



Hartlepool Borough Council

Trading Standards Service Plan

2025/26

TRADING STANDARDS SERVICE PLAN 2025/26

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INTRODUCTION

This Service Plan details how the Trading Standards Service will be delivered by Hartlepool Borough Council.

Whilst focussing primarily on the year 2025/26, longer-term objectives are identified where relevant. Additionally, there is a review of performance for 2024/25 and this aims to inform decisions about how best to build on past successes and address performance gaps.

The Plan is reviewed annually and previous plans have been approved by the Neighbourhood Services Committee.

1 SERVICE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

1.1 Overall Vision

The Council's overall vision is that Hartlepool will be a place...

- Where people are enabled to live healthy, independent and prosperous lives;
- Where those who are vulnerable will be safe and protected from harm;
- Of resilient and resourceful communities with opportunities for all;
- With a Council that is ambitious, fit for purpose and reflects the diversity of its community;
- That has an inclusive and growing economy; and
- That is sustainable, clean, safe and green.

1.2 Service Aims and Objectives

Hartlepool Borough Council aims:

- To carry out our enforcement duties and deliver high quality services through the efficient and effective use of resources;
- To supplement our enforcement role by providing targeted education and advice;
- To encourage innovation through actively seeking out best practice and working in partnership with other agencies;
- To actively contribute towards achieving nationally agreed strategic aims and objectives; and

- To ensure our actions are consistent, proportionate and targeted and that we are transparent and open about what we do.

In its delivery of the service the Council will have regard to directions and examples of best practice as disseminated by Local Government Regulation, Chartered Trading Standards Institute and Central Government.

1.3 Links to Corporate Objectives and Plans

This service plan fits into the hierarchy of the Council's planning process as follows:

- Hartlepool's Community Strategy - the Local Strategic Partnerships (the Safer Hartlepool Partnership) and the Health and Wellbeing Board
- Hartlepool's Council Plan 2030
- Trading Standards Service Plan - sets out how the Council aims to deliver this statutory service and the Trading Standards Service's contribution to corporate objectives.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Profile of the Local Authority

Hartlepool is located on the north-east coast of England to the north of the River Tees. The Borough consists of the main town of Hartlepool, the seaside resort of Seaton Carew and a number of small outlying villages. The total area of the Borough is 9,390 hectares. The residential population is 92,338 of which ethnic minorities comprise 3.5% (2021 census).

Hartlepool is a unitary authority, providing a full range of services. To the south of Hartlepool is the wider Teesside conurbation which includes the boroughs of Middlesbrough, Stockton on Tees and Redcar and Cleveland, and which together with Hartlepool and Darlington makes up the Tees Valley sub-region. Bordering Hartlepool to the north is the administrative area of County Durham.

The borough has a long and proud history, with the original settlement of Hartlepool dating back to Saxon times. Originally an important religious settlement the town's early development resulted from the existence of a safe harbour and its role as a port for the city of Durham and subsequent grant of a Royal Charter from King John in 1201.

The main phase of Hartlepool's expansion took place from the mid 19th Century with the building of a new railway and docks to serve the export of coal. The town continued to expand over the next 100 years as port trade increased and the development of heavy industries including steel making, shipbuilding and manufacturing. Like most industrialised towns in the north of England, Hartlepool has suffered over the last half century from structural reform of these industries and the town has had to look for new opportunities to diversify the economy.

Over the past 20 years Hartlepool has experienced some transformational changes through public and private investment. This has included the transformation of the former South Docks area into a fabulous 500-berth marina where the town hosted The Tall Ships Race in 2010 and repeated the well-received successful event in 2023.

2.2 Organisational Structure

Under the Council's governance arrangements, most day-to-day decisions are taken by five Policy Committees. These Policy Committees cover the following main service areas: -

- Finance and Policy Committee
- Adult & Community Based Services Committee
- Children's Services Committee
- Neighbourhood Services Committee
- Economic Growth and Regeneration Committee

The Neighbourhood Services Committee provides political oversight for Trading Standards law enforcement.

The Council is made up of four Departments:

- Children's & Joint Commissioning Services
- Adults & Community Based Services
- Development, Neighbourhoods & Regulatory Services
- Legal, Governance and HR

The Trading Standards Service Plan is delivered through the Public Protection Section contained within the Neighbourhoods & Regulatory Services division, which is contained within the Development, Neighbourhoods & Regulatory Services Department.

