

Protecting young people from illicit vaping

Seizing and testing vaping devices to protect young people from serious health risks caused by illicit substance harm.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Evaluated locally
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Public Protection, Safeguarding & Vulnerability Anti-social behaviour Drugs and alcohol offences
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Region	North West
Partners	Police Community safety partnership Education Health services Local authority
Stage of implementation	The practice is at a pilot stage.

Key details

Start date	October 2024
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people General public Victims

Aim

The aim of the initiative is to:

- determine whether there is an illicit problem with young people vaping
- protect vulnerable young people from illicit vaping
- prevent continued substance use through effective safeguarding and diversion strategies
- mitigate the long-term health consequences for young people

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes are to:

- increase the education offering of illicit vaping in schools
- enhance the intelligence to identify who are responsible for the supply of illicit vapes
- improve the safeguarding for young people using illicit vapes
- reduce the number of young people using illicit vapes
- reduce the risk of young people being exploited

Description

In 2023 Lancashire Constabulary experienced a significant rise in the number of young people using illicit vapes. While vaping among young people often goes unchallenged, illicit vaping devices contain substances such as tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), spice, or ketamine which can cause serious health risks to young people.

Lancashire Constabulary were unable to conduct an initial review of whether there was a problem with young people illicit vaping due to limited evidence and statistics. The Pennine Community Safety Partnership (CSP) approached the force's problem-solving command team after recognising that schools, local authorities, and community alcohol networks identified illicit vaping as being a prevalent issue. Additionally, several schools had reported incidents of hospitalisation due to vaping. This raised concerns that vaping devices containing harmful substances were being illegally supplied to young people.

The force also identified a correlation between illicit vaping and incidents of anti-social behaviour (ASB), leading to concerns for the health of young people and community safety. Intelligence from the force revealed a shift in how drug dealers were advertising their operations, with more of focus on reaching young people through social media platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat. Intelligence suggested drug dealers were promoting vapes allegedly laced with THC at low prices, though the actual substance was often the synthetic cannabinoid, spice.

Lancashire Constabulary recognised there was a lack of testing for illicit substances in vapes. The force typically only tested devices during criminal investigations involving identifiable offenders, which were rare. Trading standards, schools, and local authorities also had limited means to test seized items and often destroyed them. Testing is essential to understand the substances in the vape devices and to deliver an effective response to deter young people from using them.

The CSP had seen an interview from the University of Bath on how illicit vaping was becoming more prevalent in schools. While conducting researching the illicit vaping industry, the university had developed a testing kit capable of accurately identifying substances contained within vapes. The force contacted the university to discuss the impact illicit vaping has on young people. The university offered to test vape devices for the force free of charge as part of their research.

Lancashire Constabulary approached schools within a town, with the intention to deliver a two-week period of action to seize and test any vapes brought into school. The schools were supportive, recognising the scale of the issue and five agreed to take part throughout February 2025. During this period, any student found with a vape would have it seized, and the school would hand it over to the police for testing. Parents were informed in advance, and this condition was made clear as part of school entry requirements for the month. The force anticipated receiving between 200-300 vapes by the end of February 2025.

In March 2025, Lancashire Constabulary collected the vapes from the schools and transported them to the University of Bath, for testing the following day. During the testing, liquid was extracted from all submissions via destructive sampling of the e-cigarettes, with hardware being retained for further inspection.

Evaluation

An evaluation is being planned to assess the impact of the intervention, led jointly by Lancashire Constabulary and the University of Bath. While the evaluation plan is being developed, initial methods will include regular meetings with the schools, the CSP and community alcohol partnerships to monitor trends in vaping among young people.

The aim of the evaluation will be to measure changes in behaviour and understand the underlying reasons why young people are engaging in vaping.

Overall impact

In March 2025, 215 seized vaping devices were tested:

- 153 (71%) of the vapes were refillable/liquid vapes
- 63 (29%) contained controlled substances
- 95% of positive samples were found in the refillable vapes or liquid vapes

The findings from the testing provided a valuable insight into the scale of young people using illicit vapes. This enabled the force to plan an appropriate response.

A broader, force-wide testing phase is being considered to determine the scale of the issue across different areas. Lancashire County Council has expressed interest in the results, and the force intends to hold further discussions regarding a potential force-wide rollout.

Learning

- It was important for the force to work closely with schools, to provide support and reassurance around the safe handling of vaping devices.
- The schools have raised concerns about how to safely store and retain confiscated vapes. To address this, Lancashire Partnership Against Crime (LANPAC), provided flammable bags for secure storage. Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service also offered guidance and reassurance to

schools upon the provision of the bags.

- Some school staff were initially not confident to stop students and confiscate vapes. In response, the force offered online drop-in sessions to help explain the aims of the initiative and how it would work in practice. This also enabled headteachers to share the messaging with staff and support them in carrying out the initiative.

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