

From: Paul Webb – Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services
Simon Jones – Corporate Director, Growth, Environment and Transport.

To: Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee

Subject: Protecting the Communities and Economy of Kent

Past Pathway of report: None

Future Pathway of report: None

Electoral Division: All

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This report sets out how services provided by Kent County Council from within the Growth and Communities Division protect residents and businesses within the County from harm.

Recommendation(s):

The Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee is asked to note the report and make any comments to the Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Whilst Kent is recognised as a great place to live, visit and operate a business from, there are issues which have the potential bring about harm to residents and businesses.
- 1.2 Some of those issues can be mitigated by helping people understand the risk and giving them the tools to protect themselves. Some, however, require more direct intervention due to their nature.
- 1.3 This report will set out how various aspects of life and doing business in Kent are protected from harm by our services, much of which is otherwise not visible to the public nor all of the county's businesses.

2. Consumers

- 2.1 All of us, in our daily lives, fulfil the role of a consumer. Businesses, too, act in that capacity.
- 2.2 The risk of harm to consumers falls predominately into two categories, the risk of physical harm and the risk of economic harm, from being defrauded.
- 2.3 KCC's Trading Standards Team have the duty to enforce the law in relation to the sale of dangerous goods to consumers. The Team operate at all levels of

- 2.4 the supply chain from retail outlets, including internet based sellers, through wholesalers to manufacturers and importers.
- 2.5 A key aspect of this service delivery is for our Trading Standards officers to work with and support businesses who want to do the right thing, which is the vast majority. Expert officers provide advice and guidance to help businesses comply with the law.
- 2.6 Occasionally a business chooses not to follow the advice given and breaks the law, meaning that dangerous goods can be on the market. Our Trading Standards Team have very significant legal powers to have dangerous goods removed from the consumer market and, if appropriate, to prosecute offenders.
- 2.7 The greatest protection is secured when businesses comply with the law. Trading Standards' approach, therefore, is to work with businesses to bring about legal compliance. There are many methods of doing this ranging from a quiet, informal conversation through the serving of formal compliance notices and ranging up to prosecution, including restraint and seizure of financial assets gained through criminality. Whilst the option to prosecute is important and necessary as a deterrent, this option is reserved for the most serious or repetitive offending. Prosecution does not always bring about the end of illegal behaviours whereas many of the other methods used do.
- 2.8 Most consumers, given access to correct, up to date information, are capable of protecting themselves from harm. Our Innovation and Business Intelligence Communications Team undertake significant activity to ensure that consumers in Kent have that information whether it be about food safety recalls or scams that are being perpetrated within The County. The team have over 73,000 followers and, in 2024/25, their posts were seen by Kent residents over 20 million times. Each 'warn and inform' alert was seen by over 40,000 people and, in a survey, 72% of Kent residents said that these alerts helped them avoid being scammed.
- 2.9 Members are encouraged to follow the 'Kent Protect' various social media content and to share that content with residents and businesses in their divisions.

3. Vulnerable consumers

- 3.1 Within the wide group of consumers generally, is a smaller subset of consumers who would be considered as being vulnerable. Vulnerability may take many forms including age (young and old), health, disability and social exclusion.
- 3.2 It is recognised that socially excluded and lonely adults are at significantly higher risk of falling prey to dishonest businesses and that, when defrauded in this way, are 2.4 times more likely to die or go into residential care than their non-defrauded peers⁽¹⁾. Fraud is now the county's most prevalent crime. The average age of mail scam victims is 74⁽¹⁾. Over half of people over the age of 65 believe they have been the target of a scam⁽¹⁾. As well as being devastating for the individual concerned and their family, this can also have a direct impact on the County Council's adult social care provision and budgets. Whilst it is not

