

Impact of a Reduced Budget on Trading Standards Service Delivery

Report of the Head of Services for Communities

1. Summary

This report summarises the impact of the overall reduction in budget on Devon County Council's Trading Standards Service arising from the Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010 and the subsequent corporate service prioritisation exercise.

2. Background/Introduction

The immediate impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010 and the subsequent corporate service prioritisation exercise was a proposed reduction in the overall Trading Standards Service budget of around 40% over two years.

In order to meet those savings the Service carried out a comprehensive review of its core functions and as a result reorganised both its structure and methods of working. With around 85% of its budget being directly related to salary costs, this inevitably meant a significant reduction in staff.

After the corporate restructure placed Trading Standards within Services for Communities a review of the budget situation was carried out and a mitigated programme of reductions agreed.

- 2011/12: £436,680
- 2012/13: £100,000
- 2013/14: £200,000

This equates to a total of approximately 26% from the original budget.

Partly in response to the initial proposed reduction the Trading Standards Service had moved ahead at an early stage with restructuring and adopting new working methods. By April 2012, the Service reduced from 74 FTEs to 53 FTEs. Compulsory redundancies though were restricted to a small group of Animal Health Advice officers (7 individuals, 4.9 FTEs in total) who carried out a specific data input function, under the earlier Defra "Framework Agreement" (see 3.1 below). All the required savings were made early and were in place for the start of the 2012/13 financial year. As a result there have been a number of significant changes to service delivery.

Subsequent to these changes having been implemented, during the final part of budget setting process for 2012/13, Cabinet reinstated £150,000 to the Trading Standards budget leaving the final reduction required over three years at 20.5%.

The following section of this report will outline the significant changes to service delivery already made and ongoing enhancements resulting from the decision to restore £150,000 to the Service base budget.

3. Impact on Service Delivery

3.1 Animal Health

3.1.1 Sheep and Goat Movement Data Input:

£171, 000 of the total reduction in the overall Service budget was the direct result of drop in funding from a ring-fenced Defra grant of £501,000 which was partly offset by a virement for animal health work in the Revenue Support Grant of £330,000

As a result, the Service stopped inputting sheep and goat movement data onto the Defra database. This decision was based on the following:

- the recording of pig movements had been transferred from local authorities to the pig industry in October 2011. There are also plans for sheep and goat movements to be recorded by the industry, although no timescales have been set and it is dependant on available finance.
- the proposal to implement a nationwide movement standstill should an animal disease outbreak occur has arguably changed the importance of these records. This should allow time for access to on-farm records. Although a slower process, these will give a more accurate picture.
- data was collected into a national system but as a result of the general economic situation other local authorities have also ceased this activity, significantly reducing the effectiveness of the system.

This decision meant that front-line animal health enforcement role at critical disease control points and high risk farms could be maintained at the same level as in previous years.

Devon Trading Standards has now negotiated an agreement with Defra, whereby sheep and goat movement data will be input by a third party at no direct cost to the local authority. However, there is some administration work involved in collating notifications for dispatch to the inputting organisation and in additional remedial and investigative work following discovery of any non-compliance.

A proportion of the £150k returned to the Trading Standards budget will be used to increase animal health capacity to deal with the additional workload flowing from this arrangement.

3.1.2 Farming Standards Helpline:

The dedicated Farming Standards Helpline previously operated by the Service has now ceased. Callers now come through to the general Business Advice line. However, with the exception below, Devon Trading Standards do continue to provide comprehensive advice on animal health and welfare issues and general business advice to the rural community.

Service expertise in animal health matters has been retained through its Animal Health Officers who are more highly qualified and have greater expertise than the Animal Health Advice Officers. Indeed under previous arrangements the latter would always refer more complex matters onto the Animal Health Officers.

The exception is that the Service no longer provides advice on animal disease related matters, Defra operate a Farmers Helpline for disease control matters, have the necessary veterinary expertise and are well placed to provide this advice. Devon County Council self-help material on this subject has been improved but direct callers are now referred to the Defra helpline which reduces duplication across agencies.

