

Local Authority stop smoking support response to COVID-19

Introduction

This report provides a summary of responses to a rapid survey sent to all local authority public health teams and open between Tuesday 21st April and Friday 7th May. Valid survey responses were received from 112 local authorities or 74% of top tier local authorities.

The report provides snapshot of how local authorities have reshaped their support for smokers in response to COVID-19.

The key findings:

- The vast majority (96%) of local authorities report they have a service providing support for smokers from trained advisors
- 88% of respondents reported providing stop smoking medications or e-cigarettes to smokers
- Just under a quarter (24%) of local authorities are reporting that they have seen an increase in access to services since lockdown
- A majority (75%) of local authorities are actively communicating with smokers about elevated risks of getting severe symptoms among smokers who contract COVID-19.

This is a rapidly changing context and a number of respondents highlighted that service development and communications were ongoing. ASH will run our usual annual survey of local authority stop smoking support later this year, which will provide further detail on how services are adapting to the current crisis.

As local authorities continue to develop their service offer there are some resources to support this:

- Public Health England and ASH have collated examples of innovative practice: [Disruption to the provision of stop smoking support during the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)
- NCSCCT has published guidance [on delivering remote consultations](#)
- ASH has run a number of webinars to support councils:
 - [Smoking in pregnancy and COVID-19](#)
 - [Smoking and COVID-19: Key messages and responses for local councils](#)
 - [Smoking and COVID-19 Good Practice](#)

Local authorities are having to make rapid decisions about where to invest their resource and how to best support people at this time. Judgements on the best approaches are difficult areas should take into account:

- How to deliver services that meet the evidence base and NICE guidance as far as possible
- How to most effectively reach smokers directly with key communications
- Where there are opportunities to effectively support or engage with smokers via the assets and networks with local alliances and across local authorities
- How best to engage with and support those smokers who are most vulnerable in particular:
 - Smokers who are shielding and those with long term conditions
 - Pregnant smokers
 - People with mental health conditions
 - Those experiencing disadvantage

How services are being delivered

To understand if services were managing to continue to provide access to trained counsellors respondents were asked: “Within the current constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, is your local authority providing stop smoking support from trained advisors?”

The overwhelming majority of respondents stated that support for smokers was being delivered via trained advisors.

Yes: 96% (107 authorities)

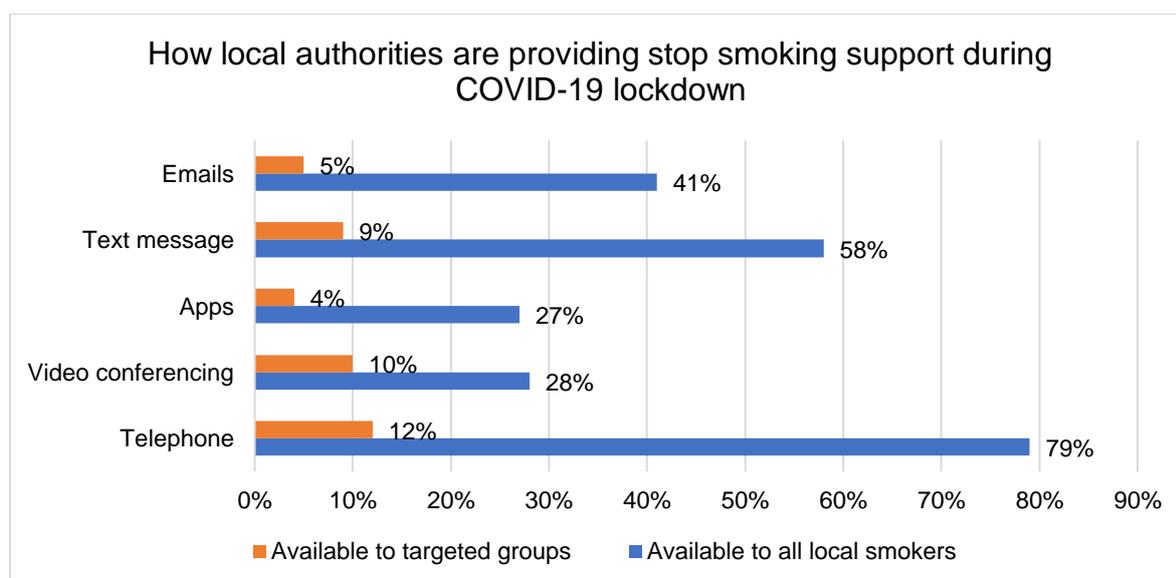
No: 4% (5)

