



What do we do about your complaints?

HAVE YOU contacted us with a complaint recently? If you telephoned your call will have been dealt with by a Consumer Direct Advisor. Consumer Direct is a nationwide government funded telephone and online advice and information service for consumers in Great Britain. The service is provided through regional centres. The centre for the South East is run by Kent County Council from its contact centre in Maidstone and staffed by 50 dedicated consumer advisors. They deal with consumers across the South East region from Oxford to Ospringe.

But this does not mean the end of Kent Trading Standards Advice Service. Consumer Direct advisors refer complex problems, or those involving vulnerable consumers in Kent, to us and our team give more in-depth advice or help where possible.



We hope the advice or information you received helped you sort out your problem. However, if you had a complaint which you wanted us to investigate you may have been disappointed if we told you that we could not take action ourselves against the business concerned.

WHY didn't we take up your complaint - even though the business concerned appeared to have broken the law in some way? With less than 40 Trading Standards Officers to cover the whole of Kent we just can't take action over every complaint as well as fulfilling our many statutory duties. Also, there are many consumer problems which are covered by civil law rather than criminal, and sometimes the only

action the customer can take is to take the case to the civil court.

DID WE do anything at all about your complaint? - Yes, we did! In Kent we have successfully adopted an "intelligence-led" approach to enforcement and every complaint, or enquiry we receive is logged so that we can keep track of problem areas or traders. We use this information to target our activities. This approach has proved very successful as you will see from some of the items in this newsletter.

TELLING YOU what we have done - It is just not possible for us to feed back individually to everyone who contacts us with a complaint or enquiry, but we hope this newsletter will give you some idea of how we deal with the problems we have been told about. You can also find out about our other activities which you may not be aware of.

If you thought "what do they do all day if they won't sort out my complaint?" we hope this newsletter will give you some idea!

Using our Intelligence

Our "early intervention" campaign is aimed at tackling problem areas of trade or traders before an unfair practice turns into a major problem. Officers visit the business to try to resolve complaints by advising on a suitable course of action and getting the trader to agree to try to put things right. We then monitor the businesses carefully to see what, if any, follow up action is needed. Below are a few examples.

A KITCHEN SUPPLIER was visited following complaints about their failure to supply goods paid for and poor quality work. A partner in the business agreed to make sure the jobs were finished properly and the complaints have now stopped.



A VEHICLE CLAMPING COMPANY was visited following a large number of complaints. A lot of effort was put into getting them to agree measures to help reduce complaints. They have now provided their operators with cameras to record the positions of improperly parked vehicles to help resolve disputes. Very few complaints are now being received.

A LETTING AGENCY was thoroughly inspected following complaints about unreasonably retaining students' deposits. Other problems relating to terms and conditions were found and the agents were given thorough advice. Our officers will be making a return visit to ensure that the problems have been resolved. We subsequently ran a campaign to publicise the problems students may encounter with letting agents.

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QUALITY OF WORK was the main complaint about a company producing pattern impressed concrete drive ways. Discussions with the trader, explaining his obligations and our powers under new consumer legislation, resulted in fewer complaints. They have also agreed to amend their contract.

MASSIVE INTEREST - following a tip-off we visited a money lender believed to be targeting low-income, vulnerable people. We found he was offering loans by word of mouth and typical loans were £100 – £500 repayable by weekly doorstep collection. The payment cards (the only documentation he used) had no mention of interest rates which turned out to be in the region of 300% APR! Officers gave him full advice on his legal obligations and he has now joined a trade association, bought a computer to calculate his APR's and started using the correct documentation.



Vulnerable consumers such as the elderly, are particularly at risk from bogus builders and rogue traders calling door-to-door and are often deliberately targeted. Here are just a few examples of how these people work and what we have been able to do to help the victims.

£7,000 Saved for Elderly Couple

Police contacted us about an elderly couple living in the Tonbridge area who had agreed to have the first few yards of their driveway tarmaced. The tarmacers covered most of their long drive and tried to charge them £7,000 saying they would be back next day to collect the cash.

Our officers, accompanied by police went to the house next day hoping to confront the workmen. Unfortunately, they failed to show up, however they did telephone and both Trading Standards and Police Officers spoke to them. The boss of the gang was not happy when he was told he would not be getting any money. Police arranged for a surveillance camera to be installed for a few days in case the workmen returned, as they had been quite threatening on the phone. Luckily they did not return and the couple were saved from paying £7,000.

Help us Beat the Cheats!

Our **Rapid Action** team was set up to intervene between rogue doorstep traders and vulnerable consumers. So far we have saved Kent consumers a total of more than £200,000 with successful interventions.

If you suspect that rogue traders are operating in your area now, and you have any information which you think might help, **please let us know by calling 08454 040506** or email tsadvice@kent.gov.uk or use the link on our website at www.tradingstandards.gov.uk/kent

**IF TRADERS ARE ON THE PREMISES
call our "rogue trader hotline"
on 08453 450210**

Here are brief details of just a few of the other problems we have heard about recently. You can find more information about local scams on our website.

