Take a health and harm minimisation approach to vaping: Young people's voices about the programs and services needed to prevent the uptake and continued use of e-cigarettes | November 2023

Acknowledgment of Country

Youth Action acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We understand that sovereignty was never ceded and recognise their continuing connection to lands, languages, waters, and cultures.

Our office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people. We recognise their traditional and ongoing Custodianship and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

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About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and the services that support them in NSW. We work towards a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged, valued, and have their rights realised. We represent over 150 Member organisations and regularly engage with young people and youth workers from all over the state, as we have for over 30 years.

We give a particular focus to young people who are regional, First Nations, LGBTIQA+, with disability, from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants and refugees, and doing it tough. We use a rights-based lens to focus on programs, policy and advocacy that achieve meaningful outcomes, embed strengths-based approaches, and are informed by data and evidence. We are an ally to the self-determination of First Nations communities, are led by the expertise of young people and the Sector, and work to be a trust-worthy partner and collaborator.

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Introduction

Youth Action welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to Inquiry into E-cigarette regulation and compliance in New South Wales. This submission is grounded in the voices and lived experiences of young people across New South Wales who we have heard from through our consultations.

Vaping use amongst young people in NSW is a recent phenomenon with young people and those working with them reporting it's prevalence amongst their peer group. It is important to note that the issue of smoking amongst young people has been the focus of health professionals for many years. There are many successful strategies in relation to reducing smoking use in young people that are applicable to use of e-cigarettes and vapes.

In preparation for this submission, we heard from 72 young people and 62 youth sector representatives across NSW who told us about their experiences and suggestions regarding vaping use amongst children and young people. The insights and quotations contained in this submission all came from young people and representatives from the youth sector that responded to our survey on e-cigarette use.

The recent Vaping Report released by the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People in NSW in October highlighted trends amongst young people regarding perceptions of vaping and why and why not young people choose to vape. It also highlighted several suggestions for regulatory reform and addiction support for young vapers.

This submission echoes the findings of the Office of the Advocate and

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responds to the terms of reference by detailing how current programs and services aimed at preventing uptake or continuing use of e-cigarettes can be improved.

Young people have crucial insights into how regulatory responses and support services to address vaping use and nicotine addiction can be best directed towards their peer group in helpful, accessible, and non-judgemental ways.

It is important for future solutions to consider the lived experiences of young people and the various possible solutions that they have identified. The young people that we have consulted with have identified a range of solutions ranging from addiction support and transforming the narrative around vaping through to harm reduction and the creation of effective anti-vaping campaigns.

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Key Recommendations

How young people want to learn about vaping

- Educational programs designed to deliver information about the health risks associated with vaping should use factual and accessible information without importing judgement about why someone might choose to use an e-cigarette product.

- Education about the health risks associated with e-cigarette use should include education about peer pressure, decision making and accessing addiction support in a manner that recognises the factors contributing to vaping use.

- Vaping education, harm reduction and addiction support can use emotive language and images to capture the attention of young audiences. Messaging and language that is tolerant of the reasons why young people vape and demonstrating an understanding of the difficulties they face in accessing support is more likely to engage young people.

- Educational programs and services designed to target vaping should employ values-based messaging to connect with young cohorts. Values based messaging can address factors such as peer pressure, independence and decision-making and reframing how young people view vaping. Young people say that the provision of factual information about risks associated with e-cigarette use is a more effective deterrent than shame-based messaging.

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- The design of any programs and services that seek to address the uptake or continued use of e-cigarette products must be co-designed with young people with lived experience.

Where to provide young people with information about vaping

- Programs and services aimed at preventing uptake or continuing use of e-cigarettes should utilise social media to reach young audiences through the dissemination of vaping education that is non-judgemental, youth led and that provides clear and accessible information and online resources that young people can access for support.
- A comprehensive school-wide strategy to address vaping is needed alongside the ban of e-cigarette products in NSW schools. This ought to include:
    - Updates to the curriculum to expand vaping education to include content on how vaping relates to peer pressure, the nature of addiction and how to access support alongside teaching on the health risks;
    - increased resourcing to support specialised guest speakers to speak at schools and run interactive workshops; and
    - The development of peer education programs where young people with lived expertise can talk to other young people about vaping.

