

Fifteen smokefree years



Public support in England for measures to reduce the harm of smoking

1 July 2022

Key points

July 1st 2022 is the fifteenth anniversary of the 2007 smokefree legislation that prohibited smoking inside public spaces such as offices, shops and pubs. This change not only cleared the air and enabled people to work and socialise without exposure to tobacco smoke. It also seeded a long-term change in public attitudes, as evidenced by an annual YouGov survey of adults in England.

Year on year, public support for further Government intervention to reduce the harms of smoking has grown, particularly among smokers themselves. Every measure that the Government has introduced since 2007 to further limit smoking has increased public support to do more.

Today, three quarters (74%) of adults in England support the Government's goal to reduce smoking prevalence to below 5% by 2030. Political allegiance makes little difference: 73% of Conservative voters and 79% of Labour voters support this goal.

There is majority public support for many of the key measures proposed in the independent Khan review,¹ which sets out a path to achieving the 2030 goal. This support extends both across the socio-economic spectrum in England and across the political spectrum.

In 2022, the following policies have substantial public support among adults in England:

- Requiring businesses to have a valid licence to sell tobacco (83% support)
- Requiring tobacco manufacturers to pay a levy to cover the cost of stop smoking services and other tobacco control work (76% support)
- Increasing investment in public education campaigns about smoking (70% support)
- Raising the age of sale for tobacco from 18 to 21 (63% support)
- Increasing the price of tobacco products 5% above the rate of inflation (63% support)
- Including inserts with information about quitting in cigarette packs (68% support)
- Banning the advertising of smoking materials and accessories (75% support)
- Printing health warnings on cigarette sticks (67%)
- Making the outdoor seating areas of restaurants, pubs and cafes smokefree (62% support)

The Government has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, from adopting the recommendations of the Khan review wholesale.

1 *The Khan review: making smoking obsolete.* Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2022

Introduction

On July 1st 2007, radical new legislation came into force in England prohibiting smoking in all enclosed workplaces and public spaces including offices, shops, restaurants and pubs. Overnight, the air cleared. Smokefree legislation was a ground-breaking, and hard-fought, achievement for public health, protecting millions of people from the harms of tobacco smoke. In 2022, fifteen years on, we take it for granted that the air we breathe inside shared public spaces will be free of tobacco smoke. We look back with amazement at the conditions in which people worked and socialised, and wonder how we ever tolerated them. A single change in policy seeded a long-term change in public attitudes.

The passing of smokefree legislation was the end of a long process of advocacy, rooted in the evidence of the harms of passive smoking. But then, as now, there was a great deal still to do. Millions of people still smoked. Yet public support for measures to reduce smoking and its many harms did not decline following the introduction of smokefree legislation. On the contrary, it continued to grow, particularly among smokers.

This report describes public attitudes to proposals to reduce the harm of smoking, as measured by an annual YouGov survey of adults in England. It shows that support for specific measures to reduce the harms of smoking tends to grow over time, among both non-smokers and smokers, including after proposals have become legislation and been implemented.

Smokefree legislation led to real change in the lives of ordinary people throughout England. That change stimulated public support for further measures to reduce the harms of tobacco. This virtuous circle remains powerful today. If the government is serious about its 2030 smokefree goal, it can afford to be ambitious.

After smokefree: support builds for government intervention

Public support for smokefree legislation was high at the time of its introduction, with 78% of survey respondents supporting the measures and only 14% opposing them (the remainder were 'don't know' responses). This support continued to grow following implementation of the smokefree laws, reaching 83% in 2017. This rise was principally because of an increase in support among smokers themselves, from 40% support in 2007 to 55% in 2017 (the last time this question was asked).

The experience of smokefree environments at work and leisure led to a collective re-evaluation of the acceptability of smoking in everyday life, and ever more people questioned whether the government was doing enough to limit smoking and reduce its harms. Figure 1 illustrates public attitudes to government action to limit smoking from 2009 to 2022 in England. Over this period the proportion of people who thought the government was not doing enough to limit smoking increased from 29% to 46%, while the proportion who thought government action was about right fell from 47% to 30%. Most strikingly, given the reach of the smokefree legislation and the significant measures that have been implemented since, the proportion of people who thought that the government was doing too much to limit smoking fell from 20% in 2009 to only 6% in 2022.

The biggest change has been among smokers themselves. In 2009, half of the smokers surveyed (51%) thought that the government was doing too much to limit smoking. Thirteen years later, in 2022, less than one in five smokers (18%) felt the government was doing too much (Figure 2). This is an extraordinary result: despite all the changes that have constrained their behaviour, most smokers recognise the importance of continuing to intervene both to discourage people from smoking and to support people to quit.

