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Use of Vapes and Nicotine Products by Young People and Adolescents: Statements

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An Ceann Comhairle

I call the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, to make a statement under Standing Order 56.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor)

I am pleased to address the House as Minister of State with special responsibility for public health, well-being and the national drugs strategy. I will talk about vaping and the use of other nicotine products by our young people and what the Government is doing about this public health challenge. Every day, I hear from parents, teachers and coaches who worry about how many of our children are vaping. Residents and Tidy Towns organisations also see the proliferation of vape shops in our towns and villages and the litter caused by disposable vapes. Before we discuss newer products such as vapes, we must remember that the nicotine product that remains the biggest single health threat to our young people is combustible tobacco. Cigarette smoking is both addictive and lethal. According to international analysis, it remains the biggest single risk factor driving disability. In our country the life expectancy of a smoker is on average ten years shorter than that of a person who has never smoked. Our own data tells us that smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke kills more than 12 of our people every day. Smoking during childhood and adolescence causes reduced lung function. There is evidence it increases the risk of developing psychoactive disorders in later life.

There is a long and proud tradition in Ireland across all political parties of introducing strong tobacco control measures. That started with our world-famous workplace smoking ban, introduced in 2004 by the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin. Successive Governments have built on that and achieved a further driving down of our smoking rates. Our most recent measures include a ban on the sale of cigarettes at events aimed at children, from vending machines and from pop-up shops. We have also increased to 21 the minimum legal age of sale of tobacco products. This will come into effect in 2028. We have made much progress but we cannot rest on our laurels. The prevalence

of smoking among children was a frightening 19% in 2002 but it is now less than 5% according to the 2022 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study. This reduction is very welcome. However, we want that figure to be zero. Our children should be free from a future blighted by the harms of tobacco.

The data on our adolescents is more worrying. The European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs survey assesses the health behaviours of our 15- and 16-year-olds. The 2024 survey showed that one in eight in that age group reported that they are smokers. The objective of our national tobacco control policy, Tobacco Free Ireland, is to reduce our smoking rates to less than 5% of our population. The principles underpinning that policy are that this is not a normal activity and that we should not have this for our children. This is about the protection of our children.

We are currently revising that policy to examine further measures we can take finally to eliminate the enormous burden on our health system caused by tobacco. A Bill that is currently being brought through the UK Parliament will create a smoke-free generation by banning the sale of tobacco to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009. We will examine all possible options, including groundbreaking measures like the UK approach. In the context of the devastation caused by smoking, e-cigarettes and other nicotine products represent a reduction. There is a general scientific consensus that they are less harmful than smoking. It is important to stress that outside of the possible benefits for a smoker, there is nothing good about these products. For our young people, these products do nothing other than deliver nicotine and addictive drugs. The primary risk of these products is that the use of nicotine may become an addiction that will result in tobacco smoking and the harm that can cause people.

Since 2014, the World Health Organization has recommended that the sale of e-cigarettes to minors be prohibited. This is because of the evidence of potential long-term consequences for brain development in adolescents caused by nicotine exposure. Our own Health Research Board evidence review from 2020 found that adolescents who vape are more likely to smoke. E-cigarettes or vapes have been regulated at EU level since 2014 under the EU tobacco products directive, which was transposed into Irish law by regulation in 2016. These regulations imposed many restrictions on vapes. Health warnings advertising that e-cigarettes contain nicotine, which is a highly addictive substance, are mandatory on packaging.

The regulations also include a limit on the maximum nicotine concentration allowed for vapes containing nicotine and require manufacturers or importers to notify the HSE of all products that they place on the market. The advertisement of e-cigarettes on television, radio and online is also prohibited. These are some of the measures in EU law and we have since added to that with our own laws to further strengthen the regulation of vapes.

I acknowledge the work of my colleague, the former Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, who also played a role in this. The Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Act 2023 introduced a range of measures to further protect

our young people. The most important was a ban on the sale of nicotine vapes to under-18s. That law also prohibited their sale by retail workers under the age of 18, with an exception for small family-run businesses. The Act banned the advertising of these products in cinemas, in or within 200 m of a school, on public transport and in taxis. These measures were designed to further limit children's exposure to messages normalising or glamorising the use of vapes and to support the ban on their sale to under-18s. The Act also reduced the types of outlets that could sell these products. From next week, vapes will no longer be sold from vending machines, which is important. It is a big step for us to ensure that happens. The sale of these products at events that are aimed at children is banned and their sale from pop-up shops or stalls that might appear at festivals will be banned from 2026. It is critical that we break the link between the sale of these products and events that our young people enjoy.

The annual licence system for the retail sale of vapes and tobacco products under the Act reflects the seriousness of these products. It will provide our enforcement authority, the national environmental health service, with up-to-date information on businesses in operation. That requirement will come into effect for all retailers of these products in February 2026. A minimum suspension period will apply to retailers that are convicted of offences.

On the use of nicotine vapes, the 2022 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study found that 19% of 12- to 17-year-olds had used one and 13% reported that they had used one in the past 30 days. These responses date from before the ban on their sale to minors was introduced so that measure will likely reduce the number. However, we must be realistic. There are other ways that our children can access these products. The European schools project on alcohol and drugs, dating from 2024, demonstrates this. Some 32% of our 15- and 16-year-olds have tried vapes. Some 16% stated they are current users and 7% reported daily use. These numbers are unacceptable and one of my priorities, as the Minister of State with responsibility for public health, is to take whatever action we can to bring them down to zero. The Government is determined to tackle this issue. We do not want our children using nicotine.

We can all understand how a child might be attracted to vapes, with their colourful appearance, attractive flavours, flavour names and the variety on display in our ordinary grocery shops and newsagents. I do not think it is an overstatement to say that these products are the revenge of the tobacco industry. That is why I look forward to bringing forward legislation with the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, which we are currently working on, to address the aspects of vapes that can be attractive to young people. That law will be in two Bills on the advice of Office of the Attorney General. The public health (single-use vapes) Bill will ban the sale of all single-use or disposable vapes. That Bill is at an advanced stage of drafting and is prioritised for publication in this term. The removal of these low-price products should reduce their availability for our children, as well as addressing the huge environmental issue caused by their disposal.

The public health (tobacco products and nicotine-inhaling products) (amendment) Bill will restrict the colours and imagery on the packaging and on the devices themselves to make them less attractive to our children. It will also ban devices resembling products such as toys to ensure that the Irish market does not see the evolution of vapes into a multiuse device that specifically attracts our children. The Bill will also restrict the flavours for sale and prohibit all flavour descriptors other than the basic names so as to eliminate the marketing potential of child-friendly flavours. The Bill will ban the point-of-sale display and advertising of these products in our shops so that our children are not exposed to vapes in their everyday life and they are not seen as ordinary grocery goods. This Bill is also at an advanced stage of drafting and prioritised for publication in this term. These measures cannot come quickly enough and I looking forward to doing my part to ensure that this legislation is enacted as soon as possible and to have the support of this House.

Nicotine pouches are a relatively new product. The evidence is not clear yet on their potential health harms but we know that they contain nicotine, which is an addictive substance. However, they have become very visible here in the past two years and are marketed heavily. The use of these products remains low, with an overall 1% of adults currently using them, but I acknowledge that use is highest among the cohort of those aged from 15 to 24, at 3%. They are used by 3% of current smokers and 2% of former smokers. The results from the European school project on alcohol and other drugs in 2024 show that 3.7% of 15- to 16-year-olds are currently using nicotine pouches, with 7.6% having used them at some point. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is giving ongoing consideration to the possible approaches to the regulation of nicotine pouches. Introducing laws on these products has already been discussed at EU level in the context of discussions on a revised tobacco products directive.