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Support for young people to address e-cigarette use

- Comprehensive training for the youth sector is needed to build their capacity to address vaping in the young people they work with. This training needs to provide education on what e-cigarettes are and the health risks associated with using them, the nature of addiction, the withdrawal cycle and the consequences of long-term use. It also needs to extend to how youth workers can facilitate supportive conversations with young people regarding how to prioritise their health, deal with peer pressure, employ critical thinking in decision making, options for reducing or ceasing their use of vapes and how and where they can refer young people to youth friendly supports.

- Funding for the provision of youth specific alcohol and other drug support for those seeking help to reduce or cease their use of vapes needs to meet the demand of young people that currently and will in future require support for dependence on e-cigarette products. Young people emphasise that non-judgemental supports both in person and online are fundamental in creating a safe space in which they are prepared to address addiction and nicotine dependency. Access to this support will become critical in 2024, when legislation to restrict the import and sale of non-prescription e-cigarettes in NSW is enacted.

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Trends: where young people are currently learning about vaping and what information they need

Young people and vaping: where young people learn about e-cigarettes

The young people we heard from in preparation for this submission identified social media (62.5%) and teachers (58.3%) as their two main sources of information about vaping. 52% of young people also identified news outlets and 47.9% identified vaping campaigns and friends as a source of information. Other identified sources of information included siblings and family members, parents, youth workers, personal research online and at university.

What information young people need about vaping

The young people we surveyed identified that they had some knowledge about vaping but wanted to know more. They asked for information on:

- How to talk to other young people about the risks of vaping, how to reduce vaping use and alternatives to vaping (60.87%)
- The short and long-term harms associated with the use of vapes (60.87%)
- What is a vape, what it contains and what vaping does to the body (50%)
- How to access support for vaping and how to stop or reduce vaping (45.65%)

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- Information about the addictive nature of vaping use and how it can lead to other substance use (45.65%)
- Information about peer pressure and social vaping (43.48%)
- How to navigate the myths surrounding vaping (41.3%)
- How to find reliable information about vaping that is easy to understand (28.26%)

One respondent also identified that they feel young people are aware that vaping is harmful, but still struggle to navigate the perceived social requirement to engage in use of e-cigarettes. Others identified the need to support young people to understand harm reduction and how to reduce use of vapes if they do not intend to quit by introducing safer alternatives.

Why young people are vaping

Young people that vaped and young people that did not vape told us about their views on why they and their peers used e-cigarettes. There was a myriad of reasons, but they emphasised the use of vapes to fit in, relieve stress and the ease of access to e-cigarette products.

- Young people vape to fit in (85.11%)
- Young people vape to relieve stress (72.34%)
- Young people find vapes easy to access (70.21%)
- Young people see vaping as a non-harmful or less-harmful choice (59.57%)
- Young people don't have access to reliable and factual information about vaping and its' harms (40.43%)
- Young people use vapes as a way to quit smoking cigarettes (29.79%)

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Some young people also pointed out that for those experiencing difficult or abusive family circumstances or mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety or suicidality, vaping provides a way of dealing with the stress It was suggested that these young people might not care for the long-term impacts of vaping and are more concerned about finding coping strategies for their present situation.

Young people also felt the need to highlight that vaping was attractive where cigarettes were not, citing several factors including the price point, ease of access and that the many flavours provided an enjoyable experience, instead of the "gross" odour and feeling of smoking a cigarette.

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How young people want to learn about vaping

The young people we heard from were very clear that they were open to learn about vaping and the risks of e-cigarette use but felt alienated by messaging that was often judgemental and framed in a way that made them feel like they were being shamed.

