

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE: *Uncovered*

The Vaping Generation

Shining a spotlight on our county of contrast



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Introduction

Heart of Bucks' Young Futures Fund is dedicated to supporting the aspirations and dreams of young individuals across Buckinghamshire. Our participatory grants panel is composed of young, Bucks-based individuals with local knowledge and experience, and establishes its own criteria for funding.

One key concern for the panel is the widespread use of vapes among Buckinghamshire's young people. They have observed firsthand significant use - particularly in schools - and feel this issue is not being adequately addressed locally.

To investigate further on their behalf, Heart of Bucks have developed this report to understand the nature of the issue on both a local and national level. The report highlights the available data, perspectives of some Bucks-based young people, and the views of local charity organisations working with young people.

The problem of vaping among children and young people is nationally recognised, having been addressed by the House of Lords, the British Medical Association, and the World Health Organisation (WHO), which notes that the use of vapes by children and adolescents actually exceeds that of adults in many countries.

It is also timely as the UK government Department of Health and Social Care have recently announced a landmark 10-year study into health effects of vaping on young people.





What is vaping?

Modern vaping, being a relatively new mass phenomenon, is worth defining. Vaping involves inhaling and exhaling vapour containing chemicals (including nicotine) and flavourings through an electronic cigarette device that heats liquid.

The concept of smokeless mechanical or electronic cigarettes has existed since at least 1927. However, the first modern 'e-cigarette' was developed in the early 2000s by Chinese pharmacist Hon Lik, specifically as an aid for smoking cessation.

Whilst vaping is an effective tool for those trying to quit smoking, it is certainly not without risks. E-cigarettes contain nicotine, which is highly addictive. The aerosol from e-cigarettes can also contain harmful substances such as heavy metals and volatile organic compounds.

Due to marketing influences and misinformation, vapes have been adopted by many non-smokers and are often promoted to young people through appealing flavours and advertising tactics; similar to tactics used by tobacco companies to promote cigarettes in the 1950s. This has led to concerns about the effects on young people, prompting several other countries to ban vaping.



Why does it matter?

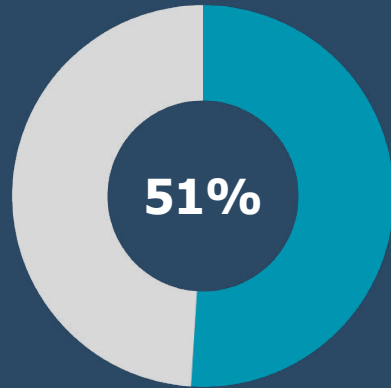
Regardless of their relative safety compared to smoking, vapes contain nicotine - an addictive substance with proven detrimental effects on developing brains. Nicotine addiction can negatively impact both the physical and mental health of young people, affecting attention, learning, mood, and impulse control. Prolonged nicotine exposure during adolescence can also increase the risk of future addiction to other substances.

Vaping itself is not technically illegal for under-18s; however sale or purchase of vape products is. Vape use and selling/trading amongst youth peers can, and often does, lead to school exclusion. Such exclusions can result in loss of learning and increase the risks for excluded young individuals, making them more likely to engage in further risk-taking behaviour, become young offenders, and achieve less positive outcomes in adulthood. The disruption caused by school exclusion can also lead to social isolation and mental health issues for Bucks' young people, further compounding the potential negative effects on their lives.

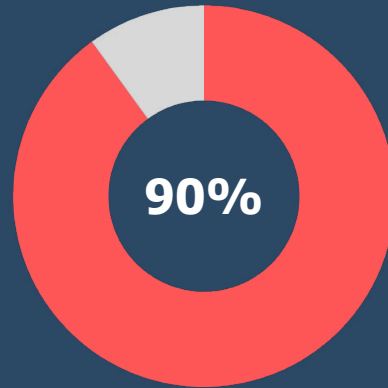
Vapes and tobacco products are also being used to groom young people into gangs and involvement in other drug-related activities. This exploitation can expose young individuals to violence, criminal behaviour, and a cycle of substance abuse, significantly impacting their future prospects and wellbeing.

Given these significant concerns, it is crucial to address the issue of vaping among young people to protect their health, education, and overall development.

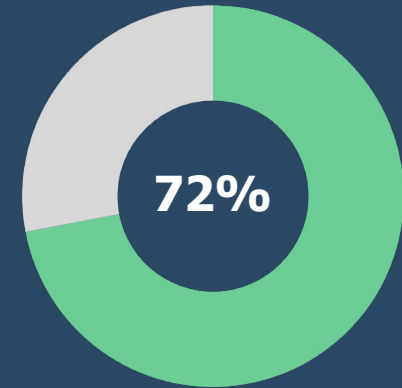
Key statistics



51% of Buckinghamshire's Year 12-13 students have at least tried vaping vs. 35% for smoking



90% of Bucks' youth charities actively engage with their service users on vaping



72% of 11-17s have been exposed to vape promotion



5 million disposable vapes are thrown away every single week in the UK



Some counterfeit vapes can contain **hundreds of times** as much nicotine as a cigarette

The national picture

The most recent national data on vaping comes from ASH (Action on Smoking & Health). The organisation conducted a large survey in July 2024 titled "Use of Vapes Among Young People in GB." This is the most up-to-date and in-depth data available.

