

MINUTES OF THE TRADING STANDARDS JOINT ADVISORY BOARD
Wednesday 29 July 2009 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Susan Hall (Chairman, London Borough of Harrow), Councillor Miah (Reserving for Councillor Weiss, London Borough of Harrow), Councillor Baker (London Borough of Brent), Councillor Jones (London Borough of Brent) and Councillor Hashmi (London Borough of Brent).

Councillor Detre also attended this meeting.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Tom Weiss and Keith Ferry.

Officers in Attendance were: Bill Bilon (Director of Trading Standards, London Boroughs of Brent and Harrow), Finlay Flett (Head of Community Safety, London Borough of Harrow) and Ash Shah (Assistant Head of Service, Trading Standards, London Borough of Brent)

1. Appointment of the Chairman (amongst Harrow Members)

Councillor Hall was appointed Chairman of the meeting.

2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting – 18 March 2009

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 18 March 2009 be approved as an accurate record.

3. Matters Arising

None.

4. Report No. 1/09 from the Director of Trading Standards

Annual Report of the Director of Trading Standards for the year 2008/2009

Bill Bilon introduced the report which highlighted the work of the Trading Standards Service for Brent and Harrow in 2008/09 and the benefits that the Service provided to the public. He advised that the Office of Fair Trading had reported that consumers had made an annual saving as a result of the Service's fair trading activities. He added that a measure of the Service's success was evidenced by the improved trading practices of businesses and a reduced number of consumer complaints. Some of the initiatives officers had used to achieve these results included the Responsible Retailer Scheme for the underage sale of alcohol and tobacco to children and car dealerships selling clocked vehicles.

He reported that:

- Brent and Harrow had worked in partnership as a Consortium since 1965. Brent and Harrow had received £956,000 and £816,000 respectively from the agreed budget for 2008/09;

- The recession had generated extra demand for the Trading Standards Service. Officers had worked in partnership with the police to raise awareness of rogue builders, scams and counterfeiting. Officers had also provided advice on unsafe goods to businesses and taken enforcement action to remove unsafe products when necessary. A saving of approximately £150,000 on legal fees, £88,125 on fines and £76,139 of costs were collected from traders who were prosecuted in 2008/09;
- The Service was comprised of three teams that included; the Fair Trading Team, that dealt with counterfeiting and financial investigations; the Metrology & Safety team that dealt with weights & measures, product safety and pricing; and the Development & Support Team who provided administrative support and was also the first point of contact for consumer and trader enquiries. Sixty-five percent of the budget had been spent on costs for these front line services;
- Existing staff had attended a number of internal and external courses and completed different stages of the Diploma in Consumer Affairs and Trading Standards (DCATS). This was in order to keep updated on legislative and procedural changes that influence trading standards. Ash Shah, reported that the Financial Services Investigator had completed a six month secondment with the Regional Assets Recovery Team of the Metropolitan Police, where he gained first hand experience of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002;
- Trading Standards had received positive results in the annual staff satisfaction Survey completed in 2008. Employees of the Service felt that they were encouraged to work on their own initiative , but felt that their work life balance could be improved;

Bill Bilon provided an outline on the budget and finance of the service where he highlighted the results of comparisons between London boroughs that had been reported by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) for 2007/08. He reported that even though 65% of costs had been spent on staff that provided front line services, the individual cost to residents had been £3.12 per person compared to 50% and approximately £3.70 respectively for another London borough. The Chairman commented that these results affirmed the Services status as the benchmark to other London Boroughs as it had continued to produce a great volume of work considering its budget.

A brief summary of the Service's performance against National Performance Indicators (NI) was provided. The overall results of the NI 182 Business Satisfaction survey, which had been gathered jointly with other similar Services in both Council's of businesses that had received an inspection visit, had produced an overall score of 59% and 69% respectively for Brent and Harrow. The results of the postal survey completed by consumers who had contacted the Service had produced overall satisfaction levels of 84.6% and 80.4% for Brent and Harrow consumers. In response to a query raised by a Member of the Board, an officer advised that the indicator had been introduced in 2008 and could not be compared to other indicators for previous years.

The Board received an outline of the partnerships and projects that had been completed by the Trading Standards Service throughout the 2008/09 year. A number of these included the successful coordination of:

- The London Trading Standards Authorities (LoTSA) that had been established between 32 Authorities within the region. Officers were tasked with organising regional projects and campaigns, including investigations relating to the purchase of age-restricted goods by children via the Internet. The survey had reported that the 75% of websites visited had supplied age restricted goods. Its success spearheaded a wider investigation by the Metropolitan Police and Home Office where 80% of the test purchase attempts by children had resulted in sales;
- A joint partnership with the Fire Service and Age Concern to provide free electric blanket testing for residents. It was reported that 19 out of the 100 blankets that were tested were reported to be unsafe;
- A multi-agency approach with CCTV operators and town centre police teams to tackle street traders selling counterfeit DVDs in Harrow. Ash Shah reported the success of this operation has resulted in the problem moving to Brent where a similar initiative that had been rolled out resulted in the seizure of counterfeit clothing and DVDs;
- A partnership with Licensing Services and the Police in both boroughs following underage sales of alcohol to child volunteers and further police investigations, which had resulted in two retailers having their alcohol licence revoked;
- Purchases to test the Challenge 21 and Think 21 schemes used by a number of businesses. Ash Shah confirmed that despite electronic till prompts to remind sales assistants of the scheme, 25% of retailers had sold alcohol to the 14 year old child used in the underage operations;
- The 'Shop the Shop' campaign that had been launched in three schools to encourage pupils and adults to report shops who had sold age-restricted goods to children. Officers confirmed that the scheme would be extended to more schools within the coming year;
- A Department of Health project to tackle problems relating to tobacco products sold by businesses. During their investigations, officers found that a large number of products had not displayed the prescribed health warnings and discovered fake goods, including batteries, lighters and razor blades.

An outline of successful prosecutions under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 was provided by Ash Shah where he reported that a Harrow trader had been ordered to pay £55,000 in November 2008. He added that a trader who had provided the Service with the largest seizure of at least £1 million worth of counterfeit trainers had been sentenced to three years in prison. In light of these cases, the Chairman requested that press releases should be produced to inform residents of the enforcement actions taken by officers to increase the profile of the Service. Bill Bilon stated that press releases were always issued after such cases but he would make sure that they utilised the services of the Press Office within both Council's.

Officer intervention in civil cases was also reported, where civil advisors had saved consumers a total of £65,992 through refunds, repairs and negotiation of final payments. Officers' perseverance had successfully negotiated a full refund for a consumer who had been unable to recover the £1,550 that she had been charged for a makeover and photo shoot.

Whilst concluding their report, officers advised that budget cuts to the Service would impact in the long term and would limit the resources available to tackle large scale organised crime. It would also no longer support the proactive approach taken in previous years. Bill Bilon advised that in order to meet expectations of Central Government, the Service intended to promote the benefits of a shared service and the partnership by inviting other Authorities to join the Consortium. He thanked the Board for their support to officers employed by the Service and, in response, the Board congratulated officers on the hard work and dedication of the Trading Standards Service.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

5. Any Other Urgent Business

None

6. Date of Next Meeting

RESOLVED: That it be noted that the next meeting of the Trading Standards Advisory Board was scheduled to take place on Monday 7 December 2009 at Brent Town Hall.