

TRADING STANDARDS

BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Following the presentation of a Best Value Review of the Trading Standards Service to Cabinet on 19 February 2001 it was resolved:-

“That the Best Value Review Team Leader and the Head of Trading Standards prepare an improvement plan for agreement by the Deputy Leader, to include the following options for improvement:-

- 1 Ways in which the service could increase its presence within Buckinghamshire - through co-ordination with other agencies and accessibility to the public.
- 2 A reduction in the resources devoted to low-risk, non-food, inspections to enable targeting at areas of greater priority.
- 3 A clearer focus on the resources that the service will target on proactive investigative work, and what consumers can expect from the service.
- 4 Outcome measures are suggested for those areas where it is not currently possible to specify what is achieved with the resources used, nor identify whether improvements are being made.
- 5 Other improvement targets derived from the options set out in the report, in the light of Cabinet’s comments.”

Monitoring of the agreed actions will be carried out:-

- 1 by the Trading Standards Management Team at monthly intervals;
- 2 by written report to members of the Trading Standards Special Interest Group for consideration at their three monthly meeting chaired by the Community Services portfolio holder;
- 3 by copying written report to Deputy Leader of the Council at three monthly intervals.

Some of the targets relate to areas where, at present, no detailed performance information is available. Evaluation of the appropriateness of the targets will therefore be an important part of the monitoring process.

Summary of Proposed Action

More detailed information, including the allocation of responsibility to lead officers, is contained in the Trading Standards Service Plan (SP) and Work Programme (WP).

1 Co-ordination and Accessibility	Action By	Links to Plans
1.1 Obtain the Community Legal Services Partnership Qualitymark.	Application May 2001 Provisional approval subject to CLS schedule August 2001	Flagship Project SP2 WP31
1.2 Propose an exchange of information with environmental health officers of District Councils in Buckinghamshire of food premises regarded by each authority as high risk. Quarterly information exchange to be in place.	May 2001 July 2001	SP4 WP29
1.3 Explore how to contribute to the information AVDC use in their food retailers award scheme.	June 2001	SP4 WP29
1.4 Explore the feasibility and viability of subscribing to an existing food sampling programme and database.	June 2001	SP4 WP7
1.5 Recommendations based on a trial video link to Trading Standards at Aylesbury will be reported to Community Services portfolio holder.	November 2001	WP20 WP21
1.6 Make eight car servicing tests to evaluate the accuracy of claims made by garages. Interim report.	September 2001	Flagship Project SP3 WP30
1.7 Report to Cabinet Member the results of a review of the advice service availability that will be compiled from completed questionnaires (approximately three hundred) having been returned.	July 2001	SP2 WP6 WP31
1.8 Report to Cabinet Member with proposals of how the Trading Standards Service in Buckinghamshire can benefit from the Crossing the Boundaries Partnership review report.	Within 2 months of published report expected in 2001	WP26

1.9	We will share in developing the LACOTS (Thames Valley) Liaison Group Notice Board for sharing information, questions and answers between officers.	June 2001	WP26
1.10	In partnership with other Trading Standards authorities, explore the potential introduction of a pilot scheme to target rogue doorstep sellers.	July 2001	Flagship Project SP3 WP27
2	Reduce Resources and Re-Target	Action By	Links to Plans
2.1	The number of officer visits due in the year to low risk non-food premises will be reduced by 80% in 2001/2002. A 'postal visit' scheme will be introduced. 100% of high risk non-food visits and 50% of medium non-food premises will be visited with the additional resources gained.	April 2002	WP26
3	Planned and Published Proactive Investigative Work	Action By	Links to Plans
3.1	We will improve compliance with legislation by traders recorded by us as the three most persistent offenders.	March 2002	Service Project SP3 WP32
3.2	For complaints relating to criminal enforcement we will let 90% of consumers know, within twenty working days, what action we will take.	May 2001	SP3 WP5
3.3	We will report to Special Interest Group with recommendations of how a Fair Trader Recognition Scheme could be piloted.	September 2001	Flagship Project SP3 WP33
4	Measuring Outcomes and Performance	Action By	Links to Plans
4.1	We will identify those premises whose risk assessment is high or medium due to the likelihood of the businesses continued failure to comply with the law. The identified premises will be subject to targeted enforcement activity with the intention of reducing the risk of 10% of such premises by one category in a two year period.	March 2003	Service Project SP1 WP7 WP8
4.2	The net cost of providing the MetLab service will have been reduced by 10%.	March 2002	WP1

4.3	We will have raised the level of refusals by traders asked to sell cigarettes to under sixteen's to 96% of those targeted.	August 2001	Service Project SP5 WP11 WP24
4.4	Farmers submitting Animal Movement Records containing inaccuracies will be identified and those with a history of non-compliance will be targeted to reduce within two years the number of incorrect records submitted from the current average of 8% to 6% per annum.	March 2003	SP3 WP5
4.5	We will have consulted with staff to establish how/if communications can be improved and will have established if it is necessary to reconsider the service structure.	August 2001	WP21

1 Co-ordination and Accessibility

The Community Legal Services Qualitymark will be applied for in recognition of the standard of information and advice the Trading Standards Service provides, to Buckinghamshire residents and consumers using Buckinghamshire business, in partnership with other agencies.