ASH survey findings show that vaping is prevalent among young people:

- 18% of 11-17-year-olds have tried vaping, amounting to an **estimated 980,000 children** nationally. Assuming Buckinghamshire's proportional vape usage is similar to the national average, this equates to roughly **14,000 young people aged 11-17 in Bucks.**
- The prevalence of vaping increases with age: **28% of 16-17-year-olds and 34% of 18-year-olds have tried vaping.**
- Currently, **7.2% of 11-17-year-olds vape**, a figure that has remained relatively stable since 2022.
- By age 18, nearly **1 in 5 (17%) young people are vaping regularly.**

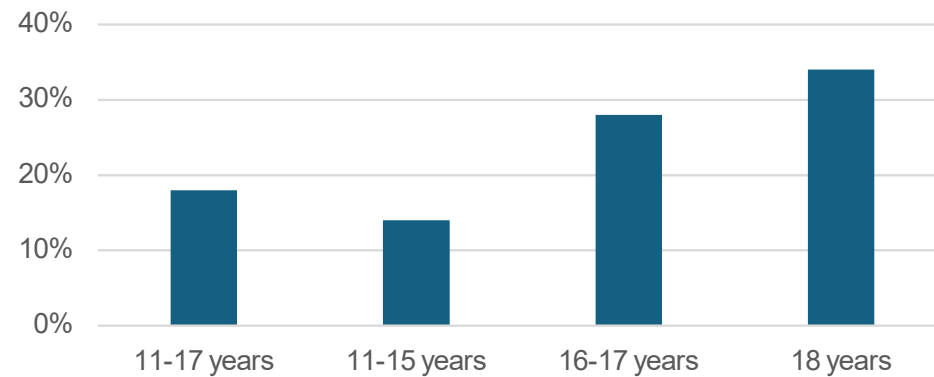
One caveat to be aware of is that all risk-taking behaviour increases with age, not just vaping.

This data nevertheless highlights the significant and growing issue of vaping among young people, evidencing the need for targeted interventions and policies to address this trend.

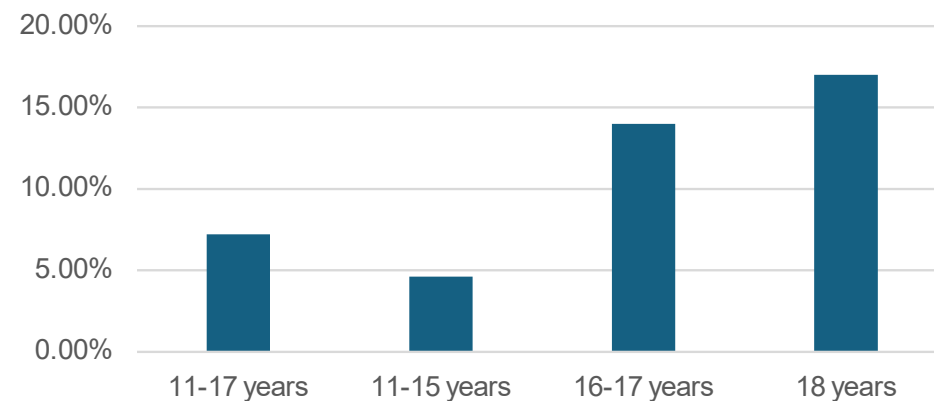


The national picture

Percentage of Young People Who Have Tried Vaping (2024 - ASH Survey)



Percentage of Young People Who Currently Vape (2024 - ASH Survey)



Young adults

Further information from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) provides insights into vaping use by age and gender. The data indicates that **more women aged 16-24 have at least tried vaping compared to men**, and this group also represents the largest “occasional user” group.