2.3 Scope of the Trading Standards Service

Service delivery broadly comprises:

- Investigating complaints relating to consumer protection issues;
- Carrying out programmed test purchase exercises to monitor trader compliance with relevant legislation – including underage sales;
- Taking samples of consumer products for testing and analysis
- Carrying out programmed interventions;
- Providing advice and information to both consumers and traders;
- Taking action (formal and informal) to ensure compliance with legislation;
- Acting as a statutory consultee for applications made under the Licensing Act 2003;
- Ensuring appropriate standards of animal welfare at farms and other relevant premises; and
- Enforcing smoke free legislation in public places;

To achieve its strategic aims and objectives it is necessary to work in partnership with other organisations and agencies such as local authorities, Cleveland Police, Her Majesties Revenues & Customs (HMRC) and local businesses. The Council aims to ensure that these joint working arrangements are in place and that officers of the Service contribute, and are committed to, the ongoing development of these arrangements.

2.4 Demands on the Trading Standards Service

The Trading Standards Service is the principal enforcing authority for approximately 500 statutory instruments relating to consumer protection.

With limited resources it is necessary to prioritise proactive work. Prioritisation takes account of a range of factors including public concerns, business concerns, degree of risk to the public, complaint trends, government concerns at a national level (as expressed through the National Trading Standards Board) and local councillors concerns – each of which helps establish which enforcement areas should take priority over others.

The current priority areas for the Trading Standards Service are: -

High Priority

Rogue Traders – Doorstep crime and cowboy builders can cost local residents hundreds or even thousands of pounds. Trading Standards work closely with a number of agencies to help protect the vulnerable from this type of crime.

Scams and Cons – Unscrupulous traders routinely prey on the vulnerable and elderly by taking advantage of their goodwill. Most people regularly receive unsolicited letters, telephone calls, text messages or e-mails offering services that are ‘too good to be true’. Sadly, on some occasions, consumers are drawn into these scams and pay for goods or services that either never arrive or are not what was initially described. In many cases, making one purchase opens up the consumer to many other scams and problems can escalate. Trading Standards aims to identify common scams and notify consumers through press releases and other mass media.

Where a company can be identified, formal action would be commenced against them.

Product Safety – Consumers are entitled to assume that all products they purchase will be safe. Trading Standards is responsible for the monitoring, sampling and testing of consumer products to ensure they do not pose a risk.

Medium Priority

Tackling Underage Sales - The illegal sale of alcohol and other age-restricted products to children not only contributes significantly towards anti-social behaviour in Hartlepool but can also represent a serious risk to the health and well-being of the children involved.

Trading Standards and licensing officers work closely with Cleveland Police and other agencies to target premises that are thought to sell to children and uses underage volunteers to identify where offences are being committed.

Counterfeiting and illicit tobacco – The supply of counterfeit tobacco products and designer clothing continue to be a significant issue in Hartlepool. Counterfeiting is bad for business – it takes money away from local retailers who sell genuine products and puts it into the hands of local and national criminals with little or no local benefit for the town. Counterfeiting is often carried out by large organised crime units who are also engaged in other types of criminal activity such as drugs and smuggling.

Trading Standards works closely with HMRC, the Police and trade mark holders to identify and prosecute those who sell counterfeit products. Significant intelligence is received in relation to counterfeit tobacco products.

Animal Welfare – Trading Standards Officers are responsible for carrying out inspections of farm premises to ensure that animals that may end up in the food chain are looked after correctly. There has also been a significant increase in the illegal sale of puppies as a result of the very high prices that are now being charged (commonly £2000 per puppy for many breeds).

Low Priority

Weights and Measures – Many products are still sold by either weight or by length and consumers expect that they will receive the quantity stated. For some products, such as petrol, the value of goods is so high that even a small error in the accuracy of a measuring machine may lead to significant consumer loss.

Trading Standards officers are 'Weights and Measures Inspectors' and routinely carry out checks on weighing and measuring equipment.

Due to the specialist nature of weights and measures compliance, an arrangement has been entered into with Durham County Council for them to undertake inspections at factory sites and other premises in Hartlepool where specialist testing equipment is required.

Misleading Pricing – Most products are now sold with no price marking on them bar codes having replaced price stickers. This has made it extremely difficult to check whether the price stated on a shelf is actually the price charged at the checkout. For some purchases, there may be 'hidden extras' that can significantly inflate the final price of goods or services.

