

**London Boroughs of Brent & Harrow
Trading Standards Joint Advisory Board
12 October 2022
Report from the Senior Service Manager**

FOR INFORMATION

HOW TRADING STANDARDS WILL RESPOND TO THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide members with information of our work on tackling the current cost of living crisis.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 That Joint Advisory Board Members take note of the report and provide comment where appropriate.

3.0 Details

- 3.1 The 'cost of living crisis' refers to the fall in 'real' disposable incomes (that is, adjusted for inflation and after taxes and benefits) that the UK has experienced since late 2021. It is being caused predominantly by high inflation outstripping wage and benefit increases and has been further exacerbated by recent tax increases and rises in fuel costs.
- 3.2 The cost-of-living crisis is beginning to have a significant impact on both our residents and business owners in every part of Brent and Harrow. Price rises driven by energy price inflation, alongside additional taxation, are having an impact on most, with those on the lowest incomes likely to be hardest hit.
- 3.3 The Trading Standards Service seeks to promote and maintain a fair and equitable trading environment for consumers and businesses alike, creating a level and equal marketplace in which consumers can spend in confidence and business can confidently trade. Our duties extend to all business types including those who trade online and the growing internet marketplace, our local high streets, commercial business parks, trading estates, those who trade from their homes and door to door tradespeople.
- 3.4 The Service is key to protecting people, especially the most vulnerable, during a cost of living/energy/ inflation crisis when they need every penny and cannot afford to lose money through rising or misleading prices, misdescriptions, short measures, substandard services, fraud or scams.

- 3.5 The crisis will likely exacerbate problems in some areas, with a potential proliferation of illicit goods (unsafe imports, illicit tobacco, counterfeits) and increase scams in areas such as short measure fuel, short weight food and “energy efficiency” claims.
- 3.6 Trading Standards, equally, ensure that there is a level playing field for businesses many of whom (especially the smaller ones) are facing unprecedented problems just as they try to recover from the pandemic. Trading Standards are key as a source of advice supporting businesses from unreasonable consumers trying to drive a hard bargain and in enforcing against law breaking businesses.
- 3.7 In addition, the Service anticipate an increase in demand when cost of living is further felt in our communities. The most vulnerable cannot afford to lose any money at all to scammers and fraudsters. Business will need advice and will want action if they see others gaining an unfair competitive advantage by failing to comply with legal standards.
- 3.8 The Service may also see some businesses that are also hit with the cost of living crisis may be tempted into more reckless trading or worse, fraudulent activity if stretched financially.
- 3.9 The Service can support our residents and businesses in a range of different ways during the cost of living crisis. Below are main areas that the Service covers and how we are intending to support our communities.
- 3.10 **Illicit goods, including tobacco, alcohol and other counterfeit goods**
The Service aim is to keep people safe from the harmful impacts of illicit products.
- We develop intelligence on places where illicit goods are being sold.
 - We work with our partners to target these traders and seize the illicit goods.
 - We take appropriate action against these traders, publicise this to deter others from getting involved and publicise how to report illicit goods to the Service.
 - We monitor and enforce online platforms.
 - We tackle underage sales of restricted products including vapes.
 - We educate and warn the public what to look out for and avoid
- 3.11 **Weights and Measures**
The Service aim is to ensure that consumers are getting what they paid for.
- We test weighing machines to ensure that they are accurate
 - We investigate weights and measures complaints and take appropriate action when necessary.
 - We check pre packed products contain the amount they claim.
 - We publicise our results to inform and reassure our consumers.
 - We check that businesses aren't weighing goods incorrectly, such as including packaging.
- 3.12 **Product Safety**

The Service aims to ensure products manufactured, imported and sold in our area are safe regardless of their cost.

- We will continue with market surveillance, using intelligence, to monitor and ensure safety, especially of essential and high demand goods.
- We work with the Office of Standards and Safety and the Ports Authorities to ensure only safe products are supplied in our areas.
- We take appropriate enforcement action against those not complying with the law.
- We support business with advice about proportionate and effective due diligence checks they need to carry out and where possible, identify how expensive testing procedures can be minimised.
- We can help businesses with access to free fast and accurate product safety advice and our charges are favourable compared to private industry where assured primary authority advice is needed.

3.13 Fairness of the Trading Environment

We help honest businesses and make sure that they are not put at any disadvantage for trading fairly.

- We tackle fraudulent and non-compliant businesses, making sure we use proceeds of crime laws to ensure crime doesn't pay.
- We provide high quality business advice, up to seven hours free and then 'at cost'. This enables businesses and traders to get compliance right first time, and assist in making it cheaper than non-compliance.
- We publicise actions taken against non-compliant businesses and traders to deter other businesses from considering non-complying.

3.14 Greener Future

We help consumers make informed choices to enhance confidence in green markets.

- We will support work to improve the energy efficiency of rented accommodation.
- We will improve our understanding of green retro-fit issues to tackle mis-selling.
- We tackle greenwashing and green scams.

3.15 Increased Vulnerability of Consumers

We aim to keep our residents safe from financial loss and harm to their wellbeing.

- We raise general awareness of scams, among consumer and businesses, especially those related to cost of living, offers of help towards energy bills, council tax refund scams, pension pot scams, green homes grants and home insulation scams.
- We signpost vulnerable people to experts in the Customer Contact centre who know what welfare and financial support is likely to be available.
- We provide enhanced support to vulnerable persons to help them exercise their consumer rights and not be further disadvantaged by attempts to defraud them.
- We help tackle the harm from loan-sharks, raising awareness and working with the national illegal moneylending team.

- 3.16 At the time of writing, the Service is feeding into both councils cost of living strategies. Where necessary, we will update our approach to our priorities ensuring we offer businesses and consumers, as much support as possible while the crisis continues.

4.0 Financial Implications

- 4.1 The staffing resource to implement this will be met from within the Trading Standards base budget.

5.0 Legal Implications

- 5.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

6.0 Equality Implications

- 6.1 The proposals in this report have been screened to assess their relevance to equality and were found to have no equality implications.

7.0 Consultation with Ward Members and Stakeholders

- 7.1 There is no requirement to specifically consult Ward Members about this report as it affects all wards across both Boroughs.

8.0 Human Resources Implications

- 8.1 There are no staffing or property implications arising from this report.

Contact Officer

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