

A Real Roadmap to a Tobacco Free Ireland

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Executive summary

Ireland's approach to tobacco control is broken. While other nations witness tangible decreases in their smoking rate (see examples below), the number of Irish people who smoke has started to increase again. There is no question that the 'Tobacco Free Ireland' goal will be missed: the only question is by how much. To rectify

this pressing problem Irish politicians, policymakers and NGOs need to develop a new approach.

In order to restart a real conversation about what needs to be done, Respect Vapers - which represents over 200,000 Irish vapers who use e-cigarettes as an alternative to smoking - has drawn up 'A Real

Roadmap to a Tobacco Free Ireland.' By looking to international examples of progressive health policymaking, by providing smokers with accurate information and effective support and by ensuring that vaping products remain available (and remain more affordable than smoking), we can make a 'Tobacco Free Ireland' a reality.

A four pillar approach is needed:

1 Agree a Government position on vaping, based on research and vapers' experiences

2 Arm smokers with information on vaping

3 Maintain the price difference between cigarettes and vaping

4 Preserve the option of flavours for adults using vaping to quit tobacco

The problem: *Ireland's slow progress in reducing the smoking rate*

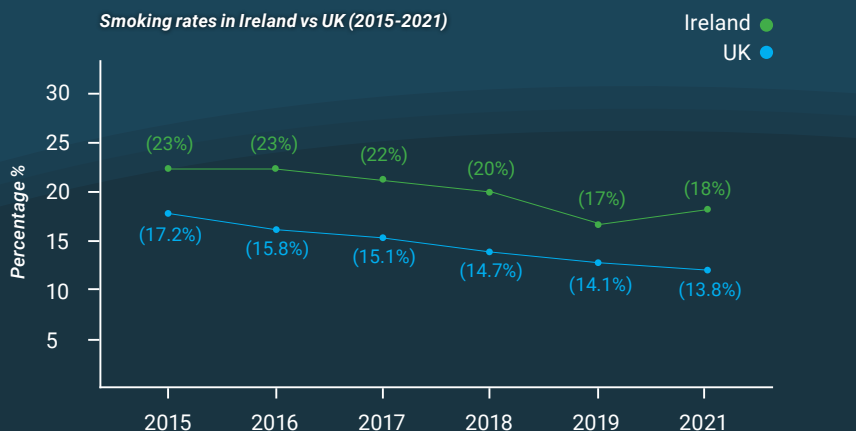
Almost a decade ago, in October 2013, the Irish Government unveiled its landmark 'Tobacco Free Ireland' plan. This comprehensive tobacco control policy was intended to serve as a roadmap towards a new future in

which smoking rates had been dramatically reduced.

"I am pleased that the target date of 2025 has now been set for Ireland to become tobacco free – less than 5% of the population smoking," the then Health Minister James Reilly said,

launching the plan.¹

The goal of lowering the smoking rate to 5% was intended to be a watershed moment, and it was a goal widely shared across society. According to the HSE, almost 6,000 smokers in Ireland die each year from



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tobacco-related diseases such as cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and heart disease. Long-term smokers, on average, have a life expectancy which is about 10 years shorter than that of non-smoker.²

Smokers will suffer from the range of damaging side effects of smoking: being poorer in terms of health, happiness and disposable income. Smoking also places a massive burden on our health system (almost

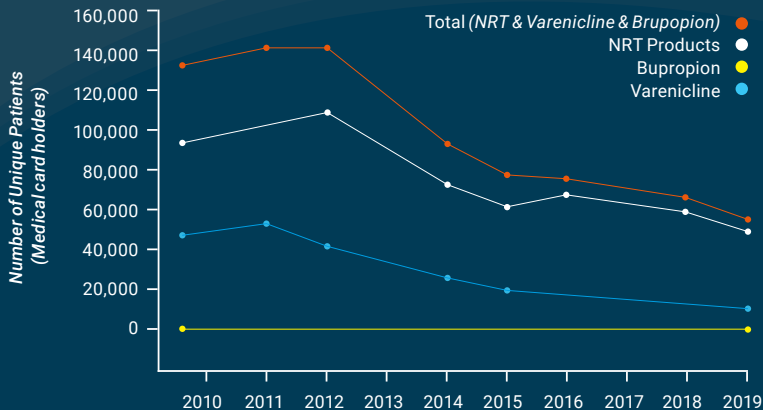
1,000 hospital episodes in Irish hospitals each week are attributable to smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke) while also inflicting a major economic burden on broader society.³

