

Research Briefing

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By Bukky Balogun

Youth vaping in England



Summary

- 1 Background
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- 4 Government proposals on youth vaping
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Contributing Authors

Rachael Harker, 2.1, Office for National Statistics

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Summary

In England, e-cigarettes that contain nicotine cannot be legally sold to under 18s. Despite this, the rate of vaping (the use of e-cigarettes) among young people is increasing.

[The government intends to introduce measures](#) that will make vaping products less appealing and less accessible to children.

The government also intends to prohibit the sale of non-nicotine e-cigarettes to under 18s. The government has also said it will close a loophole which permits free samples of nicotine and non-nicotine e-cigarettes to be given to under-18s.

[The government has indicated that its forthcoming Tobacco and Vapes Bill](#), announced in the King's Speech 2023, will provide for some of these measures.

Prevalence, patterns and perceptions

In 2023, a survey conducted by the tobacco control charity [Action on Smoking and Health \(ASH\)](#) found that [3.7% of young people aged 11 to 18 in Great Britain vape regularly](#).

[The International Tobacco Control](#) study (ITC, an international cohort study on smoking and vaping) found that 24% of people aged 16-to-19 years in England reported having vaped in the past 30 days in 2022.

The Office for National Statistics has published [data on e-cigarette use in Great Britain](#). It showed that, in 2022, 16-to-24-year-olds were more likely to report daily or occasional vaping than all other age groups.

Young peoples' motivations for vaping vary. A survey from ASH found that [54% of young people aged 11 to 18 in England report having begun vaping "just to give it a try"](#).

The ITC study found that other [commonly reported reasons for vaping](#) (PDF) include enjoying the flavour of e-cigarettes, dealing with stress and anxiety and curiosity.

Young adults demonstrated a good awareness of vaping harms in the ITC survey. [84% of young people in England, aged 16-to-19-years](#), acknowledged that there was some degree of harm associated with daily vaping. 16% of this cohort [reported that vaping had improved their mental health](#).

In the ASH survey, among 11-to-18-year-olds in Great Britain, [the proportion of young people that \(correctly\) identified e-cigarettes as being less harmful than conventional cigarettes fell](#) from 73% in 2013 to 33% in 2023.

[Most 16-to-19-year-olds in England in the ITC survey did not perceive vaping to be fashionable](#). When asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “vapes look cool”, 54% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 20% agreed or strongly agreed.

Concerns around youth vaping

Gateway concerns

There is wide consensus that vaping is significantly less harmful than smoking; however, many public health authorities are recommending that e-cigarettes should only be used by people trying to stop smoking. Despite this, [2.3% of young people who have never smoked currently use e-cigarettes](#), according to ASH.

There are suggestions that vaping could act as a “gateway”, encouraging those who vape but had never previously smoked to take up tobacco smoking. These concerns, however, have not been evidenced by [smoking rates among young people](#), which have continued to decline since 1996.

Marketing, promotion and sale of e-cigarettes

[Health organisations, such as the British Medical Association, expressed concerns about marketing and promotion practices](#) used by e-cigarette manufacturers and retailers.

Others have asserted that [vaping companies are deliberately targeting vaping products at young people](#) by using promotional characters and bright colours on packaging and flavour names resembling sweets.

The sale of nicotine vaping products to under 18s is prohibited across the UK. In response to the ASH survey, [young people aged 11-to-17-years-old reported being able to buy e-cigarettes](#) (PDF) in shops, markets, over the internet or purchased from acquaintances.

Health and behavioural concerns

[Academics have cautioned](#) that the potential long-term health impacts of vaping remain uncertain. There is also concern that [young people may be more susceptible to](#) some of those health impacts. Research suggests that [vaping is associated with an increased incidence of mental health conditions among young people](#); however, there is no evidence to suggest that vaping causes mental ill health.

[School leaders have expressed significant concern about pupils' use of e-cigarettes](#), particularly on school premises, and the resultant effect on behaviour and wellbeing.

Government action on youth vaping

[The government has set out an intention to reduce youth vaping](#), while maintaining access to e-cigarettes for adults using them as smoking cessation aids. In an October 2023 [consultation on tackling youth vaping](#), the government set out several proposals aimed at reducing youth vaping, including:

- restricting vape flavours
- regulating vape packaging and product presentation
- regulating point of sale displays
- restricting the sale of disposable vapes
- introducing an age restriction for non-nicotine vapes
- preventing industry giving out free samples of vapes to children.

1 Background

This briefing provides discussion on vaping in young people in England.

1.1 E-cigarettes and vaping

Electronic cigarettes (also known as e-cigarettes, electronic nicotine delivery system (ENDS), or vaporisers/vapes) work by heating a solution of water, flavouring, propylene glycol (or vegetable glycerine) to create a vapour that the user inhales. E-cigarettes may or may not contain nicotine, which is an addictive substance. The act of using an e-cigarette is often referred to as ‘vaping’.

1 Terminology used in this briefing

Electronic cigarettes (also known as e-cigarettes, electronic nicotine delivery system (ENDS), or vaporisers/vapes) work by heating a solution of water, flavouring, propylene glycol (or vegetable glycerine) and, typically, nicotine to create a vapour that the user inhales. The act of using an e-cigarette is often referred to as ‘vaping’.

Devices tend to consist of a mouthpiece, a battery-powered heating element, a cartridge or refillable tank containing the liquid solution and an atomiser that vaporises the solution when heated.

The term ‘smoking’ or ‘tobacco smoking’ refers to the act of inhaling and exhaling the smoke produced through the burning of tobacco.

Vaping is substantially less harmful than tobacco smoking.¹ However, the health risks of vaping are still being studied, particularly those which occur after long-term use.

