



Smoking Report

September 2021

“Smoking can make Covid symptoms worse and reduce your chances of surviving”

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Summary

Healthwatch Bexley (Healthwatch) found that during the Covid-19 pandemic, while some residents' situations may have changed, for example working from home or being furloughed, half told us that their smoking habits had not changed during this time and 24% reported smoking more. Our report shows that nearly half of the people who completed our survey did not feel smoking affected their risk of complications from Covid-19 and had not considered their general health either during the pandemic.

Introduction

Since Covid-19 is a respiratory disease, those that smoke may be more at risk of developing a more serious case of Covid-19 according to a recent report by the British Heart Foundation although the link between a smoker and Covid-19 is still not fully understood (BHF: May 2021). A study for the British Medical Journal (BMJ) found that current smokers reported more symptoms and are twice as likely, to attend hospital due to Covid-19 infection than non-smokers (Hopkinson et al, 2021).

According to the London Borough of Bexley's (LBB) Tobacco Control Group (TBCG), the number of Bexley residents seeking help to stop smoking decreased during the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the reduced number of residents accessing stop smoking services Healthwatch Bexley in partnership with the TBCG decided to conduct a snapshot survey, exploring the possible reasons why and look at residents' smoking habits during the pandemic.

We explored whether residents' smoking habits had changed during the pandemic, if smokers had quit, wanted to quit and if they felt smoking may worsen the effects of Covid-19 if they contracted it.

The current legislation that aims to reduce smoking in England came into effect on the 1st July 2007 and states that it is illegal to smoke in any enclosed area in a public space and the workplace. Government policy was reviewed in 2017 when objectives included reducing the smoking population amongst young people, pregnant women or those caring for young children (Smoke-free generation 2017).

As this was a general snapshot into smoking habits we did not specifically target our engagement or survey to young people or pregnant women. Engagement with more specific groups of the local population may be useful and a recommendation for further research.

Healthwatch were pleased to find that, of the residents who engaged with us, more than half wanted to give up smoking and 50% of respondents were aware of SmokeFree Bexley. Information about SmokeFree Bexley was available to all who we engaged with either face to face at public engagement or when completing our survey online.

Healthwatch would like to thank all those who completed the survey whose valuable feedback enabled us to produce this report.

Methodology

35 people completed our survey which ran from the beginning of July 2021 to the beginning of August 2021. A survey was produced using Survey Monkey and this was made available via our website, social media and promoted through local partners such as community groups. To reach those that may not have digital access we visited local food banks, a library, a shopping centre and the 'Let's Talk Covid bus. For those who had digital access, a QR code was produced to give residents the option to complete online if they were able but our data monitoring shows that this is not an effective method as residents take the code but do not go on to complete the survey.

The survey was not aimed at particular groups of the population but was designed to obtain a general overview or snapshot into smoking habits during the pandemic.

Qualitative and quantitative questions were used to gain valuable residents comments and views. Not all questions were answered by all respondents and some questions allowed more than one answer to be given.

The report was written by a member of the Healthwatch Bexley Team in September 2021.

Limitations

When collecting responses for this survey Healthwatch found several barriers when asking people to complete the survey face to face in public places. Firstly, it was difficult finding residents who smoked or admitted being a smoker. Whilst visiting local venues a high number of residents told us they did not smoke or had given up before the pandemic. If residents were smokers they were often reluctant to discuss their smoking habits for fear of being judged or persuaded to stop smoking especially if they were not ready to stop.

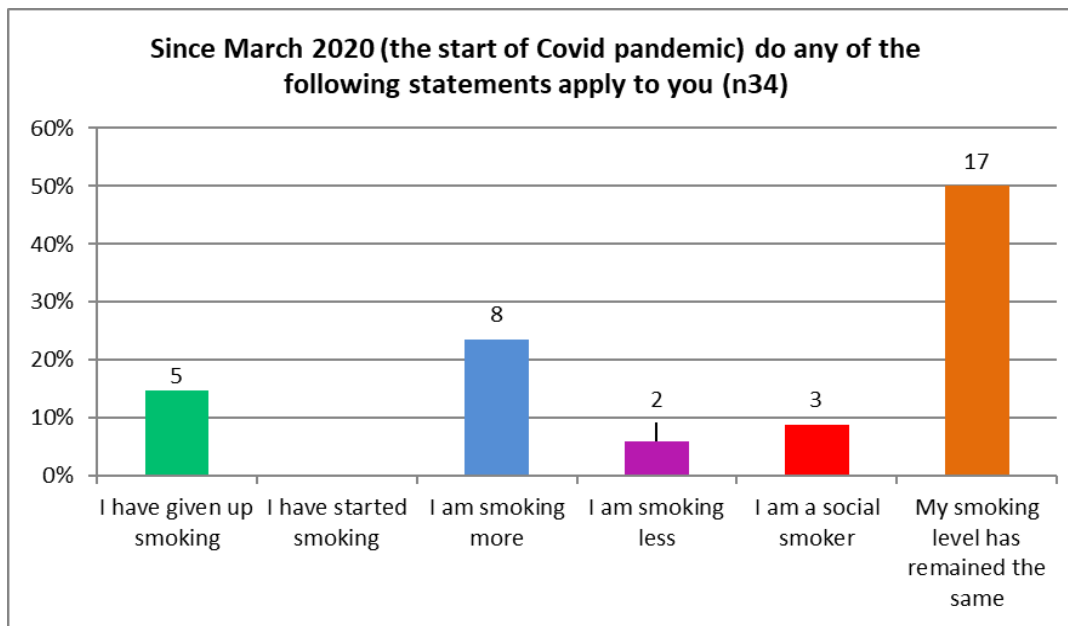
This survey is a small snapshot study into residents smoking habits with a low number of respondents. The results may not be representative of the wider population of smokers in the borough.

