

# Vaping: Young people

Healthwatch Darlington  
March 2024

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# About Healthwatch Darlington

Healthwatch Darlington is the health and social care champion for people who live and work in the Borough of Darlington. As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to people's feedback to improve standards of care.

We use feedback to better understand the challenges facing the NHS and other care providers locally, to make sure people's experiences improve health and care services for everyone.

We are here to listen to the issues that really matter to our local communities and to hear about people's experiences of using health and social care services.

We are entirely independent and impartial, and any information shared with us is confidential.

# Executive summary

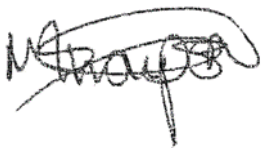
Thank you to all of our young people who took time to share their experiences of vaping. Whilst most had health concerns regarding vaping and were aware of its addictive nature, young people in Darlington are still taking up vaping, with or without an existing addiction to smoking.

We welcome the recent government moves to take steps to curb the surge in vaping by young people, including a ban on disposable vapes and new powers to restrict vape flavours, introducing plain packaging and changing how vapes are displayed in shops so they don't appeal to children.

We also support and praise the recent work undertaken by Darlington Borough Council and Durham Constabulary earlier this year, when visits were carried out at several local businesses which were the subject of complaints about the possible illegal sale of vapes or tobacco to children.

By fostering partnerships with healthcare providers, local businesses, law enforcement, and other stakeholders, our aim is to create a unified front and enhance the health and well-being of youth in our community. Moreover, we urge parents, caregivers, and educators to initiate discussions with young people regarding the risks associated with vaping and to provide support in making informed decisions.

Of utmost importance, we will advocate for policies at the local, regional, and national levels aimed at restricting the sale and marketing of vaping products to minors. This includes advocating for stringent age verification measures and advocating for flavour bans.



**Michelle Thompson BEM**  
Chief Executive Officer, Healthwatch Darlington

# Introduction

Healthwatch Darlington are concerned at the increase in vaping in young people in Darlington and wanted to better understand e-cigarette and vaping behaviours amongst our local population aged 14 to 25 years old.

Whilst the most recent figures from NHS Digital show a decrease in numbers of school children taking drugs and smoking cigarettes, they show a rise in vaping, with 9% of 11- to 15-year-olds using e-cigarettes in 2021 (an increase from 6% in 2018).

**Data source published September 2022:** <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/smoking-drinking-and-drug-use-among-young-people-in-england/2021>

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. Children's awareness of promotion of vapes has also grown, particularly in shops where more than half of all children report seeing e-cigarettes being promoted, and online where nearly a third report e-cigarette promotion. Only one in five children now say they never see vapes promoted, down from 31% last year.

It is an offence to sell e-cigarettes to children under 18 in the United Kingdom.

## Use and awareness of e-cigarettes

- In 2023 20.5% of children had tried vaping, up from 15.8% in 2022 and 13.9% in 2020 before the first COVID lockdown.
- Since 2021 the proportion of current vaping has been greater than that of current smoking (7.6% compared to 3.6% in 2023).
- The proportion of never smokers who have tried vaping is 11.5%. Nearly half (48%) of children have tried vaping.

**Data Source published June 2023:** ASH, Action on Smoking and Health

We wanted to discover what makes young people start using e-cigarettes and, what we can do with the support of other stakeholders to highlight the health issues and prevent people from vaping in the future.

To find out why they vape and what can be done to prevent young people from starting, we spoke to young people aged 14 to 25 and also to their parents or carers.

# Methodology

The key research questions we asked to all we engaged with sought to discover:

- Why they started vaping.
- How safe they think vaping is.
- If they are aware of the health issues.
- How they can afford to vape.
- If they smoked or now smoke cigarettes.

Our engagement with residents of the Borough of Darlington was via an online survey, which we promoted via our e-newsletter, and throughout Fresher Week and community events where we also distributed paper copies of the survey and promoted using a QR Code.

