

LONDON BOROUGHS OF BRENT AND HARROW

TRADING STANDARDS ADVISORY BOARD – 19TH JULY 2005

REPORT NUMBER 6/05 FROM THE DIRECTOR OF TRADING STANDARDS

FOR INFORMATION

TITLE OF REPORT: BRENT AND HARROW CONSUMER SUPPORT NETWORK PROJECT BIDS

1.0 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides information to Members on developments within the Service relating to the nationwide Consumer Support Network (CSN) scheme. It also gives details of the project bids submitted by the Brent and Harrow Consumer Support Network (CSN), which is chaired by the Trading Standards Service.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Members discuss and comment where appropriate on the projects which have been funded by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to improve the provision of consumer protection services in the consortium area.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 As most of the work of the CSN is drawn from existing resources amongst the Network members, there will be no further financial implications for either Authority insofar as these particular projects are concerned. To support the two separate project bids, funding from the DTI has already been agreed.
- 3.2 Two separate projects were submitted to the DTI; one for Brent and one for Harrow. Both were successful and £10,000 has been granted by the DTI to support a project in Brent, and a further £10,000 to support a project in Harrow. However, the work from both projects will complement both boroughs.

4.0 STAFFING IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no additional staffing implications as the work to progress the CSN project plans will be carried out in the main by Trading Standards staff and by the network members.

5.0 DETAILS

5.1.0 Consumer Support Networks

- 5.1.1 The overall vision is a simple one: to improve consumer access to expert, accurate and timely advice. Access to good quality consumer advice varies enormously across the country. The 1999 Audit Commission report on Trading

Standards entitled 'Measure for Measure' said: *"In one part of the country, a consumer with a problem may receive considerable advice and help, but elsewhere someone with an identical problem may receive no assistance at all. They might eventually find a body that offers advice, but it might not be easy to get to, or it might open for only a few hours a week, or it may be hard to reach by phone. Or it may be all of these"*.

5.1.2 There is clearly room for improvement, but rarely is a single agency able to meet all the needs of its community. By joining up the services of local authority and voluntary advice agencies, we are starting to meet the diverse needs of today's consumers. Local Trading Standards, Citizens Advice Bureaux and independent consumer advice agencies across Great Britain have come together to form Consumer Support Networks (CSNs).

5.1.3 As a group CSN members work together to ensure that good quality consumer advice is accessible by the whole community. Agencies within the network who achieve the DTI's quality standards are awarded the CSN badge. The badge is a sign that an agency provides sound advice and that it operates as part of a joined-up service.



5.1.4 The network ensures that whenever people seek help, whether they need simple information or advice, mediation, or even support in the courts, they are able to approach any of the agencies within it and receive the appropriate help and assistance.

5.2.0 Brent and Harrow Consumer Support Network

5.2.1 The Brent and Harrow Consumer Support Network (CSN) membership includes a number of local advice and information providers from the local authority, Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx), Town Centre Management and Business Partnership Group Members. All network members work together to improve customer and commercial access to information and advice about consumer rights.

5.2.2 The CSN started in March 2001 and the Network presently consists of the following members:-

- Trading Standards Consumer Advice Service
- Citizens Advice Bureaux
- Brent Women's Aid
- Harrow Library Service
- Brent Library Service

- Brent One Stop Shop
- Black Disabled Peoples Association
- Red Sea Community Programme
- Harrow Association of Disabled People
- Age Concern Harrow

5.3.0 Project Bids Overview

5.3.1 The Brent & Harrow Consumer Support Network is responsible for the provision of quality consumer advice to the communities of the London Borough of Brent and Harrow. These two Boroughs have elected to provide joint consumer advice services to their richly diverse and differing community groups. 'One size does not fit all', with the partners, constituents and the business community displaying widely varying characteristics from the inner urban to the semi-rural suburban. For these reasons, the Brent & Harrow CSN project bid comprises two elements to address the differing issues facing our communities in each of the partner Boroughs' constituent areas.

5.3.2 As a local authority, Brent serves a multi-cultural and diverse population of 264,000. Brent is also one of London's most diverse Boroughs, with an ethnic majority population, who are a vulnerable group and likely to be targeted by predatory traders. Consumer surveys show that the Afro-Caribbean population are the lowest users of the Service and, as such, there is a need to raise the awareness of consumer advice services and to address the single largest cause of consumer concern in this area - rogue builders.

5.3.3 The aim of this project is to provide a package of solutions, both preventative and remedial. The scale of this consumer concern is significant; in excess of 15% of all complaints received by the Service are about rogue builders of which the total value of the loss to consumers is in excess of £1.5m. The project will be focussed in locations which from previous intelligence are shown to be subject to exploitative predatory trading. Our primary concerns are for the communities at risk, in particular the elderly and housebound, who are the most frequent victims of this type of trading activity.

5.3.4 This project will educate and alert consumers to their potential vulnerability and ensure that enforcement work is focussed in this problem area. Measures will include the preparation and distribution of free consumer education and information packs to risk assessed localities and individuals requesting pre-purchase advice. Various projects are planned with partner agencies such as the Police and the Council's Community Safety team to raise awareness of 'Doorstep Crime'.

5.3.5 Harrow is one of London's most attractive suburbs, having a population of 207,000 with just over a fifth of the area designated green belt. Harrow has a multi-cultural community of which the single largest representative group (30%) are of Asian origin. Our customer surveys show the Asian community are least satisfied with the provision of consumer advice services in Harrow. The Harrow

project will, therefore, address the Asian community's low levels of satisfaction with consumer advice services through an awareness and access programme.

5.3.6 This project contains two main components, a research element followed by remedial action. Project actions are intended to create improved levels of consumer satisfaction amongst the Asian community through greater awareness and publicity, better management of expectations, and a greater presence of civil law advice in Harrow.

5.3.7 This will be achieved by working closely with members of ethnic communities and the Race Equality Council in Harrow. Closer links will also be forged with Asian organisations, i.e. mosques, temples and community centres, and with the ethnic minority media. Part of the DTi funding will be used to produce publicity material and advisory leaflets in appropriate ethnic minority languages. It is also envisaged that training will be provided to volunteer case workers in the various Asian community centres so that they can give basic civil advice to members of their communities on consumer related matters.

6.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

6.1 The 1999 Audit Commission report on Trading Standards - 'Measure for Measure'.

6.2 Consumer Support Networks – your questions answered (DTI Leaflet).

6.3 Brent and Harrow CSN Network Development Plan.

Anyone wishing to inspect the above documents should contact John Taylor, 1st Floor, Quality House, 249 Willesden Lane, NW2 5JH; telephone 020 8937 5500.

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