The NHS has recommended that vaping is restricted to adults who are trying to quit tobacco smoking, and that non-smokers and young people under 18 do not take up vaping.²

The Library has published a range of briefings which discuss other aspects of vaping, tobacco smoking and relevant government policy:

¹ NHS, [Vaping to quit smoking](#), accessed 12 January 2024

² NHS, [Vaping to quit smoking](#), accessed 12 January 2024

- [The Smokefree 2030 ambition for England](#)
- [Advertising, marketing and promotion of vaping products](#)
- [The regulation of e-cigarettes](#)
- [Statistics on smoking](#)
- [Vaping and health](#)
- [Environmental impact of disposable vapes](#)

1.2 Restrictions on the sale and marketing of e-cigarettes

The [European Union Tobacco Products Directive](#) (TPD) (2014/40/EU) sets out broad provisions on tobacco control. It has been implemented in the UK through [the UK Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016](#).

The Regulations set out requirements on the manufacture, presentation and sale of tobacco and related products, including e-cigarettes. Further information is available in the Library briefing, [The regulation of e-cigarettes](#).

Age restriction on the sale of e-cigarettes in England

The [Nicotine Inhaling Products \(Age of Sale and Proxy Purchasing\) Regulations 2015](#) apply to nicotine products, like e-cigarettes.

[Regulation 2](#) makes the proxy purchasing of nicotine products an offence, while [Regulation 3](#) prohibits the sale of nicotine inhaling products to persons under the age of 18. The Regulations are enforced by local authority Trading Standards.

The Regulations do not apply to non-nicotine vaping products; these fall under [the General Product Safety Regulations 2005](#). Therefore, the sale of non-nicotine vaping products to under 18s is currently permitted in England.³

In May 2023, the Prime Minister announced a commitment to review the rules on selling nicotine-free vapes to under 18s.⁴

³ See, for example comments made by Neil O'Brien, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Hansard, [Under-age vaping](#), HC Deb, 12 July 2023, Vol 736, c455

⁴ [No more free vapes for kids](#) (online), press notice by the Department of Health and Social Care, The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP and Neil O'Brien MP, 30 May 2023, (accessed 15 December 2023)

The sale of non-nicotine vaping products is enforced jointly by Trading Standards and the [Office of Product Safety and Standards](#). These bodies have the power to prosecute companies for placing unsafe products on the market.

Further information is available in other Library briefings:

- Section 2.4 of the Library briefing, [Advertising, marketing and promotion of vaping products](#), advises on compliance and enforcement of vaping product sales.
- Section 4 of the Library briefing, [The regulation of e-cigarettes](#), advises on age restrictions on the sale of vaping products in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Free samples

Currently, in England there is no restriction on marketing firms giving away free samples of nicotine or non-nicotine vapes to children and young people (those under 18). In direct contrast, the free distribution of tobacco products is prohibited under the [Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act 2002](#).

In May 2023, the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, said the Government would “close this legal loophole” at the next legislative opportunity.⁵

Further information on this issue is available in section 2.3 of the Library briefing, [Advertising, marketing and promotion of vaping products](#).

1.3

Health impacts of youth vaping

The Library’s briefing on [Vaping and health](#), provides detailed discussion on the potential health impacts of vaping. Below, we provide discussion on the health implications which are particularly relevant to young people.

Nicotine

The World Health Organization (WHO) cautions against the use of e-cigarettes in children and adolescents on the grounds that nicotine exposure at this time can have long-term, detrimental consequences for brain development and function.⁶ The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that nicotine can:

[...] harm the parts of the brain that control attention, learning, mood, and impulse control. Each time a new memory is created or a new skill is learned, stronger connections – or synapses – are built between brain cells. Young

⁵ [No more free vapes for kids](#) (online), press notice by the Department of Health and Social Care, The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP and Neil O’Brien MP, 30 May 2023, (accessed 15 December 2023)

⁶ Conference of the Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, [Electronic nicotine delivery systems. Report by WHO \(PDF\)](#), September 2014, para 13

people's brains build synapses faster than adult brains. Nicotine changes the way these synapses are formed.⁷

Nicotine is also highly addictive and it can be hard for young people to stop using once they have started.⁸

Mental health

Vaping in young people has been associated with an increased incidence of mental health conditions.

In one systematic review, researchers identified 40 studies examining the prevalence of mental health conditions among adolescents and young adults who use e-cigarettes.⁹ They concluded that e-cigarette use in this demographic is associated with greater mental health problems compared with the non-use of e-cigarettes. Researchers identified an association between e-cigarette use and a range of mental health conditions. This included depression, suicidality, disordered eating, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), impulsivity and perceived stress, with additional limited evidence for an association with anxiety.

The researchers cautioned that the long-term evidence linking vaping to mental ill health was limited and said that further research is needed to better understand how ongoing mental illness affects the uptake, use patterns and cessation of e-cigarette use in adolescents and young adults.

It is important to note that this research considered associations between vaping and mental health conditions; it did not seek to determine if vaping caused mental illness.

The researchers suggested that mental health comorbidities “generally parallel those of combustible cigarette use, with a few exceptions”. They noted that “future e-cigarette prevention and treatment strategies may be enhanced by addressing mental health”.

Over 20,000 US students in grades 6 to 12 (equivalent to ages 11-to-17-years-old) took part in the 2021 National Youth Tobacco Survey, administered by the US Food and Drug Administration and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Among students who reported current use of e-cigarettes, the most cited reason for doing so was “I am feeling anxious, stressed or depressed” (43.4%).¹⁰

⁷ CDC, [Quick Facts on the Risks of E-cigarettes for Kids, Teens, and Young Adults](#), November 2023

⁸ [Vapes | FRANK \(talktofrank.com\)](#), accessed 5 December 2023

⁹ Timothy D Becker, Melanie K Arnold, Vicky Ro, Lily Martin, Timothy R Rice, [Systematic Review of Electronic Cigarette Use \(Vaping\) and Mental Health Comorbidity Among Adolescents and Young Adults](#), *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*, Volume 23, Issue 3, March 2021, Pages 415–425

¹⁰ AS Gentzke and others. [Tobacco Product Use and Associated Factors Among Middle and High School Students — National Youth Tobacco Survey, United States](#), 2021. *MMWR Surveill Summ* 2022;71(No. SS-5):1–29, p2

Aerosol from e-cigarettes

In addition to considering the effects of nicotine on health, researchers have also focused on the aerosol from e-cigarettes, since substances used in e-liquids (which is heated to produce the aerosol) contain respiratory irritants.¹¹ Substances identified in e-cigarette liquids and aerosols include heavy metals, ultrafine particles, volatile organic compounds and other potentially harmful substances.

