



# ILLEGAL TOBACCO PR GUIDE

## Who and what is the guide for?

This document has been developed by Fresh, endorsed by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, to support colleagues to communicate on the topic of illegal tobacco. It is intended for local authority Trading Standards, public health, communications teams, police and others with messages when there is activity to tackle illegal tobacco in your area, for example through Operation CeCe.

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
- Point out some of the myths to avoid, and why
- Help you place communications activity within a [strategic framework](#) for reducing the illicit tobacco market
- Help you place messages within broader approaches to reducing tobacco use

Fresh is the regional tobacco control programme for the North East of England and the lead member in the national Illicit Tobacco Partnership. We have developed and delivered effective, insight-led illegal tobacco campaigns since 2011 including [Keep It Out](#) and Get Some Answers as part of wider efforts to reduce supply and demand within the broader aim of reducing smoking rates. These campaigns have improved public awareness about the problems with illicit tobacco, led to a decrease in public comfort levels on local illegal tobacco sales and resulted in an increase in intelligence on illegal sales submitted by the public and stakeholders.

Highlighting the good work being carried out by Trading Standards, health and wider enforcement partners across the country is a key component to the success of the fight against illegal tobacco, generating intelligence, giving people the trust that information will be acted upon, and creating a deterrent to sellers. Reducing illegal tobacco is also an important component in the national ambition to create a smokefree generation.

## What's the story?

Illegal tobacco is a newsworthy topic and media are usually keen to publish articles on raids or high profile enforcement work, particularly when quantities of suspected illegal tobacco are discovered.

Newsworthy local stories can include:

- enforcement action such as Trading Standards with partners in the police or HMRC carrying out raids with sniffer dogs, e.g. under Operation CeCe raids and enforcement work
- conviction and sentencing, when more detail can be disclosed including the identity of the offender where appropriate

## The Facts

- Around 7% of cigarettes smoked in the UK are estimated to be illegal, compared to 21% in 2000.
- Around 33.5% of hand rolling tobacco smoked in the UK is estimated to be illegal, compared to 61% in 2000.
- The illicit market in tobacco duty and related VAT was £2.8 billion in 2021/22.

(Source: HM Revenue & Customs)

**“Illicit tobacco preys on the most disadvantaged in our community, stealing health and hope”** – Javed Khan, Independent Review into Making Smoking Obsolete, June 2022

While all smoking kills, illegal tobacco is sold at pocket money prices, making it easier for children to start smoking.

Criminals also supply it to make money and fund other criminal activity.

## Quick tips for press statements

- Frame efforts to tackle illegal tobacco as part of wider efforts to reduce smoking – not to recover tax.
- Avoid suggesting illegal tobacco is worse for health than legal tobacco. We should never imply legal tobacco is a healthier choice. ALL tobacco contains harmful poisons and kills up to 2 in 3 people who use it long term.
- Avoid calling illegal tobacco ‘fakes’ as this only relates to some forms of illegal tobacco – much is smuggled or are cheap whites.
- When communicating on vapes, liaise with local public health to ensure consistency with wider strategies of supporting smokers to switch.
- Liaise with Trading Standards colleagues to agree a consistent call to action e.g. online reporting form via the local authority website and include this in all public and stakeholder communications.
- Where possible, include a photo of any seizures with your story, or invite the media to take pictures, (taking care to adhere to National Trading Standards guidance around publicity).

## Key messages to promote

These messages have been tested with both smokers and non-smokers in communities where illegal tobacco is sold. We have found the most impactful messages are those which communicate to **all community members** on the problems of illegal tobacco rather than ‘don’t buy’ pleas aimed only at smokers. Engaging non-smokers is equally important for information.

- ✓ **Health:** children are targeted by people who sell illegal cigarettes, making it easier for them to get hooked on a lethal addiction. Sellers do not care who they sell to. The illicit trade also makes it harder for people to stay quit.
- ✓ **Safety:** young and vulnerable people may 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. Even small time local sellers are at the end of a long criminal chain – selling illegal tobacco is a crime.
- ✓ **Penalties:** sellers can face tough new penalties under new [tobacco track and trace rules](#), including large fines, as well as potentially losing their alcohol licence or face closure orders from local authorities or the police.
- ✓ **Report it – empower local people:** more and more people are providing information to stop local criminals selling and distributing illegal tobacco. Since 2017, the Keep It Out campaign in the North East of England has generated over 12,500 reports on illicit tobacco sales across the country.
- ✓ **Most smokers do not buy illegal tobacco:** a common assumption is that illegal tobacco is a rising problem but most smokers do not buy it. This is not just a matter of accuracy but also avoiding fuelling social norms.

**Suggested quote:** “All tobacco is harmful but illegal tobacco makes it easier for children to get hooked on a lethal addiction. Sellers are linked to criminals and don’t care who they sell to. People can make a real difference to help keep more illegal tobacco off the streets by reporting it.”

## Key messages to avoid

- ✗ **“Illegal tobacco is out of control.”** While illegal tobacco is more prevalent in areas with higher smoking rates, the national illegal tobacco market peaked in 2001/01 when 21% of cigarettes were illegal, compared to 11% in 2021/22. The tobacco industry has been fined for supplying illegal tobacco: the [Tobacco Tactics](#) site has more on this.
- ✗ **“Illegal tobacco is worse for you/ full of harmful chemicals/contains rat droppings.”** Never suggest illegal tobacco is worse for health – this implies the genuine product is somehow safer or higher quality. ALL tobacco contains harmful poisons, kills 2 in 3 lifelong smokers and causes 16 types of cancer. We should not be suggesting smokers can reduce the risk by choosing different sources.
- ✗ **“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. Though some fire safety regulations are in place for genuine cigarettes, there is no such thing as a fire-safe cigarette.
- ✗ **“It robs the Treasury.”** More than any other message this is the one which appears to get the most pushback from smokers and illicit buyers. However, for some, it can help frame the bigger picture. If used, any financial arguments should discuss the impact on schools, hospitals and public services against the wider cost of smoking.
- ✗ **“High tax on tobacco fuels illicit tobacco.”** The illicit tobacco market in the UK has fallen significantly, despite tax rises to deter people from smoking. Increased tobacco tax is the biggest factor in motivating people to quit and reducing youth uptake. Cheaper tobacco leads to higher smoking rates which leads to more death and disease.
- ✗ **“Measures to reduce smoking like raising the age of sale may make the illicit trade worse.”** When implemented with robust enforcement, measures like standardised packs, point of sale display bans and raising the age of sale have been followed by [a fall in illicit tobacco](#). Raising the age of sale by one year every year will have a gradual impact over time, so is unlikely to affect the black market. Less demand for tobacco over time means less illicit tobacco.

**A note on vapes:** Illegal tobacco and illegal vapes are often found together in raids. There is far less evidence on what messaging is most effective in reducing demand for illegal vapes and it is important we do not inadvertently suggest that illegal vapes are worse than legal tobacco for example. Press releases which refer to both illegal tobacco and illegal vapes are best focused on the criminality which illegal supply brings into our communities. A separate communications guide on vaping is available.