An EU-wide public consultation was carried out in 2023 to gain views on regulations on novel products, such as nicotine pouches. The range of tobacco products is always expanding and this is a problem for us. We must be effective, and the Minister is working on this, in ensuring we introduce a revised tobacco products directive as soon as possible and for that proposal to cover all new nicotine products, such as pouches, in order to protect our young people.

I will take the opportunity to address the issue of HHC, which is a significant problem. Many Deputies were in touch with me about the HHC content of vapes being sold nationwide. HHC was classified as a controlled drug through an order of the Government on 29 July last. HHC is now incorporated into the misuse of drugs legislation framework as a schedule 1 controlled drug, which is the strictest level of control. A lot of work is being done. As a result of the use of HHC, we have seen hospitalisations and psychotic episodes. Many people are struggling with addiction as a result of this and similar drugs. As the Minister of State with responsibility for the national drugs strategy, I would like to reassure parents who may be worried about their children and the impact of HHC. Help and support are available. I urge parents to use the HSE's excellent resource on [drugs.ie](https://www.drugs.ie), the parents' guide to alcohol and drugs. It provides factual information and advice on talking to children about the risks

associated with illicit drugs. The HSE will also host a webinar in the coming weeks entitled, "Vaping products and psychoactive substances: what you should know as a parent." This event will provide information on HHC and is designed to support parents and guardians who are concerned about vaping and emerging drug trends among young people.

It will also provide information on prevention strategies and discuss the role of parents in guiding healthy decisions. These are really important to me. In the budget negotiations, I will be seeking funding for programmes targeted specifically at children on the dangers of vaping and nicotine use and that can be controlled nationwide and run through sports and youth clubs and local authorities. I will give an example. In my own area, I attended the launch of the Not Around Us campaign, which was developed by schoolchildren in Carlow-Kilkenny alongside the local councils and through the Sláintecare Healthy Communities programme. The message of the children was clear. They want to people to consider the impact of their smoking and vaping on them as children. It is also a matter of second-hand smoking. Smoking should not be normalised. What we are really saying about vaping is that it should not to be seen as glamorous or normal. I want to see campaigns similar to the one I have mentioned rolled out across the country so the voices of children are heard and the normalisation of vapes among them is tackled.

I also want to address the issue of nicotine pouches, which we spoke about earlier. I thank everyone for being here today. Vaping is a very serious issue. From working with the Department officials and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, I am aware that a lot of work is being done. I assure Members that we intend to do a lot more. Our priority now is to get the two Bills into the House as soon as possible. Like the Minister, I will be looking for Members' full support.

Deputy Ann Graves

Our young people have to be given the best opportunity we can offer them. Although we cannot dictate to or lecture them, we can, of course, introduce legislation that will protect them and help them make positive decisions on their health and well-being. It would be hypocritical of me to stand up here and lecture anybody - I was that smoker; I was that vaper - but we must not bury our heads in the sand and pretend the challenges and consequences for young people will simply go away.

People are rightly very concerned about the prevalence of vaping and smoking among our younger people. According to the Institute of Public Health, 39% of 15- and 16-year-olds, which is nearly four in every ten, have tried vapes, and almost 18% of them are regular users. The need for legislation has never been more urgent. Legislation can work. Between the ban on indoor smoking in 2004 and 2023, the smoking rate in Ireland decreased from 27% to 18%. This represents approximately 800,000 fewer smokers and a substantial reduction in overall tobacco consumption. This decrease can be attributed to the Public Health (Tobacco) (Amendment) Act 2004, which banned smoking in workplaces, bars and restaurants, along with ongoing public health measures to

combat smoking. This has benefited the health and well-being of our population greatly.

Since 2000, rates of nicotine smoking among young people in Ireland have significantly decreased, but unfortunately recent evidence shows there has been an increase in overall nicotine use, particularly since 2019. This was clearly driven by the rise in e-cigarettes and dual tobacco and e-cigarette use among those aged between 15 and 24. Key surveys like that of Health Behaviour in School-aged Children and the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs show a welcome decline between 1998 and 2018.

While I would of course welcome legislation, this is an issue on which we have had years of statements from several Ministers. The fact the Government is filling time with statements instead of real action and real legislation is concerning. The lack of legislation is an indictment of the Government's laissez-faire approach to our young people's health. It is time that the Government brought forward robust and future-proof legislation on nicotine products. We are already behind the curve on this. The Government has yet to address the serious issues of disposable vapes and nicotine products. HHC vapes have been covered. We have taken a very positive approach. I urge the Minister of State to seize the opportunity to put the legislation in place as soon as possible.

Deputy Mark Ward

I acknowledge that the Minister of State mentioned legislation is coming down the line. This is really welcome but it cannot come soon enough. If it is sensible and gets to the core of the issue, the Minister of State will receive support on it. Again, as Deputy Graves said, we are again having statements. There is a vacuum, and when there is a vacuum it is like the Wild West when it comes to vape shops. They are popping up all over the place. There is nothing to stop them from popping up outside schools. I walk through Clondalkin village and have noted there are vape shops throughout. With their bright lights and colours, they are lit up like Christmas trees. They are enticing young people to come in, and this is a deliberate marketing ploy. The colours are vibrant and attractive. Residents have contacted me about young people who are regularly seen going into the shops in their uniforms to buy vapes. There seems to be no regulation or policing of these issues. Vapes are definitely being sold to underage people.

The Minister of State mentioned the flavours of vapes. You have to look at the flavours. They are like something out of a sweetshop or in a cocktail, not what you would find in a tobacco shop. They include blueberry, sour raspberry, pineapple ice, lemon and lime, banana ice, menthol, and pink lemonade. I could go on and on. This is another thing that does not happen by accident; it is a deliberate marketing ploy by the vape shops.

There is also an issue in that vape shops argue vapes are a cessation method. What they are actually doing is encouraging the next generation of vapers or smokers. We have statistics and the Minister of State mentioned some herself. One in four people

between 15 and 16 has vaped. One in five between 15 and 16 is currently using. We know the dangers of smoking. They have been well researched and have been known for a long time, but we do not know the long-term effects of vaping because the relevant studies have not been done yet.

The legislation the Minister of State talked about needs to be introduced as soon as possible to stop the vapers of today becoming the smokers of the future.

Deputy Paul Donnelly

I also welcome the tightening of the legislation but we do need to see it. We need to see it implemented. Everybody has a concern about vaping, particularly among young people. Adults have a choice and free will, and if their vaping is part of smoking cessation I absolutely welcome it and believe it to be important; however, as we have already heard, the manner in which vapes are marketed and sold is an issue. I have noted flavours other than those mentioned, including cherry cola and Skittles. If these are not directed at children, I do not know what is.

Unfortunately, there are very few inspections happening. A report produced by The Journal states 3,500 vapes have been seized from shops by the HSE for breaching regulations since the start of 2024. That is an absolute drop in the ocean. It probably reflects the sales of one shop in a week, given the number of sales at the moment. Unfortunately, we need regulation. When you read in the report what is in the vapes, it is really shocking. One vape claimed to be nicotine free was found to contain nicotine. In this regard, we talk about HHC. It is really worrying that young people are getting their hands on these vapes. To be honest, nobody knows what is in them or their long-term effects. There is no doubt but that the packaging, colours and flavours of vapes are designed to target young people. There is absolutely no doubt about it because we see them. Anybody who walks will see children in school uniforms vaping. To me, that is deeply worrying.