Despite a relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions from the 19th July 2021, we found that the restrictions still in place limited the engagement we could safely undertake resulting in a reliance on promoting the survey via social media channels such as Facebook and local online community groups.

Breakdown of Responses

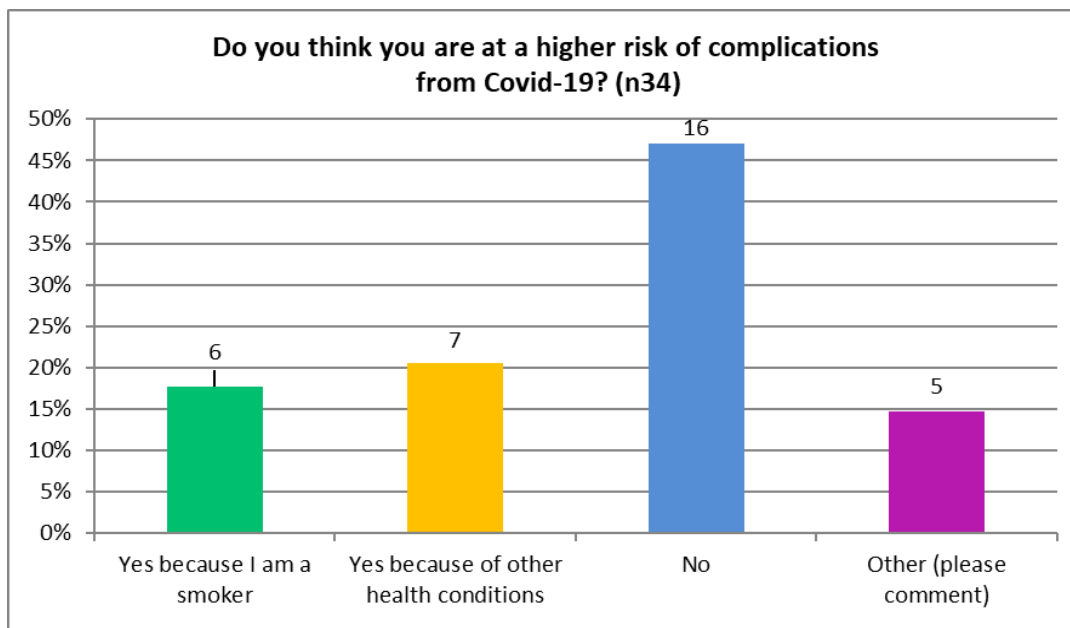
1. Since March 2020 (the start of Covid pandemic) do any of the following statements apply to you? (n34)

50% of respondents told us that their smoking level had stayed the same during the pandemic whilst 24% told us they are smoking more. 15% have given up smoking and 6% were smoking less since the pandemic began.



2. Do you think you are at a higher risk of complications from Covid-19? (n34)

47% of respondents told us that they did not feel at higher risk of complications from Covid -19 if they smoked. Alternatively, 18% did feel more at risk as a smoker. 20% felt more at risk because of other pre-existing health conditions.



3. Please comment if Covid-19 has made you consider your overall health and why? (n29)

11 of our respondents had considered their overall health during the pandemic, while 18 had not.

“Yes, the more I read and watched the pandemic unfold since March 2020, it really did make me re-consider my smoking habit. I was determined to give up. There were other competing factors, including the imminent birth of my first grandchild, and the increasing costs associated with

smoking including both health and financial. I contacted Bexley's 'Stop Smoking Service', and received great support and have not smoked since the end of February 2021".

"Of course. I need to be as healthy as possible to be able to fight away infection".

"Seeing the devastation Covid has caused I need to do more to take care of own health".

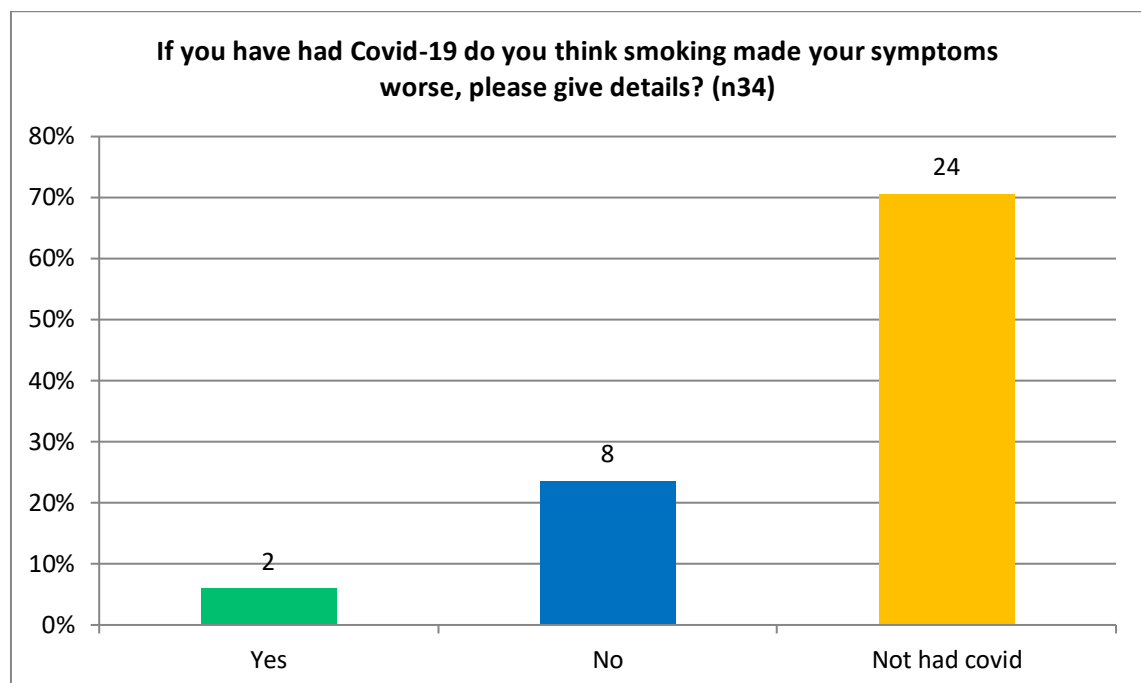
"Double jabbed, fitness has remained the same".

