

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS OF VAPING & VAPING WITH OTHER SUBSTANCES

MARCH 2026



CONTENTS

- 3. About Healthwatch Blackburn with Darwen
- 4. Summary
- 5. Methodology
- 6. Introduction
- 7. Survey Findings
- 12. Analysis of Findings
- 13. Awareness & Uses and Access & Availability
- 14. Behaviour & Attitudes
- 15. Percieved Risks
- 16. Health Risks and Mental Health Risks
- 17. Legal Risks and Social Risks
- 18. Experiences and Preferences
- 19. Workshop Conclusion
- 20. Recommendations



ABOUT US

Healthwatch was established under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 as an independent consumer champion to understand the needs, experiences and concerns of people who use health and social care services and to speak out on their behalf.

There are over 150 local Healthwatch across England. The role of a local Healthwatch is to:

Listen to people, especially those who are most vulnerable, to understand their experiences and what matters most to them

Influence those who have the power to change services so that they better meet people's needs now and into the future

Empower and inform people to get the most from their health and social care services and encourage other organisations to do the same.

Find out more at:

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SUMMARY

This report explores what young people in Blackburn with Darwen understand about vaping, including using vapes with illegal substances, as well as their attitudes and opinions on vaping. We spoke to 107 young people aged 11-17 through surveys and discussions.

Vaping is common among the young people we spoke to, with over half stating that they vape. Many said that most or all of their friends vape. They also know about vapes with substances such as THC and Spice and some have tried them which raises concerns about the growing use of illegal substances in vapes. It is reportedly easy for them to get vapes from friends, shops or other informal sources.

The findings show that vaping is often about fitting in with friends and seeming "cool". Many young people know about the basic risks to their health, mental health and the law. However, this does not necessarily deter them from vaping. Some use vaping to deal with boredom, stress or anxiety.

There is clear gap between what young people think they know about the risks and the facts.

METHODOLOGY



The research conducted by Healthwatch Blackburn with Darwen involved a series of vaping awareness sessions with young people at school and in youth settings. We had hoped to visit all schools within Blackburn with Darwen, however due to lack of communication from most schools this has not been possible. However, we would still wish to visit all schools to engage with young people about vaping and understand their attitudes towards it.

We engaged with young people through face to face workshops as well as collecting anonymous data to obtain honest feedback from participants via a Mentimeter survey. We felt that this approach was important to gather responses which young people may not feel comfortable sharing in front of a group.

Data collection in this research was gathered via two methods:

- Quantitative data that can be obtained from survey questions such as vaping behaviors, awareness, access and risks
- Qualitative information through open discussion whereby young people were given an opportunity to articulate their experiences, beliefs and attitudes towards vaping and drugs.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Healthwatch Blackburn with Darwen was approached by Blackburn with Darwen Council Public Health team to undertake engagement with young people in Blackburn with Darwen regarding their experiences of vaping, including the use of vaping products containing illicit substances. This research was undertaken to build an understanding of health behaviours that are emerging amongst young people in the local area, along with the associated health risks.



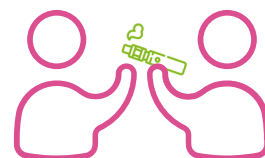
52.3% of young people spoken with said Yes they vaped



42.2% of young people spoken with said "most of my friends vape"



28.2% of young people spoken to said Yes to having tried a vape containing an illicit substance



41% of young people spoken with said they had been given the vape by someone they knew

