

DUDLEY METROPLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

SELECT COMMITTEE OF THE ENVIRONMENT 8TH SEPTEMBER 2010

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

ROGUE TRADERS and DOORSTEP CRIME

PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1 To inform Members of Dudley Trading Standards Service's role in combating the problems of Doorstep Crime and investigating rogue traders.

BACKGROUND

2. Doorstep crime occurs when householders are misled by doorstep callers, bogus workmen, high-pressure salespeople, bogus officials and distraction burglars. The most common offence involves the offender targeting an elderly victim by cold calling at the doorstep and offering repairs to garden and property. The offender will often overcharge for unsatisfactory goods or services, charge for unnecessary work, damage property to obtain money, leave work unfinished and intimidate in order to extort payment. It is now well established in Dudley from data provided by West Midlands Police and the Safe and Sound Partnership that distraction burglaries and rogue trading are interlinked.
3. Enforcement and prevention activity in relation to doorstep crime contributes to the following Community Strategy themes
 - Community Safety - Strengthen trust and confidence by working to prevent and reduce crime and antisocial behaviour and preventing vulnerable people from being victims of doorstep crime.
 - Health and Wellbeing - Tackling inequality in physical health and mental wellbeing. There is considerable evidence to prove that older people are far more likely to suffer a rapid deterioration in health after becoming a victim of doorstep crime.
- 4 Doorstep crime is targeted at the most vulnerable in society and contributes to their fear of crime and therefore their quality of life. Elderly victims are often reluctant to report incidents of doorstep crime because of embarrassment; fear of reprisals or that relatives or friends will consider they are no longer able to look after themselves.

- 5 Criminals who carry out this activity are known to sell information about likely victims to others. The victims may then be subject to distraction burglary or repeated bogus trading attempts.
- 6 The number of serious doorstep crime incidents reported to both the Police and Trading Standards has grown significantly over the past few years. Incidents involving older people losing thousands of pounds are now not unusual and what has become clear is that a co-ordinated approach to the problem is required.
- 7 In September 2009 a dedicated team was created in Trading Standards to investigate rogue traders and doorstep crime and to respond to the rise in reported incidents. The team works in partnership with West Midlands Police, the Council's Safe and Sound Partnership and other partners who have contact with vulnerable residents. To date the team has prevented in excess of £37,000 being lost by Dudley residents who have been a victim of doorstep criminals and distraction burglars. This included the case of an elderly and vulnerable Brierley Hill resident who paid £4,000 in cash to a rogue trader. The trader then demanded a further £4,000 forcing the resident to obtain a bank loan and an extension to his overdraft. The bank eventually became concerned and contacted trading standards when the resident again approached the bank for a further loan secured against the property.
- 8 In June 2010 as part of national Operation Rogue Trader officers from Trading Standards and West Midlands Police carried out stop checks to identify potential rogue traders and bogus callers. Of the 25 traders interviewed 21 were found to be in breach of consumer protection legislation and were issued with warning notices. One known trader was issued with a Police caution. It is now planned to repeat these stop check exercises on a monthly basis in targeted areas.
- 9 As part of national rogue trader month a radio campaign supported by Dudley Trading Standards ran on Smooth FM throughout July warning of the dangers of doorstep callers and rogue traders.
10. In 2000 trading standards in partnership with Age Concern established an approved trader scheme called Fix a Home. The scheme approved by the Office of Fair Trading now has more than 120 traders offering a wide range of property and garden maintenance services. Each trader accepted on to the scheme has to provide a series of references from satisfied customers and is subject to a rigorous selection and monitoring process. Demand for the Fix a Home list increases year on year with 10,000 copies being distributed in 2009.
- 11 Trading Standards has been working in partnership with the Adult Safeguarding Board to produce a groundbreaking educational package entitled "Who's After Your Money ". The package provides education to vulnerable groups and carers in the Borough about rogue traders and scams. Further training will also be made available for front line health care professionals to help them identify potential victims among their clients.

FINANCE

12. The costs associated with the activities contained within the report are covered by existing budgets.

LAW

- 13 The Councils statutory duties with respect to protecting vulnerable consumers are set out in:

- Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008
- Companies Act 2006
- Fraud Act 2006
- Proceeds of Crime Act 2002
- Enterprise Act 2002
- Cancellation of Contracts made in a Consumer's Home or Place of Work etc. Regulations 2008.

EQUALITY IMPACT

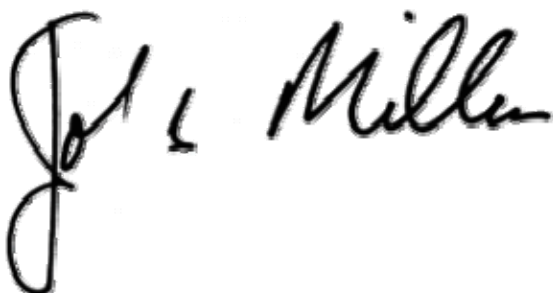
14. The proposals in this report do not impact on relevant groups or conflict with the Council's commitment to equality.

Work to combat doorstep crime and investigate rogue traders impacts the community strategy themes of health and wellbeing and community safety. In particular inequality in physical health and mental wellbeing is tackled by preventing vulnerable groups from being victims of doorstep crime through targeted enforcement and advice.

RECOMMENDATION

15. It is recommended that:-

- Members note the work carried out in this area by the Trading Standards Service.



.....
John Millar
Director of the Urban Environment

Contact Officer: Mike Chambers
Telephone: 01384 814683
Email: mike.chambers@dudley.gov.uk

List of Background Papers