Marketing that is non-judgemental or fear based

When asked about whether they had seen any anti-vaping messaging and whether that messaging was informative, several young people recalled short and memorable messaging that had an impact on them. Young people noted information they had seen about vapes that was straight to the point and attention grabbing without fearmongering. The types of messaging they found most impactful were examples such as the use of tobacco plain packaging in Australia. They felt that the graphic images on cigarette cartons would be an effective way to prompt young vapers to think about the adverse effects of e-cigarette use. Others gave examples of images and verbal descriptions of the health risks that had stuck with them.

"I saw a campaign on a bus that said 'vaping for 15 minutes is the equivalent of drinking a bottle of nail polish remover' that really struck me and I knew I never wanted to vape."

"I have seen ads on Facebook saying the chemicals what are in vapes. I found

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it helpful."

"The poster one, with a vape looking like toxic household items I think it's a great way."

"Show how people who used to vape suffer from severe health problems and show us the real, unfiltered consequences of vaping."

This kind of messaging was memorable to these young people as it included visuals alongside minimal but informative text that evoked an emotional response in these young respondents. However, the young people we heard from also explained that while this messaging affected them, they felt it was important that education around vaping remained non-judgemental.

"[Vaping education for young people] can feel condescending and belittling."

"The issue with public campaigns tends to be that they come off as harsh and accusatory (or at worst downright shaming the concerned parties, i.e. that horrid visceral fat campaign from a few years back...) However, the information is delivered, it needs to be sympathetic to affected young people as opposed to blunt and clinical."

Several young people highlighted that they felt that addiction support was missing from the campaigns and education they had seen around vaping. They pointed out that some young people might start vaping socially, but then develop addiction that is difficult to manage.

Youth workers also told us that they had many young people interested in learning about reducing vaping use, cessation strategies and accessing

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addiction support. Both youth workers and young people explained that they have noticed young people using cigarettes as a way to quit vaping as they are more expensive, less accessible and create a less pleasurable experience. For this reason, young people and the youth sector feel that addiction support needs to be targeted at young people and included in all education around vaping and e-cigarette use.

In [ACYP's recent report Young People's Perspectives on Vaping](), some young vapers said they would prefer to access online, or app-based support whereas other young vapers said that they would prefer in person supports. However, there was a consensus amongst these young people that vaping and addiction support should be youth specific and the workers they would like to talk to would include young workers roughly under the age of 35 and other young people with lived experience of addiction and vaping use. This means that specialised addiction support for young people seeking treatment for addiction and nicotine dependence should be designed in a way that is youth friendly and provides both online and in person supports so that all young people seeking support can access a program that is helpful to them.

Recommendations

- Educational programs designed to deliver information about the health risks associated with vaping should use factual and accessible information without importing a judgement about why someone might choose to use an e-cigarette product.
- Education about the health risks associated with e-cigarette use must include education about peer pressure, decision making and accessing

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addiction support in a manner that recognises the factors contributing to vaping use.

- Vaping education, harm reduction and addiction support can use emotive language and images to capture the attention of young audiences and keep them engaged through messaging and language that understands the reasons why young people vape in a manner that acknowledges the difficulties young people might have in accessing support and in being prepared to reduce their e-cigarette use.

- Funding is needed to create free and accessible addiction support programs tailored to young people in the form of online and app-based support as well as in person addiction counselling and support groups. These supports need to employ young workers and young people with lived experience that are specifically trained to support young people dealing with addiction.

Values based messaging and transforming the narrative

Current approaches to e-cigarette education that comes across as accusatory or shaming risks alienating young audiences. Values-based messaging taps into the values that young people already hold like caring for their health, fitting in amongst their peers and having concern for the environment. Young people want to see messaging that is delivered with empathy and an understanding of factors such as mental health, peer pressure, perceived social expectations and addiction. Doing so will create an environment conducive to willing participation in education around e-cigarette use.

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"Just giving out information won't do anything. You have to call for action and grab the attention of vapers first and then help them to stop including information on vaping but mostly ways to quit the use of vapes and e-cigarettes."

They felt like the information they had received focused too much on stating that vaping was bad, without actually engaging them in discussions around the genuine health risks and the way that vaping has become a perceived social expectation in many settings.