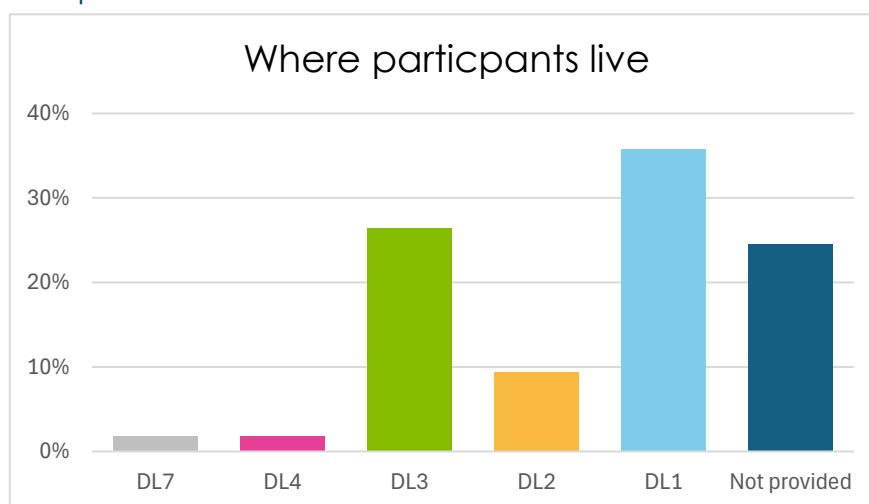
Our aim was to support young people, amplifying their voice and allowing them to be able to speak about what matters to them and what interests them.

Using this report, we intend to inform and influence local services and commissioners, Public Health, NHS England, Healthwatch England, local schools/college, parents, and carers, drawing attention to key themes and areas of possible improvement.

## Demographics

A full demographic breakdown can be found in Appendix One.

Our target audience was young people aged under 25 years old. The age of some participants exceeded this target group, and their responses are included in this report. Where there are specific differences in the responses of our target group, they are highlighted in the report.



# Survey findings: Summary

Over half of our survey respondents vaped, and their reasons for starting were varied, including stress control, an aid to stop smoking, 'tasted nice' and to fit in with friends.

Less than half of young vapers thought vaping was safer than smoking, and exactly 50% of them were worried about the long-term impact of vaping.

The majority of respondents had been vaping for 1 to 2 years, and just under half had smoked cigarettes before they started vaping.

9 out of 10 respondents vaped every day.

4 out of 5 are in work and pay for their vapes, the remainder rely on family and friends or pocket money.

The corner shop is the main location where young people buy their vapes, with 3 out of 10 getting them from family or friends.

Two thirds think it would not be easy to give up vaping, mainly because of its addictive nature.

Three quarters of those who vape had not smoked since they started vaping.

Only a third of vapers read the packaging when opening a vape.

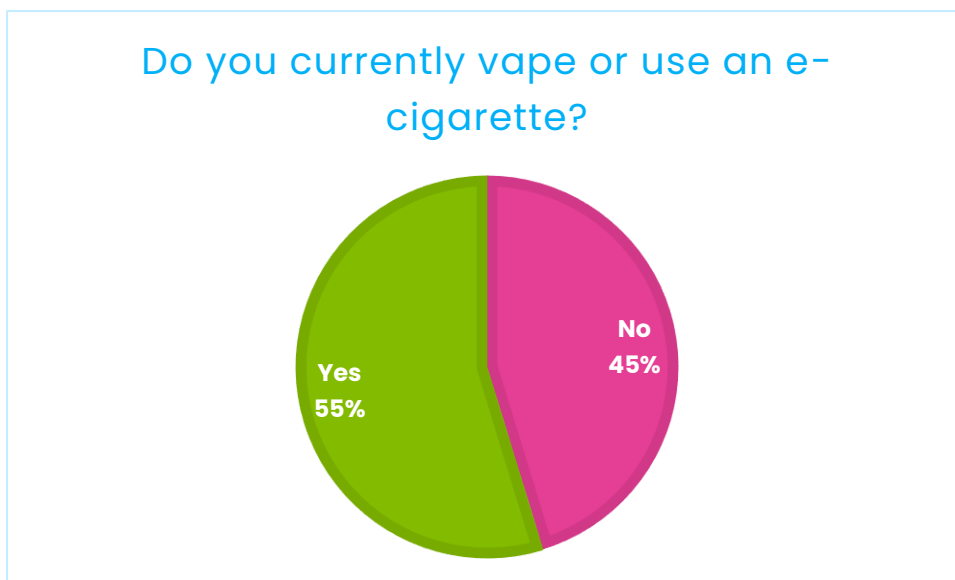
The main reason for young people to start vaping was to stop smoking cigarettes, closely followed by it 'tasting nice". For those young people who don't vape, the main reason not to is for health reasons.

