



LONDON BOROUGH OF
HARROW

MINUTES OF THE TRADING STANDARDS JOINT ADVISORY BOARD
Thursday 6 June 2024 at 6.00 pm

Present:

Chair: Pritesh Patel London Borough of Harrow

Councillors:

Norman Stevenson	London Borough of Harrow
Nicola Blackman	London Borough of Harrow
Harbi Farah	London Borough of Brent
Daniel Kennelly	London Borough of Brent
Krupa Sheth	London Borough of Brent

1. **Election of Chair**

RESOLVED: That Councillor Pritesh Patel (London Borough of Harrow) be elected as Chair for the meeting.

2. **Apologies for Absence and Clarification of Alternate Members**

Apologies for absence were from Councillor Suresh (London Borough of Harrow) with Councillor Blackman attending as a substitute. Also, Councillor Crabb (London Borough of Brent) with Councillor Harbi Farah attending as a substitute.

3. **Declarations of Interests**

Item 9 - Report on Vapes

Cllr. Blackman declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to the report on tobacco. She noted that her husband had previously been involved in the matter in his capacity as an MP. While he is currently a candidate and not an MP, she felt it appropriate to declare the interest.

4. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 20 March 2024 be approved and signed as a correct record.

5. **Matters arising**

None.

6. **Deputations (if any)**

No requests for deputations had been submitted for the meeting.

7. **Annual Report 2023-2024**

Anu Prashar (Senior Regulatory Service Manager for Brent Council) presented the annual report for the year 2023-2024. The report was a contractual requirement between the boroughs and highlights the service's efforts in promoting a fair-trading environment for consumers and businesses.

Key points include:

Service Requests and Investigations: The service received 4,297 requests from various sources, including other trading standards teams, police, and businesses. Of these, 1,143 were further analysed, resulting in 331 investigations for Brent and 169 for Harrow.

Primary Authority Partnerships: The service provided 174 hours of advice in Brent and 20 hours in Harrow, marking a 36% increase from the previous year, primarily due to European market changes and product recalls.

Business Support and Compliance Visits: The service supported small businesses and conducted compliance visits (274 in Brent and 138 in Harrow). An example was shared where a business was saved approximately £30,000 by working with the service to correct product labelling.

Wembley Stadium Partnership: The service contributed to reducing illicit goods and illegal street trading at events, alongside working with Harrow's teams on issues like the sale of knives and underage sales.

Product Safety: Investigations led to the removal of 16,000 unsafe children's swimming vests from the market. The service also provided advice to businesses, saving them potentially £100,000 in losses.

Illicit Tobacco and Underage Sales: The service seized significant quantities of illicit tobacco and carried out operations to address underage sales of tobacco and vapes, resulting in fines for non-compliant businesses.

Cost of Living Project: The service conducted compliance checks on car dealers and energy-saving products, removing dangerous items from the market.

Lettings and Letting Agents: The service issued 15 notices of intent and imposed monetary penalties totalling £12,250 for Brent and £14,600 for Harrow, addressing overcharging and compliance issues.

Financial Investigations: The team secured 11 confiscation orders totalling over £1.165 million and issued restraint orders to prevent the dissipation of assets during investigations.

The Board asked the following questions regarding the report.

The Board Expressed appreciation for the report and noted the extensive activity being undertaken. The Board queried whether there were enough resources to handle the prioritisation of service requests, citing numbers in the report: 1,100 for Brent, 700 for Harrow, with 331 investigated in Brent and 169 in Harrow. The Board asked what would happen if the number of serious cases exceeded capacity, and if the team ever felt overwhelmed by serious cases. The Senior Regulatory Service Manager for Brent Council explained that the service prioritises the most serious cases, such as doorstep crimes, particularly those involving vulnerable individuals. Resources were allocated to deal with such cases, and regular reviews of complaints and ongoing investigations were conducted to assess the situation. However, it had noted that more resources would be helpful due to the costliness of investigations, especially in cases like doorstep crimes where expert assessments were often required. Building control resources from both Brent and Harrow were used to provide initial assessments before deciding whether to pursue a case further.

