

# **Report to the Tyne and Wear Trading Standards Joint Committee**

**22 February 2018**

## **Update on the Safety of Laser Pointers**

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### **Purpose of the report**

To update the Committee on the response provided nationally to the safety issues which concern the safety of laser pointers.

### **The Safety Issue**

1. The misuse of laser pointers (sometimes referred to as laser pens) reported in the press has generated public concern over the safety of these devices.
2. Laser pointers are small handheld battery-powered devices that project narrow laser beams. Their original purpose was for use in presentations or for pointing out objects. At low powers, the human eye can only see the dot where the laser beam hits a target. However, high power laser beams can be visible in the air. Astronomers use the laser beam to guide viewers towards stars and other objects in the night sky.
3. Laser pointers have many legitimate uses. In the classroom, teachers can use them for demonstrations of optical principles. They can be used as alignment aids and in construction. However, low power lasers are usually adequate. The technological development in laser technology has decreased the size of laser products, increased the powers, and reduced the cost significantly.
4. Reject laser components from professional products are being bought by manufacturers of novelty laser products without appropriate quality control and compliance with safety standards.

### **Consultation**

5. The Government issued a Call for Evidence in August 2017 on the market for laser pointers, and how they are used.
6. High strength laser pointers – those with a strength of more than 5mW - are easy to make, obtain and use. Shining a laser pointer can be fun and many users have good intentions. However the Government is concerned that, in recent years, there have been an increased number of reported incidents of the deliberate misuse of laser pointers with consequences which could have been fatal – examples include shining laser beams into the cockpits of aircraft as they take off and land and young children suffering permanent eye damage as the result of having beams from ‘toy’ pointers shone directly into their eyes; a UK

survey of ophthalmologists reported 159 incidents of eye injuries since 2013, mainly affecting young children.

7. In 2016, the Civil Aviation Authority received reports of 1,258 laser incidents, with Heathrow the most frequent location for reports of the devices being used recklessly.
8. Laser beam attacks against the rail network are also a concern. Records from the British Transport Police show that between 1 April 2011 and 30 November 2017, a total of 578 laser incidents were recorded.

### **Response to the Consultation**

9. A response to the consultation was submitted on behalf of the region by the North East Trading Standards Association.

### **Government Announcement**

10. The Government on the 8 January 2018 pledged additional support to local authority ports and borders teams to stop high-powered laser pointers entering the UK.
11. This includes supporting local authority teams to carry out increased checks at the border, including testing products to ensure they are safe. The support will also ensure local authority teams have access to the necessary scientific, technical and testing expertise.
12. The Government also announced that it will work with manufacturers and retailers to improve laser pointer labelling, indicating that they must not be pointed at eyes or at vehicles and must state the power level of the product. The policing of online laser pointer sales will also be improved by working with online retailers.
13. Professor John O'Hagan, of Public Health England, said: "*Over time we have become increasingly concerned about the dangers of growing numbers of unlabelled and incorrectly labelled high power laser pointers being bought by the public.*"
14. *It is tragic that we continue to see eye injuries, especially in children. Laser safety experts at Public Health England have worked closely with local authorities in stopping large numbers of these lasers reaching UK consumers*".
15. The new measures are in support of the new penalties as proposed in the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill. The Bill expands the list of vehicles it is an offence to target with lasers. It also makes it easier to prosecute offenders by removing the need to prove an intention to endanger a vehicle. People who shine laser devices at transport operators could be jailed for up to 5 years.

### **Recommendation**

16. The Committee is asked to note the information as contained within the report.

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