In 2013, the Government said the target for smoking cessation was to reduce the proportion of smokers to 5%.

Unfortunately, in 2024, which was when the most recent report was compiled, and Deputy Graves talked about a figure of 18%, the rate was 17%. That neatly correlates with the time we saw a surge in vapes. The question we need to ask is whether these vapes are really contributing to a reduction in smoking or is it that we are just creating a new generation of people who are being enticed into it?

As I said, when it comes to adults, they can make the choice. If it is their choice, vapes have a place in smoking cessation, but we do not need to have them in such flavours and in packaging that is encouraging others. We need one other thing, similar to cigarettes. Any number of times you walk into a shop, you will see a counter of cigarettes at the back. There will be no advertisement, the person will take your money, press a button and the cigarettes will come out, yet right in front of you, where the

sweets are, you will see vapes. They are right where the sweets are. Again, if that is not targeted at children, then I do not know what is. We need new legislation but we also need inspections. We need the HSE to clamp down on these.

The other part of it is the HSE does not have any vaping cessation programmes. None. There is no funding and there is no capacity within the HSE. Somebody who is addicted to nicotine through vapes has nowhere to go and has no supports. At the moment, the HSE has no funding for that. I encourage the Minister of State to look specifically at vaping. We are talking about young people in particular, but there are also older people who want to get off nicotine. They may have successfully weaned themselves off cigarettes but they are still addicted to nicotine through vapes. Let us give them the support to be able to come off those products as well.

I will raise a matter that is very worrying. I see this because lobbies from tobacco companies come in regarding some of this legislation. They are using vapes as a product alongside cigarettes. They are looking at a reduction in the number of people smoking and are seeing this new product as a way of keeping in business. I really worry about that. These are very powerful, strong and profitable companies. It is something we need to keep an eye on.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin

I will also highlight the growing concern about vaping and nicotine use among young people. While vapes are often marketed as safer alternatives to smoking, the reality is far more troubling. Vapes and similar products, such as nicotine pouches, pose a very serious health risk, particularly for young people whose brains are still developing.

This scourge of modern society, as we could call it, is nearly everywhere. They are sold in every local shop, as previous contributors mentioned. In my constituency, there are dedicated vape shops in Gorey and Arklow. Vapes pose serious health risks. They can lead to nicotine addiction affecting brain development, mood, concentration and memory. They contribute to health issues, mental health issues and a transition to smoke and tobacco products. Companies are manipulating young people, as mentioned, through clever marketing tactics, having vapes cheaper than cigarettes and as my colleague, Deputy Ward, said, in appealing flavours, designs and colours, and a very strong social media presence, especially on TikTok and other platforms. Irish research showed that 23% of 15- to 17-year-olds vape regularly and teenagers who vape are three to five times more likely to start smoking compared with those who never vaped.

Vapes are also harmful to the environment. In the UK, 5 million disposable vapes are thrown away every week, so we then have plastic, heavy metals, nicotine, salts and lithium batteries in the environment. As I said, most of the popular vape brands are owned by the big tobacco companies. In Ireland, an estimated 12.5 million disposable vapes were sold in 2022, most of which ended up in landfill as plastic waste.

Vaping is far from harmless. It poses serious health and environmental risks. Of course, as always, the same industries that profited from tobacco addiction for decades, going back to the fifties when they told us how great smoking was for us, are now aggressively targeting a new generation of customers. We must take action. We need to protect youth through education, regulation and awareness. Sinn Féin wants to see legislation introduced in this Chamber to regulate the marketing of vapes and ban disposable vapes, which are basically the equivalent of smoking a battery. They are in the most dangerous form, both for children's health and the environment.

Let us ensure that the next generation is informed, supported and safeguarded from the dangers of nicotine addiction, which is orchestrated in a very manipulative way by the tobacco industry. I would appreciate whatever the Minister of State can do on this issue.

Deputy Marie Sherlock

I very much welcome today's statements. There is an irony that so much effort has gone into trying to reduce smoking rates in this country over the past two decades. We proudly talk about the smoking ban in commercial places. A lot of money has been spent by the HSE. There is a target for 2025 of a rate of less than 5% of the population smoking, but we know approximately 18% are still smoking. All the while, when the focus has been on that, the Government has taken its eye off the ball regarding a very serious and worrying trend over the past number of years, which is vaping. To see that the figure has grown from 3% of the population in 2015 to 8.5% in 2023 is something in itself, but to see that it is now up as far as almost 30% of young people vaping on a regular basis is cause for alarm.

The reality is we do not really know the full health impact of vaping. We heard from Professor Des Cox, a paediatric respiratory consultant at CHI, this week, who said that teenage vapers are three to five times more likely to take up smoking. We have heard others talking about issues with memory loss and concentration. The reality is, however, just like tobacco, that it may take a few decades to understand what the full impact of vaping is. We do know hazardous chemicals are contained within vaping. It will take some time to fully understand what they are. There is a horrible reality that we are now seeing a new generation of people with an addiction to a nicotine product. While tobacco is obviously a much more dangerous product relative to vaping, and vaping perhaps has its place in helping people wean themselves off smoking, nicotine is not a problem-free product in itself.

We need to see urgent action by this Government, not only in terms of the legislation on single-use vapes, but also on the very aggressive marketing we have seen. Others have spoken about the flavours and colours. At a number of the music festivals this summer, including Electric Picnic and All Together Now, nicotine companies were out in full force handing out nicotine pouches. The aggressive marketing tactics by these

companies are having an impact. We have seen that in the take-up of vaping by young people. We need to see an end to that very quickly.

The other critical thing is we need to future-proof the legislation. It may be vaping now, but nicotine pouches are something that are a bit more novel in Ireland. In some ways, they have been around for decades and centuries, but are newer in how they are currently packaged and marketed. There may be some other products in the future. We need legislation that is future-proofed with regard to the marketing and regulation of those products or any products that, effectively, contain nicotine. Countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium have effectively set down the template or precedent to future-proof legislation so that any future products developed with nicotine will come under existing regulations with regard to how they are marketed.

Legislation will only go so far. Regardless of the substance, the lesson is that prohibition will only ever do so much. It is the health supports that are critical. When we submitted a parliamentary question to the HSE earlier this month regarding supports for those who wish to wean themselves off vaping, we learned that there are no resources. While we have a very well-resourced smoking cessation programme, the HSE effectively told us that it has not been directed or funded by the Department of Health to develop a "stop vaping" service. There is a critical need for that. We have to make sure members of this young generation who are vaping do not become the addicted smokers of the future albeit it is a slightly different substance from tobacco. It is critical that supports are put in place to promote awareness and help those who wish to come off vaping.

There will always be substances that pique the interest of young people. We have all been young. The need for legislation is urgent and it needs to look ahead as opposed to just being reactionary regarding the trend we have seen over the past number of years. The Labour Party will not be found wanting regarding ensuring the swift passage of legislation through this House.

