



# ILLEGAL TOBACCO PR GUIDE

- **Prepared by:** Members of 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

## Who and what is the guide for?

This document provides local authority Trading Standards officers, public health, communications teams and others with the tools 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
- Support communications activity within a [strategic framework](#) for reducing the illicit tobacco market
- Help you place messages within broader approaches to reducing tobacco use

Fresh, the lead member in the Illicit Tobacco Partnership, has developed and delivered effective, evidence-based 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 context of reducing smoking rates. These campaigns have improved public awareness, led to a decrease in public acceptability of illegal tobacco and resulted in an increase in intelligence on illegal sales submitted by the public and stakeholders.

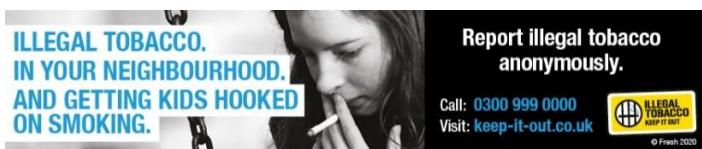
Highlighting the good work being carried out by Trading Standards, health and wider enforcement partners is a key component to the success of the fight against illegal tobacco, generating information and creating a deterrent to sellers.

## What's the story?

Illegal tobacco is a newsworthy topic and 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.

As part of a commissioned campaign package we can help you prepare press releases for use with local media to highlight key activity e.g.

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



## The Facts

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

- Statistics from HM Revenue & Customs shows that illegal cigarettes now make up just 9% of the overall cigarette market, compared to 21% in 2000.
- HMRC statistics also show that illicit hand-rolling tobacco now makes up 34% of the market, compared to 61% in 2000.
- Comprehensive regional activity in the North East and other parts 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 2019/20; illegal tobacco studies by NEMS, 2009-21)*

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 for press statements

- 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. It can make smokers of legal tobacco think they're making a healthier choice. All tobacco contains harmful poisons.
- Use the term "illegal tobacco" rather than '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.

For more information and further support get in touch with Fresh by emailing [info@fresh-balance.co.uk](mailto:info@fresh-balance.co.uk)

## Key messages to promote

These messages have been tested with smokers and non-smokers in communities where illegal tobacco is sold. We have found the most impactful and far-reaching messages are those which communicate to all community members on the wider problems of illegal tobacco rather than 'don't buy it' pleas which are aimed only at smokers.

- ✓ **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. Even small time local sellers are at the end of a long criminal chain – selling illegal tobacco is a crime.
- ✓ **Deterrents:** people can face fines or jail while shops could not only lose their alcohol licence but face tax bills from HMRC and closure orders from local authorities or the police for causing a commercial and health nuisance.
- ✓ **Report it – empower local people:** more and more people are providing information to stop local criminals selling and distributing illegal tobacco. HMRC figures show the market share of illicit cigarettes has reduced in the last decade, with 9% of cigarette sticks illegal in 2019/20 compared to 21% in 2000/01.
- ✓ **Most smokers do not buy illegal tobacco:** a common media 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 social norms.

**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 9% in 2018/19. The tobacco industry has itself been implicated in the supply of illegal tobacco, as found by the [Home Affairs Committee](#). The [Tobacco Tactics](#) site has more on this.
- ✗ **“Illegal tobacco is worse for you/ full of harmful chemicals/contains rat droppings.”** Messages which discuss the health risks of illegal tobacco can wrongly imply that legal tobacco is safer and of a 'higher quality' undermining wider public health messages. All tobacco – legal and illegal – contains over 5,000 chemicals, 60 of which can cause cancer. Smoking will kill one in two long term smokers even if they smoke legal tobacco. A High Court judgement in 2016 recognised there is no difference in the harm presented by any brand of tobacco. The message to smokers should be to quit altogether. ASH Scotland's [account of how this myth grew](#) is a useful read.
- ✗ **“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.”** Some smokers dismiss mention of lost taxes as a 'top-down authority' message. However, for some, it can help frame the bigger picture. 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. Increased tax on cigarettes is the biggest factor in motivating people to quit.
- ✗ **“Standardised packaging fuels the illicit trade.”** The illicit tobacco market continues to decline since the introduction of standardised packs. Packs still carry overt and hidden security markings, scanners continue to distinguish between genuine and illegal packs and new international measures have been introduced to track and trace tobacco products throughout the supply chain. There continues to be no evidence for this claim.

Fresh can be commissioned to provide strategic advice, guidance and practical tools to help deliver a comprehensive approach to tackling illicit tobacco. For more information, please email [info@fresh-balance.co.uk](mailto:info@fresh-balance.co.uk).