Trading Standards staff routinely check the accuracy of price indications in shops and respond to complaints about misleading price indications.

False Descriptions – Most consumer purchases are made on the basis of the description they are given by either the manufacturer or retailer. In some cases descriptions are deliberately or negligently misleading – causing consumers to make purchase decisions that they may not have made otherwise. Once money has been handed over it can, on occasion, be very difficult to get back other

than to go through the court system. Trading Standards investigates complaints about traders who falsely describe goods and look for the accuracy of descriptions during routine interventions.

2.5 Intelligence Operating Model

In addition to the identification of local priorities, the Trading Standards Service also contributes towards the development of regional and national priorities through Regional and National Tasking Groups.

The purpose of these groups is to identify those specific areas of concern that have a cross border impact and which, if tackled on a regional or national level, can benefit consumers everywhere.

The Intelligence Operating Model introduces a national intelligence framework to support regional and national enforcement through the collection and utilisation of information and data to inform work planning processes. Hartlepool Trading Standards will continue to both contribute and benefit from this Model.

2.6 Enforcement Policy

Hartlepool Borough Council adopted its current Enforcement Policy in 2021. Supplementary to this, there is a Public Protection Enforcement Policy that deals with those enforcement issues specific, or unique, to the service.

The Trading Standards Service will take account of the 2014 Regulator's Code when carrying out its interactions with the business community.

3 SERVICE DELIVERY

3.1 Proactive Work

3.2 Trading Standards Interventions

As pressure on the Service has continued to grow in areas such as doorstep crime, the ability to maintain a high level of routine inspections has been seriously challenged. As such, proactive inspections will be targeted where consumer risk is considered to be high because of intelligence received; a high numbers of complaints etc; or where new businesses have been established that may well not be fully aware of their duties and responsibilities.

On-line retailing continues to flourish and therefore it is necessary to monitor internet retailers to ensure consumers are receiving a fair deal and that products are safe.

Opening a line of communication with new businesses early will ensure that they can set up their operations as efficiently and effectively as possible without having to 'catch up' with their legal compliance at a later date.

Information on premises liable to Trading Standards interventions is held on the APP computer system. An intervention programme is produced from this system at the commencement of each reporting year.

It is anticipated that consistent, high quality programmed interventions by the Service will, over time, result in a general improvement in standards, reducing the frequency for recourse to formal action.

Revisits will be carried out to check compliance where contraventions have been identified.

3.3 Advice and Guidance

The Trading Standards Service works closely with the national Consumer Advice helpline which is now being operated by the Citizen's Advice Bureau, to provide a comprehensive advice and guidance service. Consumers in need of advice regarding the civil law will be serviced by Citizen's Advice but where issues are raised that may have a broader local impact, or there may be a criminal element to the complaint, the local Trading Standards Service will be alerted and, if appropriate, an investigation commenced.

In most cases the Trading Standards Service will look to work in partnership with local businesses to ensure they are fully aware of their legal obligations and how best to achieve legal compliance. Such advice is offered free of charge and can be made available at a time to suit the trader.

Trading Standards staff also regularly provide advice sessions to local community groups on issues such as doorstep crime, rogue traders and 'the work of Trading Standards'.

Recent surveys carried out by the Government have indicated that businesses and retailers value visits by Trading Standards staff as being an important source of up to date advice and information.

The Council considers that assistance to business, in order to help them to comply with the requirements of legislation, is one of our core activities. For Trading Standards issues the Council has a policy of offering comprehensive advice to any business for which it is, or is likely to become, the enforcing authority.

Advice will be available during the course of routine visits and interventions, through information leaflets and booklets, in response to queries and through the Council's website.

3.4 Acting as Statutory Consultee

Trading Standards is a statutory 'Responsible Authority' under the Licensing Act 2003. This means that every application for a licence to supply alcohol or offer other regulated entertainment must be submitted to the Trading Standards Service who will consider the application in terms of its likely impact on the Act's 'licensing objectives'. For Trading Standards this primarily means the protection of children from harm and officers use their expertise in detecting and

preventing underage sales to work with prospective licensees and ensure operating procedures are put in place to prevent the sale of alcohol to children.

3.5 Local programmes/initiatives

Trading Standards will be conducting a range of projects and surveys during 2025/26 in order to improve consumer protection and to raise consumer confidence. These will include: -

Protecting the Most Vulnerable – Complaints continue about rogue roofers, cowboy builders and telephone/postal scams that have targeted the elderly and vulnerable and scammed them out of money for poor quality or, sometimes, non-existent work and non-existent prize money.