"Not my health but other things relating to smoking".

"I don't think about it too much".

4. If you have had Covid-19 do you think smoking made your symptoms worse? (n34)

6% of our respondents believe that smoking made their Covid-19 symptoms worse whilst 71% did not. 24% of respondents told us they have not had Covid-19.

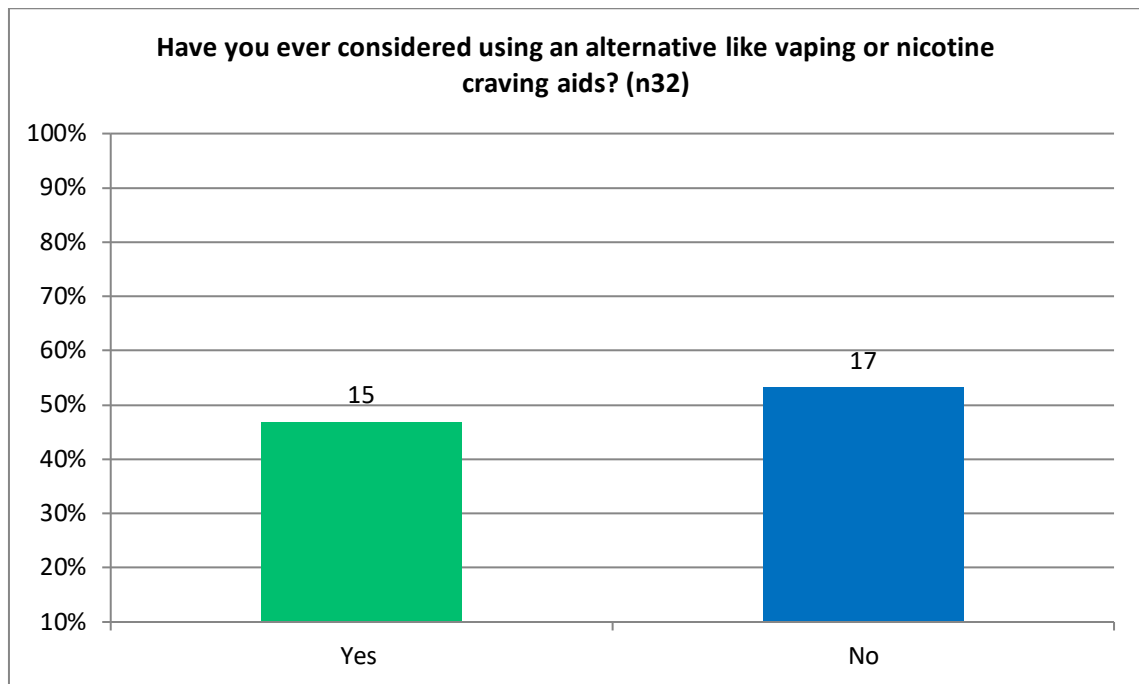


"I think it made my cough worse, I had terrible problems with my chest. It's difficult to answer because I may have felt that way event if I didn't smoke. I guess I'll never know. What was strange though is that I was having quite a lot of heart pain prior to my covid jab (Pfizer) and after the jab I have hardly any pain".

"Not sure if it made it worse, but I know it didn't help with the cough".

5. Have you ever considered using an alternative like vaping or nicotine craving aids? (n32)

47% of respondents have considered using an alternative to smoking cigarettes while 53% have not.



“Trying to vape but find the whole world of vaping very confusing. Different types of mouth piece, different shaped vape devices etc. It's not easy!”

“Tried nicotine patches before but they made me feel sick”.

“Vaped for a year. Lost my father 18 months ago and went back to smoking.”

Have used both before, vaping I just used more than smoking, nicotine aids...I started smoking as soon as I stopped using them.”