(1) age uk - scamming and its effect on vulnerable individuals

- 3.3 known how many of these victims would require KCC funded care it must be recognised that they will have been defrauded of some or all of their assets and therefore are more likely to qualify for KCC funded care.
- 3.4 Trading Standards employs two dedicated Safeguarding Officers who work across Kent, actively engaging with target groups of residents to warn and inform them about known scams and the tactics used by fraudsters. In doing so they provide those residents with the knowledge they need to recognise when they are at risk of being defrauded and also of how to prevent this happening.
- 3.5 Those officers also engage with residents who have been victims of this crime to prevent any further frauds taking place. In 2024/25 173 interventions of this type took place saving victims £431,917.
- 3.6 Our Community Wardens, in the communities they serve, visit and engage with those who are at risk of becoming victims. Data from a nationally funded scheme identifies individuals who may be being targeted by remote fraud (like fake prize draws). Wardens carry out visits to warn and advise residents and also to signpost local facilities to combat loneliness, which is a known cause of people falling victim in this type of fraud. Lonely and socially isolated older adults are 3½ times more likely to enter local authority funded residential care⁽²⁾. The health impacts of social isolation are recognised as being equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes per day.
- 3.7 The Communications Team described at 2.6 offer a product which they have developed in-house called 'TEPO' (TEacher in your POcket) which is designed to allow family members and care professionals to help vulnerable consumers have the information they need to stay safe. The product is video based and is intended for the family member or care professional to show a video to the person they are supporting and to spark a conversation. Current videos on offer are around electrical safety in the home (including keeping warm safely), how to say no to doorstep crime and help with stopping smoking.

4. Protecting our borders and supply chains

- 4.1 The U.K. imports 46% of the food we all consume. No single country accounts for more than 11% of the total imported. This means that food is imported from countries that have significantly different food safety requirements to those we expect to apply in the U.K.
- 4.2 Detailed official controls are carried out at our borders by Port Health Authorities, who include Dover District Council and Ashford Borough Council. KCC's Kent Scientific Services Team carry out testing of food, feed and consumer goods to allow unsafe products to be prevented from entering the country and to facilitate the entry of safe products to feed the nation. The team carry this out for the U.K.'s biggest ports including Felixstowe, Port of London, Southampton and our own ports at Dover and the Channel Tunnel. This work is carried out on a charged for basis, with costs being levied on the importer via the relevant Port Health Authority.

(2) Social Finance (2015) Investing to tackle loneliness - a discussion paper

4.3 Examples of the unsafe food prevented from entering the country include:

- Fresh vegetables carrying excessive residues of pesticides
- Nuts containing excessive levels of Aflatoxin (a carcinogenic mould)
- Plastic cookware which leached formaldehyde into the food being prepared
- Soft drinks containing excessive colourings and non-permitted sweeteners

4.4 At the Kent ports, our Trading Standards Service has a small team of specialist officers carrying out controls on consumer goods other than food or animal feed to protect U.K. consumers and businesses from unsafe goods entering the country. This work protects the whole of the U.K. and is fully funded by grant from the Office of Product Safety and Standards, part of the Department for Business and Trade in central government.

4.5 In 2024/25 this team prevented 285,000 dangerous item entering the U.K. Examples include:

- Illegal vape devices (some of which were declared as being 'glassware')
- Nicotine pouches
- Counterfeit cosmetics
- Teeth whitening strips containing excessive hydrogen peroxide
- Children's shoes with detachable small parts causing a choking hazard
- Five tonnes of hydroquinone, a chemical used in skin lightening cosmetics but which is dangerous and illegal.

5. Protecting businesses

5.1 Successful, confident businesses are critically important to the economic prosperity of Kent.

5.2 Our Trading Standards Service has a team dedicated to supporting and protecting local businesses.

5.3 Trading Standards Officers provide advice to local businesses to help them comply with the law and also to share the wide experience the service has of how to look after customers and enhance their reputation.

5.4 For those businesses looking to trade further afield, Trading Standards operates the statutorily based 'Primary Authority' scheme. This scheme means that advice given to a company who have signed a primary authority agreement with us will be accepted nationwide, removing one of the biggest frustrations of business, that of inconsistent enforcement of the law. Primary authority work is carried out on a charged for, cost recovery basis.

