

# **Should all vapes be treated like cigarettes?**

Banning disposables won't address the problem of recreational vaping and the creation of a new nicotine economy

Hilary Sutcliffe and Joe Woof  
September 2023

# About Recreational Vaping.

Vaping in the UK is only viewed in proportion to the immense harms of smoking. The explosion of recreational vaping in non-smokers, particularly young adults, is being overlooked. The growth of recreational vaping is not accidental and needs separate consideration from the needs of smokers.

“Vaping has nothing to do with smoking. It’s a lifestyle thing, a youth thing. A vape is sort of like an accessory”

**22 year old male - Action on Recreational Vaping research 2023**

The tar in cigarettes kills smokers, (8 million of them a year), but it is the addictive properties of nicotine which makes it so hard for them to stop. A vape market has been created by manufacturers and retailers which, once again, is being allowed to successfully package nicotine as a lifestyle product for recreational use.

A comparable playbook on health effects also looks possible. Studies are reporting significant health effects from short term use and concern is growing about future health harms from the chemicals in the many thousands of flavours being inhaled in vapes.

The shadow of smoking deaths understandably looms large. But too large in our view. The health of middle aged smokers should not be prioritised at the expense of young people. Vapes can be made to work better for smokers, whilst at the same time preventing the targeting of non-smokers, particularly children and young adults.

The government proposes to ban disposable vapes, restrict marketing to children and give free vapes to smokers. We believe this will not address the real problem, and needs a wholesale review. Refillable vapes now resemble disposables in size, portability and attractiveness. Prices are plummeting with some users seeing them as tantamount to disposables. A ban only of disposables without addressing the multiple drivers of recreational usage will leave the market open to the intentional addiction of non-smokers of all ages.

This new nicotine economy must be stopped in its tracks. It will not be a simple task. It requires a reevaluates the drivers of vaping to deliver a multifaceted policy approach.

---

**Our short film *The Vaping Dilemma*, by Joe Woof, aged 22, aims to bring the voices of young people into this debate and explore drivers of recreational usage of vapes as a lifestyle product. [It can be viewed here on our YouTube Channel](#)**

# Research and recommendations.

## The current UK regulation will not address the real problem of recreational vaping

The UK government's vape strategy proposes to ban disposable vapes, limit marketing to children and use them to help smokers quit (without the necessary accompanying support to help them quit nicotine for good). This will not address the real problem, because it overlooks three important aspects of the sector's development:

1. The effective promotion of vapes as a lifestyle product for recreational use to young adults 18-25, for whom it is now a normal part of youth culture.
2. Refillable vapes now resemble disposables in size, usability and attractiveness. Prices are plummeting, with some users seeing them as tantamount to disposables. They have a significant environmental footprint in their own right.
3. Ubiquitous availability. Vapes are now available in multiple outlets on any high street, from specialists to corner shops, supermarkets, bars, clubs, even hairdressers and takeaways. The online marketplace for cut price vapes is vast. Illegal products are easy to find.

The real problem is that vapes are already embedded as a core part of youth culture as a lifestyle product for recreational use. New figures from the [Office of National Statistics on E-cigarette](#) shows that young people 16-24 are by far the fastest growing category.

"I first tried it when a friend shared it in a club. I bought my own for a night out with my friends...it was about having a laugh with your mates, sharing vapes, flavours, you get a nice little off rush, feel good, next thing you know you are dependent on it"

**23 year old female, Action on Recreational Vaping, 2023**

This is not just about vapes, other nicotine products like [nicotine pouches](#) and [snus](#) are also being marketed in the same way - a new 'Nicotine Economy' is being created. We were unable to find one advertisement on or offline which advertised vapes for smoking cessation, despite industry protestations that this is their main goal. Manufacturers and retailers are trying, and succeeding, in making nicotine a new 'acceptable' social addiction like alcohol and gambling

## Recommendation 1 - Change the scope of regulation

The current policy is to restrict flavours and colours away from those seen as 'child-friendly'. This will not prevent new, sophisticated, equally well-targeted marketing designed to appeal to young adults and other non-smoking demographics - eg 'silver vapers', older people, have recently been identified as a new target.

More stakeholder involvement, including engagement with young people, behavioural marketing and addiction specialists must be done to assess what regulatory measures will work best to help smokers quit whilst at the same time preventing the targeting of non-smokers, particularly young adults

The effectiveness must be on the table of treating all nicotine products like cigarettes with punitive taxes, plain packaging and restrictions on the marketing of vapes as a lifestyle products and sales and usage in social situations to all users with similar restrictions applied to nicotine pouches and snus. Enforcement of these policies, and of policies on the sale of illegal vapes is critical.

## Recommendation 2 – Stop industry capture

The current All-Party Parliamentary Group for vaping and a number of its members have been criticised for inappropriate association with the vaping and tobacco industries. (Its chair Mark Pawsey was recently given 'Most Supportive Parliamentarian' by the UK vaping industry trade association!)