Less than 10% of respondents thought vaping was safe, whilst 25% thought it was very unsafe.

# Survey responses: full details

53 people completed the survey between August 2023 and February 2024.

We asked participants if they currently vaped or used an e-cigarette?



We then asked those who do vape why they started. Responses included:



"Why not."

"To stop smoking."

"Stress."

"My friends." "Everyone who I hung around with was vaping."

"Just wanted to try it." "It tastes nice."

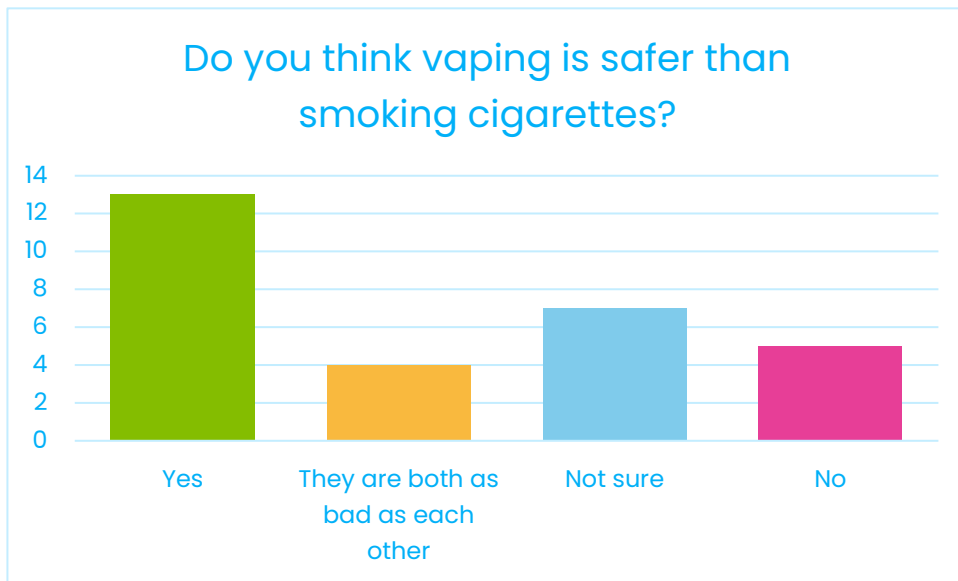
"It was a coping mechanism, better than self-harming."

"I tried so many times to quit, couldn't do it. Then I tried an e-cigarette, and it worked straight away - haven't smoked since, and I started to feel better within a few weeks. No more wheezing first thing in the morning!"

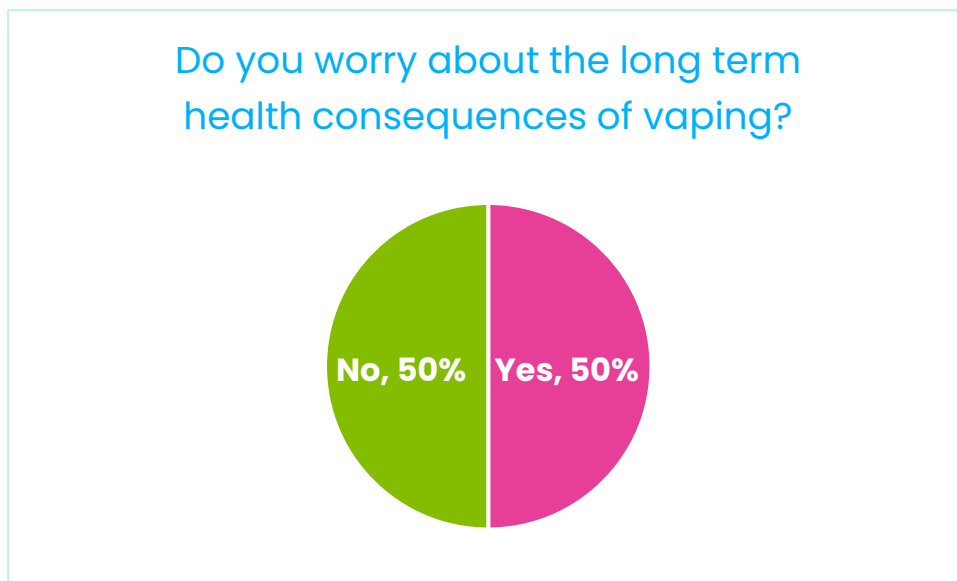
"Didn't mean to just happened."



