

Local Authority Trading Standards Services

Providing advice and assistance to local consumers

Basic consumer advice is available to everyone in Scotland 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 83 per cent of Trading Standards Services across Scotland.

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 in the UK 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 – West Dunbartonshire Council Trading Standards Service

An elderly couple received a phone call saying they had won an orthopaedic pillow. Although they couldn't recall entering a competition, the couple allowed a representative of the company to visit them at home to hand over the 'prize'. The visit turned out to be a sales pitch lasting four hours, during which the couple were persuaded to sign a contract to buy an adjustable bed for £2900. They later regretted signing the contract but, when they asked for it to be cancelled, the sales representative became aggressive and told them it was not possible to cancel. West Dunbartonshire Trading Standards Service intervened on behalf of the couple and advised the company that the couple had a statutory right to cancel the contract. As a result of the Trading Standards Service's action, the company agreed to cancel the contract and provide a full refund of the couple's deposit.

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.

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 – West Lothian Council Trading Standards Service

An elderly resident was sold double glazing but, after a short time, the windows began to leak, causing extensive damage to her curtains and carpets. The company initially said there were only minor faults and claimed to have fixed them. However, the leaking continued and the company refused to undertake further work to resolve the problem. West Lothian Trading Standards Service intervened and helped the consumer to obtain an independent expert report. As a result of this intervention, the company fixed the windows properly and agreed to compensate the consumer £500 to cover the damage to her carpets and curtains and the cost of the expert report.

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 – North Ayrshire Council Trading Standards Service

Numerous complaints were received about a company selling and installing bathroom and kitchen units and appliances. The company had previously been warned about its trading activities and had provided voluntary assurances about its future conduct. However, complaints indicated that the company continued to fail to complete work as agreed or to a satisfactory quality. North Ayrshire Trading Standards Service intervened on behalf of several consumers and helped them to obtain a total of nearly £20,000 of redress. The Trading Standards Service continues to monitor consumer feedback on the company and to work closely with the company to ensure that its customers get a fair deal.