

**From:** Clair Bell, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health

Andrew Scott-Clark, Director of Public Health

**To:** Health Reform and Public Health Cabinet Committee

6 March 2020

**Subject:** Illicit Tobacco in Kent

**Classification:** Unrestricted

**Previous Pathway:** This report follows the report of the 22 March 2018.

**Future Pathway:** None

**Electoral Division:** All

**Summary:** In 2018, NEMS Market Research conducted a survey to provide a local profile of illicit tobacco use in Local Authority areas in the South East. In Kent illicit tobacco sales are predominantly undertaken in local shops and hand rolled tobacco is more prevalent than cigarettes in the illicit market. The illicit trade undermines the work and resources Government and Public Health deliver to reduce smoking prevalence, making cigarettes and tobacco affordable to the adult population and also available to children at “pocket money prices”. Illicit Tobacco is often linked to organised crime, targeting criminal activity in the most deprived local communities. Kent Public Health and Kent Trading Standards have worked collaboratively to commissioning Illicit Tobacco Roadshows in the districts, undertake illicit tobacco raids using local intelligence and delivering informative puppet theatres in primary schools to raise awareness of the risks and dangers of smoking.

**Recommendation:** The Health Reform and Public Health Cabinet Committee is asked to:

**COMMENT ON** and **ENDORSE** the contents of this report.

## 1. **Background.**

- 1.1 There are currently around 184,000 smokers in Kent (2018). This represents a smoking prevalence of 15%, slightly above the national average of 14.4%<sup>1</sup>. Although smoking prevalence is slowly decreasing, the smoking rate is higher in deprived areas and among Routine and Manual workers (28.7%) marking smoking as a major factor of health inequalities.

Increased pricing of cigarettes has shown to be a significant government lever to trigger smokers to quit but the sale of illicit tobacco undermines the work aimed

<sup>1</sup> <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/tobacco-control/data#page/4/gid/1938132885/pat/6/par/E12000008/ati/202/are/E10000016>

at reducing smoking prevalence by offering a cheaper but illegal option for those who might otherwise see price as a reason to stop smoking.

Children are often targeted by criminals who sell illicit tobacco thereby perpetuating inequity. Suppliers of illicit tobacco are associated with organised criminal networks that also deal in people trafficking, Class A drugs and child sexual exploitation. It is important therefore that the issue of tackling illicit tobacco needs to be coordinated with other agencies in relation to other crimes.

## 2 Introduction

- 2.1 In 2015/16, HM Revenue & Customs estimated 13% of cigarettes and 32% of hand-rolled tobacco in the UK market were illicit resulting in a £2.4billion tobacco tax gap. The tobacco industry routinely uses the threat of illicit trade in lobbying against tobacco control.<sup>2</sup>

The UK has particularly high levels of tobacco taxation as high prices are known to be the most effective policy driver to encourage smokers to quit. This is supported by public health grounds as smoking becomes increasingly unaffordable and encourages smokers to quit. However, it can also provide an incentive to engage in the illicit tobacco trade where lower prices mean that smoking can be affordable to adults on low income and as a gateway to smoking for children and young people.

- 2.2 In 2018 NEMS Market Research reported to Public Health England South East on the results of the survey's illicit tobacco market indicating that local shops are the most significant source of illicit tobacco supply and under-age sales in Kent. It revealed that 5.1% of those surveyed in Kent said they have bought illicit tobacco and of those 62.9% reported buying illicit tobacco at least once a week compared to 29% average across the South East. 22.4% of respondents buy less than a quarter of their cigarettes through illicit means although 50% said that all of the hand rolled tobacco they use is all from illicit means. Although each Local Authority in the South East has a unique illicit tobacco profile, it was agreed that the Regional Public Health group and Trading Standards South East would work collaboratively to deliver a regional illicit tobacco strategy. The strategy would pool resources and broaden opportunities to tackle illicit tobacco by:

- i) **Decreasing demand** – by raising awareness of the issues surrounding illicit tobacco, its targeted approach to children and attracting crime to the locality and reduce the number of smokers in Kent
- ii) **Increase reporting** by developing and promoting a central intelligence point and making reporting available in a range of ways
- iii) **Disrupt supply** by building on and supporting the resources needed for Trading Standards to undertake seizures of illicit tobacco and to work with other agencies effectively to bring prosecutions.

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<sup>2</sup> ASH fact sheet Illicit Trade in Tobacco, March 2017, <https://ash.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Illicit-Trade-Tobacco.pdf>

- 2.3 All partners remain supportive of a regional collaborative approach which is being co-ordinated by Trading Standards South East, but some authorities have to date, been unable to commit to funding or resourcing the strategy. This has resulted in delays at a regional level, but Kent has continued to deliver an active Illicit Tobacco Action Plan in East Kent in November 2019 to January 2020. The activities comprise the delivery of Illicit Tobacco Roadshow events raising awareness of the illicit tobacco trade being associated with organised crime in the community (to reduce supply and demand) and 'Meet The Stinkers'; a puppet theatre raising awareness to children of the harms of smoking and this has been well received in two primary schools in each of the East Kent district areas.

### **3 Conclusion**

- 3.1 The Regional Illicit Tobacco strategy is still being finalised with funding and resources being sought from each of the local authority areas.

The East Kent activities of 2019/20 have been delivered and some of the results have been publicised (for example, the seizure of illicit tobacco and the prosecution of the suppliers) but the final report on the Roadshow outcomes and the feedback from the school puppet theatres is currently being finalised and will be available from April 2020, highlights will also be shared as part of the verbal report accompanying this paper.

### **4 Recommendations**

The Health Reform and Public Health Cabinet Committee is asked to:  
**COMMENT ON** and **ENDORSE** the contents of this report.

### **5 Background Documents**

None

### **6 Contact Details**

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