

TRADING STANDARDS RISING TO THE CHALLENGE OF COVID-19



Introduction

This infographic sets out the ways in which trading standards services across the UK helped respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite resources being cut by 50% in under a decade¹, trading standards services were able to quickly mobilise, retrain and regroup to protect the public from specific COVID-19 related consumer detriment issues and work with environmental health and other local government colleagues to step in wherever needed to support the COVID-19 response. Due to the strain on business and the UK economy as a whole, trading standards worked collaboratively with business to provide support, advice and guidance, only using formal enforcement as a last resort.



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1. CTSI Workforce Survey 2017 <https://www.tradingstandards.uk/media/documents/news--policy/surveys/ctsi-workforce-survey-2017.pdf>

Key Data

Below are some headline figures and case studies showing the volume of work done by authorities. It should be noted that this data varies between countries because different

governments required different data. The figures below represent the collective effort of local authority teams as a whole, not just trading standards teams.

Northern Ireland

The Trading Standards Service in Northern Ireland (TSS NI) is part of the civil service and is responsible to the Northern Ireland Government. Some “trading standards” functions delivered in Great Britain are not within the TSS NI remit, such as product safety and business closures regulation. Some highlights of the work carried out by TSS NI during the pandemic include:

- Dealing with 2,521 COVID-19 related complaints (mainly on cancellations and refunds), with 108 enforcement notices being issued to traders, mostly in relation to price gouging, travel and weddings
- the production of a social media video highlighting COVID-19 scams
- distribution of 45,000 NTS ‘Wash your hands of Coronavirus Scams’ (NI adapted) leaflets via food parcels in partnership with District Councils, large supermarkets and charities
- issuing consumer guidance on caravan park closures during the pandemic which received over 100,000 online views.

Wales

Data for Wales was obtained from Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)/local authority data which was used collaboratively with Welsh Government to inform three-weekly Coronavirus restrictions reviews. The data shows that during the pandemic trading standards supported local authorities with:

- 52,721 business premises receiving proactive advice
- 42,503 enquires in relation to COVID-19
- 48,327 business visits in relation to COVID-19
- 3,201 enforcement actions on COVID-19 non-compliances
- 1,577 reports on cancellations for holidays, events and services.

Scotland

Scottish data has been obtained from The Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland (SCOTSS). During the pandemic trading standards supported local authorities with:

- 17,251 Covid-secure compliance checks either by visual inspection or written contact
- 19,207 complaints about non-Covid secure business settings or business closure requirements
- 66,588 Covid-secure/business closure compliance visits or checks. Of these visits or checks, 12,898 non-compliant businesses were identified.

England

English data has been extrapolated based on returns provided by 41 authorities as Government data was unavailable. The data shows that during the pandemic trading standards supported local authorities with:

- 1,227,281 Covid-secure compliance checks either by visual inspection or written contact
- 97,879 complaints about non-Covid secure business settings or business closure requirements
- 222,742 Covid-secure/business closure compliance visits or checks. Of these visits or checks, 35,545 non-compliant businesses were identified
- 41,161 requests for business closure guidance or advice.



Protecting the Public

Beyond the broader local authority response illustrated in the figures above, trading standards services provided a fast and dynamic response in dealing with serious issues which threatened the health of the public. Some examples are included below.

Case Studies – PPE

East of England Trading Standards Association (EETSA) region Trading Standards Imports Teams increased their surveillance checks at points of import and prioritised their work to focus on PPE products including face masks. Officers undertook frontline checks on products coming through both airports and seaports to ensure that unsafe and non-compliant consumer goods did not enter the UK market. Demand at Stansted airport increased significantly overnight at the beginning of the pandemic, with double the usual officer attendance required. Over the first six months of the pandemic, 14,700,846 PPE items including face masks, hand sanitiser and gloves were examined by teams from Essex, Suffolk and Thurrock, with over 8,830,401 PPE products being prevented from reaching users in an unsafe or non-compliant condition, with the worst items destroyed at the border.

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PPE Over
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Sandwell's Trading Standards produced guidance to enable Sandwell Council to broaden its supply chain for PPE. It enabled the procurement team to gain correct assurances and conformity on purchases and proved essential in ensuring the Council did not procure masks that did not have correct testing and therefore protected staff.