We asked those who vape if they thought vaping was safer than smoking cigarettes.



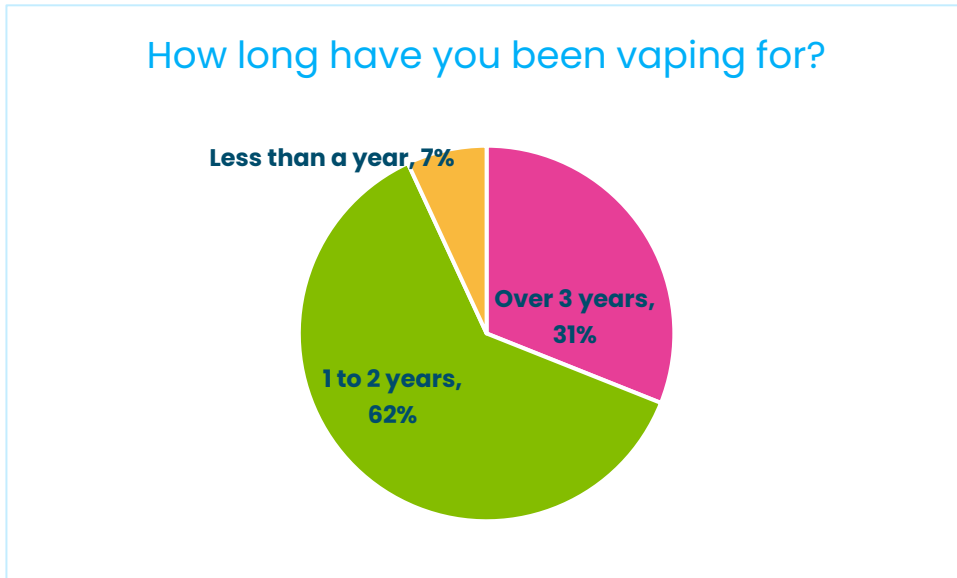
We asked those who vape if they worried about the long-term impacts of vaping.



"Yes, it is cheap, and no recorded long-term consequences have been recorded."

"No, I've read the PHE reports as they've been published over the years."

We asked those who vape how long they had been vaping for.



43% said they smoked cigarettes before they started vaping. 57% said they had not smoked cigarettes before they started vaping.

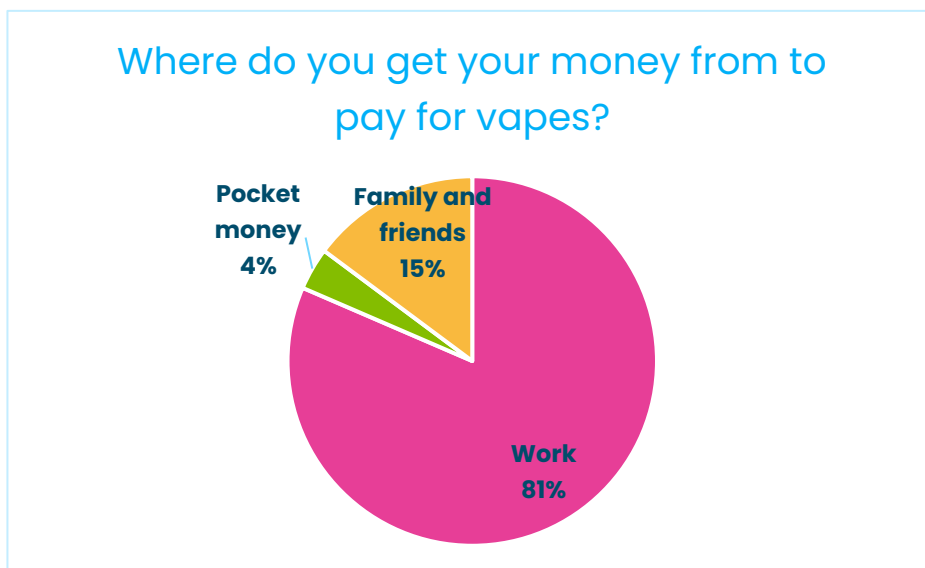
89% told us they vaped every day, and told us:



