

REPORT TO: Safer Halton Policy and Performance Board
DATE: 22nd September 2009
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Health and Community
SUBJECT: Joint Trading Standards service
WARDS: Boroughwide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To inform the Board of the performance and activities of the joint Trading Standards Service between Warrington Borough Council and Halton Borough Council.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 It is recommended that the Policy and Performance Board: -

- (1) Receive the report;
- (2) Consider the progress and performance information and raise any questions or points for clarification; and
- (3) Highlight any areas of interest and/or concern where further information is to be reported at a future meeting of the Policy and Performance Board.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 Background

This report gives an outline of the performance of the joint Warrington & Halton Trading Standards Service since the merger in late 2008. The main objectives of the joint Service were set out in the Service Specification (November 2008). The performance detailed below is referenced primarily against the objectives contained in the Service Specification.

It is vital that in today's environment of diminishing local government resources, and increasing commitments, we prioritise our activities to those, which have the greatest impact on health, wellbeing, community safety and economic prosperity. Balancing these priorities can be very difficult, as short term needs, such as rogues who are currently preying on the vulnerable, must be balanced against other issues which may take a generation to resolve, such as the rising levels of childhood obesity and alcohol harm. Building upon our commitments to improve public health, protecting the safety of our communities will bring further challenges, as will an increasingly complex and global market place. It is vital for all our stakeholders that the Service continues to modernise and improve so that we can deal with these new challenges. Consequently the first six months of the joint Service have been largely taken up with an internal restructuring to

help meet these challenges. Appendix 1 details the revised structure of the joint Service.

Alongside more effective linkages to key corporate objectives, the restructuring will enable the merged trading standards service to fully pragmatically embrace the principles of 'intelligence-led' prevention and enforcement. To enable this, the management team hold monthly tasking and coordination meetings, whereby key challenges are identified alongside managing current performance. This tasking process, which will utilise 'problem solving' approaches will again require flexible use of resourcing to be effective.

3.2 Consumer Engagement

a) Consumer Advice: Since 1st January 2009 we have dealt with **1425** Halton cases, an increase of **2.7%** compared to the same period in 2008. Whilst the nature of this rise is not 'significant', at this stage it is encouraging that consumers in Halton are not declining to use a joint service. Furthermore we expect that we will ultimately increase accessibility when we commence with our Community Engagement work later this year and in subsequent years.

b) Community Events: Attendance at 3 Money Matters/Credit Crunch Days organised by Riverside and Halton Housing. At these events we promoted Consumer Direct (the 'reception' for all trading standards advice calls in the North West), ICAN, No Cold Calling Cards and raised awareness of loan sharks, to maintain a high level of public interest following a successful conviction.

c) Consumer Education: In this period we have worked with Halton High and Wade Deacon schools on a theatre project to promote money awareness. The pupils worked with a professional drama facilitator exploring issues around money and developing a script on the theme of money. The play was then performed to peers and parents. As part of the same project we have been working with both schools to introduce credit union collections in the next academic year, to be organised and run by the pupils with guidance from Halton Credit Union.

d) ICAN: ICAN has been used to disseminate information on scams, on debt advice facilities at Halton CAB, on training for carers available through Halton Carers Centre, promoting an Age Concern money guidance service and to advise people how to make sure they don't get ripped off by debt management companies. There are now **271** ICAN members in Halton, an increase of **34%** since the start of the year. Furthermore in early July we supplied a Homewatch Coordinator (who has responsibility for organising fellow coordinators) with 300 application forms in the Preston Brook area. We trust that this will help to recruit a large number of 'trusted intermediaries' in the area. We have also registered Halton BC Internal Communications on the Scheme so that they can keep Halton employees informed of the latest scams etc.