South Gloucestershire Trading Standards took samples of a locally produced hand sanitiser which was found to have significantly less than the required 70% alcohol content and contained methanol, which is poisonous to humans. This case is subject to an ongoing criminal investigation. A copy of the recall notice for this case can be viewed here:

"hand sanitiser which was found to have significantly less than the required 70% alcohol content and contained methanol, which is poisonous to humans"

Case Study – Business Closures

As the UK went into the first lockdown, trading standards and licensing at Newport City Council were handed the responsibility for ensuring that customer facing businesses observed restrictions. Initially this meant patrols and phone calls to ensure non-essential businesses were shut and discussions with essential businesses to ensure safety measures were in place. Later, trading standards were instrumental in making city centre roads ready to accept 'outdoor café style' hospitality and assisted with a road closure process and the placement of new council street furniture. One particular music venue refused to comply and evidence from CCTV resulted in a licence review and a three month suspension. Other premises are also subject to licensing reviews.



Agility

Trading standards services across the UK had to quickly diversify and staff members were redeployed to activities outside of their roles in order to protect the most vulnerable in society.

Case Studies – Agility

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Trading Standards services supported the corporate response to COVID-19 through redeployment to a range of areas including:

- **Hotels for the 'Homeless':** working alongside the homeless charity commissioned to run hotels to house the homeless, providing a safe environment where they could socially distance. This included shift work including providing food parcels and drinks, room inspections and generally being there to listen and support people.
- **Adult Social Care front line:** retraining to become support workers for Adult Social Care, visiting extremely vulnerable members of the community to provide personal care and domestic assistance.
- **'Covid Hub':** taking calls from the public needing practical support because of COVID-19 and arranging distribution of medicines, supporting individuals with food parcels, personal care and every day matters such as dog walking.
- **Test and Trace Pilot:** supporting the implementation of the national Test & Trace Pilot, following up with those that had tested positive but whom the national tracing team had been unable to reach to ensure they isolated."

Trading standards supported the Corporate response to COVID-19 through redeployment in a range of areas



In Staffordshire, the true resilience of trading standards staff was witnessed as the pandemic became established with staff taking up multiple roles across the county including not only delivery of food parcels and ensuring vulnerable members of society were protected, but also "in the darkest moments of the pandemic, staff were trained up and prepared for mortuary management of the excess death store". The resilience of the team has shone through with partnership working across all responders to the disease, with shared intelligence between districts, county and the police aiding in ensuring compliance and robust enforcement. On advice from the Director for Public Health, multiple Direction Notices have been served on premises where there was a serious and imminent risk to public health, including a hotel, barber shops and a working men's club, in a bid to prevent the spread of disease.



"In the darkest moments of the pandemic, staff were trained up and prepared for mortuary management of the excess death store"



Protecting Consumers

Trading standards across the UK responded to the various consumer issues arising out of the pandemic by warning consumers, taking proactive steps or working to provide clarity in relation to consumer rights.

“As with many rogue trader activities, their operations evolved throughout lockdown, finding every opportunity to exploit the increased vulnerability, anxiety and isolation that came with it.”



Case Study – Warning Consumers

The West Yorkshire Trading Standards' (WYTS) COVID-19 Scam Alert is a community newsletter created at the start of lockdown to reach isolated and vulnerable residents at a time when fraudsters began to exploit the pandemic for financial gain. It offers a two-way, real-time communication channel through which to share/receive local intelligence about doorstep crime, scams and other frauds, and offers advice on how to avoid falling victim to them. As with many rogue trader activities, their operations evolved throughout lockdown, finding every opportunity to exploit the increased vulnerability, anxiety and isolation that came with it. Distributed to over 1,000 local partners and communities, and shared

on social media to almost 5,000 followers, it also provided a swift mechanism for sharing information about emerging COVID-19 scams, such as the selling of fake PPE equipment, vaccine and miracle cure scams, fake NHS test and trace messages, alongside 'regular' doorstep criminals who were evolving their sales patter to include driveway and gardening disinfecting services.

“The COVID-19 Scam Alert is a community newsletter created at the start of lockdown to reach isolated and vulnerable residents at a time when fraudsters began to exploit the pandemic for financial gain”

A copy of all the COVID-19 Scam Alerts can be found at:

In addition, a short recording was produced for YouTube:



Bristol City Council's Trading Standards service received a number of complaints about a flyer that was being posted through residents' doors. The flyer stated "National Removal of harmful bacteria that attracts COVID-19. All UK homes (kitchen and bathroom areas need to be officially checked and passed for risk of bacteria that can attract the COVID-19 virus). Appointed Corona removal officers are trained to remove and dispose of harmful and deadly bacteria". Officers carried out a swift investigation and identified online adverts and some social media posts by the business that also made similar claims. The business and individual responsible were identified and immediate contact was made. They were brought into compliance. The flyers were disposed of and the online adverts were amended.