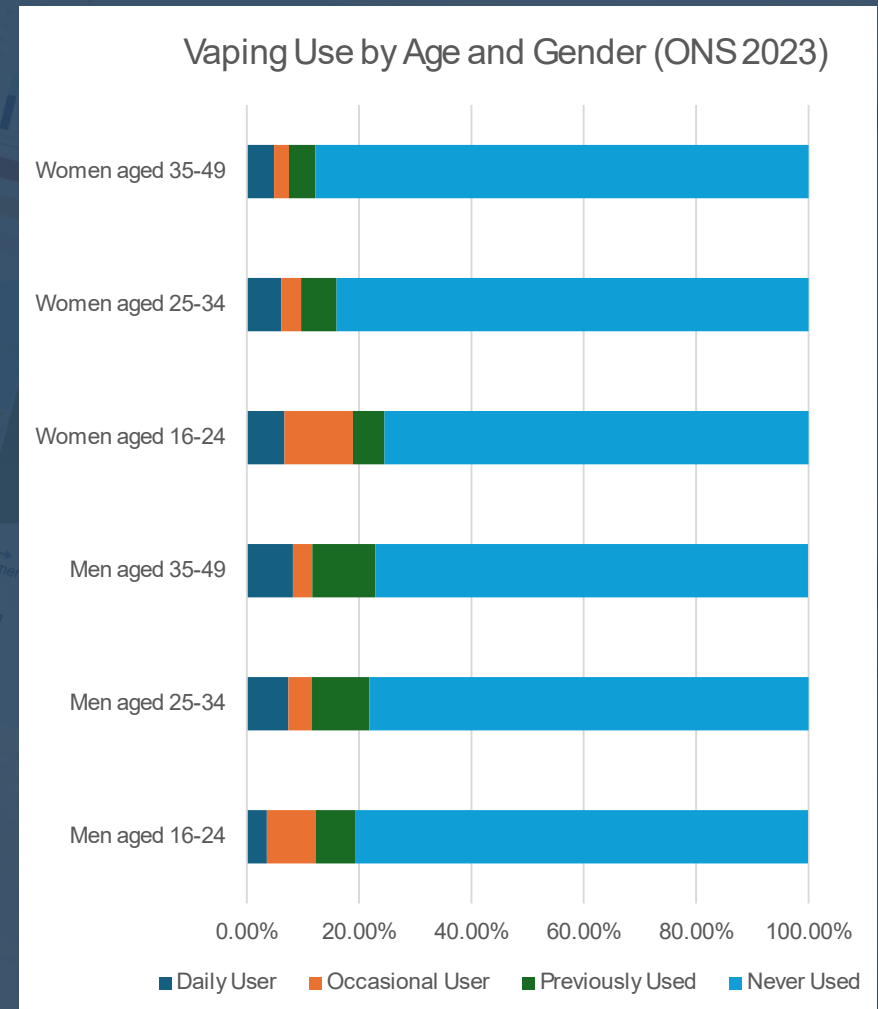
However, older male groups exhibit higher daily usage, with the 35-49 and 25-34 age groups showing the highest daily use at 8.2% and 7.4%, respectively.

Overall, **19% of adults had at least tried vaping** in 2023, a proportion similar to that of under-18s.

A new national study

In February 2025, the Department for Health and Social Care announced a series of studies into vaping, including a 10-year study tracking the long-term effects of vaping on the health of young people.

The study will track 100,000 young people over 10 years. This research is welcome, as the real health impacts of vaping on young people have until now remained anecdotal.



Local data

Whilst the ASH survey data provides a national picture, a challenge in this space has been the lack of local data. Buckinghamshire Tobacco Control Alliance reference a “clear upward trend” in the number of children using vapes nationally, however it remains hard to quantify the true scale of this issue in Buckinghamshire as the research simply had not been done.

In 2023 the Schools Health Education Unit (SHEU) partnered with Buckinghamshire Council to survey over 7,800 Buckinghamshire pupils on a variety of Health and Wellbeing topics, including vaping.

