



Kent Trading Standards

**Review
2007**



INTRODUCTION

Kent Trading Standards Service is part of The Community Safety and Regulatory Services Division within the Communities Directorate.

The huge scope of the activities undertaken by the service is impossible to cover fully in this review. But we hope the brief summaries and articles we have included will give you a flavour of our work and the wide variety of activities we engage in, as well as showing how our work fits into the Directorate's and KCC's priorities.

You can find out more about our work by visiting our website at:
www.tradingstandards.gov.uk/kent

TRADING STANDARDS

Safer, healthier communities

Daylight robbery

Doorstep criminals continue to target people in their homes, and many have been caught out by bogus tradesmen offering home improvement or garden work. However, our Rapid Action Team has been able to help some of the most vulnerable consumers, visiting their homes to help them deal with unscrupulous traders. It is difficult to quantify just how much money has been saved by our intervention but we estimate vulnerable consumers have been saved from losing many thousands of pounds.



An example of the type of work carried out by rogue traders

Working Towards Less Salt

Consuming too much salt is a recognised health risk and the FSA (Food Standards Agency) has provided grants to 8 organisations to carry out projects aimed at changing behaviour relating to salt intake. Promoting KCC's healthier living agenda is one of our business plan targets so we put forward a proposal called "Working Towards Less Salt" which involves working with employers to help them reduce the salt in food they make available for their employees and to educate employees on the dangers of consuming too much salt. KCC is the only local authority which was successful in receiving a grant, other recipients are PCTs (Primary Care Trusts) and charities.

Trading Standards food officers visited 6 businesses around the county, working with them to help reduce the amount of salt in food they make



available to their staff at work. The prominently displayed exhibition stand, with examples of various food items, highlighted the facts and figures while officers talked to employees, answering their questions and explaining food labelling information. Feedback from the businesses involved has been very positive.

Animal Diseases

KCC's contingency plans to deal with an outbreak of any notifiable animal disease were put to good use in 2007. The Foot and Mouth Disease in Surrey and the arrival in the UK of Bluetongue meant animal movement restrictions. Staff were kept busy, not only here in Kent, but helping colleagues in Surrey to cope with the Foot and mouth outbreak there.

Extra help

Arrangements have been made for 3 Community Wardens to help our officers at Ashford Market when required. The wardens all have a farming background and of course are very experienced in dealing with people. Their main role will be to act as "eyes and ears" although they will also be authorised to issue pig movement licences.

Musical Message

Trickster is a musical show aimed at informing older people about rogue traders and scams in a lighthearted, enjoyable way and has been presented at many locations across the south east. The storyline covers not just themes like bogus builders but also a free holiday "prize" letter, a wine investment scam and a phone con to get customers to reveal bank account details and passwords - to name just a few!

The project is organised by Trading Standards services across the South East and other organisations are invited along to the shows to pass on their expertise and useful information to the audience. Among those represented at the Kent shows were the Handy Van Scheme, Kent Fire & Rescue Service, Victim Support and Consumer Direct South East.

"I was delighted my 86 year-old dad, who lives alone in his own home, was able to be with me to see it and to hear those good messages"

Apart from raising awareness, the shows encourage people to report problems to Trading Standards rather than keeping quiet because they feel foolish. Attendance at the shows has been good and feedback very positive. The show ends with the audience participating in a question and answer session and taking the opportunity to talk about their own personal experiences. Questions are fielded by an informal panel of our Advice officers and Consumer Direct staff.

Romanian vets

A team of vets from Romania on a fact finding tour visited Kent to look at the implementation of animal welfare legislation in the UK. They arrived at the livestock market in Ashford earlier than expected and the accompanying SVS vet had to organise emergency bio-security equipment comprising plastic bags over their shoes! They then spent the morning with Val Allen, TS Lead Officer for Animal Health, who explained our role in animal health and welfare enforcement.

