has 11 cases awaiting trial. These include cases relating to fraud, money laundering, illegal tobacco and unfair trading. In most cases the original trial date has been delayed because of a lack of court time. In one case the offending occurred in 2018, the decision was made to prosecute in 2019 with a first trial date of 2020. Each year the trial has been delayed into the following year and the trial is now scheduled for 2024. The Service remains deeply concerned about the impact on justice of the problems in the court system.

In May, a defendant who had pleaded guilty to fraud relating to home improvements earlier in the year was sentenced to **30** months immediate imprisonment. This sentence was covered in the local media (see example below). This compares to total sentences of 352 months last year.

The Service has an enforcement policy and in line with this not all investigations will lead to a prosecution. **8** people/businesses have received **formal advice and/or warnings** following an investigation by the service into an alleged infringement.

An alternative approach to investigation and a disposal such as prosecution is to consider disruption of criminal activity instead. This is often undertaken by working with partner agencies. For example, we are currently working with the anti-social behaviour teams to explore whether it would be appropriate to request closure orders for our worst, and repeat, offending sellers of illegal tobacco.

Another disruptive approach was taken with a large market where it was identified that there were ongoing problems with counterfeit and illegal goods being sold. A multi-agency operation was undertaken alongside several local and regional partners. It is estimated that the operation prevented sales of around £400,000 illegal goods on the day. Follow up work is being undertaken with the market operator and venue to ensure ongoing compliance is maintained.



Case Study: Coverage of the sentencing of Thomas Sweeney: [Rogue trader who preyed on vulnerable residents sentenced to 30 months in prison](#) | [Buckinghamshire Council](#)

B News ▸ Buckinghamshire News ▸ Buckinghamshire Council

Aylesbury builder who preyed on elderly residents jailed for more than two years

Victims reported "severe stress and worry" caused by on-going problems, and led to some having to pay further to put it right

NEWS By **Luke Donnelly** Multimedia Journalist
15:51, 12 MAY 2023 | UPDATED 15:53, 12 MAY 2023

Bookmark



An Aylesbury builder who preyed on vulnerable elderly residents has been jailed for two-and-a-half years. Thomas Patrick Sweeney, from Marsh Lane in Bishopstone, conned his victims out of more than £93,500.

The 43-year-old pleaded guilty to home improvement fraud at [Aylesbury](#) Crown Court on 21 March 2023. The Judge observed that the unnecessary work was not only overcharged, but the work done was 'abysmal' and priced extortionately.

During the sentencing hearing, the court heard how Sweeney, who initially cold-called at his victims' property, conned them out of large amounts of money by targeting them and making them believe – wrongly – that they needed extensive roof and chimney improvement works to their [High Wycombe](#) home.

The defendant was sentenced for fraud, including grossly overcharging for work. In total, the victims paid a total of £93,500 in cheque payments towards the amounts sought by the defendant, which totalled £110,600.

Following a complaint by the victims' family, the case against Sweeney was brought by Buckinghamshire & Surrey Trading Standards, in relation to the company, TPS Property Care Ltd of Aylesbury. The defendant was the sole director and shareholder of the company.

Sweeney had direct contact with the victims in discussing the works and payments. A Trading Standards inspector confirmed that whilst there was a need for some repairs to the property, there were many other works that were unnecessary and other works that hadn't even been completed.

The expert considered the standard of work abysmal and to such an extremely poor standard that extensive repairs are now required to rectify this. The victims have reported "severe stress and worry" caused by the ongoing problems with leaks and the cost of remedial work.

They also reported "considerable worry and annoyance caused by work not being done correctly and the further financial expense to put it right". Mark Winn, [Buckinghamshire Council's](#) Cabinet Member for Homelessness & Regulatory Services, said: "This is a shocking case, with vulnerable, elderly residents ruthlessly targeted as easy prey by this fraudster.

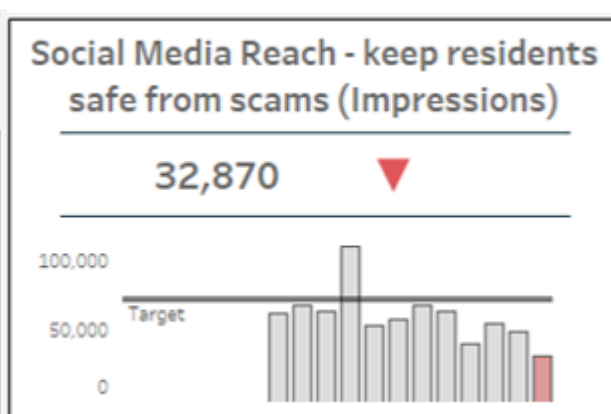
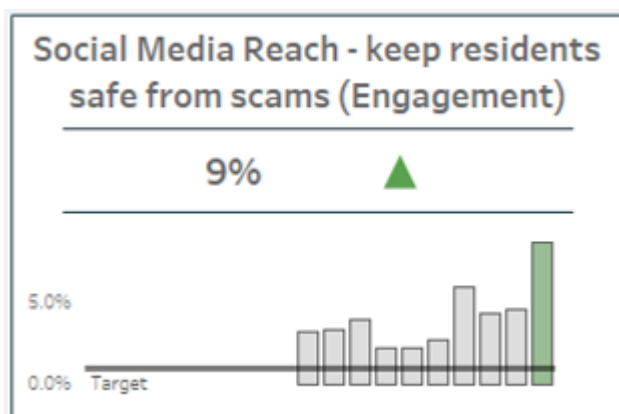
"It's not a case of a genuine builder making a few mistakes, but of a criminal who deliberately defrauded vulnerable residents out of significant sums of money. My thoughts are with the residents and the council will be pressing to ensure money is recovered from Proceeds Of Crime Act proceedings and that compensation is paid to the victims.

Key Performance Indicator:

Status: Balanced

Communications activity:

- % engagement generated by our social media activity
- Number of impressions generated by Trading Standards social media activity
- Number of followers on social media platforms.



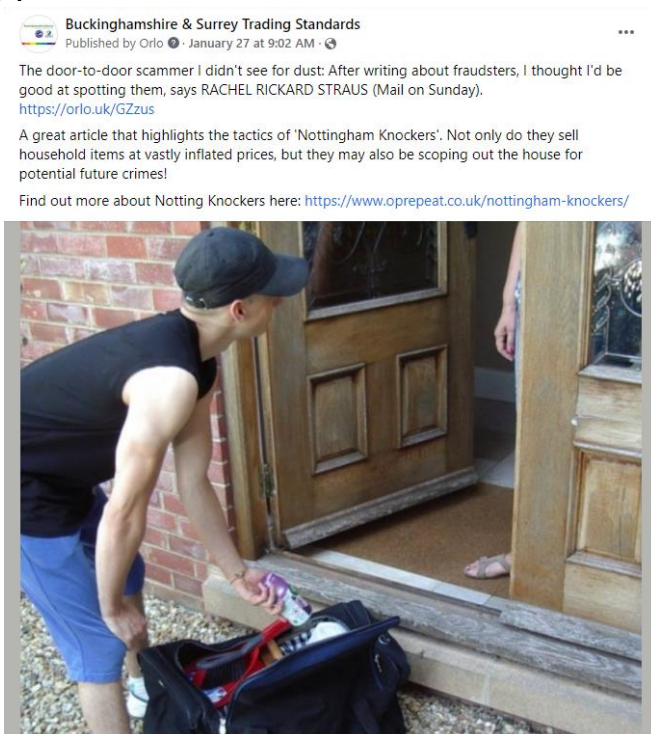
Comments:

These graphs demonstrate that engagement and impressions do not follow the same pattern, which is why the Joint Committee look at both pieces of information.

