



# Wise in 5: Teenage vaping

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

This briefing was updated in October 2024. It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

PolicyWISE creates neutral and constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to develop relationships, respect and knowledge. We support and nurture a common culture of developing and sharing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.

	Illegal to give under 18s for free	Advertising near schools banned	Sale of disposable vapes banned	Government led education campaign	Standard packaging
England	💡	▲	💡		💡
Northern Ireland	▲		■	+	💡
Republic of Ireland		+	■		▲
Scotland	+	+	■	+	💡
Wales	💡		💡	+	💡
Key	<div>+</div> Implemented	<div>💡</div> In Draft	<div>▲</div> Considered	<div>■</div> Pending Implementation	

# Wise in 5: Teenage vaping

## Overview

The sale of e-cigarettes to under-18s has been made illegal in the UK and Ireland. However, there has been increasing attention on the continued popularity of vaping amongst teenagers, from media and decision makers across these nations.

New regulation and/or guidance has been drafted or has come into force in all nations in 2024. This Wise in 5 guide focuses on the increased use of e-cigarettes (vapes) by children and young people under the age of 18.

E-cigarettes (vapes) had typically been considered a healthy alternative to smoking, and an aid for smoking cessation. They have been seen as an important tool to help governments achieve ambitions to be smoke-free nations (by 2030 in [Wales](#) and [England](#) and 2034 in [Scotland](#)).

[Research](#) suggests, however, that e-cigarette use may serve as a potential risk for the normalisation of smoking, increasing their use and leading to uptake of smoking and nicotine addiction. The long-term side effects of e-cigarette use on health are unknown. There are also concerns about the use of marketing ploys to attract non-smokers, including children and young people. The ban of disposable vapes is drafted or confirmed in all UK nations, products [disproportionately](#) used by young people.

Levers being considered by government and policymakers focus on the sale, promotion and packaging of e-cigarettes, as well as risk awareness and education. The concerns and public policy challenges have much in common with historic and current debates in other areas of public health interventions such as tobacco, alcohol and processed/unhealthy food.

There is increasing concern about young people accessing and using vapes, some of which are unregulated products with high levels of nicotine or [dangerous metals](#). Campaign group, 'Action on Smoking and Health' [claim](#) that in March/April 2023, "the proportion of children experimenting with vaping had grown by 50% year on year, from one in thirteen to one in nine.". According to the Irish Health Service, [1 in 5 young people in Ireland](#) say they vape.

According to the Advertising Standards Authority, the Tobacco Products Directive (2016) [prohibits adverts](#) in relation to nicotine-containing e-cigarettes unlicensed as medicines in newspapers and magazines, on the internet and on-demand television, in emails, and in text messages.



**In March/April 2023 the proportion of children experimenting with vaping had grown by 50% year on year, from one in thirteen to one in nine.**

# Nation by Nation

## England

[England and Wales legislation](#) made it illegal to sell e-cigarettes to anyone under the age of 18, or to anyone buying on behalf of someone under 18. The [regulations](#) also prohibit the advertising of nicotine-containing electronic cigarettes.

Following the [Khan Review](#) published in June 2022, a [call for evidence](#) on youth vaping and a policy publication detailing the [plan for a smokefree generation](#) in October 2023, the previous Westminster Government proposed The Tobacco and Vapes Bill in March 2024.

[The bill](#) proposed prohibiting free sample distribution to under-18s and making it illegal to sell vape or nicotine products to anyone born on, or after, the 1st of January 2009. The appeal of vaping to children is addressed through regulation of flavours, packaging and point of sale displays for vapes and nicotine products.

The July 2024 [King's Speech](#) details commitments by the new UK government to take forward this work. The Minister of State at the Department of Education has stated their intent to restrict the use of vaping products by children whilst allowing adults to benefit from the "[key role](#)" vapes have in smoking cessation.

## Scotland

In Scotland, age of sale restrictions came into force in 2017: "A person who sells a nicotine vapour product to a person under the age of 18 commits an offence" and "A person aged 18 or over who knowingly buys or attempts to buy a nicotine vapour product on behalf of a person under the age of 18 commits an offence."

In November 2022, Scottish government introduced the '[Take Hold](#)' educational campaign for youth vaping. The online materials have been shared with Wales and Northern Ireland, where they are also in use.

In January 2024, additions to The Health (Tobacco, Nicotine etc. And Care) (Scotland) Act came into [legislation](#) which restricted branding and advertising, free distribution and nominal pricing, and sponsorship promotion of nicotine vapour products.

## Wales

In 2016 the then Welsh Government had intended to ban the use of e-cigarettes in public places but failed to win support in the Senedd, one of former First Minister Mark Drakeford's, "[biggest political regrets](#)".

Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) Wales carried out the largest [youth vaping survey](#) in the UK to-date, in September–December 2023. Of the 12,524 secondary-school students involved, 55% who vaped were using untested, illicit products. Welsh government have set up an illegal tobacco campaign website where under-age and illicit vape sales can be [anonymously reported](#).