Some additional resource will now be put into further improving website self-help material and other front-line engagement with the farming community. For example, through our presence at livestock markets, our "Farming Matters" bulletin and our Devon Farming Partnership.

3.1.3 Emergency Cascade System:

The Service no longer operates a 24 hour emergency response system although a more informal, unpaid cascade system has been established to mitigate the effect of this loss.

3.1.4 Overall Impact on Animal Health Work:

In summary, the reduction in public sector spending as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review has had an impact on service levels provided to the farming community.

However, Devon Trading Standards Service has successfully focussed its efforts on a) maintaining inspection levels at critical disease control points, b) maintaining inspection levels at high risk farms and, c) dealing with significant animal health and welfare complaints and breaches of legislation.

As a result, Devon Trading Standards continues to respond to all animal health and welfare complaints and is still able to do a lot more proactive work than many other local authorities. For example, Devon Trading Standards attend over 400 livestock markets per annum (including 100% of pig markets – the highest disease risk); a target that was agreed with Animal Health as being appropriate to the "Framework Funding" provided before the Comprehensive Spending Review. It visits 100% of the County's livestock abattoirs, hauliers and dealers and 300 farms per year on a risk-assessed basis. It also conducts a minimum of 500 postal record checks and carries out an annual disease contingency exercise with partners.

Devon Trading Standards has also improved the quality of its on-site farm inspections. Firstly, by expanding the training of its Animal Health Officers so that they can carry out more comprehensive visits and offer wider support and, secondly, by training other generic Trading Standards Officers so that when they visit farms or other animal health premises they have a level of awareness which supports effective hazard-spotting and assessment of risk.

3.2 Consumer Advice

3.2.1 Consumer Advice Helpline:

"First tier" consumer advice has been provided by Consumer Direct, a call centre operation since mid-2004. As from the beginning of September 2011, Devon Trading Standards no longer offer "second-tier" (more complex) consumer advice as an automatic right.

Telephone callers to Consumer Direct are now referred to local CABx, or other appropriate agencies, if they require additional civil advice. This mirrors developments nationally where, Citizen's Advice have taken over the governance of Consumer Direct and are being given responsibility by central government for the provision of consumer advice and education, whilst Trading Standards are being tasked with the responsibility of a central enforcement role in the new consumer landscape.

3.2.2 Trading Standards Interventions:

Devon Trading Standards Service continue to evaluate all information received from Consumer Direct and other sources to assess whether and what type of further intervention would be appropriate. Assessment of complaints will be against degree of criminality, likely risk, consumer or business detriment involved, vulnerability of complainant and fit with service or corporate priorities. Where the Service does decide to take an active role it will continue to offer civil advice alongside and in liaison with any other agencies involved.

3.2.3 Self-Help Material:

The Service has increased and improved the provision of “self-help” information for consumers (and businesses) on our website and through other social media (for example, e-zines, a weekly Radio Devon Consumer Programme and, in association with the Communications Team, on DCC Facebook and Twitter).

3.2.4 Overall Impact on Consumer Advice:

Although Devon Trading Standards Service no longer automatically offer additional support to consumers in civil matters there are other sources of expert advice available.

This new approach has meant that the MyDevon Call Centre can now act as a first point of contact for all trading standards telephone calls and procedures have been put into place to ensure that these are signposted and routed appropriately. Training and short-term support are also being provided by the Service to MyDevon.

These new measures have removed the need for Devon Trading Standards to maintain a permanently staffed Consumer Advice Unit and allows for more efficient control and prioritisation of its work. Therefore, the Service is able to more effectively direct limited professional expertise to those areas of greatest need and impact.

3.3 Product Sampling and Analysis

3.3.1 Formal Sampling Levels

Initially the overall sampling budget for food, animal feed and product safety had been significantly reduced, with levels below statutory guidelines.

This had been mitigated to some extent in the short-term by successfully obtaining an external grant for animal feeding stuff sampling and by redirecting officer establishment savings realised before the end of the financial year.