FINDINGS

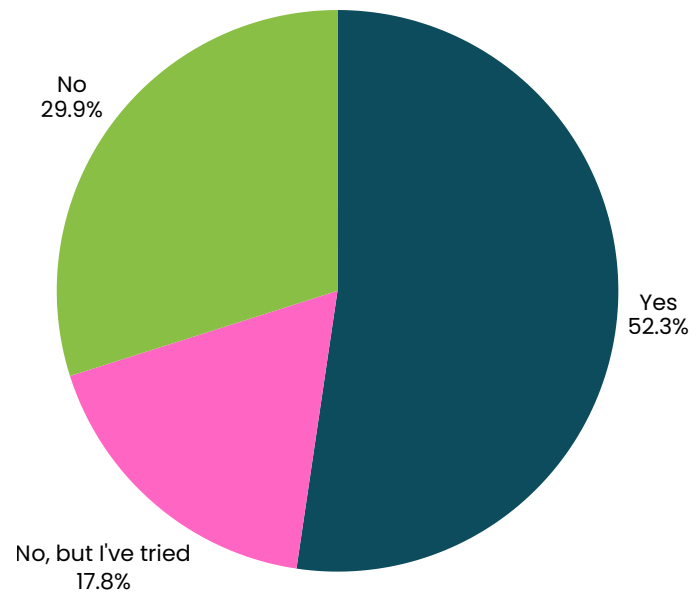


Survey Findings

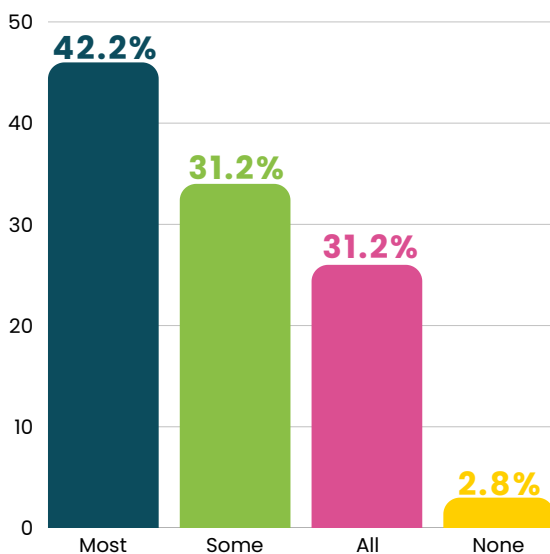
We spoke with 107 young people between the ages 11 and 17. The survey was completed through a mix of an online Mentimeter survey and printed copies of the survey to ensure their answers remained anonymous, especially when delivering the workshop in a school setting. This allowed the young people to be honest without judgement.

Q1. Do you vape?

56 young people spoken with answered **"yes"**, **19** said **"no, but I have tried it"** and **32** answered **"no"**.



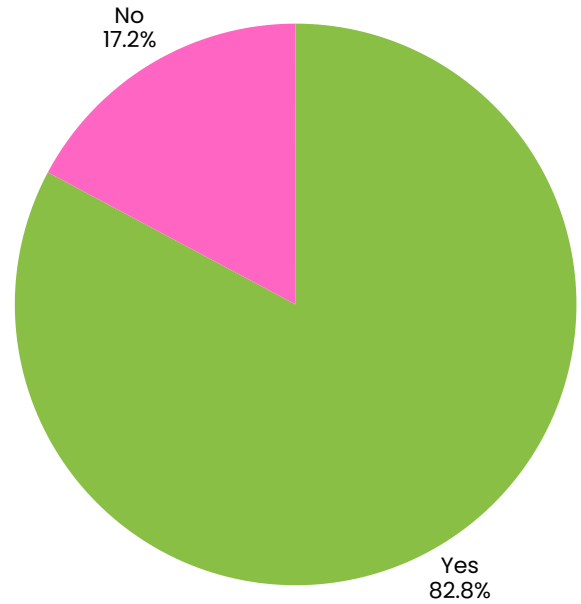
Q2. Do any of your friends vape?



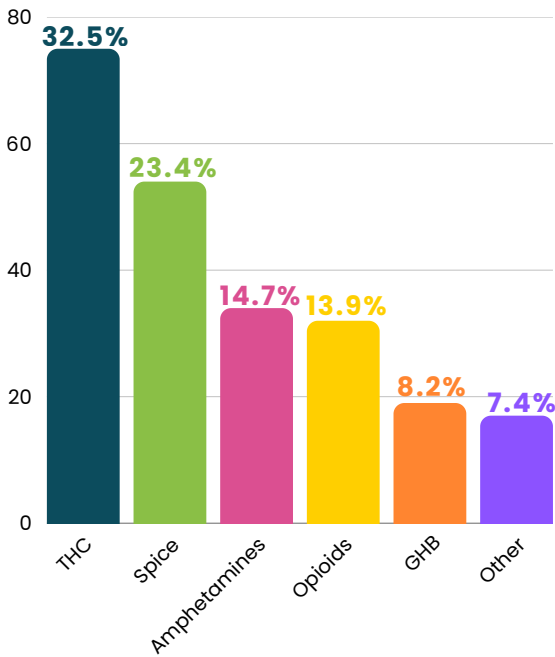
46 said **"most"** of their friends **vape**. **34** said **"some"** of their friends **vape**. **26** said **"all"** of their friends **vape** and **3** said **"none"** vape.

