

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
TUESDAY 14 OCTOBER 2003 at 10.00 A.M.**

Agenda Item No.

5

INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO CONSUMERS

Report of the Director of Community Information

Author: Ian McLachlan, Assistant Director Community Information
Tel: 01992 555612

Executive Member: Iris Tarry

1. Purpose of report

Following a request from Jane Hobday this report seeks to inform members of the current provision of information to consumers, and of possible future developments.

2. Summary

The report details sources of consumer advice and information, comments on approved trader schemes, and looks briefly at some future developments.

3. Conclusions

Members are invited to note the contents of the report and decide if there is a need to look further at this subject.

4. Background

- 4.1** Purchasing goods and services is something that most of us do almost every day for a variety of reasons. Filling the car with fuel combined with doing the weekly shop become matters of habit, and many factors influence where we do those things – advertising, location, recommendation, and perceptions of value. For most people there is the choice of purchasing goods at a variety of locations, and increasingly the option of purchasing via the internet without leaving home.
- 4.2** With high value goods and services such as vehicles or alterations to our homes, the choice is not always so wide, and in the case of services, sourcing the correct trader is not always easy, particularly if there is an urgent need. Plumbers, locksmiths, and electricians are all trades which people sometimes need to access quickly, with little or no time to "shop around".

5. Advice and Information

- 5.1** Nearly all Trading Standards Authorities provide consumer advice and information and Hertfordshire is no exception. However, most callers seek advice as to their rights when things have gone wrong and usually when their initial attempts to rectify the issue have also floundered. With the advent of our own website www.tradingstandards.gov.uk/hertfordshire we have attempted to provide some helpful hints to consumers. There are sections on legal rights as well as specific information on things to consider when buying computers or mobile phones for example. Another section gives up to the minute details of product recalls and what action to take if you have such products.
- 5.2** Other agencies, such as Citizens Advice also give post shopping and limited pre shopping advice, but all stop short of recommending a trader. This is usually in an attempt to maintain impartiality, and is particularly true for Trading Standards who need, as an enforcement authority, to retain the confidence of business.
- 5.3** The Department of Trade and Industry operate a Consumer Gateway website which links to a number of other sites, but little is available in the way of positive recommendation of traders.

6. Approval/Recommendation Schemes

- 6.1** Members of trade associations usually have to abide by particular standards and codes of conduct. Membership usually provides a dispute resolution mechanism for when the consumer has a disagreement with the trader. These mechanisms vary, but provide some guarantee that work will be completed to a particular standard.
- 6.2** Some trade associations websites, e.g. the Institute of Plumbing, allow consumers to search for one of their members by postcode.

- 6.3** A number of trading standards authorities promote “approved trader” schemes in particular sectors such as the motor trade. Traders agree to work to particular standards, audited by local authority staff, and can then display a logo in the same way as that of a trade association. These schemes tend to attract publicity in their early stages, but are time consuming and resource intensive to administer. They are more likely than trade associations to lead to withdrawal of approvals for those who fail to comply with the scheme.
- 6.4** The Department of Trade and Industry have recently introduced a “Quality Mark” scheme, backed by industry and consumer bodies. The aim is to get consumers using only Quality Mark firms for building work in particular. Companies are subject to external inspection before being awarded the mark and as with trade associations, have to agree to abide by set standards. It is only available in 10 areas at the moment, but the intention is to work towards national coverage. Latest information is that London and the Eastern Region will get this scheme in Spring 2004. The DTI are keen to work with local authorities on this scheme.

7. Future developments

- 7.1** The Department of Trade and Industry is hoping to develop a new website Consumer Direct, alongside a nationally promoted telephone number. This may result in much better and consistent information on a national basis, and will help towards the national target of “informed confident consumers”.
- 7.2** Locally we struggle on this target which is centred on consumer education. Our website will detail prosecutions of traders, including those who have mis-applied trade association logos. We can improve the quantity and quality of information on our website, but this is unlikely to extend to lists of “good” or “bad” traders.
- 7.3** We will improve links from our website to schemes such as the Quality Mark and trade associations, but will make it clear that this does not imply approval.

8. Rural Implications

No specific implications.

9. Financial Implications

The provision of information and advice is contained within existing budgets.