Figure 1. Public attitudes to government action to limit smoking, England, 2009-2022 (YouGov)

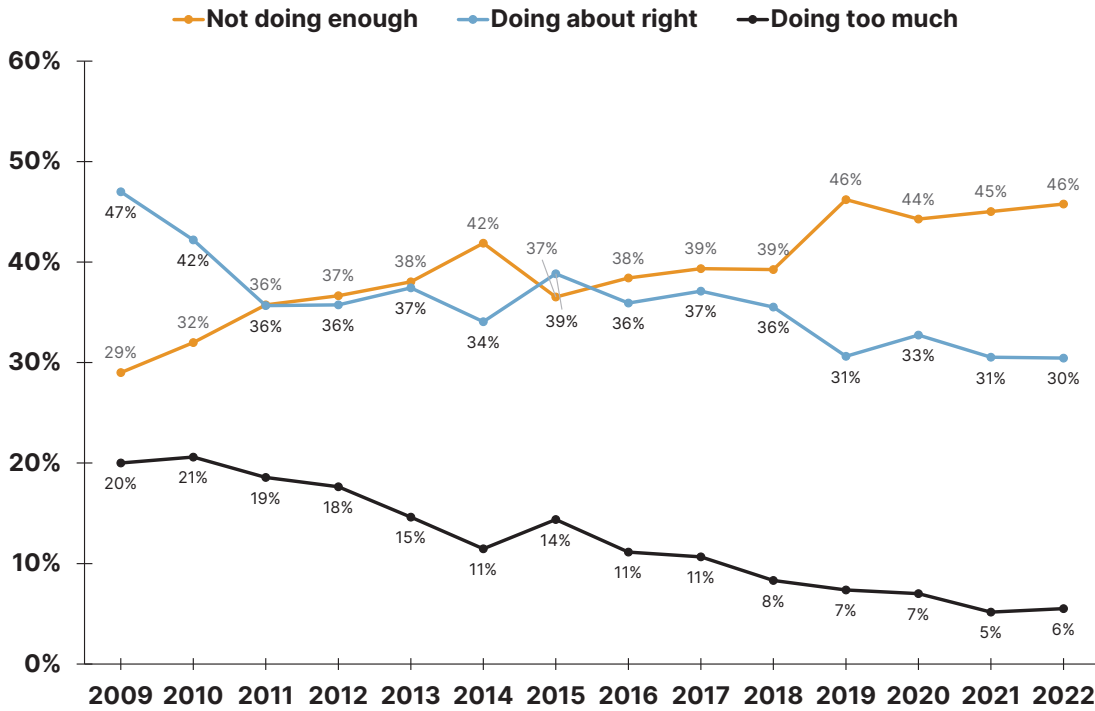
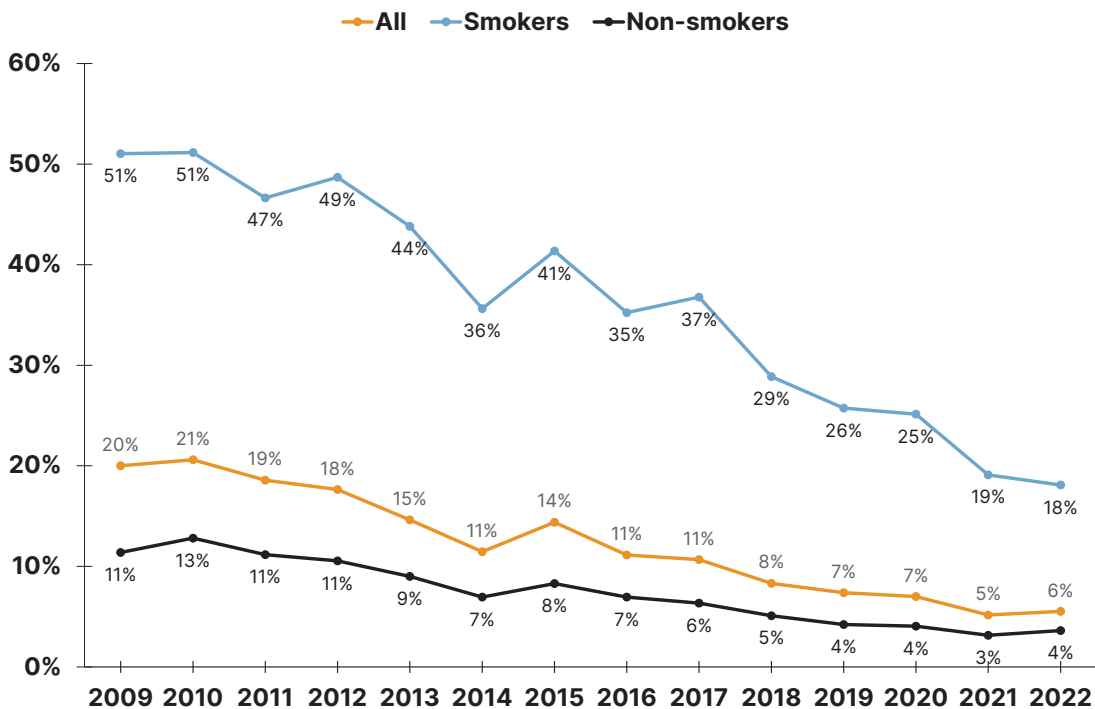