The former Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, Sir Alistair Graham, called for a review of the rules governing APPGs "*to prevent lobbyists from buying influence at the heart of Government*" as a direct result of his concern about the vaping APPG.

This capture by industry undermines the credibility of the government's policy development process and raises valid concerns about undue industry influence. SocietyInside's research on Trust and Governance found the biggest cause of distrust is the belief, and reality, that regulators were more interested in supporting economic benefits to the state than upholding the public interest.

The chair and membership of the APPG should be changed and a more independent group convened immediately to underpin a systematic review of the evidence and changed scope for the regulation on vaping.

## Have targets on smoking cessation distracted attention from health effects of vaping alone?

We don't wish to detract from the importance of helping smokers quit. Global figures from the World Health Organisation show that cigarettes kill up to half of their long term users and still pose a huge health risk to UK citizens. Smoking costs the NHS £17bn each year.

Vapes appear to have value in helping smokers quit, particularly with added support from health professionals, though many clinicians and addiction specialists question the wisdom of simply swapping one nicotine habit for another. Nicotine is why people smoke and why they don't stop until it kills them.

We are concerned that the focus on smoking cessation and targets for the policy to make the UK 'Smoke Free by 2030' may have distracted the attention of the government, media and even some public health experts, leading them to emphasise the issues of vaping only in relation to smoking. The result is the downplaying of the issues associated with recreational vaping in non-smokers and young people.

Vaping should not be compared to smoking, it should be compared to breathing for non-smokers"

**Professor Emily Banks author, meta study on Health Impacts of E-Cigarettes**

The recent meta study of research worldwide — Health Impacts of Electronic Cigarettes, shows that vaping carries significant harms, particularly for non-smokers and young people. It also heightens concern about the potential long term health effects of inhaling the wide range of chemicals used in the many thousands of vape flavours. Many are known carcinogens and others are considered safe only when ingested, but are untested for inhalation. With allegedly over 20,000 flavours, many are simply unknown.

The study also casts doubt on the assumption that vapes are the most effective way to stop smoking, with 'cold turkey' being proposed as the most effective way to quit for good. Studies also show vapes attract former and new smokers which doubles their chances of becoming regular smokers and many use both to enhance their intake of nicotine. Our conversations with young adults supports this - most new vapers we spoke to are non-smokers; most smokers do both.

"I'm at home, sat on my bed and puffing on this. I can't just have a tab in my bedroom, it's to the point now where I still smoke cigarettes, but my vape's 24/7"

**Female smoker and vaper, Action on Recreational Vaping, 2023**



### **Recommendation 3 - Ensure health effects of vapes are considered in their own right**

We welcome the British Medical Association's July announcement of a review of medical evidence on vaping harms and benefits. **We urge them, and Public Health England, to ensure the health impacts of vaping are promoted separately from comparisons with smoking and non-health impacts.**

Harms such as cancer, if they occur, will, as with cigarettes, appear after a lag time. How long that lag time will be and what the effects will be is only speculative for vaping. But with allegedly over 20,000 different flavours in legal and illegal products, much more work must be done to understand the health effects of vapes in non-smokers, taking into consideration the many different formulations and their effects when inhaled. A respiratory specialist at Kings College Hospital we spoke to, is very concerned that he is seeing more damage to the lungs in scans in the early stages of vape usage than is the case with cigarettes.

The new market leading disposables launched in 2022 now dominate the sector, and will not feature in recent statistics. It is important that **experiential evidence from young people and health professionals should be included and taken seriously by the BMJ and Public Health England.** Lessons from Long Covid must be learned where experiential evidence was ignored because of historic assumptions about health effects in viruses to the detriment of sufferers.

### **Recommendation 4 - Stop saying '95% safer'**

**The origin of the widely cited 2014 statistic that vapes are '95% safer than cigarettes', is, and never was, an accurate indicator of the safety of vaping for individuals.** The source study was an evaluation of harms based on 14 criteria, only two of which focused on health impacts of users - others included crime, environmental damage, economic costs. Furthermore the 12 experts involved drew specific attention to the *'lack of hard evidence for the harms of most of the products on most of the criteria'*. The certainty with which this figure is used is not warranted.

Government concern about the 'incorrect perception of harms' affecting smoker's use of vapes is valid, but the use of this statistic will not be helpful in earning public trust in statistics about vaping safety. **It should not be used in government advice (such as the Health Secretary's speech to Parliament in July 2023) and if quoted the word 'safety' should not replace 'harms' which was the study's focus.** Other harms including legal, commercial and environmental, should be evaluated and communicated separately from potential health harms.

## Many young people need help to quit their vaping addiction

“I do wish I’d never touched one, but it is the way it is now. I think most people my age would say the same. I do want to stop, I feel the effects at work, I’m breathless and unmotivated, it’s my decision and I know I have messed up.”

