

**Environment Scrutiny Committee – 7<sup>th</sup> November 2011**

**Report of the Director of the Urban Environment**

**Rogue Traders and Doorstep Crime**

**Purpose of the Report**

- 1 To update Members on 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 2010/11). 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.

- 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 2011) Incidents involving older and vulnerable 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 resources in Trading Standards were realigned to produce a dedicated team 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. From August 2010 to date the team has prevented in excess of £140,000 being lost by Dudley residents who have been a victim of doorstep criminals and distraction burglars. This includes 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. In one week, officers attended three separate incidents where the same trader was attempting to overcharge for roofing work. By attending the scene before the residents had handed over any cash, the residents were collectively saved around £10,000.
- 9 In June 2011 as part of a regional Operation Rogue Trader officers from Dudley Trading Standards and West Midlands Police carried out stop checks to identify potential rogue traders and bogus callers. The operation strengthened partnership working with West Midlands Police and served as a template for regular neighbourhood inspections which now take place.
- 10 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 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 2010-11. A copy of the Fix a Home List is available to view on the DMBC web pages via the following link:  
<http://www.dudley.gov.uk/advice-benefits/trading-standards/fix-a-home/?locale=en>
- 11 Trading Standards in partnership with Adult Community and Housing Services 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. The training has been received very positively and is now recognised as essential training for carers of the vulnerable and elderly. The training package has also been delivered to the staff of Dudley Telecare Services who operate the Dudley Bogus Caller Hotline.
- 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`. 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

The impact of the zones will be measured and results reported to the Older Peoples Board.

- 14 During the last twelve months, Dudley Trading Standards have successfully prosecuted four rogue traders who preyed on the vulnerable and elderly of the borough. Penalties awarded included a £4000 compensation order and 18 months imprisonment.

## **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.

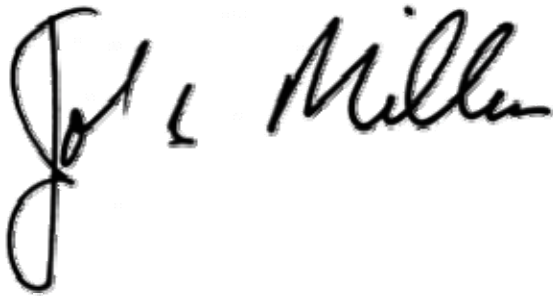
## **Equality Impact**

- 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.



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## **List of Background Papers**

Dudley Council Plan 2010 - 2013  
Dudley Community Strategy 2005 - 2020