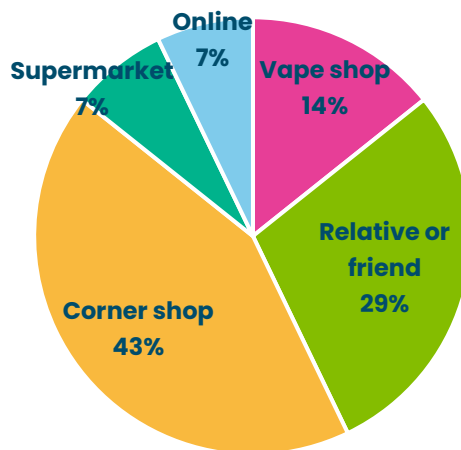
“I vape more than I smoke.”

“Socially vape (nights out, round friends etc.)”

We asked those who vape where they got the money from to pay for vapes, and where they got their vapes from.

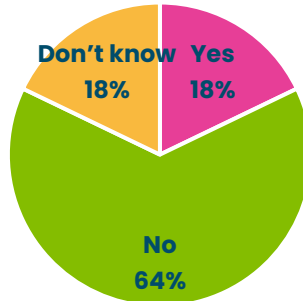


## How do you get your vapes?



When those who vape were asked if they thought it would be easy to stop vaping, they told us:

## Do you think it would be easy to stop vaping?



Those who responded no, gave the following reasons:



"It's an addictive habit."

"Too used to having it 24/7."

"You get used to having summit in your hand, so you feel lost without it."

"I have tried before, and it didn't work."

"Cause I cant."

"Already tried three times."

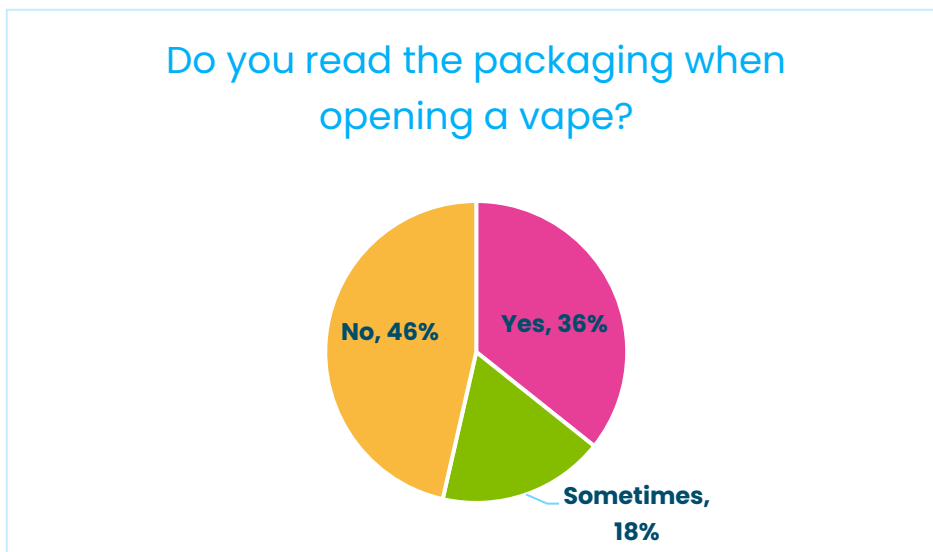
"It's nice." "Unsure."

All those who vaped told us they used vapes containing nicotine.