We will examine opportunities for raising the profile of the service and increasing local presence through local service outlets.

Technology

Technology offers one of the best opportunities to provide access to the service on as near as possible to a face to face service. Whilst E-mail and the Website currently provides access to the service using the internet and computers, there exists scope for providing and promoting remote service points using video links, etc.

Suitable key locations throughout the County could provide access to Advice and Enforcement staff. Whilst these could be located in existing area offices or 'one stop shop' operated by other agencies such as District Councils the County already has a network of local centres - the libraries.

The Library Service offers the advantage of being part of the County's own IT network (computers and telephone). Library staff are professional sign posters for directing enquiries to the appropriate agencies and their assistance with Trading Standards enquiries would complement this service and provide added value to clients. Indeed, there is no reason why this concept should be restricted to the Trading Standards Service. By using video links, scanners and printers clients could speak face to face with officers, documents could be scanned and read by officers, advice given, assistance provided including printing off of advice leaflets at the client end,

assisting in the completion of forms, drafting of letters, etc. The service could be provided without the need for officers travelling from the centre to service points and apart from any over all increase in workload, would not otherwise impact on the current advice service provision. It would provide as near an equivalent 'shop front' advice facility throughout the County to that which is currently available at Aylesbury.

An appraisal of suitable locations/premises will be made to find those that could be used to extend service accessibility. However, the project will be piloted first within the Authority thus enabling us to overcome technical difficulties which may arise, in advance of forging links with other agencies.

Agency Option

Consideration could be given to training the staff of other agencies to provide basic first stop advice. Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB) advisors are well trained in doing this and provide detailed advice through their own NACAB training scheme. However, the CABs do not operate a 9.00 am - 5.30 pm service, five days a week and they are suffering grant restrictions and a consequential reduction in hours. Key personnel at local area offices and other agencies could be trained to signpost Trading Standards matters and provide simple basic advice to support the provision of Trading Standards literature.

Freephone or 0845 Local Call Rates Number

The Division will investigate the practicalities and cost of providing a local call charges facility so that all Buckinghamshire residents are treated equally in that they are not disadvantaged by their distance from Aylesbury and higher (non local) call charges. A means to restrict non-county residents from accessing the service would need to be found.

Information Access

The Division should review and where appropriate revise the points at which current information is available and the relevance of the information to the local community.

Information and Advice leaflets are currently provided in various locations across the County such as Citizen Advice Bureaux. Other equally appropriate points where such information could be made available will be explored. The three most regularly requested leaflets will be produced in other languages once it has been determined which languages are required. The use of talking books and large print books will also be considered.

We will seek to co-ordinate our enforcement role with other authorities to enhance our efforts and to avoid duplication. The Doorstep Selling Initiative is an example of where an officer could be used to co-ordinate the setting up and implementation of the scheme for more than one authority.

Inter Authority Co-ordination

District Councils

We will exchange information with the Environmental Health sections of the four District Councils with respect to those food premises assessed by either service as being high risk. Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) are responsible for hygiene matters whereas Trading Standards Officers enforce the labelling and composition regulations. In Aylesbury Vale District Council EHO's operate a scheme for food retailers where awards are made each year for excellent or improved performance. In 2001/02 the awards will relate to good stock control. This is an area where we can contribute to the scheme by providing information from our inspections of food bearing 'use-by' dates.

Trading Standards

The Crossing the Boundaries group of Trading Standards authorities mentioned in the Best Value Review is an initiative of inter-authority co-operation. Its effectiveness is to be evaluated by DETR later this year. We will report to the Community Services Cabinet Member within two months of the results of the review being made available.

In the meantime we will explore the feasibility and viability of buying into an existing Trading Standards group food sampling programme and database.

A frequent concern of consumers is that they have no way to check if a car servicing business has carried out all the work it purports to have done. We will join with other TS services in Thames Valley to purchase a car for use in testing car servicing businesses in Buckinghamshire.

As a member of the LACOTS (TVLG) Liaison Group we will contribute in developing an Internet 'Notice Board' with our partners where information, questions and answers can be shared with officers of the respective authorities.

Consumer Questionnaire

Users of the consumer advice service are being asked to complete and return a customer satisfaction questionnaire. The objective is to assess our performance in the eyes of those who have sought information and advice from us. We also want to learn if there are ways in which we can improve service delivery, the times we are available and the ways we have of being contacted.

2 Reduce Resource for Low Risk (Non-Food Inspections)

The current national premises risk assessment and inspection scheme requires that low risk premises be inspected on a five year rolling programme. Low risk premises, as the name suggests, do not represent any great inherent threat to consumers and the community. The most pressing problems with a five year cycle are:-

- The long-term lack of contact between Trading Standards and the proprietor of the premise. Often the five year level of inspection is not met due to more pressing service demands.
- The generally short duration of the inspection due to the large number of premises to be visited.
- Changes in ownership and trade use we are unaware of.

