

Update to 2019 HWBB position on vaping

Office of the Director of Public Health



1.0 Background

Smoking is the primary cause of preventable illness and premature death, accounting for approximately 79,000 deaths a year in England. While smoking rates in both Plymouth and England have been dropping for decades, the current rate in Plymouth [2021] is still 15.5% compared to the rate for England of 13.0%. As the rate continues to drop, the challenges of successfully engaging a smaller, more heavily dependent group of people who smoke becomes greater. This group tend to be poorer and live in our most deprived areas. We need to continue to use a wide variety of approaches if we are to maintain momentum on driving down rates of smoking.

One of these approaches involves the use of vaping. Millions of people are using vaping to help them stop smoking and this presents a major opportunity to achieve population level reductions in rates of smoking in Plymouth. A public health, evidence based approach involves careful consideration of this technology to maximise any opportunities, while identifying and mitigating any significant risks.

2.0 Opportunities

Public Health advice (to the 38,000 people in Plymouth who currently smoke) is that switching from smoking tobacco to vaping is a good idea. We have now established service based offers of vaping and are seeing successes, including with the target group of poorer people living in our most deprived areas, who tend to have higher rates of smoking.

But the public tend to overestimate the relative risk of vaping compared to smoking and this can present a barrier to understanding the role that vaping can have in helping people to stop smoking and in improving their health. People need a trusted source of accurate and consistent advice and support to enable them to making a successful quit attempt.

Local stop smoking services ([One You Plymouth](#)) have now established a 'Swap to Stop' vape offer, which combines vaping with specialist behavioural support. This involves providing a choice of a 5 week vape starter kit alongside traditional prescribed pharmacology. This is working: people we are engaging who include a vape in their support to stop smoking are much more likely to be successful.

We are also transforming the support we provide to people with more complex and challenging lives, through a 'No Strings Attached' vape offer. This involves working with local complex needs organisations, Like Plymouth Alliance member organisations and Health Inclusion Pathway, Plymouth to make an offer of easy access to a vape starter kit and optional follow up support by our routine stop smoking services if people want it. Services tell us that this is successfully engaging many people who had not previously considered stopping smoking.

3.0 Concerns

As with any technology that large numbers of people are using, careful consideration of the risks it could pose and the control of risks that are significant is important.

The risk profile of regulated vaping has not significantly changed since 2019. Current national government advice is that:

- In the short and medium term, vaping poses a small fraction of the risks of smoking
- Vaping is not risk-free, particularly for people who have never smoked
- Significantly lower exposure to harmful substances from vaping compared with smoking
- Similar or higher exposure to harmful substances from vaping compared with not using nicotine products
- No significant increase of toxicant biomarkers after short-term secondhand exposure to vaping among people who do not smoke or vape^B

3.1 Use by Children

A significant area of concern relates to the potential impact of vaping on children and young people. While increased experimentation with vaping is occurring among children, this does not appear to be acting as a gateway, leading them into smoking at a population level. National government have introduced stringent controls on the age of sale (over 18s) to mitigate risks associated with children and vaping. This is a dynamic situation and we will continue to review and respond to new evidence as it emerges. Both in Plymouth and nationally, smoking rates among both children and adults have continued to drop while vaping has grown in popularity.

Latest national research from Action on Smoking and Health shows that, In March/April 2023 the proportion of children experimenting with vaping had grown by 50% year on year, from one in thirteen to one in nine. Children's awareness of promotion of vapes has also grown, particularly in shops where more than half of all children report seeing e-cigarettes being promoted, and online where nearly a third report e-cigarette promotion. Only one in five children now say they never see vapes promoted, down from 31% last year. It is an offence to sell e-cigarettes to children under 18 in the United Kingdom.

Plymouth School Health Related Behaviour Survey (Year 8 and Year 10)

2018: 25% of pupils responded that they had tried using an e-cigarette

2022: 29% of pupils responded they had vaped (tried an e-cigarette)

For 2022 this was broken down as:

Never used: 71%

Tried once or twice: 14%

Sometimes (monthly) 6%

Quite often (weekly) 3%

Most days (6%)

Females were consistently reporting higher use than males

The 2023 ASH Youth Survey

48% said they bought them from shops

46% of young people aged 11 to 17 said that they were given products by friends.

7.6%% said they bought them online

Disposable models (which are pre-filled with liquid and used only once) were the most popular type of vaping device in the 2022 ASH-Youth survey. These were used by 52.8% of 11 to 18 year olds who currently vaped, and 18.7% used tank models (which are reusable and rechargeable kits that users can refill with liquid). This was a stark difference from previous years, where tank models were the most popular type of vaping device. For example, in 2021, only 7.8% of current vapers reported using disposable models, whereas 41% used tank models.

Trading Standards across the United Kingdom are increasingly finding that non-compliant vapes and underage sales is one of their top demands on their work.

Vaping and Cannabis

Use of vape devices with illegal drugs controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act is a relatively small percentage of young people who use vapes

Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the principal psychoactive constituent of the cannabis plant. Forms of this are available to use in vapes as e-liquids. This compound falls under the Misuse of Drugs Act.

Use is by a relatively small number of young people – often amongst those who are already or at risk of engaging in higher risk behaviour.

Specific actions involving partners across the city seek to respond to the impact of this in regard to risks and harm experienced by young people themselves as well as disruption of supply and enforcement are in place.

3.2 Regulations and control of E-cigarette marketing

Marketing of e-cigarettes is an extensive, successful and developing field. This presents issues because marketing could potentially mislead people and target children. England has some of the most stringent regulations in the world covering the marketing of e-cigarettes.