Trading Standards officers will continue to work to raise awareness amongst targeted groups and identify and prosecute the traders involved.

The Team continues to work with the Police and local banks to promote the national 'Banking Protocol'. The protocol involves training bank staff to recognise when their customers may be the victim of an ongoing scam and where appropriate they can dial 999 and the local Police force has committed to treat the incident as an emergency – sending officers/Trading Standards Officers direct to the bank to assist.

The Trading Standards Team will also continue to promote No Cold Call Zones and set them up where there is an identified demand. At the end of 2024/25 Hartlepool still had 56 NCCZ's (an increase from just 7 in 2016) and there is a target that five more will be created during 2025/26.

Officers will continue to offer awareness raising presentations to neighbourhood and community groups and will promote the 'No Cold Calling' stickers that are available free of charge.

The Trading Standards Team works closely with the National Scams Team which provides details of Hartlepool consumers who have been found on scammer's databases. Trading Standards Officers will continue to contact and offer support to victims identified this way.

3.6 E-Crime – Using the internet to buy goods and services is now commonplace and rogue traders have used this as an opportunity to sell counterfeit and dangerous goods to the unsuspecting public.

Trading Standards secured national funding to purchase specialist equipment that allows local officers to identify and target rogue e-traders operating in Hartlepool.

Officers will be conducting regular monitoring of internet sites that have a Hartlepool connection and, working with other agencies, specifically the Regional Investigations Team, test purchases will be made to generate evidence for formal legal action where such steps are considered appropriate.

Social media sites have become a popular forum for the sale of counterfeit goods and, in response, the Trading Standards Service has created a Facebook 'profile'. Suspected sellers of counterfeit goods receive a 'post' from Trading Standards advising that their activities are being monitored.

This acts as a deterrent for those sellers who had not considered the potential consequences of their activities. For those who ignore the warnings, Trading Standards is able to have sites 'taken down' by Facebook. For those who continue to trade using alternative pages, investigation and prosecution will follow.

Rogue Traders, who traditionally cold called unsuspecting home owners, are now using Social Media and approved trader platforms to reach a wider audience who are already considering building work on their property. Using these sites and professional appearing accounts creates an air of legitimacy for their business making it appear they are able to do any work and get more customers approaching them. Only after traders take large deposits and start the work do the problems arise. Work is ongoing to develop consumer advice to warn of the dangers and checks that should be undertaken by would be customers.

3.7 Sampling

In order to protect the public it is essential that potential problems, particularly safety related, can be identified before they cause damage or harm.

One way of achieving this is through the sampling of consumer products to ensure they comply with relevant safety standards or with the descriptions being applied to them.

Product Safety – Trading Standards will be purchasing a wide range of consumer products to test for compliance with appropriate safety standards. Products to be tested are usually identified as a consequence of national issues, products that have a history of problems or from safety complaints. Testing during 2025/26 will concentrate on product safety.

3.8 Test Purchasing

Trading Standards (or underage volunteers under the supervision of Trading Standards officers) will carry out test purchases at premises where there is reason to suspect that illegal activity may be taking place.

Test purchasing is used to test a trader's procedures and establishes whether a trader is engaging in a certain activity, the way in which they do it and provides the best possible evidence for potential formal action.

3.9 Reactive Work

3.10 Trading Standards Complaints and Service Requests

It is intended that every complaint/request for service is responded to within two working days.

The majority of consumer complaints are forwarded to the Trading Standards Service via the 'Citizen's Advice Consumer Service' (CACS) – a national consumer hotline funded by central government. CACS provide scripted advice that can resolve many of the simplest complaints but the more complex matters, or those requiring a potential criminal investigation, are referred on to the local Trading Standards department.

The initial response is determined after assessment of the information received, and is based on the risk arising from the conditions that are the subject of the complaint.

The potential actions that are available vary from the provision of advice, often after liaison with the business, to full prosecution procedures in line with the Public Protection Enforcement Policy.

3.11 Liaison Arrangements

The Council actively participates in local and regional activities and is represented on the following:

- Tees Valley Public Protection Heads of Service Group
- North East Public Protection Partnership (NEPPP)
- North East Trading Standards Association (NETSA)
- Various multi-agency intelligence networks
- Multi Agency Approach to Fraud group

3.12 Regional Enforcement

Hartlepool's Trading Standards manager sits as an executive member of the North Eastern Trading Standards Association (NETSA) and contributes to the regional enforcement activity planned by it.

