

Comms planning for the smokefree generation

1. Purpose of this briefing

1.1 This paper sets out some ideas for local authorities to consider in developing their own communications plans through 2026, ahead of implementation. Regional tobacco control programmes (which now exist in many parts of the country) have also played a key role in helping campaign publicly, engage partners in consultation responses, highlight the case for action and amplify regional figures for public support from the annual ASH/YouGov survey. An example is the North East [Declaration for a Smokefree Future](#).

1.2 This paper includes:

- The opportunity of the smokefree generation
- Recommendations for local communications plans
- A timeline for action
- Support from ASH and others
- Communication approaches for key stakeholders
- An overview of lessons from past tobacco control measures

2. The opportunity of the smokefree generation

2.1 The Tobacco and Vapes Bill will create a smokefree generation through raising the age of sale by 1 year every year so those born after 31st December 2008 will never legally be sold tobacco. The first people this will impact will be those turning 18 on the 1st January 2027.

2.2 This is a symbolic milestone that resonates beyond the direct impact of the policy on young people. It makes clear that the goal for the UK is to end smoking; the question is just how quickly this will be achieved. Lessons from the past (see section 7) teach us that these high-profile measures can change smokers' behaviours and attitudes, and the wider public. We need to capitalise on the change through a planned communications strategy to maximise this impact.

2.3 Local organisations have a key role in this. They can organise and galvanise stakeholders locally, but also directly link the offer of support to quit smoking with the vision of a smokefree country and the creation of a smokefree generation.

2.4 This is a world leading policy with only the much smaller country of Maldives having gone ahead of the UK. There is a great opportunity to emphasise the national pride that we should feel in protecting our population

3. Recommendations for local communications plans

3.1 **Engage with regional comms planning:** most areas now have additional regional co-ordination and will be developing plans to amplify the impact of the smokefree generation laws. Co-ordinating at this level will further help to boost reach through aligning messaging and approaches avoiding duplication of effort. For those areas with budget, it will also allow co-ordination around things like media spend.

3.2 **Identify professionals who have a role in communications around the smokefree generation.** These will include trading standards, schools, councillors, healthcare professionals, smoking cessation advisors, tobacco dependency advisors, local retailers,

chambers of commerce, regional smokefree programme teams and others in your alliances and networks.

3.3 Establish a working group with relevant stakeholders and agree any local budget.

This will avoid fragmentation and ensure that comms is timely and consistent across different teams and organisations. Ensuring early and full engagement from stakeholders will enhance compliance and implementation, as well as aiding the wider public health goal of stimulating more quit attempts. Locally you may have communications budgets which can be deployed to support this work.

3.4 A clear plan is needed, engaging all stakeholders, with a clear timeline, that includes stakeholder mapping, council specific resources (see section below of likely national resources), integration with planned comms and key communications opportunities.

3.5 Communications should maximise the quitting opportunity by framing implementation as an opportunity for *everyone* to be part of the ‘smokefree generation’ and join the movement by quitting.

3.6 Utilise existing communications ‘moments’ and ensure consistency to create something that is greater than a sum of its parts. We have highlighted some of the national milestones in the timeline below.

3.7 Engage local leaders to champion the policy. Local councillors and clinical leaders can engage directly with the public on the rationale for the smokefree generation, how it will be implemented and what this means in terms of symbolic moment on the path to end smoking for good.

3.8 Find local case studies. Having local businesses, young people who support the law change, smokers who regret having started in childhood and healthcare professionals who back the changes can help to tell a compelling story to the public, smokers and businesses.

3.9 Continued engagement after implementation and analysis of the policy and its impact. Continued engagement after implementation will maximise on the quit message. This could draw upon data on local quit rates or identify case studies of people who have quit as part of the smokefree generation, or case studies/ interviews with people impacted by the policy (turning 18 on 1st January 2027).

4. A timeline for action

When	What
As soon as possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Identify local professionals who have a role in communicationsAgree a plan, and identify any local budget
11th March 2026: No Smoking Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Frame communications around the upcoming legislative changes
31st May: World No Tobacco Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none">The theme of World No Tobacco Day 2026 is: “Unmasking the appeal – countering nicotine and tobacco addiction”Focus on the opportunity to protect the next generation as part of creating a smokefree future for all

1st July 2026: 6 months to go	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communications resources should be in place for retailers and schools by now Local campaigns for smokers could include a focus on those who have quit for their children Explore collaborations with local schools where young people are excited to be part of the smokefree generation
23rd September: 100 days to go	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A key moment to begin ramping up communications at a local level
October: Stoptober	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stoptober campaign focused on quitting to be part of the smokefree generation Focus on the impact quitting now can have on the next generation
1st Dec: 1 month to go	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeted towards those turning 18 in 2027 and retailers
From 1st Jan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combined quitting and implementation messaging in local campaigns

5. Support from ASH and others

5.1 We anticipate that national government will provide further support to localities around communications once the legislation has received Royal Assent. This will likely include guidance for enforcement, materials to engage retailers and schools and could include a smoker facing communications approach. It is likely DHSC will confirm their communications strategy over the next few months. It is hoped that some materials will be developed that can be locally tailored.