3.2 Financial Inclusion & other Consumer Engagement Initiatives: In summary we have:

- Assisted Halton Credit Union with the production of a funding application for Health Grant monies to pay for a credit controller. This was successful.
- Continued to manage the Budgeting Skills Project (WNF) delivered by Halton Credit union. Since 1st January this project has saved Halton residents at least £188,999.
- Distributed loan shark posters and business cards to every doctor's surgery in Halton.
- Recently met with the North West Financial Inclusion Champions. Halton is one of their red areas and we are currently exploring how we can work together.
- Been working with Age Concern to help develop their Approved Trader Scheme.

3.3 Improving Health & Wellbeing

Test Purchase Statistics:

- Alcohol: We have already completed 39 of the 60 planned alcohol test purchase operations (65%). The current test purchase rate is **95%** (i.e. 95% of premises did not sell alcohol to our underage volunteers. This is a particularly high figure and demonstrates that alcohol interventions with the trade are having a positive impact.
- Tobacco: No test purchase operations carried out in Quarter 1 (Q1). Instead Test Purchasing is planned in Q3 & Q4.
- Knives: 6 operations were carried out in Q1 with 3 traders selling. Due to the relatively small number of test purchases we cannot state that this is statistically significant, however, we believe that the ongoing investigations and resultant legal actions will have the desired impact and reduce underage availability to knives.

Alcohol: The TSNW (Trading Standards North West) Regional Survey of 14,000 14-17 years olds in the Region has now been published; however, we are awaiting the Halton Local Survey. From the Regional Survey, Halton is one of the 4 local authority areas that have been identified, in both 2007 and 2009, as having relatively high levels of regular binge drinking. Furthermore the percentage of 14-17 yr olds claiming to buy alcohol for themselves has slightly increased by **1%** since 2007 from **22 - 23%**. Overall however those surveyed highlighted that they obtained their alcohol from parents or family / friends over 18. To help further address the challenges posed by underage drinking we have just assisted in the recruitment of an Alcohol Licensing Officer to be sited within Halton Community Safety Unit. This new post should be able to offer some much needed assistance in the area of alcohol licensing.

Alcohol Compliance Case Study

One of the benefits of a joint service is our ability to share experiences and skills across both Halton and Warrington.

In April this year staff previously employed by both Halton and Warrington devised an innovative scoring system that helps to systematically measure compliance in premises selling alcohol.

This novel system has now been used to assess all off-sales premises across both Halton and Warrington. Halton currently has 71 off-sales premises - all of which have been assessed using various criteria i.e. number of sales during test purchase operations, intelligence received about the premises selling to underage, training of staff, systems in place and our confidence in the management at the premises. The maximum score to be achieved is 20, which indicates a high level of compliance.

Whilst no off sales premises in Halton scored poorly, 15 premises had below average compliance ratings. This novel system has certainly helped to identify these below average premises, which are now being targeted to help them improve. Part of this improvement process involves the provision of training which is being carried out by staff from the former Warrington Trading Standards Service, a good example of where the shared service enables other approaches to be incorporated, which will have the desired impact of improving compliance and consequently restricting access to alcohol amongst underage drinkers.

The average compliance score for Halton off-sales premises is currently **14.37 / 20**.

Tobacco: The above survey highlights that the smoking rate amongst Halton's 14-17 year olds has dropped from **24%** in 2007 to **20%** in 2009. However, the same survey identifies that underage access to illicit tobacco is worryingly high. Funding is being obtained (see section 12 below) to provide resources to tackle the issues of underage access and illicit tobacco in Halton. Furthermore, Warrington & Halton Trading Standards Service will host the Department of Health funded Regional Illicit Tobacco Team. This brings some kudos to both Councils as this programme will, we believe, help reduce smoking prevalence in our deprived communities.

Funding: We have been successful in attracting funding to focus on illicit and underage sales of tobacco and the underage sale of alcohol, primarily by Halton & St Helens PCT. In summary funding will provide the following:

- 'Tackling Health Inequalities' funding will provide us with 2 posts and some financial resource to Tackle Illicit Tobacco in Halton.
- Halton & St Helens PCT are providing funding for 2 years to employ an Under Age Sales Tobacco Officer for Halton.
- Halton Alcohol Working Group (PCT Monies) are providing funding for 2 years to employ an Under Age Sales Alcohol Officer for Halton.
- Halton Community Safety has bid for £2,000 for Halton Trading Standards to focus on alcohol test purchasing exercises including overtime payments for Officers.

