

E-cigs, vaping and young people: a guide for settings working with young people under 18

Electronic cigarettes (also known as e-cigs or vapourisers) are the subject of much public debate, concern and confusion, not just around their own health impact but also whether they draw young people into or away from smoking tobacco.

There are particular considerations for community youth projects, schools, training, colleges, residential care or other settings engaging with young people at a time when they may be experimenting with, or developing regular use of, either tobacco or electronic cigarettes.

Context/background information:

There is already much that we know about electronic cigarettes, or can say with confidence:

- They are battery-powered devices that heat a liquid into a vapour, which is then inhaled by the user (called “vaping” rather than smoking). The liquid often contains nicotine and flavours, mixed with a carrier liquid of propylene glycol or glycerine.
- They are not tobacco products and are not bound by regulations on tobacco sale or use but have their own separate regulatory regime
- The earliest and simplest e-cigarettes look like tobacco cigarettes. Newer, more advanced models look increasingly different and deliver nicotine more effectively.
- Using an e-cigarette is expected to be much less harmful than smoking tobacco, while not entirely safe. This suggests that anyone using tobacco will significantly reduce their health risks by moving to an electronic cigarette – but to get these benefits they should stop using tobacco completely. It seems appropriate that the use of electronic cigarettes should be regulated, but regulated less strictly than tobacco. They are different products, each raising separate issues, and should not simply be treated in the same way.



First Generation



Second Generation



Third Generation

Electronic cigarettes and young people in Scotland

Tobacco is a uniquely harmful product, as addictive as heroin. Most smokers start before they are 18 and later regret doing so. Smoking greatly increases the risk of developing cancer, heart disease, dementia, diabetes and stroke. A pack a day addiction will cost over £3000 a year.

E-cigarettes can have a beneficial impact if young people vape when they would otherwise have smoked, or if they help young people stop using tobacco. They can be problematic if they result in more young people using nicotine, who then go on to use tobacco and there is emerging evidence to suggest that for a small number of young people using an electronic cigarette may move them further down the process of becoming a smoker. However we still do not know whether any of the young people in question will transition to regular smoking.

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At this time surveys in Scotland and the UK indicate that young people are engaging in a good deal of experimentation with e-cigarettes, but that not many young people are regular users of the devices. We cannot yet be certain whether or not e-cigarettes are drawing young people into smoking, but it is encouraging that overall youth smoking rates continue to fall. We need to keep monitoring this situation over time.

Legal situation/regulation:

Scotland has legislation which makes it illegal to sell e-cigarettes to under-18s, or to buy e-cigarettes on their behalf. It is not illegal for a young person to possess, use or try to buy e-cigarettes.

European regulation has banned advertising considered “international” in nature, including TV, radio and newspaper advertising and most sport sponsorship. Domestic adverts on bus shelters, shop windows, billboards and at point of sale are still legal, but will be considered by the Scottish Parliament in 2018. Tobacco advertising of any kind is banned.

While it is illegal to smoke tobacco in an enclosed public space, there are no such restrictions on using e-cigarettes and this remains at the discretion of individual premises. Many have chosen to restrict use of e-cigarettes in enclosed public spaces to ease communication and enforcement of their smoke-free policy.

Developing a policy response for youth settings:

In order to support their role as health educators and positive life choice influencers for young people, youth organisations should go beyond basic legal requirements and:

- discourage non-smokers from experimenting with vaping devices;
- Not over-regulate these devices out of existence, so that they may present a less harmful alternative for those who would otherwise smoke tobacco; and
- ensure that the strongest deterrents and restrictions are placed on tobacco, but that vaping policy sits coherently alongside existing tobacco policies.

To complement laws which will prohibit the sale or supply of e-cigarettes to young people under 18 we recommend that services discourage the use or possession of e-cigarettes amongst under 18s, or amongst older clients in the company of under 18s. Advertising of e-cigarettes should be excluded. Recognising that staff are role models for the young people that they work with, staff should refrain from using e-cigarettes with or in front of young people, as they should already do with tobacco cigarettes.

At the same time, and recognising the far greater harm arising from tobacco use, staff should take opportunities to provide good information to help young people build their understanding of electronic cigarettes, and to engage young people in discussions on tobacco and health more widely – making it clear to those already using tobacco that e-cig use brings less harm, financial cost and risk of addiction. With regards to use by staff or young people over 18, youth services may wish to enhance the appeal of e-cigarettes as an alternative to smoking by allowing their use in discrete outdoor areas which are separate to, and less restricted than, any areas where smoking is allowed.

While there is a legal prohibition on providing e-cigarettes to under-18s, we hope that some devices will become licensed as medicines and be made available to young people who smoke to assist them to stop smoking.

*For further reading see www.ashscotland.org.uk/ecigs and www.ashscotland.org.uk/youth
Resources for engaging with young people available at <http://www.youthworkessentials.org/youth-tobacco>*