

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 around 90 per cent of Trading Standards Services across Wales.

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

An elderly consumer with chronic arthritis required a new bed. A number of beds were tested, before an order was placed for one which the consumer believed would meet his requirements. On delivery the consumer realised at once that the bed wasn't the one he had tested and contacted the trader within three days. The trader advised that the bed delivered was correct and refused to do anything. After a number of calls to the trader, a technician visited who advised that there was no technical fault with the bed, but that it was a low tension bed. The consumer had ordered a high tension bed, but the trader was adamant that the bed delivered was the one ordered. The matter was referred to the consumer's Local Authority Trading Standards Service, which intervened on behalf of the consumer. After the Trading Standards Service pointed out the trader's obligations to the consumer, a suitable bed was provided and at a discounted rate.

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

Between 2004 and 2006 approximately 350 complaints and enquiries were registered about a mobile phone retailer in South Wales. The issues centred around allegations of misrepresentation of the termination date of contracts, purporting to be the service provider rather than an agent, issues concerning price tariffs and failure to give appropriate cancellation rights. The company's 'home authority' Trading Standards Service met with senior managers of the company at their premises on a number of occasions to intervene on behalf of consumers who had been misled and misinformed. By offering support and advice to the company, the Trading Standards Service contributed to a major improvement in the company's business practices and consequently to the fortunes of their current and future customers.

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

A consumer's car was seriously damaged while using a multi-national company's car wash. The estimate for repairs to the car was over £1,300. The car wash company denied any liability and pointed to the fact that there was a sign at the entrance to the car wash which claimed to exclude them from liability for all accidents, including those caused by their negligence. The consumer's Local Authority Trading Standards Service considered that the company were indeed liable for the damage and contacted the company's head office on a number of occasions in an effort to resolve the dispute. The company, however, continued to deny liability. Having exhausted other options, the Trading Standards Service helped the consumer to draft a 'particular of claims form' to initiate a civil action in the county courts. After receiving the summons, the company paid the consumer's claim in full prior to the court hearing.