6. Many people have suffered financial pressures during the pandemic. If you have been affected, please tell us whether you considered the cost of smoking as a priority? (n26)

“Didn't really affect my money but found I am spending more on cigarettes”

“Not smoking at the moment because I can't afford to buy cigarettes. I'm on benefit and going through a tough time”

“Smoking is not a priority, I do it when I can afford it”

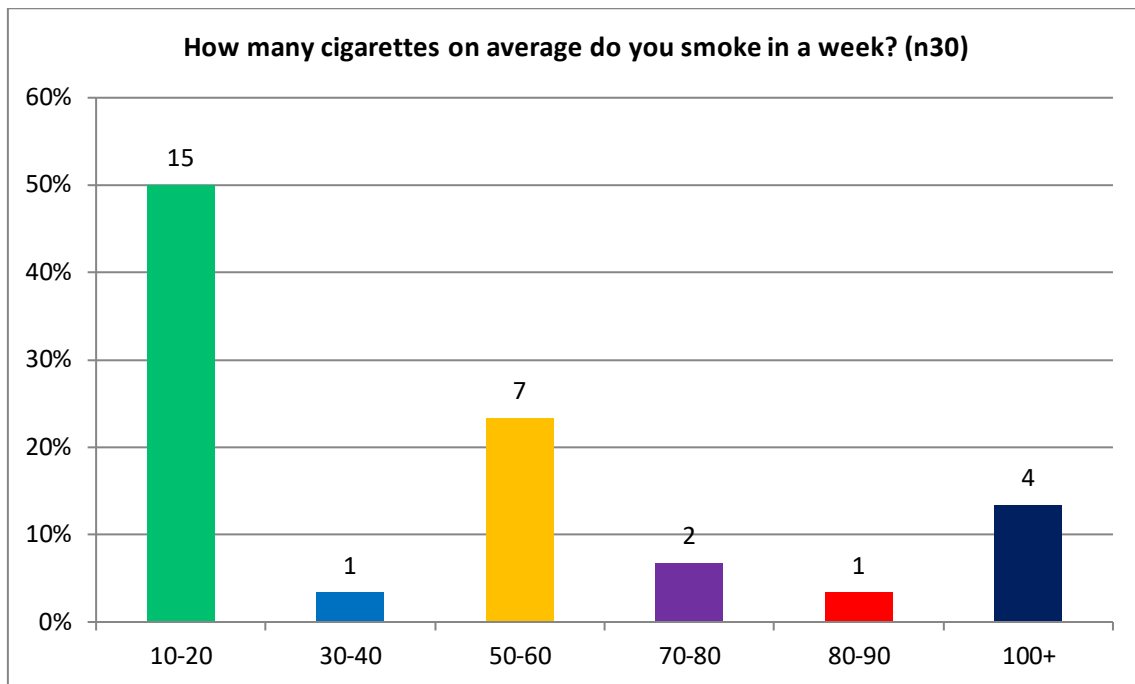
“A roof over my head is more important than smoking that would be the priority for me”

“No-during lockdown I have found I have more money as not going out socialising as much.”

“No actually been more busy (as a plumber)”

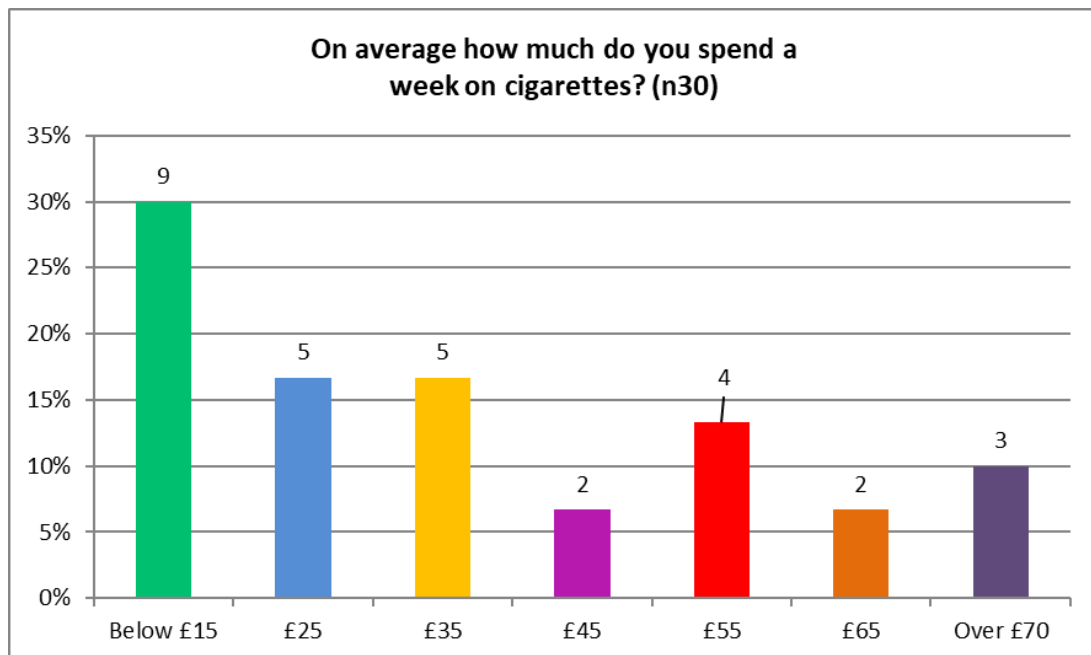
7. How many cigarettes on average do you smoke in a week?

50% of respondents told us that they smoke between 10 and 20 cigarettes a week compared to 30% who smoke over 100.



8. On average how much do you spend a week on cigarettes?

30% of respondents told us that they spend less than £15 on cigarettes per week whereas 10% spend more than £70.



9. Most of us have been at home more or working from home during the pandemic, has this affected your smoking? e.g. smoking indoors, smoking around family, increased smoking breaks etc.

