May 2026

Councillor briefing: Why tobacco control matters to local government in the North East

Contents:

1. What elected members can do
2. Public support for action to reduce smoking
3. National commitments on tobacco control
4. Smoking and social care
5. Tackling the illicit tobacco trade
6. Smoking and the economy
7. Smoking and health inequalities
8. Smoking and the environment

Key points

- **Smoking is the leading cause of preventable illness and death in England**, causing at least 16 different types of cancer and nearly 75,000 deaths each year. No other consumer product kills two thirds of long-term users.
- **Smoking causes almost one hospital admission every minute** and over 100 GP appointments every hour. It is also a major drain on economic growth, costing society in North East £2.08bn a year through lost productivity, NHS and social care costs. This compares to £353m raised through tobacco taxes.
- **Smoking rates in England have fallen to their lowest ever level** of 10.4%, due to sustained tobacco control efforts. Despite this progress, there are still 5 million UK smokers who are at risk of being left behind – local government has a key role to play in supporting them to quit.
- **Investing in smoking cessation is highly cost effective.** For every £1 invested in stop smoking services, around £2.37 is returned in healthcare and productivity savings, rising to £12.87 overall when wider health benefits are included.
- **The public overwhelmingly supports action to address smoking.**
- **72% of NE smokers say they regret ever starting to smoke, and 71% say their life would be better if they did not smoke** (Survey of 1300 NE smokers – Bluegrass 2024).

1. What elected members can do

Ask your Director of Public Health about the council's tobacco control strategy. Does it include prevalence targets for key populations? Is tobacco a priority in the council's health and wellbeing strategy? Is the strategy informed by ASH's '*10 high impact actions for local authorities*

and their partners?, or guidance on the most impactful way to spend the ringfenced funding for smoking cessation. In the North East, all local councils have a local tobacco alliance which brings together a range of partners and the involvement of elected members in these is welcome.

Support regional tobacco control programmes. The North East has had a regional tobacco control programme since 2005. Fresh is commissioned by all 12 local authorities and the North East and North Cumbria NHS Integrated Care Board and delivers a comprehensive programme across eight key strands of activity. This 'locally together' approach has helped the region achieve the largest decline in overall smoking rates over the last two decades and Fresh has been credited as acting as an exemplary approach for tobacco control. Whilst smoking rates have declined by 65% since 2005, there is still much to do and smoking is the key driver of heath inequalities. This is why North East also has a clear vision through the Declaration for a Smokefree Future endorsed by all 12 Local Councils. You can find out more about the whole Fresh programme here.

Protect tobacco control activity from the tobacco industry. The UK is a signatory to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) – an international treaty designed to help countries reduce smoking rates. Article 5.3 of the FCTC requires public bodies to protect health policy from tobacco industry influence. Every council should have a strategy for adhering to Article 5.3 and elected members should avoid any interaction with tobacco companies or their affiliates. *For more information, see the ASH guidance on implementing Article 5.3, LGA guidance for local government officers and elected representatives, and national guidance developed by DHSC.*

Support national, regional and local campaigns to end smoking. Councillors are respected public figures who can champion important issues in local and national media. Councillors have played a key role in the campaign for the Tobacco and Vapes Act, through supporting the Act in the media, writing to MPs, attending parliamentary events and joining national calls for action. *Email admin@smokefreeaction.org.uk to join the ASH Smokefree Councillor Network to receive updates about tobacco control and national campaigning opportunities.*

Fresh delivers year-round media and communication activity on a wide range of issues including delivering the hugely successful Smoking Survivors mass media campaign and our new More Ways to Quit resources platform promoting local support. You can get involved in these campaigns through the local tobacco alliance. You can find out about all the ways to quit smoking including details of your local stop smoking service at this key website for smokers no matter where they live in the North East. We have a range of free downloadable resources here.

