



ILLEGAL TOBACCO PR GUIDE

Who and what is the guide for?

This document has been developed by Fresh to support colleagues with PR 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 (eg Operation CeCe) and to link communications to the regional Keep It Out campaign.

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 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.

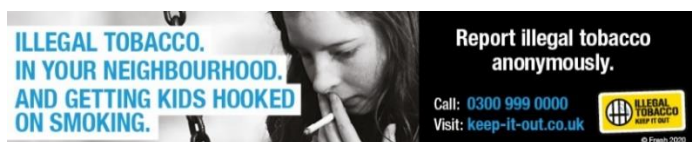
Highlighting the good work being carried out by Trading Standards, health and wider enforcement partners is a key component to the success of the fight against illegal tobacco, generating information, giving people the trust that information will be acted upon, and creating a deterrent to sellers.

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, eg 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 14% of tobacco smoked in the North East is illegal
- 83% of illicit tobacco buyers say it helps them to keep smoking
- 64% of smokers under 18 have been offered illicit tobacco, and 46% buy it
- 22% of smokers ever buy illegal tobacco – it makes up an estimated 48% of the total tobacco consumption of smokers who buy it
- 37% of smokers have been offered illicit tobacco – down 1/3 since 2011
- Pubs/ clubs (24%), homes (23%) and shops (22%) are the main self-reported sources for buyers
- Illegal cigarettes tend to be sold for an average of £5.50 a pack
(Source: North East Illicit Tobacco Tracking Study 2023, 2610 interviews)

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 recover tax.
- Avoid suggesting illegal cigarettes are worse for health than legal cigarettes. We should never imply legal tobacco is a healthier choice. ALL tobacco contains harmful poisons and kills 2 in 3.
- Avoid talking about illegal vapes in the same level of risk category as tobacco.
- Avoid calling illegal tobacco 'fakes' as this only relates to some forms of illegal tobacco – much is smuggled or cheap whites.
- Include the Keep It Out web page (www.keep-it-out.co.uk) to ensure consistency of the call to action – all information channelled through these routes is sent to Trading Standards.
- 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).

For more information visit www.keep-it-out.co.uk or email info@fresh-balance.co.uk

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 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 market share of illicit tobacco in the UK has fallen significantly, despite price rises through extra tax to deter people from smoking. Increased tax on cigarettes is the biggest factor in motivating people to quit and reducing youth uptake.
- ✗ **“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 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.
- ✗ **“Dangerous illegal tobacco and vapes have been found.”** Although illegal tobacco and illegal vapes may often be found together during enforcement activity, it is important to distinguish between the two types of products. All tobacco kills, legal or illegal, and the goal is to reduce overall smoking rates. On other hand, smokers are being encouraged to switch to legal vapes. It is also worth remembering that vapes can be illegal for a number of reasons: for vapes, illegal doesn’t always mean dangerous. A separate communications guide on vaping is available.