Q3. Have you heard of vapes containing illicit substances?

77 young people spoken to answered **"yes"** to knowing about vapes containing illicit substances, **16** answered **"no"**.



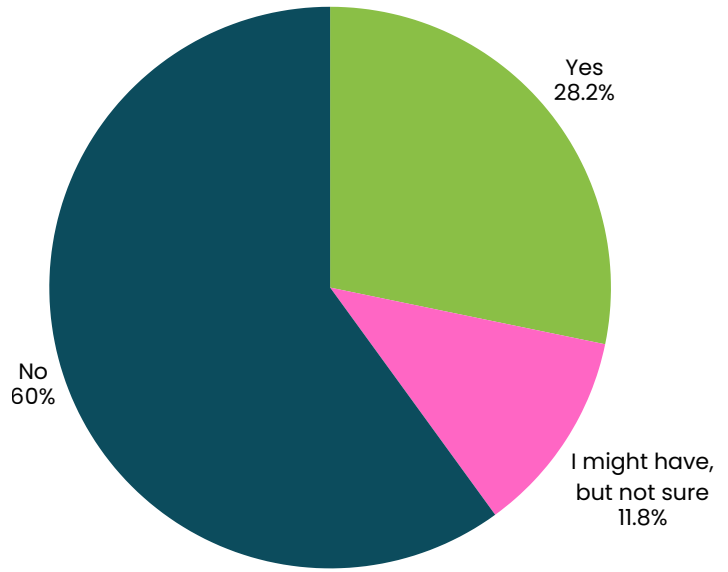
Q4. Have you heard of any of the following drugs being included in vapes?



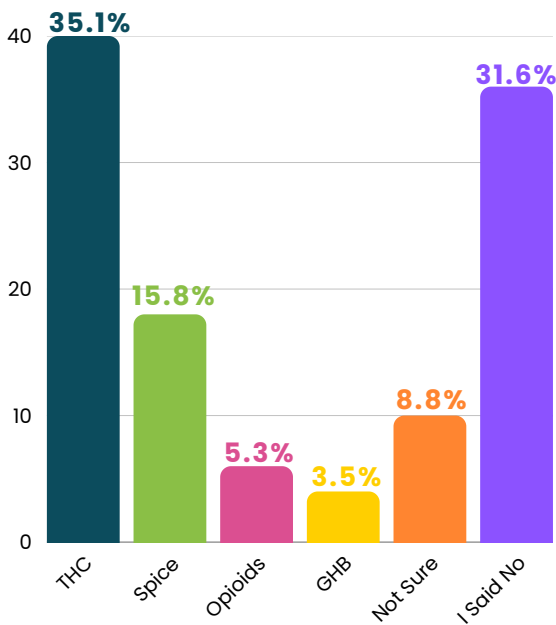
75 answered they had heard of **"THC" in vapes**. 54 answered **"Spice"**. 34 answered **"Amphetamines"**, 32 answered **"Opioids"**, 19 answered **"GHB"** and 17 answered **"Other"** however they did not tell us which drug they were referring to.

Q5. Have you ever tried a vape containing a drug?

24 young people we spoke with answered **"yes"** to trying a vape containing an illicit substance, **10** answered **"I might have, but not sure"** and **51** said **"No"**.