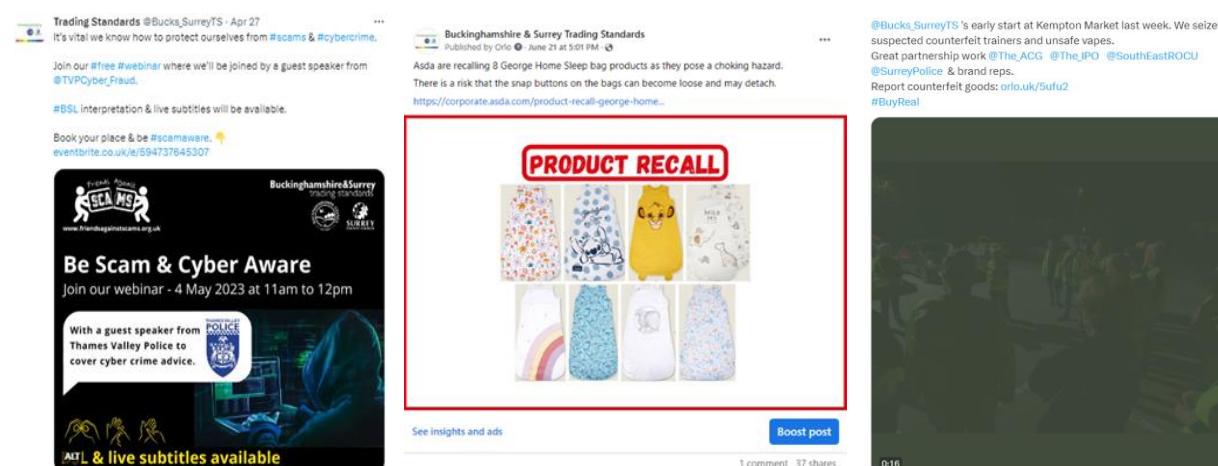
For the first six months of the year social media engagement (such as liking, sharing or commenting on the post) across all of our channels had averaged **5%** well above the local government 'good' standard of 1-2% and comparing to 3.34% during the calendar year 2022 and 2.37% in the calendar year 2021. The increased engagement since June is likely to be linked to more than one factor. With the help of the communications team, we ran a sustained campaign to raise awareness of call blockers, asking vulnerable residents or their friends/family to get in touch with us to get a free call blocker. As part of this we used a video with members of the team talking about call blockers : [Get a call blocker from Trading Standards - YouTube](#), and another video informing people how to report scams [Report a scam - YouTube](#) both of which generated good engagement:



Social media impressions (i.e. the number of times the post/tweet is seen on a readers screen) generated by Trading Standards totalled **317,481** for the first half of the year, which is a reduction compared to 1,100,000 in the calendar year 2022 and 888,000 in the calendar year 2021. The reasons for this are not entirely clear because some posts gain unexpected interest. It is possible that changes to the platform previously known as Twitter, now X, may have impacted these numbers. Looking back, the large spike in numbers back in January related to a post highlighting a newspaper article about “Nottingham Knockers”:



The Service post on Facebook and Twitter frequently (usually at least daily) with a mix of information about what we have been doing, local alerts regarding doorstep sellers and information from partners which relates to our activities (for example information on product safety recalls, information from the Animal Health and Plant Agency about Avian Flu restrictions, information from the Food Standards Agency with an allergen alert, Action Fraud messages on the latest scams etc). In addition to the video above, some of the posts generating the most engagement or most impressions so far this year include:

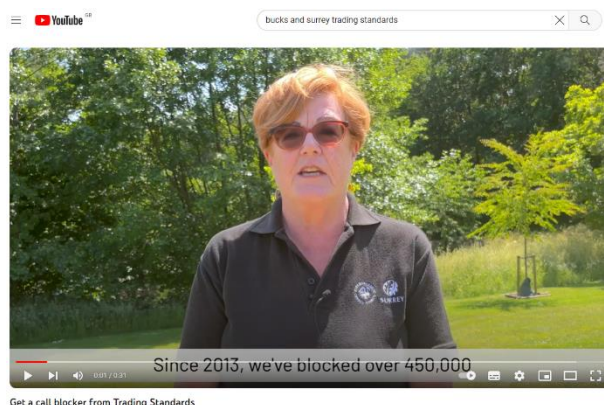


At the end of September, the followers stood at:

- Twitter/X – **4,171** (4,189 at the end of March 2023)
- Facebook – **2,171** (2,056 at the end of March 2023)
- TS Alert! Signed up to receive newsletter – **1,322** (1,244 at the end of March 2023)
- Neighbourhood Watch Alerts – **3,447** (3,127 at the end of March 2023)
- LinkedIn – **127** (122 at the end of March 2023)

Other communications activities in the first half of the year:

At the start of the year, we undertook a significant push to raise awareness of the usefulness of call blockers, encouraging local people who were particularly vulnerable to scams (or their family/friends on their behalf) to apply for a call blocker for free. This ran for several months with messages going out via both Councils' communications teams, on Twitter/X, Facebook and via Friends Against Scams webinars. Two examples include: [Be Scam Aware - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](#) and [Call blocker programme shields vulnerable Buckinghamshire residents against scammers | Buckinghamshire Council](#). As part of this we also produced a video informing residents about call blockers: [Get a call blocker from Trading Standards - YouTube](#)



The messages will be repeated from time to time in the future, including as part of a Christmas campaign, to try to ensure ongoing awareness of this key tool in the fight against phone fraud.

We continue to publish a fortnightly newsletter, TS Alert! This gives all the latest Trading Standards news, including the latest scams, product and food recalls to help residents stay safe. The newsletter can be found here: [Trading Standards Newsletter \(surreycc.info\)](#)

27 October 2023

Buckinghamshire & Surrey trading standards

TS Alert!
Newsletter from Trading Standards

Do you have an electric blanket?

Last year a shocking (literally) 86% of blankets we safety checked last year were a potential fire hazard!
Bring your blanket to us next week and we can check it for you - if it fails we will replace it free of charge (courtesy of Dreams).