Encourage your council to sign the Pledge for a Smokefree UK. The Smokefree Action Coalition has launched a new Pledge setting out a shared vision and priorities for the future of tobacco control in the UK. Signing the Pledge provides a visible demonstration of the council's commitment to ending the harms caused by smoking and tobacco use. The Pledge replaces the Local Government Declaration on Tobacco Control. If your Council previously signed the

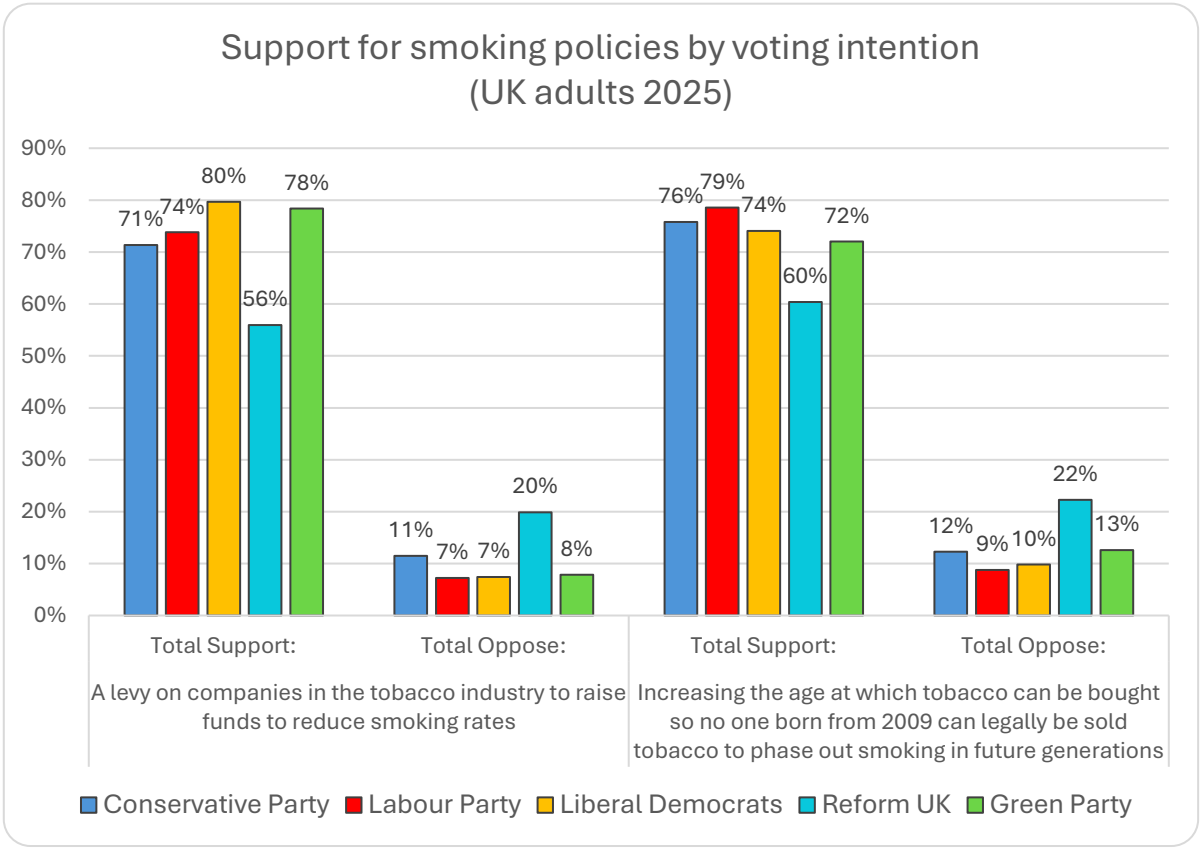
Declaration, signing the Pledge is an opportunity to renew your commitment to tobacco control. *Further information is available on the Pledge for a Smokefree UK webpage.*

Encourage your council to respond to consultations on the Tobacco and Vapes Act**.** In addition to the generational tobacco sales ban, the Act gives the Government powers to prevent vapes from being marketed to children and to introduce a retail licensing scheme for tobacco and vapes. The Government will need to consult on these powers before they are implemented. Councils should respond to these consultations to help ensure that the regulations are practical, effective and informed by local public health expertise. ASH will circulate draft responses and supporting materials to support councils to develop their own submissions.