5.2 The Association of Convenience Stores have confirmed they will be producing materials for retailers that will be launched at their March conference and may also be something local government want to utilise.

5.3 Chartered Trading Standards Institute will provide training and produce guidance for Trading Standards Officers.

5.4 ASH and the wider Smokefree Action Coalition are here to support local authorities' work in the following ways:

- Utilising our networks across civil society, local government and NHS to share best practice, case studies and insights.
- Co-ordinated social media and amplifying local authorities' campaigns- do tag us or send us an email to highlight your activity.
- Facilitating 'media moments' that local teams can respond to and amplify
- Parliamentary engagement to engage MPs to amplify the changes in their local community and encourage them to arrange appropriate visits in their constituency.

6.5 Useful resources and data from ASH

- ['Public support for a smokefree society'](#) report includes data showing that the public back the smokefree generation policy, including smokers and supporters of various political parties. You can read the PR of this data [here](#).
- Data on support for the smokefree generation by constituency is [here](#).
- [FAQ page](#) on the smokefree generation answers common questions about the policy.
- [Smoking statistics factsheet](#) provides information and data on the harms of smoking and the impact on society.

- Factsheet on [young people and smoking](#)

6. Communications approaches for key stakeholders

6.1 There are some key groups of stakeholders that your communications approach will need to include, and consideration given to targeted communications messages and different routes to reach them. More information will be provided to support the development of local messaging.

6.2 **Retailers:** Retailers will need clear information about what the law change means for them. Key messages could include:

- The law simplifies how retailers verify age, as they only need to check if people are born before or after 1st Jan 2009.
- It won't make much difference, if any, to the numbers of people trying to purchase tobacco underage.
- Trading standards will be their support compliance in the first instance.
- Retailers who consistently breach the law will face consequences.

6.3 **Under 18s:** Those turning 18 in 2027 need to know that the law is changing but it is also an opportunity for wider communications. Messages can

- Highlight that this is an opportunity to communicate the unique harms from smoking and why the law is changing for this product.
- Open discussion about what it means to be free from addiction.
- Encourage young people to be part of a new social movement that will create a smokefree generation
- Emphasise that this is a world leading measure and they will be one of the first generations in the world to be protected by this unique law.

6.4 **Smokers:** As with past tobacco control measures, there is scope to leverage the change to get smokers to rethink their own smoking and increase the salience of quitting.

Messages that could resonate include:

- Phasing out the sale of tobacco is necessary as smoking is uniquely harmful.
- You can also be part of the smokefree future that most people want to create.
- Creating smokefree homes and families now will help ensure the next generation never pick up a cigarette.
- Fewer smokers in society will likely make it easier for you to stop too.
- There have never been more ways to quit smoking and join the smokefree future.

6.5 **Local politicians:** These are key spokespeople who can connect the national policy changes with the local goals your council has to reduce smoking. Smoking is not a party-political issue and politicians from across the political spectrum back the Bill.

6.6 **Professionals:** Those in trading standards have a clear role in implementation but professionals working with young people and smokers also need to be engaged in how they can support the implementation of this landmark legislation.

6.7 **The public:** This important to support implementation but is also an opportunity to encourage people to be ambitious about what can be achieved in our efforts to end smoking and help them to envisage a country where no one smokes.

7. An overview of lessons from past tobacco control measures

7.1 ASH has reviewed historic documents and interviewed those involved in implementing some of the biggest pieces of tobacco control legislation in the UK over the last 18 years to better understand the communications approach taken; what worked and what didn't. The table in appendix 1 summarises the insights from this work.

7.2 The key lessons from this research emphasise the importance of:

- **The development of a clear plan at the centre with the engagement and buy-in of stakeholders.** One of the key success factors for 2007 smokefree campaign was a single set of messaging/ branding, clear roles and responsibilities nationally, regionally and locally which built coherence in the approach taken; a 'one message, many voices' approach. To achieve this, stakeholders need to know plans early, understand the timeline and know what resources will be available and when.
- **Specific communications strands for those who must comply with the law.** While there was a great deal of work that went into communicating with retailers when the age of sale went from 16 to 18, retailers did not feel that consumers had the same level of communication and were too often informed about the change in the law by retailers themselves. Campaigns that identified stakeholders who may struggle with compliance early and offered extra support and resources, saw good compliance.
- **Message framing that enhances overall public health goals.** When smokefree legislation was introduced, it was also used as an opportunity to inform about the harms of second-hand smoke and get a 'halo effect' (smoking inside the home dropped significantly during this time).