REPORT TO:	Housing & Safer Policy & Performance Board
DATE:	18 November 2025
REPORTING OFFICER:	Director of Public Health
PORTFOLIO:	Community Safety
SUBJECT:	Trading Standards Service Update
WARD(S)	Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To provide the Board with an update on the work of the Trading Standards service over the last 12 months and the contribution this work makes to the Borough's public protection and community safety objectives.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

i) the report be noted.
ii) Members follow the Halton Trading Standards page on Facebook to increase awareness.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 The Trading Standards team provide a wide range of statutory services to protect consumers and legitimate businesses from unfair, misleading, or unsafe trading practices. These services include, (but are not limited to) weights and measures, product safety, age restricted sales, explosives, scams awareness, fair trading, doorstep crime, e-crime, fraud, counterfeit, and illicit goods - including tobacco and vapes and animal feeding stuffs.

3.2 The team also provide an enhanced consumer advice service to help consumers in Halton to enforce their own consumer rights.

3.3 The work of the team is intelligence led and focused on risk, ensuring that resources are targeted at those products and business that pose the greatest risk to consumers and legitimate business.

3.4 The latest Consumer Detriment Survey from the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) shows that two-thirds of UK consumers experienced detriment in 2023-24 at a total cost of £71.2bn – a significant increase from the £54.2bn figure revealed in the 2022 survey.

3.5 The CMA define detriment as a consumer experiencing problems with an item or a service that caused stress to the consumer, cost them money, or took up their time.

3.6 The average number of detriment incidents per consumer rose from four to seven, with an average loss per incident of £32. Key issues included poor-quality products (affecting 35% of consumers), delivery problems (20%) and unsafe or defective items (19%). More than 60% of detriment stemmed from online purchases.

3.7 The survey also found some groups were more disproportionately affected, with younger people, those from ethnic minority backgrounds, and people with long-term, health conditions reporting higher levels of detriment. 24% of experiences had a negative effect on mental health. (Source: Trading Standards Journal)

3.8 **Scams Awareness**

Anyone can become the victim of a fraud. However, postal, telephone and doorstep frauds are often targeted specifically at disadvantaged consumers, or those in periods of vulnerability such as being isolated, having physical or mental disabilities, or suffering a bereavement. The National Trading Standards (NTS) Scams Team estimates that the detriment to UK consumers because of these frauds is between £5 and £10 Billion a year. The Home Office estimate that 1 in 17 adults were victims of fraud in 2023.

3.9 The perpetrators of fraud and scams are criminals. They use sophisticated techniques to target, manipulate, and often coerce and control victims.

3.10 Many frauds originate abroad and so it is not always possible to identify a perpetrator. Where they are UK based the team will investigate criminal activity and liaise with the appropriate agencies which may include the NTS Scams Team and the Police, when considering the appropriate enforcement action.

3.11 The focus of the service is to raise awareness of frauds and provide residents with advice and guidance to prevent and protect them from becoming victims. Where a resident is already the victim of a fraud, the team will work closely with the individual to provide support, advice, and guidance to prevent them becoming a repeat victim. They will also try and obtain the money back via their bank, using several established procedures.

3.12 Fraud is the most experienced crime in the UK. Victims can face devastating financial, emotional, and psychological harm. Statistics show that once someone is a victim of a fraud they are twice as likely to be targeted again. Fraud victims are more likely to need care in their own home or need to move into a care home, often as an additional cost to the Local Authority.

3.13 The team have developed referral routes with the police, Age UK, and the Council's complex care teams. Awareness sessions have been provided to adult social care staff on how to identify individuals who may be vulnerable to scams and referral routes to Trading Standards. Further sessions are being delivered to the elderly and vulnerable throughout the Borough to increase awareness and prevent them becoming the victim of a scam.

3.14 **Scams Case Study**
The team recently helped an elderly female recognise that she was a victim of a romance scam, which had been ongoing for around 8 years. She had been relentlessly targeted for her money. Having recently been diagnosed with Dementia this impacted on her ability to communicate with the bank. Trading Standards contacted the bank to seek compensation on her behalf. After a lot of work, the Bank have now acknowledged that this was a scam, meaning she will receive a refund of around £70,000, which she had paid out to the scammer over several years.

3.15 The loss of such a sum would have had a significant impact on the victim's wellbeing and financial independence. She is now looking forward to getting her life back to normal.

