

SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7TH NOVEMBER 2011

Annual Report of the Trading Standards Doorstep Crime Team

Report by John Jackson

Introduction

1. The Trading Standards Service has developed its response to doorstep crime occurring 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 commonly reported to Trading Standards. This incident type normally involves 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 of the work required to the property to ensure work is agreed, escalating the cost and extent of work once small scale works are agreed, making false claims about the extent of the work actually carried out to justify larger payments and occasionally starting work without permission and using intimidation to ensure that payment is made. Frequently, no details are left of the persons 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. The Doorstep Crime Team Leader produces an annual report containing a summary of the work of the team and some trend analysis on the incidents. This report has been circulated to the committee as advanced reading. This paper contains a short summary of the report for the committee.

Exempt Information

4. None

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Main Headlines from the Doorstep Crime Team Annual Report

5. The main headlines from the Doorstep Crime Team's Annual Report are as follows.
 - (a) The team has seen a large increase in doorstep crime incidents reported to Trading Standards. During 2010/11 the team received 524 incidents, an increase of 124 (31%) on the previous year.
 - (b) Thames Valley Police (TVP) are now the main referral agency. This year TVP referred 193 incidents to us compared to 140 last year, an increase of 53 (37%).
 - (c) There has been an increase in incidents being reported online to 11 in total.
 - (d) There has been a decrease in complaints received from care services. The team only received 2 referrals from care services, a reduction from 10 the previous year. The cause of this is being reviewed, and we are seeking to establish whether victims are receiving support packages or not.
 - (e) Garden and tree work has become the most popular area of doorstep crime. Driveways, roofing and guttering services continue to generate a high proportion of doorstep crime complaints.
 - (f) There has been an increase in incidents in Cherwell and the Vale. Cherwell and Vale have been specifically targeted by two different gangs operating in and around where they live.
 - (g) The victim profile shows that, where the age of the victim has been recorded, 144 of the 160 victims were 60 years or older. Of the identified victims, 249 were living alone and 155 of those were female. The oldest victim targeted was a 94 year old woman who lived alone. There were 28 victims who were particularly vulnerable as a result of a disability.
 - (h) There has been a slight increase in successful interventions. Last year we intervened on 79 occasions where the suspect was still at the premises. This was an increase on 69 the previous year.
 - (i) The amount of money saved for victims was £127,766. This was higher than the previous year.
 - (j) The amount of money that we know was paid out by victims was £816,456. This is a slight increase on the previous year's figure of £736,304.
 - (k) During the year 31 offenders were arrested. This was the highest number of arrests in a single year since the team was formed.
 - (l) The Team has featured in headlines within the Oxford Mail and on Central News, Meridian and Watchdog.

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Seconded Police Officer

6. Having a Police Officer embedded within the Doorstep Crime Team contributes significantly to the success of the team. The seconded officer, PC Jayne Newman, has extensive experience and knowledge and has been specifically trained to work with vulnerable witnesses. She has undertaken further training which has enabled her to do in-depth intelligence searches, an important tool in identifying doorstep crime suspects. In addition, working alongside the Police ensures that the team are able to utilise all investigatory options, e.g. scenes of crime facilities (SOCO), 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.

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Background papers: Doorstep Crime Team Annual Report 2010-2011
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