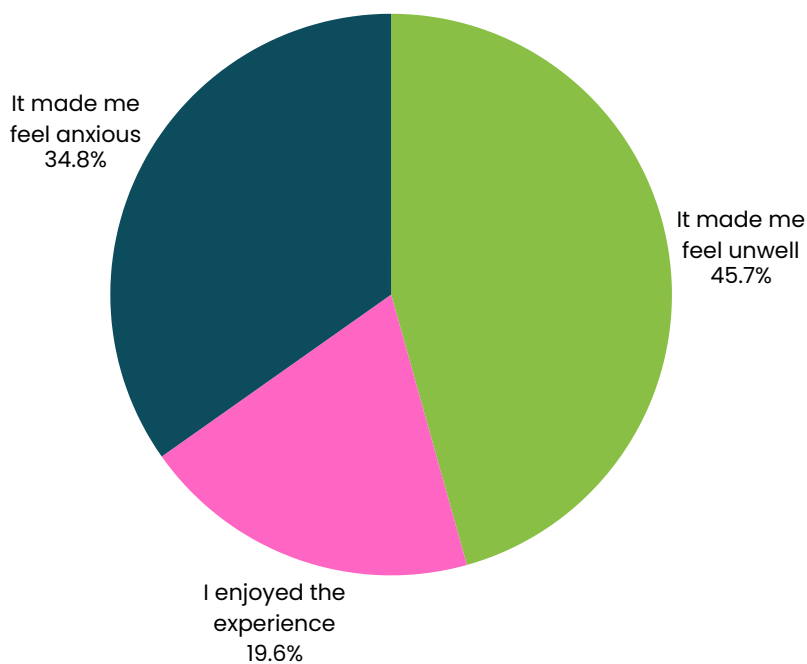
Q6. If you answered yes or might have, what drug did the vape contain?



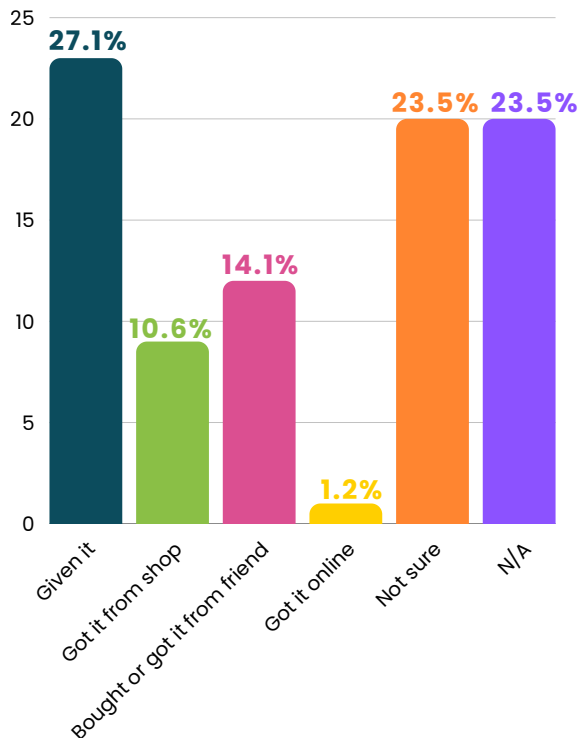
40 young people answered they had **"THC"**. **18** answered **"Spice"**. **6** answered **"Opioids"**, **4** answered **"GHB"**, **10** answered **"Not sure"** answered **36** answered **"I said no"**. Based on the numbers above, it is unclear whether they had answered Q5 honestly or had misunderstood this as awareness of vapes containing illicit substances.

Q7. What effect did the drug have on you?

21 young people spoken with answered **"it made me feel unwell"**, **9** answered **"I enjoyed the experience"** answered **16** answered **"it made me feel anxious"**.



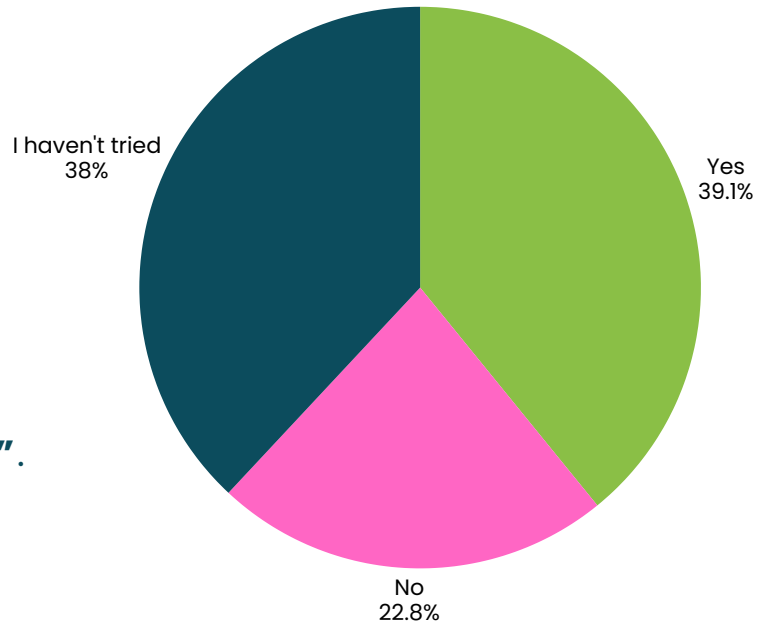
Q8. Where did you get the vape containing the drug from?