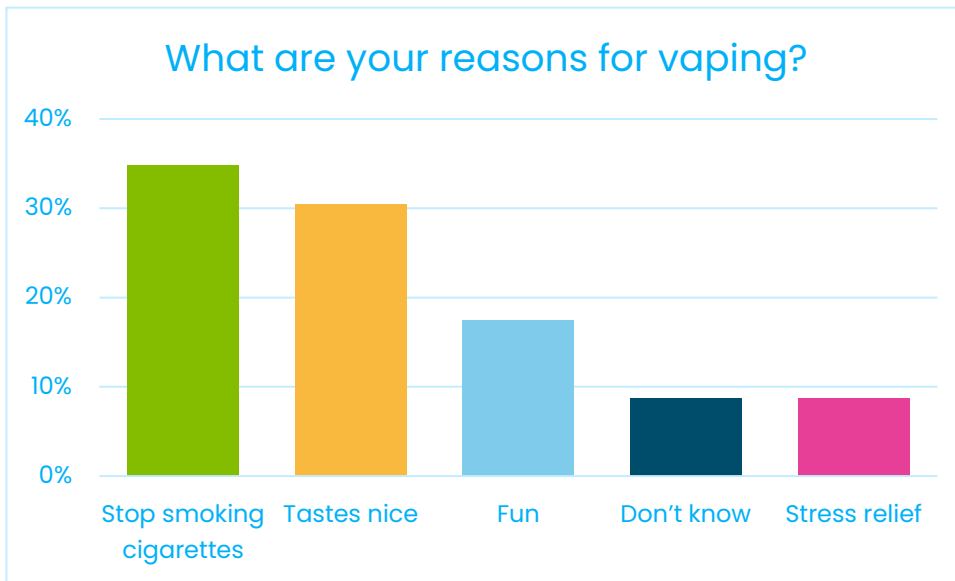
We asked those who vape if they had started smoking cigarettes since they started vaping.



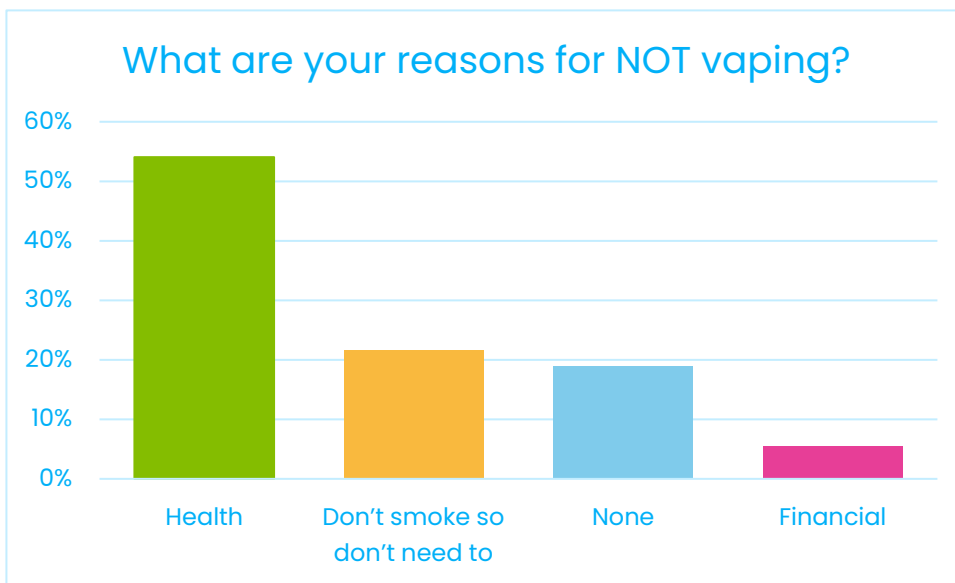
We asked those who vaped if they read the packaging when opening a vape:



We also asked those who vape to tell us why they started vaping.



And also, for those participants who don't vape, their reasons for not vaping.



Comments from those who do not vape included:



"Not good for lungs and could cause future complications in my life."

"My blood pressure is already high. I will die earlier."

