Trading Standards Institute Conference –
Home Repairs and improvements Project Mini Theatre session

On Wednesday 22 June 2011 the OFT Project team ran a mini theatre session at the TSI conference. The session, attended by around 45 representatives from Local Authority Trading Standards (TSS) and other public and private bodies, provided the opportunity for OFT to present the reports originating from the project, and to gather stakeholders’ feedback and views on the potential initiatives identified in the OFT document.

Participants confirmed the value of the research findings in informing their work going forwards and provided useful feedback on the different areas and initiatives identified by the report. These areas being: consumer pre-purchase decisions; enhancing consumer skills in monitoring progress on their projects; developing consumers’ confidence and abilities to address and mitigate problems during the work; and business practices throughout the home improvements and repairs sector.

Consumer pre-purchase decisions were considered by participants as the highest priority area for further work. 'Developing consumers’ confidence and abilities to address and mitigate problems during the work' and 'Improving and developing business practices' came as close seconds.

Consumer pre-purchase decisions
Focusing on consumer pre-purchase decisions, initiatives targeted at raising consumer awareness and promoting use of the range of sources of information such as TSS, Citizens Advice and industry bodies, and the range of choice tools already available were considered of value. Attendees highlighted the potential benefits of collating information available from reliable sources and using the DirectGov portal to signpost to this information, including existing templates and checklists on contracts/agreements.

Pre-purchase decisions and Enhancing consumer skills
Participants confirmed the importance of developing checklists to encourage consideration and discussion of, and more specifically, of agreeing, the following issues:

- price and payment schedules
• specifications (and associated costs)
• anticipated timetables for completion of key stages
• process to agree significant changes
• roles and responsibilities in areas reported as common sources of problems (for example, working hours, cleaning and disposal of waste).

**Business practices**

The OFT research identified that many businesses, especially smaller businesses, have a basic understanding of consumer protection legislation, but that they lack the confidence in their knowledge to apply it when confronted by upset or angry consumers.

Conference participants felt that it is particularly important to support businesses by promoting existing sources of clear, succinct information about legal expectations and rights for both businesses and consumers. This could include the importance of:

• providing contracts to consumers
• information about when and where cooling off periods might apply, and requirements to provide notices
• soft-skills such as customer service when handling common types of complaint, and suggesting ways to handle awkward, emotionally-charged discussions about the work.

They also agreed with the OFT research showing that businesses should be encouraged to communicate clearly with consumers, particularly over:

• key stages of the work
• amendments to key elements of the project (for example, delivery times/dates)
• use of tailored payment structures which depend on the characteristics of the project.