Where and when we are testing

Scary mask!
During a recent investigation, the

Firework safety
Injury figures support the advice



Sharks in disguise

Loan sharks can often pose as a friend or a credible lender - but if you fall for their tricks, you may



No Blame No Shame

The phrase 'fall for a scam' is often used, but you don't hear 'fall for a burglary'. This kind of language



Scary mask!

During a recent investigation, the



Firework safety

Injury figures support the advice

Over the summer we've taken the opportunity to engage directly with residents at a range of events happening across both Counties targeting different audiences, including:

- Buckinghamshire County Show to engage people in the issues of illegal vapes and how to protect themselves from scams.
- Buckinghamshire Illegal Tobacco Roadshows alongside Bucks Public Health.
- Surrey Fire and Rescue Open Day
- Surrey Pride to talk with people about how to protect themselves from Scams
- The Prevention Team have provided preventative measures at Surrey Cost of Living event, Access all areas, Neighbourhood Watch, Epilepsy Centre
- Surrey Youth Voice Summer Party talking to young people and their carers about scams and how to avoid loan sharks – our shark mascot (using a costume borrowed from the national Loan Shark Team) was particularly popular with the younger attendees and great at drawing in their carers for a conversation
- Our volunteers have led scam surgeries in libraries, Veteran Hubs and have held slots on radio including Chiltern Sound, Suzy Radio, Radio Redhill and East Surrey Hospital.



Communications campaigns currently being planned or very recently include:

- Supporting the national Loan Sharking week 24 Oct -31 Oct. This included social media content directing people to safe sources of help with debt including using the national Loan Shark England content and tailoring this to direct people towards local support. This was further supported by Buckinghamshire Council pointing residents to <https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/cost-of-living/benefits-help-with-debt-and-money-problems/>
- Reminding residents to take care with Halloween costumes, using the video we made with Surrey Fire and Rescue two years ago: [Scare safely this Halloween! - YouTube](#)



- A campaign to raise awareness of the Electric Blanket Testing being carried out at the start of November: [Do you know how safe your electric blanket is? - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](#)

- A Christmas campaign to encourage friends and family to have conversations about scams with people who might be particularly vulnerable to fraud and to request call blockers for those whom it might be particularly relevant for.
- Linking to the Adults Safeguarding Week starting on the 20th November we will be running a Friends Against Scams webinar with an additional section on Powers of Attorney provided by Age UK, to be signed in British Sign Language on the Tuesday of that week. On the Friday, there will be several face-to-face engagement points with the public to talk about Scams. In Surrey, the Squires Garden Centre chain have agreed to use using their garden centres for this, and in Buckinghamshire the Dobbies chain have agreed to us using their garden centres. The sessions will largely be run by our volunteer network and Thames Valley Police may also be involved at some of the Buckinghamshire based events.



Be #scamaware

Learn how to protect yourself from scams, and hear from our guest speaker, from Age UK, on why you should have a Power of Attorney.

BSL & live subtitles available



Service Priority Area 2

Enabling businesses to get the help and support they need to thrive and grow. Delivering public protection through supporting businesses to comply with their legal responsibilities and ensuring a level playing field.

Research shows that a positive regulatory environment can contribute significantly to economic development and sustainable growth, improving the openness of markets and creating a less constricted business environment for innovation and entrepreneurship. It can protect compliant businesses by enabling fair competition and promoting a level playing field and provide business with the confidence to invest, grow and create new jobs.

Key Performance Indicator:

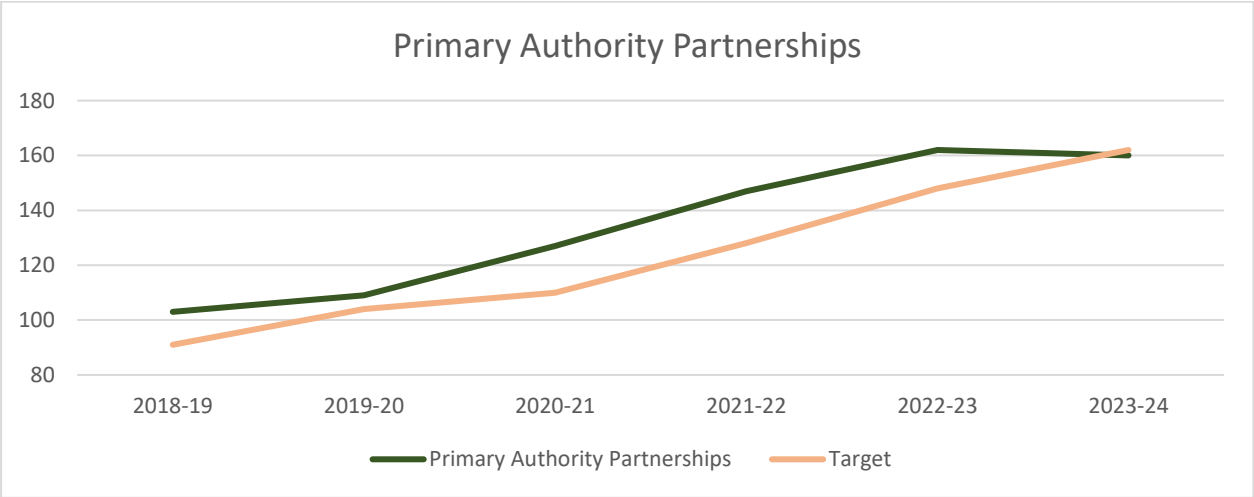
Status: Amber

To increase the number of Primary Authority Partnerships (PAPs)



Comments:

Primary Authority is a national, statutory scheme that enables businesses to access tailored regulatory advice from one authority on a cost recovery basis. Bucks and Surrey's award-winning Primary Authority service supported 160 partnerships by the end of the September. There is significant turbulence in the business world and in April there was a notable drop in number of partnerships, with businesses being acquired by others some folding and others re-evaluating finances. Since then, there has continued to be a smaller degree of turbulence, with the number of partnerships gradually moving back towards the 162 partnerships that were in place at the end of last year.



This total also includes some “coordinated” Partnerships where the relationship with an organisation covers numerous member businesses. For example, the Association of Convenience stores who have nationally over 33,500 members, with 6,600 in the regulated group (approx. 95 in Surrey and 76 in Bucks) but who also make all primary authority advice publicly available on their website.

Primary Authority Partnerships (PAPs) contribute to a positive regulatory environment as they provide a robust platform for Regulatory Services including Trading Standards to understand a business in depth and give appropriate and timely advice. The advice ensures start-ups get it right at the outset and enables all businesses to invest with confidence in products, practices and procedures, knowing that the resources they devote to compliance are well spent.