"Take a step back and not see it as a 'bad thing' or a 'troublesome thing' - and look into why they do it? The psychology behind it and what might happening in their lives that may lead to the attraction of vaping."

Values based messaging would circumvent this issue by conveying information about vaping that is more likely to resonate with a young audience. The young people we spoke to had several ideas about how values-based messaging could better connect to a young audience.

Peer pressure

Several respondents felt that it was most important to speak to young people about peer pressure and decision making.

"A lot of the time people see it as cool, or they see their mates doing it, hence why they start."

"Coolness and looking tough is why young people take it up, similarly to how they did the same thing with cigarettes historically."

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"It has a lot to do with peer pressure and a social need to fit in."

In particular, young people identified the issues surrounding vaping being seen as a 'cool' behaviour that is necessary to fit in. As a result, e-cigarette education needs to give young people the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of how peer pressure is exerted and that pressure to conform to social norms is a challenge that can be met with the development of skills such as assertiveness, decision-making and emotional resilience. Programs and services that are designed to prevent uptake or continued use of vapes must provide young people with the opportunity to both understand peer pressure and to foster an ability to self-empower and have confidence in decision-making throughout their lives.

Independence and decision making

Young people emphasised that vaping education that focuses purely on the harms of vaping can make them feel stripped of their independence, as they feel they are being told what to do without any respect for why they might feel the need to vape in the first place.

> *"[Education needs to place] an emphasis on being informed on all sides as opposed to just saying 'don't do this or you'll die,' This will encourage more thoughtful behaviour because it provides young people with the information and lets them decide what to do on that basis."*

Young people want to feel that they have agency over their own lives and decisions. While all young people must learn how to balance risk and reward in decision making, many feel that they are not given the space to do so when

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they are delivered messaging that unequivocally tells them not to vape. Instead, young people would like to see vaping education that respects their independence and capacity to make informed decisions.

With regard to e-cigarette education, this can look like framing that gives young people the facts about vaping, alongside the aforementioned discussions on peer pressure and decision making. This opens the possibility for e-cigarette education to come across as motivating and encouraging, rather than as judgemental. It will equip young people with unbiased information about the health risks of vaping and build their capacity to make informed and independent decisions.

Reframing how young people see vaping

Values based messaging could be used to tap into how young people see vaping, by inviting them to think critically about how their values impact their decision making. The young people we heard from identified that while they and many of their peers were starting to understand the health risks, they did not necessarily understand issues such as the potential for serious long term health issues, broader public health implications and the environmental impact caused by disposable e-cigarette products.

Many young people explained that they felt that e-cigarette education and anti-vaping messaging needed to prioritise its attention on reframing the narrative that vaping is 'cool' and holds social capital. Some young people spoke about how vaping maintains a mystique around it, due to its newness and the lack of clarity around its illegality.

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"Information about the long and short-term risks of vaping is not sufficient to get people to stop vaping: many young people vape because it's considered illicit/pseudo illicit which gives it a mystique around it."

Other young people spoke about how vaping does not carry the same stigma as smoking amongst their young peers and that myths around vaping should be debunked so that their peers could understand that vaping was also dangerous and harmful. They felt that education could debunk the perceived social attractiveness of vaping and draw parallels between cigarettes and e-cigarettes.

"Young people are always concerned about their image, so by making vaping seem 'uncool' or makes them feel like outsiders, could greatly reduce vaping rates."

"I think the separation drawn between it and smoking makes people feel better to vape over smoking rather than outright just avoiding it, so I think they need to either be taught to have the same or similar effects or treated as completely different to avoid to idea that it's okay to vape because it's not smoking."

"Making it a stigma like cigarette smoking would help, and increasing prices or reducing availability of vapes."

"Vaping must be characterised as the most boring, bland and distasteful thing in order to kill off any romanticism around it, thus making it unappealing for young people."

Some young people also suggested that it would be worthwhile to expand

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vaping programs and services to invite young people to recognise the environmental impact caused by disposable vapes.

