



REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 2ND JULY 2013

**SUBJECT: ANNUAL REPORT ON THE CONSUMER ADVICE SERVICE PROVIDED
BY TRADING STANDARDS**

REPORT BY: ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide information to Members on the number and nature of complaints dealt with by the Consumer Advice function of the Trading Standards Service for the financial year 2012/2013.
- 1.2 To inform Members of the successful transfer of the basic telephone advice service from Consumer Direct Wales to Citizens Advice Consumer Services (CACS).

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Consumer Advice function within the Trading Standards Service, dealt with 1,555 requests for in-depth consumer advice during 2012/13. Consumer complaints are categorised on the authority's database by trade sector and second-hand cars and home improvements continue by far to be the main source of complaints. The total value of all goods and services complained about for the financial year was £1,368,132.
- 2.2 First line basic consumer advice was previously dealt with by Consumer Direct Wales on behalf of the authority and transferred to Citizens Advice Consumer Services (CACS) on 1/4/2012. Calls that require in-depth intervention due to their technical or legally complex nature are referred through to Consumer Advice officers within the Trading Standards service. Most calls are automatically referred at first contact if they relate to vulnerable consumers or criminal offences. During the last financial year CACS dealt with 3861 telephone calls, either from Caerphilly residents, or about businesses based within Caerphilly county borough.
- 2.3 The report includes some practical examples of assistance given to Caerphilly residents by the Trading Standards Consumer Advice service during the year.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

The assistance provided to Caerphilly residents with consumer problems contributes to the outcomes of several strategies including:

- Strategic Equality Plan - Objective 1: Individuals, families and groups in the communities of Caerphilly county borough feel safe living their own lives at home, at work and in the community at large.

- The Caerphilly Local Service Board single integrated plan, Caerphilly Delivers – contributing to the Healthier Caerphilly, Prosperous Caerphilly, and Safer Caerphilly priorities.

4. THE REPORT

- 4.1 Consumer complaints are categorised on the authority's database by trade sector and by product or service. Categorisation of complaints follows the current national scheme and allows the data gathered to be used in planning services and, in particular, intervention against particular problem trade sectors.
- 4.2 The table below gives the top 10 products/services and the monetary value involved that were complained about during 2012/2013:

	Product/Service	Number	% of Total	Value £
1.	Second-hand cars	174	11.2%	594,331
2.	Home maintenance and Improvements	165	10.6%	300,395
3.	Furniture	69	4.4%	62,787
4.	Clothing	62	4%	2,196
5.	Telecommunications (including mobiles)	60	3.9%	3,185
6.	Vehicle Repairs and Servicing	59	3.8%	40,810
7.	Personal computers	54	3.5%	5,741
8.	Other Professional Services	52	3.3%	18,631
9.	Competitions, Prize Draws	43	2.8%	N/A
10.	Non-Life insurance	41	2.6%	13,657

The analysis is comparable with national data, with second-hand cars and home maintenance being the highest sources of complaints.

- 4.3 Referrals to Caerphilly Trading Standards have remained constant over the past two years. The number of complaints to the National helpline from Caerphilly residents has slightly decreased this year but this is believed to be a result of the change over to CACS. In the current economic climate complaint resolution is harder to achieve with many national companies less willing to offer consumers redress where it is due to them. As such the complexity of cases and the time taken to bring them to resolution has increased.
- 4.4 The total value of all goods and services complained about for the financial year was £1,368,135.77. This figure excludes high value complaints regarding financial advice and prize draws.
- 4.5 Levels of criminal complaints requiring formal criminal investigation continue to rise.

5. CUSTOMER SATISFACTION LEVELS

- 5.1 A monthly customer satisfaction survey is sent to all users of the service. This year's results show that 96.2% of users are fairly or very satisfied with the service. Response time indicators show that 97% of users had an initial response within one working day.

6. EXAMPLES OF COMPLAINTS

- 6.1 Detailed below are examples of assistance given to Caerphilly residents by the Trading Standards Consumer Advice service during the year:

- A consumer had experienced problems with his hearing aid for some time. He returned it to the trader on several occasions but each time it was sent back with the same inherent fault. He contacted Trading Standards who intervened and assisted with a letter to the trader who then agreed to refund the purchase price of nearly £3000.
- A consumer contacted Trading Standards on behalf of his son. The son had used birthday and Christmas money to purchase a remote controlled model car and after only a few uses it had developed a fault. After returning it to the store to be examined the consumer was advised that the problem was caused by usage and not a manufacturing fault. The consumer disagreed with this, left the car there and came to Trading Standards for advice. As a goodwill gesture after contacting both the store and supplier it was agreed that a refund would be provided minus a nominal sum to cover usage and return costs. The consumer accepted this offer and a cheque for £200.
- Trading Standards received information from the local Police about an elderly lady who had received an unsolicited parcel containing a number of health products from a French company. She subsequently received an invoice for £46. She had no recollection of ever ordering any such products. The company were contacted but insisted they had a telesales recording that had been made to the lady where she had agreed to receive the products. On explaining the lady's situation, age and the fact that she had no recollection of the company calling her, they agreed to cancel the outstanding invoice and allowed the lady to retain the products. The lady and her carers were also given advice on how to reduce the number of telesales calls received.
- A local student purchased a tablet computer for use with his studies. Unfortunately, whilst using the tablet in his kitchen it was accidentally knocked off the work surface into a bucket containing bleach. Even though the tablet was covered by an insurance policy for accidental damage the company was not prepared to replace it. Officers contacted the insurers and with evidence and photographs supplied by the student they were able to obtain a new replacement tablet worth £400 to enable him to continue with his studies
- A consumer purchased a vehicle he had seen advertised on the Internet, from a car trader in Kent for £5,700. The car was advertised and sold with 82,000 miles on the clock. The consumer subsequently discovered that the car had been clocked and had actually travelled in excess of 286,000 miles. Trading Standards were able to ascertain the true value of the vehicle with the higher mileage and persuade his credit card company to refund £2,700 in line with his rights under the Consumer Credit Act 1974. The seller was also prosecuted for the criminal offences.
- Mrs C. had a fibreglass roof replaced in 2010, which came with the benefit of a 10-year warranty. When the roof started to leak 2 years later she attempted to contact the company but found that they had ceased trading. A new company operating from the same premises offered to go and look at the problem for her but failed to turn up despite several telephone calls. Mrs C contacted Trading Standards for advice; they spoke to the trader who then carried out the necessary repairs free of charge.

7. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Consumer advice is provided to members of the community in the language and format of their choice in line with the Council's Strategic Equality Objective 4: Communications Access.
- 7.2 This report is for information purposes only, so the Council's Equalities Impact Assessment process does not need to be applied.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Activity is managed within existing budgets.

9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are no personnel implications.

10. CONSULTATIONS

10.1 This report has been sent to the Consultees listed below and there are no responses that have not been reflected in the report.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 Members are requested to note the report.

12. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

12.1 To keep members informed of the type and level of complaint activity within the county borough and the assistance provided by the Consumer Advice service.

13. STATUTORY POWER

13.1 Trading Standards enforce a wide range of legislation relating to consumer complaints that require mediation and intervention.

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Consultees: Cllr. Dave Poole, Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services
Cllr. D.T. Davies, Chair Regeneration & Environment Scrutiny
Cllr. E.M. Aldworth, Vice-Chair Regeneration & Environment Scrutiny
Sandra Aspinall, Acting Deputy Chief Executive
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