

Introduction to a whole settings approach for schools

Why do schools need a whole settings approach to smoking and vaping?

The smokefree transformation of England began in 2009, when all enclosed workplaces and public spaces became free of tobacco smoke. School buildings went smokefree and most extended the legislation to their entire sites. Since then, the proportion of children who have ever smoked continues to decline. As of the latest update (October 2024), the proportion of regular smokers in England aged 15 is now 1.7%, down from 2% in 2018.¹

Whilst we have made great strides in the right direction, there is more to do and to create a smokefree generation an ongoing effort is needed. This is especially true for those in our society who already suffer from poorer health and other disadvantages, where smoking rates remain stubbornly high.

Additionally, there have been substantial changes in smoking trends and legislation. These include the increased popularity of vapes and other tobacco and nicotine products, which require consideration as part of a whole settings approach to becoming smokefree. Education settings play a major role in health education, including smoking and vaping prevention, as most adult smokers first try smoking before the age of 18.

A whole settings approach recognises that to create a smokefree culture, schools must focus on a range of areas such as policy and education, and extend work further into the system such as considering the school environment and wider community. This will help to ensure that smokefree efforts are embedded in the school culture and extended into families and communities. A persistent effort in all aspects of the school setting is most likely to result in change, over time. More information on the whole settings approach to smoking can be found in this **NICE Guidance**.

¹ Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID), 2024. Smoking Profile. Fingertips. Viewed June 2025.

What are the challenges of a whole settings approach for schools?

Working with young people aged 11-15 offers a number of challenges. The whole settings approach aims to address the issues identified below:

- Students are at an age where the influence and opinion of peers is very important to them.
- Parents/carers play an important role in influencing behaviour and if they smoke or vape themselves, it can undermine messages from school.
- Curriculum and staffing time is very limited to focus on individual issues such as smoking and vaping.
- The school may have staff who smoke or vape themselves.
- Staff knowledge of smoking and vaping may be limited and mixed messages conveyed.
- Some staff may not understand that some students cannot 'just stop' smoking or vaping, and can be addicted to nicotine.

Benefits of a whole settings approach in school

- It recognises a variety of influences (e.g. family and friends) that are likely to impact a young person's decision to smoke or vape and seeks to address these with targeted interventions.
- It makes clear the role of the school in providing an understandable and consistent message to students.
- It emphasises the staff as role models.
- It makes clear that students are likely to enter into work places where smoking is not the norm and prepares them for this.
- It recognises that some young people may already be addicted to smoking or vaping and supports them in going smokefree.
- It can reduce the litter found on site and reduces environmental harm from cigarettes and vapes.