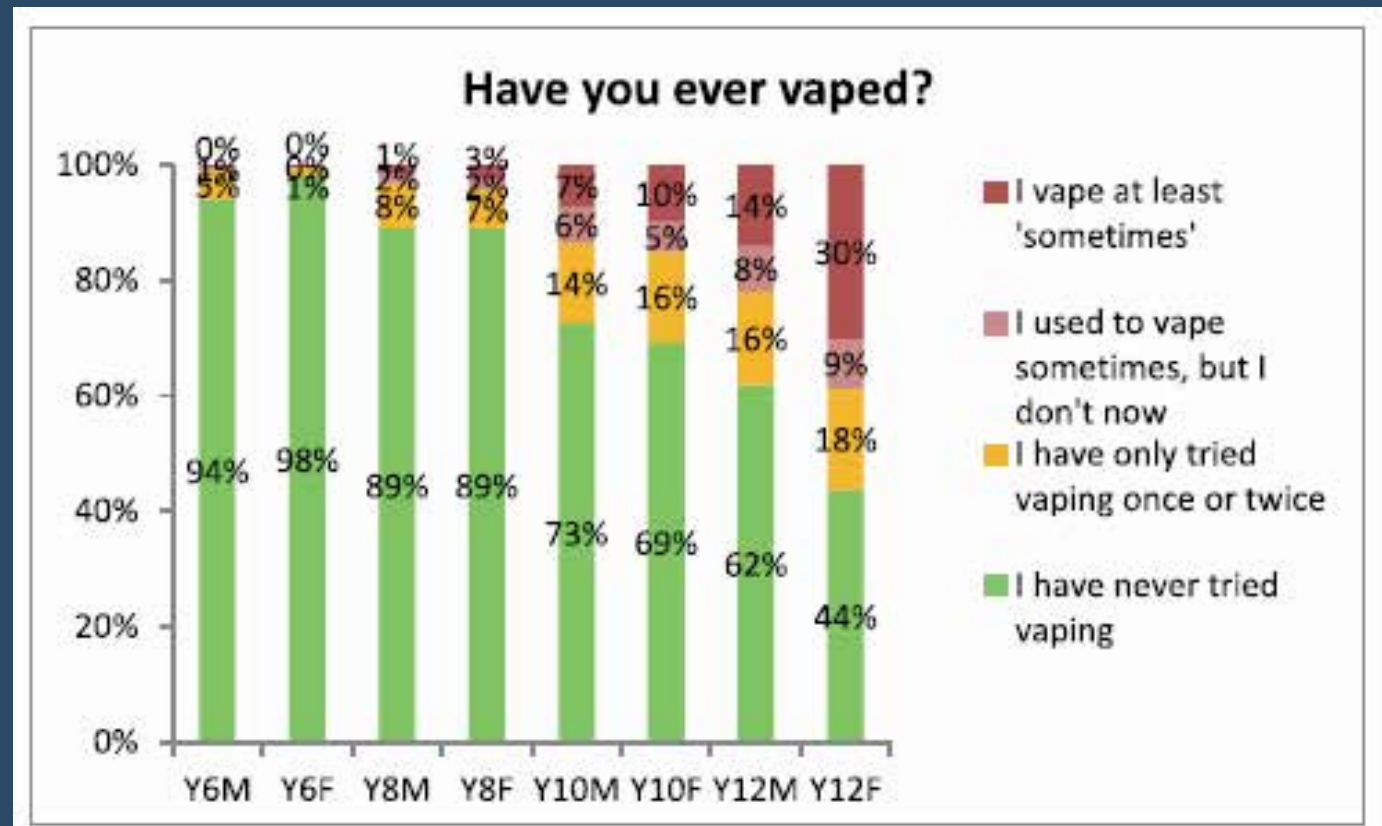
This substantial survey subsection of Buckinghamshire’s youth population is a positive step in filling the local research gap, and helps us to pinpoint the scope of the issue:

- 4% of Year 6 pupils have tried vaping, rising to 20% at Years 8 and 10.
- 5% of Year 8 and 10 pupils vape at least ‘sometimes’
- 51% of Year 12-13 students have at least tried vaping (compared to 35% having tried smoking).
- 23% of Year 12-13 students vape at least ‘sometimes’ (compared to 5% who smoke at least one cigarette per week).
- 17% of Year 12-13 use disposable vapes most often (as opposed to reusable products).

Local data

This data shows us that a significant proportion of Bucks' secondary school-aged young people have at least tried vaping, and that more of our young people are vaping than they are smoking.

It also suggests that by the age of 18, **a higher proportion of Bucks' young people have tried vaping compared to the national average.**

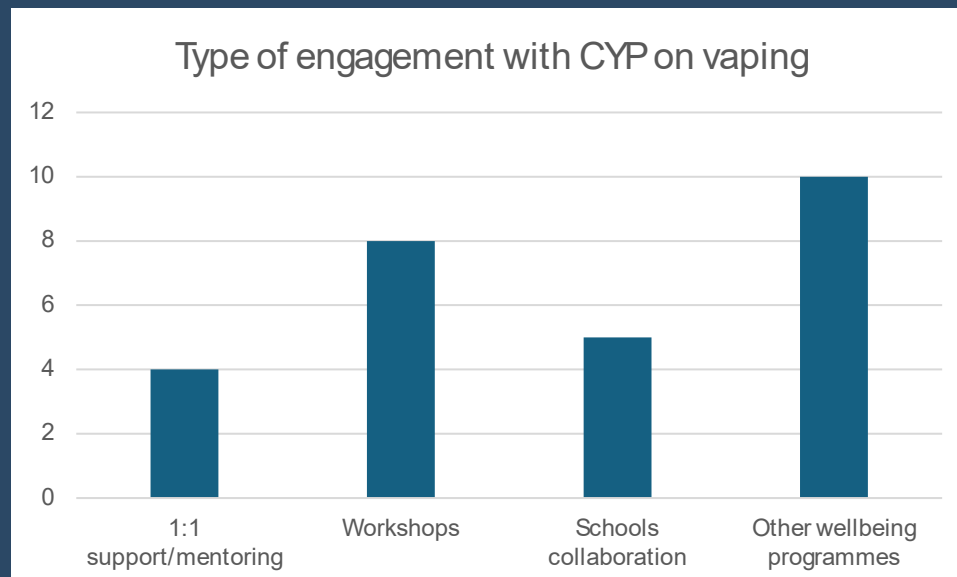


Bucks charity survey

Given the challenges vaping poses to Buckinghamshire's young people, Heart of Bucks conducted a brief survey of Bucks youth charities and voluntary organisations working with young people to understand the local VCSE (Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise) sector's position on vaping.