> *"The most useful way for young people to be given information about vaping would be educating on the immediate effects of vaping and also pointing out the environmental issues regarding single use/discardable vapes."*

While young people might still experience peer pressure, this kind of values-based messaging could encourage them to weigh up these other factors in their decision making.

Recommendations

- Educational programs and services designed to target vaping should employ values-based messaging and be co-designed with young people with lived experience of vaping use. This is necessary alongside the provision of factual information on risks associated with-cigarette use to counterbalance the way that young people already feel shamed by messaging they have received about vaping. Values based messaging can address factors such as peer pressure, independence and decision-making and reframing how young people view vaping.

Utilise Youth Led and Peer Education Models

The young people we heard from were clear that programs and services preventing the uptake or continued use of e-cigarettes must be designed and led by young people themselves.

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Young people told us that they were more likely to listen to and trust their peers, particularly other young people who had used e-cigarettes. These young people spoke about how hearing from young people that had used vapes and understood the relevant social context in which vaping occurs would be useful.

> *"Tell people's stories - from a vaper's experience. It is a lot to do with peer pressure and a social need to fit in."*

> *"Young people trust other young people … because they trust that other young people have their best interests in mind."*

> *"I would argue that the best way to deter is to let young people speak first and foremost on their experiences."*

They also said that this would be the only way that education could genuinely target issues such as peer pressure and addiction in a way that is likely to connect with young audiences. Young people that have experience with vaping are able to talk to other young people with empathy and without judgement.

Recommendations

- The design of any programs and services that seek to address the uptake or continued use of e-cigarette products must be co-designed with young people with lived experience.

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Where to provide young people with information about vaping

Social Media

The young people we heard from identified social media as the most effective means by which they could learn about vaping. They suggested that as young people already have vast exposure to social media, it would be a good place for information to be made available to their demographic.

The young people we heard from identified that platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, are easily accessible to them and their peers. Most adolescents and young adults are active on one or more of these platforms, allowing educative materials and harm reduction messaging to reach a larger audience. This enables young people to access the information they need without having to navigate research that might contain misinformation, or without necessarily wanting to learn about the harms associated with vaping.

> *"Social media is an indirect way to impact those that it is targeted at while the individual is in a safe space and has the choice to accept the information or scroll past."*

> *"Social media [would be the most useful way for young people to be given information about vaping] as it is a major part of our generation and most likely everyone would have access to it."*

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Social media also has the benefit of providing bite size pieces of education, without necessarily overwhelming the user with information. This is done in a way that is visual and often interactive, allowing the young user to engage more deeply with the message and remember its impact. As outlined in the preceding section, young people identified that they felt that messaging ought to evoke a non-judgemental, emotional response to encourage young people to consider changing their vaping habit.

Programs and services can use social media to disseminate information about the harms of vaping and support for quitting, by using short form video or visual post format on platforms like Instagram and TikTok to evoke this emotional response and provide a link for the user to find more information.

One respondent identified that while educational programs at school are important, some vapers will "switch off" or not want to engage in learning about the harms of vaping due to social pressures. Social media therefore provides an opportunity to reach those young people while also providing them with an opportunity to learn more about the health risks and avenues for reducing or ceasing e-cigarette use. It can also embed links to web-based supports or direct users to information pages that show them how they can access free and in-person support in their community. Previous strategies undertaken to address young people's use of cigarette through health promotion and addiction support has proved successful in reducing smoking in young people. [The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#) reports that in 2019 (before the emergence of vaping in Australia), 97% of young people aged between 14 and 17 years had never smoked. Further, the rate of young people that had smoked tobacco in 2019 aged 18 to 24 that had never smoked raised

to 80% from 51% in 2001. This demonstrates the efficacy of targeted education and support over time to reduce uptake of smoking products.

> *"Social media [is useful], from experience when educational programs are presented at schools even those who need the information will avoid it to fit in."*

While some young people identified that they felt aware of the harms associated with vaping, those young people that wanted more information pointed out that it is difficult to navigate misinformation about e-cigarettes. Educational programs promoted through social media provide an opportunity for simplicity and clarity around some myths and assumptions about how vaping is not harmful or 'less harmful' than cigarettes. Visual content can simplify complex information, making it easier for young people to understand the dangers of vaping. Clear visuals can convey key messages in a straightforward and concise manner. Links to websites designed for young people can be included for those users that want to learn more.