Canterbury: Two men visited a consumer with Alzheimer's Disease and demanded payment for uncompleted gardening work.

Headcorn: Genuine tree surgeons contracted to carry out work on behalf of a utility company (which does not charge for the work) were followed around by a trader who approached householders for payment as soon as the real workmen left.

Maidstone: A trader offered to tarmac a consumer's driveway. The consumer said he would consider it, but the trader carried out the work while he was out and then demanded payment.



Most reputable tradesmen do not have time to knock on doors and it is highly unlikely that any job is so urgent that there is no time for a second opinion!

Watch out for the Tricks of the Trade!

Tactics used by rogue traders include:

- ! taking a broken tile up to the roof and back down again to show there is a problem
- ! dipping loft insulation into the water tank to show how the roof is leaking
- ! using technical language to confuse and worry householders.



Conman Caught!

A trader had convinced an elderly gentleman living in Whitstable that his fascias and guttering needed urgent repairs and he agreed to pay £600 deposit. Fortunately a relative, worried it was a con, contacted us.

Our officers visited the trader concerned and asked him to provide copies of his paperwork including the required Cancellation Notice (you normally have certain cancellation rights if you sign a credit agreement at home). Further enquiries established the trader was wanted by police in London in connection with taking around £30,000 from an elderly gentleman suffering from Alzheimer's Disease.

The conman was arrested and the £600 deposit returned. We also arranged for the Handyman Van Service to fit security locks, free of charge and Age Concern provided a Senior Link service for eight weeks.

**Doorstep Sellers -
Have the confidence
to say NO!**



Prize Con

We receive huge numbers of complaints about prize notifications. If you, or any of your friends or relatives, receive any letters or phone messages saying you have won a large prize or substantial sum of money, but to claim the prize you have to send off money or make a phone call (which will almost certainly be at premium rates) **IGNORE THEM.**

You are very unlikely to receive anything at all. If you do, it will almost certainly be of little value, and it will prove almost impossible to get your money back. You will also be targeted all the more in future.

Problem Traders

Your complaints help us to target those traders who deliberately ignore the law and who have no interest in co-operating with us. Such traders not only affect consumers who are conned into parting with their money, but also businesses who trade fairly and have to face unfair competition. One problem we often face is that many consumer issues are covered by civil rather than criminal law. However, even when no criminal laws have been broken there are now other steps we can take, using new consumer legislation providing us with more options.

TAKING MONEY but failing to finish the job was the main complaint about a loft conversion company. Although the company have now ceased trading we are trying to prevent it being wound-up until we can trace those involved to get a signed undertaking not to breach consumer regulations in future. This means that if they start trading again we will be able take action.

A CONSERVATORY COMPANY gave rise to numerous complaints. When customers, dissatisfied with quality and delivery times, withheld payment the company removed doors and windows. We offered the company the opportunity to sign an under-taking to comply with consumer legislation, but it failed to do so. The case is now with our legal team and the complaints have stopped.

WE ARE CURRENTLY working with the Office of Fair Trading to take further action against a finance company which, despite signing an undertaking to comply with consumer legislation, continues to breach Consumer Credit Advertising regulations.

SUSPENSION NOTICES were served on a car dealer trading in cheap, potentially dangerous, cars preventing him selling the vehicles. We are also investigating other aspects of the business.



Consumer Safety Matters

Reports of dangerous items on sale are always taken seriously. Below are some of the safety issues we have investigated recently.

Product safety problems have included complaints about a hairdryer (bought from a market stall) which caught fire when used for the first time; an electric kettle which burnt the consumers hand when the lid became extremely hot and a Moses basket sold with the wrong stand which made it unstable in use. Other potentially dangerous items we have checked include pens, staplers and lighters which apparently give the user a shock.

Buy with Confidence

One of the questions most frequently asked by consumers who contact us is "how do I find a reputable trader?".



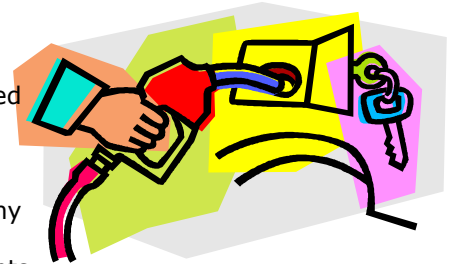
TESSE (Trading Standards South East) which includes all 19 local authority Trading Standards Services in the South East has now set up a scheme called "Buy with Confidence". We aim to launch the scheme in Kent during 2006, with the approved business directory available on-line and free of charge to consumers.

All in a Day's Work

It is just not possible to investigate every individual complaint, however, we will often follow up enquiries during the course of our planned activities. Here are a few examples.

Out of Date - a complaint about pricing was followed up when officers visited a newly opened pub/restaurant. During their inspection officers also found a pack of bacon which was 6 days past its "use by" date.