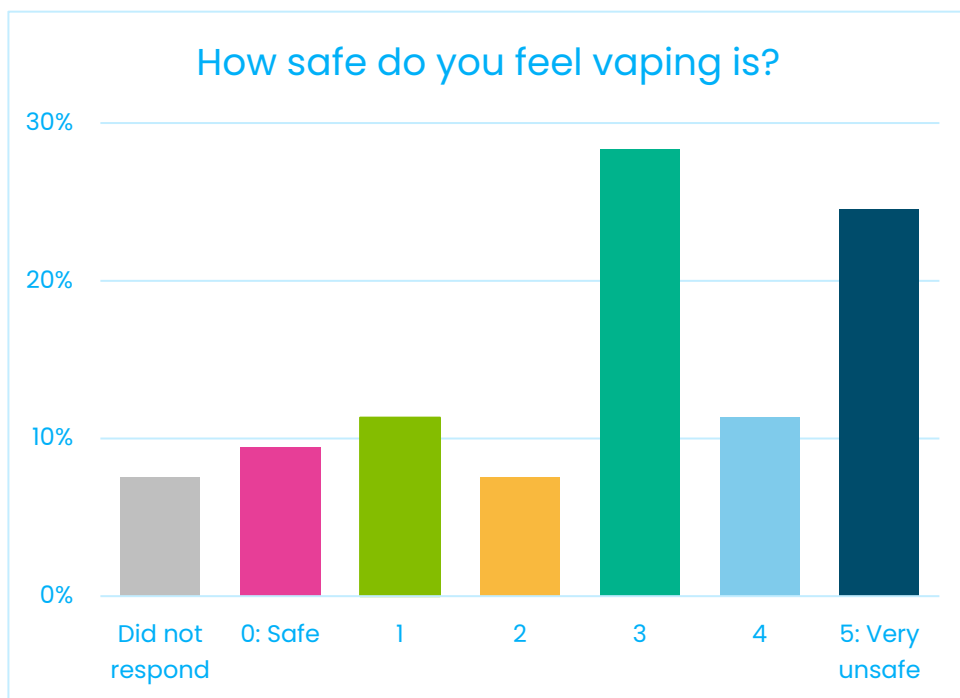
"Don't smoke so why vape."

"I don't know what is in them."

"Don't see any benefits and costs money to vape."

“Because I do boxing, and I want to be fit.”

We asked all participants how safe they felt vaping was.



Only 2 respondents told us they felt pressurised into starting vaping.

# Conclusion

During our engagement with young people, the Government announced that they intended to take steps to curb a surge in vaping by young people, including:

- A ban on disposable vapes which have driven a rise in youth vaping.
- New powers to restrict vape flavours, introducing plain packaging and changing how vapes are displayed in shops so they don't appeal to children.
- A new law to make it illegal to sell tobacco products to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009.

This is welcome news and a step toward tackling the issues highlighted in this report.

We found 3 in 10 young people started vaping because it 'tasted nice', therefore the restriction on vape flavours will make a difference.

Less than half of Darlington's young vapers had smoked cigarettes before they started vaping, and most now vaped every day. A ban on accessibility will support those who take it up because it is 'fun'.

25% of young vapers were both smoking and vaping, and the new law making it illegal to sell tobacco products to those born after 1 January 2009 will help in this area.

The most popular venue for Darlington's young vapers to purchase their vapes is the local corner shop. Latest research indicates young people are targeting corner shops to buy vapes because of lax ID checks (data source:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/07/31/children-corner-shops-vapes-lax-id-checks/>).

We ask corner shop owners and parents and carers to ensure that their local corner shops are stringent in their application of ID checks, and thank our local council and constabulary for the work they have done to combat illegal sales to young people (data source: <https://www.darlington.gov.uk/your-council/news/news-item/?id=2026>).

# Recommendations

1. **Education and Awareness:** Develop educational programs aimed at informing young people about the risks and consequences of vaping, including its impact on health and well-being.
2. **Community Engagement:** Collaborate with schools, youth organisations, and community centres to raise awareness and provide support for prevention initiatives.
3. **Policy Development:** Advocate for policies that restrict the sale and marketing of vaping products to minors, including enforcing age verification measures at retailers.
4. **Peer Support Programs:** Establish peer-led initiatives where young people can support each other in making healthy choices and resisting peer pressure to vape.
5. **Parental Involvement:** Engage parents and caregivers through workshops and informational sessions to educate them about the dangers of vaping and how to recognise signs of vaping in their children.
6. **Access to Support Services:** Ensure that young people have access to support services such as counselling and cessation programs if they are already vaping and want to quit.
7. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Regularly monitor the effectiveness of prevention efforts through data collection and evaluation, and adjust strategies accordingly based on the results.
8. **Partnerships:** Forge partnerships with healthcare providers, local businesses, law enforcement, and other stakeholders to create a united front against youth vaping.