As discussed in the preceding section, young people spoke about the peer pressure and requirement for social conformity that contribute to use of e-cigarettes. As young people wish to see themselves in vaping education campaigns, social media provides a platform where peers can influence each other. Young people told us that they often trust and relate more to their peers and social media influencers than authoritative figures or institutions.

> *"Media by young people for young people is better consumed by young people than corporatised media from either enterprises or governments."*

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When a friend or an influencer shares content related to vaping, it carries a level of credibility and authenticity that official sources may lack. Many young people emphasised that peer-driven content is seen as more relatable, honest and less-judgemental.

Social media is a powerful platform for messaging around vaping, targeting young people due to its unparalleled reach and ability to leverage peer influence. This allows these campaigns to effectively disseminate critical messages about the risks of vaping, available supports and pathways to reducing use of e-cigarettes, while providing information to young people in a way that they want to receive it.

School programs

The young people we heard from also identified that school was a setting in which they were open to learn about vaping. They told us that they would appreciate more comprehensive attention given to e-cigarettes and their harms in their PDHPE syllabus, through interactive workshops and guest speakers, as well as through peer education.

Curriculum changes

Young people and the youth sector highlighted the need for education to start very early, as children at primary school level have started accessing vapes and engaging in the habit. It was stressed that education about vaping must be persistent, detailed and carry right through schooling from primary school and throughout high school.

> *"Support needs to start in primary schools."*

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"There needs to be awareness of the harms because I have seen primary school aged children engaging to be seen as cool without understanding the ramifications."

"[It needs to be included] in the PDHPE curriculum with smoking. [We also need to be given] updates about new information that is discovered about vaping, as new research is done."

At different year levels, the curriculum can evolve to match the developmental stages and knowledge levels of students. For younger students, the focus might be on understanding the concept of vaping, recognising vape devices, and differentiating between vaping and smoking. As students' progress through their education, the curriculum can delve deeper into the specific health consequences, such as lung damage, addiction, and the role of flavoured e-cigarettes in attracting young users.

Young people also emphasised that they wanted the curriculum to address the social factors that surround vaping as a phenomenon. In particular, they felt it would be important to address the marketing tactics employed by vaping companies to target young demographics, understanding the nature of peer pressure and how they can navigate perceived social requirements to engage in behaviours such as vaping. Workshops and discussion on topics such as media literacy and critical thinking would be helpful to accompany learning around the health and wellbeing aspects of e-cigarette use and nicotine addiction.

Interactive workshops

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The young people we heard from emphasised that hearing from guest speakers and participating in interactive workshops at school was an engaging way to learn about topics such as vaping, alcohol and drug use. They felt that this kind of opportunity would be a more dynamic way to learn than just through presentations on e-cigarette use.

> *"Interactive workshops or seminars at school [would be good], rather than just being talked at, students usually engage better when we have something to do and generally it is more memorable."*

> *"[I like] educational programs at school, a speaker with personality and also a young person so there is [more of a relationship between the students and the speaker]."*

Some young people named speakers that had come to their school who were proficient at relating to young people in a non-judgemental manner, but that brought an element of credibility and expertise. Not only did young people tell us that hearing from guest speakers was more engaging, but they felt that being involved to ask questions and engage in discussion shifted the focus away from an authoritarian tone that merely instructed young people not to do something.

> *"[I would like to see] an external talker come in with interactive games and programs regarding the harms of vaping."*

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Peer education

Young people are experts on their own experiences and have capacity to relate this experience to their peers. As outlined above, young people want to hear from other young people who had used e-cigarettes and understand the social context in which e-cigarette use occurs. Involving young people with lived expertise has the potential to create a safe and non-judgemental environment where open dialogue and questions are encouraged.

