

Trading Standards Service Performance Report 2017/18

Through advice, education, enforcement and partnership working, the primary aim of the Trading Standards Service is to provide a fair and safe trading environment for the benefit of consumers and reputable businesses in the Borough of Stockton-on-Tees.

Key areas of work, that support local, regional and national priorities, are identified through the service planning process. For 2017/18, the Service identified five key priority areas which are outlined below, along with some of the main achievements against each of the priority areas.

Ensuring a Fair, Safe and Competitive Trading Environment

- ✓ During the year, Trading Standards Officers have contacted over 1400 business premises in the Borough. Through these contacts they carried out a variety of activities, including checks on the accuracy of petrol pumps on garage forecourts, beer meters in pubs and weighing equipment in retail shops, as well as advice on the labelling of foodstuffs, the safety of products offered for sale, the accuracy of pricing information and special offers and the legality of contract terms and conditions.
- ✓ A Billingham man was given a 21 month prison sentence suspended for 2 years following a long and complex investigation carried out in conjunction with the North East Regional Investigations Team, looking into the supply of illegal IPTV boxes. The boxes in question were preloaded with software allowing the user illegal access to subscription only premium channels, such as Sky Sports and BT Sport, and to movies which were only available to view at the cinema. The man pleaded guilty to a single charge of acquiring criminal property under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.
- ✓ The Service carried out checks on the quantity of spirit served at local pubs using free pouring thimble measures. Two double whiskys (2 x 50ml) were requested by undercover officers and checks were then made as to the measure provided. It was found that 70% of the drinks purchased were short measure, with the worst being 25% deficient. Written warnings were given to those pubs found to be serving short measure.
- ✓ A survey was carried out looking at the accuracy of advertisements where businesses had made claims regarding membership of trade associations such as Gas Safe, FENSA, NECEIC or the Federation of Master Builders (FMB). Over 190 checks were carried out, involving claims about membership of 70 different trade associations, and around 20% were found to be false. Written warnings have been issued in relation to a number of those found to be non-complaint, whilst follow-up action is pending on a small number of traders who seem reluctant to change their misleading advertisements.
- ✓ A builder was prosecuted after he failed to complete paving and fencing work for a couple in Billingham. He was sentenced to 16 weeks imprisonment suspended for 12 months, told to carry out 200 hours of unpaid community work and ordered to pay £5,000 in compensation to the victims and £500 in costs.

Supporting Reputable Businesses

- ✓ The Service received almost 100 requests for business advice on specific Trading Standards issues and in addition to this Officers gave advice to business owners in over 400 visits made during the year.
- ✓ Guidance was sent out to small local retailers throughout the Borough with advice on the new requirements with regards to the sale and supply of tobacco and related products.
- ✓ The Real Deal Charter was launched in October 2017, in conjunction with local market traders and the Council's Markets Team. The launch of the Charter indicated a commitment to the provision of safe, fair and fake-free markets right throughout the Borough.
- ✓ A local internet trader was prosecuted following the supply of counterfeit GHD hair straighteners to an undercover officer. This cost him £1,400 in costs along with a 12 month community order for 60 hours of unpaid work.
- ✓ Throughout the year, officers have participated in a number of multi-agency raids focused on tackling organised criminal activity within the Borough. As part of these raids a large quantity of counterfeit and illicit tobacco has been seized and related investigations are on-going.

Contributing to Public Health and Wellbeing

- ✓ As part of a proactive food sampling programme, samples have been taken at local takeaways checking for meat species and for the presence of non-permitted colours. In addition visits have also been carried out at a number of butchers to check the country of origin labelling for various meat products and the related traceability requirements.
- ✓ In July 2017, officers worked with colleagues from Public Health to promote the Smoke Free message to coincide with the 10 year anniversary of the introduction of legislation restricting smoking in public places. As part of this, officers spoke to pubs and clubs throughout the Borough and distributed over 25,000 beer mats promoting the Smoke Free message.
- ✓ Officers have continued to advise local takeaways and other caterers selling ready to eat food, about the new rules requiring the provision of allergen information at the point of sale. Over the past year, officers have made almost 200 visits to outlets in the Borough checking with regard to issues such as cross contamination and the supply of allergen information and have sent out advice and guidance to over 400 local caterers.
- ✓ Officers have carried out visits to assess the safety of sunbeds across the Borough in terms of the degree of irradiance emitted. If a sunbed is above the specified limit there is concern that users could in the short term suffer burning to the skin and in the longer term may develop skin cancer. In total 23 sunbeds were tested and 6 were found to emit irradiance above the limit laid down in safety standards. The tubes on the non-compliant sunbeds were subsequently replaced to bring them back within the specified safety limit.
- ✓ The Service participated in the Food Standards Agency's regional animal feed hygiene inspection and sampling programme. This helps ensure that local registered farms and animal feed establishments are complying with regulations to safeguard the safety of animal feed and hence the integrity of the human food chain.
- ✓ A local retailer was fined £450 and ordered to pay costs of £1,740 after been caught with counterfeit and illicit tobacco. This case involved the use of a sniffer dog to identify hidden concealments of the illegal tobacco within the shop.

Protecting the Vulnerable

- ✓ The Service dealt with almost 1,000 complaints, including those handled by the Trading Standards Advice Centre and those investigated by Trading Standards Officers. In addition to this, our partner agency, the Citizens Advice Consumer Service, provided first tier telephone advice to over 1,400 residents in the Borough.
- ✓ Officers participated in a range of multi-agency activities designed to disrupt rogue traders. This included for example, participation in National Rogue Trader Week and other locally targeted initiatives such as Operation Mermaid.
- ✓ The Service has signed a partnership agreement with the National Scams Team (NST) to help in identifying, advising and educating those local vulnerable consumers who are being targeted by scam mail. As a result, officers have contacted over 220 individual victims following priority referrals from the NST.
- ✓ In another initiative with the NST, officers have installed 13 TrueCall devices in the homes of particularly vulnerable people suffering with dementia and other related conditions. These devices use state of the art call blocking technology to stop unwanted nuisance telephone calls. Those people suffering with dementia are particularly vulnerable to nuisance scam callers and initial figures show that over 730 nuisance telephone calls have been blocked since the installation of the first device in July 2017.
- ✓ In order to help vulnerable residents who are often targeted by rogue traders on their own doorstep, four new No Cold Calling Zones have been introduced during the year. This now brings the total number of No Cold Calling Zones in operation throughout the Borough to over 130.

Providing an Effective Service

- ✓ Customer satisfaction levels for the Trading Standards Advice Centre remained exceptionally high with a fantastic satisfaction index of 100%.
- ✓ The Service helped local consumers to recover over £77,000 in redress following complaints about unsafe, faulty or misdescribed good and services.
- ✓ On average, officers received almost 43 hours of training over the year, the vast majority of this being free or low cost events hosted by the North East Trading Standards Association.
- ✓ The Service has looked at different ways of tackling the growing sale of unsafe, illicit and counterfeit goods through social media channels, particularly through Facebook and local internet selling sites. In order to make it easier to monitor Facebook and comply with surveillance related legislation at the same time, it has been decided to try and set up a Trading Standards Facebook page and this will be actioned over the forthcoming year.
- ✓ The Service now has its own accredited Financial Investigator and this has helped to reduce costs and streamline the criminal investigation process, through the analysis of financial records and the ability to restrain and/or confiscate the assets of an offender under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. In addition our Financial Investigator has also been commissioned to carry out work for the North East Regional Investigations Team.