Electric blanket safety risks

Nearly 40% of electric blankets tested in a 4-day campaign organised by Kent Trading Standards failed safety tests. Many older people use electric blankets so the free checks were carried out at Age Concern Centres in Gravesend, Lyminge, Herne Bay and Ashford in association with Kent Fire and Rescue and Age Concern.

Of the 123 blankets tested 41 were recommended to be destroyed while 8 others were fitted with new plugs to make them safe. Discount vouchers for new blankets were given to those who attended and the old blankets were stripped of their wiring and donated to a local animal sanctuary as bedding.

Training

Our staff regularly deliver training on trading standards activities for other KCC units and partner agencies. Many people have subsequently benefited from the Bogus Caller/ Doorstep Crime training given to KCC Community Wardens. The Wardens deliver the programme across Kent, helping the most vulnerable to avoid becoming victims. Feedback has been extremely positive.

Police probationers also receive training covering all our core activities. This includes the Kent Act 2001 which covers the sale of second hand goods and the Vehicle (Crimes) Act 2001 which applies to Motor Salvage operators, aimed at making it harder for criminals to dispose of stolen vehicles through the salvage industry.

Shock risk

Faulty carbon monoxide gas alarms imported by a Kent company were recalled after checks found they could not be relied on to detect the so-called "silent killer" gas. Not only was the alarm itself unreliable, an adaptor allowing it to be used abroad left the user at risk of electric shock. In addition although the packaging carried the British Standards Institution (BSI) kitemark the product had not been tested by BSI. We issued a press release and published a warning on our website to consumers to stop using the alarm and the adaptor.

Partnership projects

Officers joined colleagues from partner agencies for a number of community safety events. Dover Safety Day was aimed at all consumers, but particularly the more vulnerable. Our stand highlighted trading standards activities showing how we tackle problems including door-step criminals, underage sales, counterfeiting and safety issues, as well as food matters such as salt content, best before and use-by dates. We also promoted The Buy with Confidence approved trader scheme and told consumers how to contact Consumer Direct for advice or to pass on information to Trading Standards.

A similar and well-attended event was staged in Hythe. Our officers received a very positive response from residents and a recent spate of doorstep sales in the area prompted much interest in our doorstep sales advice.

Ashford Fire and Rescue Day was attended by around 1,000 people and our officers were kept busy all day working alongside other agencies including the Police, ambulance crews, Ashford Borough Council, Community Wardens and Kent Air Ambulance. We explained about safety and counterfeiting issues and demonstrated why certain products were unsafe and what to look out for. One particular dangerous nightlight had been bought by several of those attending, so alerting them to the dangers was particularly worthwhile. We also gave pointers on identifying counterfeit products. Many people were deterred from buying counterfeit perfumes when they learnt that fakes often contain human or animal urine!

Young People



Young Designers

Children from six Kent primary schools participated in the 2007 Play Safe competition to design a safe toy. Twenty entries were chosen from the original 89 to go on to the national final held at the Trading Standards Institute annual conference in Manchester in June 2007. The Kent finalists were presented with certificates and a goody bag by Elizabeth Tweed, KCC Lead Member for Community Safety and the Director General of the British Toy and Hobby Association.

Young designers with their plans for a safe toy

Tackling underage drinking

Kent Trading Standards takes a strong line with retailers who sell age-restricted goods, particularly alcohol, to children. A program of regular advisory campaigns ensures retailers know what they need to do to stay within the law and we take legal action when retailers do not take their responsibilities seriously.

Despite rigorous enforcement sales still take place and we are currently looking at other possible approaches to the problem.



Under age sales survey response best ever

We regularly survey school children around Kent and ask them about buying age-restricted goods like alcohol and tobacco. We use the information to help plan our ongoing enforcement activity. The response in 2007 was the best ever, with completed questionnaires returned from just over 1,000 students attending almost 50 different schools across the county. The majority (**79%**) of responses were from 14 and 15 year olds.

We found the proportion finding it difficult to buy alcohol has increased in each survey and **19%** now say they are asked to prove their age all the time to buy alcohol. Although this still leaves a large proportion who claim they are not asked for ID it is an improvement of around 7% on any of our previous surveys. Fewer young people under 18 say they are buying both cigarettes and alcohol through retailers.