Deputy Cormac Devlin

I welcome the Government's proposals to protect young people from the harms of vaping and nicotine addiction. As the party that delivered the first workplace smoking ban in the world, Fianna Fáil knows that smart, proportionate regulation saves lives. We have already raised the age of sale to 18 and tightened advertising near schools, on public transport and in cinemas. Now we must go further because the evidence is clear. Brightly coloured devices, confectionery flavours and cheap disposables are hooking a new generation on nicotine. The package before us does exactly what parents, teachers and clinicians have asked for. First, it involves a complete ban on single-use, disposable vapes. These products drive youth uptake and create a toxic waste stream of plastics and lithium batteries. It also involves a crackdown on child appeal. It involves standardised packaging and sensible limits on colours and imagery for devices - no toys, games or novelty shapes and a clear simple approach to flavours with basic descriptors only. Point-of-sale display and advertising will be removed from general retail in line with what we know works for tobacco. Specialist shops will be able to serve adult

consumers, including smokers trying to quit. That balance matters. This builds on measures already enacted, including a licensing system for retailers from early 2026, a ban on vending machine sales and pop-up premises and serious investment by the HSE in youth-focused information, school guidance and cessation supports such as Quit 4 Youth.

We are not just restricting supply; we are supporting healthier choices. We should also be clear that Ireland is moving in step with our neighbours. Across Great Britain and the North, single-use vapes are being taken off the shelves, marketing routes have been sharply curtailed and strict product limits apply. Aligning with that direction of travel reduces cross-Border leakage from Northern Ireland and sends a consistent message that these products are not for children. I accept some elements require EU technical notification and a short standstill period, etc., but that should not delay Oireachtas scrutiny or preparedness. Retailers will need time to adapt store layouts, Revenue and the HSE will need time to bed in licensing and enforcement and producers will need to rework packaging and flavour descriptors but let us give them clarity and a fair, firm timeline and then hold the line. Our objective is simple - fewer children starting, more adults stopping and less litter on our streets. If this legislation means no more bubblegum "unicorn" vapes at the till, that is a positive outcome and not a problem. I commend the Minister of State and officials on a measured, evidence-led approach and I look forward to supporting swift passage of these Bills.

Deputy Cathal Crowe

This is a very important debate. Like other speakers, it needs to be acknowledged on the record of the Dáil that it was Fianna Fáil in government that brought in the world's first ever national ban on smoking in the workplace. It was ahead of its time and many other countries have followed suit since. This debate is very timely. I wrote to the Department of Health recently. Like many Deputies, I get emails about many issues. I received an email from a man in County Clare two weeks ago. His wife has profound asthma. He cited an evening where they were in a restaurant. The meal was ruined anyway because of a cloud of horrible fruity vapour being blown their way all the time but she had an asthmatic episode afterwards and ended up in hospital, which she attributed to the fact that vaping had happened alongside them. There is no structure of rules regarding this. I know there are certain guidelines and a policy direction being taken by the Department but if one goes into restaurants, bars and other places, one will see that it is hit and miss. It requires national regulation. Some bars do not allow it while others do. Some barmen take an easier approach and some are a bit lax. The Joe Duffy show - I think we have to call it "Liveline" these days to give it its official name - featured a singer a week or two ago whose name I did not get. I do not think he is particularly famous but he is someone who has done the pub circuit in Dublin over many years singing ballads and sitting on a stool in the corner keeping people entertained. He said that in the worst of days when there were clouds of smoke billowing across the bar and the lounge, he would go home with his jacket smelling and he might have had to hang out it out to refresh it but he certainly never found himself overwhelmed by smoke. He said that when he sings in a bar where someone is vaping, he goes home feeling rotten. He

knows from his vocal chords that he has been subjected to it all evening. I very much think that this needs to be dealt with.

We need to get to a point where there is prohibition in public spaces. I often bring my young children to a playground or go some place that is nice for them but the moment can be ruined very quickly when that cloud of fruity vapour billows across you. It just consumes you. It is probably worse. From a health point of view, it is not as bad as nicotine but from the point of view of being nauseated, I find it far worse.

My next point is on a slight tangent but it is relevant to the debate we are having today. I sit on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and attend its meetings religiously. Last year before the general election, we did a body of work on drivers who might be under the influence of alcohol or drugs, something that is an issue that is increasing. There is a lacuna in the legislation. If I am sitting at a bar and someone across from me is drinking pints all evening, I will not passively become drunk by any stretch of the imagination. If someone is smoking, I might get a chesty cough and the odour of smoke on my clothes but that is it. An Garda Síochána made the point that somebody in the presence of a person who is smoking cannabis will be passively inhaling that all evening and that it has come across instances where people have then failed the oral fluids test and must be brought to a Garda station for a blood test, which goes to the Medical Bureau of Road Safety for laboratory analysis, so there is a bit of a legal lacuna here. If someone is in a room where he or she is a passive smoker - I do not know if that is the correct term to use anymore but certainly he or she could be sitting 10 yd or 12 yd away from someone smoking cannabis all night - the following morning, he or she could find himself or herself being stopped by gardaí, checked and ultimately going through our judicial system so we need to look at that. We cannot have ambiguity insofar as enforcement is concerned.

Deputy Barry Ward

I put on record my support for the smoking ban. Ireland showed its mettle in terms of being ahead of the pack and dealing with smoking in a really serious way about 20 years ago. I have friends who gave up smoking the day the smoking ban came in and they have stayed off cigarettes ever since. It has undoubtedly saved lives and I pay tribute to the Ministers for Health who have contributed to attacking smoking over a long number of years.

I remember working in pubs as a teenager and going home reeking of smoke. It is such a great thing that this is no longer happens to workers in their work environment.

That is great and the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts and the legislation we brought forward were a really positive force for dealing with this public health issue, but let us be under no illusions, because vapes, electronic cigarettes and nicotine products also pose a public health risk. While it may not be possible to show the direct causal link we have established with tobacco products there is no doubt the toxic substances used in these nicotine products cause harm and no doubt whatsoever that they are highly addictive,

because there is scientific evidence for it. The notion, therefore, we would be supporting a regime that allows people to engage in addictive behaviour that is going to become worse and worse is highly regrettable. In that regard I welcome some progress on banning the sale of them to under-18s. I welcome the proposed legislation, which I understand is going to ban disposable vapes, though we are still behind the curve on that as it has already been done in Belgium, France and the United Kingdom. I agree with the bans on the point of sale displays, making them look like toys and the colours and flavours.

All this makes sense but given we have been through this experience already, we need to be serious about this and essentially substitute the word “nicotine” for the word “tobacco” in the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts. All these products contain nicotine but they do not seem to have the same recognition within the State apparatus for helping people quit smoking, and vapes can be a gateway to cigarettes rather than a means to get away from them for many people as well. I hear people saying the quit programme, which has shown some success in helping people leave the fags behind, does not extend to these nicotine products. It should, and we should be providing the funding in the coming budget to ensure the programme is allowed to operate for e-cigarettes, nicotine products and vapes. The easiest way to do that is to essentially deal with them as if they were tobacco products, the same as cigarettes or other tobacco, and substitute the word “nicotine” into the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts so all the restrictions that apply to smoking indoors, purchasing cigarettes, advertising cigarettes to making them available to or to targeting them at children can be dealt with in one fell swoop. Rather than reinventing the wheel in the form of the legislation the Minister of State is proposing, which I am absolutely behind, let us do it across the board and ensure they are treated in the same way we treated cigarettes 20 years ago.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú

This is another of these circumstances where we are going to have agreement there are absolute dangers with vapes. You do not ever have to go very far to find them. At times I probably do not even have to leave my own house, and that is the thing. We have seen the prevalence of vape use among young people, as well as other nicotine-related products such as nicotine pouches. We have also seen something that is far more nefarious, which is HHC vapes. It is like synthetic THC. We have seen the huge damage that happens. We are talking sometimes about very young children who have engaged in this sort of behaviour and that is a gateway to a really bad place. These synthetic-type drugs can also have real detrimental impacts.

