

## **Scrutiny Committee**

Meeting to be held on 15 January 2016

Electoral Division affected: ALL
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### **Trading Standards Service Safe Trader Scheme**

Contact for further information:

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#### **Executive Summary**

The Safe Trader Scheme has been in operation since October 2009 primarily funded by the Adult Services Health and Wellbeing (ASHW) Directorate. The scheme has been managed by the Trading Standards Service since this time. In March 2015 funding for the scheme from ASHW ceased, and the scheme has continued to be delivered as part of the Trading Standards core service offer since April 2015. A report to cabinet members in January 2015 referred to the exploration of the possibility of delivering a chargeable scheme in the future, to ensure the sustainability of the scheme.

#### **Recommendation**

That the contents of this report are noted.

#### **Background and Advice**

Trading Standards have traditionally received high numbers of complaints in relation to the activities of rogue traders particularly in the property repair and home improvement sector. Evidence showed that many householders found it difficult to find reputable traders, for property repairs and home improvements and for a range of practical support services.

Many rogue traders deliberately target older and vulnerable consumers, cold calling and carrying out little or no work at high cost. Often once an older and vulnerable consumer is identified as such by rogue traders they are repeatedly targeted until their life savings are gone. This type of crime is referred to as doorstep crime and is well recognised as having a severe impact on the ability of consumers who are targeted to continue living independently. Indeed a study has shown that victims of doorstep crime are over twice as likely to die or go into residential care within two years of an incident. Rogue traders typically use strategies such as cold calling, identifying a small job for cash which then turns into major work, taking consumers to the bank for cash, befriending older vulnerable consumers and using them as continuing sources of ready cash, carrying out shoddy work, and sometimes carrying

out work before authorised by the householder, leaving it difficult for consumers to say no.

The Trading Standards Service employs a range of strategies designed to deal with offences of doorstep crime in Lancashire, including target hardening, work with banks and other partners, work with older people's groups, a rapid response to deal with live incidents, and regular disruption initiatives with the police. The development of a safe trader scheme is seen as a key factor in the strategy to address doorstep crime, providing an alternative to consumers to dealing with cold callers offering to carry out property repair work, by providing a list of traders who undertake to abide by a code of practice and to carry out work to a reasonable standard and at a fair price. Where problems arise, the Trading Standards service undertake to mediate and look to resolve disputes informally wherever possible.

Ultimately traders can be removed from the scheme if they do not abide by the code of practice, and entry to the scheme is by an application, which is assessed by Trading Standards Officers and includes a face to face meeting with the business. In addition, organisations are expected to ask customers to submit feedback on, and a rating of their service, which is monitored by the team and displayed on the website to help other users make informed decisions.

The Lancashire County Council Safe Trader scheme is the largest of its kind in England. The scheme is primarily marketed by means of the website [www.safetrader.org.uk](http://www.safetrader.org.uk) which receives approximately 47,000 visitors per year, and prior to the end of March over 25,800 people had also been assisted and supported to access the scheme through Help Direct. There are over 1300 businesses who trade in Lancashire currently on the scheme, including plumbers, electricians, roofers, handy people and general home maintenance businesses.

Member businesses receive regular support and information about compliance with the scheme's code, compliance with legislation, and assistance in the case of civil disputes. They are permitted to use branded material bearing the scheme logo, including vehicle stickers, and they benefit from general promotion of the scheme, particularly where the Trading Standards service is promoting information about doorstep crime issues.

A number of Home Improvement Agencies such as Lancaster and Chorley also use the scheme rather than maintain their own list of traders. Those Home Improvement Agencies who do maintain their own list, such as Hyndburn Homewise, Wyre and Fylde Care and Repair and St Vincent's Homecare and Repair list still use the scheme to verify traders before working with them.

The Trading Standards Service is currently looking into the sustainability of the scheme long term as it is key to supporting a number of priorities such as preventing doorstep crime, protecting vulnerable consumers and supporting businesses.

## **Consultations**

Latest feedback from member businesses indicates that 75% of the traders who are members of the scheme believe that they have gained business as a result of being members.

The Trading Standards Service regularly consults with consumers who have used the service who give highly positive feedback about the scheme. Recent comments include:

- ***I am very pleased. This is the second one I have used out of the Scheme. It is very good to have someone who can do the job right. Thank You.***
- ***I knew I was dealing with a reliable person who was with the Safe Trader Scheme.***
- ***I am very glad this Scheme exists as I'm a pensioner living on my own.***
- ***This Scheme helps to safeguard the public from "cowboys" and you get a guarantee regarding insurance.***
- ***All the traders that I have used on this Scheme have been trustworthy and the work was completed to a high standard.***
- ***This seems like a good idea. It is particularly helpful to other potential customers.***
- ***A good Scheme for all. You know the tradesmen do a good job.***
- ***This is an excellent Scheme as finding a suitable tradesman can be difficult.***
- ***We go through Trading Standards for reliability.***
- ***It is the best thing ever started. It gives us peace of mind knowing we're going to get a good job done.***
- ***This is a great idea and it is helpful for the vulnerable.***
- ***This is an excellent Scheme. I felt safe choosing one of your tradesman.***
- ***I now only use tradesmen registered with the Scheme.***

## **Risk management**

### **Financial**

There are no financial implications, Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the content of this report.

### **Legal**

Legal issues in connection with the scheme were addressed at the time the scheme was established.

### **Equality and Cohesion**

The scheme protects all users, however older vulnerable people are more at risk from doorstep crime, so the scheme disproportionately protects this group.

### **Crime and Disorder**

Targeting of elderly vulnerable consumers by rogue traders has a number of impacts, including reducing the resilience of individuals to continue living in the community, and also taking from them their life savings. The scheme is a key factor in addressing this type of crime.

**Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985**  
**List of Background Papers**