Case studies: Primary Authority relationships are a successful multiplier for the impact of preventative advice and an effective way to manage and resolve non compliances that, whilst presenting a risk, don't meet the threshold for enforcement action. There are numerous examples of our work to choose from so a few are provided below:

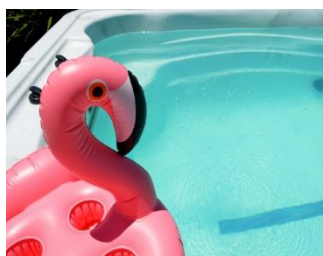
Case Study 1



In August 23 we welcomed the National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF) as new partners. SAIF were established in 1989 and represent 766 privately owned, independent funeral homes and independent funeral directors across the whole UK.

In October officers attended an onsite meeting to deliver bespoke training for auditors who assess member compliance. The feedback from the day was very positive *“Today, the QA training was the best training I have experienced in my tenure. We really appreciate the depth and breadth of your contribution as well as your engaging style. Thank you for serving us so well and we’re looking forward to planning for 2024.”*

Case Study 2



The British and Irish Hot tub and Spa Association (BISHTA) hold an Annual Information and networking day for their 178 members. This year officers from the team returned to deliver a presentation and Q&A session for the group to help upskill their consumer protection knowledge.

Feedback from the session was very positive with plans beginning for further webinars, *“a huge thank you for the excellent presentation on Wednesday, it was very helpful for members to navigate their way through some of the topics that have cropped up during the year!”*

Case Study 3



A visit conducted by another authority resulted in them contacting us. On inspecting a retail outlet of a Primary Authority business, they had identified an issue with Calorie labelling (out of Home sector) (England) Regulations 2021. Officers worked with the business to resolve the matter and apply changes across all nationwide premises. Other matters discussed this year included how to present allergen information, weekday promotion of desserts, and cleansing of coffee machines.

A voluntary business feedback form was received stating the most useful part of the service was *“A quick and clear interpretation of the relevant piece of labelling legislation I was enquiring about. The team made sure that they understood our business and are able to give very clear and focused advice.”*

Case study 4



Each business enquiry is unique. For one business, in a single month we responded to a technical enquiry about the suitability of best before or use by dates on yoghurt-based drinks, the intended changes to UK address requirements from 2024, and labelling and compliance for a product under development aimed at small children.

A voluntary business feedback form was received stating the most useful part of the service was *“the response to our enquiry. The officers are always professional and give very understandable and applicable answers for our business. As a business we value our relationship with them very highly”*.

Logos of all current partnerships

Primary Authority Partnerships in Surrey



New Partnerships since 1 April 2023



Primary Authority Partnerships In Buckinghamshire



New Partnerships since 1 April 2023

National Primary Authority Partnerships



New Partnerships since 1 April 2023



Supporting another
regulator:

COSTA
COFFEE

Key Performance Indicator:

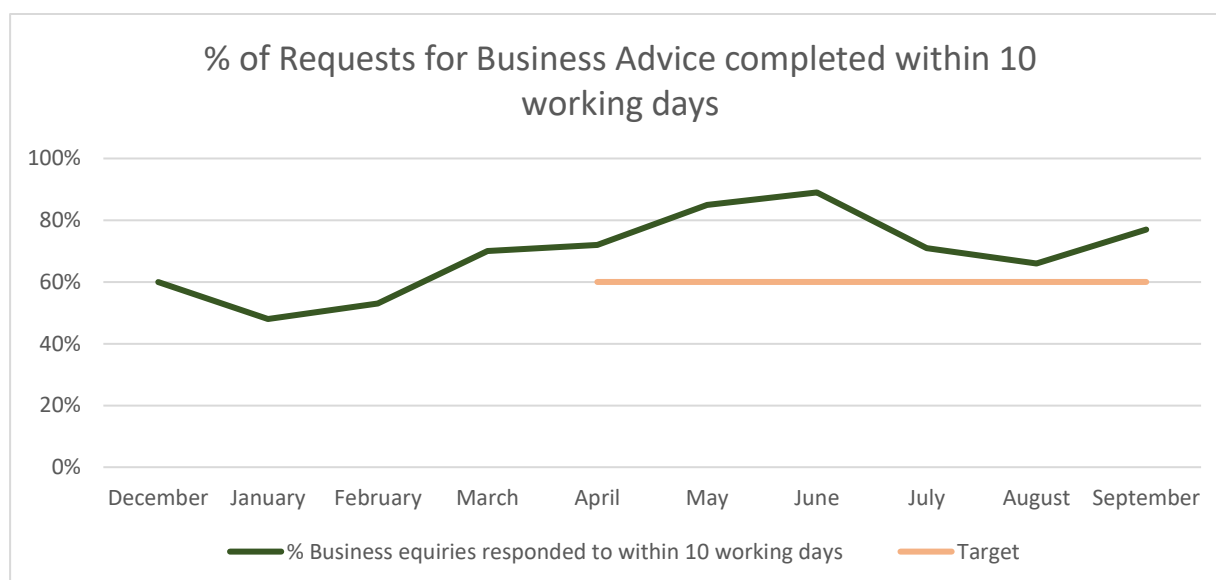
% of requests for business advice completed within 10 working days

Status: Green



Comments:

This indicator was trialled last year and is now fully embedded. The primary aim for business advice is to give accurate and relevant advice. However, the speed is also important, which is reflected here. The target is 60% because a proportion of advice requests will always be much more complex and unable to be appropriately completed within 10 working days. Since the start of the year the indicator has stayed consistently above target.



Case studies: Advice is delivered on the business advice helpline either by telephone or email and is often bespoke to particular circumstances or products.

Examples

- Label checks, advice regarding the use of the words traditional, traditional way and ethically sourced.
- Query regarding the application of EN71 (toy safety) to badges.
- Implications for the addition of substation and EV chargers to a petrol forecourt.
- Advice sought on labelling taps/showers and bathroom accessories.

Service Priority Area 3

Improving wellbeing and public health; tackling the supply of unsafe, dangerous or age restricted products and working to maintain the integrity of the food chain from farm to fork, including food quality, nutrition, and animal health.