Figure 2. Proportion of public who thought government was doing too much to limit smoking, England, 2009-2022 (YouGov)



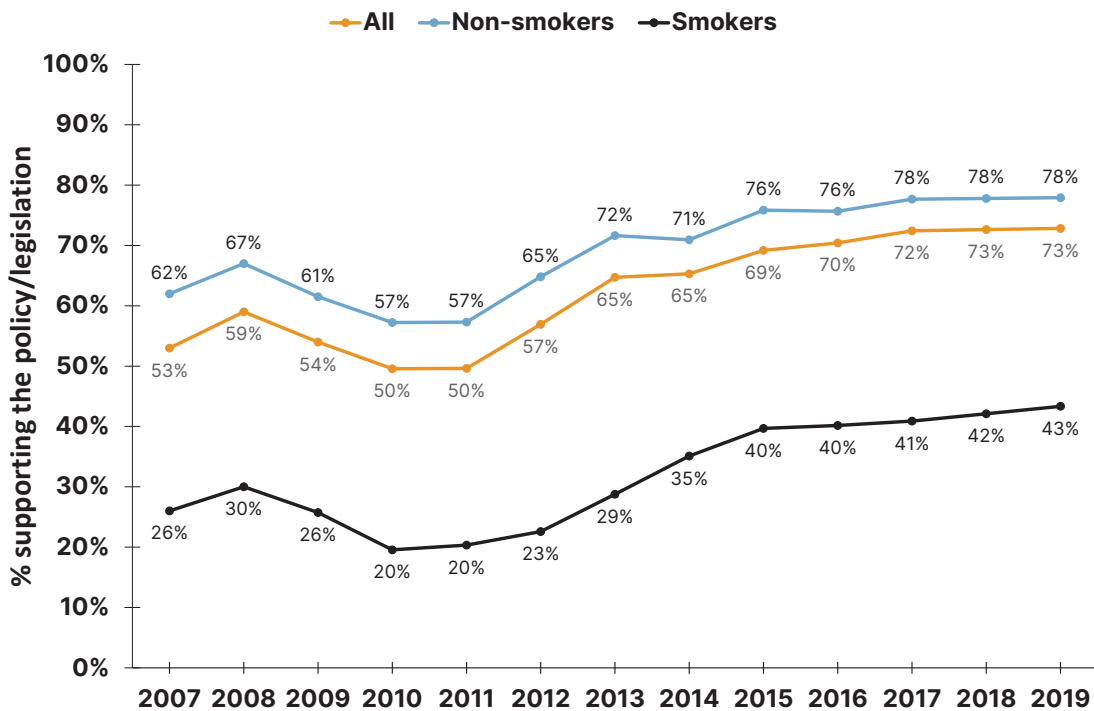
Three key changes in the last fifteen years

The smokefree legislation in 2007 was a huge step forward. Yet cigarettes were still attractively packaged and prominently displayed in every supermarket and corner shop. Furthermore, children and young people had very little protection from the tobacco smoke generated by the adults around them at home and in cars.

Over the subsequent decade, three legislative steps were taken to address these problems. The display of tobacco products at shop counters was banned, first in supermarkets in 2013, then in all shops in 2015. Also in 2015, smoking was banned in cars carrying children. Finally, in 2016, standardised plain packaging of tobacco products was introduced, stripping the tobacco industry of its last opportunity to market its products and making those products far less attractive to young people.