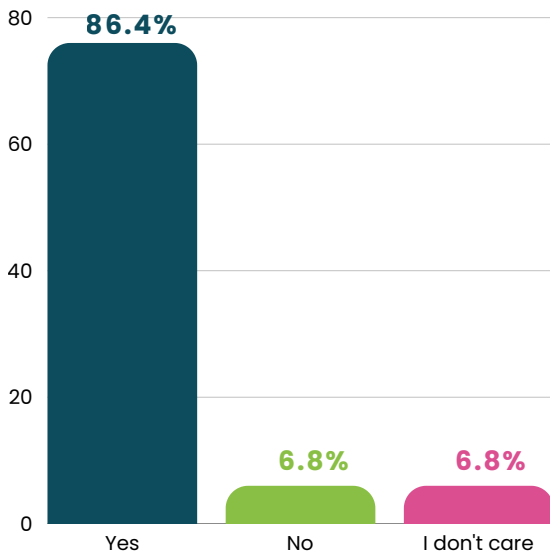
23 answered that **they had been "given it"**. **9** stated they got it from **"the shop"**. **12** answered **"bought or got it from a friend"**, **1** answered they **"got it online"**, **20** answered **"Not sure"**, **20** answered **"N/A"**. And one just answered **"no"**.

Q9. Is it easy for you to get hold of vapes containing drugs if you want them?

36 young people spoken with answered **"Yes"** it is easy to get hold of vapes containing drugs, **21** answered **"No"** and **35** answered **"I haven't tried"**.



Q10. Are you aware of the dangers of vaping drugs?



76 answered **"Yes"**. **6** answered they got it from **"No"**. **6** answered **"I don't care"**.

Analysis of Findings

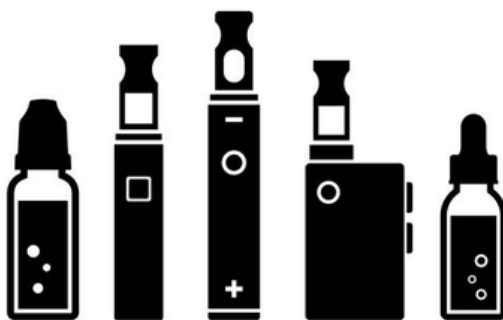


Summary

The workshop discussions gave valuable information about what young people really think about vaping and illicit substances. When starting the workshop, the young people showed a mix of openness and hesitation when it came to discussing vaping and whether they had vaped. However, as the workshop progressed, the young people were more open to share their views.

The discussion findings are grouped into five key themes:

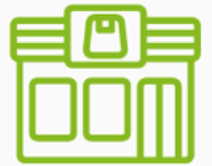
- **Awareness and Use**
- **Access and Availability**
- **Behaviour and Attitudes**
- **Perceived Risks**
- **Experiences and Preferences**



Awareness and Use

Young people know a lot about vaping. They see it around them all the time and many of them have tried vaping. Vaping has become a normal part of social life for young people in the borough. They are also aware that some vapes have illicit substances in them with the majority knowing of THC and Spice being used. Some reported that they had tried these vapes or that they know someone who has. While some young people are aware of the risks, others stated they were not. When trying vapes with illicit substances, some said they felt **"out of it"**, **"off my face"** or **"monged out"**.

This trend raises serious concerns about the evolving nature of vaping, as nicotine vapes have become vehicles for a wider range of substances.



Access and Availability

Participants consistently reported that vaping products are easy to obtain. Common answers included:- being given them, from shops or from friends. A significant concern raised was that retailers often do not check identification, allowing underage access.

