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 ***News Release***

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**Tobacco seized in North Wales**

An operation to disrupt the sale and supply of illegal tobacco in North Wales uncovered more than 1.6 million cigarettes, 700kg kilos of hand-rolling tobacco and 3000 litres of alcohol.

Around 40 officers from HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), with support from North Wales Police, UK Border Agency, and Flintshire, Wrexham, Conwy and Denbingshire Trading Standards officers, visited 55 retail premises, private addresses and self-storage units on 14, 15 and 16 July.

The visits, as part of HMRC’s Tobacco Taskforce activity, led to tobacco and alcohol products being seized at 15 locations. These included:

* 1,646,000 cigarettes, with a potential £545,700 duty and VAT evaded
* 700 kilos of hand-rolling tobacco, with a potential £170,800 duty and VAT evaded
* 3000 litres of alcohol, with a potential £38,600 duty and VAT evaded

Colin Spinks, Assistant Director, Criminal Investigation, HMRC, said:

“The sale of illegal tobacco and alcohol will not be tolerated by us or our partner agencies. Disrupting criminal trade is at the heart of our strategy to clampdown on the illicit tobacco market, which costs the UK around £2 billion a year, and the sale of illicit alcohol which costs the UK around £1 billion per year. This is theft from the taxpayer and undermines legitimate traders.

“We encourage anyone with information about the illegal sale of tobacco or alcohol to contact the Customs Hotline on 0800 59 5000.”

Superintendent Sacha Hatchett of North Wales Police said:

 “The large scale seizures have shown this criminal activity to be big, lucrative business for some individuals who flout the law.

“The co-ordinated operation across Wrexham, Flintshire, Denbighshire and Conwy demonstrates how well partner organisations can work together to tackle serious organised crime.

“I hope local communities, who we rely on for information and intelligence, are reassured by the firm action we have taken.”

Kevin Jones, Chair of the North Wales Heads of Trading Standards, said:

“The widespread availability of cheap, illegal tobacco in our communities poses a major threat to health. Around 11,000 children become addicted in Wales every year (that’s a classroom full each day) before they are even old enough to be legally sold tobacco.

“The results achieved in this joint agency operation, led by HMRC, are incredibly encouraging and sends a clear message that we are committed to working together to tackle illegal tobacco and alcohol”

Investigations are continuing.

**Notes for editors**

1. The activity was carried out over the 14, 15 and 16 July in the Wrexham, Rhyl, Llandudno, Flint, Deeside, Mold, Holywell and Caernarfon areas.
2. Eight tobacco dogs and their handlers also worked on this operation.
3. Since 2000, the illicit market in cigarettes has more than halved. In the last two years, almost 3.3 billion cigarettes and over 800 tonnes of illicit hand-rolling tobacco have been seized and 593 criminals involved have been prosecuted.
4. HMRC can also levy civil penalties on anyone handling, using or supplying non-duty paid tobacco products. Penalties introduced in April 2010 range from 10 to 100% of the possible lost revenue.
5. Anyone with information regarding tobacco fraud is encouraged to contact the Customs Hotline on 0800 59 5000 or via the website: <http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/reportingfraud/online.htm>
6. Photographs of goods seized are available on HMRC’s Flickr channel [www.flickr.com/hmrcgovuk](http://www.flickr.com/hmrcgovuk) and from the “press and media” pages at [https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs%22%20%5Co%20%22https%3A//www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs)
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