3.3 Involvement of the tobacco industry

The e-cigarette market is emerging and many small to medium sized manufacturers are independent of the tobacco industry. However, as with any new industry, these companies are consolidating over time. With conventional tobacco sales in decline in established markets and e-cigarette sales growing, the tobacco industry has begun to launch its own products as well as taking over existing manufacturers. Plymouth City Council have signed the Local Government Declaration on Tobacco Control, which includes a pledge to recognise and apply our responsibilities under the WHO framework convention on Tobacco Control. Plymouth City Council do not have a partnership of any kind with any tobacco company and do not knowingly promote or supply their products.

4.0 Current Activity

Plymouth City Council commission Livewell Southwest to deliver an integrated health improvement service for the local population [One You Plymouth <https://www.oneyouplymouth.co.uk/>]. This service helps people to stop smoking by providing behavioural and pharmacological support. Clients are encouraged to consider the whole range of options available to help them in their quit attempt, including the use of e-cigarettes. The service also provides training and support for a wide range of health professionals, including nurses, midwives and community based stop smoking advisors working in local GP surgeries. This training includes the established public health position on e-cigarettes.

Plymouth City Council Trading Standards team provide regulatory advice and carry out routine enforcement operations with shops in Plymouth to test their compliance with the law that prevents the sale of e-cigarettes to anyone aged under 18 and test the quality and safety of e-cigarettes and e-liquids.

4.1 Children and Young People

Over the last 6 months webinars to raise awareness of vaping and implications on policy and practice across our school system and wider children and young people's system have been delivered. It is planned to deliver more in the coming months.

A task and Finish Group is to look at agreeing an approach involving a wide range of partners. This is a complex situation experienced across the UK. The Group will look at support for schools and the wider children and young people system to raise awareness and educate; prevent harm and share management of risk where required. Information, advice and support to support young people, families and communities will also be key.

Mechanisms to respond to incidents or concerns linked to vaping of substances that sit under the Misuse of Drugs Act will be clarified and shared with key stakeholders.

5.0 Frequently Asked Questions

What are electronic cigarettes?

E-cigarettes are battery-powered devices, which heat a solution that typically contains nicotine and propylene glycol or glycerine, producing an inhalable vapour. Unlike tobacco cigarettes, e-cigarettes do not contain cancer-causing tobacco or involve combustion. So there is no smoke, tar or carbon monoxide.

What is “vaping”

The action of using an e-cigarette.

What is the difference between E-cigarettes and tobacco cigarettes?

The key difference between vaping with nicotine e-cigarettes and smoking tobacco cigarettes is in the relative harm they present to people’s health. The smoke from tobacco causes the vast majority of harm in cigarettes, not the nicotine. Nicotine is relatively harmless to health. ECs do not contain tobacco. The current best estimate is that e-cigarettes are around 95% less harmful than smoking.

Are e-cigarettes 100% safe?

No. E-cigarettes are not risk free but are safer than smoking tobacco cigarettes because they don’t contain tobacco. They do contain nicotine, which is addictive, but isn’t responsible for the major health harms from smoking.

People who switch completely from tobacco to e-cigarettes show reduced exposure to the harmful chemicals in tobacco smoke. There remain some questions around long-term safety of these products due to the lack of long-term health studies. Some traces of toxic chemicals have been found in some products, although generally in much lower levels than tobacco cigarettes.

Can ECs help people to stop smoking?

Yes. A study in 2014 showed that those who made quit attempts with e-cigarettes and no other support were around 60% more successful than those who used no aid. In contrast, the same study found that those who use over the counter nicotine replacement therapy [NRT] with no support are no more likely to quit than those who go cold turkey.

E-cigarettes may be particularly effective when combined with behavioural support. The National Centre for Smoking Cessation and Training (NCSCT) has advised Stop Smoking Services to be open to those wishing to use an e-cigarette as an aid to stop smoking, especially those who have tried and failed to quit using licensed stop-smoking medicines.

Are e-cigarettes cheaper than smoking?

Yes. Many people can save hundreds of pounds over the course of a year after making the switch from cigarettes to e-cigarettes. Each person will use their e-cigarette differently, and

across a wide range of devices and liquids, so prices can vary. After purchasing a starter kit, e-cigarettes will often work out cheaper over time than smoking.

Are e-cigarettes a gateway to smoking tobacco?

No. There are some concerns that e-cigarettes could act as a gateway to young people taking up smoking cigarettes, but so far, the evidence does not support this view in the UK. Continued use of e-cigarettes by 'never smokers' remains low and coincides with the continuing decline in youth smoking. The rate of current smoking among 15 year olds in Plymouth is at an all-time low (around 6%).

Can e-cigarettes be prescribed?

No. E-cigarettes are currently not available on prescription in the UK, and there are no e-cigarettes licensed as a medicine commercially available in the UK. It is unlikely there will be a medically licensed product that will be available for prescription in the near future.

Do e-cigarettes harm bystanders?

No. Unlike tobacco smoke, there is no good evidence to suggest that second-hand e-cigarette vapour is dangerous to others.

Can pregnant women use them?

Yes. [Guidance](#) for midwives and other health care professionals states that: "Little research has been conducted into the safety of electronic cigarettes in pregnancy, however they are likely to be significantly less harmful to a pregnant woman and her baby than cigarettes."

What controls exist concerning the marketing of e-cigarettes?

Regulations are in place aimed at:

- restricting appeals to children
- controlling sales to children (under 18 years of ages)
- ensuring minimum standards for the safety and quality of all e-cigarettes and refill containers
- providing information to consumers so that they can make informed choices
- determining where and how they can be advertised