Key Performance Indicator:

Number and estimated value of unsafe/non-compliant goods removed from or prevented from entering the supply chain

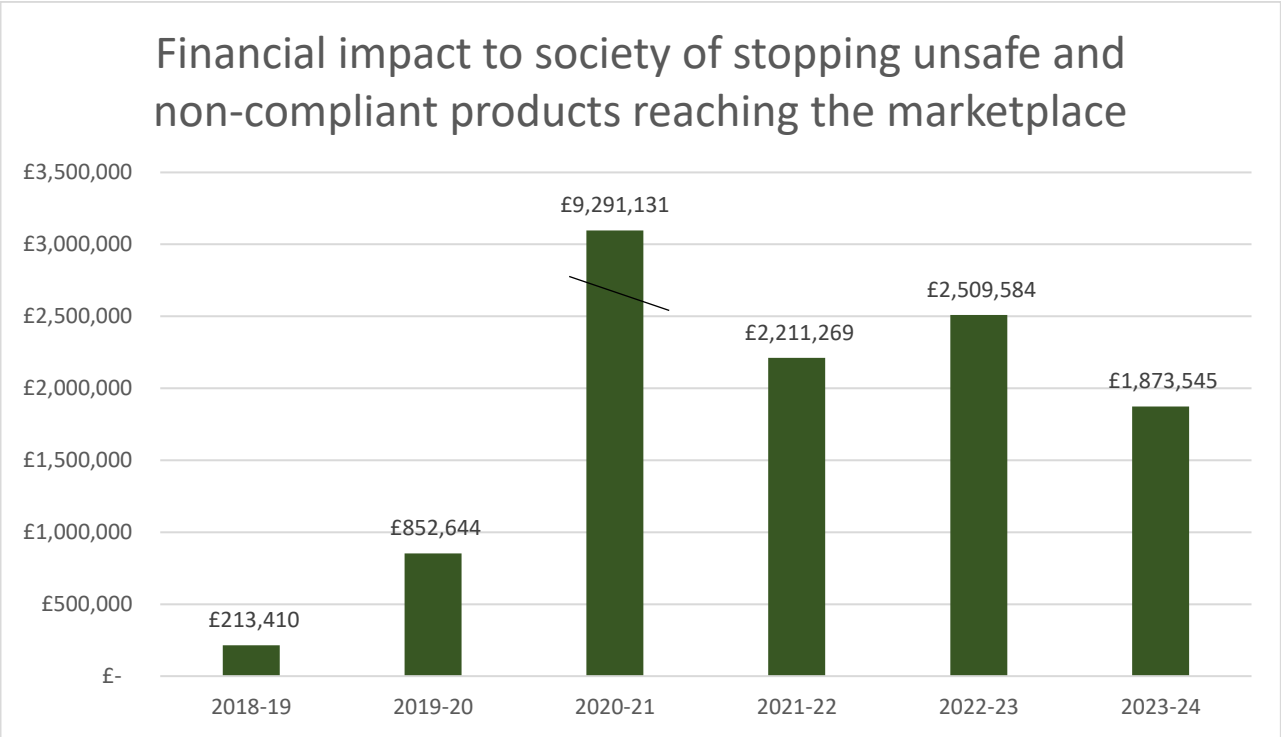
Status Green



Comments:

Using funding from the Office for Product Safety and Standards (OPSS) who are part of the Department for Business and Trade, over **53,000** unsafe or non-compliant products were stopped from entering the country by our officers at Heathrow during the first half of the year. This represents a positive financial impact of over **£1.8m** to society of preventing unsafe goods reaching communities where they can cause damage to people and property.

This compares to just over 71,000 unsafe or non-compliant products stopped in the whole of the previous year.



Amongst the range of products, we have stopped various make up and cosmetic products containing banned or excessive chemicals that pose risks of cancer, kidney failure and neurological damage. A regular reason for declining entry to consignments is the importer failing to provide documents to prove what their products contain or that they have been tested to check they are safe. A frequent issue is the failure to provide testing or compliance documentation for toys, jewellery, cosmetics and electrical items to show the products have been correctly tested to ensure compliance with safety standards. We work with the businesses to inform them of their obligations to stop recurring issues such as this and are looking at ways to make this message more effective. Some examples of other unsafe products prevented from entering the country during the year include:

Case study 1

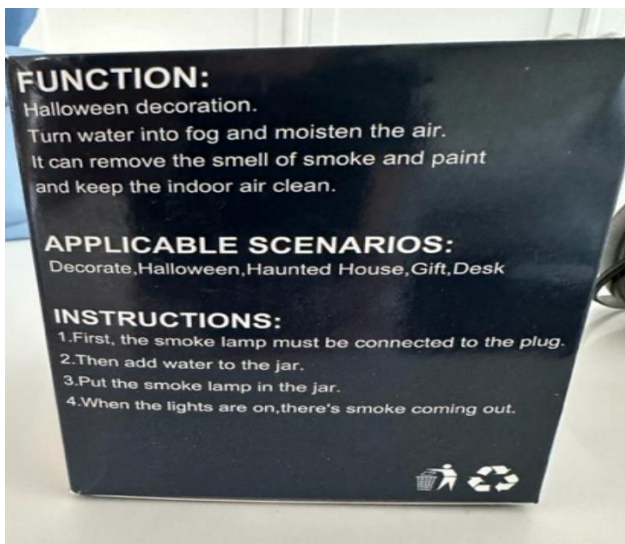
Unsafe plush toys where the stuffing could be easily accessed presenting a choking hazard and there was no labelling in English:



Case study 2

A Halloween Humidifier with a non-complaint plug; no CE or UKCA mark to show they have been tested to the UK standard and are safe; and which presented a risk of electrocution because of the mix of water and poor wiring and construction.

In this item the cauldron is filled with water and the bubbler is submerged in it. When it is switched on water splashed out of the top. The product was considered unsafe, was denied entry and was destroyed.



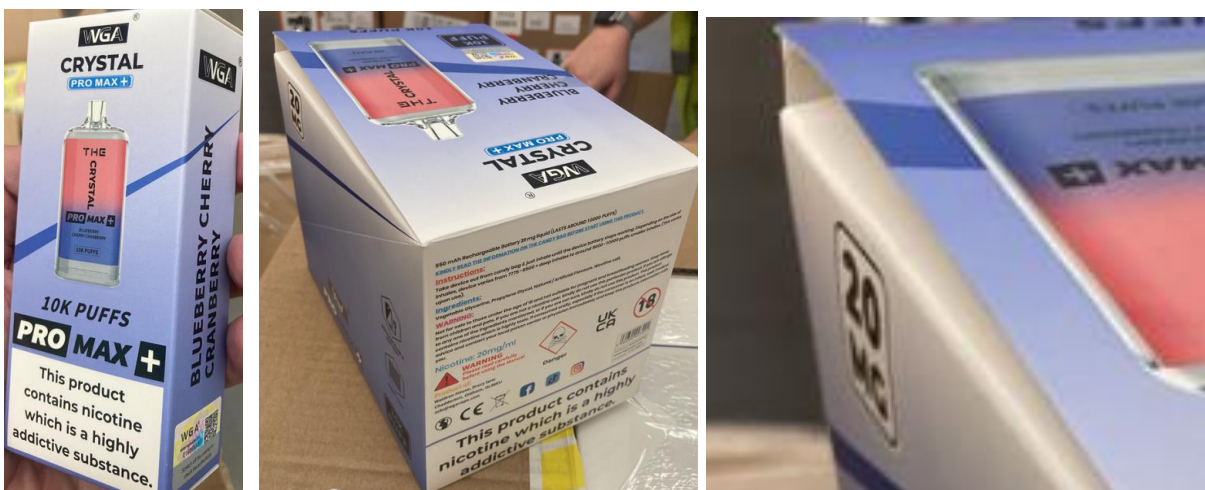
Case study 3

Magnetic sticks containing small parts and magnets that could pose a choking hazard and without adequate documentation to show that the product had undergone the correct safety checks.