N = 112

Among those who said ‘no’ 1 was suspended due to the need to provide support to other council services and 2 others were in a transition period due to the commissioning cycle.

Local authorities were asked how they are delivering support, options included via telephone, video conferencing, apps, text messages, emails and other. 10 respondents did not select any support methods, though 5 of these did state that support was being provided via trained advisors. All local authorities that provided a response indicated that they are delivering telephone support.

Medium of support	Available to all local smokers	Available to targeted groups	Total
Telephone	79% (89)	12% (13)	91% (102)
Video conferencing	28% (31)	10% (11)	38% (42)
Apps	27% (30)	4% (5)	31% (35)
Text message	58% (65)	9% (10)	67% (75)
Emails	41% (46)	5% (6)	46% (52)



N = 107

The respondents were asked to identify all the ways in which they’re providing support to smokers. 16 localities reported using each of these mechanisms with a further 27 local

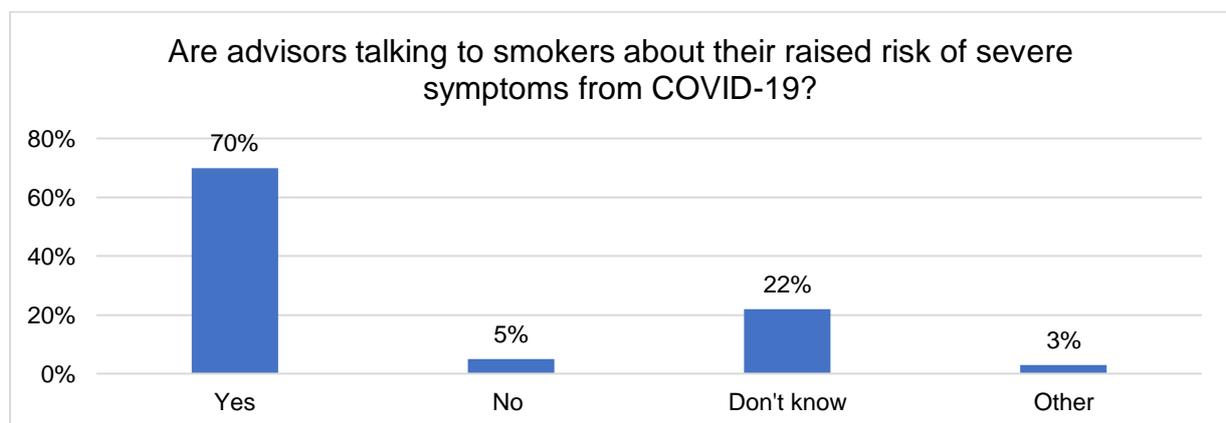
authorities using four of these methods. 20 local authorities selected telephone as the only mechanism through which they're providing support.

Respondents highlighted that they are working to expand the mechanisms they are using to provide support, especially video conferencing. Three local authorities in London noted that they direct smokers to the Stop Smoking London Portal and telephone support line while one local authority is doing Whatsapp videos and setting up a live chat on Instagram.

In response to the question: 'Are your advisors talking to smokers about their raised risk of severe symptoms from COVID-19?' A clear majority of localities said their advisors are talking to smokers about risks relating to COVID-19, with a majority reporting to be using national evidence and information resources. The national resources referenced were: resources from the #QuitForCOVID campaign and Today is the Day website, statements from the Chief Medical Officer and Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and PHE's [press release](#) on smokers' elevated risk of getting a severe disease.