2. Public support for action to reduce smoking

The public overwhelmingly supports action to reduce smoking rates. Support is strong across voters of all the main political parties. Click here to view ASH polling on public support for tobacco and vaping policies in every region in England, including the North East.

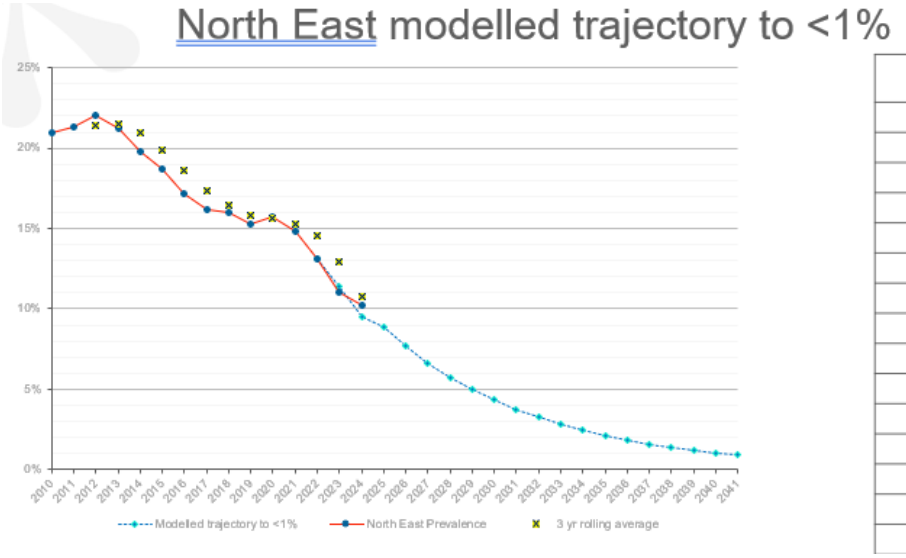
% of voters in the UK that would support/oppose each policy



Note: Respondents who answered "Don't know" or "Neither support nor oppose" are not included. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from 2025 Public First Polling for ASH. Total sample size was 11,103 adults. Dates of fieldwork: 21st Feb - 5th Mar 2025.Data weighted by interlocking age & gender, region and social grade to Nationally Representative Proportions The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

3. National commitments on tobacco control

- The Tobacco and Vapes Act will create a Smokefree Generation by phasing out tobacco sales to anyone born after 2008, saving thousands of lives and easing pressure on public services.
- The Government is providing local authorities with ringfenced funding of £153 million per year for smoking cessation activity for the next 3 years, along with additional funding for the NHS to support more people to quit smoking. This is alongside additional funding for local and national enforcement and the national smokefree pregnancy incentive scheme. *See the ASH briefing here for an overview of Government funding for tobacco control.*
- The Government has committed to halving the gap in life expectancy between the richest and poorest regions in England – smoking is responsible for half the difference in healthy life expectancy between the richest and poorest.
- The North East Declaration for a Smokefree Future. Based on APS smoking prevalence data, and assuming current rates of quit attempts (46% of smokers each year) and quit success (29%) continue, modelling shows the North East is on track to reach below 1% smoking prevalence by 2041.



	No. quit attempt to remain on trajectory
2026	110598
2027	95844
2028	83058
2029	71978
2030	62376
2031	54055
2032	46844
2033	40595
2034	35180
2035	30487
2036	26420
2037	22896
2038	19841
2039	17194
2040	14901

4. Smoking and social care

Current and former smokers are much more likely to need care in later life as the result of smoking-related illnesses. Over 1.5 million people require social care because of smoking-related disease, with smokers needing care on average 10 years earlier than never smokers and three times as many weekly care hours.

This costs North East local authorities over £60.2 million, in residential and domiciliary care – with the total Social Care costs estimated at a total of £735 million, with most of this made up

of informal care by family and friends or unmet care needs. *The ASH Ready Reckoner tool shows the cost of smoking-related social care in every local authority in England.*

The North East has an enhanced offer of stop smoking support targeted at all NHS and Adult Social Care staff through the working well programme across NENC.