Case Study 4

Illegal vapes – oversized (they state 10k puffs, whereas the maximum legal size would only give around 600 puffs) and containing excessive nicotine. Legal vapes are allowed a maximum of 2mg nicotine, whereas this states they contain 20mg. These vapes were identified by Border Force who then sought our advice about whether they were legal or not. We have seen examples on import document of vapes being described as dishwasher parts, atomisers and 0% nicotine when they contained nicotine.



Example 5

Illegal vapes – These ones are illegally using a brand name and look that is currently very appealing to teenagers “Prime” but is counterfeit because the owners of Prime drinks do not make or sell vapes with their brand on them:



Example 6

Illegal vapes – oversized (they state 8,000 puffs, whereas the maximum legal size would only give around 600 puffs). Whilst not currently illegal this product also demonstrates the child appealing flavours being offered “Blue razz cherry”



Key Performance Indicator:

Status Green

Number of premises tested for selling illicit or age restricted products inappropriately, and approximate value of seized goods.



Age Restricted Goods

55 test purchases by underage volunteers were carried out for age restricted products to the end of September. The volunteers made **10** attempts to buy alcohol (no sales), 1 attempt to buy nitrous oxide (no sale) and **45** attempts to buy vapes with a failure (sale) rate of **15.5%**. The higher number of attempts to buy vapes is because we are receiving a very high level of complaints and information about illegal vapes or the under sale of vapes, with **154** in the first half this year (compared to 214 last year).

The Service is alert to the risks of age restricted products being sold to under 18's from nitrous oxide for psychoactive purposes, to knives, alcohol, tobacco and vapes. With some of these products the situation around them can be complex and we may be very unlikely to receive complaints directly. Therefore, particularly with knives, nitrous oxide and alcohol we work with partners in the Police and Licensing teams who often have more knowledge about the crime and antisocial behaviour occurring as a later consequence of what could be underage selling.

Last year the government made an announcement that nitrous oxide will be banned and this is due to come into force imminently, which we assume will change the current legislation regarding sales to under 18s.

There is also significant discussion whether disposable vapes will be banned, discussed in a separate vapes report, which would have an impact on the need for this work in relation to vapes.

Illegal Tobacco

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.

Smoking remains the biggest single cause of preventable mortality and morbidity with huge costs to society¹. Because smoking is so harmful, differences in smoking prevalence across the population translate to health inequalities, and differing smoking prevalence

¹ In Surrey smoking was responsible for 3,958 deaths (2016-18) and 7328 hospital admissions (18/19).

The estimated cost to society of smoking in Buckinghamshire is estimated to be £106.2 million¹ per year (made up of losses to the local economy due to productivity losses, costs to the NHS, additional social care costs and costs of house fires caused by smoking).

rates in different groups² 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.

With 9 ongoing investigations into the supply of illegal tobacco, in the first half of this year we have been focusing on follow up work to these rather than checking the marketplace for further issues. Several of these are unusually complex and so this includes working with the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Teams to explore closure orders for premises known to be selling illegal tobacco and not responding to repeated seizures and in some cases prosecutions. Trading Standards do not have powers to seek the closure orders but can provide the ASB teams with the necessary evidence and intelligence so that they can.

A joint visit with a colleague from the district council licensing team to advise about underage sales on the basis of intelligence that they were selling to children resulted the seizure of 3900 illegal cigarettes, 620 illegal vapes and 1600g of shisha. The investigation is ongoing

There is currently one case awaiting trial for illegal tobacco in February 2024. In this case the illegal tobacco was hidden and secured with the use of electromagnets to seal a storage space in the top of a walk-in chiller cupboard, which was found with the assistance of a tobacco detection dog. The company have pleaded guilty to all the alleged offences, but the Director has pleaded not guilty, hence the trial.

In the first half of the year 4 premises have been warned and given written advice regarding illegal tobacco. These will all be revisited at a future point. This compares to 16 investigations into the supply of illicit tobacco concluded during 22/23 with 4 people and 1 company convicted for tobacco related offences and 12 written warnings being issued. The lower numbers this year are due to the complexity of some of the ongoing investigations and the need to prioritise other work.

Alongside the Public Health Team in Buckinghamshire, we ran two Illegal Tobacco Roadshows in the markets of Aylesbury and High Wycombe. These were an opportunity for Public Health to share messages around quitting smoking and how people could get support, for us to show people what illegal vapes look like so they can avoid them and for our dog handlers to show the skills of the tobacco detection dogs that we use to find hidden tobacco. Pippa the detection dog continues to be a great draw and an excellent way to start a conversation about the issues with local people. We also took the opportunity to also talk to people about protecting themselves from scams more broadly.

