

# Local Authority Trading Standards Services

## Providing advice and assistance to local consumers

Basic consumer advice is available to everyone in Great Britain over the telephone and online via Consumer Direct, a central government funded advice service delivered in partnership with Local Authority Trading Standards Services.

Many consumers, however, require greater help than Consumer Direct can provide. This may be because a consumer is vulnerable and less able to deal with their problem or because a complaint involves complex paperwork or requires direct intervention with a trader.

The advice and assistance required by these consumers is currently provided by 84 per cent of Trading Standards Services across Great Britain.

Trading Standards Services that provide advice and assistance to local consumers aim, where possible, to provide expert advice that empowers consumers to resolve their own problems. Where this is not possible, more in-depth assistance and direct intervention such as mediating with a trader might be provided. This type of help is targeted to those consumers who are least able to resolve their problem without it. Typically, these will be the most vulnerable members of the local community, such as older people and people with learning disabilities.

Without this advice and assistance, many consumers simply give up their claim and as a result may find themselves facing considerable financial loss. In most Local Authority areas there are no other means by which this type of assistance can be obtained without significant, often prohibitive, cost to the consumer.

### Protecting local consumers and improving lives

Trading Standards Services that provide this advice and assistance help ensure that local consumers, including vulnerable members of society, can resolve their disputes and obtain redress when things go wrong. Redress may take the form of a refund, compensation, or the proper provision of goods or services by a trader.

The Office of Fair Trading estimates the savings achieved for consumers by Trading Standards Services solely through intervention in those cases referred to them by Consumer Direct to be at least £50 million a year. This includes only the direct savings to the consumers concerned. The effect that well-funded and active Trading Standards Services have in deterring businesses from acting illegally in the first place is an additional benefit.

#### **Case Study – Gloucestershire County Council Trading Standards Service**

A salesman for a fascia company called at the door of an elderly couple and told them that their guttering was in a very poor state and needed to be replaced. The salesman arranged a 10 year credit deal with a finance company which meant the couple would pay back more than £7000 over 10 years. The couple's son believed that there was nothing wrong with the guttering which had only been fitted a year or two previously. After Gloucestershire Trading Standards Service contacted the finance company to discuss the matter, the company agreed to cancel the couple's agreement.

## **Supporting enterprise, economic development and a fair trading environment**

As with other Trading Standards Service functions, the provision of advice and assistance to consumers helps to maintain a fair trading environment in which consumers can make purchases with confidence and in which fair-dealing businesses are not commercially disadvantaged against those that flout the law. In March 2007, the Government set fair trading as one of the six national priorities for Local Authority Regulatory Services and, from April 2008, performance against this priority will be measured in the Local Government Performance Framework.

Legitimate businesses also benefit from the impartial role that Trading Standards Services play in resolving disputes. In doing so, Trading Standards Services provide unbiased, expert advice that is targeted to those businesses that are causing problems for local consumers. By helping businesses resolve existing complaints and by providing advice to prevent future ones from arising, Trading Standards Services help businesses to improve their customer satisfaction, increase repeat business and reduce the amount of time and money spent on handling complaints.

### **Case Study – Westminster City Council Trading Standards Service**

An orthopaedic bed company failed to supply beds that had been ordered and paid for. One very elderly couple (one of whom suffered severe arthritis), who had disposed of their bed on the day the new one was due, spent Christmas sleeping on the floor. Westminster Trading Standards Service had a series of meetings with the company to discuss this and other complaints and to advise the company on how they could be resolved. As a result of this intervention, the above-mentioned couple received their bed the following day, refunds of up to £1000 were obtained for over 60 consumers and another 200 were supplied with the beds they had ordered.

## **Part of a comprehensive Local Authority Trading Standards Service**

Acting to protect the interests of individual, often vulnerable, consumers is widely seen as the public face of Local Authority Trading Standards Services. This part of the service is highly visible to local residents and surveys undertaken around the UK indicate that consumers rate it as being of very high importance to them.

Furthermore, where they provide advice and assistance to local consumers, Trading Standards Services themselves benefit from the collection of detailed intelligence about local traders and how they operate. Indeed many breaches of criminal and civil legislation that Trading Standards Services have a duty to enforce are detected in this way.

This type of intelligence allows Trading Standards Services to target enforcement action and consumer education initiatives to where they have the greatest impact in terms of enhancing the economic and social welfare of local consumers and driving down the number of complaints about local businesses.

### **Case Study – London Borough of Havering Trading Standards Service**

A disabled consumer's ceilings were flooded and damaged by a trader fitting a new central heating system. Pieces of fibreglass and plastic were also present in the consumer's tap water following the trader's work. The trader refused to deal with the matter on the grounds that a claim was being processed by his insurer, and the insurer advised the consumer that the case was not urgent. The matter was referred to Havering Trading Standards and Environmental Health who intervened with the trader and the insurance company. As a result, the trader accepted responsibility and rectified the water supply, and the insurer dealt with the claim as a priority.