5. Tackling the illicit tobacco trade

The illicit tobacco trade harms communities, funds organised crime and undermines the impact of public health measures by reducing the incentive to quit smoking and making it easier for young people to buy tobacco. Local trading standards officers have a key role to play in tackling the sale of illicit tobacco. Fresh works closely with Trading Standards across the North East and also leads the national Illicit Tobacco Partnership. Fresh has been providing expertise in this area for over two decades and has an eight key strand framework in place to address both demand and supply of illicit tobacco and has been tracking the size of the market in the North East every two years.

HMRC data shows that **the number of illicit cigarettes consumed in the UK has declined by almost 90% since 2000-01** – amounting to 13 billion fewer illicit cigarettes consumed per year by 2023-24 – alongside a 68% decline in illicit hand-rolling tobacco (HRT). This has been achieved through a long-running anti-smuggling strategy led by HMRC, Border Force and Trading Standards, alongside measures that have significantly reduced smoking rates – cutting demand for both legal and illegal tobacco. The current UK illicit tobacco strategy was launched in 2024 and is backed up by £100 million funding over 5 years. This has been supplemented by an additional £10 million a year to support illicit tobacco and vapes enforcement led by Trading Standards.

UK illicit market for cigarettes and HRT (2000-01 – 2023-24)

	2000-01	**2023-24**
Cigarettes (illicit volume)	15 billion cigarettes	2 billion cigarettes
Cigarettes (illicit market share)	20%	10%
HRT (illicit volume)	5.9 million kg	1.9 million kg
HRT (illicit market share)	61%	24%

Source: HMRC. Measuring tax gaps tables. June 2025

The best way to end the illicit trade in tobacco products for good is to support the 5 million smokers in the UK to quit and create a smokefree generation.

See here for more information about the UK illicit tobacco trade and how the tobacco industry exploits it to further their lobbying efforts. See also ASH's blog 'Why are UK tobacco sales falling?'.

6. Smoking and the economy

Smoking costs society in the North East a total of **£2.08 billion a year** – far more than the £353 million raised through tobacco taxes. This includes **£1.24 billion** in lost economic productivity (early deaths, reduced employment, lower earnings due to illness from smoking and lifetime spend on tobacco), **£735 million** in social care costs to local authorities, and **£18.1 million** in fire-related costs.

It is estimated that around **230,000 people in the UK are unfit to work due to smoking-related illnesses like cancer, heart disease, COPD and diabetes.** Investing in smoking cessation improves productivity by reducing sickness absence and preventing premature death, increasing time in employment and overall economic output.

The ASH Ready Reckoner tool shows the cost of smoking in every local authority in England.

7. Smoking and health inequalities

Smoking is responsible for half of the difference in life expectancy between the richest and poorest in society. Smoking rates among the most disadvantaged groups are significantly higher than the general population – 10.2% of adults in the North East smoke, compared to **23.8%** of adults in social housing, **21.7%** of adults in the most deprived decile, and **40.5%** of adults with serious mental illness.

The average person who smokes spends almost £3,000 a year on tobacco – equivalent to 10% of the average disposable income for England. When factoring in smoking costs, 42.4% of households with a smoker in the North East fall below the poverty line, this would represent 112,000 households. Quitting smoking is one of the best things people who smoke can do to boost their income.

The ASH Inequalities Dashboard shows impact of smoking on health inequalities in every local authority in England.

8. Smoking and the environment

Cigarettes are the most littered item in England, costing councils around £40 million per year to clean up. They leach over 7,000 toxic chemicals into rivers, lakes and soils and pose a hazard to wildlife. Cigarette filters – despite their name – don't provide any health benefits to smokers and are an environmental disaster.

According to the WHO, every year the tobacco industry costs the world more than 8 million human lives, 600 million trees, 200 000 hectares of land, 22 billion tonnes of water and 84 million tonnes of CO_2.