Everyone agrees there is an urgent need to work towards the goals set out in 'Tobacco Free Ireland.' Yet as we draw ever closer to 2025, it is becoming increasingly clear that this objective will not be achieved. Alarming, after years of slow progress, which brought about minor

decreases in the smoking rate, the proportion of Irish people who smoke has begun to increase yet again, thus jeopardising all that progress.

There have been warning signs of this imminent failure, with the HSE warning in 2018 that, based on trends up until that point, a smoking rate of 5% or below would not be achieved until 2052 - thus missing the target by 27 years.⁴ The Department of Health's annual 'Healthy Ireland Survey' findings

Trends in number of unique patients (medical card holders only) availing of NRT and other smoking medications, 2010



Source: Primary Care Reimbursement Service (PCRS), April 2018 & July 2020 by request

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"I am pleased that the target date of 2025 has now been set for Ireland to become tobacco free – less than 5% of the population smoking,"

— James Reilly
Former Minister for Children,
Equality, Disability, Integration
and Youth of Ireland



have illustrated again and again just how little headway the existing policies were making.

The Healthy Ireland Survey 2015 showed that 23% of Irish adults were smokers. No decline was recorded in the following year's survey, after which Healthy Ireland 2017 showed a 22% smoking rate.

Thanks in no small part to the growing popularity of e-cigarettes or vaping as a way of quitting cigarettes, Healthy Ireland 2018 showed a fall to 20%, followed by a further decrease to 17% in Healthy Ireland 2019. However, this progress has reversed in the last two years, as the recently

released Healthy Ireland 2021 shows that the smoking rate had increased to **18%** since 2019.⁵ Despite the dire impact of cigarettes on health, almost one in five Irish adults still smoke.

This slow progress was not inevitable, as the experience of our neighbours in the United Kingdom shows. In 2015, 17.2% of British adults smoked, and since then there has been a steady decline in the smoking rate to just **13.8%** which was recorded by the Office for National Statistics in 2021.⁶ Unlike in Ireland, the Covid-19 pandemic has not resulted in any upsurge in smoking.

Crucially, many Irish smokers are trying to give up the

habit. According to Healthy Ireland 2021, 44% of those who smoked in the previous year had tried to quit, but unfortunately, **73% of those quit attempts ended in failure.** That means that more than 200,000 Irish smokers tried and failed to quit over the last year.

Many will try again - 29% of current smokers say they are either trying to quit or actively planning to do so.⁷ To make sure they are successful, we need to give them the best support on offer. Right now, Irish policymakers are not doing this. Healthy Ireland 2019, for instance, showed that vaping accounted for almost four times more successful quit

attempts than nicotine replacement therapies: 38% of successful quitters used vaping, compared to just 10% who used nicotine replacement therapies (NRT) such as patches or gums.⁸ These figures reinforced the findings of major academic studies including the Cancer Research UK-funded study in Queen Mary University of London. This found that e-cigarettes were almost twice as effective as NRT treatments in helping smokers quit,⁹ while the major Cochrane review showed that vaping is nearly 70% more effective.¹⁰

“This is the first trial to test the efficacy of modern e-cigarettes in helping smokers quit. E-cigarettes were almost twice as effective as the ‘gold standard’ combination of nicotine replacement products”

— Professor Peter Hajek,
Director of the Health and Lifestyle Research Unit at Queen
Mary’s Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine.¹¹

