

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 3 April 2013
Report of: Councillor Rob Chilton, Chairman of Topic Group B

Report Title

Review of Scrutiny Topic Group B: Doorstep Crime

Summary

The above review was selected by Scrutiny Members to be undertaken during the 2012/13 municipal year.

The following report outlines the Topic Group's findings and recommendations.

Recommendations

1. That the Executive note and consider the recommendations set out in the report;
2. That the Executive Member for Environment and Transportation coordinate a response to be considered by the Scrutiny Committee.

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

Name: Helen Mitchell
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Background Papers:

None

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF DOORSTEP CRIME

APRIL 2013

Introduction :

The review into Doorstep Crime within Trafford has been wide-ranging and has highlighted some excellent practice by Trading Standards and partner agencies to assist vulnerable people who have been targeted by rogue traders. We have met with Council Officers, Police, charities and victims of crime in order to discover of the extent of this problem within Trafford, and our approaches to tackling it.

I am grateful to everyone who has contributed and co-operated (see Appendix 1 attached) and would like to commend the recommendations set out in this report to you. There are still some areas where the Topic Group felt that joined-up thinking and further co-operation between departments and agencies would result in improved outcomes, and I hope this will result from implementation of our recommendations.

**Councillor Rob Chilton,
Chairman, Topic Group B
April 2013**

Background

The Scrutiny Review was based around the incidence of doorstep crime in Trafford. The purpose of the review was to evaluate the current approach to tackling doorstep crime in the Borough and to recommend further actions based on the evidence gathered. Members of the Topic Group agreed that it was essential to meet with those stakeholders who were close to the issue and this included those people who had fallen victim to doorstep crime.

What is Doorstep Crime?

When someone tries to sell you something or gets you to sign up for something in your home, someone else's home or your place of work, they may be a genuine salesperson, but sometimes it's a scam and an incidence of doorstep crime.

There are many forms of doorstep crime, the main types being distraction burglary, bogus callers / bogus officials, high pressure doorstep selling and rogue traders which is often perpetrated by organised gangs who target some of the most vulnerable residents.

Given the relatively high incidence of home ownership and a significant number of suitable properties, rates of doorstep crime are higher on average in Trafford than compared with our neighbours. The typical victim of Doorstep Crime is a woman of around 80 years of age, living alone in a house in a relatively affluent area but a house that may be showing signs of neglect in terms of up keep.

You just can't fight the same when you're older'.

(Mrs L, Ashton on Mersey, victim of doorstep crime)

One of the issues with Doorstep Crime is that it often goes unreported. The victim is often too embarrassed and ashamed of what has happened and sometimes does not want others, including family members, to know.

The Approach to Doorstep Crime in Trafford

The approach led by Trafford's Trading Standards Service involves a range of partners, including the Police, and can be summarised by the following:

Prevention – Undertaking pro-active work with residents, healthcare professionals, bank clerks and advising the media to reduce instances of doorstep crime and enhance resilience.

Intelligence – Working with relevant parties to share intelligence and coordinate appropriate responses.

Enforcement - Active use of enforcement powers in a collaborative fashion with partners.

Service Improvement – Use of questionnaires and their responses as well as engagement days to steer future service direction.

Review Activity

The Topic Group considered the approach adopted by Trading Standards and its partners and focused on a number of key strands of work. They also spoke to victims of doorstep crime.

1. Informed Consumer Alert Network (iCAN)

A key element of the prevention strand of the strategy was the launch of the iCAN messaging system. Trafford is the only Trading Standards team in Greater Manchester to operate such a system. Members of the scheme can receive information by pre-recorded phone message, text messaging to a mobile phone or email. Messages are also tweeted via the Council's Twitter account and can be then re-tweeted¹ to other followers.

The system was introduced two years ago and currently has 1476 members. In 2012, the iCan system was subject to a consultation and evaluation exercise. The responses indicated that 99% of members found it useful or very useful, 90% said that as a result of iCan they felt more confident dealing with doorstep and cold callers and 94% said they would recommend it to friends, relatives and neighbours.

Members noted the focus on prevention as a key strategy within the overall approach to tackling doorstep crime within the Borough and that the innovative iCAN facility was one facet of this approach.

Members discussed the take up of the service and questioned what they perceived as low numbers of residents, groups and Councillors who had joined the scheme. Trading Standards colleagues reported that benchmarking with other similar schemes was not possible as there is no other such scheme to benchmark it with. However, Trading Standards were committed to ensuring an increase in take up.

2. No Cold Calling Zones (NCCZs)

The purpose of NCCZ's is to deter cold callers from approaching people living in the Zones, but more importantly, they can give people the confidence to say "No" to doorstep traders. Whilst the Zones do not ban cold callers or create exclusion zones, they can be useful in dealing with any unwelcome cold callers. Recent work undertaken by Hampshire County Council has found that since the introduction of a Zone in their street, 77% of residents felt safer and 77% felt more confident when dealing with cold callers.

The Topic Group were informed that that work was progressing in relation to the establishment of NCCZ's in the Borough. Two designated areas in Sale Moor and Davyhulme have received this designation with further work on-going in Hale to establish a further Zone. The decision to establish a Zone is one based on evidence that there is a problem in the area and which receives agreement from all the residents within that Zone.