A 2018 review of the [Public health consequences of e-cigarettes](#) (PDF) by the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found “moderate evidence” of increased “cough and wheeze” symptoms among adolescents who use e-cigarettes as well as an increase in asthma exacerbations.¹²

Illegal vapes

Trading Standards departments within local authorities are responsible for enforcing consumer protection legislation. Trading standards teams in the North East of England reported seizing over 1.4 tonnes of illicit vapes, over a 6 month period in 2023, that did not comply with UK quality and safety regulations (as set out in the [Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016](#)).¹³ It is difficult to determine what substances illegal vapes contain and what effect they may have on a person’s health.

The issue of illegal vapes appears to particularly impact children and young people. Kate Pike, from the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, told The Guardian newspaper that “non-compliant vapes were particularly popular with underage consumers – because they were cheap and could be bought in places that were less likely to check ID”.¹⁴

[A BBC News investigation](#) in May 2023 analysed 18 vapes confiscated from pupils at a secondary school in Worcestershire. It found that “most were illegal and had not gone through any kind of testing before being sold in the UK”. Notably, they contained “high levels of lead, nickel and chromium”.¹⁵

More information on the enforcement of the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016 is set out in the Commons Library briefing paper on [Advertising, marketing and promotion of vaping products](#).

¹¹ A Ratajczak and others. [How close are we to definitively identifying the respiratory health effects of e-cigarettes?](#) Expert Rev Respir Med. 2018 Jul;12(7):549-556.

¹² Committee on the Review of the Health Effects of Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, [Public health consequences of e-cigarettes](#) (PDF), 2018, p19

¹³ Chartered Trading Standards Institute, [News, 1.4 tonnes of illegal vapes seized by North East Trading Standards teams](#), 14 December 2022

¹⁴ Sarah Marsh, [Millions of illegal vapes seized in UK in three years, data shows | Vaping | The Guardian](#), 23 June 2023

¹⁵ [Vaping: High lead and nickel found in illegal vapes - BBC News](#), 23 May 2023

2 Prevalence, patterns and perceptions of youth vaping

2.1 Prevalence of youth vaping

There has been a steady increase in the proportion of young people who are regularly vaping globally. The World Health Organization (WHO) has said that children aged 13-to-15-years-old are using e-cigarettes at higher rates than adults in all WHO regions.¹⁶

The Action on Smoking and Health annual survey

The charity Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) carries out an annual survey on smoking and vaping attitudes and behaviours in young people. [The 2023 ASH Smokefree GB Youth Survey](#) surveyed 2,656 11-to-18-year-olds between March and April 2023.¹⁷

It found that, in 2013, just 0.3% of respondents to the ASH survey reported regular use (more than once a week) of e-cigarettes, compared with 3.7% in 2023. Those reporting occasional use (less than once a week) rose from 3.1% in 2013 to 11.6% in 2023.¹⁸

The International Tobacco Control (ITC) Policy Evaluation Project

The [International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project](#) (ITC) is an international cohort study of tobacco use. As part of this project, the [ITC Youth Tobacco and Vaping Study](#) surveyed young people aged 16-to-19-years-old in the US, Canada and England to assess the uptake of e-cigarettes and other novel nicotine products.¹⁹ This briefing includes discussion on the findings for England, which were based on 32,824 responses.

¹⁶ WHO, [Urgent action needed to protect children and prevent the uptake of e-cigarettes](#), 14 December 2023

¹⁷ ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023

¹⁸ ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023, p3

¹⁹ University of Waterloo School of Public Health Sciences, [International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project. Trends in smoking and vaping among young people: Findings from the ITC youth survey](#) (PDF), May 2023. Eight surveys (“waves”) were carried out between 2017 and 2022, capturing 104,467 responses across the US, Canada and England. The report summarises findings from these eight waves, with a focus on the 2022 wave. In this report, we focus on the findings for England,

The ITC survey reported on vaping in the past 30 days. This had risen steadily from 8% in 2017, to 24% in 2022.²⁰ There was a noticeable dip from 14% of 16-to-19-year-olds in February 2020 to 11% in August 2020; the timing might suggest that this drop was because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Office for National Statistics

The Office for National Statistics has published [data on e-cigarette use in Great Britain](#). It showed that, in 2022, 16-to-24-year-olds were more likely to report daily or occasional vaping than all other age groups. There was a statistically significant²¹ increase in daily or occasional vaping compared with 2021 rates, rising from 11.1% in 2021 to 15.5% in 2022 in this age group.

The 2022 increase in e-cigarette usage among 16-to-24-year-olds was due to changes in rates for young women. The percentage of women aged 16-to-24-years-old reporting daily or occasional vaping increased from 9.0% in 2021 to 18.9% in 2022. Among men aged 16-to-24-years-old there was a small decrease from 13.0% down to 12.3%.

2.2

Is vaping a gateway to tobacco smoking?

According to ASH, 2.3% of young people who have never smoked, currently use e-cigarettes.²² While there is growing consensus in the public health and medical field that tobacco cigarette users should switch to vaping as a means of risk reduction, it is recommended that those who have never smoked should not vape.²³

There is concern that, in this group, e-cigarettes could act as a “gateway” to tobacco smoking for young people. There are behavioural similarities between tobacco smoking and vaping. This underpins fears that vaping could renormalise tobacco smoking while undoing the decades-long work that has gone into making smoking socially unacceptable.

The concerns are that young people with no prior smoking history may take up vaping before eventually transitioning into tobacco smoking.