In addition, Devon Trading Standards has initiated closer sub-regional working over a number of work-streams one of which is formal sampling. This will help to avoid duplication, gain economies of scale in tendering and coordinate specific analytical requests to gain a more comprehensive picture of product quality and safety.

A further proportion of the £150k returned to the Trading Standards budget will be used to increase Devon County Council's base sampling levels to a more sustainable level.

3.3.2 Overall Impact on Product Sampling and Analysis

Levels remain below statutory guidelines but are not inconsistent with the position in other local authorities and will improve slightly with the increased money available. Progress has also been made in smarter working across the sub-region and the Service has again been successful in attracting some external funding for food and animal feed sampling. The current risk of formal criticism or direct intervention is considered to be low.

3.4 Intelligence Led and Evidence Based Interventions

3.4.1 Risk Based Interventions

The Service no longer carries out routine inspections in line with recommendations from central government departments but now assesses potential risk and evaluates likely impact in prioritising all of its work. This is a continuation of changes previously introduced by the Service and, currently, central government departments appear generally to accept and, in many cases, recommend this approach.

3.4.2 Business Support

The Service has expanded its Business Support offering to create a team of customer focussed officers with the relevant specialisms to support businesses in a way that goes beyond mere regulatory compliance. Once again activity is targeted on an assessment of risk and need so; for example, focus may be given at different times to Devon based businesses with a national profile, new SMEs, or trade sectors with high complaint figures.

3.4.3 Intelligence Analysis

The Service collates and analyses intelligence from various sources in line with the National Intelligence Model. Monthly tasking based on intelligence profiles and guided by an Annual Strategic Assessment allows a flexible allocation of resources to areas of greatest priority. To facilitate this approach, three of its officers are now formally trained in intelligence analysis. The Service also retains its small Special Investigations Unit, with a focus on major consumer fraud, including Accredited Financial Investigators authorised under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

3.4.4 Impacts and Outcomes

The chain of intelligence analysis has been extended to include monitoring and reporting of impacts and outcomes. This has always been difficult in the regulatory environment but progress has been made and longer term the aim is to develop a robust evidence trail which can illustrate the wider impact of Service interventions.

3.4.5 Overall Impact on Intelligence Led and Evidence Based Interventions

Although this is a direction the Service has been moving in over a number of years the recent changes have been transformational and have now ushered in a significantly different way of working. This approach is still developing but is attracting interest from a number of other regulatory services around the country.

This new way of working underpins all the other changes the Service has been able to make and is central to its ongoing effectiveness with more limited resources.

A final proportion of the £150k returned to the Trading Standards budget will be used to progress the development of this facility and to ensure that front-line operational officers, including animal health officers, have the intelligence and other direct support they need to function efficiently.

4. Public Health Impact

The impact of the budget reductions has been managed in such a way as to minimise any direct effect on the Service's contribution to Public Health which remains a key priority for the Trading Standards Service. It is hoped that the further developments in an intelligence led way of working will enable better targeting of resources to areas in which it can make a real contribution and to an improvement in measuring the outcomes and impacts of its public health work.

5. Conclusion

As a result of the above changes, Devon Trading Standards Service has not only achieved the required budgetary reduction but also introduced an innovative, new approach to working which strives to ensure that all its work is intelligence led and evidence based and that all interventions are based on identified impacts and outcomes. This new way of working is still embedding itself but is already resulting in a smarter, more efficient service delivery focussed directly on customer needs.

The Service has also taken a lead on sub-regional strategic planning, designed to share resources and maximise the impact of any interventions. Work is ongoing with regulatory services in Somerset, Plymouth, Torbay and Cornwall.

The Service has reduced the overall scope of its activities but the direct impact on consumers, businesses and the farming community has been mitigated and carried out in a controlled manner taking into account risk and likely impact.

The exact amounts of additional funding to be apportioned to the three areas identified above are difficult to isolate, due to the way in which work is integrated across work-streams within Trading Standards, and will also be subject to job evaluation of specific posts.

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Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers

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Background Paper	Date	File Reference
Nil		