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Greenwich operation spotlights weakness in online protection for children

Lax measures by companies selling age-restricted goods online could be putting children at risk, Greenwich Council has discovered.

In a survey of current protection measures, Greenwich discovered worrying examples of how easy it could be for a 16-year-old to buy knives, adult-rated DVDs, violent computer games and alcohol.

In an operation supervised by Council trading standards officers, the 16-year-old volunteer went online and successfully purchased the following items:

- Knives from Debenhams, Amazon, Choice and Tchibo
- Age-restricted games for PS2 and PCs from HMV, Play.com and Game
- Age-restricted DVDs from Argos and Play.com
- Alcoholic drinks from Drinksdirect, M&S, Oddbins, Laithwaites

He made the purchases having bought a prepaid Splash maestro card and a MasterCard gift card from local retailers. Both cards were registered with his real date of birth and address. He then went online to buy the age-restricted goods.

Website capturing software was used to record the purchase of these age restricted products.

Only three of the online retailers asked the young volunteer to confirm his age at the time of making the online purchase – and he simply got round the system by giving false information about his age, with no requirement to provide documentary proof of his age. Other sites merely declared that buying the goods was taken as a declaration that the person purchasing was 18 years or over.

12 out of 15 (80%) of the online retailers in the Council's operation sold to the young person without making any further checks at the point of delivery (see Notes).

Cllr Maureen O'Mara, Greenwich Council's cabinet member for neighbourhood services, said, "Although a small sample, our findings from this operation seem to show the danger to which young people can be exposed on the internet. On the evidence of our survey, there are a number of companies who appear to be doing little or nothing to determine whether or not the people they are selling to meet the minimum age requirement."

Greenwich Council has written to all those firms who sold the restricted goods. The Council does not plan further action in relation to these offences.

ENDS

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Notes to editors:

- 1 12 out of 15 (80%) of the online retailers in the Council's operation sold to the young person with no further checks at the point of delivery. The other three made pre-delivery phone calls to the home. The Council did not follow through the test on these three companies to establish what proof of age – if any – they might have required before completing delivery.
- 2 The Online Purchasing of Goods and Services (Age Verification) Bill is due receive its second reading in the House of Lords today (8 May 2009).