# Response from Darlington

## Public Health

*“We welcome the report undertaken by Healthwatch Darlington and acknowledge the concerns raised about the number of youth people who vape. We look forward to working with Healthwatch Darlington to share public health key messages with our Darlington residents young and old around tobacco control and stop smoking services.*

*Based on our annual Healthy Lifestyles Survey, (self-reported survey), which surveys over 5,000 Primary and Secondary pupils aged from 9-16 years old, asks whether a pupil has tried vaping or smoking a cigarette. The numbers reported as doing so are low, yet the perception is there are high levels of use. We share the data and encourage our schools to use local evidence to challenge perceptions, which supplements the school-based education programmes which are delivered, which currently have limited evidence of effectiveness.*

*We are supporting the roll out of drug education awareness programmes in our schools and are addressing illegal drug taking via vapes in the same way as other methods of consumption, until there is sufficient evidence to develop effective tailored solutions. We also intend to work with our colleagues in education and our 0-19 public health service provider to agree on the most effective way to communicate key messages to schools and offer support where required.*

*We support the work of FRESH in advocating for improved regulations for nicotine vapes, in an effort to ensure they remain available to adult smokers to support them to stop smoking but that every effort is made to reduce their attractiveness as a product to children and young people. The key measures we want to see introduced nationally are the removal of child-friendly packaging, reduced promotion in shops and appropriate pricing policies so that they are not available at pocket money prices.*

*It is wholly inappropriate for retailers to sell vapes to children and young people under the age of 18 years and in response our Trading Standards colleagues are*

*working hard with the Police to support compliance with age of sale legislation and reduce illegal sales. We are already seeing some positive results in Darlington, based on local intelligence gathered from residents reporting retailers who sell vapes to children and young people, or illicit tobacco products of any kind. Our Trading Standards team also has strong relationships with our secondary schools, with schools reporting illicit vapes and confiscating such vapes from young people which can then be sent for testing.”*

## Next steps

To prevent vaping among young people, collaboration between young people, Healthwatch Darlington, and Public Health is crucial. Our next steps will include:

1. Empower young people to take a leading role in designing and implementing prevention initiatives, ensuring that interventions are relevant and effective.
2. Work with public health and young people to create engaging and informative materials, such as videos, social media content, and school presentations, to reach their peers effectively.
3. Advocate for policies at the local, regional, and national levels that restrict the sale and marketing of vaping products to minors, including stringent age verification measures and flavour bans.
4. Collaborate with young people to amplify their voices in policy discussions, emphasizing the importance of protecting youth from the harms of vaping.
5. Monitor compliance with existing regulations, including targeted mystery shopping.
6. Advocate for enforcement measures to hold retailers accountable for selling vaping products to minors.
7. By working together, young people, Healthwatch, and Public Health can develop comprehensive strategies to prevent vaping and promote the health and well-being of youth in the community.

# Acknowledgements

## Thank you from Healthwatch Darlington

Thank you to our young people of Darlington, and to those who support them, who took part in our survey and shared their experiences to help improve services.

# Appendix One: Demographics

Age category	Number	%
17 or younger	20	37%
18 – 20 years	8	15%
21 – 29 years	5	9%
30 – 39 years	5	9%
40 – 49 years	3	6%
50-59 years	1	2%
60 or older	7	14%
I don't want to say	4	8%

Gender	Number	%
Male	17	32%
Female	30	57%
Prefer not to say	1	2%
Did not respond	5	9%

Are you currently...	Number	%
Single, never married	26	49%
Married or domestic partnership	13	25%
Divorced	4	8%
Widowed	2	4%
Prefer not to say	3	5%
Did not respond	5	9%

Ethnic background:	Number	%
White		
White British	43	81%
Irish	1	2%
Other	-	-
Asian / Asian British		
Indian	-	-
Pakistani	1	2%
Bangladeshi	-	-
Any other Asian background	-	-
Mixed		
White and Black Caribbean	3	5%
White and Black African	-	-
White and Asian	-	-
Any other mixed background	-	-
Black or Black British		
Caribbean	-	-
African	-	-
Any other Black background	1	2%
Other ethnic group		
Chinese	-	-
I do not wish to disclose my ethnic origin	-	-
Other, please specify	-	-
Did not respond	4	8%

What do you consider your religion to be?	Number	%
No religion	36	68%
Christianity	11	21%
Buddhist	1	2%
Hindu	-	-
Jewish	-	-
Muslim	-	-
Sikh	-	-
Other	-	-
Prefer not to say	1	2%
I don't know	-	-
Did not respond	4	8%



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