3.16 Cases such as this, take a lot of time, effort, and patience to build upon and gain the trust of the victim, and for them to engage with Trading Standards to get the help and support that they need. Trading Standards engaged with Adult Social care and worked with them to contribute to capacity and wellbeing assessments, which will allow her to live an independent life and prevent further additional costs to Halton.

3.17 **Doorstep Crime**
Doorstep crime involves residents, who are often elderly or vulnerable, being pressured into agreeing to work on their property. This can arise from a cold call at their door, or by the victim

contacting a trader that appears to be legitimate. The work is often unnecessary, and what may start off as a small job, ends in the victim being pressured into further work, which is carried out to a poor standard, of little or no value, or not done at all. They will often demand payment in cash and the price charged is significantly higher than the actual cost or value of the work undertaken. In many cases the price will rise, and the trader will make further demands for payment by exerting pressure or becoming aggressive. In some cases, the trader will offer to take the victim to the bank to coerce them into making a payment.

3.18 The team respond to many cases of doorstep crime each year. The numbers fluctuate and vary over the seasons. Where a live incident is reported a rapid response visit is carried out, alongside the Police. This is to safeguard the victim, prevent any money being handed over, and where necessary arrest any suspects for further investigation.

3.19 The team assess all criminal complaints, and where an alleged crime has been committed and an offender can be identified, they will consider criminal action for any potential fraud or consumer protection offences. Where fraud or theft is suspected the police may investigate. Most doorstep crime offenders operate across borders and Local Authority boundaries and are part of much wider organised criminality as part of an Organised Criminal Group (OCG). The team liaise with neighbouring Trading Standards teams, the Police and partner agencies to ensure that intelligence is gathered and shared, and any enforcement action is coordinated.

3.20 Banks that are signed up to the Banking Protocol are trained to alert the Police and/or Trading Standards if they spot unusual transactions, for example a consumer making large cash withdrawals for home improvement work. If the Protocol is invoked, then the consumer will be prevented from withdrawing the money and Police and / or Trading Standards will intervene.

3.21 **Doorstep crime case study**

An elderly victim was advised he needed a new roof and paid £9,900. He was left with water pouring through the ceilings of his home. The team assisted, and the work was found to have no value, and the roof had to be completely re-done at a further cost to the victim. A lengthy criminal investigation uncovered further fraudulent activity across the North West and previous convictions for similar offences. The case was joined with two other Trading Standards prosecutions in Stockport and Lancashire. Mr Steven Lee was sentenced at Preston Crown Court to the maximum permitted term of imprisonment of 10 years for numerous offences under the Fraud Act. The judge in the case commended the work of Trading Standards "*I also want to commend the various trading standards and other bodies that have acted to bring this case together. The success of the case is due to the skill, expertise, and resilience of those involved and the co-ordinated way they have worked to ensure that all the offending has been dealt with together, which has ensured the court can deal with all the criminality.*

3.22 *I want the comments to be passed on to the relevant senior officers so the investigators can be commended as appropriate.*

3.23 Unfortunately, the victim in Halton died before hearing the outcome of the case. Sadly, this is a situation that happens often, as victims in doorstep crime cases are impacted in several ways, and often this is a catalyst which sees their health decline. This only goes to illustrate the importance of the team and the work they do.

3.24 On a more positive note, our civil team were able to obtain a refund of £9000.00 for this elderly victim from his bank. This was refunded to him before he passed away, and he expressed his sincere gratitude for the help he was given by this service for both the criminal investigation and the refund of monies from his bank.

3.25 **Tobacco and Vapes**

The team have a range of powers to deal with the risks posed by illicit tobacco and vapes.

3.26 The trade in illicit tobacco includes products that may be counterfeit or illegally imported and sold illegally without the payment of VAT or excise duty. These products are sold at a fraction, often just a third of the price, of legitimate products. By evading taxation these products undermine the principal public health control on tobacco consumption. Through a combination of taxation and other legislation, such as the ban on smoking indoors, the rate of people smoking has reduced from 26% in 2000 to 13% in 2023. Illicit tobacco risks reversing the significant public health progress that has been made.

3.27 Over half of all smokers of illicit tobacco come from the most deprived socioeconomic groups. (source Gov.uk). The health risks associated with tobacco consumption are well documented. The sale of illicit tobacco therefore compounds the health inequalities experienced by these groups.

3.28 Vapes were developed by the tobacco industry in response to the indoor smoking ban which was introduced in the UK in 2007. There is now growing concern about the use of vape products by children and adults who have never previously smoked, thereby exposing them to the risk of becoming addicted to nicotine.