While some localities reported these conversations being added to advisor's notes for conversations with smokers, others reported using this information to advertise local services either through directly sharing this evidence in texts or emails to smokers, or providing information posters to a variety of local services and providers.

Of the localities responding 'don't know', eight reported having provided this advice and guidance to local providers but without mechanisms to confirm whether it is being used in discussion with smokers.



N= 101

Availability of medications and e-cigarettes

98 local authorities (88%) reported that they are providing nicotine replacement therapy (NRT), medications or e-cigarettes to smokers with 10 local authorities (9%) responding that they are not doing so. Of the 10 respondents not providing NRT, medications or e-cigarettes five are the same authorities which are not providing advisor based support for smokers.

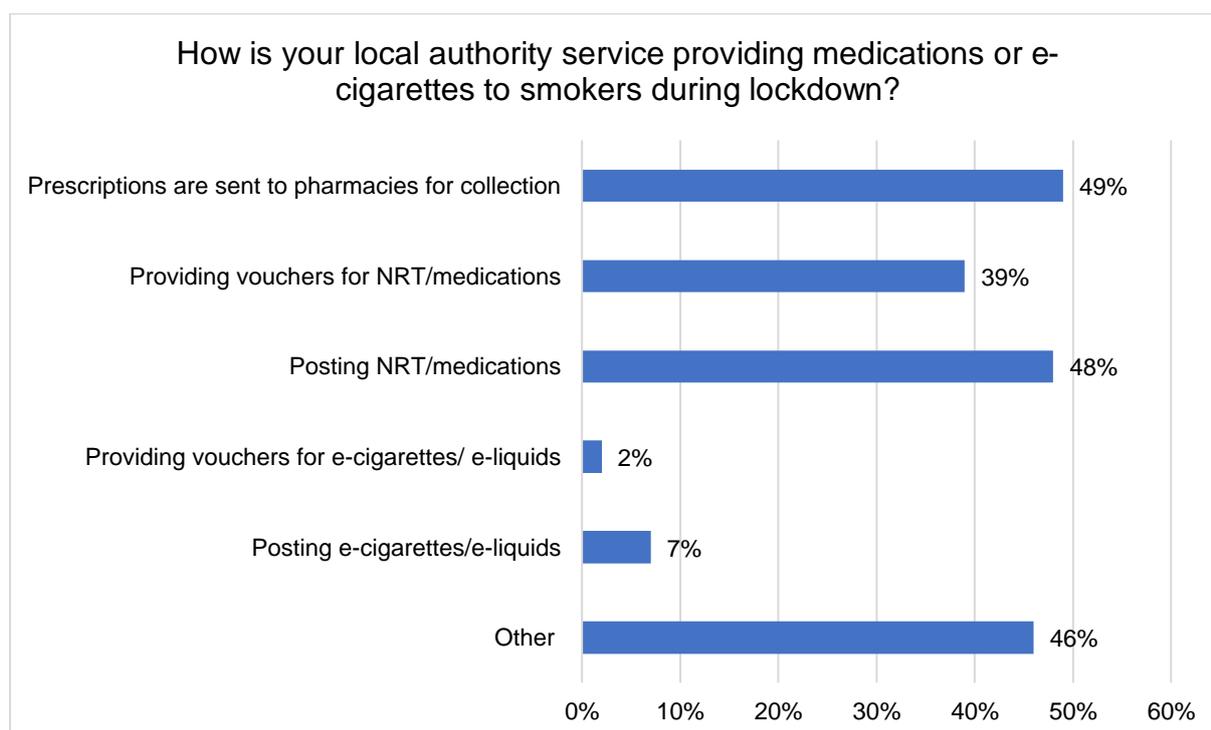
Local authorities were asked how they are providing access to these products, with the most popular responses being prescriptions sent to pharmacies for collection and posting of NRT/medications directly to smokers.

There were a wide variety of 'other' responses. For the provision of Champix (varenicline) 11 local authorities reported requests for Champix being sent to GPs as usual, with some GPs then sending the prescription either direct to pharmacy or individuals, with a few areas requiring patients to collect prescriptions.