One sign of the relative ineffectiveness of NRT products has been the significant decrease in the number of potential quitters using them, in spite of the constant promotion of these alternatives by health authorities such as the HSE Quit Team: a policy which has involved a significant increase in HSE spending on products designed to aid smoking cessation.¹²

This investment continued even though the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) 2017 assessment of smoking cessation interventions

showed that the use of combination NRT to quit smoking costs more than twice as much as using vaping, while other medications for smoking cessation interventions cost over three times as much.¹³ In fact, as the ***Edmund Burke Institute has already shown, for every 1,000 people who quit smoking using vaping rather than combination NRT, there would be a cost saving of over €100,000.***¹⁴

A clear example of the declining popularity of NRT products was shown in the Department of Health’s recently released Stop Smoking National Clinical Guidelines, which showed that the use of such alternatives by medical card holders had collapsed over the last decade.¹⁵ (See infographic on P3)

Despite the demonstrable fact that the current policy will fail to achieve a ‘Tobacco Free Ireland,’ Irish politicians and health

authorities continue to focus on supports which do not give potential quitters the help they need to give

up smoking once and for all. This failure is the main obstacle to achieving a 'Tobacco Free Ireland,'

but there is a solution – including vaping as a viable option for smokers.

The solution:

Including vaping to accelerate the shift away from tobacco

Over the last 15 years, vaping has played an effective role in helping smokers to access a viable alternative to quit, one which is 95% less harmful than cigarettes and costs far less.

Public health authorities in the UK, the US, Canada, New Zealand and elsewhere have acknowledged the evidence that vaping is far less harmful. The use of vaping as part of a harm reduction approach is resulting in major decreases

“from a risk-benefit point of view, from our understanding of the evidence, if a person is a smoker, it is better to go on to e-cigarettes.”

in the smoking rate in many jurisdictions.

Even Ireland's Department of Health, though still stubbornly sceptical about

adopting this harm reduction approach, has acknowledged the advantage of moving to vaping, with a senior official recently telling the Oireachtas Health

Committee that: *“from a risk-benefit point of view, from our understanding of the evidence, if a person is a smoker, it is better to go on to e-cigarettes.” That is something we would welcome.”¹⁶*

Successive Healthy Ireland Surveys show that, as smoking rates were gradually falling, vaping rates were gradually going up. In 2016, 3% of the population were vapers, compared to the 23% who smoked. In the following year, the vaping rate increased by 1%, while the smoking rate fell by 1%. By 2019, 5% of the population were vaping, and the smoking rate was at last coming down quickly. This was not just helping to save smokers’ lives, it was also helping to save people enormous sums of money - according to our review of vaping released in 2021, the average smoker can generate annual savings of €3,416 by switching to vaping.¹⁷ Unfortunately, this was to be the high watermark

for vaping in Ireland, as an avalanche of coverage about the addition of THC and other illegal substances to unregulated vaping products in the United States, resulting in lung injuries, contributed to growing public concern. The regulations and health and safety standards in place in Ireland and the European Union ensure that no such situation developed here.

Vaping products in Ireland are regulated under the Tobacco Products Directive 2014, implemented as S.I. 271 of 2016 (Annex 1).¹⁸ For vaping products to be sold on the Irish market the manufacturers must share with the HSE, six months in advance detailed product information including: a list of all ingredients contained in the product, the emissions resulting from their use, toxicological data regarding the product’s ingredients and emissions and information on the nicotine doses.

Despite this, Irish politicians and NGOs quickly became critical of vaping when it

appeared likely to bring about major reductions in the smoking rate. Unfounded claims about youth vaping and the supposed danger of flavoured vaping products quickly became common. This increased confusion about the relative harm of these products, causing some potential quitters to steer clear of vaping. The publication of Healthy Ireland 2021 made clear just how much damage was done and the strong link existing between the vaping rate and the smoking rate: ***the numbers vaping decreased by 1%, and the numbers smoking increased by 1%.***¹⁹

This misguided crusade against vaping has also ignored the evidence about what vaping does, and who uses it. Apart from the findings in successive Healthy Ireland Surveys, the 2021 National Drug and Alcohol Survey (NDAS) 2019/2020 (funded by the Department of Health and managed by the Health Research Board) provided the most

comprehensive overview of who vapes in Ireland.

