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Department for
**Innovation,
Universities &
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Dear Mr Paice

2008/0095821POLD

7 December 2008

Thank you for your letter of 25 October, addressed to John Denham, seeking clarification of the Government's position on the enforcement of weights and measures legislation as it relates to metric and imperial units of measurement. I am replying as this falls within my Ministerial portfolio.

Contrary to some reports in the media, the law as it relates to the use of units of measurement for trade in this area has not changed, nor does the Government have any plans to change it. The position remains that traders may display imperial units of measurement alongside metric units should they so wish, provided they are no more prominent.

The Government's longstanding policy in relation to units of measurement is to move towards full metrication in time, but at a pace that recognizes that a significant proportion of consumers are still more comfortable with using imperial units. Metric units are used for the majority of transactions regulated by the Weights and Measures Act 1985. The United Kingdom is already substantially metric and as you note in your letter, the use of metric units continues to rise, as familiarization increases. We recognise that a single system of units of measurement as a reference point is vital for fair trade and consumer protection. However, we also believe it is important that imperial units can continue to be used alongside metric ones whilst they remain more familiar for some consumers.

Decisions as to whether to prosecute in cases where there may have been a breach of weights and measures law are entirely a matter for individual trading standards departments, taking into account the circumstances surrounding each case. However, the Government is always keen to ensure that enforcement is proportionate and consistent and also in the public interest. That is why my Department is currently working with the enforcement community on the production of guidance designed to assist trading standards departments when taking decisions on appropriate enforcement action.

I believe that co-operation of this kind, bringing together the combined expertise of Government and the enforcement community, is the right approach. Work on the revision of the existing Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services guidance is still in progress and so I cannot comment in detail on its content. However, I can assure you that its purpose ultimately will be to help to facilitate the handling of cases such as those which have featured so prominently in the media.


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This being so, it will not conflict with the principles underpinning the existing guidance. I believe this to be in the best interests of consumers, businesses and the enforcement community. In the meantime, in an attempt to be helpful and to further promote clarity in the wake of the media speculation, the National Weights and Measures Laboratory (NWML) issued the statement you refer to, which I think does make clear the position as regards weights and measures law.

I understand that you are to meet with Peter Mason, Chief Executive of the NWML, and hope that this will provide a further opportunity to make clear the Government's position.

I hope that this helps to reassure you that the Government, in conjunction with the enforcement community, is making every effort to ensure a clear and unambiguous approach to the law as regards the use of imperial and metric units.

Yours sincerely


LORD DRAYSON
MINISTER FOR SCIENCE AND INNOVATION