The Board asked for clarification regarding the cost of expert assessments and whether it was always necessary to engage experts, even if the case does not proceed to investigation.

The Senior Regulatory Service Manager advised generally; expert assessments do involve costs to the Council. While not all cases lead to full investigations, experts are sometimes required to determine whether a case merits further action. Building control teams are consulted initially to help reduce costs where possible.

The Board enquired about the issue of used vehicles, noting it was a significant concern in Brent and asked how resources were being allocated to address the problem. The Board also queried whether the increase in used vehicle complaints was linked to motor vehicle crimes.

The Senior Regulatory Service Manager advised it was noted that used vehicles have consistently been the most complained-about issue, largely because of the high volume of transactions and the difficulty in distinguishing between civil and criminal cases. Many complaints were civil in nature, while those with a criminal element were pursued. However, issues arose with some sellers who disappear or change details, making it hard to track and investigate further. The link to motor vehicle crime was unclear, as stolen cars would be handled by the police, though there had been past issues with misrepresented insurance write-offs.

The Board raised two questions. Firstly, on the discrepancy in Primary Authority partnership hours between Brent (174 hours) and Harrow (20 hours), and secondly, regarding investigations into the sale of chewing tobacco in paan shops and its impact on street cleanliness.

The Senior Regulatory Service Manager explained the disparity in hours were because Harrow has fewer Primary Authority partnerships compared to Brent, which had major clients like Ikea and River Island. Harrow had previously partnered with travel agents that went into liquidation due to COVID-19, resulting in a loss of hours. On the issue of chewing tobacco, it had confirmed that investigations were conducted where necessary, particularly if the products are improperly labelled. The issue of paan-related spitting was acknowledged, and it was noted that enforcement would occur if tobacco was involved. The environmental impact of spitting was also recognised as a concern.

8. Analysis of Trading Standards Service Requests

The Senior Enforcement Officer presented a report on the analysis of service requests received by Brent and Harrow Trading Standards from 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024. The report provided an overview of the types and volume of complaints and highlighted areas where resources should be focused to have the greatest impact.

A total of 4,397 service requests were received during the period. Most complaints (85.3%) came via the Citizens Advice Consumer Service, with the remainder coming from statutory bodies, businesses, officers, and councillors.

The types of goods and services complained about were grouped into 68 categories. The highest number of complaints concerned used vehicles (610 complaints) and building/renovation services (482 complaints). Substandard services and defective goods were the most reported breaches, often linked to these two categories.

Regarding complaints by location, the NW10 postcode (Brent) and HA1 postcode (Harrow) had the highest number of complaints against businesses. Prioritisation was discussed, noting that only the most serious complaints were investigated due to resource constraints.

The board was informed that used vehicles and building/renovation services would continue to be the most frequently reported issues. Additionally, the rise in complaints concerning locksmith services in Harrow was noted as an emerging trend.

In conclusion, the service will continue to target hotspot areas and the most complained-about businesses, aiming to raise compliance and reduce complaints. There will also be efforts to raise public awareness of consumer rights and to work with other council departments to address anti-social behaviour linked to certain businesses.

The following questions were asked by the Members of the Board in response to the update provided:

The Board enquired about the difference in complaints between Brent and Harrow, noting a higher proportion of complaints from Harrow residents compared to Brent. The Senior Enforcement Officer advised that this was only the second year of gathering this type of data. A clearer comparison could be provided in the future as trends are further analysed.

The Board highlighted a discrepancy in the report on page 29, where it mentioned February as having the highest demand for Harrow. However, data showed May had higher complaints. The Senior Enforcement Officer acknowledged the error and confirmed that May indeed had the highest demand, noting the need for further analysis to identify trends and seasonal fluctuations in complaints.

The Board raised a concern about used vehicle sales in hotspot areas, such as car parks near train stations, and asked how Trading Standards and the Council could take action in such locations. The Senior Enforcement Officer explained that they often collaborate with businesses for CCTV footage to aid investigations. He also

suggested the need for public education on buying used vehicles, particularly around conducting checks such as HPI reports and ensuring sellers' credentials match vehicle details. Additionally, they would consider publicising areas that are prone to fraudulent vehicle sales.