3.29 Legitimate vape products must be approved by the Medicines Health Care Regulatory Authority (MHRA), to ensure they meet standards relating to health and safety. The quantity and strength of nicotine within the products is also restricted. Illicit products are not MHRA approved.

3.30 New legislation came into force on the 1st June 2025 preventing the supply of disposable vapes, which are now illegal in the UK. Retailers in Halton were written to, to advise them of the new legislation and support them with the implementation.

3.31 Since 2020 the team have seized over 263,000 illegal cigarettes with a value of around £230,000, So far in 2025 the team have seized over 1900 illegal vapes.

3.32 The team have adopted a multi-faceted approach to tackle illicit tobacco and vapes. Using intelligence to target premises and disrupt criminal activity by seizing illicit products to remove them from the market.

3.33 The most recent approach is with the use of Closure Orders under the Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014 to close premises that are persistently found to sell illegal products and also sell the illegal products to children. This can be used as a standalone means to disrupt and stop criminal activity or can be used in conjunction with other means such as a criminal prosecution.

3.34 The team works closely with partner agencies to investigate, prosecute and disrupt the criminals. Utilising funding available from the NTS Operation CeCe (tobacco) and Operation Joseph (vapes), to fund the use of tobacco search dogs and third-party test purchases.

3.35 With the recent introduction of track and trace legislation there are also additional sanctions for HMRC to fine businesses up to £10,000 for each seizure of illicit tobacco and to remove their ability to sell tobacco. Trading Standards are able to refer cases to HMRC to administer the sanction and provide the valuable intelligence regarding those involved in the illegal manufacture, importation or distribution of tobacco in the UK. The track and trace legislation requires legitimate tobacco products to have identity marks and security features to ensure legitimate products can be identified and distinguished from counterfeit products.

3.36 A penalty for £5000 was issued in June 2025 to Town Market Widnes Ltd. This was due to a referral from Halton Trading Standards to HMRC, after a seizure of illegal tobacco from the premises in November 2024

3.37 **Illegal Tobacco and Vapes case study.**

Dannys Mini Market – 36A Langdale Road, Runcorn was issued a Closure Order in July 2025 at Warrington Magistrates after a Trading Standards investigation. The premises had a history of illegally trading illicit tobacco and vapes (e-cigarettes). The persons connected with the premises were warned on multiple occasions that the illegal activities on the premises must stop or Trading Standards would seek a Closure Order. Unfortunately, these warnings were not heeded and to protect the public a Closure Order was sought and granted for an initial three-month period. Swift action was taken by the team to stop the illegal activity from continuing. The premises has since been cleared and is no longer trading as a retail outlet.

3.38 The news of the closure has been widely reported and has received praise from legitimate business owners and has prompted further intelligence being received about other premises who are involved in criminality. This sends a strong message that criminality of this nature will not be tolerated in Halton.

3.39 Several other premises have been warned about their conduct and are being reviewed for a Closure Order. Since they were first used in 2024 five premises have been closed by means of a Closure Order. Many other premises have ceased trading following the process. In some cases, the team have worked with landlords to remove those committing criminality without the need to resort to court. Therefore, the impact is much wider than the five premises that have resulted in Closure Orders.

3.40 Licence reviews may also be utilised where premises are licensed under the Licensing Act 2006.

3.41 **Age restricted sales**

The Trading Standards team enforces a range of legislation that places age restrictions on certain products such as alcohol, tobacco, vapes, knives and fireworks. They work with premises selling age restricted products to advise and educate and promote age verification schemes, such as Challenge 25, to help prevent sales being made to children who are under the legal age.

3.42 The team also undertake test purchase operations using child volunteers to test a retailer’s systems and see if they sell to age restricted products to children. This is targeted at premises where intelligence has been received regarding sales to those underage.

3.43 Owing to difficulties recruiting young volunteers there has only been one test purchase operation in the past 12 months, however we have recently recruited several volunteers, and have operations planned in the coming months working with Cheshire Police

3.44 The 2025/2026 Young People's Alcohol, Tobacco, and E-cigarette Survey is to commence this November 2025. Eight secondary schools in Halton have been approached to participate, and the survey is to conclude in February 2026, with the data analysed and a final report due in early 2026.

3.45 **Consumer advice and the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline**

The main route for referrals into the Trading Standards team are via the Citizens Advice Consumer Service Helpline (CitA). CitA will provide initial advice to the consumer. Cases requiring further criminal investigation are referred on to the team for action. Halton is one of a small number of Local Authorities that have retained a consumer advice function, and some civil cases are referred through for enhanced consumer advice and support to help consumers enforce their legal rights with support and guidance.