> *"[It should come] from fellow students, educating students through schools so that they can educate others."*

There was a consensus among young people that this would be relatable and help them to connect with the genuine impacts of vaping by seeing it in another young person, while also hearing about how that young person accessed support.

> *"I would argue that the best way to deter is to let young people speak first and foremost on their experiences - positive, negative and mixed."*

> *"Tell people's stories- from a vaper's experience."*

> *"Involve people with lived experience."*

Recommendations

- Programs and services aimed at preventing uptake or continuing use of e-cigarettes should utilise social media to reach young audiences through the dissemination of vaping education that is non-judgemental,

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youth led and that provides clear and accessible information and online resources that young people can access for support.

- A comprehensive school-wide strategy to address vaping is needed alongside the ban of e-cigarette products in NSW schools. This ought to include:
  - o Updates to the curriculum to expand vaping education to include content on how vaping relates to peer pressure, the nature of addiction and how to access support alongside teaching on the health risks;
  - o Young people will benefit from increased funding to support specialised guest speakers to speak at schools and run interactive workshops; and
  - o The development of peer education programs where young people with lived expertise can talk to other young people about vaping.

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Support for young people to address e-cigarette use

Supporting young people through addiction and using referral pathways

Youth workers explained that when they talk to young people about vaping, they are having conversations about how nicotine affects the brain, the withdrawal cycle, issues around nicotine poisoning and strategies young people can use to reduce or quit. However, there was consensus amongst the youth workers we heard from that there were not adequate resources or services that they could refer young people to that would support them to reduce or quit the use of vapes.

> *"[The youth sector can facilitate] curious conversations with young people who vape and be a liaison to support options."*

Some youth workers were aware that they could refer young people to the Quitline, but others weren't sure what resources would be appropriate to refer a young person to for vaping specifically. To remedy this, youth workers explained that they needed training directly from health promotion officers or youth drug and alcohol clinicians around how they can proactively respond to young people dealing with addiction that are seeking support to reduce their use of e-cigarette products.

Youth workers need to know where they can refer young people for individualised support, outside of just recommending that the young person

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speak to their GP. Some youth workers also identified that they were well placed to be supporting young people to learn about how to manage addiction to nicotine and had helped young people to design a plan to reduce and ultimately quit e-cigarette use. These youth workers felt that widespread training as to how they could offer this kind of support would be beneficial throughout the sector.

How to facilitate safe conversations with young people around vaping

Many youth workers told us that they are already having conversations with young people about the health risks associated with the use of e-cigarette products. Members of the youth sector told us that they regularly have conversations with young people on the impact of vapes on the body, short- and long-term health risks, alcohol and other drug dependency and where they can access information and support.

> *"[I have talked to young people about] why they vape, how long they have vaped for, how they access vapes, do their parents know, have they considered quitting, do they know what effects vaping has on them."*

> *"[I am having] regular conversations about the (harmful) effects of vaping, conducted during streetwork and/or outreach."*

However, it was clear that some youth workers still felt unequipped to have these discussions as they were not clear on the information themselves. The young people they had spoken to often communicated that they believed vapes to be less dangerous than cigarettes and youth workers wanted more

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training to be able to dispel these kinds of myths, and to provide factual information and referral to youth friendly services, supports and resources.

"Youth workers need to be educated on vaping themselves so they can open up the conversation in a preventive way."

Harm minimisation

Several of the youth workers that spoke to us acknowledged that many of the young people they worked with that vaped were not yet prepared to quit. Some youth workers and young people also acknowledged that for some, vaping was a means to self-medicate unmanaged mood disorders such as anxiety and depression.

"Many young people are wanting to stop vaping but are finding it difficult to so I'll speak with them about cessation strategies. However most young people I see aren't open to cessation and do not identify this as an issue to work on in therapy."

Other young people might not understand what the health risks or they may not be aware of the health risks but continue to vape due to perceived social expectations or addiction.