“Pandemic didn’t affect my smoking, when at home I’m smoking in the garden”

“Increased smoking. Started smoking when I first wake up and have never done this”

“Do not smoke indoors. Since Covid not smoking in front of family members”

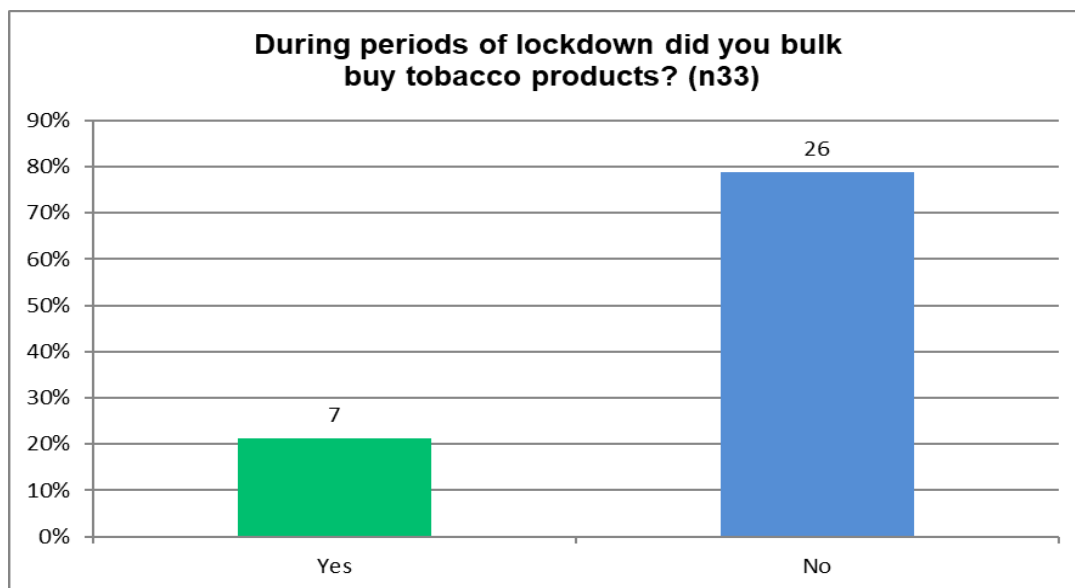
“I work for the NHS so not been home based. My smoking has increased through stress and boredom - working for the NHS is stressful”.

“I used to work in an office but was made redundant during lockdown. I was working from home and having family around affected my decision to quit”

“I’m a social smoker, mainly at work. I don’t smoke at home. At work it’s an excuse to take a break with others. No one else I know smokes apart from work colleagues”

10. During periods of lockdown did you bulk buy tobacco products? (n33)

21% of respondents told us that they had bulk bought tobacco products during the lockdown.



11. How do you feel about smoking in public and what, if anything, would you like to see changed? (n30)

33% feel that smokers should consider non-smokers when smoking in public. Whilst 33% told us that more consideration should be given to smokers by the provision of dedicated smoking areas, not being made to feel like a criminal or the provision of more smoking wall bins to extinguish cigarettes.

“I agree with the smoking ban indoors in public places, happy to smoke outside in a designated smoking area”

“It's not fair to smoke around non-smokers and I know they don't like it. Wouldn't change anything just so long as there are areas for me to go and smoke when I want to”.

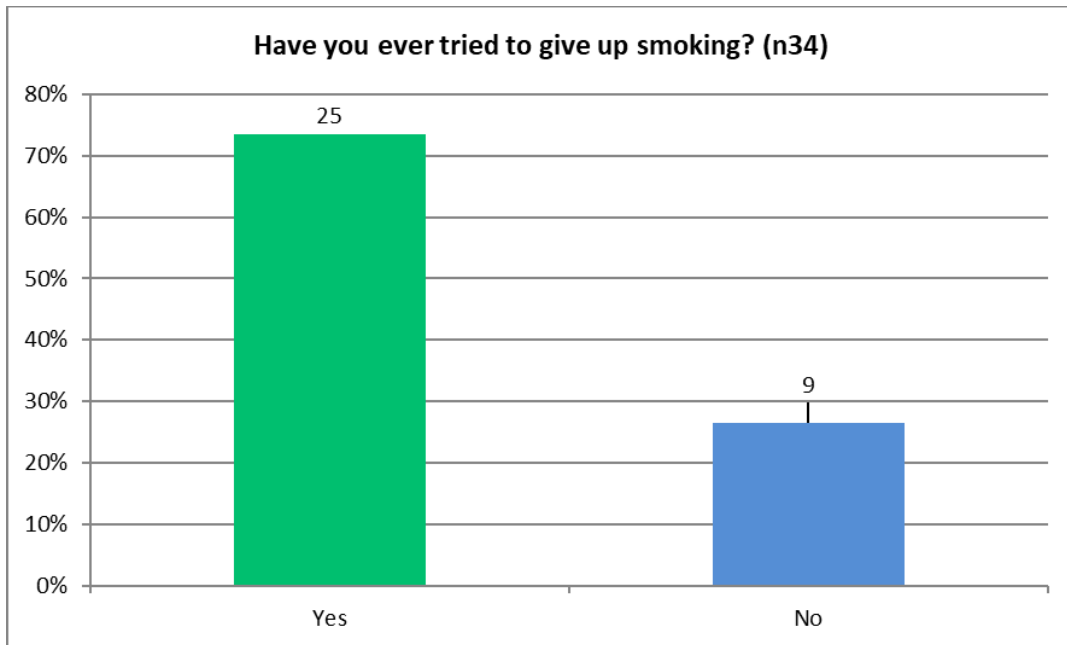
“I think the indoor smoking ban has been a good thing and it should stay as is but should be more bins and ashtrays provided on streets”.