The original leaflet advert showing misleading information.

In one instance the individuals even **arrived in hazmat suits** to prey upon the consumer

Middlesbrough Trading Standards saw an explosion of COVID-19 scams and received 176 scam complaints. The scams included individuals exploiting the pandemic, and those shielding, by posing as volunteers in person and by telephone, offering to do people's shopping, collect prescriptions or pensions, but then disappearing with the money – never to return. In one instance the individuals even arrived in hazmat suits to prey upon the consumer. Middlesbrough Trading Standards worked with Cleveland Police and other agencies, sharing intelligence to try and identify perpetrators and stamp out these practices. Using social media to publicise these scams was key to this activity. Ninety posts regarding COVID-19 scams were shared on social media via the Middlesbrough Trading Standards Facebook page, which reached 458,313 people.

The Impact of COVID-19 Scams

The Public Protection Partnership (Bracknell Forest, West Berkshire and Wokingham) have numerous examples of the serious impact of COVID-19 scams. In one example, Mrs B, a Professional British National, was the subject of a particularly complex scam. She was contacted by an individual involved in the scam to say her Amazon account had been hacked. Mrs B was informed that this had caused the National Crime Agency (NCA) to become involved and told that her help was needed to investigate similar hacked accounts. This necessitated Mrs B transferring monies into the suspect's bank accounts so that the NCA could track the money to its final destination. In all around £192,000 was transferred from her accounts, which also resulted in her bank accounts being frozen under Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) rules around money laundering. The banks then ceased communicating with her. The Fraud Victim Support Officer from the Public Protection Partnership helped guide Mrs B through the complex challenges to be made on the bank in relation to the defrauded £192,000 and to date £111,987 has been recovered of the monies she transferred, her account unfrozen and her peace of mind restored.

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Over 17,000 nuisance calls blocked preventing an **estimated £70,000 in scams**

“Scams included individuals exploiting the pandemic, and those shielding, by posing as volunteers in person and by telephone, offering to do people's shopping, collect prescriptions or pensions, but then disappearing with the money”

TSS NI received **1,355 consumer complaints** against airlines and tour operators

Case Study – Travel and Weddings

Since March 2020, the Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service (TSS NI) received 1,355 consumer complaints against airlines and tour operators following cancellations of holidays as a result of the pandemic. TSS NI issued enforcement notices to 29 travel businesses in Northern Ireland advising them to pay refunds for cancelled holidays or face possible enforcement action. Within the same timeframe, TSS NI has received over 230 consumer complaints against wedding service providers following cancellations of weddings as a result of the pandemic. Couples have complained to TSS NI's complaints and advice line – Consumerline about being misled about the level of refund they are entitled to or being offered the opportunity to rebook but only at a higher price. This is causing a considerable amount of consumer detriment, with consumers being refused refunds for deposits and payments totalling approximately £100,000 and couples being denied sums of money ranging from £300 to £10,000. TSS NI has already secured approximately £30,000 in refunds for consumers from wedding providers.

Case Study – Price Gouging

At the outset of the pandemic panic buying was prevalent and some traders took advantage of the heightened demand. Working jointly with Westminster Trading Standards eBay placed restrictions on certain items to stop panic buying of online sales. eBay prohibited non-business sellers from reselling goods and thereby profiteering from human tragedy or suffering. Restrictions were placed on the sale of baby formula and milk, toilet paper, tampons, baby wipes and nappies, with only business sellers being allowed to sell such products during the first lockdown. Utilising their Disaster and Tragedy Policy, eBay were able to also combat price gouging by introducing a new policy (Price Gouging Policy) to address the COVID-19 situation specifically. Furthermore, eBay set up and gave customers the ability to report price gouging through a dedicated page for price gouging and a separate 'price gouging' option in the "report this item" tool which is found on each and every listing.





Cooperation and Intelligence Sharing

During the pandemic, trading standards formed networks with other regulatory organisations to provide an efficient and targeted response to COVID-19 issues. They also worked to publicise what they were learning as the pandemic continued, to help other agencies and warn consumers to prevent potential harm.

