

PRESS RELEASE

SCOTSS Jewellery buying advice (for immediate release 19.12.19)

Buying jewellery for Christmas? Make sure it's the genuine article.

With Christmas just around the corner, local authority Trading Standards services in Scotland are urging consumers who are considering a last-minute purchase of jewellery for themselves or a loved one to make sure they are getting a genuine, quality product and good value for their money.

All items over certain weights* sold in the UK and described as being made from gold, silver, platinum or palladium must have a legally recognised hallmark. Assay Offices test the purity of precious metals, and if an item conforms with the legal requirements for purity, the Assay Office marks it with the appropriate hallmark. Local Trading Standards authorities are responsible for ensuring that shops meet their legal obligations under the Hallmarking Act. Premises which sell hallmarked items are required by law to display signage, a Dealer's Notice, explaining to customers the meaning of the markings on these precious metal items. However, in a recent survey by officers of 234 jewellery outlets covering 20 local authorities across Scotland, it was found that almost half of the premises inspected, were not displaying the Notices.

In the course of the project the trading standards officers also examined a total of 1553 articles of jewellery and discovered 247 of these to be either incorrectly marked or not hallmarked at all, a failure rate of 15.9%. Some instances of counterfeit copies of designer branded jewellery items, bearing names including Tiffany and Louis Vuitton were also found.

SCOTSS report that officers who visited the shops and inspected businesses were generally well received, as reputable businesses value the role trading standards can play in ensuring they are competing on a level playing field.

Noel Hunter, Chairman of the British Hallmarking Council, says:

“It is illegal to sell anything in the UK made from a precious metal (silver, gold, platinum and palladium) over a certain weight without a hallmark – a stamp of quality that protects the consumer by confirming that what they are buying is made from real precious metal. Our research suggests that around 150,000 items of fake “gold” jewellery could be listed for sale in the UK each year, and this work by Scottish Trading Standards confirms that the consumer must be very careful when buying what can be a very expensive product. I would recommend that consumers should only buy through a reputable and recognised source, that is fully compliant with the Hallmarking Act requirements.”

In the UK, a hallmark can only be applied by one of the four Assay Offices and the Edinburgh Assay Office worked closely with the officers on this project, providing training and inspecting and reporting on some suspect items. Their Assay Master Scott Walker said:

"Edinburgh Assay Office has been testing and hallmarking precious metals for over 550 years. Hallmarks are an independent verification of precious metal content. They ensure that consumers are protected at point of sale and legitimate jewellers can demonstrate their commitment to and compliance with legislative standards. We were delighted to support this project through the training of trading standards staff and the examination of jewellery items. It is essential to the jewellery market, especially at this time of year, that there is robust enforcement of the Hallmarking Act, and we will continue to support it at every opportunity."

In most cases of non-compliance, shops were supplied with a Dealer's Notice to display on the premises or were instructed to withdraw improperly marked and unmarked items from sale until corrected. Counterfeit items were seized and may be reported to the Procurator Fiscal. Follow-ups are planned and this will also involve a close examination of the expanding online market. A report commissioned by the British Hallmarking Council (BHC) shows that there may be an even greater level of non-compliance with the requirements of the hallmarking legislation online, with up to a third of products supplied unhallmarked.

Sandra Harkness, Chair of SCOTSS, the Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland explained: "The hallmark shows that an item has been independently tested and verified as matching its description and conforms to all legal standards of purity and fineness so protecting buyers against fraud. The market in jewellery and precious metal items in Scotland and throughout the UK is significant, amounting to billions of pounds. If some traders don't get their products hallmarked, hallmark them incorrectly or don't clearly let their customers know what the hallmarks mean this can disadvantage both consumers and other, competitor businesses who are complying with the law."

Sandra Harkness continued: "Trading Standards don't tend to get a lot of complaints from consumers concerning hallmarking law and this can suggest there are no issues of concern. However, I think our findings and those of the BHC suggest this is not the case. The low complaint numbers are likely to be because consumers don't know about hallmarking and don't realise they are being defrauded. We would urge consumers to check the hallmarks on items, make use of the Dealer's Notice which shops must provide and let us know of any concerns. We also welcome enquiries from businesses."

Advice for consumers on hallmarking law is available at

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/hallmarking-in-the-uk-consumer-protection>

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Notes for Editors:

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1. The Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland (SCOTSS) represents the 31 local authority Trading Standards services in Scotland. SCOTSS was established in 1996 and helps support and coordinate the activities of Scotland local authority trading standards teams. It is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation SC047951 and works closely with other governmental and regulatory organisations, such as the Competition & Markets Authority, and Office for Product Safety and Standards.

2. Trading Standards Officers in Scottish councils advise on and enforce laws that govern the way we buy, sell, rent and hire goods and services. Local authorities carry out inspections and monitor or investigate complaints, they work with businesses to help achieve compliance but ultimately, can instigate prosecutions against those who break the law.

3. If a precious metal item weighs less than a certain amount it is not compulsory to apply a hallmark. The minimum weight thresholds are:

- gold 1 gram
- silver 7.78 grams
- platinum 0.5 gram
- palladium 1 gram

4. In the UK there are four Assay Offices, in Edinburgh, London, Birmingham and Sheffield, part of a consumer protection regime that dates back almost 700 years. The British Hallmarking Council is a body that oversees the precious metals sector and was established under the Hallmarking Act 1973.

5. Anyone with information or complaints about jewellery or precious metal sales can report it anonymously through Advice Direct Scotland on 0808 164 6000 www.consumeradvice.scot or in England & Wales through the National Consumer Helpline on 03454 040506 <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/cymraeg/consumer/get-more-help/if-you-need-more-help-about-a-consumer-issue/>

Or to their local Trading Standards team <https://www.tradingstandards.uk/consumers/support-advice>