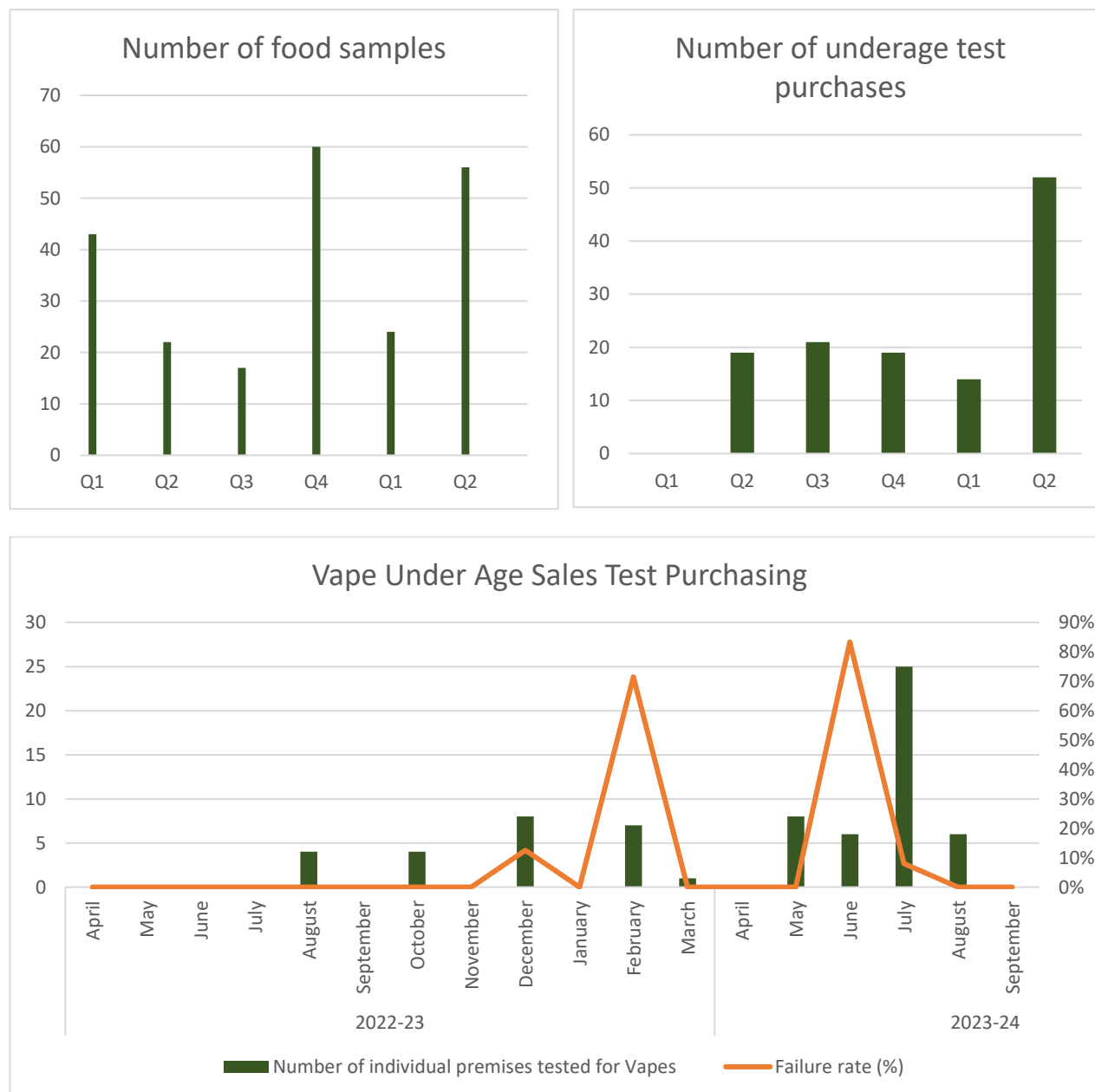


² In 2019 Surrey smoking prevalence in routine and manual workers was 24.4% compared to 7.5% for those in managerial and professional occupations

Key Performance Indicator:

Market surveillance activity carried out, including in relation to food and animal health e.g., samples taken, visits conducted, seizures made.

Status Green



75 businesses were found to be in breach of animal health and welfare legislation and brought into compliance.

77 businesses were identified as supplying: misdescribed food, or not correctly declaring allergens, or selling food containing toxic or illegal components, or involved in fraud involving food.

Lettings Agents

With increased mortgage costs and a shortage of properties more people are looking to rent: [Renters chasing each home jumps from 20 to 25 in five months - BBC News](#) Around 20% of households are in the private rentals, spending³ 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 responsible for ensuring that Letting Agents for rented accommodation comply with requirements to ensure:

- That client money (for example paid as deposits) is kept safe in a government approved Client Money Protection Scheme (so that it cannot be used by the letting agent for another purpose and be lost) and that membership of the CMP Scheme is visible to prospective renters.
- That lettings agents and landlords treat renters fairly in that only permissible fees are charged, and that there is visibility to prospective and current renters of what those charges are
- That prospective renters understand the energy efficiency of the property they are considering buying by visibility of a current Energy Performance Certificate at the time of marketing
- That renters can exercise their rights effectively by requiring lettings agents to have clearly visible which Redress Scheme they are part of.

After a particular focus late last year, we have been continuing our work to bring lettings agents into compliance and are pleased to report all 50 of those identified as non-compliant have now been brought into compliance through advice. The lack of compliance largely appeared to be caused by lack of knowledge about the legal requirements.

Weights and Measures



Cost of living pressures raising the importance of residents needing to know that they are getting what they have paid for and so following up on cost-of-living projects started last year, we have been doing further **petrol pump accuracy testing**.

Last year the failure rate averaged 5% of nozzles tested with consumers losing £1 per fill up on the inaccurate pumps. This year we targeted rural petrol stations where there may be less choice for consumers and are pleased to report that none of the 161 nozzles tested failed.



³ [Private rental affordability, England, Wales and Northern Ireland - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

Product safety

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): The Service has had a number of motorcycle jacket and trousers with hard points tested for safety, and some of these have failed due to inadequate stitching that holds the armour. A business in Bucks was found to be selling these PPE items and the team are working to ensure that no further sales of the unsafe items are made.

Following last years' focus on testing products that are more appealing to people during more intense cost of living pressures, and the high failure rates, the early part of this year was taken up with **follow up** work on the products claiming to save energy and electricity costs that failed. This has included having products withdrawn from sale (both voluntarily and through web site take downs), advice to businesses on changes that were needed to labelling to make the products safe in use, sharing information with other regulators nationally through the Product Safety Database and investigation. This is all now complete.

Vapes: Just over 7,000 illegal vapes have been removed from the open marketplace so far this year (compared to 7,965 last year) in addition to others stopped from being imported via Heathrow.

This year the focus has moved to disrupting the supply of illegal and unsafe goods (including vapes) being sold through car boots and markets. As part of a large multi-agency operation at a market in Surrey some illegal vapes were seized, and work has been undertaken to gather intelligence about sales at car boots so that we can plan a suitable approach to work with car boot organisers prior to the season starting next year.



Electric Blanket Testing

Buckinghamshire & Surrey
trading standards

Do you have an electric blanket?

Bring it to be safety tested for free and get a new one if yours fails

1 November St Martin's Church, Camberley 10-11.30am & Camberley Library 1-4pm	2 November The Lighthouse, Woking 10-2pm 3 November Horley Community Centre 10-4pm
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86% of blankets we tested recently were a fire risk!

Following an 80% failure rate in the safety of electric blankets in use by local residents, and the ongoing pressures of high energy costs, the Service is planning on repeating electric blanket testing this autumn.

Fortunately, one of our Primary Authority Partners, Dreams, have donated more brand-new electric blankets that will be used to replace unsafe blankets so that no one will be left without or left with a fire risk.

Buckinghamshire & Surrey
trading standards

Do you have an electric blanket?

Bring it to be safety tested for free and get a new one if yours fails

30 Oct Chesham library
31 Oct Burnham library 10am-4pm

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

We are working with partners both to find venues and to ensure the days are as useful as possible to residents, this includes the Fire Services and libraries teams of both authorities

and Surrey's Fuel Poverty team. Our volunteers will also be attending to provide advice about scams for residents.

Early feedback shows the failure rate during this testing remains worryingly high.

Firework Storage safety

The Service licences sellers of fireworks for their storage. When the retailers have live fireworks on their premises, we undertake targeted visits to the higher risk retailers and any whom we receive complaints about to ensure that the explosives are being stored safely given that fireworks can be so dangerous if not stored and used correctly.

This year we received some intelligence from Bucks Fire and Rescue of antisocial behaviour being committed by under 18's with fireworks in a particular town. Therefore, we have very recently undertaken some targeted underage test purchasing of fireworks at three premises in that area. No sales were made.

