

Students' experiences of smoking and vaping

Buxton & Leek, Chesterfield and Derby Colleges



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About us

We are an independent voice for the people of Derbyshire. We are here to listen to the experiences of Derbyshire residents and give them a stronger say in influencing how local health and social care services are provided.

Our mission

We are a strong, independent, and effective champion for people that use health and social care services. We will continue to influence health and care services and seek to improve joined-up care for the people of Derbyshire.

Our vision

We want to see consumers of health and social care services being put centre stage so that service providers and commissioners listen to what they have to say and use their voices to shape, inform and influence service delivery and design.

Summary

In the autumn of 2024, we collected feedback from 267 college students. We asked them why they smoke, vape or have chosen not to. We collected feedback in a short survey. We visited three colleges to talk to students during freshers' fairs.

The colleges we visited were:

- Buxton & Leek College (Buxton Campus)
- Chesterfield College
- Derby College (Broomfield Hall Campus).

Key findings

98 (37%) students had never tried smoking or vaping

39 (15%) students smoked sometimes or every week



Of the 16 students that smoked cigarettes every week, 13 of them also vaped every week



Vaping is more common than smoking with 160 (60%) of students vaping now or have done so in the past



The most common reason given for either smoking or vaping was to reduce stress or to help with mental wellbeing.

- Seven smokers admitted that addiction or habit was why they continued smoking
- Curiosity and “just wanting to try it” were the main reasons for those who had vaped in the past
- 89 students used vapes sometimes or every week. Some students told us they would like to quit vaping but didn't know where to get help with this

- Smoking and vaping were seen as normal behaviours by students who were under peer pressure to start
- Some students chose to smoke or vape because their family members did. However, of the students who told us about family members who had lung cancer or ill health due to smoking, did not smoke
- Of the 98 students who had never smoked or vaped, 51 said they avoided it because they knew about the negative health effects.

Key recommendations

- Provide resources and support aimed at reducing stress and anxiety for young people to improve their emotional wellbeing
- Develop clear, health-literate messaging about the long-term health risks of smoking and vaping. Making sure the messaging is aimed at young people and their families
- Increase young people's awareness of the support services available to help them quit smoking. Create resources specifically designed to help young people stop vaping
- Conduct further research in Derbyshire to understand why vaping is particularly popular among young people.

Why we did this project

Smoking remains the single largest cause of preventable deaths. *One in seven adults in Derbyshire smoke.

*(Source: [Derbyshire County Council Public Health Annual Report 2024: Building a tobacco and smokefree future for all](#)).

To help build a smoke-free Derbyshire action is needed. Understanding why young people smoke or vape can inform services to help young people from starting in the first place.

Derbyshire County Council carries out an annual youth wellbeing survey called 'My Life, My View' with Year 8 to 11 school pupils. This includes research into smoking and vaping.

To avoid repetition, we chose to research with young people in school Years 12 and 13. College fresher fairs are a great opportunity to speak with students in a safe environment.

Understanding why young people smoke or vape is important to find ways to prevent it. We can also learn from those who have never smoked or vaped as the reasons that might inspire their peers.

How did we do it?

With the help of Healthwatch Derbyshire volunteers, we collected feedback from 267 college students. We visited three college sites in Derbyshire hosting fresher fairs.

- Buxton & Leek College (Buxton Campus)
- Chesterfield College
- Derby College (Broomfield Hall Campus).

At each fresher fair, societies, support services, student union reps and community services shared what they had to offer. The fairs ran for about 3-4 hours during the day. We asked students why they smoke tobacco, vape or have chosen not to.

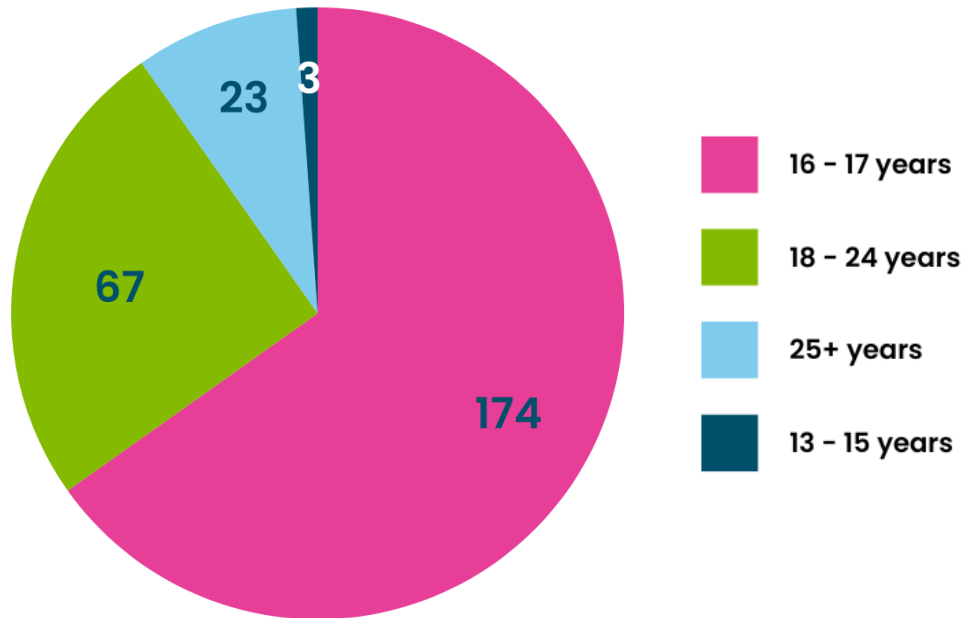
We gathered feedback through:

- a digital survey,
- a paper version was also available, and
- a QR code was displayed for students to easily access the survey on their smartphones.

Students could also fill out the survey using our tablets with the support of Healthwatch staff if required.

Who did we hear from?

Of the 267 college students we heard from, the majority (241) were between 16 and 24 years old.



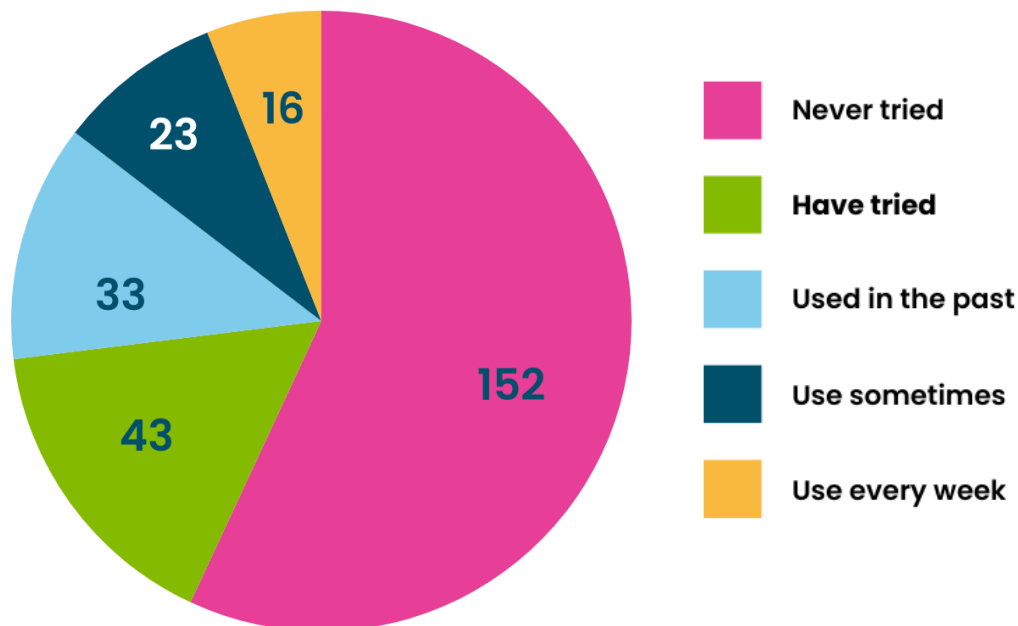
What did people tell us?

How many students smoke and/or vape?

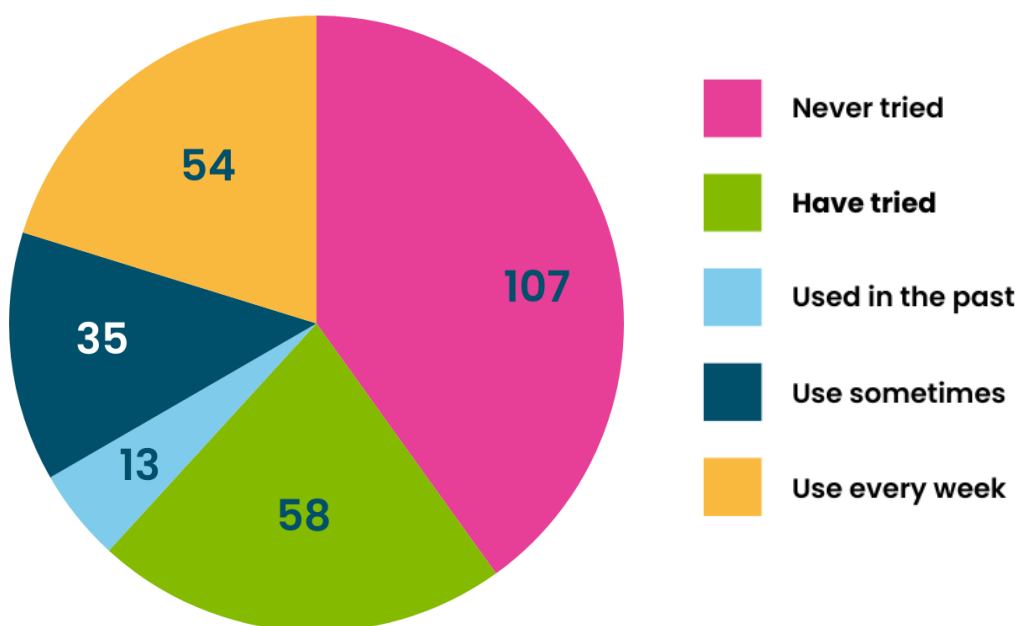
Students were asked about their use of smoking and their use of vaping.