Among its key findings, it showed:

- *More than 95% of Irish vapers are ex-smokers or current smokers.*
- *The main reason cited for starting e-cigarette use was to help quit smoking (59.9%).*
- *Over three-quarters of vapers are using the products to get off or stay off smoking or to cut down on smoking.²⁰*

Despite the evidence and the latest Healthy Ireland Survey showing that less than 1% of

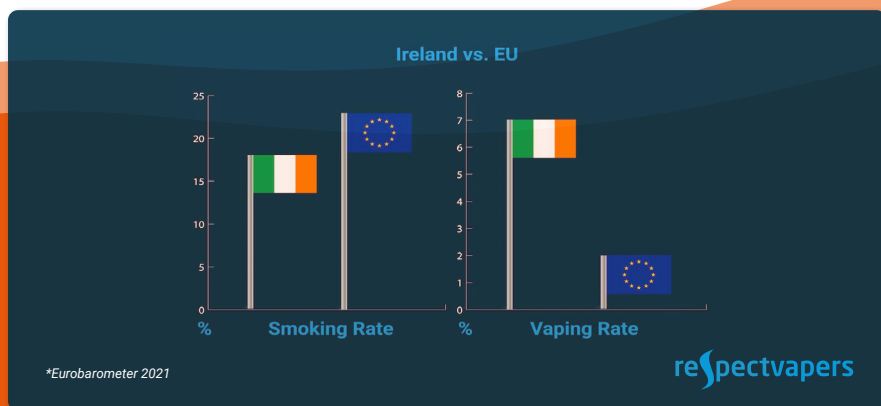
'never smokers' are current vapers,²¹ health bodies have continued to claim that it is a gateway into smoking, rather than being the best path out.

International research shows that flavours are not a gateway to teen smoking. As highlighted in the surveys, vapers are cigarette 'quitters not starters.' In reality the original legislation passed in 2016 failed to include a ban on sales of vaping products to under 18s.

We also have international evidence from the European Commission's recent Eurobarometer study on the 'Attitudes of Europeans towards tobacco and electronic

cigarettes.' This Europe-wide research showed that Ireland's smoking rate - while unquestionably too high - was 5% below the EU average (18%-v-23%). Our vaping rate, on the other hand, was 5% above the EU average (7%-v-2%).²² As the vaping rate goes up, the smoking rate falls, and vice versa. So, to achieve meaningful progress in reducing the smoking rate, we urgently need to take every action possible to encourage smokers to make the switch.

Smoking is the problem, vaping is a viable solution, and if these two facts are not recognised soon, a 'Tobacco Free Ireland' will remain a fantasy.



Case study:

How Britain has slashed its smoking rate

Sajid Javid plots vaping revolution to help poor live longer

Vaping Clinic offers service to help Lanarkshire smokers quit for good

Switch to vaping 'helps smokers' hearts'

Smokers to be given free e-cigarettes at A&E

"There is something for everybody': readers on switching from cigarettes to vaping

VAPING ON NHS Smokers trying to quit will be prescribed e-cigarettes on the NHS in months

