Local authority trading standards services spend over £130 million each year to protect consumers from unfair trading, faulty or dangerous goods and substandard services. To do so effectively, they must respond to recent developments...

- the new duty on local authorities to achieve best value in delivering services
- the change agenda outlined in the recent White Paper, Modern Markets: Confident Consumers
- increasing consumer expectations of standards of safety, quality and value for money

...and changes in the worlds of manufacturing, retail and commerce.

- local traders and corner shops are being replaced by large corporations
- 24-hour and seven-day opening are increasingly common
- transactions by telephone and over the internet are growing

However, costs vary between councils, and trading standards services in different authorities treat consumers and businesses inconsistently.

- spending per head on trading standards services can vary by a factor of seven between councils
- the help that consumers receive for similar problems varies widely between councils

- on average, authorities inspected just over 50 per cent of their high-risk trading premises in 1998/99
- for similar offences, some councils will prosecute a trader while others may only give a warning
- a large company may sometimes be prosecuted by several authorities for the same offence

These inconsistencies arise for a number of reasons...

- nearly two-thirds of services do not systematically assess local needs
- only around half of councils have consulted on the priorities for their trading standards services
- poor co-ordination between authorities results in duplication and a reduced ability to deal with rogue traders who cross council boundaries

All trading standards authorities should take action.

- assess needs, consult consumers and traders, and identify the approaches to enforcement that are most appropriate to local circumstances
- assess risk, and an authority’s ability to make a difference, to target resources more effectively
- develop better information systems to help to inform decisions and evaluate performance
- use the cornerstones of best value – challenge, consult, compare and compete – as a framework for continuous improvement of the service

Effective trading standards services are key to protecting the interests of the consumer. Central government can help by providing consolidated guidance for trading standards services and helping improve performance management. One government department could take the lead in co-ordinating policy on, and advice to, trading standards services. The Local Government Association and professional bodies could assist by encouraging further co-operative working between authorities.
Key questions for councillors: trading standards services

Challenge

1. What statutory obligations are we under? What discretion do we have?
2. What risks do local people and businesses face from trading malpractice?
3. What impact can our trading standards service have on each of these risks?
4. What information do we have, or need, about the extent of problems in our area?
5. What do we currently do? What does this cost? What does it achieve?
6. How important are the different aspects of the service (including things that we could do but currently have chosen not to)?
7. What do we want to do in future?
8. What approach will we take to enforcement (for example, when is it appropriate to warn and educate traders and when is it appropriate to prosecute them)?
9. What discretionary services (for example, consumer advice) do we want to provide?
10. Do we need to work with others to benchmark performance and evaluate the outcomes of different approaches to enforcement?
11. How can we improve our performance?

Consult

12. What do local people, local businesses and other stakeholders think?
13. How can we find out the views of people who do not use, and who may be unaware of, the service?
14. Who will we consult with? When and how will we do this?
15. What questions do we need to ask to ensure that consultees can express views on service priorities? What background information will consultees need?
16. What feedback can we give to consultees about the choices we make when setting priorities?

Compare

17. What do other authorities do?
18. How do our approaches, costs and performance compare with those of other trading standards services?
19. Do we need to develop better performance measures?
20. Are our arrangements for delivering the service competitive?
21. Would we improve quality, or reduce costs with no loss of service quality, if, where lawful, we bought in more of the service?
22. Do we need to encourage the emergence of private sector suppliers, for example, by encouraging a management buy out?
23. Alternatively, do we need to co-operate with others to provide all or part of the service?