Evidence

These concerns, however, have not been evidenced by tobacco smoking rates among young people. If vaping were acting as a gateway, an increase in

which captured 32,824 responses. Further detail on the methodology is available in [a series of technical reports](#).

²⁰ University of Waterloo and International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project, [Trends in smoking and vaping among young people. Findings from the ITC youth survey](#) (PDF), May 2023, p13

²¹ Meaning we can be confident that there was a change in prevalence.

²² ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023, p5

²³ See, for example; British Heart Foundation, [Is vaping safe](#), accessed 11 January 2024; Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, [Policy briefing: Vaping in young people](#), last modified 6 June 2023

tobacco smoking would have been expected. However, this has not been demonstrated in data for England.

[Data published by NHS Digital](#) shows a continued decline in smoking prevalence among pupils (aged 11-to-15-years-old) since 1996.²⁴

The ASH survey results show some fluctuation of smoking prevalence in young people over the last ten years; however, they show an overall decrease in prevalence from 6% in 2013 to 3.6% in 2023.²⁵

At present, there is no data available for England that can conclude discussions on the gateway effect in young people. The ASH survey includes data on the proportion of young people who “tried an e-cigarette before [they] first tried smoking a real cigarette”. This has stayed relatively stable since 2017 and was reported at 22% in 2023.²⁶ This finding might be indicative of a gateway effect, however:

- the data reports on young people who “tried” an e-cigarette and not those who were regularly using them,
- the findings may be indicative of e-cigarette use prior to tobacco smoking, but it cannot demonstrate a causal link.

However, a person having tried a cigarette is not the same as them replacing vaping with tobacco smoking.

Vaping is still relatively new, so it is likely that any potential effect on smoking rates may emerge in the coming years.

The Library briefing, [Vaping and health](#), provides discussion on the scientific evidence surrounding gateway concerns and the role of e-cigarettes in risk reduction.

2.3 Young peoples’ reasons for vaping

Young peoples’ motivations for vaping vary.

In the ASH survey, 48% of respondents said they had tried vaping before but had never smoked tobacco. Of this group:

- 54% began vaping “just to give it a try”.
- 18% said “other people use them so I join in”.²⁷

²⁴ NHS Digital, [Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England, 2021](#), publication date 6 September 2022

²⁵ ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023, p6

²⁶ ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023, p5

²⁷ ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023, p7

ASH reported that use of e-cigarettes is mainly confined to former or current tobacco smokers:

- 88% of ‘never smokers’ had never tried an e-cigarette, or were unaware of them.
- Of those using e-cigarettes more than once a week, 36% were current smokers and 26% were former smokers.

Respondents to the ITC survey (ages 16-to-19-years) reported fifteen reasons for vaping. The four most popular reasons were:²⁸

- For the flavour (43%)
- For fun / I like it (43%)
- To deal with stress or anxiety (39%)
- Curiosity / to try something new (29%)²⁹

The [2021 National Youth Tobacco Survey](#), administered by the US Food and Drug Administration and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, surveyed over 20,000 US students in grades 6 to 12 (equivalent to ages 11-to-17-years). Among students in the United States who had ever used an e-cigarette (7.6%):

- 57.8% did so because “a friend used them”
- 47.6% did so because they were “curious about them”
- 25.1% did so because they were “feeling anxious, stressed, or depressed”
- 23.3% did so “to get a high or buzz from nicotine”³⁰

2.4

Vaping as a smoking cessation tool for young people

There is limited evidence to suggest young people are using vaping as a means of smoking cessation.

²⁸ The survey received 4,267 responses to this question for England.

²⁹ University of Waterloo School of Public Health Sciences, [International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project, Trends in smoking and vaping among young people: Findings from the ITC youth survey](#) (PDF), May 2023, p80

³⁰ Gentzke AS, Wang TW, Cornelius M, et al. [Tobacco Product Use and Associated Factors Among Middle and High School Students — National Youth Tobacco Survey, United States, 2021](#). MMWR Surveill Summ 2022;71(No. SS-5)

The [ITC Youth Tobacco and Vaping Study](#) report shows a decrease, between 2017 and 2022, in the number of 16-to-19-year-olds who vaped in the past 30 days who also currently smoked or experimentally smoked.³¹

One of the survey's questions asked respondents to indicate their reasons for vaping.³² While the survey questionnaires did include the options "to cut down the number of cigarettes I smoke", "to help me quit smoking cigarettes" and "to help me stay quit", the report did not include responses to these questions in its analysis.³³

The ASH survey did not demonstrate that vaping has a significant role in smoking cessation among young people:

- 1.7% of those who had ever smoked tobacco said they used e-cigarettes because they were trying to quit smoking.
- 6.4% of those who had ever smoked tobacco said they used e-cigarettes instead of smoking.³⁴

2.5

Is vaping the new smoking?

One of the primary concerns with youth vaping is that many young people who have never smoked are vaping. This is despite recommendations from public health professionals that vaping should only be taken up by tobacco smokers who are trying to quit smoking.³⁵

There has been an overall decline in the prevalence of tobacco smoking among young people since 1996.³⁶

The ASH survey (of 11-to-18-year-olds) demonstrated some fluctuation in the prevalence of tobacco smoking over the last ten years; however, it showed an overall decrease in prevalence from 6% in 2013 to 3.6% in 2023.³⁷ [Data published by NHS Digital](#) shows an overall decline since 1996, when 22% of pupils (aged 11-to-15-years) were current smokers compared to 3% in 2021.³⁸

³¹ University of Waterloo and International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project, [Trends in smoking and vaping among young people. Findings from the ITC youth survey](#) (PDF), May 2023, p24

³² University of Waterloo and International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project, [Trends in smoking and vaping among young people. Findings from the ITC youth survey](#) (PDF), May 2023, p80

³³ ITC, [Youth and young adult tobacco and vaping survey. Wave 6 survey \(Aug 2022\)](#) (PDF), 15 July 2022, p48

³⁴ ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023, p9

³⁵ DHSC, [Chief Medical Officer for England on vaping](#), 30 May 2023

³⁶ NHS Digital, [Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England, 2021](#), publication date 6 September 2022

³⁷ ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023, p6

³⁸ NHS Digital, [Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England, 2021](#), publication date 6 September 2022

There has been a steady increase in the proportion of young people who are regularly vaping. However, at the same time, the proportion of young people who are regularly vaping has increased. For further information, see section 2.1 of this briefing.