- 39 (15%) smoked sometimes or every week (23 students said sometimes, 16 students said every week)
- Of the 16 students who smoked every week, 13 of them also vaped every week
- 76 (28%) had tried smoking or have smoked in the past
- 160 (60%) had vaped or currently vape
- 89 (33%) students used vapes sometimes or every week (35 sometimes, 54 every week)
- 98 (37%) had never smoked or vaped.

Number of students who smoked tobacco e.g. cigarettes (from a packet or roll-up):



Number of students who vaped with e-cigarettes:




Why are students smoking and/or vaping?

Students were asked why they had smoked and/or vaped. Their reasons were sorted into ten groups.

Below are the reasons given by the 39 students who smoke sometimes or every week:

Themed reasons for students smoking:	Number of students giving this reason
To reduce stress/to help with mental wellbeing	17
Because of peer pressure/it's the social norm	8
It's habitual/I'm addicted	7
Because it's social	4
For fun/it's cool	2
Because my family/the household smoke or vape	1
I was curious and wanted to try it	1
To relieve boredom	1


Students commonly said that smoking reduced their stress and helped their mental wellbeing. Three reasons given for smoking were:



“[It] helps me to calm down in stressful situations.”

“Stops me from thinking too much and is relaxing.”

“Stress, poor mental health ... a way of coping with life.”




The reasons below were given by the 89 students who use vapes sometimes or every week:

Themed reasons for students vaping:	Number of students giving this reason
To reduce stress/to help with mental wellbeing	34
Because of peer pressure/it's the social norm	18
It's habitual/I'm addicted	11
I was curious and wanted to try it	9
I'm vaping to stop smoking	5
Because it's social	5
For fun/it's cool	3
Because my family/the household smoke or vape	3
Because I like the flavours	2
To relieve boredom	1

Over a third of students who vaped said it reduced their stress and helped their mental wellbeing. Four of the reasons given for vaping were:

6 “I vape to distract from bad thoughts.”
 “Helps me to calm down in stressful situations.”
 “Coping with stuff.”
 “To destress and help with my anger.”
 “Because I have awful PTSD and need to cope without doing self-harm.”




The reasons below were given by the 71 students who had tried or used to vape in the past:

Themed reasons for students who had tried vaping or vaped in the past:	No. of students giving this reason
I was curious and wanted to try it	28
Because of peer pressure/it's the social norm	20
To reduce stress/to help with mental wellbeing	7
Because it's social	3
For fun/it's cool	2
Because my family/the household smoke or vape	2
To relieve boredom	1
Because I like the flavours	1


Students who had tried vaping in the past mainly explained their curiosity for wanting to try it. Two reasons for trying vaping were:

6 “Wanted to know what it felt like.”
 “... tried it because I was curious why it was so popular.”



The second highest reason for trying vaping was due to peer pressure or the social norm. Two reasons given were:

6 “It was mainly peer pressure because everyone was doing it at the time, and they were pressuring me to do it as well.”
 “My friends were saying how good it was and wanted to try it.”



Why had students not smoked and/or vaped?

Students were asked why they had not smoked and/or vaped. Their reasons were sorted into nine groups.

Below are the reasons given by 98 students who had never smoked or vaped:

Themed reasons for students who had never smoked and/or vaped:	Number of students giving this reason
Knowledge of health impacts/addictiveness	51
No interest in smoking or vaping	22
Because they smell/are dirty	9
The impact of seeing family member(s) who do or did smoke/vape	6
Because of a personal health condition	5
Because they are expensive	4
Influence from parents	1
Not around people that do	1
Don't agree with it	1

Most students said the reason they had never smoked or vaped was because of the impact on their health and how addictive it is. Two reasons given were:



"Because I am aware of the adverse effect. It destroys the lungs."

"Didn't want to have an addiction."



The second highest reason for never smoking or vaping was due to lack of interest. Two reasons given were:



"Never really appealed to me."

