

Environment Scrutiny Committee

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 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. It is known to be underreported on a scale of 9:1. (Home Office data) 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 This crime affects older people and contributes to their fear of crime and therefore their quality of life.
- 7 The number of serious doorstep crime incidents reported to both the Police and Trading Standards in the West Midlands has risen by 22% over the last 12 months. (Consumer Direct database) 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.
- 8 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. The Service also works in partnership with Telecare services who operate the bogus caller hotline. The hotline enables anyone to report a bogus caller or rogue trader on 01384 812045. Any information received is then forwarded to agencies including the Police and Trading Standards. From August 2010 to date the team has prevented in excess of £270,000 being lost by Dudley residents who have been a victim of doorstep criminals and distraction burglars. This includes numerous cases of intervention, whereby officers from the team have carried out 'rapid responses' to attend doorstep crime incidents and prevent Dudley residents having to pay rogue traders for unnecessary and shoddy work. By attending the scene before cash had been handed over in one instance residents were collectively saved £10,000. Officers were also able to assist residents in cancelling cheques and negotiating with banks to recover cash obtained as a result of fraud. Officers also represented an elderly and vulnerable resident in Stourbridge County Court who was being sued by a rogue double glazing firm for work which was unnecessary and of poor quality. The district judge struck out the company's claim and commended Trading Standards Officers for the assistance they had given to the consumer whose poor health and vulnerability prevented him from attending court in person.
- 9 In 2000 trading standards in partnership with Age UK Dudley established an approved trader scheme called Fix a Home. The scheme approved by the Office of Fair Trading now has more than 140 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 2011-12 and over 90% of customers were satisfied with the service they received. The Fix a Home brochure is available at <http://www.dudley.gov.uk/advice-benefits/trading-standards/fix-a-home> or by calling 01384 814695.
- 10 Trading Standards in partnership with Adult Community and Housing Services (DACHS) have developed a groundbreaking educational package "Who's After Your Money" which has been delivered to over 200 professional carers in Dudley over the last twelve months. The training enables carers to identify whether the people they care for are victims of doorstep crime and scams, and take steps to protect them. Further information is available on the Safe & Sound website by visiting <http://www.dudleysafeandsound.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Rogue-Trader-leaflet.pdf> The training has been received very positively and is now recognised as essential training for carers

of the vulnerable and elderly. Training invites are sent to all staff within DACHS and also to private and independent care providers who support people within their own homes. The training package has also been delivered to the staff of Dudley Telecare Services and to staff and managers at NHS Dudley, Alzheimer's Society, Age UK, Citizens Advice Bureau and members of Dudley Adult Safeguarding Board. The package has also been adopted by four local authorities in the Midlands. .

- 11 A further training package entitled "Doorstep Crime its Daylight Robbery" has also been developed. Aimed at Police Officers and front line civilian staff the package is intended to increase understanding of doorstep crime and financial abuse of older people and has been delivered to in excess of 200 delegates.
- 12 In August 2011, Dudley Trading Standards in partnership with Safe and Sound (Dudley's Community Safety Partnership) launched the first of the Borough's 'No Rogue Trader Zones.' 'No Rogue Trader Zones' seek to create a deterrent to rogue traders and bogus callers in areas identified as 'hotspots' for doorstep crime. Signage is erected across the zones and booklets distributed to encourage residents to report anyone suspicious to Trading Standards. Trading Standards will then carry out checks on the individual and if necessary initiate a joint 'rapid response' with West Midlands Police. In many cases the callers may well be genuine, in these circumstances reassurance can be given to the resident. Conversely if the trader is a rogue trader then all involved can be dealt with appropriately. Within the zones, joint neighbourhood inspections will be carried out by Trading Standards and Police officers on a regular basis. These inspections will be overt and highly visible to residents and traders promoting the scheme and providing reassurance to residents. An approach will be made to any persons going door to door, or working on property, to ensure they are carrying out legitimate activities. From time to time, other partner agencies such as the Health & Safety Executive, Benefit Fraud and the Hidden Economy Team may also accompany these inspections.
- 13 The 'No Rogue Trader Zones' encompass the following neighbourhoods which have been identified from Police and Trading Standards data as 'hotspots' for rogue trader activity and distraction burglaries:-
 - Halesowen North
 - Hayley Green & Cradley South
 - Halesowen South
 - Belle Vale

Advice booklets and door stickers have been delivered to 22,000 households within the zones and monthly inspections have been carried out in partnership with West Midlands Police. The impact of the zones is currently under evaluation and results will be reported to the Older Peoples Board. National research by the Trading Standards Institute in 2010 indicated that an average of 72 per cent of residents said they felt safer since their zone was introduced and an average of 78 percent of residents questioned said instances of cold calling had reduced.

- 14 During the last twelve months, Dudley Trading Standards have successfully prosecuted three rogue traders who preyed on the vulnerable and elderly of the borough. Penalties awarded included fines costs and compensation in excess of £13,000 and 100 hours unpaid work.

FINANCE

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

LAW

- 16 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

- 17 The proposals in this report do not impact on relevant groups or conflict with the Council's commitment to equality.
18. 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

19 It is recommended that:-

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Millar'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'John' written in a stylized, looped manner and the last name 'Millar' in a more straightforward cursive script.

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John Millar
Director of the Urban Environment

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List of Background Papers

Council Action Plan
Community Strategy
Trading Standards Institute Report No means No February 2010