3.4 Community Safety

Doorstep Crime: There were 63 reported incidents between 1 January 2009 and 22 July 2009. 22 of the complaints related to a company based in the area which has been involved in cold calling and offering to carry out roofing work. A report is being compiled, as there are offences in relation to the Consumer Protection Regulations CPR's. We responded immediately to all calls where there was a crime in the process of being committed. A number of complaints relate to power washing and sealing of driveways and gardening work. We have found that residents in Halton have tended to contact Trading Standards after they have paid money over, whereas by contrast in Warrington consumers and 'trusted intermediaries' tend to call Trading Standards at an earlier stage thus allowing us to intervene. We believe that this should improve with a greater saturation of ICAN.

Doorstep Crime Case Study

Earlier this summer an 85 year old partially sighted lady, living alone in Widnes was approached by two men offering to power wash her front paving. She agreed to pay £300 for the work. She gave them a cheque, which they were unable to cash. They then offered to take her to the bank. When she declined they said they would return on Tuesday to take her to the bank.

Fortunately the lady mentioned this to a relative who contacted the Warrington and Halton Trading Standards service. Trading Standards liaised immediately with both the victim and the relative on the best way to resolve this matter. Working with Cheshire Police, the trader was arrested when he visited the victim to take her to the bank.

As a result of our prompt action, the lady did not have to pay the extortionate amount for such a small job and was given 'reassurance' support by both TS and the Police to ensure she doesn't become a repeat victim. The police have since put a camera in her house, although we doubt any other traders will return!

Proceeds of Crime: We are currently managing 13 Proceeds of Crime (POCA) cases, all of which will generate vital funding to enable further investigations to take place. In order to support this function into the medium - long term we have begun to negotiate keeping percentage returns from recovered monies. Due to the nature of this work it takes time to fully enforce the payment of these monies through the Courts but following the conclusion of some of most recent cases we should begin to see some financial returns. The use of POCA financial returns is restricted and monitored but we are able to use it to further POCA work and this is the aim.

3.5 Fair Trading

Rogue Traders: There are only 3 that are currently active in Halton side, namely:

- **Digital Services:** Satellite TV systems maintenance/service provider. There have been allegations of deliberate confusion with Sky. Complaint volumes have been maintained at high levels and questionnaires have been sent to 65 complainants to assist with identifying breaches. 30 have returned their questionnaire and these are currently awaiting analysis.
- **North West Fascias/Homeshield/Mark Miles:** The principal of this business is/was an employee of NWF/HS. We have received allegations that he has misled customers and taken money under false pretences with no work being done. The owner has failed to attend interview on a number of occasions. Consequently a criminal report is imminent. Homeshield also are a cause for concern in their own right trading both as Homeshield and their former name North West Fascias. A fresh review of recent Homeshield complaints is due.

3.6 Conclusion

The above report details current activity, which is undoubtedly making a difference in Halton and which adequately demonstrates the value of a joint service. The ability, for instance, to complete effective intelligence led investigations into rogue traders and trading practices is a real strength of a joint service.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 N/A

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The joint service is within agreed budget.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

The joint service supports better outcomes through reducing underage drinking.

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

N/A

6.3 A Healthy Halton

The impact of the service is outlined in paragraph 3.3.

6.4 A Safer Halton

The joint service makes a major contribution to safeguarding vulnerable people.

6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**
N/A

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 *The key risks/opportunities associated with the proposed action and an outline of the key control measures proposed in relation to these risks should be included.*

*A statement must be made as to whether proposals are so significant as to require a full risk assessment. If a full risk assessment is required, please describe high risk areas and control measures. (NB **all** key decisions automatically fall into this category of requiring a full risk assessment.)*

8.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
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