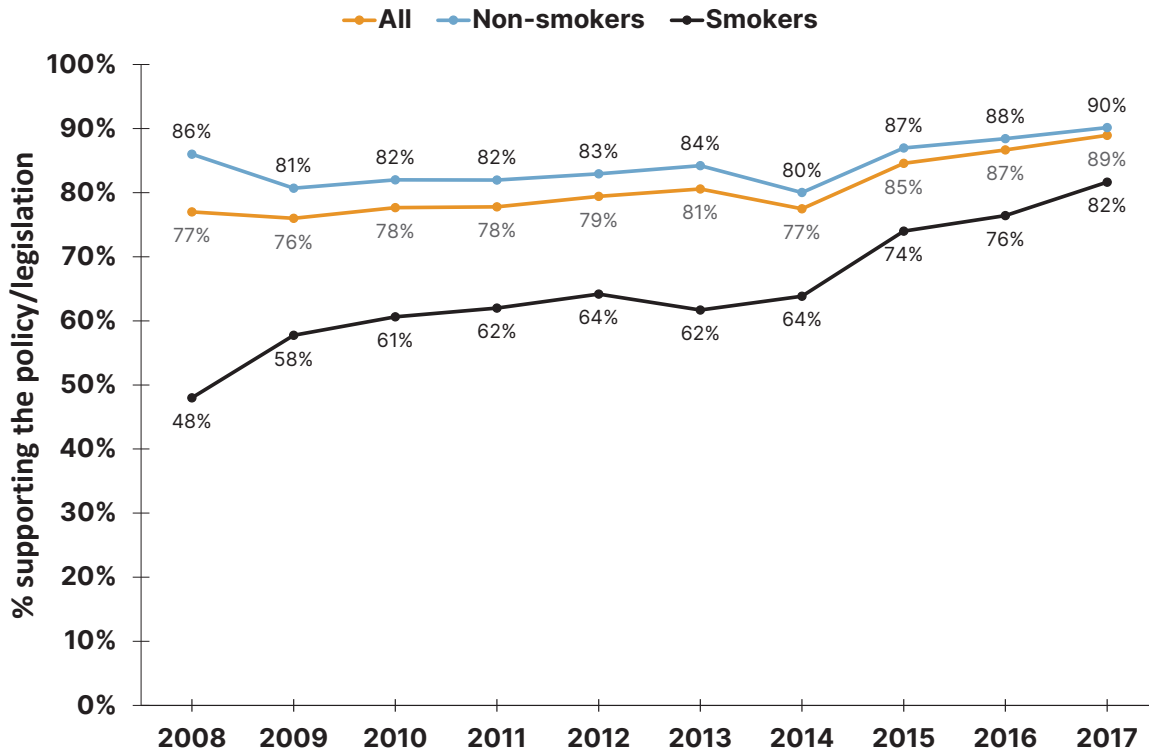
Public attitudes to these measures followed a consistent pattern: at the time of implementation, there was always majority public support for each new measure and this support grew further in subsequent years. Figure 3 shows the level of public support for removing displays of tobacco products at the point of sale. In 2007, just over half of the respondents to the YouGov survey supported this measure. By 2015, the year of full implementation, this support had grown to 69%. In 2019, the last year in which support for the legislation was recorded, nearly three quarters (73%) of the public supported the measure. Despite no longer being able to see the products they wanted at shop counters, support for the change also continued to grow among smokers, reaching 43% in 2019.

Figure 3. Public support for removing tobacco products from view at the point of sale, England, 2007-2019 (YouGov)



The proposal to ban smoking in cars carrying children had substantial public support from the outset: in 2008, 77% of the public supported the measure, rising to 85% in 2015, the year of the legislation, and 89% two years later (Figure 4). In this case, support for the measure among smokers increased at a greater rate than among non-smokers, who were mostly already persuaded. In 2008, only 48% of smokers supported the measure, rising to 74% at the time of implementation, then to 82% in 2017.

Figure 4. Public support for banning smoking in cars carrying children, England, 2008-2017 (YouGov)



Likewise for the plain packaging of cigarettes and other tobacco products: only 42% of the general public supported the policy in 2007 but a decade later in 2016, when plain packs were finally introduced, support had reached 58%. Three years after implementation, 62% of the public supported the legislation, including a third of the smokers who were buying the new drably-packaged products.

Cleaner air almost everywhere

Smokefree legislation and subsequent measures have contributed to a decline in smoking prevalence in the adult population of England. Smoking has long ceased to be an acceptable norm and, almost everywhere, the air is cleaner to breathe.- Opponents of smokefree legislation argued that the new restrictions would result in smokers lighting up more at home, increasing the exposure of children to tobacco smoke.² In fact, the number of people choosing to make their homes smokefree increased over time. In 2009, 78% of respondents to the YouGov survey said they did not allow anyone to smoke in their home, or only in outside spaces. Six years later, in 2015, this had risen to 85%.

