

Note to HMRC: don't whinge about rogue traders, employ ...

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The [South Yorkshire Star](#), obviously reproducing a H M Revenue & Customs press release reported over the weekend:

Visitors to Easter car boot sales in South Yorkshire are being urged to be on the lookout for traders selling counterfeit and smuggled cigarettes and alcohol.

HM Revenue and Customs wants rogue traders to be reported to stop cut-price cigarettes and booze being sold.

Stuart Crookshank, Assistant Director for HMRC, said: "Low-cost tobacco and alcohol products can often seem very attractive to people who believe they are buying genuine products at a knock-down price.

"Those involved are not concerned if they are selling to children and under-age people. The illicit trade has a devastating impact on legitimate retailers and the local community. We all pay extra to compensate for the money these criminals steal.

"The profits from tobacco and alcohol smuggling fund other criminal activities including drug and people trafficking and cause real harm in the local community.

"With over £2 billion in unpaid revenue stolen last year from public funds through tobacco smuggling and around £1bnn through alcohol smuggling, this crime impacts hard on the UKs finances."

Many illegally sold cigarette brands seized in the UK are known as 'cheap whites,' made for smuggling and bought by crime gangs.

Three points:

First, I suspect the estimates of tax loss are, as is normal for HMRC, understated. These people don't just not pay duty. They also evade VAT, national insurance and income tax. All are part of the tax gap.

Second, If the effect is so serious why not employ officers to go to car boot sales and investigate the crime? It's not rocket science. It creates work. It stops crime. It raises revenue. It protects children. It protects local communities. It supports a level playing field for small business. It means the tax base is spread evenly.

Third the loss, at a minimum of £3bn is over 65% of the cost of running H M Revenue & Customs last year. Isn't that worth just a little more than a press release and a request for a tip off?

Sorry, but this is just not good enough HMRC. You make the case for action and then don't deliver it. Put a thousand people on monitoring such activity every weekend, backed up with the power to arrest, seize goods and close down car boot sales where illegal sales are taking place and to fine organisers who do nothing to stop it and this practice will be curtailed in no time at all at a significant profit to society as a whole.

What's stopping you? Anything more than George Osborne and his manic desire for cuts that impose burdens on all of us?