Heart of Bucks reached out to 45 Buckinghamshire-based organisations. Of 20 respondents:

- **95%** report vaping to be an issue on their organisation's radar
- **90%** actively engage with their service users on the topic of vaping
- **75%** consider vaping to be a significant issue amongst the young people they support



Survey feedback

"The only way we have been able to get through to young people on vaping is by showing them the financial cost."

"Through our mentoring programme, we discuss vape use, and how this is funded. We also encourage lowering use or signpost to other services. We are also mindful if young people are at risk of selling vapes as this could lead to other areas of exploitation."

"It is more common for our young people to vape than not. There are very few who don't."

- Our survey shows that Buckinghamshire charities are supporting their young service users' vape awareness through 1:1 mentoring, workshops, and collaboration with schools.
- The most common vehicle for VCSE support, however, is as a part of wider wellbeing programmes.
- The likelihood of a charity considering vaping to be an issue in their service users correlates with the ages of young people they work with. Charities working primarily with younger children are less likely to do so.
- That said, one such group told us that even pre-teen children have expressed thoughts and opinions on vaping during wellbeing projects delivered by the charity.

Survey feedback

"I think there's a confusion over what it is... and where you can vape. For example is on a bus OK? I even saw one adult vape poolside at my gym recently! I don't think the rules are widely known. We also had a young person who had asthma who could have an attack from vape smoke. but this isn't widely spoken about."

"30% of young people tell us they use vapes. 85% are under 18 and 58% are under 16.

19% of young people report heavy and moderate use of vapes. 14% of these are over 18, 86% are under 18."

- Responses indicate overall strong awareness within the local VCSE sector of vaping as an issue impacting Bucks' young people.
- For some charities however, vaping is understandably not a priority in the face of competing pressures and complex needs.
- Youth charities and VCSE organisations working with young people can act as leaders in spreading awareness and accurate information about vaping in an accessible way.

Why vape?

The data shows that Buckinghamshire's young people are vaping, and our survey tells us that youth charities in Bucks are working to tackle this. To do so, it is important to understand why young people are vaping.

Action on Smoking & Health survey responses show us the top four reasons why young people vape:

Curiosity:

"Just to give it a try"

Peer pressure:

"Other people do it so I join in"

Enjoyment:

"I like the flavours"

Stress:

"Stress or mental health"

This is mirrored in feedback from local young people in Buckinghamshire:

"Young people use vaping, nicotine or smoking to self-medicate. I don't think there's recognition of this with neurodivergence and mental health. Vapes are easy to get hold of and they're socially acceptable in our peer groups."

"There's a specific group [at school] who all vape as part of their social identity, but I don't."

"Peer pressure and 'looking cool' are a huge factor."

"Smoking is seen as old-fashioned by young people now, but vaping is cool and exciting."

Key challenges

These commonly cited reasons for youth vaping are exacerbated by the following challenges.

1. Ease of access to vapes

It is illegal to sell vapes to under-18s – yet Bucks' young people report that access is easy and availability high:

"I know a few people who sell vapes in and out of school. It's easy to get hold of."

"They're really cheap and easy."

Vapes are also much cheaper than cigarettes, and these "pocket money prices" mean that cost barriers are not an issue for children and young people.

