

NATIONAL TRADING STANDARDS

Protecting Consumers
Supporting Business

National Strategic Assessment

National Trading Standards

October 2026

BRIEFING DOCUMENT



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1. Foreword

This document summarises the key findings from the October 2026 National Trading Standards (NTS) Strategic Assessment. This will be used to prioritise NTS work for 2026-27. The NTS 2026 Strategic Assessment identifies the key national threats, emerging issues and priority areas for NTS work. It will help the NTS Board produce their national Control Strategy for 2027/28.

Fraud and unfair trading are becoming harder to spot for consumers, easier to commit and capable of reaching more victims than ever before. What begins with a text message, an online advert, a knock at the door or an illicit product for sale on the high street are often part of a much bigger picture – sophisticated organised criminal networks operating across communities, regions and national borders.

The harm these criminals cause is significant and often devastating. Victims can lose their life savings and suffer lasting psychological harm. Dangerous and illicit products can put people's health and safety at risk. Legitimate businesses lose trade to criminals who have no intention of playing by the rules. And as criminal activity grows in scale and sophistication, it risks undermining the confidence in fair and functioning markets on which our economy depends.

The threat is evolving quickly. Serious and organised crime, artificial intelligence and online crime will cut across all areas of Trading Standards' work in the year ahead. AI in particular is giving criminals powerful new tools to create increasingly convincing deceptions, target potential victims and operate at unprecedented speed and scale. As the technology develops, we should expect criminals to continue finding new ways to exploit it. But new technology is only part of the threat. Used cars and home improvements remain among the most complained-about issues reported to Citizens Advice, while illegal tobacco and illegal vapes continue to harm communities and undermine responsible retailers. Calls, texts, emails and doorstep approaches also remain effective tools for fraudsters. The challenge for Trading Standards and the Government departments it works with is therefore to tackle the established forms of criminality that continue to cause immense harm while anticipating where – and how – criminals will strike next.

Criminals will continue to adapt. They will exploit new technologies, identify new vulnerabilities and change their methods when existing routes are disrupted. The challenge for enforcement is to adapt just as quickly. Intelligence is fundamental to staying one step ahead – allowing us to understand how threats are changing, identify emerging risks and direct enforcement towards the criminals, markets and activities causing the greatest harm.

Since 2014, NTS has tackled more than £11 of consumer and business detriment for every £1 spent. This Strategic Assessment will help us build on that impact by looking ahead as well as understanding the threats we face today. In the year ahead, our focus remains clear: protecting consumers, safeguarding legitimate businesses and staying one step ahead of the criminals who seek to exploit them. A more detailed account of our 2025/26 activity is available in our Annual Report at nationaltradingstandards.uk/documents/.

Lord Michael Bichard, Chair of National Trading Standards

2. Introduction

This briefing summarises the key issues from our NTS 2026 Strategic Assessment. It uses data from 1/4/25 to 31/3/26, to identify the key NTS national threats, emerging issues, and priority areas for the NTS 2027/28 Control Strategy. A wide range of information sources have been used, including intelligence from local and regional Trading Standards Services (in England and Wales), partners, Citizens Advice consumer service and open-source data.

3. Key Findings

During the period of 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026 research found that:

- Over 49,000 intelligence logs were recorded on IDB by Trading Standards Services in England and Wales (up 13.1% from the previous year).
- Tobacco and cigarettes, doorstep crime and cold calling, and age restricted sales have the highest number of intelligence logs recorded on IDB.
- Over 328,000 Citizens Advice consumer service complaints were recorded (a decrease of 70,289 from the previous year). The top five complaint categories were: (1) used vehicles, (2) home maintenance and improvements, (3) clothing and footwear, (4) holidays and accommodation, and (5) food and drink.
- The City of London Police Report Fraud Analysis Service (RFAS) dashboard reports over 6,233 reported door to door sales and bogus caller incidents across the UK, with reported losses of £41.4 million. There were over 22,016 other consumer non-investment fraud reports across England and Wales, with reported losses of £116.3 million (at 11/08/2026).
- Cross-cutting issues affecting all areas of Trading Standards' work have been identified as eCrime, the increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI), serious and organised crime, and the cost-of-living crisis.
- Trading Standards have 25 active Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) mapped on the Police National Database, associated with 154 nominals and 27 companies (at 20/08/2026).

There has been a marked increase in the number of IDB intelligence reports on tobacco and cigarettes – this is directly linked to the ongoing HMRC funding for illegal tobacco work. Doorstep crime remains a priority for all Regional Trading Standards Groups, with a consistently high number of intelligence reports and consumer complaints in this area. Complaints continue to remain under-reported, with other mechanisms being used by consumers and businesses to try and address issues. It remains a concern that NTS Teams and Trading Standards do not have direct access to Report Fraud or National Fraud Investigation Bureau data despite having further discussions with the City of London Police and the Home Office.

The Citizens Advice consumer service acts as the national reporting centre for Trading Standards, providing consumer advice and referring complaints to Trading Standards for analysis and enforcement action. In 2025/26, demand for the service increased, with contacts rising by around 6% following additional government funding that enabled more advisers to be recruited and increased service capacity. Contact figures are higher than complaint figures because a single case may generate multiple contacts from the same consumer. While advice quality and customer satisfaction remain strong, future capacity may be affected if funding doesn't keep pace with costs.

4. NTS Priority Areas

The NTS priority areas for the NTS Control Strategy (April 2027 – March 2028) are:

- Doorstep crime and cold calling
- Lettings (England only)
- Mass marketing fraud/scams
- Importation of illegal vapes (England only)
- Used cars
- Illegal tobacco
- Other fair trading issues
- Intellectual property
- Estate agency
- Animal feed work

NTS will also have the following cross cutting issues, as they impact on each priority area:

- eCrime and the use of social media/online platforms
- Increasing use of Artificial Intelligence
- Serious and organised crime
- The cost-of-living crisis

NTS delivers work on specific activities, where direct funding is provided for a programme of work.

5. Key Threat Areas

The NTS Strategic Assessment identifies key threat areas for each priority area. These help inform the work that NTS supports (subject to the NTS grant conditions) and include:

- Call centres involved in mass marketing scams and fraudulent trading.
- High street criminality linked to serious and organised crime.
- Criminals use of Artificial Intelligence to defraud consumers and businesses.
- Ongoing roofing and property maintenance fraudulent activities, where rogue traders continue to target the older and more vulnerable consumers.
- Emergency repair scams, including plumbing and locksmith services.
- Fraudulent used car sales through online marketplaces and social media platforms.
- Organised crime groups involvement in the illegal tobacco supply chain.
- Tenancy and rent regulation changes may lead to some landlords/agents seeking ways of avoiding their legal obligations.
- Emerging animal feed hygiene threats and risks to the integrity of the food chain.

6. Other Trading Standards Priorities

The analysis of intelligence also identified the following as priorities within local and regional Trading Standards and may be a high priority for many Trading Standards Services. NTS cannot deliver work in these areas as it is not funded to do so:

- Age-restricted sales
- Animal disease control
- Animal health and welfare
- Food Standards
- Product safety
- Metrology

NTS values the support that has been provided by Trading Standards Services, Regional Groups, NTS Teams and Citizens Advice to help produce the NTS 2026 Strategic Assessment.

Please contact the NTS Programme Office (nationaltradingstandards@actso.org.uk) if you have any questions or need any further information.