2.6 Young peoples' perceptions of vaping

The [ITC Youth Tobacco and Vaping Study](#) explored respondents' (aged 16-to-19-years) perception of vaping in a series of questions.³⁹ Most respondents did not perceive vaping to be fashionable. When asked what extent they agreed with the statement "vapes look cool", 54% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 20% agreed or strongly agreed.⁴⁰

The survey also showed that respondents felt that most young people generally approved of or were indifferent to vaping. A question asked, "do people your age approve or disapprove of using e-cigarettes/vaping?": 51% approved or strongly approved, while 17% somewhat or strongly disapproved.

Young peoples' perception of vaping harms

Respondents to the [ITC Youth Tobacco and Vaping Study](#) also demonstrated some awareness of health harms and risks associated with vaping.

84% of respondents (aged 16-to-19-years) acknowledged there was some degree of harm associated with daily vaping.⁴¹ Within this group, 28% identified this practice as "somewhat harmful" and 16% said this was "extremely harmful". 3% said daily vaping was "not at all harmful", while 14% said they didn't know how harmful it was.

52% thought that e-cigarettes or vaping would be harmful to health after one year or less of use.⁴²

Respondents largely believed that vaping had not made any difference to their health. 73% and 69% reported that vaping had made no difference to

³⁹ University of Waterloo and International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project, [Trends in smoking and vaping among young people. Findings from the ITC youth survey](#) (PDF), May 2023, p79-89

⁴⁰ University of Waterloo and International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project, [Trends in smoking and vaping among young people. Findings from the ITC youth survey](#) (PDF), May 2023, p82

⁴¹ University of Waterloo and International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project, [Trends in smoking and vaping among young people. Findings from the ITC youth survey](#) (PDF), May 2023, p85

⁴² University of Waterloo and International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project, [Trends in smoking and vaping among young people. Findings from the ITC youth survey](#) (PDF), May 2023, p86

their physical and mental health respectively. In fact, some said that vaping had made their mental health “a little better” (13%) or “much better” (3%).⁴³

The ASH survey highlighted that young people might not be completely aware that e-cigarettes are less harmful than tobacco cigarettes.

The proportion of young people (aged 11-to-17-years) that (correctly) identified e-cigarettes as being less harmful than conventional cigarettes fell from 73% in 2013 to 33% in 2023.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the proportion of young people that (incorrectly) reported that e-cigarettes are “about the same or more harmful” than conventional cigarettes, rose from 13% in 2013 to 54% in 2023.⁴⁵

⁴³ University of Waterloo and International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project, [Trends in smoking and vaping among young people, Findings from the ITC youth survey](#) (PDF), May 2023, p90

⁴⁴ ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023, p9

⁴⁵ ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023, p9

3

The use of disposable e-cigarettes

Many stakeholders have commented on the role of disposable e-cigarettes (or vapes) in facilitating young peoples' vaping practices.

Disposable e-cigarettes are non-rechargeable devices that typically come pre-filled with e-liquid. They are intended for single use and are discarded once the e-liquid has been used up.

Reusable e-cigarettes incorporate a more powerful battery that can be charged and tank system that users can refill with e-liquid. Further information on the design and function of disposable and reusable e-cigarettes is available in section 1.1 of the Library's briefing, [The regulation of e-cigarettes](#).

The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID), a government unit within the UK Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), noted that while "disposables are more expensive to use in the long term, they do not require any initial outlay for equipment and are relatively cheap to buy".⁴⁶ This may be of particular relevance to young people who are likely less able to spend significant sums of money on vaping than adults.

In the [2023 ASH Smokefree GB Youth Survey](#), 69% of young people (aged 11-to-17-years) said that they most frequently used disposable, single-use vape.⁴⁷ In the same survey, ASH some correlation between increased use of disposable vaping products and higher rates of youth vaping.⁴⁸ However, ASH did caution that the findings could not prove that this increase in use of disposable products had actually caused the increase in youth vaping.

There are also concerns about the environmental impact of disposable vaping products, particularly when they are improperly discarded. A Library debate pack, [Environmental impact of disposable vapes](#), provides further information on this aspect.

⁴⁶ Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, [Youth vaping: call for evidence](#), April 2023

⁴⁷ ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023, p1

⁴⁸ ASH, [Use of e-cigarettes \(vapes\) among young people in Great Britain](#) (PDF), June 2023, p2

4 Government proposals on youth vaping

4.1 Call for evidence on youth vaping (April to June 2023)

Between April and June 2023, OHID held a [call for evidence on youth vaping](#). It sought evidence on identifying opportunities to reduce the number of children (under 18-years) accessing and using vape products, while ensuring they remained easily available as a cessation aid for adult smokers.

Specifically, it called for evidence on the following themes:

1. Building regulatory compliance: ensuring only adult smokers can access legally compliant vape products.
2. The appeal of vape products: how the appearance and product characteristics of vapes may attract children.
3. Marketing and promotion of vape products: how the marketing and promotion of vapes may attract children.
4. The role of social media: the impact of social media on the uptake and use of vaping by children.
5. Effective educational approaches to prevent the uptake of vaping by children.
6. The impact of vapes on the environment, particularly disposable products.
7. Understanding the vape market.⁴⁹

Responses to the call for evidence

OHID published [an analysis of responses](#) in October 2023.⁵⁰ The call for evidence received 441 submissions; 324 (74%) were from individual citizens, and 117 (27%) were from organisations.