In addition there is a National Illegal Money Lending Team (IMLT) which is now directly funded by a levy on the Banking industry and a Regional Investigations Team (previously 'Scambusters'), funded via the National Trading Standards Board, that targets criminal activity at a regional and national level.

To assist with the work of these two teams NETSA also manages the work of a Regional Intelligence Analyst whose role is to gather and disseminate intelligence to NETSA members, the IMLT and the regional Investigations Team.

3.13 Primary Authority Scheme

It is the Council's policy to comply with the Local Better Regulation Office's Primary Authority Scheme.

In particular the Council will contact the Primary Authority and liaise over:

- any proposed formal enforcement action
- service of Notices
- shortcomings in the companies policies that have wider implications

In Hartlepool, there are currently no formal Primary Authority arrangements in place with a Hartlepool based trader however the service works closely with some local businesses on an informal basis.

The level of resourcing will have to be reviewed if an opportunity to enter into a formal Primary Authority arrangement arises.

3.14 Financial Fraud Advocate

Trading Standards Teams within the Cleveland Police Force area have agreed to fund a project in collaboration with the Cleveland PCC to fund Financial Fraud Advocates to assist victims of financial frauds in our Boroughs.

The Advocates act on behalf of the victim and approach banks to recuperate money under the Contingent Reimbursement Model which was implemented to reduce the financial impact of scams from authorised push payment frauds.

The Advocates have been funded using money recovered from criminals prosecuted by the team using the Proceeds of Crime Act.

4. RESOURCES

4.1 Financial Resources

The annual budget for the Consumer Services section in the year 2025-26 is:

	£ 000
Employees	740
Other Expenditure	55
Public Health Grant	(306)
Other Grant Funding	(35)
Income	<u>(11)</u>
Net Budget	443

This budget is for all services provided by this section including Food, Health & Safety, Animal Health and Trading Standards with resources being allocated in accordance with service demands.

4.2 Staffing Allocation

The Executive Director of Development, Neighbourhoods and Regulatory Services has overall responsibility for the delivery of the Trading Standards Service in accordance with the Service Plan.

The Assistant Director (Regulatory Services) has responsibility for planning service delivery and management of the Trading Standards Service, Food, Licensing, Public Health, Private Sector Housing, Water Quality, Health & Safety, Animal Health and Welfare, Environmental Protection, Emergency Planning and Community Safety as well as general management responsibilities as a member of the Neighbourhoods & Regulatory Services department.

The Trading Standards & Licensing Manager has responsibility for the day to day supervision of the Trading Standards and Licensing Service and, having the requisite qualifications and experience, is designated as the authority's Chief Inspector of Weights and Measures.

Senior Trading Standards officers are responsible for carrying out the Trading Standards premises intervention programme as well as the delivery of all other aspects of the Trading Standards service and will undertake complex investigations.

The Technical Officer (Trading Standards) officer post advertised and filled after the Graduate Trading Standards Officer gained their professional qualification and filled a vacant Senior Trading Standards Officer post. This officer will gain experience by assisting qualified officers with team tasks and eventually undertaking their own investigations.

Administrative support is provided by a dedicated Support Services team.

All staff engaged in Trading Standards law enforcement activity will be suitably trained and qualified and appropriately authorised in accordance with guidance and internal policy.

The resources determined necessary to deliver the Trading Standards Service in 2024/25 are as follows:

1 x 0.2 FTE Assistant Director (Regulatory Services)

1 x 0.5 FTE Trading Standards & Licensing Manager (with responsibility also for Licensing)

3 x Senior Trading Standards Officers

1 x Technical Officer (Trading Standards)

4.3 Staff Development

The Council is committed to the training and personal development of its employees and has in place Personal Development Plans for all members of staff.

The Staff Training Plan allows for the formal identification of the training needs of staff members in terms of personal development linked with the development needs of the service on an annual basis.

The Training Plan clearly prioritises training requirements of individual staff members will be developed and reviewed bi-annually.

Detailed records are maintained by the service relating to all training received by officers.

The new Technical Officer (Trading Standards) has completed the Regulatory Compliance Officer Level 4 qualification and will be undertaking training and gaining experience with the qualified officers on the breadth of Trading Standards' remit.