We need to move beyond having statements. Statements are fine but we need to see legislative action on this. I do not know how many times we have been in here talking about vapes and how it is pretty obvious tobacco companies have looked for alternatives to what they used to be able to sell, like cigarettes and other products, which have obviously caused abject harm to a huge number of people and families throughout this State and the world. We have seen the huge money these companies have put into fighting legislation, including some of the legislation that has been

introduced in this jurisdiction. I have no issue with stating we have seen some decent action taken on cigarettes, but we are where we are in relation to dealing with what we are dealing with at the minute and we know there are particular products that are aimed at younger and younger children. That needs to be dealt with. We need legislation on that.

Going back to the issue with HHC in vapes, no more than dealing with nitrous oxide and all the rest of it, we have really harmful gateway drugs. We have a huge issue with addiction. Even in the last few days we had an event in the audiovisual room where the North Eastern Regional Drug and Alcohol Task Force alongside the Coalition for Better Alcohol Policy said they needed money first of all, as well as a national alcohol strategy and for us to tie it all together. I will be honest that with addiction, drugs and alcohol and some of the accoutrements we are talking about there, we are not having a holistic conversation about how we deal with this. There is an overlap with crime. I am not just talking about organised crime but also about disorganised crime, which people sometimes term antisocial behaviour. We need to have a real conversation. We need rules, regulations and the supports for people to get beyond their addiction as well and to deal with the reality of what we have, rather than just dealing with very simplistic statements.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore

My colleagues will talk about the wider issue of vapes. I will take this opportunity to talk about another product that in a very similar vein is causing huge problems for teenagers, namely, nicotine pouches. I do not know whether the Minister of State is familiar with them. They are small white pouches you can buy in any corner shop. You put them on your gum, underneath your lip, and they directly and very quickly give you a very strong hit of nicotine. They can be bought in packs for I think €5 or €7. They are very colourful and really marketed towards children. It is very similar to the vapes in that they have different flavours and the marketing is very eye-catching.

These pouches are prevalent in many of our secondary schools because there is no regulation of them in Ireland, meaning there is no age restrictions, no restrictions on the sale of them, the packaging or anything like that. As governments controlled how tobacco was marketed, especially to under-18s, and are now going towards vapes, the industry is coming up with a new technique of making money and the nicotine pouches are that technique. Unfortunately, as I said, many teenagers are now using them and are addicted to them. The principals' association has twice called on the HSE to provide guidance on these but this has not yet happened. This is a product that is causing huge problems for our teens, and health problems as well, and we are just too reactive in dealing with it. It is taking too long to deal with this. I started raising the issue of nicotine pouches nearly two years ago now when Stephen Donnelly was the Minister and I have repeatedly asked for them to be regulated. Now is the opportunity to deal with these, rather than waiting a number of years or until Europe deals with them. We need to take control of this and provide the regulation. They should not be for sale to under-18s. They should not be marketed to children. They should not be flavoured. We

should not be allowing a company or different companies to give them away free. You can sign up on their websites and get them free. You can go to concerts and get them free there. They are heavily promoted towards teenagers. I ask the Minister of State and the Government to deal with this now and not to wait for two or three years, when the problem is too big to deal with and we have a whole generation of children addicted to these products. I also ask the Minister of State to ensure the HSE urgently provides the guidance the school principals have requested, because schools are finding it difficult to deal with this issue and it is a big problem for them as well.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney

I welcome the opportunity to discuss this topic this evening, but like others I am frustrated, because it is another instance where we discuss something yet the regulatory vacuum still exists. This is our generation's version of big tobacco and it is preying on our children. Big tobacco is marketing to children on purpose and it is no secret the sale of e-cigarettes or vapes has boomed in recent years. Far from the original branding, which positioned these products as a way to quit smoking, they are now branded with bright colours, sweet flavours and stronger and stronger hits of nicotine. Why do these products come in blue raspberry, strawberry kiwi, watermelon and pineapple ice flavours? The answer is because they are marketed at the younger generations, including under-18s.

We know from young people, parents and teachers that the use of nicotine and tobacco products by children has not gone away. I know sometimes the Government recoils when I use terms like "big tobacco", similar to when I use the term "big tech", but I think it is important to do so and I feel that this is part of the problem. We know that these companies have endless piles of money that they use to lobby for their interests and subvert the common good. It is up to us to lead in standing up for that common good against these corporate interests.

A World Health Organization report from 2024 detailed how big tobacco is crassly using language of harm reduction while it gets a generation of children addicted to vaping. This, paired with the lack of enforcement of what little protection we have, means that youth vape use is higher than ever and continues to rise. Tá níos mó páistí ag úsáid galtoitíní ná riamh, but we are not resourcing the HSE to help people quit vaping. The HSE says it does not have capacity to deliver stop-vaping care and is not resourced to do so. A woman in my constituency of Dublin Rathdown contacted me recently to highlight how vaping products were being displayed and sold alongside toys like fidget spinners in a shop in her local shopping centre. Níl sé sách maith go bhfuil sé seo ag tarlú in 2025. I appreciate the proposed legislative fixes the Minister of State outlined at the start of today's discussion but we are currently operating in a regulatory vacuum, so this problem is urgent. We need regulation on the packaging of vapes, on their flavouring and on their points of sale. We need to future-proof against an industry that does not care about our children.

Deputy Pádraig Rice

The Minister of State and her predecessors have shown a shocking lack of urgency when it comes to vapes. Under the watch of successive Ministers, youth vaping rates have skyrocketed. Is this any wonder with flavours like cotton candy, cherry cola and bubble gum readily available in any corner shop or indeed with stores showcasing vapes like pick and mix rather than the display of highly addictive products? The numbers speak for themselves. In June, a study by The Lancet into Irish nicotine use found that, between 2015 and 2023, vaping had more than doubled across all age groups going from 3% to 8%. The dual-use of vapes and cigarettes also more than doubled, increasing from 1% to 3% while vaping among 15- to 24-year-olds went from 19% to 30%.

During the same period, the only real action taken by the Government was to ban the sale of vapes to under-18s, something most people thought was already the case. That 2023 legislation should have been the vehicle used to ban disposable vapes and restrict flavours, packaging and advertising. In 2022, the previous health committee recommended regulating flavours and marketing in that Bill but it was ignored. Two public consultations on single-use vapes had to be held before the Government finally accepted that action should be taken.

Now with the end of 2025 in sight, we are still none the wiser on the regulation and banning of vapes. I accept that there is an EU notification process which must be adhered to, but that cannot even be initiated until we have draft legislation. This needs to be a priority. We should not be here making statements; we should be dealing with the necessary legislation. It is time for action. The time for talk is truly over. We need decisive action here. I raised this point with the senior Minister previously. Time and time again, we have statements in this House on health issues instead of dealing with health legislation. All the time we call for more productivity in the health service. We need more productivity from Parliament and more productivity from the Department of Health in particular on health legislation.