**22 year old male Action on Recreational Vaping 2023**

Help is needed for those concerned about their usage and addiction to vapes and wanting to quit and there is virtually nothing available. Searching ‘How to stop vaping’ into the NHS website (as of 20 Sept 2023) only gives advice on [‘Vaping to quit smoking’](#) with information on potential harms basic and dated. There is no advice on how to stop vaping available on any government website we could find. (The website and book of renown Allan Carr’s EasyWay [How to Quit Vaping](#) seems to be the best we found)

The Government’s [‘Swap to Stop’](#) scheme, which gives free vapes to those wanting to quit smoking, appears to give no support to help people give up nicotine altogether and no suggestion it might be advisable to eventually wean themselves off vapes. It is unclear whether there is to be any additional support at all to those wishing to give up smoking in addition to the vape prescription, which is advised by addiction specialists.

Current public information on vaping does not reflect an understanding of young people’s motivations to vape, the phenomenon of recreational vaping or specifically targeted approaches to cessation. Information in the UK appears limited, such as these resources [on ASH website](#), though [more innovative approaches are being tried elsewhere](#).

Communication on vaping, and help for young people to quit vaping, should be a priority. But to ensure it is as effective as possible, it is important that young people themselves are part of the design process and the ongoing debate about vaping.

### **Recommendation 5 - Provide support to help vapers quit**

**The NHS website must be updated urgently** to give advice to help vapers quit and to give more measured, updated advice on the potential harms of vaping.

It is essential to provide information on vaping and cessation for young people which is based on a better understanding of their motivations, the social pressures to vape and is not boring or patronising. **Government and health charities must take recreational vaping seriously and develop appropriate support and help for young people which is designed with them to be engaging, and treats them with respect.**

## **The involvement of young people, smokers and citizens in these decisions is essential to prevent the undue influence of misinformation and ‘astroturf’ campaigns.**

It seems likely that vaping in the UK, as it did in Australia and the US, will become another battleground in the ‘Culture Wars’. Already free market think tanks and tobacco funded lobby groups are producing social media campaigns to urge UK vapers to oppose the new regulations and support ‘Save My Vape’ campaigns. These fake grassroots movements are known as ‘astroturf’ campaigns which present themselves as the voices of grass roots vapers, but are in reality disguised industry attempts to subvert regulation. There is also concern as we have outlined here about the quality of information available to citizens in general about vaping in the UK.

The antidote to astroturf campaigns and the way to regulate which is effective and trusted involves the open and systematic engagement of citizens in the design of regulation. This has not happened, so far, in the process of regulation of vapes. Consultation to date has consisted of a single web-based call for evidence to experts via the government website, which focused only on the marketing of vapes to children.

### **Recommendation 6 - Involve young people, smokers and citizens in the regulatory process**

**Young people, smokers and citizens in general should be involved in the process of regulatory design.** Our work on stakeholder involvement with regulation shows that those most impacted by the area being regulated should be part of the process.

In addition to the young adult recreational vapers and smokers, many citizens have concerns about the proliferation of outlets on the high street, second hand vapour from vapes and the social impact of widespread vaping as a new recreational activity.

**The systematic involvement of these impacted stakeholders should be part of the regulatory process.** Sophisticated multi-stakeholder processes such as a citizens assembly, multi-stakeholder qualitative research and innovative technological approaches such as Polis should be used.



## Conclusion

We cannot let the market dictate the health of our young people. We must learn the lessons of smoking, social media, opioids, gambling, computer games and other products of the ‘addiction economy’ and stop these harms in their tracks. It is also important to incentivise and support those who want to quit smoking with the most appropriate incentives, support and technologies. A wholesale review of the current regulation and its approach to evidence and citizen engagement is required now.

“The medical profession was hoodwinked by the tobacco industry years ago and endorsed cigarettes and we are now endorsing vaping. As a colleague of mine has said: ‘Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.’”

**Sarah Brown, Consultant iPaediatric Respiratory Medicine Royal London Children’s Hospital**

---

## Contact Hilary and Joe

If you would like to speak to us about these recommendations, our perspectives on recreational vaping, the government regulation, or our short film [The Vaping Dilemma](#) contact us on: [Hilary@societyinside.com](mailto:Hilary@societyinside.com) or [Joe@societyinside.com](mailto:Joe@societyinside.com) For urgent enquiries contact Hilary on +44 (0) 7799 625064. For ongoing information about our work see our website [www.recreationalvaping.org](http://www.recreationalvaping.org)

## About us

Action on Recreational Vaping is part of a larger piece of work on The Addiction Economy which seeks to understand how other sectors have applied chemically addictive ingredients in mainstream products for commercial gain. Opioids is an obvious one, alcohol another and most recently ultra-processed foods are shown to stimulate addiction based on their physical properties. We will also explore the sectors which seek to addict by manipulating human psychology. Think gambling, social media, computer gaming.

The project will identify common themes, explore criteria of addiction and consider how society can respond better to prevent these addictions, many of which are the cause of the largest preventative health and mental health problems we face.

It was initiated by SocietyInside, a UK based not-for-profit advocating a pro-society approach to innovation and regulation, rather than one which is focused on the making of money or scientific kudos. For more on our work see [www.societyinside.com](http://www.societyinside.com)