OHID noted that many responses were based on lived experience or opinions, while others included data or research to support their submission. Respondents suggested that there had been an increase in vape use among

⁴⁹ OHID, [Youth vaping: call for evidence](#), published 11 April 2023

⁵⁰ OHID, [Youth vaping call for evidence analysis](#), 4 October 2023

children and noted the impact of marketing and packaging on making vaping attractive to them.

Regulatory compliance

On regulatory compliance, the call for evidence highlighted several concerns, including underage sale of vape products and counterfeit and illegal products and packaging.

Respondents put forward suggested interventions to limit children's access to vapes including mandatory age verification for sales, or a licensing scheme for retailers.

Appeal of vape products to children

On the appeal of vape products, some respondents said that vape packaging was appealing to children, noting the use of colour and packaging resembling that of sweet brands. Some respondents also said that the range and type of vape flavours, such as sweet or fruity flavours, made vaping more attractive to young people.

In order to mitigate these concerns, some respondents said that flavours should be limited or banned, and the names of flavours should be restricted. Standardised packaging was also put forward as a means of reducing appeal.

Marketing and promotion of vape products

On the marketing and promotion of vape products, some respondents pointed out the role of vape displays in shops in increasing appeal to children. Others highlighted online advertising of vape products by social media influencers, or sponsorship by sports brands. To mitigate this, some respondents said there should be better enforcement of current advertising regulations and a clarification of restrictions set by the Advertising Standards Authority.

On the role of social media, respondents reported that vaping content that could attract children is visible and promoted through a variety of social media platforms. There was also mention of influencers promoting vaping products, often without disclosing financial relationships with vaping brands.

OHID noted that when asked about interventions to ensure vapes are not targeted to children through social media, most responses did not provide any suggested intervention. The most suggested intervention was to regulate social media platforms.

The analysis of responses also includes discussion of vapes' environmental impact, the wider vape market and educational approaches to prevent the uptake of vaping by children.

Government response to the call for evidence

The government's response to the call for evidence was published in its policy paper, [Stopping the start: our new plan to create a smokefree generation](#), in October 2023.

The paper set out the government's proposals on tobacco and vaping control, notable a widely reported intention to introduce a generational ban on the sale of tobacco by raising the smoking age by one year, every year. Neil O'Brien, then a Minister at the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), summarised the proposals in a written statement in October 2023:

1. Plans to bring forward legislation to make it an offence to sell tobacco products to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009. In effect, this would mean that the age of sale of tobacco products will increase by one year each year, so that children turning 14 years old or younger this year will never be legally sold tobacco, phasing out tobacco over time and preventing future generations from ever taking up smoking.
2. A package to support current smokers to quit smoking, including by more than doubling funding for stop smoking services with £70 million additional funding per year, and £5 million this year and £15 million each year after for anti-smoking marketing campaigns.
3. Measures to tackle youth vaping. While the legal age of sale for vapes is 18 (and will remain so), youth vaping has tripled in the last 3 years. The government announced that it will consult on measures to reduce the appeal and availability of vapes to children, including restricting flavours, regulating point-of-sale displays, regulating vape packaging and restricting the sale of disposable vapes.
4. Plans to strengthen enforcement, including £30 million new funding each year for enforcement agencies.⁵¹

A policy paper by the DHSC sets out the government's proposal to address youth vaping in more detail:

- restricting vape flavours and their descriptions, to make them less attractive to children.
- regulating vape packaging and product presentation to ensure that neither devices nor packaging targets children.
- regulating point-of-sale displays to keep them away from children.
- restricting the sale of disposable vapes to reduce their environmental impact.

⁵¹ Hansard, [Statement HCWS1059: Stopping the start: our new plan to create a smokefree generation](#), 16 October 2023

- introducing an age restriction for non-nicotine vapes, which are not subject to the same product standards and age restrictions as nicotine-containing vapes. The sale of non-nicotine vapes to under-18s would be prohibited. For further information on these restrictions, see section 1.1 of this briefing.
- exploring further restrictions for other nicotine consumer products such as nicotine pouches.
- preventing industry giving out free samples of vapes to children.

4.2 The Tobacco and Vapes Bill

In October 2023, [Prime Minister Rishi Sunak set out the government's plans to create a 'smokefree generation'](#).⁵²

Proposed new legislation would make it an offence for anyone born on or after 1 January 2009 to be sold tobacco products. This would effectively raise the smoking age by one year, every year, until it applies to the whole population. The government said, "this has the potential to phase out smoking in young people almost completely as early as 2040".⁵³

Further detail on the proposed legislation was set out in the [King's Speech \(November 2023\)](#), where the government said it would also restrict the sale and marketing of e-cigarettes to children.⁵⁴

For further information on the government's work on reducing the prevalence of tobacco smoking and the government's 'smokefree' policies, see the Library briefing, [The smokefree 2030 ambition for England](#).

⁵² Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street and The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, [Prime Minister to create 'smokefree generation' by ending cigarette sales to those born on or after 1 January 2009](#), 4 October 2023

⁵³ Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street and The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, [Prime Minister to create 'smokefree generation' by ending cigarette sales to those born on or after 1 January 2009](#), 4 October 2023

⁵⁴ The Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street and His Majesty The King, [The King's Speech 2023](#), 7 November 2023

4.3

Consultation on creating a smokefree generation and tackling youth vaping (October - December 2023)

After publishing its policy paper, [Stopping the start: our new plan to create a smokefree generation](#) (October 2023), the government launched another consultation on [creating a smokefree generation and tackling youth vaping](#). With agreement from the devolved administration, DHSC led the consultation on a UK-wide basis.⁵⁵

The government described the consultation as “a set of proposals to reduce youth vaping, ensuring we get the balance right between protecting children and supporting adult smokers to quit”.⁵⁶

The consultation was open between 12 October and 6 December 2023.

The consultation sought views on three areas, which were proposed in the [Stopping the start: our new plan to create a smokefree generation](#) policy paper (October 2023). For all of these areas, new legislation would be needed:

1. The smokefree generation policy and its scope to inform future legislation. This policy, announced in October 2023, would make it an offence for anyone born on or after 1 January 2009 to be sold tobacco products.
2. Tackling youth vaping, taking steps to build on England’s [analysis of the youth vaping call for evidence](#).
3. Introducing new powers for local authorities in England and Wales to issue fixed penalty notices to enforce [age of sale legislation](#) of tobacco products and vapes.