Deputy Jen Cummins

Vapes and nicotine products are the absolute bane of parents' lives. I have been contacted many times by parents asking what can be done about vapes, their contents, how they look and how they are sold. I am speaking not only as a TD but as a mother and somebody who has worked with children and young people for many decades. As previous contributors have said, school principals and school communities are really looking for guidance on this.

What galls me most is that vapes are being targeted at young people. I know from talking to young people that they can get a vape that matches their outfit when they go to a party. Companies are absolutely marketing then so that young people will buy them. They go to a party and have a fantastic time. They are wearing whatever it is and their vape matches it. If I was young person now, I would probably be doing the same.

Companies are very smart in how they are doing this, but we have to protect young people. They are not allowed to be sold under-18s. I genuinely want to know if anyone has ever been prosecuted over that. Has anybody ever come before the courts for selling nicotine vapes to young people who are under 18?

HHC, hexahydrocannabinol, is a controlled substance and illegal. I was contacted by a parent in my constituency asking why her 14-year-old child and the child's friends were able to buy that. Why is she catching them using this? If that is illegal, they are not supposed to be buying vapes in the first place and we have legislation, why is it not being acted on?

I agree with previous speakers about having statements here. As a legislator, I would much rather be in here making sure that we are creating legislation that is not just sitting on a shelf but is actually able to be enacted so that we prevent young people from being taken advantage of by these big companies that want to make money over the health of our young people.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere

I am delighted to be here today for statements on the use of vapes and nicotine products by young people. Fianna Fáil is the party that introduced the smoking ban. We have a steadfast commitment to improving public health but we have to go further. I know this legislation will tackle the rise in the use of vapes by children and young people by reducing their attractiveness and availability but I just want to make three points in my few minutes here.

The first point relates to the product placement of vapes. It is absolutely unbelievable that sweets, bars of chocolate and vapes can all be side by side in a shop. We see it right across the country. We see it in Carlow-Kilkenny. Every single day when I go into shops, I see these vapes with their strong branded colours and flavours. That cannot be allowed to continue and has to be changed. Some of these products look very attractive and that has to be changed.

In relation to vaping in schools, I spoke to a young student recently and he told me that, in his school, people were able to get access to vapes in various manners. In the bathrooms of the school, they are actually selling drags of a vape for €1 or €2 a drag, which is absolutely unbelievable. We need to work extra hard with our younger people to make sure they are aware of the consequences of vapes.

I welcome the Not Around Us campaign, a joint initiative between Kilkenny County Council and Carlow County Council, which is hugely successful. Younger people are coming together to promote smoke-free and vape-free zones. We need more of these kinds of initiatives. It has worked really well in Carlow and Kilkenny in promoting awareness.

My final point is on accessibility. It is too easy for a young person to get access to vapes in 2025. I spoke to a 15-year-old transition year student who, as part of a project, went to 20 vape shops right across the constituency to see if that student could purchase vapes. In 17 of the shops, it was absolutely no problem and no questions were asked even though this person was under age. Three shops asked if the student had ID and when the student said they did not have ID on them, the shops still sold vapes anyway. Such easy accessibility is a huge issue. If there are restrictions there and if people are not allowed to be served until they are over 18, there have to be strong penalties in place for shops that sell vapes people who are under age.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne

I welcome that the Minister of State is here to take this debate. However, why are we having statements on this issue and not a debate on the legislation? During my time in the Seanad when we debated the legislation on the prohibition of sales to under-18s, there was promise at that time that we would move on legislation to deal with the issue of flavoured nicotine-inhaling products and that we would deal with some of the marketing issues, yet it has not happened. I really have to ask the question: why are we having statements on this? We have talked about this. Everybody knows and every colleague here has highlighted the problems. They have been highlighted by youth organisations.

FDYS in County Wexford did an extensive study around young people. Young people themselves want action to be taken. Even the use of the term "vapes" is wrong. These are nicotine-inhaling devices and it is a public health crisis. While I respect that the Minister of State is relatively new in the post, I am not convinced that her Department is taking this sufficiently seriously.

We know the damage nicotine causes. Many of these nicotine-inhaling companies are the cigarette companies of old and we are allowing them to market products, as we have heard already, in an attractive way to young and vulnerable people. People who had never smoked before are taking up vapes. I really question why the Minister of State is in here responding to statements. When the Minister of State responds, will we hear her say that legislation will be introduced on this issue before Christmas and that it is a public health emergency? I am quite happy to sit as late as we need to some evening to fast-track this legislation. There is cross-party agreement on the need to address this. We know that this issue is at crisis point in all of our communities.

I was very struck by a survey of approximately 1,400 young people from the Wicklow, Carlow and Wexford areas that two students from FCJ Secondary School, Bunclogh carried out nearly four years ago. The Minister of State knows that school and area very well. A total of 10% of the young people involved in the survey had never smoked previously but now regarded themselves as regular vape users and effectively addicted to it. The problem is that nothing has happened in that four-year period. I am not convinced that the Minister of State's Department is treating this as a public health emergency. I will be very disappointed if the Minister of State does not stand up in her

concluding remarks – and I will tune in – to give a clear commitment that, as the Minister of State with responsibility in this area, she will introduce legislation before Christmas that will address the issues of packaging and marketing.

We do not have a department of public health in this country. Rather, we have a Department of illness and sickness. This is a public health crisis. I know the Minister of State is a serious person who is deeply committed to her role, but we need to move on legislation as soon as possible.

Deputy Colm Burke

It is amazing how the market changes. One issue that is now on the market is high puff count vaping devices. They have exploded onto the Irish market in a short period. They are known as carousel or click-on vape devices, but they are commonly known as “big puff”. While they do not breach existing laws because their tanks contain 2 ml of vape liquid, big puff disposable vapes are in clear breach of the spirit of existing legislation as they have supplementary tanks. It just goes to show how the market responds where there is legislation or regulation and how it is able to sideline that.

We should look closely at what the Irish Heart Foundation has set out in its recommendations. It recommends that any product containing nicotine should first have to be granted approval by the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HRA, before being placed on the market; future-proof legislation that prohibits the marketing, selling and distribution of disposable vapes and prevents any novel disposable vapes circumventing the rules to enter the market; a complete prohibition of the marketing, selling and distribution of nicotine pouches and any novel nicotine products, nicotine gummies or nicotine strips; a ban on all e-cigarette flavours, bar tobacco, by restricting the permitted flavouring ingredients to a limited few e-liquids with a tobacco flavour, as has been introduced in the Netherlands; an immediate ban on all e-cigarette products advertising through all communication media, including outdoor arenas, billboards, buses, at points of sales and online; the introduction of plain packaging for all e-cigarettes; a ban on the online sale of e-cigarettes and nicotine products; and an increase to the legal age of the sale of e-cigarettes from 18 to 21, as has been done in the USA. Basically, this is what the Irish Heart Foundation has set out because it has a lot of experience in dealing with the effects and use of tobacco.

We have clear evidence that when people start off with vapes, they tend to go on to tobacco products and then suffer the health consequences as a result. Even with vapes, there is growing evidence that they have adverse effects on people’s health. We need, therefore, to ensure those products are not allowed on the market. The problem we have with the people who produce these products is that they are not worried about the negative effects they may have on people; they are only interested in profit. They will use any mechanism they can to sell the product, and the easiest market to get at is young people. That is why we need to ensure we have the required legislation in place that not only prevents these products from coming onto the market, but also the

sidelining of regulations and legislation. It is therefore extremely important that we bring in robust and comprehensive legislation that cannot be sidestepped in any way.