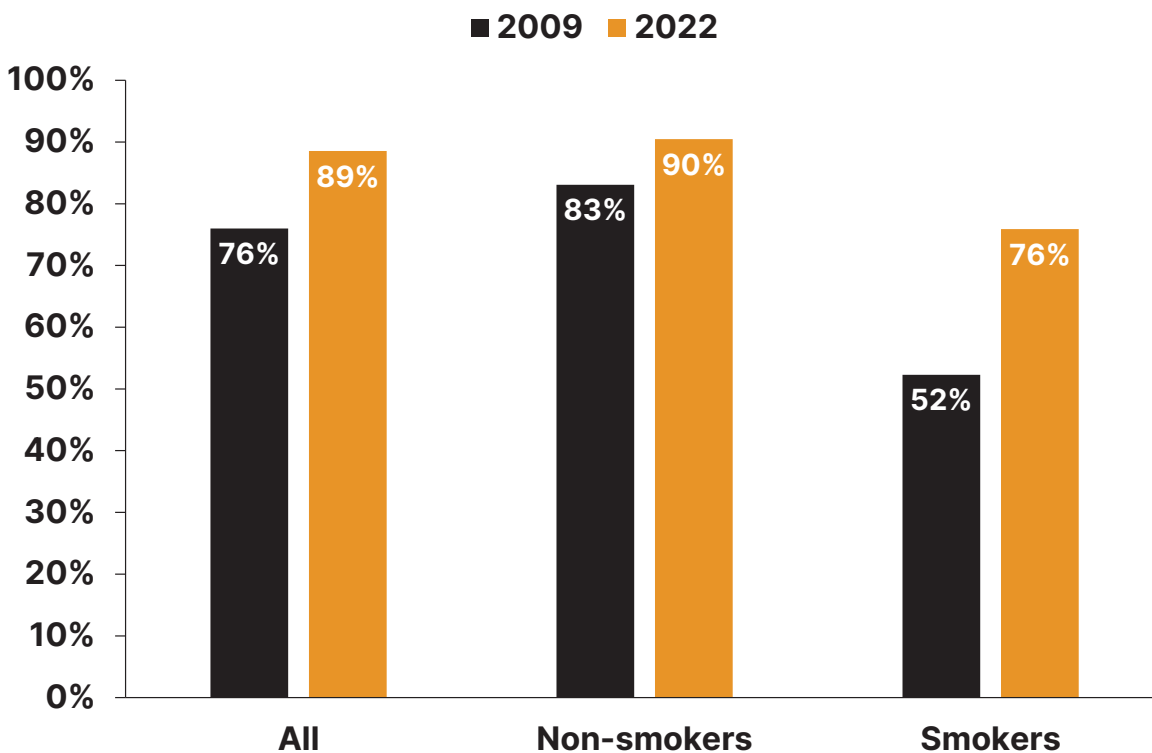
² Doctors Condemn Caution on Smoking Ban. The Guardian. November 2004. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2004/nov/16/smoking.politics1>

In 2022, 86% of survey respondents reported that ‘nobody smoked in their home on most days’. This included half of all smokers and 88% of households with children aged up to five years.

The YouGov survey results are supported by direct measurement of children’s exposure to secondhand smoke which has fallen by 90% since 1998, with an acceleration in the adoption of smokefree homes since the 2007 legislation came into force.³

The experience of working and socialising in smokefree spaces has increased public enthusiasm for making other shared environments smokefree. Many local authorities have made outdoor play areas for children smokefree, a policy that has wide public support: in 2022, 89% of respondents to the YouGov survey said they supported banning smoking in children’s play areas, up from 76% in 2009 when the question was first asked. Support for this measure among smokers has grown markedly, rising from 52% in 2009 to 76% in 2022 (Figure 5).