5.5 Kent Scientific Services makes it's testing facilities available to businesses who do not have their own laboratories. Testing is sought to identify allergens in food, specify the nutritional content in food and animal feed, check products for

unknown contaminants and also to investigate complaints from the public about, for example, the presence of a foreign body in food.

- 5.6 Some areas of business have, over many years, developed a generic poor reputation which holds back businesses operating in that sector from growing and also restricts consumer confidence to engage businesses to carry out work. One of these business areas is the home improvement and repair sector. KCC operates a “Trading Standards Checked” membership scheme where businesses can submit themselves to an audit of themselves and then, assuming they meet the criteria, carry the badge to show consumers that they are reliable, trustworthy businesses. As well as helping those businesses, this membership scheme allows us to signpost consumers to reliable tradespeople and reduces the likelihood that those consumers will be left vulnerable to rogue trading.
- 5.7 Local, low-level anti-social behaviour (ASB) is known to have a detrimental impact on small, often retail businesses. The National Business Crime Centre has stated that “Many businesses suffer from the effects of anti-social behaviour but particularly it can impact small independent retailers. Small outlets in local communities can act as a hotspot for ASB causing mental, physical and financial harm to a business.” Some of the harms identified include higher prices for goods, higher insurance premiums and loss of investment.
- 5.8 Our Community Safety Team, including our Community Wardens, work with partners, including Kent Police, district and borough councils and local community groups, to address this issue. Community Wardens provide a uniformed presence in the communities they serve, they are embedded in their communities and know and understand where and when ASB occurs and, in many cases, the person or people engaged in it. They work with local businesses to reduce the impact and work with those at risk of committing ASB to deter and divert them from that course.
- 5.9 Tackling neighbourhood crime and ASB is one of the eight priorities of the Kent Community Safety Agreement which is coordinated by our Community Safety Team. The Team has recently been recognised by Kent Police for their work bringing partners together to develop and implement strategies and share best practice in preventing ASB.
- 5.10 For legitimate businesses to trade successfully and to grow, a level playing field is required. Whilst the vast majority of businesses are legitimate and want to do the right thing, there are a small handful who deliberately or persistently break the law, putting consumers at risk of harm and competing unfairly with those legitimate businesses in the same market. Our Trading Standards Service has the legal power to prosecute for offences within the remit given to them by parliament. This power is used sparingly and is reserved for the most serious cases. Two examples in 2025 are:
- Three people convicted of conspiracy to defraud by reducing the mileage on second-hand vehicles (by the equivalent of four round trips to the moon).

- A company and installer who supplied a dangerous electric gate which failed and caused life-changing injuries to the home owner.

6. Protecting the rural economy

- 6.1 According to the National Audit Office, the Foot and Mouth outbreak in 2001 is estimated to have cost the U.K. economy £8Bn, £3Bn of that being borne by the public sector and the remaining £5Bn by the private sector. Economic losses did not just relate to farming but also, and in fact more so, the many businesses who rely on open access to the countryside including hotels, pubs, restaurants and activity providers. Following that outbreak a raft of new law was introduced to manage what is permitted to be fed to livestock and also to control movement of livestock. Since that outbreak there has been at least one further outbreak of Foot and Mouth and many outbreaks of other diseases like Bluetongue and Avian Influenza. Whilst serious, none of these have caused the widespread harm that the 2001 outbreak did.
- 6.2 Enforcement of the laws that were introduced is a duty upon our Trading Standards Service. Most enforcement is carried out working in partnership with the farming community, helping them comply rather than taking formal action via enforcement.
- 6.3 It is a sad fact that the farming industry is one which has greater than average levels of mental health issues and suicide. KCC Officers working in this area are always mindful of the impact of their work on individuals and work with partners, including rural community based organisations, to provide help and support wherever possible.
- 6.4 The Innovation and Business Intelligence Communications Team have also supported farmers by running information campaigns. The latest being the 'Take the Lead' campaign, encouraging dog walkers to keep control of their dogs and reduce attacks on livestock.