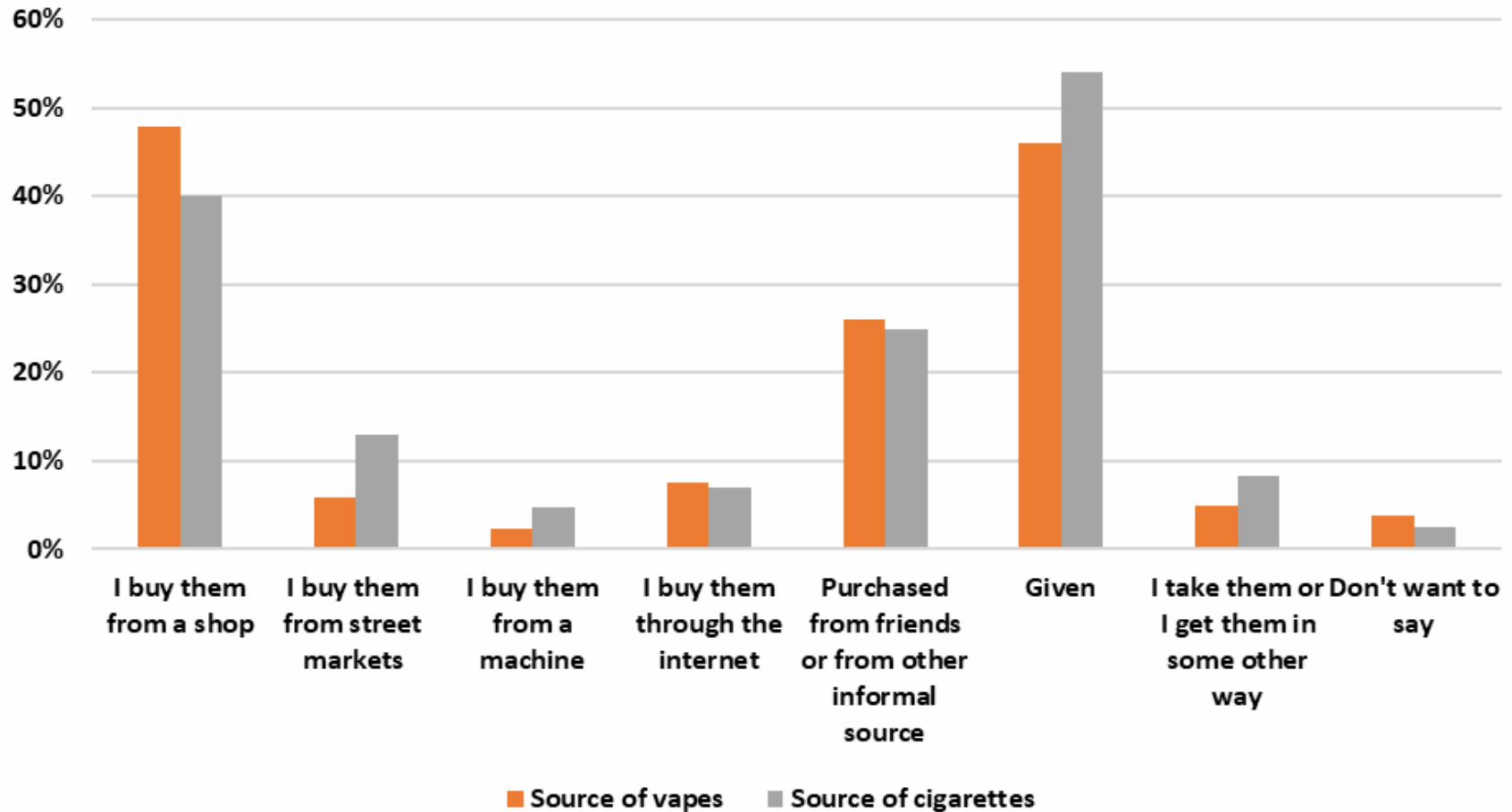
Vapes are being sold in a variety of settings, including convenience stores and informally in other businesses (eg barbers). According to ASH, **vapes are now four times more profitable to convenience stores than tobacco**, and these stores are one of the most prevalent sources of vapes for young people.

Even more concerning in 2024, 2.3% of 11-17s who had ever tried vaping reported their first vape was given to them by an e-cigarette company.

The 2025 Tobacco and Vapes Bill is set to close a legal loophole whereby, despite selling vapes to under-18s being illegal, it was not illegal to give nicotine products to under-18s for free.



Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) Youth Survey 2023:
Sources of cigarettes and e-cigarettes among current users (11-17)



2. Advertising and messaging

72% of 11-17s have been exposed to vape promotion (most commonly in shops and online).

Advertisers actively target young people using “fun” flavours, social media promotion, and colourful packaging.

- Use of sweet flavours like fruit, chocolate, candy, and energy drink – which are the preferred flavours of young people.
- Children and young people report seeing advertising across the social media they frequent, including platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat.
- Vapes are often strategically advertised near sweets in shops in order to appeal to young people.

There have been widespread calls for legislation to limit these factors, including a standardised packaging/vape device style to reduce appeal similar to that implemented with tobacco products.

“Seeing vapes on social media and in shops all the time normalises it to us.”

“I see vapes next to sweets and lollipops, and they’re the same colours and flavours. It makes you want to buy them.”

“The flavours and marketing tactics are definitely focused towards a younger age group.”



Official Messaging and Misperceptions

Government and national Public Health messaging around vaping has focused on promoting it as an alternative to smoking – and for good reason. A typical vape contains 10 - 100 different chemicals, whilst a typical cigarette can contain between 5,000 - 7,000 different chemicals, many of which are carcinogenic. Vaping is also often more effective for smoking cessation than traditional nicotine-replacement therapies.

It is clear that vaping is a positive improvement for those who already smoke cigarettes. However this messaging has also had unintended consequences, causing confusion and leading many young people to think vaping is safe or harmless.