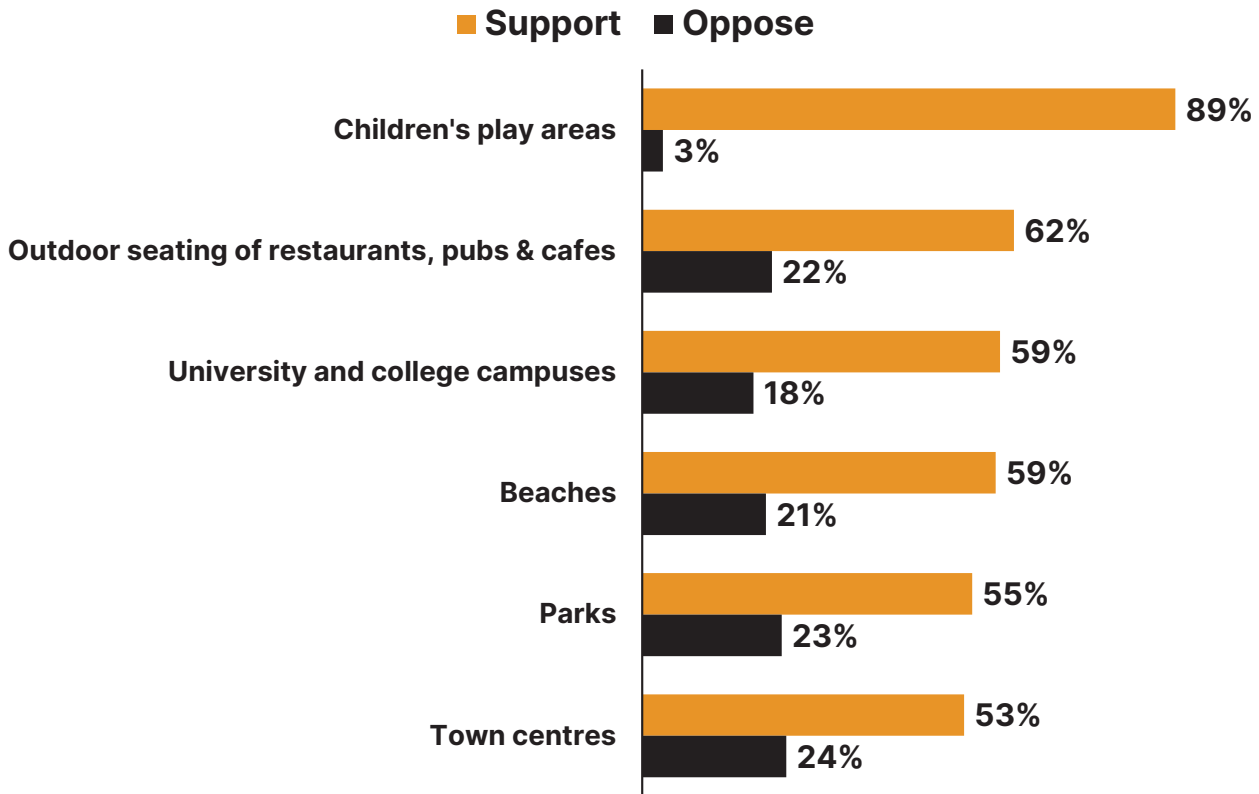
Figure 5. Public support for banning smoking in children’s outdoor play areas by smoking status, 2009 vs. 2022 (YouGov)



One location where tobacco smoke remains a problem for many is the outdoor seated areas of restaurants, bars and cafes. This can be a particular problem in the summer when smokers and non-smokers alike want to eat and drink outside. The 2022 YouGov survey found that 62% of adults would like to see smoking banned in these areas. Other public areas where there is currently majority public support for prohibiting smoking are university and college campuses, beaches, parks and town centres (Figure 6, missing data are ‘don’t know’ responses).

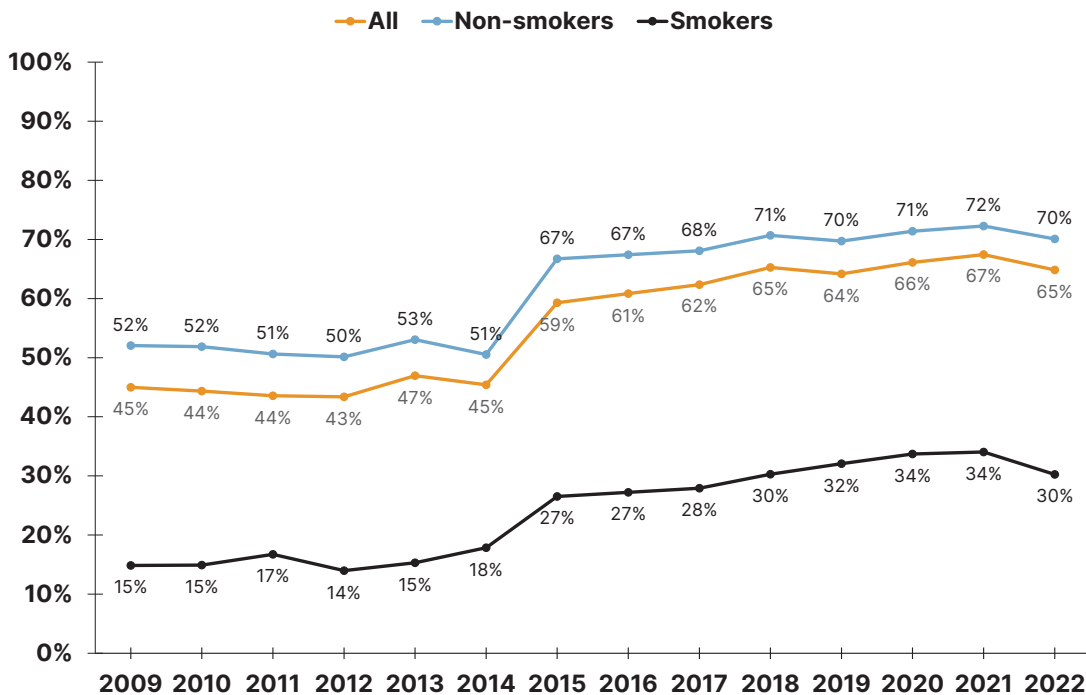
³ Tattan-Birch H, Jarvis MJ. Children’s exposure to second-hand smoke 10 years on from smoke-free legislation in England: cotinine data from the Health Survey for England 1998-2018. *The Lancet Regional Health-Europe*. 2022 Apr 1;15:100315.