Case Studies – Regulatory Networks

Salford Regulatory Services including trading standards and working in partnership with Greater Manchester Police delivered COVID-19 related business compliance activity on a weekly basis. They worked with their audit team reviewing businesses that applied for business support grants and flagged suspected fraudulent applications and businesses that breached COVID-19 regulations. They assisted the grants team in communicating funding opportunities to businesses.

From March 2020, the Heads of East Sussex and West Sussex County Councils' Trading Standards Services became quickly aware that enforcement and compliance needed to be co-ordinated across Sussex in order to avoid disjointed and fragmented enforcement which could have resulted if departments kept to their traditional boundaries. As a result, a weekly liaison group was formed, a protocol was designed and intelligence sharing established. The group gained representation on the Public Health Operational Cell weekly meeting ensuring that updates on enforcement and compliance were shared and discussed in a timely manner – this led to a clear protocol for considering the issuing of Directions.



Case Study – Publicising Key Learnings

With the establishment of a joint expert group² by the two societies, Chief Officers of Trading Standards (SCOTSS) and Environmental Health (SOCEHoS), to provide a source of expert advice and interpretation on closure regulations issued by the Scottish Parliament, it was agreed that it would be helpful to also publicise what these services did alongside dealing with pandemic issues. A video was produced outlining a number of enforcement areas relevant to the pandemic and highlighted the work done in connection with the public health emergency such as advising businesses on restrictions and investigating and resolving complaints from consumers.

Suffolk County Council achieved a combined **Twitter reach of 5.56m** and **Facebook reach of 2.42m**

In April 2020, Suffolk County Council found that social media was key in publicising warnings of COVID-19 scams, which were often targeting the vulnerable and providing information to businesses. Working regionally, the Council achieved a combined Twitter reach of 5.56m and Facebook reach of 2.42m.

Case Study – Leading the Way

During the pandemic CTSI worked to support the profession by helping to provide clarity on legislative and enforcement issues and collaborating with key stakeholders to assist in finding solutions to COVID-19 issues affecting consumers and business.

In response to Government published guidance covering the easements of placing PPE on the UK market and the derogation from product authorisation for hand sanitiser, with funding from OPSS, CTSI developed and delivered webinars on hand cleansing products and PPE to assist local authorities in advising businesses. Over 500 local authority officers from trading standards, Environmental Health and some central Government departments benefited from this training.

An **information hub** was created for the trading standards profession focusing on **key enforcement issues** in a number of subject areas including food and travel

CTSI held regular COVID-19 Roundtables with key stakeholders in attendance including the CMA, Which?, British Retail Consortium (BRC), Citizens Advice (CitA), Office for Product Safety and Standards (OPSS), Money Saving Expert, National Trading Standards (NTS) Scams and Resolver. This focused on collaborating to tackle issues arising from the pandemic and a forward look to economic recovery. CTSI also worked with Lead Officers and sought legal guidance to help clarify enforcement issues around price gouging. An information hub was also created for the trading standards profession focusing on key enforcement issues in a number of subject areas including Food, Travel, Housing and Home Improvements, Pricing, Product Safety, Scams and Doorstep Crime.

2. The Scottish ETC Covid Expert Group won the CTSI Hero Award for the COVID-19 Team category in 2020



Conclusion

CTSI has compiled this infographic to highlight the ways in which trading standards stepped out of its usual functions, responding to the needs of local authorities, business, consumers and the public at large and swiftly adapted to help deal with the multifaceted challenges caused by a global crisis. We have seen this reaction by trading standards time and time again, such as in the fuel crisis in the 1970s, the BSE crisis in the 1990s, the Foot and Mouth outbreak in 2001, and latterly the Grenfell Tower tragedy bringing unsafe electrical and construction products into focus. We hope that trading standards' dynamic, agile and dedicated response to the pandemic shown here highlights the importance to Government on maintaining a strong and robust local trading standards infrastructure. Trading standards has proven itself as crucial, working smartly and collaboratively, to deliver the protection that local authorities, consumers and businesses need in a rapidly changing world.

CTSI would like to thank all of the authorities that responded to our call for evidence. We hold more information which we couldn't fit into this infographic, and so a full list of case studies can be viewed on the membership area of our website www.tradingstandards.uk.