

Briefing by Head of Corporate Governance

North Trading Standards Collaboration

13 June 2017

Background

The [Audit Scotland 2013 report “Protecting Consumers”](#) concluded that: “...the long-term viability of councils’ Trading Standards services is under threat and urgent action is needed to strengthen protection for consumers”. In response, COSLA set up the Trading Standards Strategic Review Group to take forward a review of services across Scotland: a main theme is the need for increased voluntary collaboration between local authorities.

In parallel to the Scotland-wide Strategic Review, informal discussions were held between local authority Trading Standards services in the North to explore options for mutually-beneficial collaboration. One topic appropriate for such collaboration was “notified body” status for weights and measures work and this was explored as an early example.

Weights and Measures

Although no longer central to the everyday work of Trading Standards, weights and measures remains a key topic for consumer protection and business assistance. Nowadays, in order to test and certify weighing and measuring instruments for trade use, a local authority needs “notified body” authorisation. Such instruments include: petrol pumps, heating fuel meters and large weighing machines such as quarry “weighbridges” for lorries.

The “notified body” process involves the operation of a detailed quality system, with onerous ongoing requirements. Each local authority in the North was carrying out this work, separately, in order to maintain their individual notified body status. Thus essentially the same work was being repeated in each authority, and this to carry out diminishing amounts of weights and measures work. It became clear to each authority that this was no longer necessary and the Trading Standards services got together to form a single, unified notified body¹. This process is now complete and the single North notified body was approved by Regulatory Delivery² on 30 May. Officers in Highland are still able to take action to protect consumers and assist local businesses, but are now spared most of the “back office” work. It is a much more efficient arrangement that benefits each authority.

Further Collaboration

Encouraged by the progress on weights and measures, the North authorities have got together to discuss other collaboration. Two meetings have been held, in Inverness and

¹ Participating authorities are: Highland, Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Moray, Perth & Kinross, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Shetland.

²Regulatory Delivery is part of the UK Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS)

Aberdeen, attended by the Trading Standards Managers from each authority and several of their Heads of Service, including Highland Council's Head of Corporate Governance. The following matters were discussed as the main drivers behind the collaboration initiative:

1. Much consumer and business detriment stems from cross-border issues, such as doorstep consumer crime, mass marketed scams and manufacture and distribution of illicit goods, which can be tackled more effectively by Councils working together.
2. Individual Councils struggle to maintain full Trading Standards capability, trying to deliver a broad range of functions requiring diverse knowledge, skills and equipment.
3. Workforce planning in small units is very difficult, exacerbated by ageing workforces.
4. The Audit Scotland report 'Protecting Consumers' from 2013 recommended greater collaboration between Councils, including formal joint working.

The following principles have been agreed:

- Under any proposals, Councils will maintain control over their budgets and staffing to avoid pitfalls that have derailed attempts at shared Trading Standards services.
- The aim is to pool resources and expertise to produce better outcomes for consumers and businesses in the North when buying and selling goods and services.
- Guiding principle is Reciprocity, i.e. authorities to contribute as much as they benefit.
- Partnership must be greater than its parts to enable all Councils to maintain services.

Among the specific ideas being explored are:

- Establish a joint committee comprising of Elected Members from participating authorities, to ensure political oversight. (similar to e.g. North Roads Collaboration).
- Establish under the political group an operational management group of officers from each participating authority. The officers would be Trading Standards professionals, probably Trading Standards Managers, with options for reserves.
- Produce an overarching operational plan applicable to all participating authorities, creating a consistent and united approach, while allowing member Councils to adopt differences of approach and resource allocation where local priorities dictated.
- Establish a common set of operating policies across areas of activity, e.g. one Enforcement Policy; Standard Operating procedures for Doorstep Crime, e-Crime.
- A workforce planning operation to map out strengths, weaknesses and skills gaps across the constituent authorities, followed by a coordinated training programme.
- Pooling expertise and specialist equipment.
- Joint projects and initiatives, and reciprocal help with complex investigations.

The Director of Corporate Development and Depute Chief Executive was briefed on the meetings.

Next Steps

The next meeting to discuss these partnership ideas is on 15 June. It is anticipated that, after discussion at that meeting, more detailed proposals will be produced to allow authorities to consider whether to take this process to the next stage. These proposals should be ready by late summer.

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