I agree with my colleague, Deputy Byrne, that we need to urgently bring forward the legislation so that we can bring in the necessary controls and regulations.

Deputy Donna McGettigan

The Government has been caught napping when it comes to vapes. We all knew this was coming down the line and yet the Government failed to take adequate action to prevent the problems we are now witnessing. I am even after hearing the Minister of State's Government colleagues calling this out. The rate of vape use among 15 to 16-year-olds is at 18%, with 39% of them having tried it at some stage. This should be a serious concern for all of us. Many vape shop owners share those concerns, some of whom have contacted me in County Clare to express their worries. Responsible shop owners want robust legislation as much as we do. Future-proof legislation is needed as a matter of urgency. The delay in bringing forward legislation before now means that much of what is being proposed is already out of date. To be meaningful, any legislation needs to include disposable vapes, nicotine pouches and HHC vapes. The legislation also needs to be broad enough to include new, alternative products which will become available to replace any products that will be restricted. Such alternative products are already available. We cannot be left trying to catch up again.

According to the Health Research Board, we have a situation where young people are reporting for treatment for the effects of HHC vapes at a rate of approximately ten per month. This is absolutely unacceptable and an indication of the lack of Government action. There have been calls from the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland for HHC to be banned because of the addiction and serious mental health issues it is seeing in young patients.

A number of steps need to be taken to reduce the number of children accessing these products and to reduce the harm they cause. An anti-vaping service for young people needs to be established to inform, advise and assist them to quit or, better still, abstain from using such products in the first place. An awareness campaign needs to be brought forward so that everyone is aware of the dangers these products can cause. Parents in Clare have been in touch to say that they are left dealing with their children suffering from addiction because of vape use. According to Clare Parenting's guide on vapes, e-cigarettes and disposables for teenagers, using these products can have an impact on a person's physical and mental health, concentration in school, activities and hobbies, relationships with family and friends and finances. The current support system services around tobacco and smoking should be reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Single-use vapes are banned in the North and should be banned here without delay. The Irish Heart Foundation called on the Government to do this when the ban came into effect in the North in order to protect the health of our young people. Vapes are

marketed to our young people through the use of catchy product names, imaginative flavour names and strategic packaging. All of these aspects of vapes need to be regulated by the Government. The Government's record on this issue is one of failure to act promptly. Government Ministers have been issuing statements and expressing intent, but to date we have not seen the necessary legislation enacted. That needs to change. I call on the Minister of State to reassure the House that it will.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger

I am extremely frustrated that we are here on the cusp of October making statements in the Dáil when the election was last November. It is outrageous that the Government has not got its act together to produce a number of Bills over the summer. Even the Minister of State's party colleague is taking her to task on this issue. We are talking about this important health issue for young people but no legislation is forthcoming; we are just making statements. We need to hear what the proposal for action is. Major companies are now targeting young people with these so-called vapes. They are also posing for older people as a gateway to give up smoking.

It is ludicrous we are only having a little chat about it, with nothing actually worked out.

I want to mention the health issues for young people. Research was done by the RCSI in Dublin recently and a few of the comments made were very important. For example, it was suggested that it "is plausible that we are on the cusp of a new wave of chronic diseases that will emerge 15 to 20 years from now due to these exposures." It was also suggested that "without comprehensive regulation [and laws], as we try to treat the nicotine addictions of older tobacco smokers, there is a substantial risk of transferring new health issues to younger generations." This is very serious. It is not a bit surprising that the companies behind the tobacco industry are moving into this to make profits. Flavour like cotton candy and cherry cola are deliberately targeted at children, not at adults trying to quit smoking which is the so-called justification for allowing the vaping industry to operate. In the study, 180 vape flavours were tested from a huge range of products. It would take decades to test every product, as there are so many chemicals within them. They were found to contain 127 acutely toxic chemicals with 153 health hazards and 225 irritants. Loads of evidence is emerging about the dangers of these and the fact that young people whose lungs are still developing are using these nicotine products and will damage their health in the long term. We really need action from the Government.

Another study on vaping and young people's lungs did fitness tests on young people who smoked, vaped and did neither. Vapers and smokers were less able to take in oxygen. Vapers had an average peak exercise capacity of 186 watts, similar to smokers. That is extremely worrying. The evidence is right in front of us. It adds to growing evidence that long-term vaping is harmful and challenges the idea it could be a healthier alternative to smoking.

The statistics on young people using e-cigarettes, tobacco products and vapes show the figure has increased from 20% in 2015 to 30% now, with 17% of 15- to 24-year-olds using e-cigarettes. Meanwhile, 13% of under-18s had used vapes in the previous 30 days. Three quarters of the children in the studies had never smoked. A new market and a new cohort of young people who had not smoked were vaping, much as happened in the 1970s and previous decades. We know the colourful packaging is designed to go with outfits, handbags or whatever. It is happening.

It should be noted the vaping industry makes really spurious claims. One claim is this is the biggest way people get off cigarettes. To be clear, the biggest way people quit smoking is by quitting smoking. There is no scientific evidence that more people quit smoking by using vapes than just quit smoking. These things have to be tested out. The literature shows young people who use vapes are at increased risk of anxiety, mood disorders and sleep disturbance.

I want to mention the companies that are marketing the vaping industry. Big tobacco has shifted to this industry. Philip Morris is the world's biggest tobacco company and it is looking to make two thirds of its profits from non-smoke products by 2030. BAT, another big tobacco company, wants to be 50% reliant on vapes by 2035. PJ Carroll doubled its profits in 2023 from vaping. The other two major players, JTI Ireland and John Player and Sons, have also moved to vaping products to increase profits. Lobbying records show all those companies have lobbied governments around legislation and around not making this restrictive. It is extremely worrying that tobacco companies who lied through their teeth for decades about the effects of smoking on people's health are now involved in this. That should be a major red flag.

I will finish up on solutions. Thus far the Government has banned vaping products being sold to under-18s. Unfortunately, 66% of children and young people said they would find it easy to access vaping products so that ban will not be enough. We need to do other things straight away: a ban on disposable vapes, because they are too cheap; the introduction of plain packaging; and a ban on all flavours apart from tobacco, in order to stop this targeting of children and young people. We also need to look at the creation of addiction services because people are addicted to these products and this habit and have no way of getting off them. At least the HSE provides quit-smoking healthcare, etc. We need services for people to quit vaping. There needs to be action now and an end to just talk.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil

When I was in college in Maynooth, a while ago now, I started smoking. I was 19 and playing hurling for Kildare and the university but fell into a bad habit and it took me a long time to quit smoking - about 12 years. I was on and off but managed to quit cold turkey and then eventually found a vape on a night out and become dependent on vapes in social settings and then in normal day-to-day settings. To this day, I am on and off a vape - not a disposable vape but a vape you fill up. Much has been said about disposable vapes. I agree with the criticism of them and think they should be banned.

The vape liquid is even cheaper. If you have a vape you can refill, the e-liquid for it works out far cheaper in the long run and even in the short term, given we see young people using two or three disposable vapes per day and we see the impact that has.