4.4 Equipment and Facilities

A range of equipment and facilities are required for the effective operation of the Trading Standards Service.

The service has a computerised performance management system, Authority Public Protection (APP). This is capable of maintaining up to date accurate data relating to the activities of the Trading Standards Service. A documented database management procedure has been produced to ensure that the system is properly maintained, up to date and secure. The system is used for the generation of the intervention programmes, the recording and tracking of all Trading Standards activities, the production of statutory returns and the effective management of performance.

The team have regard to the National Trading Standards Intelligence Operating Model using IDB to input and share intelligence with colleagues around the country and with other agencies.

4.5 Working with Others

Durham County Council undertakes the majority of Hartlepool's weights and measures inspections and maintains the specialist equipment necessary to meet statutory metrology requirements.

The Team agreed to participate Operation Zernius which is a national Trading Standards project aimed at identifying and addressing non-compliances in the Estate and Letting Agents Sector. The project included both an inspection of the physical premises and any social media / website publications to ensure compliance with legislation including the Consumer Rights Act and Tenants fees legislation to ensure consumers are fully informed of charges or fees and helping to provide a level playing field for agents. This Operation was

established in 2023/24 with the inspections and partnership working continuing into 2025/26.

In 2024/2025 inspections took place to determine the level of compliance of Letting and Estate Agents both onsite and on their websites. Matters inspected included Client Money Protection scheme membership, member of redress scheme, displaying tenant fees as required by Consumer Rights Act 2015 and putting deposits into an approved scheme. Three local agents were inspected with one found to be non-compliant. Advice to bring that business into compliance was issued.

The team regularly work with a variety of operation partners such as the Police, HMRC and Immigration as and when the need arises. In 2024/25 Hartlepool took part in a multi agency operation with the NE Regional Organised Crime Unit and Immigration to conduct intelligence led visits to barber shops in the town. One visit led to the seizure of counterfeit and illicit cigarettes and hand rolling tobacco.

5. QUALITY ASSESSMENT

The Council is committed to quality service provision. To support this commitment the Trading Standards Service seeks to ensure consistent, effective, efficient and ethical service delivery that constitutes value for money.

A range of performance monitoring information will be used to assess the extent to which the Trading Standards Service achieves this objective and will include on-going monitoring against pre-set targets, both internal and external audits and stakeholder feedback.

Specifically the Trading Standards & Licensing Manager will carry out accompanied visits with officers undertaking interventions, investigations and other duties for the purpose of monitoring consistency and quality of the intervention as well as maintaining and giving feedback with regard to associated documentation and reports.

6 PERFORMANCE REVIEW

6.1 Overview - It is recognised that a key element of the service planning process is the rational review of past performance. In the formulation of this service plan a review has been conducted of performance against those targets.

This service plan will be reviewed at the conclusion of the year 2025/26 and at any point during the year where significant legislative changes or other relevant factors occur during the year.

It is the responsibility of the Assistant Director (Regulatory Services) to carry out that review with the Executive Director of Development, Neighbourhoods and Regulatory Services.

The service plan review will identify any shortfalls in service delivery and will inform decisions about future staffing and resource allocation, service standards, targets and priorities.

Any relevant amendments to the Council's Corporate Plan will be incorporated into the service plan.

6.2 Public Health

The Trading Standards Team undertakes a range of activities designed to protect public health.

The sale and supply of counterfeit or smuggled tobacco continues to be a significant issue in Hartlepool and the North East as a whole.

During 2024/25 Officers have continued to enforce a wide range of legislation around the sale of counterfeit or otherwise illicit tobacco. Officers seized 7860 illegal cigarettes and 7.9kg of illegal tobacco from the market with a combined street value of approximately £2,913.

The Trading Standards team will continue to focus on premises suspected of selling counterfeit and illicit tobacco premises and take formal action where needed.

During 2024/25 officers removed 589 illegal vapes with a street value of £5890 from the market.

The Trading Standards Team will continue to utilise the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to obtain prompt closure orders for problem premises

The Team also carries out checks on the safety of products made available for sale to the general public. These may be visual checks of the product and its labelling or the purchase of the product for testing at an accredited laboratory.

Trading Standards have been commissioned by Public Health to inspect medical weighing equipment used within the community, during 2024/25 the team tested 62 pieces of equipment. Of the 62, 44 were baby weighers. There was an 8% failure rate in this round of testing.