“I feel that if smokers are being told where they cannot smoke, there should be designated areas where they can smoke. Why can you drink alcohol anywhere but smoke almost nowhere? If the answer is second-hand smoke, what about people who are violent when drunk? It is still someone's habit impacting on strangers”

“More places to extinguish cigarettes like wall bins. Harder to smoke and put it out safely. Disagree with smoking at bus and train stops”.

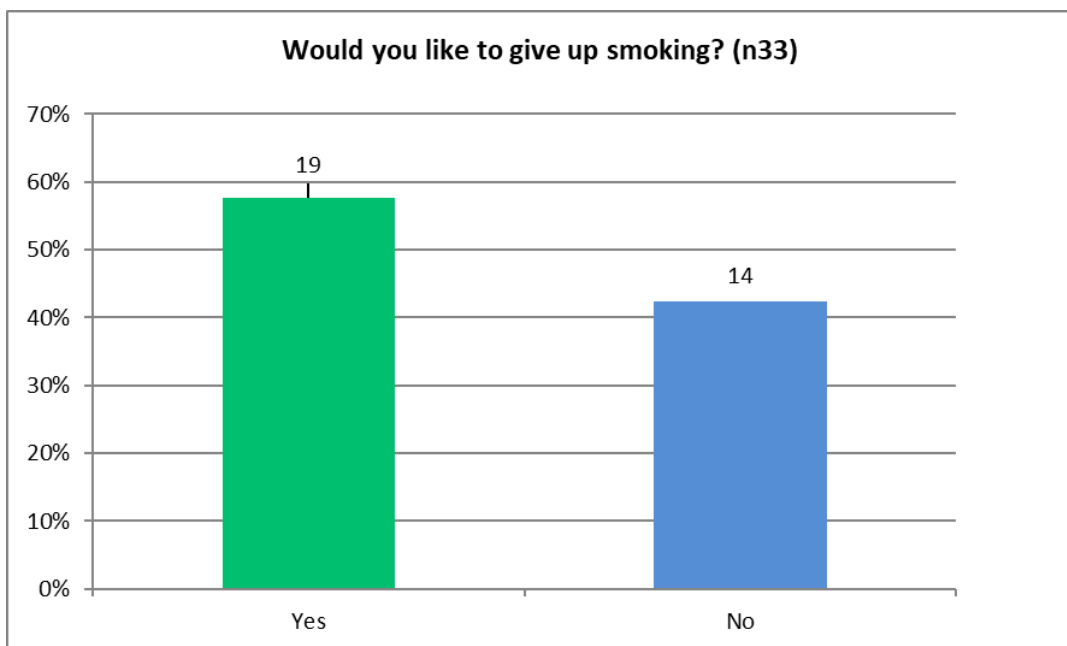
12. Have you ever tried to give up smoking? (n34)

74% of respondents have tried to give up smoking while 26% have not.



13. Would you like to give up smoking? (n33)

58% of respondents told us they would like to give up smoking.

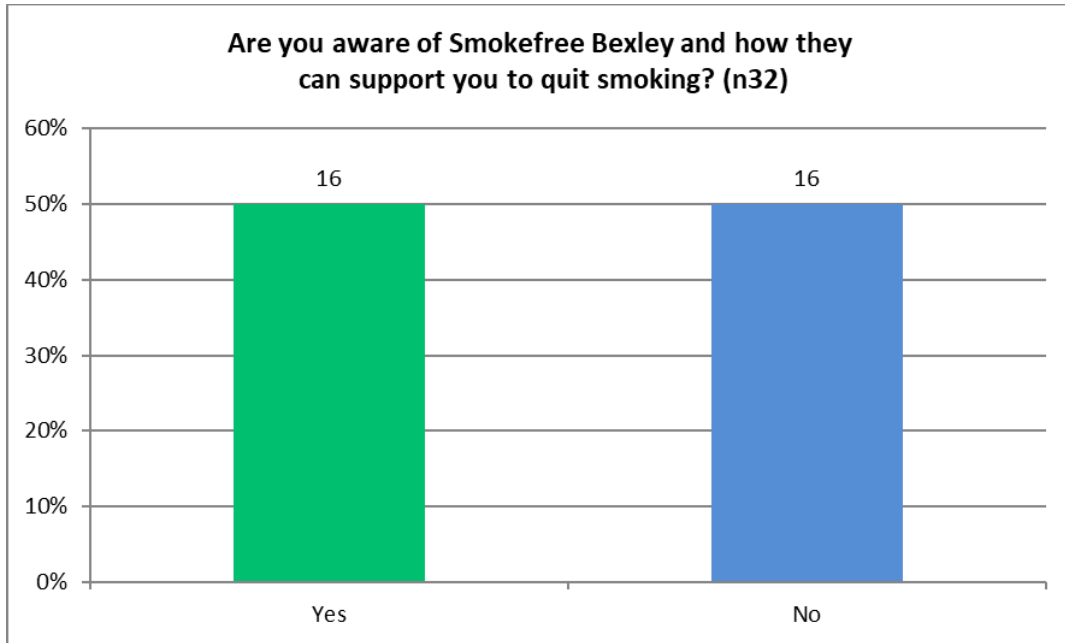


“Covid made me consider quitting. It wasn’t because of health concerns as such; it was because for the first time my whole schedule completely changed. Where smoking was a habit for me, I

would have a cigarette when travelling to work and at lunchtime, I smoked around my daily habits and had smoking times during day”.