Postal Inspections

It is proposed that we pilot a postal inspection system. A similar logistical exercise has been undertaken for the past five years in relation to the inspection of animal movement records.

A postal system will involve sending a questionnaire to known traders or the occupier of any premises. Where the anticipated trader is still in business the owner/management will be invited to complete a questionnaire confirming the continued nature of the business and then to make self-declaration as to how compliance with the various laws that relate to their business is achieved. They will also be asked if there is any particular advice or information they require which may then be provided, by telephone, leaflets, letter or by officer visit. Returns will be examined and where the response does not represent any cause for concern it will be recorded as an inspection. At the next due visit date the trader will receive a personal visit.

Where a change of occupier has taken place a request for information as to trade name and business will be made. On receipt of the response consideration will then be given to the likely risk factor which should be applied and a decision made as to when a 'live' visit be made.

Where there is no response the premise will receive a 'live' visit from an officer to ascertain if business is being conducted at the premises. Covering letters to traders will indicate that whilst a response is not a legal requirement, where none is received an inspection visit will be conducted. Similarly a percentage of all respondents will be visited as a quality assurance measure of the scheme and to check the self-declarations.

3 Planned and Published Proactive Investigations

Guidelines for Enforcement Officers

We will produce guidelines for use of officers of the Investigations and Advice Service. This will assist in deciding whether, on the receipt of a complaint, an investigation will be commenced. Criteria will include the severity of non-compliance, fraud, previous history of trader/business involved and the staffing resources available within the teams at a particular time. Self help advice will always be given, verbally or by leaflet wherever it is requested.

Information for Complainants

An explanatory leaflet will be produced which will contain details of how a complaint will be dealt with, the ways in which the service will respond to a complainant and the maximum time we will take to make a first response.

Where a decision is taken to pursue a complaint with a view to taking formal action against a business or person, the complainant will be advised of what will be expected from them to assist and support the service in its enforcement role.

Action Against Persistent Offenders

We will investigate the activities of the three most persistent offenders held on our records database with the objective of improving their trading methods.

Fair Trader Award Scheme

We will report to the Special Interest Group the results of our research into designing and implementing a fair trader recognition scheme. The principles required to operate a successful scheme, the resources necessary and the areas of trade most suitable to be piloted will be identified.

4 Measuring Outcome and Performance

Outcome measures in relation to certain inspection activities will be developed, although it must be pointed out that the Trading Standards' profession, the Audit Commission and until this year the Best Value process, has failed to identify meaningful measures for Trading Standards activities. A Best Value Indicator has recently been approved for introduction for 2001/02. This has ten best practice elements.

Risk Assessed Premises

It is proposed that we give particular attention to those specific premises which represent a cause for concern to the community. In general it is not the case that these will be only high risk premises or that all high risk premises will be included. It is also not statistically sound to monitor the global movement of premises from one risk category to another as change in risk due to external factors would mask the impact of Trading Standards. The premises profile changes by some 10% annually as new traders start business and others cease trading.

Consideration will be given to awarding premises a compliance score irrespective of the inherent risk in their trade. This will assist in measuring improvements in performance. However, to be effective premises would need visiting on a more regular basis than is envisaged at the present time.

Persistent Offenders

Other areas where inspection impact will be monitored and targeted is in relation to investigation of those traders who continually fail to comply in non critical areas causing consistent 'incorrect' reports. The persistent offenders' record will enable us to identify those traders who we will make a concerted effort to persuade to trade in compliance with the law. This will include, for example, farmers who fail to return accurate animal movement records and traders who have been complained about on a regular basis by consumers. Other specific inspection types such as petroleum storage and businesses recognised as home authority manufacturers, importers or wholesalers will also be monitored, assessed and 'persistent offenders' identified and targeted for action.

MetLab

The staffing of the Laboratory, its income and expenditure will be restructured to reduce the net cost of the service by 10%. The Senior Inspector of Weights and Measures who has been responsible for the high quality operation of the laboratory and maintenance of UKAS accreditation has also had to participate in calibration work. An additional calibrator is being employed to relieve the Senior Inspector of this task. One of the calibrators will be used to test electrical equipment as part of his duties.

Age Restricted Goods

Young people will be used to test the effectiveness of the Proof of Age Card Scheme which has now been implemented throughout the County. Traders have been enthusiastic in supporting the scheme. Tests in 2000/2001 suggest the Proof of Age Card is making an impact in preventing illegal sales. We will aim to achieve at least 96% refusals when tests are made during 2001/02.

Staff Communication/Service Structure

An organisational health survey was carried out in October 2000. Twenty four members of Trading Standards responded, indicating that 58% of them considered internal communications were not satisfactory. Further research is needed to elicit more accurate information. Is the concern with communications within Trading Standards or the County Council? If the results can be obtained and they identify poor communication in the service then staff will be asked what measures can be taken to improve this in the coming year.

The structure of the service was reviewed and adjusted from 1 April 2000. Staff will be consulted to establish if it is necessary to reconsider the present arrangement.