

22 May 2017

Dear Theresa May

Ahead of this general election consumer protection in the United Kingdom urgently needs a strategy that will ensure all levels of government can deliver suitable protections for people and businesses.

As we move towards Brexit, it will be essential for future trade deals that Britain can demonstrate a robust system for ensuring the safety and quality of exports which other countries can take confidence in. Further, where British and EU legal systems diverge there will be new challenges for the consumer protection system to maintain a level playing field and ensure that businesses can continue exporting to our closest trade partners with the minimum of regulatory barriers.

Local trading standards services will be the foot-soldiers in this task; giving businesses the advice they need to grow, removing dangerous goods from the marketplace, and combating the criminals who target vulnerable consumers.

Despite its critical importance in the context of the Brexit challenge, the system for consumer protection is at a crisis point, as the National Audit Office (NAO) recently outlined. The complexity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century marketplace combined with structural challenges caused by falling resources are not being adequately addressed, resulting in a system of consumer protection that is increasingly inconsistent and ineffective.

We welcome the proposals in your manifesto on fairer markets for consumers and to strengthen the hand of regulators - especially proposals on subscription traps and contract terms. However, individual changes do not amount to a strategy that will protect British consumers and markets against 21st century issues and prepare us for Brexit.

It is essential any future government seizes this opportunity to address the weaknesses in the consumer protection system. I am writing on behalf of consumers to ask you to set out your strategy for the future of consumer protection ahead of the general election.

All voters are consumers, and every voter benefits from the protections of the UK's strong consumer regime. Although often seen in a negative light, it is well designed regulation that has given businesses the certainty to trade on a level playing field while undoubtedly raising living standards and improving public health more than any other advance over the last 100 years.

Trading standards regulations alone cover a vast range of goods and services. They ensure that vulnerable people are not targeted in their own homes with unscrupulous selling techniques. They give confidence to parents that the toys they buy for their children are safe, and motorists the confidence that they are getting value for money when buying a second hand car or tank of petrol.

Because of their preventative effect, a lot of the enforcement work of regulators is not noticed until the system breaks down and something goes wrong. Over the last few years we have seen successive market failures from horsemeat to exploding hover-boards and tumble driers which have had in some cases led to tragic impacts on individuals and damaged the industries involved. These are indicative of a system under strain and needing urgent attention from government.

This is where a clear strategy for consumer protection in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be welcome. From a professional perspective and supported by the NAO report there are three challenges that any strategy must answer.

- That the system has not kept pace with innovations such as the internet, especially concerning fraud.
- That funding is not consistent and does not reflect the challenges that the system is facing.
- That there is no direct accountability between the outcomes aspired to by lawmakers and those on the front line of local authority trading standards.

We look forward to hearing about your Party's strategy on this important issue.

Yours sincerely

Leon Livermore  
Chief Executive