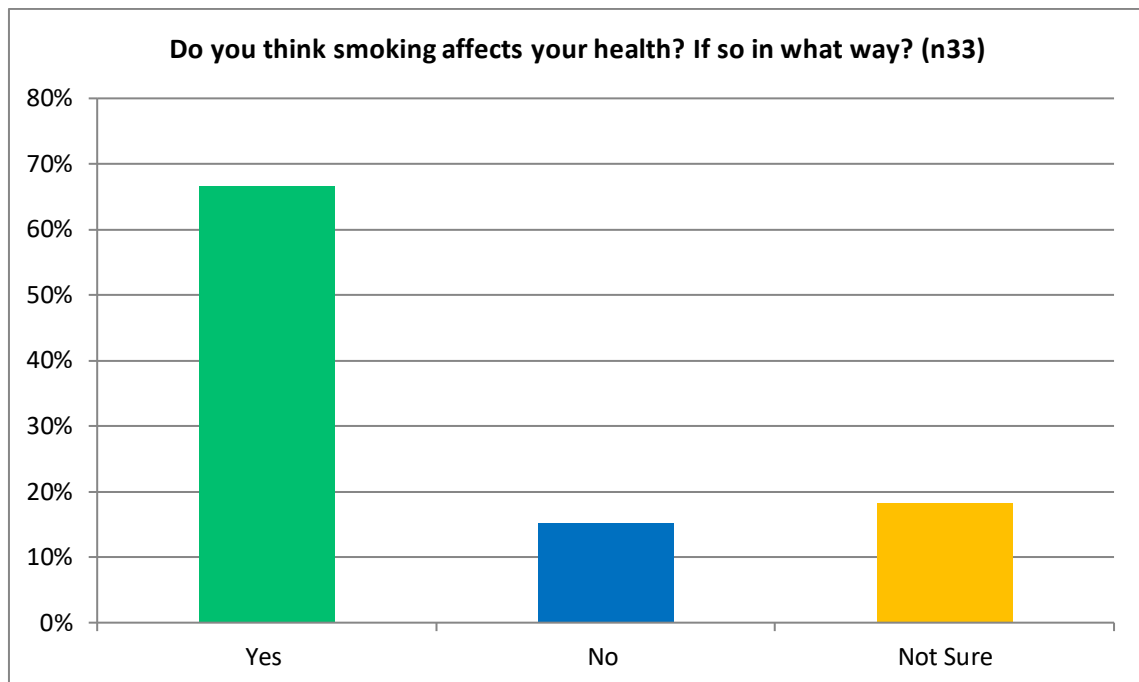
14. Are you aware of SmokeFree Bexley and how they can support you to quit smoking?

50% of respondents have heard of SmokeFree Bexley while the remaining 50% had not.



15. Do you think smoking affects your health? If so in what way?

More than 50% of respondents told us that they think smoking affects their health, the remainder were not sure or did not feel it was affecting their health.



"Get acid reflux and shortness of breath"

"Causes chronic health problems, high cause of cancers"

"It's made me breathless and I do not exercise as much as I should because of this".

"Breathing problems. Also notice my skin is not in good condition, I feel I look older than I am"

"It's bad for you and addictive. Can lead to all sorts of complications"

"I work out constantly, hasn't affected my aerobic performance"

"No symptoms of ill health experienced"

"Still the same fitness as I have always been. Run every day, weights every day"

"We all know it's not good for you but it's addictive and difficult to stop"

"Sometimes no smoking means more stress"

"Yes Probably but It's my stress relief"

Conclusion

Since the Pandemic started in March 2020 half of the people we spoke to told us that their smoking habits had not changed, however, almost a quarter reported that their smoking has increased. What is concerning is that 47% do not consider themselves at a higher risk of complications if they were to catch Covid-19, despite recent evidence suggesting some smokers may be at more risk of developing a more serious case of Covid-19 if contracted (BHF, 2021).

Less than half of the survey participants had considered their general health during the Covid-19 pandemic even though more than half are aware that smoking causes a risk to health without the potential added complications if they were to contract Covid-19.

Several of our participants had considered safer alternatives to smoking such as vaping and nicotine products but had either not found these a suitable replacement. We did not ask if they had accessed support in the past to help them in their efforts to give up using tobacco products but support information was available to all that completed our survey.

Recommendations

- PHB TCCG could explore in more depth the smoking rates amongst specific groups of concern ie young parents. This would enable a targeted communication program to be developed offering support to those who wish to give up smoking.
- PHB and the TCCG could explore the Covid-19 vaccination rates in smokers as they may be at more risk of complications if they contract Covid-19. This would enable a targeted program of support to be offered to smokers to include vaccination and access to stop smoking services.

References

BHF, 2021. Does smoking increase or reduce your risk from coronavirus? Available at: [bhf.org.uk](https://www.bhf.org.uk) (Accessed: 20th September 2021).

Hopkinson NS, Rossi N, El-Sayed-Moustafa J, et al. 2021. Current smoking and Covi-19 risk: results from a population symptom app in over 2.4 million people. *Thorax* 2021; 76:714-722 Available at: thorax.bmj.com (Accessed: September 20th 2021).

Smoke-free generation 2017: Policy paper Smoke-free generation: tobacco control plan for England. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/towards-a-smoke-free-generation-tobacco-control-plan-for-england> (Accessed on 27th August 2021).

