

Trading Standards Service Performance Report 2020/21

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 within 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 2020/21, the Service identified five key priority areas which are outlined below, along with some of the main achievements against each of those priority areas.

Ensuring a Fair, Safe and Competitive Trading Environment

- ✓ During the year, Trading Standards Officers contacted over 700 business premises in the Borough. Through these contacts a variety of activities were carried out, including checks on whether businesses were complying with Covid restrictions, advice on the labelling of foodstuffs, checks on the safety of products offered for sale, the accuracy of pricing information and special offers and the legality of contract terms and conditions.
- ✓ A local builder was sent to prison after a long and complex investigation looking into building work costing over £56,000, carried out for a Billingham couple. The work itself was substandard and incomplete and despite numerous assurances by the builder, he failed to get the necessary Building Control authorisations for the work. He was subsequently sentenced to 13½ months imprisonment by the judge at Teesside Crown Court.
- ✓ One local man was handed a 12-month prison sentence suspended for 2 years after been caught with a significant quantity of counterfeit and illicit tobacco during a raid at his home address. The man's transit van was also seized during the raid and a forfeiture order was granted by the court.
- ✓ Work has begun on Operation CeCe in conjunction with HMRC and other regional Trading Standards partners, looking into the supply of counterfeit and illicit tobacco across the region. Operation protocols have been agreed and put in place, initial intelligence has been assessed and test purchase exercises have been carried out. This work will develop going forward into 2021/21.

Supporting Reputable Businesses

- ✓ The Service received almost 90 requests for business advice on specific Trading Standards issues such as food labelling and allergens, product safety, e-commerce and cancellation provisions. A number of requests were also received which related directly to Covid, this included advice on the safety requirements for facemasks, gloves and other personal protective equipment as well as advice on the requirements for hand sanitisers.
- ✓ Formal enforcement action has been targeted specifically at rogue traders. The owner of one landscaping business was sentenced in court to 12 months imprisonment suspended for 12 months and ordered to pay £2,400 in compensation, following an investigation into complaints about substandard and incomplete work.

- ✓ Following a complaint by a local artist, a simple caution was issued to a trader after he was found to be in possession of copied artworks, thereby breaching copyright law. All of the copied artworks were seized and subsequently destroyed.
- ✓ Throughout the year, officers have participated in a number of multi-agency operations focused on disrupting rogue traders and tackling organised criminal activity within the Borough. This has included raids targeting known sellers of counterfeit and illicit tobacco.

Contributing to Public Health and Wellbeing

- ✓ Covid compliance work has been a huge undertaking for the team, particularly from October 2020 onwards, when Trading Standards Officers took on primary responsibility for formal enforcement action as part of the Council's Covid Compliance and Enforcement Workstream. This work was important in keep the public safe during the pandemic by ensuring that local businesses were following the restrictions in place and operating in accordance with Covid-safe guidelines.
- ✓ In relation to Covid compliance work, the team investigated 279 complaints and referrals, carrying out 275 trade visits and issuing 81 written warnings in the process.
- ✓ In some cases, further enforcement action was necessary, and as a result 5 prohibition notices were issued to businesses operating illegally during lockdown, along with a £1000 fixed penalty notice issued to a local pub that refused to follow the closure restrictions in place.
- ✓ Work targeting the illicit tobacco trade has continued with officers looking at different ways to tackle the problem, alongside the traditional prosecution route. As a result of this, a shop in Thornaby was hit with a three-month closure order issued under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, after being caught selling counterfeit and illicit tobacco.
- ✓ 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 protect the safety of animal feed and hence the integrity of the human food chain.

Protecting the Vulnerable

- ✓ The Service has dealt with over 800 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, has provided advice to over 1,500 residents in the Borough.
- ✓ The Service has signed a partnership agreement with the National Scams Team (NST) to help in identifying, advising and educating those vulnerable local consumers who are being targeted by scam mail and other mass marketing scams. As a result, officers have contacted 39 individual victims following priority referrals from the NST.
- ✓ No Cold Calling Zones (NCCZs) have been introduced around the Borough to reduce the number of bogus callers and rogue traders operating in a particular area and to help educate and empower residents in dealing effectively with cold callers. Five new NCCZs have been set up in Hartburn, bringing the total in the Borough to almost 140.

Providing an Effective Service

- ✓ Customer satisfaction levels for the Trading Standards Advice Centre remained exceptionally high with a satisfaction index of 97.6%.
- ✓ The Service has helped local consumers to recover over £127,000 in redress following complaints about the supply of unsafe, faulty or misdescribed good and services.
- ✓ On average, officers received over 31 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.
- ✓ Like many other Council services, Trading Standards has adapted positively to the challenges presented by Covid and working from home. In particular, a new case management system has been introduced which has allowed officers to work both remotely and efficiently, making full use of online systems to remove the need to keep paper-based records. Given this success, the new case management system will be retained going forward even as officers gradually return back into the office environment.
- ✓ The Service has its own Accredited Financial Investigator, and this has helped to reduce costs and streamline the 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. During the year our Financial Investigator has also been commissioned to carry out work for the North East Regional Investigations Team and Hartlepool Trading Standards.