3.46 The civil and criminal team work together to try and obtain redress for the consumer and take enforcement action where appropriate for any criminal breaches.

3.47 Despite being a small team, in the last twelve months the civil advice team has helped Halton consumers achieve over £78,000 of civil redress, in cases where this would not have otherwise been possible without their expertise.

3.48 The civil team have received numerous messages from consumers who have been grateful for their support. Often, they are on low incomes and find technology difficult to use. The impact they have for these consumers is significant.

3.49 **Consumer advice case study**

A consumer who was housebound and suffering from serious illness was having persistent problems with her fire not working. The impact was significant to her as she used her fire daily. The trader had tried, but failed, to fix the fire on several occasions. The customer had requested a refund but had been unsuccessful. The civil team intervened and secured a full refund for her, despite being two years from purchase. The consumer wrote to the civil team, and stated *“Thanks immensely for your help, we absolutely could not have done this without you!”*

3.50 **Product safety**

The team are responsible for enforcing various pieces of product safety legislation designed to ensure that all consumer products are safe and do not pose a danger under normal or reasonably foreseeable conditions. Products subject to this legislation include, but are not limited to, electrical goods, cosmetic products and toys.

3.51 Inspections have been carried out at high-risk importers in the Borough, especially those importing toys and electrical items. These inspections assess these documentation and processes in place by the importer, so they comply with their legal duties and thus place safe products on the market.

3.52 Product safety and counterfeit goods often interlink. In recent months, the team visited two premises in Halton and seized 615 counterfeit Labubu dolls. The counterfeit Labubu dolls are poorly made and are unsafe. Many contain small, detachable parts such as eyes, hands, and feet, which present a serious choking hazard to young children. Loose stitching, and exposed stuffing, further increase the risk of suffocation. These fake toys often breach the UK’s Toys (Safety) Regulations 2011, lacking CE or UKCA safety markings, importer details, and required safety warnings. Without proper safety checks, they may also contain toxic substances such as lead, harmful dyes, or banned plasticisers.

3.53 Firework licence applications, processing and inspections, have been carried out. The licencing regime allows Halton Trading Standards to monitor the sellers of fireworks and manage the risks of storing explosives within the Borough.

3.54 Last year over 100 new electric blankets were swapped for old ones, as part of a project to improve home safety within the Borough. Halton Trading Standards carried out the project using funding granted by the Electrical Safety-First charity. The old electrical blankets were subsequently assessed for safety, with a failure rate of over 60%. The blankets were swapped free of charge to residents and helped tackle the risk of fire and serious harm within the Borough.

3.55 **iCan Consumer Alert Network & Facebook**
The team operate iCan a popular email alert service to warn consumers, business and community groups of scams and product safety information. There are over 720 external recipients such as community groups, charities, agencies (such as the police) and members of the general public. iCan messages are also distributed to all HBC council staff and elected members.

3.56 Individuals or organisations that wish to join iCan should email trading.standards@halton.gov.uk

3.57 The team have recently launched a dedicated Trading Standards Facebook page – 'Halton Trading Standards'. This will be utilised to publicise the work of the team and provide advice and information to consumers and business. This is still in its infancy, and we would encourage members of the Board to like and follow the page to increase the reach within Halton.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The Trading Standards functions are statutory services. The Trading Standards team is a small, but integral part of the Public Health department enabling the core Trading Standards functions to contribute to the borough's public health and community safety objectives.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no financial implications associated with this report.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence

The team's work to tackle illicit tobacco and vapes contributes to the borough's public health objectives in reducing the prevalence of smoking and the harm caused by illicit and illegal products.

6.2 **Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy**
The work of the team supports the legitimate business community by investigating and preventing illegal trading practices.

6.3 **Supporting Children, Young People and Families**
The work of the team to enforce legislation regarding age restricted products such as tobacco, alcohol and knives helps to protect children from the harms caused by these products. The work around product safety and unsafe items such as toys also protects children from harm.

6.4 **Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need**
The team's work to investigate cases of doorstep crime, raise awareness of scams and support victims helps to protect the community and contributes to the safeguarding of vulnerable adults.

6.5 **Working Towards a Greener Future**
None

6.6 **Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community**
The newly created Trading Standards Facebook page will enable the team to engage with residents and partner organisations to share important consumer safety information and ensure the community are protected from scams and the activity of rogue traders.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 There are no significant risks arising from his report.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 None

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None under the meaning of the Act.