



ILLEGAL TOBACCO PR GUIDE

- **Prepared by:** The Illicit Tobacco Partnership in association with Trading Standards colleagues
- **For:** Trading Standards officers, local authority public health and communications teams or anyone with an interest in reporting illicit tobacco activity

This document provides local authority Trading Standards officers, public health, communications teams and others with the knowledge, tools and templates to engage local media when there is activity to tackle illegal tobacco in your area. This document will:

- Save you time and resources by pulling together information and messaging into one short guide
- Increase accuracy and consistency of key messages relating to illegal tobacco
- Point out some of the myths to avoid

The Illicit Tobacco Partnership has funded illegal tobacco campaigns including [Keep It Out](#) and Get Some Answers. Not only have these campaigns improved public awareness, there is also evidence to show they have led to a decrease in public acceptability and an increase in intelligence submitted by the public and stakeholders.



It is vital that the good work being carried out by Trading Standards and health and enforcement partners is highlighted to our communities. It is not just a publicity exercise but a key component to the success of our fight against illegal tobacco.

What's the story?

The media are usually keen to publish articles featuring raids or high profile enforcement work, particularly when large quantities of suspected illegal tobacco are discovered.

We have prepared template press releases which can be used with local media and can be made available as part of a wider commissioned support package.

They include:

- a **post-enforcement** press release to be used immediately following inspection visits by either Trading Standards acting alone or in partnership, with or without the use of sniffer dogs
- a **post-conviction press release** to be used when more detail can be disclosed including the identity of the offender where appropriate

Each release includes signed off quotes and accurate key messages.

The Facts

Studies show that action to drive down the illegal tobacco market is paying off:

- Statistics from HM Revenue & Customs shows that the illegal tobacco market now makes up just 15% of the overall tobacco market, compared to 21% in 2000.
- HMRC statistics also show that illicit hand-rolling tobacco now makes up 28% of the market, compared to 61% in 2000.
- Comprehensive regional activity in the North East, North West and South West of England has resulted in reductions in the size of the illicit tobacco market and a smaller proportion of smokers turning to the illicit tobacco trade.

(Source: HMRC tax gap estimates 2016/17; illegal tobacco studies by NEMS, 2009-17)

Although a lot has been achieved, illegal tobacco is still a problem.

While all smoking kills, illegal tobacco is a danger to health, particularly to children and young people, as it is sold at 'pocket money prices', making it easy for children to start. It also encourages other crimes in our communities.

Quick Tips

- Position efforts to tackle illegal tobacco as part of wider efforts to reduce smoking
- Avoid suggesting illegal cigarettes are worse for health than legal cigarettes. There is little evidence supporting this and it makes smokers of legal tobacco think they're making a healthier choice. All tobacco contains harmful poisons.
- Use the term "**illegal tobacco**" rather than e.g. 'fakes' as this covers all forms of illegal / illicit tobacco.
- Include an agreed reporting telephone number/form on press releases, e.g. the local Trading Standards department, that will be equipped to receive and act upon intelligence.
- Wherever possible, include a photo of any seizures with your story, or invite the media to take pictures of your "Aladdin's Den."
- For more information and further support get in touch with the Illicit Tobacco Partnership info@illicit-tobacco.co.uk or visit www.illicit-tobacco.co.uk.

Key messages to promote

These messages have been tested with smokers and non-smokers in communities where illegal tobacco is sold and resonate best with the widest possible audience:

- ✓ **Health:** children and young smokers are often targeted by people who sell illegal cigarettes, making it even easier for them to get hooked on smoking. The people making money out of this do not care who they sell to. The availability of illegal cigarettes also makes it harder for people to quit and remain smoke free.
- ✓ **Safety:** young and vulnerable people are often the ones to visit private addresses to buy cigarettes. It puts them into risky situations with people who might also be selling alcohol, drugs and stolen goods.
- ✓ **Crime:** the illegal tobacco trade has strong links with organised crime and criminal gangs, so many of the people smuggling, distributing and selling it are involved in drug dealing, money laundering, people trafficking and even terrorism. Selling illegal tobacco is a crime.
- ✓ **Schools and hospitals:** people who buy illegal tobacco steal from the taxpayer. This is money that could be spent on important public services like schools and hospitals.
- ✓ **Report it:** more and more people over the past few years have decided enough is enough and are providing information to stop local criminals selling and distributing illegal tobacco.
- ✓ **Progress has been made in tackling illegal tobacco:** HMRC figures show the market share of illicit cigarettes has reduced in the last decade, with 15% of cigarette sticks illegal in 2016/17 compared to 21% in 2000/01.
- ✓ **Most smokers do not buy illegal tobacco:** Some media exaggerate the extent of the illegal tobacco market. However this has the negative effect of more people buying it, because they believe others are too.

Suggested quote: “All tobacco is harmful but illegal tobacco makes it easier for children to start smoking and get hooked. Sellers rarely care who they sell to. Fewer people are buying illegal tobacco and fewer people are now prepared to turn a blind eye to it. People can make a real difference to help keep more illegal tobacco off the streets by reporting it. We need to keep the pressure up on those who continue to sell it.”

Key messages to avoid

- ✗ **“Illegal tobacco is out of control.”** It isn't. HMRC statistics show the overall illicit cigarette market has reduced in the last decade, from 21% in 2001/01 to 15% in 2016/17. The tobacco industry has itself been implicated in the supply of illegal tobacco - read the [Home Affairs Committee report into tobacco smuggling](#).
- ✗ **“Illegal tobacco is worse for you/ full of harmful chemicals/contains rat droppings.”** Messages like these wrongly imply that legal tobacco is safer and undermine wider public health messages. All tobacco – legal and illegal – contains over 4,000 chemicals, 60 of which can cause cancer, and will kill one in two long term smokers. A High Court judgement in 2016 recognised there is no difference in the harm presented by any brand of tobacco. Reporting this point encourages people to smoke, when the message should be to quit altogether. [Illegal tobacco is bad for you because it is tobacco.](#)
- ✗ **“Illegal cigarettes pose a real risk of causing fires – legal cigarettes are fire safe.”** We hear stories about fire risks, sometimes used to suggest a legal cigarette is safer than an illicit cigarette. In fact, the RIP test allows 25% of a batch to burn fully and still be compliant. Suggesting that any cigarette is "fire safe" is dangerous.
- ✗ **“It robs the Treasury.”** Some smokers have dismissed mention of the Treasury as a top-down authority message. Financial arguments resonate more if they discuss the real impact on schools, hospitals and public services.
- ✗ **“High tax on tobacco fuels illicit tobacco.”** The market share of illicit tobacco in the UK has fallen significantly, despite price rises through extra tax to deter people from smoking. There are many countries where tobacco is far cheaper but smuggling rates are far higher than here because of the lack of a concerted effort to tackle the trade. Increased tax on cigarettes is the biggest factor in motivating people to quit.
- ✗ **“Standardised packaging will fuel the illicit trade.”** Standardised packs still carry overt and hidden security markings and scanners will continue to distinguish between genuine and illegal packs. There is no evidence new packs will increase the illicit market. That is the position of the Chartered Trading Standards Institute and the recent High Court judgement on standardised packs backed this up. Read the [CTSI's position here](#).

The Illicit Tobacco Partnership can provide strategic advice and guidance and practical tools to help deliver a comprehensive approach to tackling illicit tobacco. For more information, please visit www.illicit-tobacco.co.uk.