

Tobacco and Vapes Bill: Royal Assent - Q&A

What is happening today?

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill is receiving Royal Assent, meaning it has completed all parliamentary stages and will become law. This is a major public health milestone.

What does this law actually do?

It creates the UK's first smoke-free generation; this means anyone born on or after 1 January 2009 can't be legally sold tobacco. The legislation also introduces stronger controls on vaping and tobacco regulation.

Why is the government introducing this now?

Smoking remains the leading preventable cause of death in the UK, responsible for around 80,000 deaths a year. In Northern Ireland, smoking causes over 2,000 deaths annually. This law focuses on preventing harm before it starts.

Does this mean smoking is being banned for everyone?

Adults who can legally buy tobacco today will always be able to do so. The smokefree generation means anyone born on or after 1 January 2009 can't be sold tobacco, in practice this means the age of sale will gradually rise over time.

Is this a prohibition policy?

No. This is about prevention, not prohibition. This policy progressively raises the age of sale for tobacco, while continuing to support adult smokers to quit.

How will this affect current smokers?

It will not criminalise or penalise current smokers. Stop smoking services are available in a range of local settings across NI, including GP practices, pharmacies, hospitals and some community and voluntary sector organisations to help those who want to quit.

What about vaping – is that being banned?

No - vapes are not being banned. However, it will be an offence to sell nicotine- and non-nicotine vapes to under 18s. The advertising and sponsorship of vapes will be banned.

Why is vaping included in the legislation?

Because of concerns about youth vaping and nicotine addiction, the Act introduces powers to enable restrictions on packaging, flavours and displays of products, subject to consultation. This will enable us to reduce their appeal to children. PHA research shows

that, in Northern Ireland, 15% of all 11 - 18 year-olds vape (Source: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2025-05/Behavioural%20Insights%20into%20Youth%20Vaping%20in%20NI%200.pdf>).

Will this lead to a black market in tobacco?

The Government is strengthening enforcement powers, including NI District Councils issuing £250 fines for underage sales. The legislation allows us to extend the existing NI Tobacco Retail Register so that it also applies to retailers of vape and nicotine products. In the longer term, there are powers to introduce a retail licensing scheme following public consultation. These measures will help prevent illicit trade in Northern Ireland.

What enforcement measures are included?

NI District Councils will gain stronger powers, including fixed penalty notices for underage sales and other breaches of tobacco, vape and nicotine regulations.

How is this going to work in practice, in years to come, when a 41 year old can buy tobacco but a 40 year old can't?

The smoke-free generation is designed to prevent people from ever starting smoking. Someone who has never previously smoked is unlikely to want to take up smoking later. Eight out of 10 smokers report that they started smoking before the age of 16 (Source: [Stopping smoking | HSC Public Health Agency](#)).

Will everyone need to carry ID?

As with all age-restricted products, customers looking to buy tobacco, vapes or nicotine products should expect to show ID if asked to prove they are above the age of sale. Most young adults carry some sort of ID and already get asked for identification as part of the 'challenge 25' approach. Estimates suggest that 99% of 18–29-year-olds currently have a form of ID that can be used. Eight out of 10 smokers report that they started smoking before the age of 16 (Source: [Stopping smoking | HSC Public Health Agency](#)).

How will retailers be supported to implement these changes?

The Department of Health is committed to supporting retailers through the changes brought in by this legislation. We continue to engage with the sector and have listened to their requests for sufficient lead in times and clear guidance, both of which will be provided. The Act provides powers to specify in regulations the steps that may be taken to verify a customer's age that will satisfy the defence to the age of sale offence. These regulations will provide further clarity for retailers.

How are retailers meant to enforce and implement the new age of sale?

Retailers have an important role to play in ensuring the effectiveness of the age of sale change. We are already working closely with retailers and will continue to do so. We will utilise the lead-in time to best support them in preparing for and implementing these changes in 2027.

What about outdoor smoking restrictions?

The Act provides powers to strengthen smoke-free protections in certain outdoor settings, to protect children and medically vulnerable people from the second-hand harms of smoking. This will be subject to regulations following public consultation in Northern Ireland, to seek views and gather evidence on proposals to extend smoke-free laws to certain outdoor public places. The timing of this consultation is yet to be confirmed.

Does this affect pubs, restaurants or hospitality businesses?

The NI public consultation will seek views on extending existing smoke-free spaces to become vape free and heated tobacco free. Proposals may include extending smoking and vaping restrictions to certain outdoor settings, such as school grounds, playgrounds and healthcare settings, as well as outdoor areas of pubs and restaurants and other hospitality businesses.

How does this support the HSC?

Reducing smoking-related illness will ease long-term pressure on the Health and Social Care services in Northern Ireland. It is estimated that around £218 million is spent each year in Northern Ireland treating smoking related illness.

How does this help the economy?

Smoking costs the UK economy around £21.3 billion each year through healthcare costs and lost productivity. The Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland recently estimated that smoking costs society in Northern Ireland £450m annually. Reducing smoking will improve productivity and reduce public costs.

Is there public support for this?

Yes. Polling shows strong public support for measures to protect children, including over 90% support for smoke-free school grounds and playgrounds. ASH reports that 71% of adults support the goal to make Britain a country where no-one smokes (Source: <https://ash.org.uk/media-centre/news/press-releases/71-of-adults-support-the-pms-ambition-to-stamp-out-smoking>).

How many people smoke in the Northern Ireland?

In 2024/25 the Health Survey Northern Ireland reported that 12% of adults in Northern Ireland smoked cigarettes (approx. 180,000) with around three-quarters saying they wish they had never started (Source: <https://ash.org.uk/media-centre/news/press-releases/71-of-adults-support-the-pms-ambition-to-stamp-out-smoking>).

What support is there for people who want to quit?

The Public Health Agency (PHA) commissions over 500 specialist stop smoking services (SSS) across NI. Smokers can access these free services in a range of local settings, including GP practices, pharmacies, hospitals and some community and voluntary sector organisations.

What happens next after Royal Assent?

Further regulations and detailed implementation guidance will be developed and published on GOV.UK.

Is this legislation UK-wide?

Yes, the Tobacco and Vapes Bill is UK-wide. It has been developed in partnership with the devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. The NI Assembly consented to the Tobacco and Vapes Bill via Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) in February 2025 (Source: [Tobacco and Vapes Bill](#)). The territorial application of future regulations may vary, meaning some future regulations could apply UK-wide whilst others might apply only, for example, in England.

What is the long-term goal of this policy?

To create a smoke-free generation, reduce preventable illness and deaths and shift the HSC focus from treatment to prevention.

Is this just the government acting as a “nanny state”?

No. This is about protecting children from addiction and reducing avoidable deaths. There is no freedom in addiction. Smoking is the leading preventable cause of death in Northern Ireland, and most smokers say they wish they had never started. The policy is designed to stop future generations being drawn into a highly addictive product, while adults who can legally buy tobacco today will continue to be able to do so. It also has strong public backing, particularly for measures that protect children in places like schools and playgrounds.