As a result, it is becoming normalised behaviour for young people who have never smoked to take up vaping.

Meanwhile, whilst 58% of 11-17s incorrectly believe vaping to be more harmful than smoking, 46% of this group have still at least tried it.

"On the flip side if vaping reduces the rates of smoking and thereby does less harm to people's health... there has to be some value in its use as a quitting device."

"There's a moral grey area here – there have always been underage smokers, and if they are vaping instead that's still better for their health."

"If you get addicted to smoking [as an under-18] it's harder to get support because it's illegal"



Initiatives from Buckinghamshire Public Health

Buckinghamshire Public Health have a number of initiatives specifically aimed at educating the county's young people about vaping. These include:

- A library of resources on vaping, made available to schools via Public Health, in order to educate and to challenge misconceptions around vaping.
- HOOKED: A new co-produced drama intervention entered a majority of Buckinghamshire's secondary schools throughout March 2025. Targeted at Year 8-9 students, it explored addiction, peer pressure and risk-taking behaviour. The project also included workshops on smoking and vaping. Schools have been extremely receptive as they have themselves noticed increasing issues around vapes. Student feedback has also been positive.
- Public Health messaging around vaping clearly states that young people and those who do not already smoke should NOT start vaping.
- Public Health are working with Buckinghamshire Council and the FA to promote "smoke-free sidelines", aimed at creating a smoke- and vape-free environment for children in sport and modelling behaviours for young people. 9 Council-run pitches and pavilions in Aylesbury, High Wycombe and Farnham have just had new signs and banners installed to promote smoke-free sidelines.
- Public Health have recently funded a Vaping Youth Worker to support Buckinghamshire Council's children and youth services.

3. Commoditisation of vapes

Young people are increasingly using vapes as a commodity to trade and sell amongst peers.

"Teens used to sell sweets and cigarettes when I was a teenager, now it's vapes."

They are also increasingly seen as a type of status symbol, feeding into peer pressure issues and low-level bullying for not taking part.

There have also been multiple reports of school incidents revolving around vapes, including:

- Students being excluded for selling vapes
- Older students pressuring younger children into holding vapes for them
- Potential grooming and threatening behaviours around demanding money for vapes



Initiatives from Youth Voice Bucks

Youth Voice Bucks ran a Vape Workshop as part of their **2025 Bucks Youth Summit**. This event aims to bring together young people from across the county to discuss issues of interest to them. Amongst a variety of insights, young people discussed the ease of access to vapes and awareness of how they are targeted.

Heart of Bucks were invited to attend one session in the Vape Space. In partnership with Public Health and Trading Standards, the workshop included discussions about facts and myths around vaping, the dangers of illegal and fake tobacco/vape products, and a survey of attendees' views and perceptions around vaping.

This Vape Space provided valuable insight from the 80 young people who participated as to current attitudes towards vaping in Bucks.

They found that those surveyed held generally negative views towards vaping and felt confident they could refuse vaping.

The students expressed concern that corner shops will happily sell vapes to children, and noted that TikTok shops often spring up that target specific year groups or local communities of young people.

The young students called for a 'Stop Vaping' service and greater in-school education.

The positive response to the workshop shows the effective impact of engaging with young people on vaping, raising awareness and tackling misinformation in this space.

Read more about The [Youth Voice Bucks 2025](#) insights and the 2024 [The Vape Space Workshop](#) outcomes.

4. Illegal and counterfeit vape trade

Buckinghamshire Tobacco Control Alliance recognise that illegal vapes are “rampant in the market”, and **almost £9 million worth of illegal vapes were seized across the UK in 2024.**

Illegal products contain unregulated chemicals, increasing health risks to anybody using them. This can include higher levels of nicotine, lead and nickel.

On top of this, **those selling counterfeit vapes are more likely to sell to underage individuals**, putting them at greater risk.

“My biggest worry is our young people are buying illegal vapes which have high contents of nicotine in – and buying and using THC vapes.”

Illegal vapes are of growing concern in Buckinghamshire, and there has recently been a new funded Trading Standards Officer role created specifically devoted to illegal vapes and tobacco.

During 2024, Thames Valley Police have worked closely with Trading Standards to identify and shut down multiple Buckinghamshire shops and premises selling illegal vapes and tobacco and serving under-age customers.



5. The environment and waste

Single-use and disposable vapes have increased significantly over the past few years – and they are especially popular with young people as they can be bought for as little as £1.99.

2023 research found that five million disposable vapes are thrown away every single week in the UK.

Disposable vapes can be toxic to the environment. They contain lithium ion batteries that are classed as electrical waste by law, and can explode or ignite if not properly disposed of. The plastic materials can take thousands of years to degrade, and they also contain heavy metals, lead, mercury and chemicals like nicotine that can leak out.

“They’re littered all over outside [my] school. What if one exploded as a younger child walked past?”