Talkingshop

Talkingshop is a web-based interactive education tool which meets the National Curriculum for Citizenship Key Stage 4. It is offered free to schools in Kent and is run by our Advice Education team. It uses real-time role play, involving Trading Standards Advice staff to help 14 and 15 year old students learn about and understand the rights and responsibilities of consumers, employers and employees.

Over 1,200 Kent students from 7 schools are taking part in the project between June 2007 and April 2008. Some 33 schools have also registered for future sessions with others in the pipeline.

Peter Lake, KCC Vice Chairman presents the 2007 Kent Consumer Challenge winning team from Broomhill Bank School with their trophy



Consumer Challenge

Consumer Challenge is a fun, national quiz, designed to help students with moderate learning difficulties become more aware of their role as citizens. The Kent quiz takes place in November and in 2007 was won by the team from Broomhill Bank school, Maidstone. They will go on to represent Kent at the national final in June 2008 at the Trading Standards Institute's National Conference in Bournemouth.

Ramsgate team in national final

A team from Chatham House Grammar School, Ramsgate, beat off rival teams in the South East heat of the 2007 Young Consumers of the Year competition to earn their place in the national final held at the Trading Standards Annual Conference in June in Manchester.

The competition, which tested the young people's consumer skills and knowledge in areas such as finance, food, health and the environment, began earlier in the year with county-wide and regional competitions. The team answered dozens of questions, competing against 10 other schools from across the country and were close runners up to the final winners, Portobello High School, Edinburgh.



The Chatham House team pictured here with Coronation Street Actress Samia Smith



Supporting Local Businesses

Buy with Confidence

Kent's "Buy with Confidence" good trader scheme was officially launched in April 2007. It is proving very popular with both businesses and consumers and to date around 30 businesses ranging from builders, plumbers and carpenters to car sales and servicing have been through the rigorous vetting procedure and approved. Many more are in the pipeline.

Businesses joining the scheme benefit from good publicity and can display the BWC logo at their business premises and on all paper-work. The scheme should also make life harder for rogue traders by providing consumers with a list of reliable traders. Feedback from businesses already on the scheme show some of the benefits - one trader secured a two year commercial contract with the help of the BWC logo on his business shirt. For more information visit www.tradingstandards.gov.uk/kent/bwc.htm



The official launch of the BWC scheme.

Business advice and information

Officers regularly participate in business seminars and exhibitions. During the summer we attended the 2020 business to business event where we took the opportunity to promote our Buy with Confidence Scheme. The Kent show in July provided another chance to promote the scheme to both consumers and businesses.

Business feedback

Every year we ask businesses we have inspected and those asking for advice or information what they think about the service they received from us.

Key results:

- 99% found staff courteous and polite
- 96% overall satisfaction
- 94% found staff informative
- 93% said the visit caused little or no disruption to their business
- 93% not meeting legal obligations thought our response to problems reasonable
- 89% of those we have been in touch with before said they were treated consistently each time

Good working relationship

Good working relationships with businesses are particularly helpful when problems occur. One local business asked us for help and advice after identifying a safety problem with several batches of an electrical product. Officers visited their premises for discussions with senior managers. They also carried out further checks on the warehouse stock and contacted the Chinese manufacturer.

The company was happy to follow our guidance and issued a recall to all affected customers. Other relevant bodies were also kept informed and an alert message sent to all other Trading Standards authorities.

Informing & educating

Kent Officers star in TV series

Kent Trading Standards officers featured in six programmes for a new BBC 3 series "Scam Squad" made by Talkback Thames Productions, the company responsible for "X Factor", "The Apprentice", and "Grand Designs". Our officers took part in six half-hour 'fly on the wall' programmes which provided the opportunity to give the public an insight into the variety of work we do and the skills and experience required.

Businesses were generally happy to speak to the TV crew because it gave them a chance to explain their business and pressures they face.



