

TRADING STANDARDS - UPDATE REPORT

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REASON FOR ITEM

The Chairman requested that an update report on the work of Trading Standards be brought to the committee, as he was aware that the team had been praised at a national level, and that RESPOC had not considered a report on trading standards in a very long time.

INFORMATION

1. The Hillingdon Trading Standards Team

The Trading Standards team is one of 5 teams making up the Public Protection Service, the others being the Food, Health & Safety team, the Licensing Services team, the Environmental Protection Unit and the Imported Food team who are based at the Airport.

The Trading Standards team consists of the Team Manager, 2 Senior Trading Standards Officers, 2 Investigating Officers, and an Assistant Officer (one of the Investigating Officers posts has been vacant for 14 months but recruitment is currently underway).

2. What do Trading Standards do?

Trading Standards are responsible for the enforcement of a wide range of legislation covering fair trading, product safety, intellectual property crime (counterfeiting), weights and measures, and sales of age-restricted products.

The remit includes consumer fraud, doorstep crime, scams, the regulation of estate agents and letting agents, and trader advice.

With such a wide range of work that the team could get involved with, it has become necessary to become intelligence led and to set priorities.

Our priorities for 2015-16:

Doorstep Crime (see below): Support older, disabled and vulnerable residents by prioritising action against rogue traders, raising awareness, taking enforcement action and offering interventionist help where appropriate.

Product Safety: Ensure the safety of consumer goods available within the London Borough of Hillingdon.

Tobacco: contribute to Hillingdon's Tobacco control plan.

Fair Trading and Counterfeiting: Enforcement of a safe and fair trading environment in order to protect legitimate business, protect consumers from shoddy/unsafe goods and disrupt criminal activity.

Business Advice: Provide business advice to local businesses and raise profile of the Trading Standards team's activities.

By constantly reviewing the information available to the team, resources are allocated to tackle problem areas or problem traders where there is the greatest detriment to consumers and where the most impact can be achieved. Action taken may be project work tackling an area of trade or trading practice, investigation of a specific complaint, working with a trader who generates high numbers of civil complaints, or promoting advice to specific groups of residents.

3. Consumer complaints from residents.

Free, impartial and confidential consumer advice is provided by the Citizens Advice Consumer Service (CACS) and all residents who contact Hillingdon Trading standards are initially directed to CACS.

CACS records all case details on a central database which can be accessed by all Trading Standards in the UK. Records are also referred to the relevant Trading Standards Service for evaluation as to whether or not action could or should be taken.

Thus, individual complaints do not necessarily lead to immediate action, as sometimes more than one complaint is needed to trigger action. However all the information is valuable as it can be analysed to determine trends and to identify most complained about traders and emerging areas of consumer detriment.

In order to assess whether an individual complaint should be actioned, we have developed a scoring matrix which takes into account our priorities, consumer detriment and reliability of the information, any known previous intelligence, and currently available resources.

4. The National Picture

The National Trading Standards Board was set up as part of the new Consumer landscape in 2012 to provide leadership, influence, support and resources to help combat consumer and business detriment locally, regionally and nationally.

The National Trading Standards Board administers grants received from central government to fund national and regional initiatives such as Scambusters, the Illegal Money Lending Teams in England and Wales, the Safety at Ports Project, and the National E-Crime Centre. It also distributes funding to regional groups to facilitate co-ordination and the use of intelligence.

5. Safety at Ports Project

The objective of the Safety at Ports Project is to enforce consumer protection regulation at the source of the problem. The interception of dangerous goods at the point of entry aims to prevent and reduce harm caused to people, business, and the economy by stopping unsafe and non-compliant products from reaching the market.

Heathrow Airport is considered to be a high risk point of entry and in 2013, Hillingdon and Hounslow were invited to join the project.

Funding was made available and shared between the 2 Boroughs;

2013/14: £33,000 - 2014/15: £25,000 - 2015/16: £25,000

An independent report has estimated that for every £1 spent on enforcement at the airport, £44 is saved by inland authorities.

In 2014/15, Hillingdon officers inspected 66 consignments. 78,500 non-compliant items were detained; of these 22,500 items were unsafe and posed a real risk to consumers.

Examples of unsafe items found: LED bulbs, mobile phone chargers, sunglasses, toys, cosmetics, including skin lightening creams containing mercury or hydroquinone and electrical products such as screen splitters etc.

On the 21st April 2015, Lord Toby Harris, Chair of National Trading Standards, visited the Civic Centre to recognise the good work carried out by Officers. His visit gave the Trading Standards Team the opportunity to demonstrate the skills needed to carry out their work and the range of unsafe goods they have to inspect



6. Other 2014-15 achievements

Doorstep Crime : 14 reports of doorstep crime were received during the year. For example: a trader demanded £40k for work that was worth considerably less - perhaps £1.k. The alertness of a bank employee prevented the victim from parting with any money, and following intervention by Trading Standards and the Police, the trader agreed not to pursue the resident for any money at all.

Age-restricted sales: 33 alcohol test purchases were carried out in partnership with the Police.

Product Safety: In addition to work carried out at the airport, Hillingdon took part in a London wide project targeting skin lightening products on sale in retailers in the Borough. In June 2014, a large seizure of tooth whitening product was made from a residential premises in Sipson. The product was being sold on the internet directly to consumers, but contained high levels of hydrogen peroxide. Legal forfeiture of the goods worth £0.5 million was obtained as the person responsible had left the country.



Above: Some of the tooth whitening products awaiting destruction.

Illegal tobacco and alcohol: A large seizure of counterfeit cigarettes and tobacco was made from a market trader's home in Hayes - enquiries are ongoing. Visits to local retailers with HMRC, the Police and Trademark Holders have resulted in seizures of counterfeit and/or non-duty paid alcohol.

Most complained about traders: Officers have worked with 5 local businesses identified as "most complained about" in order to reduce complaint levels.

Prosecutions: A number of prosecutions were concluded in 2014, including a counterfeiting case now subject to Proceeds of Crime action, and the supply of an unroadworthy vehicle. A prosecution involving the possession of a large quantity of counterfeit DVDs is ongoing.



Above: A shisha pipe with partially compliant tobacco labelling.