The DHSC is considering feedback to the consultation.⁵⁷

The government said the consultation would help to inform the forthcoming Tobacco and Vaping Bill, announced in the King’s Speech in November 2023.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ DHSC, [Creating a smokefree generation and tackling youth vaping: your views](#), updated 20 October 2023

⁵⁶ DHSC, [Stopping the start: our new plan to create a smokefree generation](#), published 4 October 2023

⁵⁷ DHSC, [Creating a smokefree generation and tackling youth vaping: your views](#), published 12 October 2023

⁵⁸ Steve Brine MP, [Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, Letter to Victoria Atkins MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care](#) (PDF), 23 November 2023

5 Vaping in schools

5.1 Concerns about vaping in schools

NASUWT, a teachers' union, engaged with 4,000 members in September 2023 as part of its [Vaping in Schools survey](#).⁵⁹ The survey highlighted a range of behavioural problems associated with vaping in schools. Teachers raised concern about pupils leaving lessons to vape in toilets, and pupils' use of e-cigarettes as a means of emotional self-regulation.

Pupil toilets appeared to play a significant role, as teachers reported that pupils were regularly vaping there. Some suggested it was “impossible to control [vaping] without policing the toilets, which has privacy issues”. Others noted that non-vaping pupils were “afraid” to go to the toilets and were reducing fluid intake to avoid needing to do so.

Teachers also said that vaping wasn't limited to “rebellious” pupils, and that those “considered to be more studious” were also vaping. There was a suggestion that “students who would not have tried smoking are willing to try vaping due to the flavours and smell”.

Teachers raised concerns about pupils who were “admitting to addiction but refusing support from external agencies, and an escalation from vaping nicotine to THC⁶⁰ and marijuana”.

There were also concerning reports of pupils facing pressure to buy or sell vapes. Teachers also reported that vaping commonly caused fire alarms to go off, disrupting teaching and learning.

The [independent, government-commissioned Khan review](#) (a review of the government's smokefree ambition, June 2022) also noted concerns from school and college leaders about vaping:

I have also heard from school and college leaders that vaping has become a problem in their playgrounds and common rooms. They say vapes have become too easily available to young people under 18. They have seen a rise in related disciplinary action and fear that numbers will rise further. They want to see restrictions on accessibility, in shops and online, and to reduce the marketing appeal of vapes to young people. They also believe the school

⁵⁹ NASUWT, [The Teachers' Union. Rise in vaping in schools is failure of Government](#), 13 October 2023

⁶⁰ Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the main psychoactive ingredient in cannabis.

curriculum should be adopted to include sessions about vaping, alongside smoking and alcohol.⁶¹

Further information about the review is available in the Library's briefing, [The smokefree 2030 ambition for England](#).

5.2 Government comment on vaping in schools

The government has responded to concerns about vaping in schools by referring to a statutory obligation for each school to have a behaviour policy in place. The government has referred to having strengthened the Department for Education's (DfE) [Behaviour in schools guidance](#), which addresses sanctions that will be imposed for misbehaviour, including vaping anywhere in school.⁶²

The government noted that schools have the autonomy to decide which items should be banned from their premises, including e-cigarettes or vapes. The government also said that school staff can search pupils for banned items, as set out in DfE guidance on [Searching, screening and confiscation in schools](#).

The government is planning to include a specific reference to the dangers of e-cigarettes in the curriculum for relationships, sex and health education (RSHE), which is currently being reviewed.⁶³ The [DfE's statutory guidance for RSHE](#) already requires pupils to be taught about harmful substances and associated risks. Teacher training modules, which have been made available by the DfE, include material on e-cigarettes.⁶⁴

⁶¹ OHID, [Independent review of Smokefree 2030 policies: terms of reference](#), published 9 March 2022

⁶² [PQ6916](#), 20 December 2023

⁶³ [PQ6916](#), 20 December 2023

⁶⁴ [PQ6916](#), 20 December 2023

6 Views on youth vaping

6.1 Action on Smoking and Health (ASH)

ASH has welcomed government action on youth vaping but has suggested that more stringent measures are needed to address the issue.⁶⁵

ASH has called on the government to prohibit branding that appeals to young people, require vaping products to be kept out of sight and reach in retailers, and introduce a tax on disposables vapes to reduce their accessibility to young people.⁶⁶

6.2 Health organisations

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH)

[The RCPCH, the UK's professional body for paediatricians, has set out its position on vaping in young people in a policy briefing.](#)⁶⁷ It expressed concern about the increase in youth vaping, and identified marketing and easy access to disposable vapes as contributing factors.

The RCPCH made several recommendations to prevent uptake and protect young people from the harms of vaping. It called for the government to require plain packaging of vaping products and ban free samples of nicotine products.

It also called for the government to extend the regulatory framework for nicotine vaping products to non-nicotine vaping products, under the [Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016](#) (TRPR). Further information on the TRPR is available in the Library briefing, [The regulation of e-cigarettes](#).

The RCPCH called on the government to restrict advertising of vaping products to medicinal use as a smoking cessation aid only, and ban disposable vapes to reduce their accessibility to young people and environmental impact.

⁶⁵ ASH, [ASH response to the government announcement on youth vaping](#), 30 May 2023

⁶⁶ ASH, [ASH response to ONS figures on smoking and vaping](#), 5 September 2023

⁶⁷ RCPCH, [Policy briefing: vaping in young people](#), 6 June 2023

The RCPCH concluded:

- As we do not know the long-term effects of vaping, paediatricians should discourage its use in young people and take a proactive approach in preventing uptake.
- Young people who have never smoked should also be discouraged from using vapes.⁶⁸

The British Medical Association (BMA)

The BMA, a UK trade union for doctors, has welcomed proposals to address youth vaping, highlighting the importance of “protecting children and young people from starting to vape and taking vital steps to safeguard the health of future generations”.⁶⁹

The British Paediatric Respiratory Society (BPRS)

The BPRS, a specialty group overseen by the RCPCH, expressed concern about the use of disposable e-cigarettes by children and young people and has supported calls for an outright ban on the sale of these products.⁷⁰

Its concerns centred on the potential health risks of vaping to young people, and the environmental impact of disposable vapes.