Targeted complaint led product sampling and testing will continue to take place throughout 2024/25.

6.3 Underage Sales

During 2024/25 in intelligence led underage sales operation took place. The focus of this operations was retail premises selling cigarettes, alcohol and vape

products. Two sales were made which were followed up with enforcement activity and licence reviews were applicable.

Underage sales test purchasing will continue in 2025/26.

6.4 E-Crime

Officers continued to monitor websites during 2024/25 and social media, such as Facebook, continues to be a significant source of counterfeit goods.

Counterfeit sellers can either sell directly from their own site or advertise their goods through a 'Selling Page' operated by a third party.

The Trading Standards Team continues to have a Facebook presence which allows it to interact with other Facebook users and this is used to identify where social media sites are being used to sell counterfeit, or otherwise illegal, goods. Due to the ever evolving world of social media, sites such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Whatsapp are now being used more than Facebook. This has created challenges for the team which are still being worked on.

As discussed in 3.6, many rogue traders are now using approved trader platforms and Social Media to promote their business. This allows them to have an online presence with polished profiles to gain access to a wider audience with less effort. Being on sites such as Check-a-Trade, gives them an air of legitimacy meaning unsuspecting consumers are more likely to employ them. This is also increasing the demographic range of their potential victims to include younger homeowners looking to have extensive home improvement works completed. Traders have been known to take large deposits and never return or start work and request more money before walking off jobs leaving the consumer with a half finished project and no funds left to complete the project.

In addition to social media, the internet continues to be used for the sale of general goods which creates difficulties when faulty goods are delivered or goods fail to arrive. Complaining to 'virtual' traders, who are often not based in the UK, is often not as easy as returning to a shop. Where difficulties arise, consumers are generally referred to the Citizen's Advice Consumer Service for advice and guidance.

On those occasions where criminal offences may have been committed by internet sellers, Trading Standards Officers must undertake investigations that can be far more complicated than when dealing with traditional, fixed site retailers. Internet sellers can be based anywhere in the world and even obtaining the genuine name and address of a trader can be a challenge.

National and regional relationships have been, and continue to be, established with larger internet retailers and service providers to allow for the effective investigation and resolution of criminal and civil matters.

6.5 Sampling

No complaint led sampling was carried out by the team in 2024/25.

In 2024/2025 the Trading Standards Team took part in a regional project - Retail Monitoring of Packaged Goods 2024/25. Due to the cost-of-living crisis' continuing impact upon the country couple with food prices still being high following relatively sharp rises over the latest two years it is vital that consumers receive the quantity of product they have paid for.

As consumers will be unaware of short weight food purchases Trading Standards Teams adopt a proactive approach to short measure products. Visits to three Hartlepool Supermarkets were conducted with batches of food products subjected to reference tests to determine if average and minimum quantity laws as set out in the Packaged Goods Regulations 2006 were being complied with.

In total 36 product lines were selected and batches of products assessed and weighed. Of those 36 batches of food products 7 failed to comply with Packaged Goods regulations due to insufficient quantities.

Non-compliances were raised with the premises themselves but also with the companies head office and the Primary Authority Trading Standards departments. Further non-compliances may be dealt with by way of formal action including prosecution.

6.6 Promotional/Campaign Work and Publicity

Four presentations were given to community groups in 2024/25. Presentations are free of charge and are an integral part of promoting the work we do in trying to give members of the public information to help protect themselves. We welcome further promotional opportunities throughout 2025/26.

Press releases are generally published following legal action including but not limited to Prosecutions and Closure Orders.

6.7 Doorstep Crime/Scams

The Team continues to focus resources on preventing the vulnerable from becoming victims of unscrupulous traders and identifying and prosecuting those found to be responsible.

'No Cold Calling' stickers continue to be made available that can be placed in a front door or window advising prospective callers that they are not welcome. The sticker also provides the homeowner with a valuable 'aide memoire' on what to do if a cold caller ignores the sticker. Over 13,000 have been issued to Hartlepool residents since the initiative began in 2015.

As detailed in paragraph 3.5 above, 56 No Cold Call Zones (NCCZ's) have been created. The team continue to promote them with a view to establishing a further five in 2025/26.

The Trading Standards Service also works closely with the National Scams Team which routinely sends details of Hartlepool consumers who have been found to be on scammer's databases.

Officers contact, and subsequently visit, these victims to provide help and support. Where appropriate, other agencies, such as Adult Safeguarding Teams, are brought in to provide ongoing professional support.