For example: *We send a letter of medication recommendation to the patient's registered GP. Once signed off by the GP the prescriptions are forwarded to the patient's local pharmacy for collection. We also direct smokers wanting to switch to vaping to the Vape Shops we are working with locally who are all making deliveries of vape devices to their customers.*

10 local authorities reported having introduced home deliveries of NRT with one local authority reporting to have introduced home delivery of e-cigarettes and e-liquids. Additionally, several areas highlighted that provision of NRT is being integrated into council support for people who are shielding or self-isolating.

Other options highlighted included emailing prescriptions to pharmacies, posting prescriptions to clients and pharmacies issuing prescriptions under PGDs.

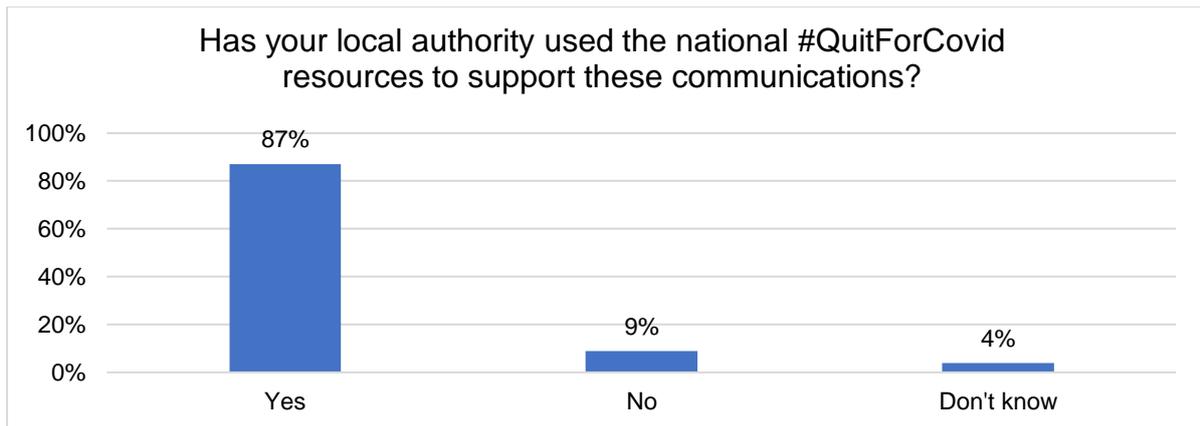


N= 98

Public communications

A clear majority (75%) of local authorities reported doing public communication about the elevated risk of getting severe symptoms among smokers who contract COVID-19. By far the most popular channel for these communications is social media posts with 56 local authorities (53%) referencing promoting these messages through social media channels. This was followed by promoting these messages through healthcare providers with 20 local authorities (19%) reporting to take this approach. This includes direct messaging to local smokers as well as creating posters displayed in healthcare settings, using NHS websites and communications pages.