[The Smoke Free Wales strategy](#) discourages uptake of e-cigarettes in young people whilst also highlighting the role these products could play in smoking cessation. Though the plan is due an update, The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care published [recommendations](#) in May 2024 that the Welsh Senedd give full support to the UK Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

## Northern Ireland

It is [an offence](#) for an adult to buy, or attempt buying, any tobacco or nicotine inhaling products (including e-cigarettes/vapes) on behalf of someone under the age of 18 (known as proxy purchasing). Currently, Northern Ireland does [not have a target](#) to be smoke free.

The Northern Ireland Executive have focused on [public health campaigning](#) in schools. The September 2023 [review](#) of the Tobacco Control Strategy proposed education materials be developed. In June 2024, the Public Health Agency released a [series of resources](#) to assist young people and their parents with vaping awareness.

## Republic of Ireland

The [Public Health \(Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products\) Act](#) 2023 prohibits the sale of nicotine inhaling products to anyone under 18. In September 2024, further stages were enacted to prohibit their [sale at children's events](#), and stop their [advertisement](#) in cinemas, within 200 metres of schools, and on public transport.

After [several](#) public [consultations](#), the Irish cabinet has also approved the ban of disposable vaping devices to be drafted into [legislation](#), along with restrictions on point-of-sale displays and shop advertisements.

The [Public Health \(Tobacco\) \(Amendment\) Bill](#) 2024 will make Ireland the first country in Europe to increase the legal sale age of tobacco to 21. This does not apply to other nicotine inhaling products.

## International learning

Vaping is illegal in a number of countries including Singapore and Thailand. In some others like [Australia](#), the sale and advertisement of vape devices is banned from everywhere but pharmacies, who do not sell single-use vapes. Belgium was the [first EU country](#) to legislate a ban of single-use vapes. In [Turkey](#), no vaping devices or liquids are licensed for sale and the use of vapes indoors is banned.

In April 2023 the New York Attorney General announced the final settlement of a lawsuit against [Juul](#) (a well-known vape brand) with an agreement to distribute a \$462 million settlement between six states and Washington DC. The lawsuit accused them of targeting under 18s with advertising, failing age verification laws, and allowing the illegal sale of (and exposure to) harmful chemicals that could cause cancer.

## University research

[Research undertaken in Scotland](#) in 2016 provided insights into youth perceptions of e-cigarettes – that they were seen as “harmless, affordable, cool and innovative”. They also highlighted “conflicting messages on safety, efficacy, potential ‘gateway’ to smoking and nicotine”. In 2022, research at [Queen’s Belfast University](#) found that legislation and resources should target parents, who have a strong influence on young people abstaining from vaping.



## Wise up – 5 policy points to take away

Five key points from what we've learnt above, which could be considered as part of further policy development and delivery in any or all of the nations.

1. It is important that governments commission research focused on the attraction of vaping for young people and the behavioural changes needed to discourage them from experimenting.
2. The role of advertising should be considered, with a focus on social media which targets younger audience and those who don't currently smoke.
3. New regulations must also consider the impact and unintended consequences for those that benefit from e-cigarettes as a means to reduce reliance on nicotine and tobacco cigarettes.
4. As policymakers consider these issues, and identify different actions and priorities, it is clear that there would be a benefit in governments learning from each other and from research in understanding the popularity of vaping amongst teenagers.
5. Although this is a relatively new public health challenge it is important to consider the impact of existing interventions on other issues – e.g., smoking in public places, standard packaging, promotion and advertising guidance – and whether they provide a template, or not, for teenage vaping prevention.



**This briefing was led by Catherine May, PolicyWISE Senior External Affairs and Communications Manager and updated in collaboration with Lucy Adams, PolicyWISE Intern. With thanks to colleagues across the UK and Ireland for their feedback.**



**PolicyWISE**

### Our focus and way of working makes us unique:

1. **Space:** We create and maintain neutral but constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to **develop relationships, respect and knowledge.**
2. **Sharing:** We develop and support a common culture of sharing and developing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.
3. **Solutions:** We help governments focus on evidence-informed policy solutions for citizens and communities across the nations, informed by comparative and collaborative research and methods.

The Open University has been awarded £1m in funding from Dangoor Education to establish and run PolicyWISE. The funding has supported the launch of PolicyWISE in 2023 and our development over the following four years.



### Our offer

**PolicyWISE** works cross-nation on comparative research and knowledge exchange which will change and improve how governments and academics work together in and across nations to solve policy challenges.

#### **Rapid Response Capability**

We work at pace to support policy analysis, development, and consideration.

#### **Comparative and Collaborative Analysis & Understanding**

We are a partner of choice for collaborative and comparative projects, and we work across The Open University's four nations.

#### **Wise in 5**

The only regular snapshot comparative guide to public policy issues across the nations of the UK and Ireland.

#### **Training**

Utilising our distinct focus and skills we deliver impactful and dynamic training for any audience interested in learning how a comparative policy analysis and knowledge exchange can benefit their work.

**Dewi Knight, Director**

### Get in Touch



[www.policywise.org.uk](http://www.policywise.org.uk)



[policywise@open.ac.uk](mailto:policywise@open.ac.uk)

### Follow us



[PolicyWISE](#)



[@\\_policywise](#)



[@\\_policywise](#)

Updated October 2024