7. Protecting children and young people.

- 7.1 Several types of goods are restricted by law to prevent children and young people accessing them, for very good reason. The long term risks to adults who begin smoking as children are well known and, because of them, most want to quit and three quarters of adult smokers would never have started if they had the choice again. More than four in five smokers start before the age of 20. People who start smoking before the age of 18 (the legal age to be sold cigarettes) have higher levels of nicotine dependence than those who start after the age of 21, and therefore find it harder to quit⁽³⁾.
- 7.2 Vaping is now a well known issue for children and young people with many who would never choose to try smoking becoming addicted to the toxin that is nicotine by this route. Whilst vaping has a real public health benefit in helping existing smokers to quit, it has no benefit for those who have never smoked. As well as this addiction, studies are now being published showing the potential damage caused to children's lungs by vaping.

(3) - Stopping the start: our plan to create a smokefree generation, Department for Health and Social Care

- 7.3 Access to other products, including alcohol and fireworks, as well as putting young people at risk, also have a wider impact on communities.
- 7.4 The vape and tobacco market is known to have illicit elements to it, including organised criminals selling illegal products.
- 7.5 Our Trading Standards Service, supported with funding from KCC's Public Health Service, carry out extensive work removing illegal product from the market and enforcing the law on age restricted sales by deploying young people volunteers into retail premises to attempt to buy these goods.
- 7.6 The Team also work closely with the legitimate trade to help them develop systems to avoid selling to children. The now national 'Local Vape Action' partnership was initially trialled in Tunbridge Wells and has since been started in Ashford. This project brings together retailers, local authorities and the Police to prevent sales of illicit goods and sales to children. The Team also works with schools to provide information to help teachers demonstrate the dangers to students.

8. Protecting the Public – Learning from when it goes wrong

- 8.1 Two of our services are uniquely placed to learn from situations where people have died.
- 8.2 Kent and Medway Coroners, who are supported in their independent judicial capacity by the KCC Coroner Service, are charged with investigating death where the cause of death is unknown, the death was violent or unnatural or where the death occurred in prison, police detention or other form of state detention. In the course of their investigation it is not uncommon for the Coroner to identify an issue which, if acted upon, may prevent a future death. In these circumstances the Coroner issues a 'prevention of future deaths' report and the recipients are required to consider it and respond with their proposed actions. So far in 2025, 11 have been issued by the coroners covering Kent and Medway.
- 8.3 Our Community Safety Service coordinates and delivers the legally required reviews into a death which is linked in some way to domestic abuse or violence. These reviews are victim centred and aim to see life through the eyes of the victim and their children.
- 8.4 The purpose of a DHR is to understand what lessons can be learnt from domestic abuse-related deaths and to identify and implement local and national learning to better safeguard victims of domestic abuse.
- 8.5 A thorough and detailed report is produced following the carrying out of each review and is shared with, and approved by, the Home Office who share on any identified nationally relevant learning.
- 8.6 The Team draw together the lessons identified for local learning and deliver learning events for professionals to share the details of the improvements that should be made. Commonly two to three hundred professionals attend these events. Recent themes have included:

- Counter allegations
- Caring dynamics, domestic abuse and dementia
- Parental conflict

9. Conclusions

- 9.1 KCC's services have a significant key role to play in protecting Kent residents and businesses from harm
- 9.2 Much of the activity which is undertaken to achieve that protection is not widely known and appreciated by the public or businesses, who, generally, have an understanding that something is being done, but little concept of the scale of the effort. This is as it should be. If our work is being done well then the public should not need to be concerned about the safety of the food they buy every time they shop nor about the safety of the toys they give their children to play with.
- 9.3 The type of protection demonstrated in this paper is also a key element to supporting economic activity and growth. Consumer confidence is a vital element of trade and that confidence is enhanced by the protection work carried out by KCC.

Recommendation(s):

The Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee is asked to note the report and make any comments to the Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services.

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Annex

Public Protection Social Media:



<https://www.facebook.com/publicprotection>



<https://x.com/kentprotect>



<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtdaM7bkuOsbFpd8CzFnyhw>



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