Response to the program was very positive - in fact for the latter part of the series it was the most watched programme on BBC3 on that evening. The programme also won the Trading Standards Institute Media Award for best Consumer Television Programme.

Consumer survey

We regularly ask consumers contacting us what they think of our service. Below are key results of our most recent survey.

- 99% found officers courteous and polite
- 96% found advice easy to understand
- 92% said they were treated fairly
- 94% found staff informative
- 82% overall satisfied
- 74% said advice would, or may, help with similar problems in future

Community alerts

Our advice team operates an email messaging system to many groups, such as the Police, Age Concern, Neighbourhood Watch, local media and some Parish Councils. These groups then distribute the messages to their local community.

Most messages contain warnings about suspicious traders or activities that could be harmful to consumers or businesses. Sometimes we send messages asking for information. Past alerts have resulted in valuable intelligence reaching Trading Standards and the Police. Other messages contain information about changes in the law affecting consumers or businesses or we may distribute information about events or projects of interest to local communities.

National Consumer Week

National Consumer Week takes place each November and Trading Standards authorities around the country, supported by Consumer Direct, promote events based around a particular theme. The 2007 theme was buying on the internet. In Kent we issued a press release offering advice which resulted in further media interest and a radio interview.

Successful Peer Review

Kent Trading Standards was subject to a Peer Review in 2007. We carried out a self assessment on our processes and procedures on issues including leadership, policy and strategy, partnerships and resources, people and society. The resulting report and improvement plan were sent to the review team before they arrived in Kent in July to carry out the actual review.

The team spent 3 days interviewing staff throughout the service and viewing our working practices at first hand. They met Mike Hill, Cabinet Member for Communities, and had the opportunity to talk to various stakeholders including representatives from the Police, Customs and Defra.

The team were impressed by what they found. Following their visit they reported back on their findings, approving our improvement plan, agreeing we had identified areas where we could make improvements and commenting very favourably on examples of good practice already in place.

Enforcement action

Underage alcohol sales

A number of retailers have been prosecuted for selling alcohol to young people, they included a licensee who was fined £150 and, somewhat unusually, ordered to pay all our prosecutions costs amounting to £892.00. He was also informed that full payment had to be made within 60 days. After 30 years in business with a clean record he appeared most concerned about the criminal conviction and automatic notification being sent to the licensing authority.

New penalty

Our first PND (Penalty notice for disorder) was issued to the seller of 2 litres of cider. It is a fixed penalty fine given if the offender agrees. No criminal conviction or admission of guilt is associated with payment of the penalty. If the offender fails to pay the ticket the fine increases and eventually a warrant will be issued. If the PND is refused the case will proceed as normal to the courts and if found guilty will be recorded as a criminal conviction.

Ignored advice

A trader prosecuted in 2004 for claiming membership of various organisations of which he was not a member was prosecuted again for doing the same thing. Ignoring the advice given after the earlier offences resulted in a fine totalling £8,000 and costs of £1,200.

Butchers fined

The two partners in a chain of butchers shops were each fined a total of £3,360 and ordered to pay costs on 28 specimen charges covering a variety of offences. These included problems such as failing to indicate meat products had been previously frozen; that sausages contained preservative; selling drink without English language labelling; selling food past use-by dates; selling lean mince with a high fat content; and failing to indicate beef origin.

Unsafe products

A long running case against a company importing and selling dangerous products including multipug adaptors and lamps finally came to a conclusion with the company ordered to pay fines and costs amounting to £28,541 within 7 days.

Serial offender

A serial car clocker convicted of 41 offences was sentenced to 12 months imprisonment (suspended for 18 months) plus 150 hours community service. Unfortunately, he claimed to have no money so no costs, compensation or fine were imposed.

And also

Other cases included two retailers who were each fined a total of £2,100 and ordered to pay £150 costs for having out of date food, including milkshakes, pate and desserts for sale in their shop, and a company that delivered short weight steel and brass bars that was fined a total of £6,000 and ordered to pay £270 costs.



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