As with nicotine products, illicit substances are often obtained through informal or illegal channels like online purchases. Some young people reported purchasing the illicit liquid from **"Snapchat"** or **"getting it from a friend"**





Behaviour and Attitudes

Vaping was widely viewed as normal and socially acceptable among participants. Many described it as something that **“everyone does”** reinforcing the perception that vaping is the ‘norm’ within their peer groups. This normalisation appears to reduce perceived risk and increase willingness to participate.

Vaping was also, in some cases, seen as “cool”, particularly within social settings. This perception contributes to its appeal and can influence young people to start or continue vaping in order to “fit in” or maintain social status.

To reinforce the point that vaping can be considered as a way to “fit in”, some participants reported using nicotine free vapes, because they enjoyed the taste and flavours. Some young people also described vaping as something that helps them feel more comfortable or settled, particularly those who identified as having ADHD. Participants explained that having a vape in their hand provided a sense of ease, similar to holding a phone, and helped with restlessness or focus. This highlights that vaping is not always driven by substance use alone, but also by sensory appeal and habit.

There was also some confusion among participants about why healthcare professionals ask about vaping during ADHD assessments. While not always clearly understood by young people, this is likely because nicotine can affect attention, may interact with ADHD medication, and is associated with higher rates of use among individuals with ADHD. Young people admitted not being honest with healthcare professionals about their vaping habits.





Perceived Risks

Despite widespread awareness of the risks associated with vaping, this knowledge does not consistently translate into behaviour change. Many young people were able to talk about potential harms, including serious health consequences, yet continue to vape. A young person we spoke with was shocked to learn that their constant irritated throat was likely to be due to vaping.

This disconnect highlights a critical gap between knowledge and action. Awareness alone is insufficient to deter use, particularly when other factors, such as peer pressure, stress, boredom are more immediate and influential.

For some individuals, the perceived benefits of vaping, such as stress relief or social inclusion, outweigh concerns about long-term risks. Others may underestimate the likelihood or severity of harm, viewing negative outcomes as distant or “unlikely to happen to them”

The perception of vaping as less harmful than smoking also contributes to its appeal. Many participants described cigarettes as “dirty,” “smelly,” and “for older people,” while viewing vaping as cleaner, more modern, and more acceptable. This shift in perception reflects broader cultural changes and suggests that anti-smoking messaging may have inadvertently contributed to the rise of vaping.

When discussing the risks, we had four questions and four risks that we asked the young people. They were:

- What could go wrong?
- Who could be affected?
- What might happen in the short term?
- What might happen in the long term?

- Health Risks**
- Mental Health Risks**
- Legal Risks**
- Social Risks**



Health Risks

Young people demonstrated a strong awareness of the potential physical health risks associated with vaping. These included serious outcomes such as lung damage, cancer, organ failure, and death. Some participants specifically referenced conditions such as “popcorn lung,” as well as symptoms including breathlessness, dizziness, nausea and fatigue.

Short-term effects identified by participants included irritation of the throat, feeling unwell, and reduced physical fitness. One participant reported experiencing throat irritation directly as a result of vaping. There were also accounts of device related risks, including an incident in which a vape device caught fire in a student’s pocket.

Long term risks were described in more severe terms, including chronic illness, weakened physical condition, and reduced life expectancy. Participants also recognised the impact of second hand exposure, noting that vaping could affect those around them, including friends and family.

Mental Health Risks

Mental health impacts were a significant concern raised during discussions. Participants highlighted the potential for addiction, anxiety, and emotional distress associated with vaping.



Some young people described a cycle in which vaping is used as a coping mechanism for stress or anxiety, but quitting can lead to withdrawal symptoms and increased emotional difficulty. This can result in repeated attempts to quit followed by relapse.

Short term mental health effects identified by young people included negative thoughts and emotional instability without their vape. Long term impacts were described as more severe, including ongoing mental health struggles and a decline in overall wellbeing.

Legal Risks

Legal risks were primarily associated with the use of illicit substances in vapes. Participants recognised that involvement with illegal drugs could result in serious consequences, including arrest and imprisonment.

The impact of a criminal record was also highlighted, with participants noting that this could affect future employment opportunities and overall life chances. These risks extend beyond the individual, impacting families and communities.