"I have never tried as I don't understand the hype."



54 students who had never tried smoking said they vaped or had tried vaping.

Nine students said they had tried smoking or do smoke but had never tried vaping.

One student said the reason for not trying vaping was:



"[I have] never been able to see the point of vaping and with all the plastic waste, it is atrocious."



Family members smoking and/or vaping

Six students who had smoked or vaped said that their reason was because of family or people in their house smoking or vaping.

One student said that they smoked, "Because I grew up in a house with people who smoked, and it seemed normal."

Another student said that it was, "Because adults have smoked around me."

Many students however chose not to smoke or vape due to the health risks.

For seven students, seeing the impacts of smoking on their family's health helped them make their choice not to smoke and/or vape.

Three students shared these reasons for never smoking and/or vaping:



"My grandad died from lung cancer because of smoking."

"I have seen the effect first hand."

"[My] family suffers from lung cancer."

"I have never smoked seeing as my grandparents were chain smokers and it badly harmed their health both physically and mentally. I don't vape either as my father vaped and we never knew if it had any ill effects. He and my grandad died last year, my dad to cancer and my grandad from suspected heart failure."



Conclusion

Students told us that they smoke or vape to deal with stress, anxiety or because they are feeling sad.

Many know that smoking and vaping can be addictive and bad for their health. Lung cancer and heart disease were the only two health issues that students named.

Students said their friends influenced them. They also said that if family members or friends smoke or vape, it can make them more likely to try it too.

However, some students said they avoid smoking because family members who smoke have had health problems.

Vaping is more popular than smoking with students, many were curious to try it. Vaping is not risk-free, the public health message is, "If you smoke, vaping is less harmful. If you don't smoke, don't vape." It's unclear from our research whether students are aware of the harms linked to vaping.

Some students want to stop smoking, and some students start vaping to help them quit smoking. Many students said they know they are addicted. Students spoke to Healthwatch staff at the fresher fairs to say they want help to stop vaping.

Students gave many reasons for smoking, vaping, or choosing not to. To help prevent students from starting to smoke or vape, a range of support is needed.

Support is needed from families, friends, health services, schools, local groups, and the wider community. Everyone has a role in providing clear, age-appropriate information and support.

Recommendations

- Promote effective resources and support for reducing stress and anxiety. This needs to be offered to young people as a solution to improve their emotional wellbeing
- Make sure that messaging about the long-term health risks of smoking and vaping is clear for young people. Messaging should keep in mind health literacy and be aimed at young people and their families
- To raise young people's awareness of the support available to help quit smoking
- Develop resources to help young people stop vaping
- It is important to design engaging and relevant resources for young people. This can be achieved by working closely with them throughout the development process, ensuring their input and perspectives are included
- Further research is needed in Derbyshire about why vaping is so popular among young people.

What will happen next?

The feedback has been shared with decision-makers within the Public Health team at Derbyshire County Council (DCC) and Derby & Derbyshire's Tobacco Control Strategic Board. The data from this survey will help to inform their work towards a 2030 smoke-free Derby and Derbyshire.



Hearing the direct experiences of children and young people is vital to shaping services to meet their needs. Smoking and vaping being used as a tool by young people to reduce stress and anxiety is a significant concern, and this feedback will be used to consider how alternative advice, and support can be provided to young people to meet their needs and reduce the likelihood of increasing smoking and vaping. Thank you to those who took the time to conduct this valuable piece of research.



Adele Glover – Director for Early Help and Safeguarding
Derbyshire County Council

Thank you

We would like to thank all the students who completed our survey and shared their honest views with us. Your voice matters, it is vital for services to hear your experiences. With this understanding, services can better tailor their advice, support and guidance to help young people 'stop the start'.

Thank you to the colleges of Buxton & Leek (Buxton Campus), Chesterfield, and Derby (Broomfield Hall Campus). The welcome we received at the fresher fairs helped us to raise awareness with students that their voice matters.

Thank you to Derbyshire County Council for responding to our report.

Disclaimer

The comments outlined in this report should be taken in the context that they are not representative of all young people within Derbyshire but still offer useful insight.

It is important to note that the engagement was carried out within a specific time-frame and therefore only provides a snapshot of people's views as shared with Healthwatch staff and volunteers.

They are the genuine thoughts, feelings, and issues people shared with Healthwatch Derbyshire. The data should be used in conjunction with, and to complement, other sources of data that are available.



Healthwatch Derbyshire
Suite 14 Riverside Business Centre
Foundry Lane
Belper
Derbyshire
DE56 0RN

www.healthwatchderbyshire.co.uk
t: 01773 880786
e: enquiries@healthwatchderbyshire.co.uk
@HWDerbyshire
Facebook.com/HealthwatchDerbyshire

healthwatch
Derbyshire