A brand new Tobacco & Vapes bill **banning disposable and single-use vapes** has come into effect as of June 2025 to combat these very challenges. However, the vape waste already produced and discarded continues to pose dangers. There is also debate over how effective this ban will be; some fear it will simply drive a further rise in the aforementioned illegal vape trade.



A person wearing a light blue t-shirt, dark shorts, and white sneakers is using a long-handled litter picker to pick up trash in a grassy field. The person is wearing a white glove on their right hand. The background is a blurred green field with trees.

Tackling vape waste in Bucks

Aylesbury Community Board

Vaping and vape waste have been a priority area project for Aylesbury Community Board. Working with Bucks College Group and Buckinghamshire Council's Waste Reduction Team, the worst areas for vape waste were identified as surrounding local schools and colleges in Aylesbury. Understanding that the message may be better received and conveyed to young people by young people, they have engaged students themselves to produce posters raising awareness.

Aylesbury Wombles

Aylesbury Wombles do regular litter picking to keep the local environment clean. The charity no longer retain data on the number of disposed vapes they collect due to just how significantly the volume has increased over the past few years. However, the collected vape waste is deposited monthly to a vape shop for proper disposal and is estimated to average 1,000 vape items/month. Given that this is just from litter picking work in the Aylesbury area, we can begin to understand the scale of the vape waste problem across Buckinghamshire as a whole.



Recommendations

1. Research

- Further local surveys similar to the detailed ASH national survey model would help determine a more accurate picture of vaping in Bucks' young people.
- Studies on the long-term impacts of vaping on young peoples' health are strongly recommended at a national level. Heart of Bucks welcome the news that the UK government has commissioned a long-term study on health impacts in young people.

2. Intervention and education

- Buckinghamshire charities report success through providing workshops and 1:1 support for young people. There can be further engagement in this area by local VCSE organisations working with young people.
- Charities are well-placed to deliver workshops and raise awareness of the impacts of vaping.
- Local social media campaigns can help tackle misinformation and educate young people.
- Schools and education providers can support young people by engaging and educating them on the tactics utilised by advertisers.

3. Policy and enforcement

- Nationally, there must be a greater focus on cracking down on illegal/counterfeit vape production, importation and sales.
- Larger fines and sanctions for those found to be selling illegal products or selling to under-age individuals can deter activity. Whilst sanctions are not always effective, this, combined with the above recommendation, could make it harder and less profitable for those engaging in the counterfeit market.
- Vapes should not be so cheap – increasing the cost is proven to reduce use, especially in young people. However, this could drive an increase in illegal trade to undercut the market, again highlighting the need for adequate resourcing to investigate and enforce the above.
- The 2025 Tobacco & Vapes Bill is a strong step in legislating against disposable vapes and products marketed at children and young people.
- Businesses, individuals and criminal groups that are already engaging in illegal trade of vapes are not simply going to stop because of this new legislation. Once in effect, this must also be enforced – requiring the local resource and capacity to investigate and sanction appropriately.
- A national standardisation of vape packaging and product style to reduce appealing colours and pictures is also supported to reduce appeal to young people.

Final thoughts

Vaping, like smoking, is a complex and multifaceted issue - particularly when it comes to young people. While it can be an effective tool for smoking cessation, the widespread use of vapes among Buckinghamshire's young people raises significant concerns that mirror national trends. These concerns are not only about the health risks associated with nicotine addiction but also about the broader social and environmental impacts.

The challenges around vaping and young people are numerous. More than half of Bucks' young people have tried vaping by the age of 18. Ease of access to vaping products, rampant illegal trade, and the environmental waste generated by disposable vapes highlight the need for comprehensive local strategies and interventions.

However, **there are also positive local examples that show promise.** Our brief VCSE survey, insights from Youth Voice Bucks, and local projects tackling vape waste demonstrate that community-driven initiatives can make a real difference. Buckinghamshire Public Health and Trading Standards are also heavily involved in tackling the issue, developing practical solutions to support the county's young people to be safe and healthy.

Most importantly, **vaping is an issue of concern raised by numerous local young people themselves.** Listening to their voices and involving them in the development of solutions is crucial. Their perspectives and experiences are invaluable in shaping effective policies and interventions.

While vaping can aid smoking cessation, **the ultimate goal should be a smoke- and vape-free society.** Achieving this will require a concerted partnership effort, including policymakers, educators, health professionals, and the community. By working together, we can create a healthier environment for Buckinghamshire's young people and future generations.

YOUNG FUTURES FUND

Heart of Bucks' Young Futures Fund is committed to improving opportunities and outcomes for young people in Buckinghamshire, and welcomes applications from local VCSE organisations working to improve health and wellbeing.

youngfuturesfund.org



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- Youth Voice Bucks – Bucks Youth Summit: Vape Workshop

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