The Board Member provided an example from his ward, where a specific location was notorious for vehicle crime. He suggested a "name and shame" approach for businesses that attract such criminal activity. The Senior Enforcement Officer acknowledged the suggestion, stating that any public warnings would need to go through the proper legal channels. They also noted the possibility of working with primary authorities to raise awareness of crime at specific businesses.

Board Members enquired about the scale of the problem in Brent and Harrow compared to other boroughs or on a national level. The Senior Enforcement Officer responded that, while some national data is available through the Association of Chief Trading Standards Officers, most local authorities do not analyse complaints in the same detail. Comparative data with neighbouring boroughs would be reviewed and presented in future reports. The Chair clarified that some boroughs, like Westminster, have more businesses than residents, which can skew complaint data. Comparable data from outer London residential boroughs would offer a more accurate reflection of trends.

The **Board endorsed** the recommendations and **noted** the report.

The Chair thanked the team for their hard work in complying the report and their ongoing work.

9. **Report on Vapes**

Anu Prashar (Senior Regulatory Service Manager for Brent Council) presented a report on the proposed government legislation relating to a ban on disposable vapes and new tobacco control measures.

The Senior Regulatory Service Manager explained that, due to the dissolution of Parliament ahead of the general election, the legislation did not progress, and its future depends on the incoming government.

The proposed measures included a ban on disposable vapes, concerns over environmental impacts (particularly litter and lithium battery waste), and increased regulation of vape flavours and packaging to prevent child-targeted marketing.

Additionally, a bill was proposed to create a smoke-free generation by making it illegal to sell tobacco to individuals born after January 1, 2009. Trading Standards would be responsible for enforcement, including issuing fixed penalty notices for underage sales.

The Senior Regulatory Service Manager also noted ongoing collaboration with Brent and Harrow Public Health groups to share intelligence on illicit tobacco and underage vape sales.

There were no questions from the Board.

The report was **noted** by the Board, with an agreement to monitor developments after the general election.

10. **Funeral Directors Report**

The Senior Regulatory Services Manager provided an update on government-directed visits to funeral homes by Trading Standards and Environmental Health teams.

A joint letter had been received from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Ministry of Justice, following an incident at a funeral home in Hull.

The aim was to ensure public confidence in the funeral sector, which had been currently unregulated. Funeral homes in Brent and Harrow would be visited by Trading Standards and Environmental Health officers to assess compliance and audit practices.

The visits would be supported by two trade associations: the National Association of Funeral Directors and the National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors. These bodies have established procedures for handling deceased individuals.

The purpose of these visits was to gauge compliance and reassure the public, with the possibility of further regulation based on findings.

Visits are yet to commence, but staff have undergone initial training.

The following questions were asked and answered.

The Board asked if Trading Standards had ever engaged with funeral directors prior to this initiative, except in cases of complaints. The Senior Regulatory Services Manager advised that, in their 30 years with Trading Standards, they had never visited a funeral director. Engagement with funeral directors would only occur if a complaint arose, such as misleading claims about membership in a trade association, which would be a violation under consumer protection laws. The Senior Regulatory Services Manager commented that there had been no history of issues in Brent or Harrow concerning funeral directors, which was reassuring.

The Senior Regulatory Services Manager further explained that while funeral plans might fall under Trading Standards' remit, such matters would likely be referred to the Financial Ombudsman. They reiterated that they had never had to investigate a funeral director, and that many professionals in the field were unaware of the lack of regulation in the sector.

The report was **NOTED**.

11. **Date of Future Meetings**

NOTED the dates for future meetings of the Advisory Board agreed for the 2024-25 Municipal Year, as follows:

- Wednesday 6 November 2024 at 6pm to be hosted (online) by the London Borough of Brent
- Wednesday 19 March 2025 at 6pm to be hosted (online) by the London Borough of Harrow

12. **Any Other Urgent Business**

None.

Councillor Pritesh Patel
Chair