Appendix 1

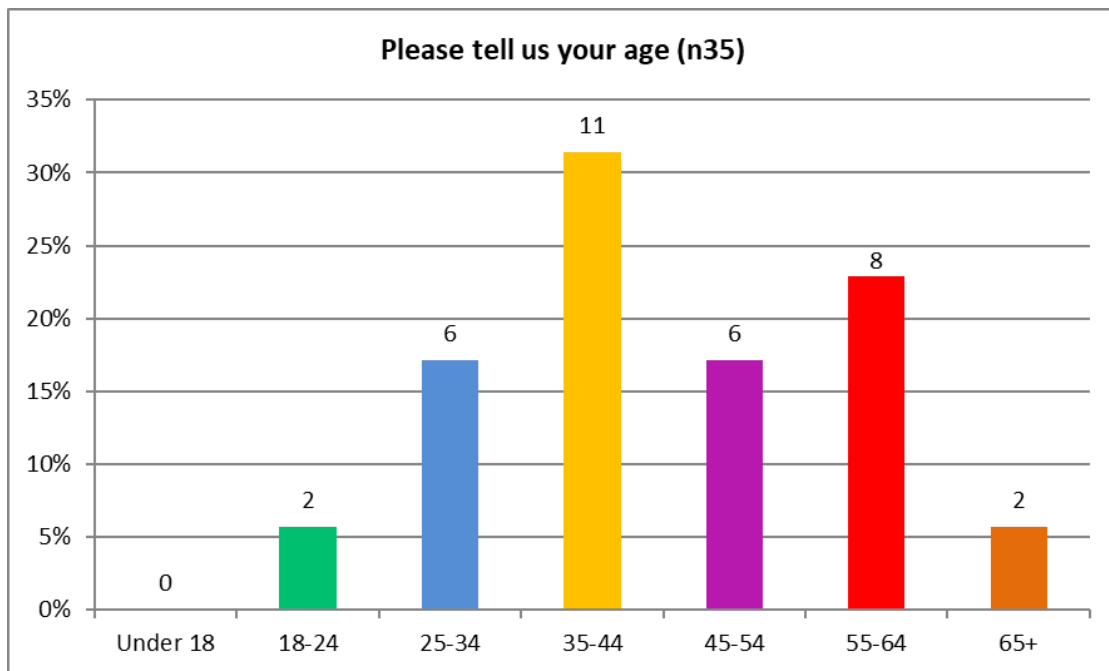
Demographics

Do you live in the London Borough of Bexley? (n33)

97% of our contributors live in the London Borough of Bexley.

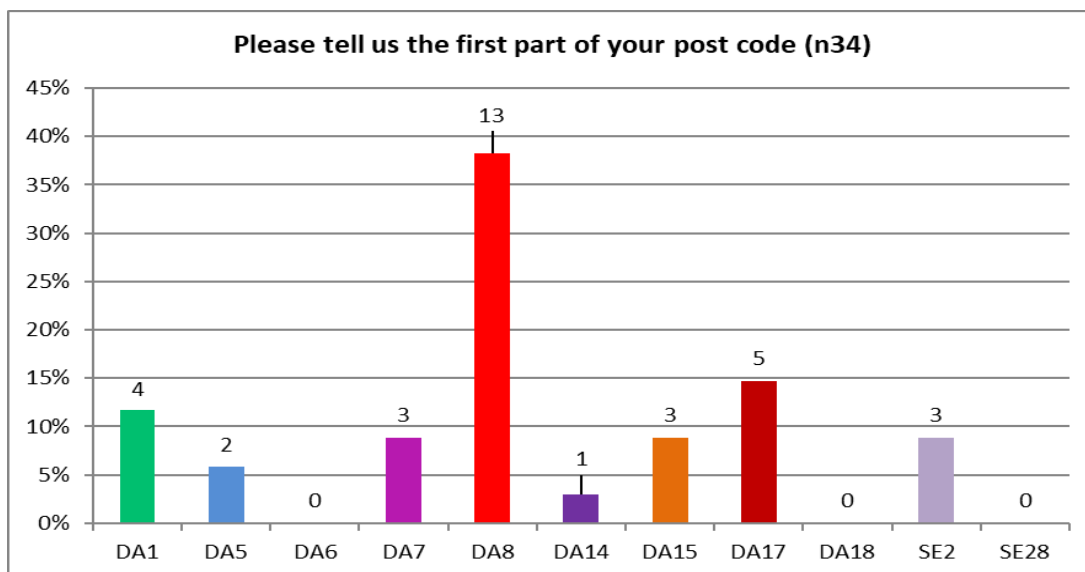
Please tell us your age (n35)

Healthwatch Bexley were able to engage with residents from all adult age ranges over 18 with 31% being from the 35-44 age group.



Please tell us the first part of your post code (n34)

Healthwatch Bexley were able to engage with residents from eight of the eleven postcodes mentioned within the borough of Bexley.



Please tell us your ethnicity (n35)

Black Caribbean 3%

Other Mixed Background 3%

Asian British 6%

White English 80%

Other 9%

28 respondents told us they were White English, 1 Black Caribbean, 1 came from a mixed background. 2 were Asian British and 3 told us they fell into 'other' which included Romanian and other European countries.

Gender/identity (n28)

25% of participants in this survey were female and 68% were male. 1 participant identified as Non-Binary and 1 preferred not to say.