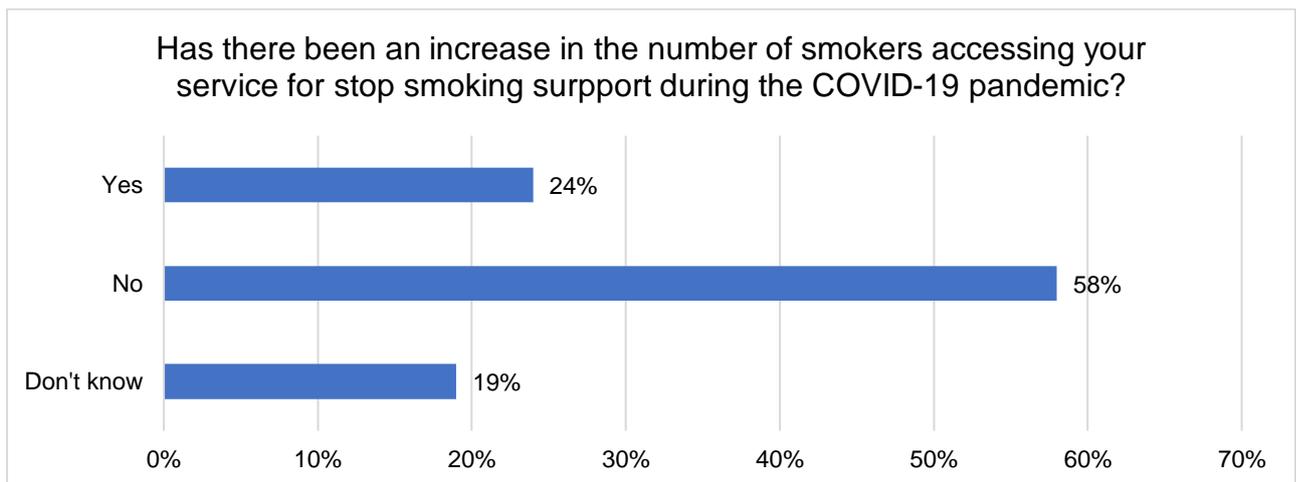
Other communications channels referenced were websites, newsletters, press releases, radio promotions and using partners (eg housing providers) to promote messages to target groups of smokers.



N= 79

Uptake of stop smoking services

Findings from YouGov's COVID-Tracker have [indicated that motivation to quit among smokers may be higher at this time](#). To understand whether higher motivation was leading to an increase in referrals to stop smoking services respondents were asked if the numbers accessing services had increased. Just under a quarter (24%) of areas reported that they had.



N=102

There were some differences between the areas that reported an increase in footfall and those that did not. While the types of service delivery and access to NRT were similar across both groups those with an increase in footfall were more likely to report outreach communications across a wider range of mediums than those who did not report an increase. Among those with an increase in footfall 23 out of 24 (96%) were doing public communications about smoking and COVID compared to 44 out of 59 (75%) of those who had not seen an increase.

Those authorities that were doing public communications were invited to provide more detail about what they are delivering. Below is a list of the activity being undertaken by the localities that have seen an increase in access to their stop smoking service. Some of this activity was also undertaken by those localities reporting no increase. Localities reporting no increase in access to their service were more likely to report that some or all of their communications activity was still in the planning stage at the time of the survey.

Communications activity undertaken by areas reporting increased access to local stop smoking services
Promotion on websites and social media
Briefing and engaging local partners and stakeholders
Press releases
Using local authority publications to share key messages
Texting smokers
Paid for advertising
Targeting key populations (eg pregnant women, healthcare staff)

More areas reporting an increase in service access, reported that they were undertaking multiple different types of communications activity whereas those who did not report an increase were more likely to only report doing promotion on websites or social media.

Examples of communications activity that seemed to have been most successful include:

Hertfordshire proactively contacted the local CCG in late March 2020 with a request for all local GP practices to send a text to smokers and ex-smokers in their records advertising the local support available to help smokers quit. GPs were sent this standard text to disseminate:

*If you smoke, you have an increased risk of severe illness with COVID-19. Your doctor would like you to stop smoking as soon as possible. Contact Hertfordshire Health Improvement Service on **0800 389 3 998** OR text **quit4covid** to **80818** for telephone support and medication to quit smoking.*

This text from GPs prompted approximately 600 referrals into the service over a 2 – 3 week period. To respond to this increased demand, the service has increased clinical hours from 70 – 184 to ensure support is provided.

Similar activity has been undertaken in a range of local authorities either through GP practices or through stop smoking service providers. Some areas have emphasised contacting people in GP records with long-term conditions that may place them at an elevated risk from COVID-19.

Some local authorities reported increased engagement with the local stop smoking service following communications campaigns advertising the support available.

Gloucestershire has adapted the stop smoking service to provide consultations via telephone and video conferencing. To promote the service locally, they are running a social media campaign across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram including the use of paid advertisements and videos of success stories. This brought in nearly 80 enquiries to the service over the Easter bank holiday weekend.