

**SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE
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Doorstep Crime Update

Report by John Jackson

Introduction

1. The Trading Standards Service has led the response to doorstep crime in the county over the last few years. The term 'doorstep crime' has no formal definition but is applied to categorise a type of incident normally involving an individual or group of individuals providing home improvement or repair work. Frequently the work is solicited by way of a cold-call to private homes, and little or no paperwork is provided. The harm arises from a range of practices, including making false claims that work is required to the property to obtain the owners agreement to a contract, escalating the cost and extent of work once small scale works have been agreed, making false claims about the extent of the work actually carried out to justify increased demands for payment and occasionally starting work without permission and using intimidation to ensure that payment is made. Frequently, no details are left of the business that carried out the work and any details provided are often false. The victim is often an older person.
2. A dedicated team provides an immediate response to reported incidents of doorstep crime with the primary aim of preventing consumer loss to this type of fraud. By intervening in the incident before payment is made the team can support the consumer, preventing them from being intimidated into making unnecessary payments. The team also investigates incidents and prepares reports to enable formal legal action to be instigated where appropriate. This team consists of three Trading Standards staff and a seconded Police Officer.
3. This paper provides a summary of the current situation concerning doorstep crime in the County and an overview of the approach taken by the Trading Standards Doorstep Crime Team.

Exempt Information

4. None

Doorstep Crime Overview

5. Trading Standards seeks to tackle doorstep crime in a number of ways. Firstly, the primary role of the Doorstep Crime Team is to respond to incidents, intervening directly to prevent losses where the property owner needs support. This immediate response is necessary since the suspects tend to seek to complete work and obtain payment in a short-period to reduce the chances of the victim seeking support. In 2011/12 direct intervention in incidents saved Oxfordshire consumers £130k.
6. From this intervention work the team will seek to investigate any suspected criminal offences with a view to preventing repeat incidents.
7. Investigating the incidents can be complex and time consuming. The victims are often older people and the suspects frequently take steps to avoid identification. The joint approach with the Police is particularly important helping to ensure a rapid response to incidents. In addition, there are strong links between doorstep crime and other types of criminality and therefore linking intelligence can lead to the identification of suspects who would not otherwise be traced.
8. Alongside the enforcement approach adopted by the Trading Standards Service we also seek to reduce the likelihood of a person being victimised through prevention and awareness raising work. Of particular note are the continued support provided for No Cold Calling Zones which empower people to refuse to speak with cold-callers. We are currently working to extend these zones into park home sites which have been targeted recently by rogue traders.
9. There is no central collation of doorstep crime data across agencies at this time. We have started to try and address this in order to ensure that an accurate assessment of the level of this type of crime can be made which will allow comparisons to be made with other types of offences.
10. Using Trading Standards held data we project that there will be in the region of 400 doorstep crime incidents identified in 2012/13. This compares with 480 in 2011/12 and 524 the previous year. The slight downward trend in identified incidents is encouraging but no conclusions can be drawn on the reason for this trend and whether it will continue.
11. Significant recent outcomes include the prosecution of Jason Butcher who was originally identified on the BBC Rogue Traders programme. Mr Butcher cold-called and offered tree surgery work. He was prosecuted for work that he did at 5 locations which was shown to be either overcharged, not completed or unnecessary. In particular he claimed that trees on the property were infected with a fungus when they were not. The age of his victims ranged from 55 to 94 years. He was sentenced to 12 months imprisonment.

Joint work with Thames Valley Police

12. The response to doorstep crime could equally be led by Trading Standards or the Police. The type of offending involved in doorstep crime incidents often includes fraud, criminal damage and theft. However, consumer protection offences are a common thread through most incidents (e.g. false statements made in relation to work carried out or failure to provide legally required documentation). The most effective response therefore involves a multi-agency approach which is recognised through the joint Police/ Trading Standards team based in the Trading Standards Service.
13. A joint enforcement approach allows consumer protection legislation, which is commonly breached in doorstep crime incidents, to be applied alongside the kind of investigatory techniques necessary for effective detection of this type of crime. This includes scenes of crime facilities, finger print analysis, DNA matching and formal identification facilities. Most importantly, the joint approach ensures that suspects can be arrested and bailed, providing for more effective investigations. The officer is able to draw in support from local Neighbourhood Teams when required. This can be very effective in providing on-going support for victims after an incident.
14. The joint team includes a Police Officer seconded from Thames Valley Police. The Trading Standards Service pays for this seconded officer. As well as providing an effective link across agencies, in recent years the seconded Police Officer has brought to the team skills necessary for interviewing vulnerable witnesses. This can be essential when the victim has underlying health conditions, e.g. dementia.
15. Alongside the joint enforcement response we are currently seeking to develop a clearer referral and response mechanism across the different disciplines within each organisation. In particular, it is recognised that there are clear links between our work on doorstep crime and the work of the Police Economic Crime Unit and Financial Abuse Safeguarding Team. This will be a focus of our development work through 2013/14.

Regional and National Links

16. Our local work links to, and is supported by, regional and national enforcement projects. Most local authority Trading Standards Services will seek to tackle doorstep crime to some extent. We have strong links to neighbouring authorities and share intelligence through a regional intelligence database. This ensures suspects working across local authority boundaries are identified and enforcement action is coordinated.

17. In addition there is support available for investigations of cross-boundary cases from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. We have accessed some of this funding to support investigations into incidents arising in Oxfordshire but which are also replicated in other local authority areas. In 2012/13 we received £10k funding for these cases.
18. Since April 2012 the National Trading Standards Board has had responsibility for tackling national consumer protection priorities. This Board is currently analysing available information in order to identify these national enforcement priorities and has funding available to tackle these. It is possible that doorstep crime will be identified as a national priority and if this is the case we will need to link our local work to national programmes.

Further Protecting Vulnerable People Activities

19. The Trading Standards Service has committed to support a regional project concerning postal scams. The project, which is coordinated through another local authority, seeks to tackle postal scams through better coordination of intelligence concerning victims. Through linking with the National Anti-Fraud Network, Royal Mail and other organisations scams victims will be identified and notified to local Trading Standards Services. We will then seek to contact the suspected victim and provide support to enable them to reduce their losses to scams. Information on these scams will then be collated and used to better inform enforcement and awareness raising work.

Recommendations

20. Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny are asked to note the contents and comment on areas for future development of the Trading Standards Doorstep Crime Team

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Background papers:None
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