Figure 6. Public support for, and opposition to, banning smoking in specific outdoor areas, 2022 (YouGov)



Travelling in private cars remains a problem for many non-smokers, given how quickly tobacco smoke builds when a smoker lights up within the confined space of a car cabin. In the 2022 YouGov survey, 14% of smokers who regularly used a vehicle said that anyone could smoke in the vehicle at any time, regardless of who else was in it. Support for a ban on smoking in all cars has grown over time, with nearly two thirds (65%) of the public now supporting such a ban (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Public support for banning smoking in all cars, 2009-2022 (YouGov)



Achieving the 2030 smokefree goal

The government’s ambition is for England to be smokefree by 2030, defined as the prevalence of smoking among adults falling below 5%. This is an extremely challenging goal, not least because there are many communities in which smoking prevalence remains stubbornly high. The Khan review made clear the scale of the task:

“Without further action, England will miss the smokefree 2030 target by at least 7 years, and the poorest areas in society will not meet it until 2044. To have any chance of hitting the smokefree 2030 target, we need to accelerate the rate of decline of people who smoke, by 40%.”

There is clear public support for the smokefree goal. In the 2022 YouGov survey, 74% of respondents expressed their support for it including 43% of smokers.

The 2022 survey also examined public attitudes to a range of policies that would help to deliver the smokefree goal, most of which have been recommended by the Khan review. Table 1 describes the level of support for each policy proposal, every one of which enjoys majority support across all social grades.

Table 1. Public support for measures to reduce smoking, 2022, by social grade (YouGov)

Proposed government measure	% Adults supporting the measure				
	All	Social grade			
		AB	C1	C2	DE
Requiring business to have a valid licence to sell tobacco which can be removed if they are caught more than once selling to underage smokers	83%	86%	84%	84%	77%
Requiring tobacco manufacturers to pay a levy to Government for measures to help smokers quit and prevent young people from taking up smoking	76%	82%	79%	75%	69%
Raise the age of sale for tobacco from 18 to 21	63%	63%	64%	65%	60%
Tax should be used to increase the price of tobacco products 5% above the rate of inflation	63%	70%	64%	62%	56%
Require cigarette packs to include inserts with Government information about quitting	68%	72%	68%	67%	63%
Ban the advertising of smoking materials and accessories (e.g. rolling papers)	75%	80%	78%	74%	68%

Increase investment in public education campaigns on smoking aimed at adults and children	70%	76%	72%	69%	64%
Health warnings printed on cigarette sticks to encourage smokers to quit	67%	71%	69%	68%	61%

There is support for further action to reduce the harms of smoking across the political spectrum in England. Figure 8 illustrates the level of support for the Government’s 2030 smokefree goal by voting behaviour at the last election. Although political allegiance clearly makes a difference, there is consistent majority support for the smokefree goal across political parties.

Table 2 takes this analysis further, describing the level of support for each of the proposed measures to limit smoking explored in the survey against voting behaviour. Once again, there is majority support for every measure regardless of political allegiance.

Figure 8. Support for the Government’s 2030 smokefree goal, by vote at last election (YouGov)