The United Kingdom is a good example of a country which has adopted a policy of encouraging smokers to quit by switching to vaping, with very positive results. Not only has the expert advisory group Public Health England concluded that vaping is around 95% less

harmful than tobacco,²³ their findings have been endorsed by leading anti-tobacco groups like the Royal College of Physicians and Action on Smoking and Health (ASH). There is strong political support, in the UK, for a comprehensive harm reduction policy, which

places vaping at its heart: so much so that the All-Party Parliamentary Group has called on public health bodies to do even more to "communicate the positive public health message of vaping to the remaining seven million smokers in the UK."²⁴ The main professional

association for British doctors has said that “given that e-cigarettes are now the most popular device used in attempts to quit smoking, and that many people have used them to successfully quit tobacco use, they have significant potential to support this ambition, and help reduce tobacco-related harm.”²⁵ Vape shops have even opened in hospitals,²⁶ while the UK Government is considering prescribing vaping on the NHS, in what would be a world first.²⁷

Not only has this pro-vaping policy contributed to a dramatic decrease in the smoking rate, but it has also brought this feat about without encouraging an upsurge in e-cigarette use among younger people. ASH UK’s most recent reports on vaping among adults and vaping among young people produced a number of key findings:²⁸²⁹ (See right)

With a similar approach, Ireland could achieve similar, or even better, results.

Key findings from ASH UK:

- **Around 3.6 million adults now vape - a vaping rate of over 7%.**
- **Nearly two thirds of current vapers are ex-smokers (64.6%), and the proportion continues to grow, while the proportion who also smoke has fallen.**
- **Fewer than 1% of never smokers are current vapers.**
- **Regular use of e-cigarettes remains rare in young never smokers.**

The threat:

Same policies, same results

One thing is absolutely certain: with the current approach to smoking, a 'Tobacco Free Ireland' will not be achieved by 2025. It is also extremely likely that it will not be achieved any time in the near future, unless radical changes occur. By sticking to a failed approach, the Government is in danger of condemning enormous numbers of smokers to ill health and the high risk that their habit will ultimately kill them.

For the hundreds of thousands of Irish vapers who rely on e-cigarettes to help them stay off smoking, and the 700,000+ Irish smokers who need an alternative, there is another risk, and that is that the Government will introduce policies making it harder and more expensive for people to vape. Worryingly, in recent months

“We can build a ‘Tobacco Free Ireland,’ but to get to that destination, we need a roadmap that works.”

NGO and anti-vaping activists have demanded bans on the flavoured vaping products, which are a vital part of what keeps quitters from ever going back to tobacco. Instead of helping smokers to choose an alternative which is far less harmful than tobacco, and far more effective than NRT in helping people quit, politicians seem determined to dissuade people from making a decision which could change their lives for the better. Rather than building on the progress of vaping in Ireland

to help the 'Tobacco Free Ireland' campaign up to 2019, politicians and activists have done everything to reverse this, with the unfortunate consequence of the campaign stalling. In the one recent key indicator, vaping use has gone down, and smoking has gone up. We need to do better, and 700,000 Irish smokers need us to do better now. We can build a 'Tobacco Free Ireland,' but to get to that destination, we need a roadmap that works.

Case study:

Jacinda Ardern's plan to use vaping to end smoking in New Zealand

Recently, the Government of New Zealand's plan to ban the sale of cigarettes to anyone born after 2008, as part of a wider suite of tobacco control measures, has captured the attention of many. Just as in Ireland, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Government is aiming to achieve a national smoking rate of 5% by 2025.³⁰

The country has already experienced significant success in reducing its smoking rate - which fell from 13.7% in 2019/2020 to just **10.9%** in 2020/2021. What some outside observers have overlooked, however, is the extent to which the

growing popularity of vaping has driven this decline, and the degree to which policymakers there are determined to encourage smokers to switch to vaping. According to New Zealand's Ministry of Health, the **vaping rate went from 3.5% in 2019/2020 up to 6.2% in 2020/2021.**³¹ Vaping's popularity among Kiwi adults has increased by 5.3% since 2015/2016, and the smoking rate has fallen by 5.7% in the same time period: once again, vaping has driven a massively positive societal trend.³²