6.8 Serious Violence and Knife Crime

Knife crime continues to be an issue of serious concern and whilst Hartlepool has not been as seriously affected as some other areas of the country, the sale of illegal knives and the sale of knives to children are issues that must not be ignored or overlooked.

The Trading Standards team will be monitoring the retail market for illegal knives (such as 'zombie knives') and will take action if anything is discovered.

The Trading Standards team will continue to support National Campaigns such as Operation Sceptre, Operation Sceptre, is a national campaign which takes place twice a year, supporting the work Cleveland Police carry out all year round to ensure residents are safe from knife crime in the community.

6.9 Formal Enforcement Action

In line with our enforcement policy on some occasions it is necessary to prosecute for serious or repeat offences.

In May 2024, Darren Graham, who was operating as a self employed landscape gardener in Hartlepool, pleaded guilty to offences to Fraud Act 2006 and Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 offences following an investigation by the department. Graham took over £3,820 from two elderly neighbours for landscaping work and after an initial start, never returned to complete it. Graham received a 26-week prison sentence suspended for 12 months and was ordered to complete 200 hours unpaid work. He was also told he must pay a total of £4,420 in compensation to the victims and pay £600 investigation costs.

Hartlepool has been subject to a range of premises that are intent on supplying illicit tobacco products. In 2024/2025 greater emphasis was placed on Closure Orders made possible by virtue of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. These orders can be applied for at the Magistrates Court and if granted force that problem premises to close for a period of time (typically 3 months) the following premises have been subject to Closure Orders:

- 29 Murray Street
- 45 Murray Street
- 29 Murray Street (Extension)
- 40 Murray Street
- 45 Murray Street

- 15 Murray Street

6.10 Responding to Complaints

115 complaints were received in 2024/25 which is an increase of four on the previous year. Trading Standards enforcement landscape has dramatically changed in recent years, the team focus their resources on lengthy complex criminal investigations. Previously all consumer enquiries including civil matters would have been recorded on our complaints database, due to service pressures these complaints are now retained on the Citizens Advice Portal and thus the figures are not produced within our service plan.

6.11 Complaints against Our Staff

No complaints were made against our staff during 2024/25.

7. KEY AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT & KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2025/26

1. The Public Protection Service continues to face significant financial pressures due to ongoing Council savings and, as such, the need to prioritise service delivery and maximise effectiveness remains paramount.
2. There are significant changes taking place at a national level as the Government presses forward with regulatory reform. The National Trading Standards Board has been established which identifies national priorities and increases Regional and Sub-Regional co-ordination including the funding of the North Eastern Regional Investigations Team. The Trading Standards & Licensing Manager sits on the management board of this Team which, due to tightening budgets, remains under pressure to reduce costs and contribute towards national projects as and when required.
3. Serious doorstep crime continues to be a major concern and responding to complaints is extremely resource intensive. Due to the significant consumer detriment involved, tackling rogue traders remains the highest of priorities which may mean that responding to other areas of responsibility has to be delayed.
4. The Trading Standards Landscape has changed dramatically over recent years and events such as EU Exit, the COVID-19 Pandemic and the cost of living crisis have altered the Trading Standards working regime:

COVID-19 – The coronavirus pandemic fundamentally altered our lives, including how we interact with one another. Lots of small business struggled during pandemic but also a lot of home based traders flourished. Trading Standards were required to establish a relationship with these new and evolving traders to ensure compliance. Trading Standards services need to get behind small honest traders who want to help build the UK economy and deal with rogue traders who are acting illegally and are undercutting genuine UK businesses.

EU Exit – Trading Standards need to provide support, advice and guidance to businesses through the transition period and as new legislation and opportunities arise. As a service we need to support businesses to diversify and adapt to the new circumstances and legislative framework.

Cost of living - Trading Standards is key to protecting people especially the most vulnerable, during the cost of living crisis when every penny counts and they cannot afford to lose money through fraud or scams. The Cost of Living crisis will likely exacerbate consumer problems in some areas where individuals seek out to find the cheapest products which could be unsafe imports, illicit tobacco, or counterfeits

5. Following the disposable vape ban on 1st June 2025 the team will continue working to enforce the strict rules governing the composition and marketing of 'nicotine delivery devices' such as e-liquids and vapes (which are age restricted products) by working with local retailers, and several manufacturers to ensure legal compliance with the new requirements.