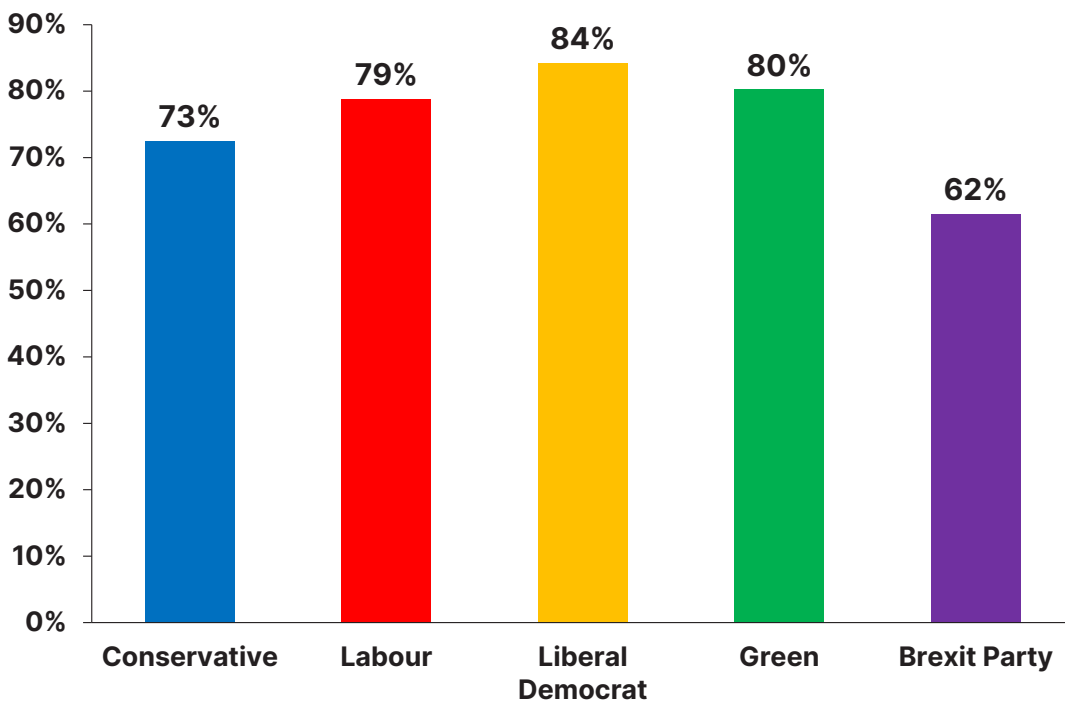


Table 2. Public support for measures to reduce smoking, 2022, by vote at last election (YouGov)

Proposed government measure	% Adults supporting the measure				
	Con	Lab	LD	Grn	Brexit
Requiring business to have a valid licence to sell tobacco which can be removed if they are caught more than once selling to underage smokers	84%	85%	89%	89%	78%
Requiring tobacco manufacturers to pay a levy to Government for measures to help smokers quit and prevent young people from taking up smoking	75%	82%	85%	85%	67%
Raise the age of sale for tobacco from 18 to 21	65%	64%	64%	64%	63%
Tax should be used to increase the price of tobacco products 5% above the rate of inflation	66%	63%	73%	71%	57%
Require cigarette packs to include inserts with Government information about quitting	67%	72%	74%	71%	60%
Ban the advertising of smoking materials and accessories (e.g. rolling papers)	76%	78%	83%	83%	71%
Increase investment in public education campaigns on smoking aimed at adults and children	66%	78%	80%	75%	56%
Health warnings printed on cigarette sticks to encourage smokers to quit	68%	70%	74%	74%	62%

Conclusion

A smokefree England is not yet in sight. Every day, millions of people continue to put their lives at risk because of an addiction that they have yet to beat. We can, however, plan for a smokefree future in the knowledge that further intervention to reduce smoking and its harms has public support across English society and across the political spectrum.

The government's 2030 smokefree goal can be achieved. The Khan review has shown the way, with extensive recommendations for new investment and action at national, regional and local levels. The findings presented here should reassure the government that there is no political cost to adopting these recommendations wholesale. Intervention to reduce the harms of smoking consistently increases public support for further intervention. Fifteen years on from the transformational smokefree legislation of 2007, the people of England are keen to see the end of smoking.

Appendix 1: Methods

Each of the annual ASH Smokefree England surveys was conducted online by YouGov using a representative sample of the population of England aged 18+. Results have been weighted to be representative of all English adults by age, gender, education level, region, social grade, and ethnicity.

The data were not sampled or weighted by past vote or political affiliation and those figures are provided for illustrative purposes only.

Not all questions explored in this report have been asked every year. Once opinion on long-established and widely-supported policies stabilised, the relevant questions were replaced by new questions.

Public support for the 2007 smokefree legislation was last asked in 2017; for legislation prohibiting smoking in cars carrying children in 2017; and for removing tobacco products from view at point of sale in 2019.

Public support for banning smoking in all cars was first asked in 2009. This question was not asked in 2016, and in order to maintain a consistent date axis, the data point for 2016 in Figure 7 has been interpolated from years before and after using simple linear interpolation.

Table 3: Survey dates and sample sizes for England 2018-2022 broken down by smoking status

Year	Smokers (unweighted n)	Nonsmokers (unweighted n)	All (unweighted n)	Dates of Survey
2022	1,415	9,468	10,883	17th February - 11th March
2021	1,228	8,983	10,211	18th February - 18th March
2020	1,417	9,332	10,749	17th February - 11th March
2019	1,481	8,857	10,338	12th February - 10th March
2018	1,349	9,229	10,578	8th February - 6th March

NB. Data for 2007 to 2017 taken from [Smokefree: The First Ten Years](#). Tackling the smoking epidemic in England: the views of the public. ASH research report. 1 July 2017

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