The World Health Organization (WHO)

The WHO has expressed concern at e-cigarettes being “aggressively marketed to young people”.⁷¹

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, has objected to “kids [being] recruited and trapped at an early age to use e-cigarettes”, and has urged countries to “implement strict measures to prevent uptake to protect their citizens, especially their children and young people”.

6.3 The retail and vaping sector

The UK Vaping Industry Association (UKVIA)

UKVIA, a trade association representing vaping businesses, said it had been “calling on government for many years to do more to keep vapes out of the

⁶⁸ RCPCH, [Policy briefing: vaping in young people](#), 6 June 2023

⁶⁹ BMA, [BMA welcomes consultation aiming to create a ‘smokefree generation’](#), 12 October 2023

⁷⁰ BPRS, [Statement from the British Paediatric Respiratory Society Supporting the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health’s Call for an Outright Ban on Disposable E-cigarettes \(PDF\)](#), 31 May 2023

⁷¹ WHO, [Urgent action needed to protect children and prevent the uptake of e-cigarettes](#), 14 December 2023

hands of children” and has recommended higher on-the-spot fines for retailers who sell vapes to children.⁷²

However, it warned against a ban on disposable or flavoured vapes, which it called a “lifeline for former adult smokers”.⁷³

UKVIA has also called for further regulation on branding and packaging, which it says “protects against vape products getting into the hands of those under the legal age”. However, it said plain packaging should not be mandated as it could imply that vaping was as harmful as tobacco smoking:

[...] such a move would just put vaping in the same bracket as smoking at a time when we know that misperceptions of the relative harm between the two categories is discouraging adult smokers to quit using vaping.⁷⁴

The Independent British Vape Trade Association (IBVTA)

The IBVTA, another trade association representing vaping businesses, has expressed broad support for proposals to address youth vaping but has cautioned that this must be balanced against protecting access for tobacco cessation support.⁷⁵

The IBVTA also believes there is a “clear association between the sale of illegal vapes and sales to young people” and has called for additional resources to be given to Trading Standards⁷⁶ to strengthen enforcement.⁷⁷

Gillian Golden, IBVTA’s Chief Executive Officer, strongly condemned businesses that have taken the advantage of the “legal loophole” on the giving of free vape samples to children.⁷⁸

The Association of Convenience Stores (ACS)

The ACS, which represents local shops, has called for further action to ensure that vaping products are never sold or used by children. It said that better enforcement of current and future regulation was needed and called for Trading Standards to be better funded so it can carry out more local enforcement against retailers that facilitate underage sales.⁷⁹

⁷² UKVIA, [UKVIA statement following Government announcement of 8-week consultation on vaping in the UK](#), accessed 29 December 2023

⁷³ UKVIA, [Press release: research shows adult vapers rely on flavours and disposable vapes as government considers bans to address youth vaping](#), accessed 29 December 2023

⁷⁴ UKVIA, [Statement by the UKVIA re: Action on e-cigarette packaging aimed at children](#), accessed 2 January 2024

⁷⁵ IBVTA, [IBVTA welcomes tobacco phase out but highlights role of vapes as smoking cessation tool](#), 4 October 2023

⁷⁶ Trading Standards are local authority departments that enforce consumer protection legislation.

⁷⁷ IBVTA, [IBVTA responds to Government announcement on free vape product samples for children](#), 30 May 2023

⁷⁸ IBVTA, [IBVTA responds to Government announcement on free vape product samples for children](#), 30 May 2023

⁷⁹ ACS, [Government sets out options for further vape and tobacco restrictions](#), 12 October 2023

6.4

Other stakeholders

The Local Government Association (LGA)

The LGA, which represents local councils in England and Wales, has expressed concern about the marketing of vaping products that feature designs and flavours which could be said to appeal to young people. It is calling for:

- vapes to be sold in standardised packaging and kept out of sight behind the counter.
- the legal loophole permitting free vaping samples to be given to children, to be closed.
- the DHSC to liaise with other government departments responsible for other age-restricted products and “align their policies/messages to stop confusion among consumers and businesses”.⁸⁰

The LGA suggest that vapes should only be used as an aid to quit smoking, and that sanctions should be tougher for retailers who persistently sell vapes to children.⁸¹

The Children’s Commissioner for England

Dame Rachel de Souza, Children’s Commissioner for England, expressed concern about the prevalence of youth vaping, and the associated risk of dependency and ill health.⁸²

She welcomed the government’s intention to close the loophole on free vaping samples and the introduction of the new illicit vape enforcement squad. However, she said stricter regulations was needed to prevent more children becoming dependent on vaping products.

NASUWT, the Teachers’ Union

NASUWT has called on the government to take further measures to protect children from vaping associated harms.⁸³ NASUWT highlighted concerns about the impact of vaping on young peoples’ behaviour and performance in schools.

Dr Patrick Roach, General Secretary of NASUWT said underage vape sales needed to be addressed. He also said that the marketing of nicotine products to children and young people through the use of sweet flavours and bright

⁸⁰ LGA, [Debate on electronic use, House of Commons, 29 June 2023](#), published 28 June 2023

⁸¹ LGA, [Debate on electronic cigarette use, House of Commons, 29 June 2023](#), 28 June 2023

⁸² Children’s Commissioner, [The Children’s Commissioner’s response to ‘Youth vaping: call for evidence’](#), 9 June 2023

⁸³ NASUWT, [Rise in vaping in schools is a failure of government](#), 13 October 2023

packaging needed to be stopped, and a ban on disposable vapes should be considered.

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