New Zealand's health authorities and politicians,

accepting this seismic shift away from smoking and towards vaping, have actively supported it. The Ministry of Health's 'Position statement on vaping' is clear: *"The Ministry of Health considers vaping products to have the potential to make a contribution to the Smokefree 2025 goal and could disrupt the significant inequities that are present."* Far from ignoring what is happening, they are seeing why vaping works for potential quitters, and they have encouraged those working to support smoking cessation to aid in this process: *"The Ministry of Health encourages smokers*

who want to use vaping products to quit smoking to seek the support of local stop smoking services. Local 'stop smoking' services provide smokers with the best chance of quitting successfully and must support smokers who want to quit with the help of vaping products.”³³

While Irish NGOs were quick to support the New

Zealand policy to banning cigarette sales to young people, they generally failed to acknowledge just how important vaping has been in bringing the smoking rate down. More importantly, they completely overlooked what Prime Minister Ardern said about how important vaping would be in getting to a smoking rate of 5%. Jacinda Ardern can see

that vaping is making a difference, and so can Kiwi health officials, why can't Irish politicians, policymakers and NGOs see as well?

Respect Vapers says it's time for a united approach, using all options available for smokers to quit with a real and achievable roadmap to a Tobacco Free Ireland'.

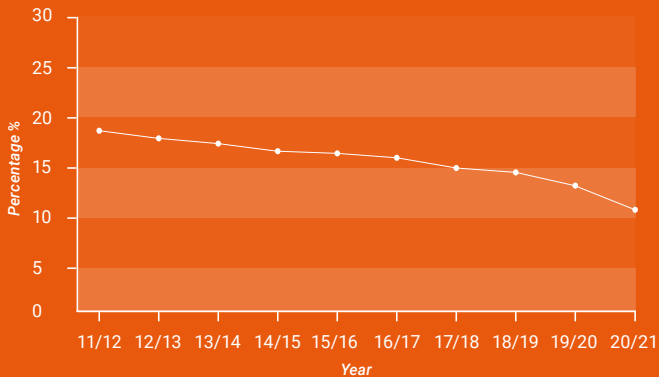
“We already see vaping being used by people as a tool to stop smoking and that actually enables us to push ahead with further activity to reduce down smoking because there is an alternative that works very successfully for people in order to quit smoking...We know that vaping is making a difference for those now in order to stop smoking. And so, it is an important tool”. ³⁴

— Jacinda Ardern
Prime Minister of New Zealand



New Zealand's Smoking rate reduction

Percentage of adults who were current smokers, 2011/12 - 2020/21



Source: New Zealand Ministry of Health, 'Annual Update of Key Results 2020/21

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The Real Roadmap to a Tobacco Free Ireland

Vaping products were relatively new when the Tobacco Free Ireland Report was released in 2013, and it was understandable that the then Government paid little attention to them within their 67-page plan, merely

stating that there was a "lack of sufficient evidence that they aid with smoking cessation" while referring to how consideration was ongoing at EU level as part of the Tobacco Products Directive.³⁵

That was almost a decade ago, and since then we have seen an abundance of new evidence showing that vaping is: 95% less harmful; far more effective than NRT in helping people to quit successfully; and

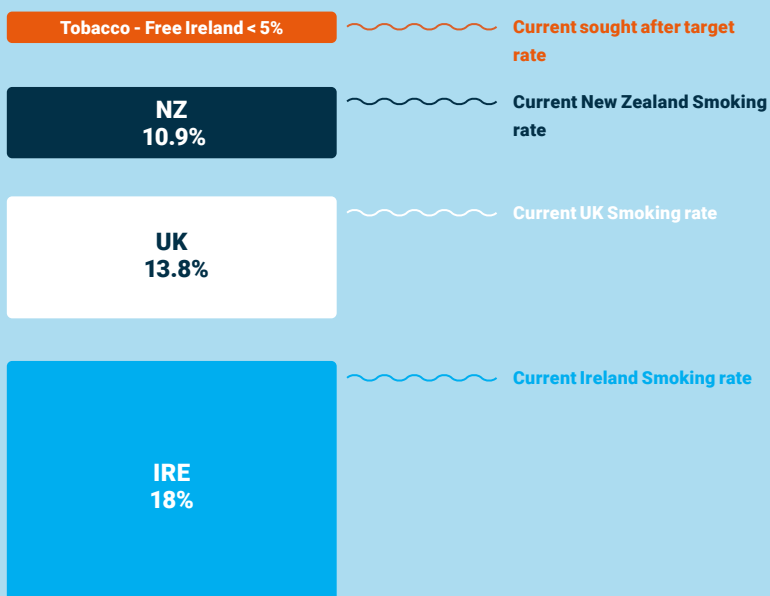
showing the overwhelming majority of vapers are current or ex-smokers.