Petrol - complaints about vehicle breakdowns following refuelling were checked out at the garages concerned, but when we checked we could find no problems at any of the filling stations and no other complaints have been received.



Pizza Problem - In the previous issue we reported the case of a consumer who suffered a severe allergic reaction after eating a pizza purchased from a health food store. The purchaser suffers from an allergy to dairy, nut and egg products so had bought this particular pizza because it should have contained no dairy products. The company concerned were prosecuted and fined a total of £6,000 and ordered to pay prosecution costs of £802.50 for the false description.

Missing Sausage Rolls - following complaints about packs of sausage rolls apparently containing fewer than the 50 items stated on the packaging, checks were made during the course of our normal weights and measure audits. Although the packs did indeed contain less than expected, they actually contained the correct amount of weight. Advice on resolving the problem was given to the company concerned.



Remember, if an offer seems too good to be true - it probably is!

Did you know we also

We have given you a brief look at what we do about your complaints, but you may not be aware of the full range of our activities. The following is a brief description of our main areas of work.

Community Safety - making Kent a safer place in which to live and do business is a high priority and our Community Safety Officer is involved in many local and national projects aimed at doing just that. Protecting the vulnerable is one major project. Cracking down on under-age drinking, which is linked to rowdiness and petty vandalism, is another. We want to promote a culture change in Kent from one of tolerance to alcohol sales to underage young people, to one of zero tolerance where any person who **might** be under 18 will have to provide proof of their age if they want to buy alcohol, or indeed any age-restricted goods.

Estate Agents - our home is the biggest investment most of us ever make, and making sure that property descriptions are accurate is another of our responsibilities.

Farm Animal Health and Welfare - many people don't know we are responsible for the health and welfare of farm animals in transit and at markets. We also enforce the rules aimed at preventing the spread of diseases such as foot and mouth, and rabies.



Food and Agriculture - it's our job to make sure that food is labelled accurately, contains only permitted ingredients and is not on sale past its "use-by" date. We regularly take samples of all types of food and agricultural products, including petfoods and fertilizers. We also check drinks to make sure that cheap alternatives haven't been substituted for branded spirits in pubs and restaurants.

Consumer Credit - the rules governing consumer credit are complex and cover areas such as credit advertising, credit licensing, mortgage broking, etc. Our specialist officers make sure that businesses are sticking to the rules.

Explosives - we register premises stocking explosives, the majority of which are fireworks. However, there are a number of businesses which keep other types of explosives ranging from shotgun cartridges and bird scarers, to blasting explosives. Our officers check to see that all these items are stored safely.

Petrol - filling stations are high risk areas which have to be licenced to store petrol. Approving and licensing such premises and making sure they store and handle petrol safely is another of our duties.



Weights and Measures - you may not know that as well as testing all shapes and sizes of scales and measuring instruments in shops and factories, pubs and restaurants we also visit packers and importers to check all sorts of products ranging from tea, milk, fruit and vegetables to propane gas, fertilisers and liquid anaesthetic. We also test petrol pumps for accuracy, check weighbridges and carry out roadside checks on fuel delivery tankers.

but that's not all - we enforce the rules relating to trade descriptions and the package travel regulations. We also seize counterfeit goods (ranging from clothing, music CDs and DVDs to fake perfume and shoes), and keep an eye on motor traders who might be selling unsafe cars, clocked vehicles or not carrying out services properly. Then there are checks at markets and car boot sales; investigating claims about membership of trade associations; misleading price indications; registering second hand dealers and motor salvage operators. Not forgetting the educational activities our advice team get involved in, such as the Young Consumers of the Year Competition, providing resources for students.... There is much more, but we hope this is enough to give you some idea of the wide range of our activities.

Support to Business - trading standards legislation can be complex, so we help businesses to trade fairly and within the law by providing them with specialist advice and information. We also carry out approximately 5,000 inspections each year, many of them unannounced spot checks.

Environmental Crime

Illegal rubbish dumping is an anti-social activity and environmental crime which spoils our surroundings. A small dedicated team of officers based in Kent Trading Standards has been formed, in partnership with district councils, to tackle this problem.

We have already brought several successful prosecutions including one against two employees of a construction company who were convicted of dumping debris from the back of their hired transit tipper on their way home from site. They were each fined £1,500 and ordered to pay £856 costs.

Product Safety - monitoring the safety of consumer goods involves much more than just following up complaints and responding to changes in the law. We aim to identify problems early on by liaising closely with manufacturers and importers in Kent, so controlling the distribution chain much more effectively. We also work closely with Customs to intercept many dangerous goods before they ever reach the market place.

Need consumer advice? Call 08454 04 05 06

or visit our website at: www.tradingstandards.gov.uk/kent where you will find useful information to view or download including factsheets, safety recalls and press releases. You can also register a complaint and find links to other useful sites. (Don't forget you can use the computer in your local library if you don't have one at home).

Please let us know if you would like a large print copy of **Re:Action**