

REPORT TO: Safer Policy and Performance Board
DATE: 14th July 2020
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director People
PORTFOLIO: Community Safety
SUBJECT: Covid-19 – Trading Standards
WARDS: Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The report describes the Covid 19 related work of the Trading Standards service between March and June 2020.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That the report be noted.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 The ability to undertake normal duties

- 3.1.1 As the pandemic began, the Service was carrying two vacant enforcement posts and had been since October 18. An agency worker was employed to supplement the two criminal officers in post.

One member of the team is in the high-risk category and began to work from home and to self-isolate on the 12th March. Two team members were living in households with family who were high-risk and one team member was the sole carer for a family member who was high risk. The agency worker lives 135 miles from Halton. Together, this resulted in very limited opportunities to have feet on the ground in Halton.

3.2 New duties

- 3.2.1 The Government gave the responsibility for the regulation and enforcement of business closures to Environmental Health and Trading Standards. Given the resource issues for Trading Standards and some capacity in the Environmental Health Team resulting from the business closures, the decision was taken that Environmental Health would lead on the issue in Halton and Trading Standards would provide support if formal enforcement action was necessary. Environmental Health have dealt with all business closure matters.

3.3 Scams

- 3.3.1 Scammers will target people who they believe are likely to be in vulnerable situations or they will create a vulnerable situation so that the target will act without thinking – bank scam phone calls are an example of the latter. The pandemic has provided scammers with a fertile feasting ground: most of the population has found themselves in a vulnerable situation at some point since the pandemic began. This might be because of worries over personal and family health, finances or the impact of loneliness during the lockdown.
- 3.3.2 Well known scams have proliferated, particularly those involving bank and PayPal accounts, and those services that became even more important during lockdown e.g. mobile phone contracts, movie and TV streaming services and the TV licence.
- 3.3.3 New scams have emerged which are specifically about Covid: fines for breaching the lockdown rules; the sale of fake test kits; the sale fake or non-existent PPE; fake health visitors and fake funeral directors.
- 3.3.4 The Scams Officers have been unable to undertake their normal 1-2-1 visits to the 160 people we are working with on the scams project. Instead, the officers have maintained contact via regular phone calls and some have told us that this contact has been a lifeline for them.
- 3.3.6 We worked with Adult Social Care to introduce protocols for their staff who had moved from visiting to conducting reviews over the phone and we publicised this safe way of working on iCAN.
- 3.3.7 We became aware of a scam email, directed at care homes, offering antibody testing kits when antibody testing was not available. The company was reported to The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency and Adult Social Care were able to advise care homes that they should not respond.
- 3.3.8 The Trading Standards Manager was interviewed about scams on BBC Radio Merseyside in May. The item was broadcast on the same day.

3.4 iCAN and awareness raising

- 3.4.1 Between the 1st March 2020 and 26th June 2020 the Service has issued 74 iCAN warnings about scams. During the same period last year, the Service issued 11 iCAN Warnings.
- 3.4.2 Working with IT, we have expanded the iCAN system to use the corporate address book to send iCAN messages to all HBC staff and members. Using the live corporate address book means that each time a message is sent any new staff or councillors are picked up automatically.

3.4.3 Recognising that most of the Government's information on the pandemic was through digital channels, the Service identified a gap in information provision for people who were not able to access the internet. A Covid-19 information pack was created and posted to 169 people whom we knew did not have digital access. The pack covered scams and how to avoid being caught out; the help available for the shielded and the high-risk groups; information on how to volunteer safely; advice on mental well-being and details of local and national support agencies. An electronic version of the information was also provided to iCAN members.

3.4.4 We identified supermarket delivery box schemes and a telephone ordering service for groceries – confirming with the latter the means of operating the scheme to remove the likelihood of scammers being able to fake the service. The information was circulated via iCAN.

3.4.5 Many of the iCAN messages have been shared on Twitter and have been read 91,268 times.

They have been shared on Facebook and reached 98,700 people.

They have been turned into press releases and several have appeared in the Runcorn and Widnes Weekly News Papers and the Liverpool Echo. Assuming the articles were read according to the papers' normal distribution levels, it means that the messages have reached over 113,00 people via printed media.

The combined figure for the reach of the messages, excluding the number of iCAN members who received the messages directly, is 302,968. Officer time has been the only cost.

3.5 **Price Gouging**

3.5.1 The start of the pandemic saw a minority of retailers hiking prices, or price gouging, on basic food staples, toilet rolls, hand sanitiser and medicines. Retail Price Maintenance (which put controls on the price of food) was abolished many years ago. Since then retailers have been able to charge whatever price they wish for the goods they sell, and increase prices whenever they want, provided the price indicated is the price they charge. Whilst there is no legislation to prevent price gouging, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) announced that they would take action to make sure that traders didn't exploit the situation and they would consider any evidence that companies may have broken competition or consumer protection law.

3.5.2 The CMA introduced an online reporting form for consumers; information about this was circulated on iCAN. The Service reported two instances of price gouging in Halton to the CMA.

3.6 Personal Protective Equipment

- 3.6.1 The service regulates the safety and labelling of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supplied to the consumer market. The Government has eased the labelling requirements for the labelling of PPE for supplies through the Government portal – such supplies such not reach the consumer market. Nationally there have been reports of non-compliant PPE being offered for sale.
- 3.6.2 We investigated one Halton retailer whose online business was diversifying into face masks for the first time. He was offering non-compliant face masks for sale. He accepted advice and removed the products from sale.
- 3.6.3 We investigated a complaint of a Halton trader selling non-compliant face masks but found that the masks were genuine.
- 3.6.4 We investigated a Halton resident who had distributed flyers offering ‘Staysafe packs’ containing gloves, face masks and hand sanitiser. The resident admitted that he did not have any stocks of the items for sale and he agreed not to distribute any leaflets and not to take any orders. An iCAN warning was issued to warn residents.
- 3.6.5 We investigated a company who had approached the HBC procurement team offering PPE with very quick delivery when most suppliers were out of stock. We found the offer to be bogus and alerted the National Anti-Fraud Network who alerted all member local authorities.

3.7 Loan sharks

Anticipating an increase in loan shark activity, the Service has been working with the national Illegal Money Lending Team to raise awareness of the dangers of loan sharks.

In April the Illegal Money Lending Team children’s competition. Arranged for competition to be circulated on corporate social media account.

In May, the Trading Standards Manager recorded a podcast with the Illegal Money Lending Team to talk about the work the Service had done in partnership with the Police in Halton. The podcast is now available on Apple, Google and Spotify.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

None

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

None

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES [\(click here for list of priorities\)](#)

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

None.

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

None

6.3 A Healthy Halton

The health impacts associated with being scammed or being involved with a loan shark are well known. Awareness raising helps people to protect themselves by understanding how scammers and loan sharks work and how to deal with them.

6.4 A Safer Halton

Scammers and loan sharks are criminals who affect the safety of residents. Likewise, the supply of fake PPE will fail to provide the claimed protection to the wearer, leaving them vulnerable to the danger they are trying to protect themselves from.

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

None – the report is for information only

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

None

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None under the meaning of the Act.