The Government can no longer claim that they are waiting for evidence: the evidence is here, and it needs to accept it. Clearly, 200,000 vapers can't be wrong, and Irish people

hooked on smoking cannot afford for policymakers to continue to ignore the facts. What they need is a viable path to a 'Tobacco Free Ireland,' and this must involve promoting vaping as a viable option for quitting smoking.

To achieve a 5% smoking rate in the coming years,

we need a roadmap built around four pillars, which, taken together, will allow us to first reduce our smoking rate to that of neighbours in the UK (13.8%) before then reducing it further to the rate which exists in New Zealand (10.9%) on our way to reaching the much sought-after target of 5% or lower.



**Percentage of smoking reduction rates attainable using our four pillar approach*

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Our four pillar approach

1 Agree a Government position on vaping

- In other countries, politicians and health authorities provide clear and consistent messaging about the relative harm of smoking and vaping, and the effectiveness of vaping in helping smokers quit.
- In Ireland, the HSE and the Department of Health seem at odds - with a Department of Health official telling the Health Committee they would “welcome” smokers moving to vaping,³⁶ while the HSE says they cannot recommend this approach.³⁷
- From the Government down, the message needs to be the same: smokers should move to a far less harmful alternative.

2 Arm smokers with information

- The National Clinical Effectiveness Committee's National Clinical Guidelines on smoking should be strengthened to provide GPs and other health professionals with more facts on vaping, and why smokers should consider it as a viable option.
- The HSE Quit teams nationwide must be more assertive, not merely in supporting those who choose to use vaping, but in actively encouraging smokers

to consider this as an option.

- Success stories of those who used vaping to quit should be highlighted by the HSE's social media and in their media engagement more generally: even though far more people use vaping to quit compared to the number who use NRT, right now, these quitters are ignored.
- Advertising restrictions should be constructed to ensure that adult smokers can learn more about vaping and why it is enormously better than smoking.

3 Maintain the price difference between cigarettes and vaping

- Avoid introducing a vaping tax as this would be a misinformed step which would discourage people from using e-cigarettes.
- This would eliminate one of the best advantages of switching to vaping: as Respect Vapers has shown, by switching from smoking to vaping, the average smoker can generate annual savings of over €3,400.³⁸
- Instead of taxing vaping, the Government must ensure a significant cost differential between cigarettes and vaping is preserved in the coming years. Not only will this save vapers a great deal, but it will also encourage many more smokers to switch over to vaping.

4 Preserve the option of flavours

- Vapers want appropriate regulation on the sector, including an immediate ban on underage sales, which Respect Vapers has consistently called for.
- While stopping young people from ever accessing products which are meant for adult smokers, the Government should avoid any actions which would reduce the options for those looking for an alternative to smoking.
- For many smokers, the availability of flavoured vaping products is essential. Polling of Irish vapers shows that restrictions on flavours could lead to people going back to smoking or purchasing unregulated products from abroad or using dangerous home-made products.³⁹
- A recent large-scale study of vapers across the EU showed that almost 95% of vapers used at least one non-tobacco flavour.⁴⁰
- In the UK, where vaping has helped to bring about a sharp decline in smoking rates, fruit flavours are most popular with ex-smokers. Vapers need more options, not less.⁴¹

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