Members welcomed and endorsed NCCZ's Zones but only in instances where there is a robust evidence base to progress with their establishment.

¹ Subscribers to twitter are able to follow and be followed by other subscribers. The re-tweet facility allows subscribers to 'push' messages to those who are following them for their information.

3. Trusted Trader List

Members were particularly concerned that rogue traders are one of the sources of doorstep crime within the Borough and that elderly persons or those with learning disabilities are key targets.

The approach of these traders can take two forms - speculative visits or persistent communication with householders. The aim is to secure work which is then charged at an extortionate rate and delivered to an average or below average standard. Disturbingly, Members also heard that some rogue traders keep lists of vulnerable residents who live alone in which to target. In order to try and divert vulnerable residents away from using such traders, both Age UK and Trafford Care and Repair have developed lists of approved traders for the public to use.

Further information provided in due course

4. Partnership Working with Greater Manchester Police (GMP)

Councillors Candish and Chilton met with Inspector Laura Burgess during the course of the review to understand her views in relation to doorstep crime and how the issue is tackled in Trafford.

Inspector Burgess noted that doorstep crime is heavily underreported in the Borough due to a variety of factors such as embarrassment, fear of reprisal and even ignorance of criminal activity. In order to successfully combat this, the profile of doorstep crime should be raised, including the use of iCAN within the community.

Inspector Burgess commented that GMP worked closely and effectively with Trading Standards, especially in relation to Rogue Trader Days and that GMP would be happy to commit more resources to such initiatives. Furthermore, Inspector Burgess welcomed the establishment and development of NCCZs within the Borough.

5. Victims of Doorstep Crime

Councillor Chilton, Julia Bentley (Principal Fair Trading Officer) and Helen Mitchell (Democratic Services Officer) visited two elderly residents who had fallen victim to doorstep crime.

Mrs L was in her 80's and had lived alone in Ashton on Mersey since the death of her husband and suffered from Parkinson's Disease. She had been targeted by a rogue trader who had undertaken work for her previously and was persistently calling her to undertake a small piece of roofing work.

'Once you get on the mill, it's difficult to stop'

(Mrs L, Ashton on Mersey, victim of doorstep crime)

Mrs L eventually 'gave in' and the work was undertaken at a cost of £31,000 and was completed to an average standard. The alarm was raised when Mrs L went to the bank to withdraw the cash and the Bank Clerk telephoned the Police and Trading Standards. Since the incident, Mrs L signed up to the iCAN scheme and welcomed the messages alerting her to any issues in the area.

Mr B was in his 70's and lived alone in Hale. He was targeted by rogue traders who increased the scale and cost of a very small piece of paving in his garden. From the discussion with Mr B, it was clear that he was more vulnerable to further instances of doorstep crime than as had not fully grasped the need to cease doing business on the doorstep. Similar to Mrs L, the alarm was raised when he visited the bank to withdraw a substantial sum money and the Police and Trading Standards were alerted.

6. Work of Banks and Building Societies

The Topic Group were very pleased to see the excellent work undertaken by banks and building societies in the Borough in raising the alarm in both cases of doorstep crime as mentioned above.

Members understand that as part of the prevention strategy of Trading Standards, training is undertaken by Bank Clerks to identify when customers could be involved in scam before they withdraw the necessary funds. The Topic Group wish to endorse this work in particular as this, and the Banking Protocol - National Best Practice Guidelines, are clearly having a positive effect on the residents of Trafford

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Topic Group's conclusions and recommendations are based around a number of themes:

- Prevention
- Intelligence and Enforcement
- Trusted trader Scheme
- Victims

Prevention

As a result of evidence gathered, the Topic Group arrived at the view that an increase in iCAN membership would significantly improve levels of awareness and resilience to doorstep crime in the community. However, the Group felt that iCAN, as a service, needs to be more user friendly. Currently, a form has to be completed and returned and Members felt that an opportunity existed to streamline processes such as electronic registration to support an increase in Membership.

The Topic Group were disappointed to see that, at the time of writing, only 26 Members had signed up to the Scheme, despite reminders, and felt that all Members of Council should receive such alerts.

Additionally, the Topic Group felt that as part of the preventative agenda, householders should be provided with cards to deter cold callers which would be placed on front doors and support householders to say "no" to doing business on the doorstep. Whilst resources are finite, the Topic Group suggested that the most vulnerable of Trafford residents should be provided with these.

Recommendation 1: That Trading Standards work with the Communications Team to make registration for the iCAN system simpler and more accessible.

Recommendation 2: That Trading Standards work with partners to consider the preparation and dissemination of small cards to be placed on the front doors of residents to deter doorstep traders.

Intelligence and Enforcement

The Topic Group acknowledged the different methods used to address doorstep crime in the Borough and felt that the balance between prevention, intelligence, enforcement and service improvement was appropriate.

However, they feel that there is a need to ensure that active enforcement which utilises intelligence appropriately is done as regularly as possible. Inspector Burgess offered further resources in relation to Rogue Trader Days and this should be welcomed by Trading Standards.

Recommendation 3: That Trading Standards work with the Police to maximise the number of Rogue Trader Days within the Borough.

Trusted Trader Scheme

Further information provided in due course.