"The young people I work with know about the health impacts and have heard a 'don't do it' message so often. They need motivation to reduce harm and decide whether they want to quit or not, vape or not." – youth worker

For this reason, youth workers wanted support to understand harm minimisation techniques that they could use to speak to young people about

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reducing their use of vapes, exploring safer alternatives, setting usage limits and understanding the contents of e-liquids. Youth workers could also benefit from training that would help them to facilitate discussions around how to recognise and respond to peer pressure and creating a safe and non-judgemental environment for young people to talk about vaping.

Online and in-person supports for young people seeking support for nicotine addiction

Preventing the continued use of e-cigarette products with young people should include the provision of specialised alcohol and other drug (AOD) support.

These specialised support services are already equipped with the skills to address vaping in young people but will need the capacity to address the number of young people that wish to seek support for dependency on e-cigarette products. If education around the harms and long-term consequences to vaping use becomes successful in motivating young users to reduce or cease their habit, more young people will need accessible and affordable access to addiction support.

Youth Action's Health Literacy Project recently hosted an expert panel in relation to vaping and e-cigarette use amongst young people. Na Joomelah, an Indigenous Smoking program run by the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council, identified that education from primary to high school on the effects of vaping can equip young First Nations people to make informed decisions about their health. They run programs with young people that break down vaping,

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explain what a vape contains and discuss the effects of vaping on the body. They identified that many young people wanted to understand this so that they had the literacy to be able to discuss vaping with their family and peers.

Meanwhile, the Ted Noffs Foundation, one of Australia's largest providers of drug treatment, spoke about the concurrent use of vapes and other substances amongst the young people using their services. They suggested that treatment and support solutions should incorporate straight-forward information in a manner that is non-judgemental. They have identified that the best way to help young people to address addiction is to create opportunities for them to be able to talk to a trusted person in a balanced way and that respects the factors that underly use of e-cigarette products.

Communication channels where young people are not just faced with fear-based messaging that instructs them to stop vaping can be replaced with opportunities for young people to have positive and encouraging conversations about use of e-cigarettes. This aligns with what we heard from young people in our consultations, that they would like to access education and support that is understanding and empathetic.

As discussed above, ACYP's recent report on Young People's Perspectives on Vaping showed that young people would like access to both in person and online support. The youth AOD sector is best equipped to design this support but will need capacity and access to be able to provide support to the growing number of young people that are using and developing a dependence on e-cigarette products. Specialised addiction support is not known to many young vapers, and attention is needed to direct those young people to their preferred

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method of seeking treatment, whether that be through an online resource or app-based assistance, or through in person counselling and support groups. Existing methods designed to help people to quit smoking cigarettes, such as the Quitline have worked well to nearly eradicate the uptake of cigarette smoking amongst young people. Similar supports are needed to target vaping.

Recommendations

- Comprehensive training for the youth sector is needed to build their capacity to address vaping in the young people they work with. This training needs to provide education on what e-cigarettes are and the health risks associated with using them, the nature of addiction, the withdrawal cycle and the consequences of long-term use. It also needs to extend to how youth workers can facilitate supportive conversations with young people regarding how to prioritise their health, deal with peer pressure, employ critical thinking in decision making, options for reducing or ceasing their use of vapes and how and where they can refer young people to youth friendly supports.

- Funding for the provision of youth specific alcohol and other drug support for those seeking help to reduce or cease their use of vapes needs to meet the demands of young people that currently and will in future require support for dependence on e-cigarette products. Young people emphasise that non-judgemental supports both in person and online are fundamental in creating a safe space in which they are prepared to address addiction and nicotine dependency.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing vaping among young people requires a multifaceted approach that combines various strategies and leverages the power of empathy, understanding, and engagement. The sections explored in this submission, including the use of emotive marketing, values-based messaging, co-designing programs with young people who have lived experience, disseminating information through social media and schools, providing support for the youth sector and establishing widespread and accessible AOD support targeted to young vapers, collectively form a comprehensive framework for tackling the issue.

Youth Action would like to emphasise that the solutions outlined in this submission came from young people and the services that support them. Effective action on vaping will listen to young people, incorporate their insights, and invite them to actively participate in the design, development and implementation of vaping programs and supports.

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