**Six million cigarettes found in West Midlands by trading standards**

More than six million illegal cigarettes and 350kg of hand rolling tobacco were seized last year by local authority trading standards services across the West Midlands region.

Officers point out that the big successes at finding illegal sales of tobacco were achieved despite ingenious efforts to hide them.

They point out that sophisticated concealments using electronic magnets controlled by a switch, hydraulic compartments in floors and cavity wall compartments were all used by traders acting illegally in an effort to avoid detection by trading standards.

Such hiding places are difficult to detect without the aid of specialist tobacco sniffer dogs.

The cigarettes, along with the hand rolling tobacco, were confiscated by officers during the 2018/2019 financial year and had an estimated street value of nearly £1.3 million.

The goods were either counterfeit or smuggled to avoid tax, but would have been worth in excess of £3.3 million if they had been genuine UK duty paid goods. The loss to the tax payer is in excess of £1.9 million.

All businesses caught with illegal cigarettes or tobacco are subject to criminal investigation, with some traders already being successfully prosecuted.

Some have received custodial sentences, others have received suspended prison sentences and community orders. Financial penalties have also been ordered, including Proceeds of Crime confiscations of over £150,000.

In addition, some businesses have had closure orders granted against them and those who have an alcohol licence have had their alcohol licences suspended or revoked.

Councillor Farut Shaeen, Sandwell Council's cabinet member for living health lives, said: "It's important that communities support efforts to crack down on illegal cigarettes.

"Far from being a victimless crime, the trade in illegal tobacco creates a cheap source for children and young people.

“The trade in illegal tobacco is seen by some as a low risk way of making money to help fund more serious crime.”