

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

**13 February 2020**

## **House of Commons Petitions Committee – Fireworks October 2019**

---

**Anneliese Hutchinson, Service Director, Economy, Innovation and Growth,  
Gateshead Council**

---

### **Purpose of the report**

To update the Committee on the publication by the House of Commons Petitions Committee of a report on “Fireworks” in October 2019.

### **Summary**

1. Fireworks have been a popular topic for e-petitions during the previous Parliament. Individuals and campaign groups used the e-petitions system to express a wide range of concerns, including noise from fireworks having serious detrimental effects on people and animals; misuse of fireworks and anti-social behaviour blighting local communities; and environmental issues.
2. The Petitions Committee (“the Committee”) scheduled three debates in Parliament on petitions relating to fireworks that had each gained more than 100,000-signatures. In total, petitions calling for tighter restrictions on the sale and use of fireworks by the general public have attracted around 750,000 signatures in three years. While the Government at the time expressed “empathy” for people and animals affected, it was clear it had no plans to change the law. The Government’s responses to these petitions, and Ministers’ replies to the debates, left petitioners feeling frustrated and ignored. The Committee undertook the inquiry to hear their concerns and propose changes in response to them.
3. The Committee looked closely at the proposal to ban sales and use of fireworks by the public but were not persuaded to recommend this drastic course of action at that time. There are valid concerns, backed up by evidence from overseas, that a ban could have unintended consequences. A ban would have a substantial economic effect, which would be most keenly felt by people who have built their livelihoods on the fireworks industry. A ban would likely have dire consequences for competently run, voluntary, community displays, which use fireworks to raise funds for local good causes. In many cases these community displays have widespread local support and increase community cohesion.
4. However, the enquiry found clear evidence that petitions calling for greater restrictions on sales and use of fireworks have been motivated by justified concerns. In many cases, there are substantial adverse effects, for example on people with a very wide range of health conditions and disabilities. There can be very distressing effects on people with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, including military veterans. Animals can suffer serious and long-term effects. The

Committee took the view *“that it is not good enough for the Government to repeatedly claim that the law protects these people and animals from harm. It does not. We now expect action, rather than continued apathy”*.

5. Loud and high-pitched noises can adversely affect a large proportion of animals, whose hearing is often much more sensitive than humans'. The decibel level limit of consumer fireworks needs to be reconsidered, with animal welfare in mind, with a view to setting a workable reduced maximum decibel limit, that would diminish the risks to animals' health.
6. Inconsiderate or irresponsible use of fireworks can have appalling effects on people too, but the Committee was frustrated by the lack of official data on the extent and nature of the problems. Any rule about who can set off fireworks, and where and when they can be used, would be difficult to enforce because fireworks are inherently transient. A lack of enforceability is likely suppressing the number of complaints, meaning the real level of concern is under-reported. People must be enabled, and encouraged, to make their concerns known. There must be a coordinated effort led by the Government, across the relevant agencies, to establish a consistent approach to the collection and publication of Fireworks data about the types and extent of problems associated with fireworks.
7. Local authorities must be empowered to act where they deem it necessary in response to their residents' concerns. The Committee recommends that the Government work with local authorities to identify a best practice approach to a revenue-neutral, mandatory permit system for fireworks displays, where local evidence suggests this is necessary to protect the community. The Committee proposes that a scheme is piloted by the end of 2020.
8. The Committee took the view that it is imperative that consumer fireworks are only sold to the public through legitimate retailers with the appropriate licences and by staff with the appropriate level of training to advise customers about safe and responsible use. Government is encouraged to act quickly to close a potential loophole in the regulations around storage by retailers of up to 5kg of fireworks without a licence. It should also conduct a review of online sales of fireworks, particularly over social media, with a view to establishing a national, cross-agency strategy to tackle illegal online sales before October 2020.
9. Packaging of consumer fireworks in a way which may appeal to children creates a risk that children may be tempted to play or tamper with potentially dangerous products stored in the home. The Government should act swiftly to address this through new packaging Regulations as soon as possible, and no later than November 2020.
10. Inconsiderate and irresponsible use of fireworks should be considered as socially unacceptable as drink driving. There is very clear evidence that loud unexpected noise from fireworks has severe and distressing effects on people with a range of health conditions and disabilities, including military veterans and others suffering with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), children with autistic spectrum disorders and people with hyperacusis and other hearing conditions. If people are going to use fireworks, they must let their neighbours know in advance, so that people can take steps to protect themselves if they need to. The Committee took the view that Government must fund and

coordinate major, national awareness campaigns, from October 2020 and annually thereafter, on responsible use of fireworks to get this message across to the public.

11. The Committee concluded that *“Government has so far failed to act in response to legitimate concerns about fireworks expressed through the e-petitions system. People rightly expect the Government to listen to them, take their concerns seriously, and act. The Government’s response to this Report is its chance to finally do that”*.

### **Recommendation**

12. The Committee is asked to note the information.