Social Risks

Participants identified a range of social risks associated with vaping. These included conflict with family members, loss of trust, and strained relationships. In some cases, young people suggested that vaping could lead to being asked to leave home. There were also concerns about social isolation, particularly if vaping behaviour leads to exclusion or conflict. While vaping may initially facilitate social inclusion, it can also contribute to longer term social challenges – one young person stated that they would not want to **“end up like those homeless people in the town centre”**.





Experience and Preferences

Young people had tried both cigarettes and vaping. They preferred vaping because of the taste.

Pod vapes were the most popular amongst young people. They told us that they liked them because they tasted better, with some young people stating that they use vapes without nicotine.

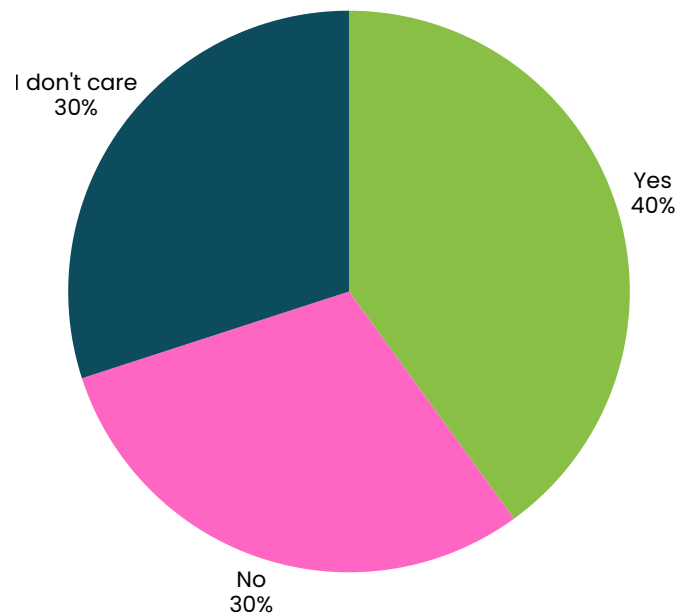
The impression Healthwatch BwD gathered from the workshops around smoking was that young people think that smoking is old-fashioned compared with vaping. They said cigarettes were not nice and were “dirty” and “smelly”. They also did not like the taste of tobacco flavoured vapes. They thought that smoking was not cool and that cigarettes “were for older people”. Some young people had tried cigarettes, but they did not like them. Vaping was seen as more acceptable than smoking, with some saying that they would rather sit next to someone who is vaping than someone who is smoking a cigarette.

**SOME YOUNG
PEOPLE STATED
THEY
WOULD RATHER SIT
NEXT TO SOMEBODY
WHO IS VAPING
RATHER THAN
SMOKING**



Workshop Conclusion

In the workshops at the end of the session we asked the young people if they would still vape after what they've learnt today. From the young people that answered, **8** said **"Yes"**, **6** said **"No"** and **6** said **"I don't care"**



The workshop findings highlight the importance of continued engagement with young people, as they are willing to discuss sensitive topics openly when approached appropriately.

This openness provides a valuable opportunity for education and prevention work to build on existing awareness and address the social drivers that influence vaping behaviour.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings within this report, the following recommendations are proposed:

Early Education and Prevention

Develop early, targeted and accessible education programmes that address both vaping and vaping illicit substances, ensuring young people understand the risks in a relevant and understandable way.

Peer Influence and Group Based Interventions

Address peer influence through group-based interventions delivered in schools and youth settings, recognising the strong role of social normalisation in vaping behaviour.

Enforcement of Age Restrictions

Strengthen enforcement of underage sales and improve retailer compliance with age verification laws through regular monitoring and appropriate action where breaches occur.

Parental and Community Awareness

Increase awareness among parents, guardians, carers, and the wider community about vapes and illicit substances through clear communication from schools and local services. This awareness should include the use of vapes as a quit aid for cigarettes in order to tackle young people going straight to vaping.

Youth Voice and Engagement

Integrate youth voice into the design and delivery of vaping prevention campaigns to ensure messages are credible, relevant, and engaging for young people.

Mental Health and Coping Support

Provide accessible mental health support and promote healthy coping strategies to reduce reliance on vaping as a response to stress, anxiety, or boredom.

Monitoring and Schools

Explore approaches to improve understanding of vaping trends within schools, including enhanced monitoring and information-sharing to identify emerging risks early.

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