Animal Health & Welfare

One of our officers has been liaising with a care farm for vulnerable children and children who are neurodiverse regarding animal welfare issues. Working with the Animal Plant and Health Agency (APHA) Environmental Health, the RSPCA and World Horse Welfare Society our officer has provided advice to the farm about what improvements they need to make to the premises, so they are suitable. Whilst there were no immediate threats to animal health the conditions if left as they were would have become an issue. The work is a good example of what can be achieved if we become aware of such issues at an early stage.



Avian flu is an infectious type of influenza that spreads among birds. In rare cases it can infect humans if they are in very close contact with infected birds, and the Health Protection Agency are monitoring this aspect of the disease very closely.

Up to date information on the outbreak, or general level of risk and the latest biosecurity requirements is published on our social media channels and through our newsletters. The most up to date situation, including outbreaks and the latest risk level can be found here: [Avian influenza \(bird flu\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/avian-flu)

Bovine Tuberculosis: Our activity to ensure the health and welfare of farmed animals and the security of the food chain has identified **75** businesses in breach of Animal Health and Welfare legislation including issues relating to failure to test in relation to Bovine Tuberculosis (Tb), not reporting animal movements and minor animal welfare matters. Bovine Tb is an infectious zoonotic chronic respiratory disease in cattle. It is one of the biggest challenges facing the UK cattle farming industry today.



Cattle in the Edge area (Buckinghamshire) are required to test every 6 months to prevent the spread of the disease. Enforcement and intervention are concentrated on overdue TB tests, illegal movements of cattle from restricted holdings; cattle moved prior to the required pre or post movement tests and failure to cleanse and disinfect a holding after a TB Breakdown.



Rabies: Illegal landings of animals which have been brought into the country and haven't followed the quarantine or vaccination requirements continue to occur increasing the risk of rabies being brought to Great Britain. Whilst the Councils have plans in place if rabies is suspected, it is important to do everything we can to minimise the chance of using them as the risk to health and life of both humans and animals coming into contact with an infected animal would be significant.

Since the beginning of April **2** investigations have been carried out into illegal puppy imports (compared to 4 last year).

Food Surveillance Projects

In a time where people remain under significant financial pressure and are concerned about getting what they have paid for and expect, we continued to carry out food market surveillance projects, with **80** samples taken. These samples are sent to the Public Analyst for testing to verify what is in the product. We will then act on the results of the analysis. If the food is non-compliant, we may work with the business, giving them advice to improve or in more serious case we may investigate the offences and may issue Food Improvement Notices. In many of the projects started in the first half of the year we await results. In the meantime we are continue to work with, or investigate, businesses identified as selling misdescribed food in last years food surveys.

77 businesses have been found to be selling misdescribed food, or not correctly declaring allergens, or selling food containing toxic or illegal components, or involved in food fraud. These non-compliances were found during Food Interventions and because of food sampling.

Examples of Food Market Surveillance Projects:

Alcohol levels of beer from smaller brewers

In the 21st century there is a demand for good quality products with known provenance, locally sourced ingredients and production and distribution which minimises carbon footprint. There is a worldwide need to change to reduce global warming but also an increasing call for sustainable production which minimises its impact on the environment. Craft beers, by their definition, meet these criteria and the economics reflect this:



- In 2022 the value of the beer market was £19 billion
- Craft beers accounted for £1.5 billion, approximately 8%

A craft beer is unique, and each batch is unique, and they are marketed as such. This is what the consumer wants but they are still controlled by legislation. The alcohol level should be in the range 4% – 7% but the label on the bottle states the actual % alcohol. There is a tolerance in the regulations of $\pm 0.5\%$ for beers with a declared % alcohol up to 5.5% and $\pm 1\%$ for beers with a higher declared % alcohol. The brewer must be able to satisfy this criterion, bearing in mind fermentation can continue once the beer is bottled so this is not necessarily easy.

Artisan ciders are also included in this survey. The market is smaller, but they account for 0.5% of the market with a value of £19.5 million.

Our samples revealed common issues relating to alcohol strengths being declared incorrectly, incorrectly formatted/illegible durability dates and proper names of the food not being indicated. The businesses concerned have been advised so that they can improve their systems and ensure accurate labelling in the future.

All of these pieces of information are needed to be accurate to enable consumers to make informed choices when buying their beer.

Nutrition and health claims on canned fruit and vegetables

Ensuring the accuracy of nutrition and health claims made on food enables consumers to rely on labels when making choices about the food they eat, whether that is for specific dietary needs or for overall health and balance. Canned fruit and vegetables are usually cheaper than fresh alternatives and therefore may be particularly appealing in the current cost of living squeeze. We are awaiting results.

Levels of lead in milk

Lead can find its way into milk and milk powder through contaminated animal feed or environmental contamination of soil or pasture grasses. Lead is a highly poisonous metal affecting almost every organ in the body. Of all the organs, the brain and nervous systems are the mostly affected target in lead toxicity, both in children and adults, although the metal can also accumulate in bones. The toxicity in children is however of a greater impact than in adults and therefore there is legislation which states a maximum permissible level of lead in milk and milk products.

No significant lead was found in the liquid milk samples we submitted. Lead was found in the dried powder milk samples but not at concentrations that would be above the limits where harm might be caused. (90%) had unsatisfactory labelling, the majority of these (92% of the samples with labelling failures) being associated with the nutritional information provided with the other issue relating to incorrect formatting of use by dates which have been discussed with the businesses involved so that they could improve their labelling.

Colourings and Additives in Imported Foods

We also carried out a targeted sampling programme on imported foods, such as highly coloured sweets from the USA and snack foods from Asia, funded by the Food Standards Agency. The tests are mainly to look at levels of food colours and additives which can have a harmful effect especially on children. We are awaiting the results.

Mycotoxin levels in cereals

Lead and mycotoxins are toxic substances harmful to human health but low levels are permitted so testing is important to ensure these levels are not being exceeded. Mycotoxin contamination can occur when crops are of poor quality and have been badly stored. They are toxins produced by certain moulds and are a significant health hazard; aflatoxin is carcinogenic.

In the United Kingdom the breakfast cereal market is worth around £2.76 billion with an additional market for cereal-based snack products.

The combination of poor weather conditions in the USA, enforced storage of damp crops and delayed export of stored crops in Ukraine is the "Perfect Storm". There is the potential for the development of mycotoxins on the crops either during growth or on storage. There is a likelihood of shortages and with this an increased likelihood of a poorer quality of raw material being used to produce cereal products.

Again, we are currently awaiting results.

Responding to complaints about foods and food businesses

In addition to surveillance projects, invaluable information to help us target our activity comes from complaints. There have been a number of complaints in relation to allergens which, due to the potential risk to life caused by undeclared allergens, we follow up and provide advice to support businesses to comply. We also come across food issues when visiting premises for another reason, and officers will check to ensure compliance.

In all scenarios, where a business fails to comply after advice, further enforcement, including the use of Food Improvement Notices, is considered.