Other speakers have spoken of the packaging and flavours involved with vapes. That is a key problem. Watermelon ice, pineapple crush or whatever it may be is clearly an attempt to market to younger people and to target children. We are seeing younger and younger people starting to vape. When I was in secondary school, there were some people who smoked at a younger age but now far more teenagers vape than ever smoked. At school, there were always people at the back of the shed or wherever it may be who smoked, but now teenagers are walking home from school and droves of them have plumes following them. There are multiple issues causing that. One is the marketing of this to young people; another is the packaging. Legislation needs to be introduced for plain packaging and to eliminate flavours. We eliminated menthol cigarettes and the tobacco industry came in with clickies to bring it in the back door. They were removed through legislation as well and we need to do the same with plain packaging for vapes and vape products. Flavours need to be removed so only tobacco is available.

It is not just vapes. The tobacco industry is expanding its reach as it sees traditional cigarettes are not in vogue. There are also snus products, little tobacco pouches that go under the lip at the gum and provide high dosages of nicotine. We are seeing significant impacts on the oral and general health of young and older people. These need to be regulated as they are causing serious issues. Friends of mine were at Electric Picnic recently and these were being handed out for free, which completely shocked me. Handing out nicotine products for free to festivalgoers was clearly an attempt to get more people addicted to those products.

Imagine if there were tobacco companies handing out boxes of free cigarettes. There would be absolute uproar. We should have the same response in relation to handing out the likes of snus, vapes or whatever it may be. That needs to be something that is not permitted in any way, shape or form because it is trying to encourage more young people and people of all ages. Let us be honest; it is not just young people, and it is unfair to put it down to just young people. There are older people like myself who started vaping at an older age to try to stop smoking. Unfortunately, that is now what other people and I are relying on as well to deal with the nicotine addiction that is there.

There are multiple issues around vaping, but it needs to be tackled. It needs to be tackled quickly because we will see health implications further down the line, as we have seen with cigarettes. There have been studies into vaping. We have seen a lot of studies that show there are significant health impacts from vaping, but we are going to see even more of that over the next five, ten or 20 years as we have seen with smoking. We need to get ahead of it. I implore the Minister of State to focus on the packaging and flavours, and to ensure the likes of snus and vaping products are not being handed

out at festivals or in public. That is absolutely shocking and should not be something we stand for. I thank the Minister of State for the work she is doing and continues to do.

Deputy Erin McGreehan

I thank the Minister of State. It is great to have this debate in this House. I look forward to supporting the Minister of State as she brings forward the urgent legislation that has to come next. The "Vaping Nation" programme on Virgin Media One shone a stark light on what parents, teachers and health professionals have been warning us all about for some time, which is that vaping has become normalised among our children and adults. People believe vapes are harmless, but they are incredibly harmful. What was once marketed as a tool to help smokers to quit has been repackaged into bright disposable gadgets designed to hook the next generation on nicotine. The evidence is clear, as the Minister of State knows. Nearly one in five young people in Ireland between the ages of 15 and 24 now vape. Among school-aged children, vaping rates are higher than smoking rates. More than three quarters of teenagers who vape have never touched a cigarette before. That is not harm reduction; that is harm creation.

Fianna Fáil has always led the way on public health. It was our party leader, the Taoiseach, Deputy Martin, who introduced the world's first workplace smoking ban. In government, we have banned the sale of nicotine-inhaling products to under 18s, ended self-service sales and legislated for the licensing system for retailers, but as the Minister of State knows the job is not done yet. The two Bills are being finalised. The public health (single-use vapes) Bill will ban disposable vapes outright. These are devices that entice children and pollute our environment. The public health (tobacco products and nicotine-inhaling products) Bill will restrict packaging, flavours and advertising. There will be no more bubble gum flavours, no more cartoon branding and no more shop displays aimed at our children. We need to ensure our legislation is robust enough to ban outright alternative nicotine products. Ministers must have the ability to be flexible to create a regulation to automatically add a new product to a banned list. Legislation alone is not enough and will not be. We must back it with strong enforcement, especially in the black market that continues to increase supply to our children and adults.

A reply to a parliamentary question I received from the HSE confirmed that by June of this year, 310 test purchases had been carried out and there had been 50 cases of non-compliance. That is a breach rate of 16%. It shows a little bit of progress in relation to checks, but we need far more of those checks. We need a far greater focus on imports and illegal supply. We need to deepen the research into the long-term health impacts of vaping, youth addiction patterns and how best to support those children and people who are already hooked. Children are becoming addicted. I ask the Minister of State to ensure the HSE has the resources to deliver appropriate targeted programmes to help those young people to quit. Some adult smokers, like Deputy Ó Cearúil, have turned to vaping to help them to quit. Regulated products will remain available to them, but it is

our moral duty to work on public health and protect children from nicotine addiction and the long-term harms that we already know there are from tobacco and nicotine.

Rightly, history will judge us. Our children's health will judge us in years to come. We will be judged not on how convenient we made it for industry to sell these products, but on how strong and high we hold public health. In the legislation that is coming, we need to send a clear message that Ireland will not allow a new generation of young people to be trapped in nicotine addiction.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty

Unfortunately, some of my colleagues could not make it.

I wish to talk at the outset about protecting our young people. It is not just about vapes, e-cigarettes and nicotine products; it is also about alcohol, nitrous oxide canisters and unfiltered access to social media. Our young people are being assaulted from all sides like never before. We need to protect them. We have legislative tools to make that a reality. Other people have spoken in various ways with different styles of contribution, but the facts that my colleagues have outlined are all fairly similar. There is less research on vapes because they have been around for a shorter period of time. With the long-term implications, there are suggestions relating to cancer. However, there are clearer reports on the immediate to short-term implications.

The key message coming out from some of my colleagues, as well as myself, is that in the short term we have to ban the use of flavours other than tobacco in all vaping products. Deputies have mentioned the sweet smell and I repeat this point. The Minister of State is probably sick of hearing the repetitive contributions about the multicoloured vapes, the different sweet smells and the fact a lot of sweet shops have been thrown in. The Minister of State is aware of it, but we are all reiterating it because it is staring us in the face as legislators and we need to do something about it. If a vape tastes like tobacco, it is going to be much less attractive to young people. It is as simple as that. As Deputy Ó Cearúil referenced, it is why young people were attracted to menthol cigarettes back in the day.

Disposable vapes are the drug of choice among young people. What we can do as legislators is to get rid of disposable vapes, full stop. As a side issue, during a previous contribution about cigarette butt tossers I mentioned that 50% of all litter comes from cigarette butts that contain plastic and do not biodegrade. If we are looking at legislation on banning disposable vapes, we should legislate to ban plastic filters in cigarettes so that cigarettes can biodegrade. This activity is creating huge amounts of environmental waste, but we are talking more about the health impacts here. Research from the Health Research Board has revealed that adolescents who use e-cigarettes are three to five times more likely to start smoking tobacco compared to those who have never used e-cigarettes. As others have mentioned, 8% of the population use e-cigarettes daily or occasionally. Among young people, however, 17% of 15- to 24-year-olds use them daily or occasionally. If young people who vape are about three times

more likely to start smoking, vaping is part of the problem. As others have mentioned, it is not the solution to give up smoking. It is actually a gateway to smoking.

A health research report from 2024 pooled data analysis from different surveys and showed a strong link between vaping and the use not only of cigarettes, but also other substances like marijuana and alcohol. We have all these effects. I mentioned the long-term indicators towards carcinogenic impacts, but asthma is one issue that jumps straight out. We also have the issues of burns, blast injuries, poisonings, lung injury and potentially cancer.

I will go backwards for a second. At the outset of my contribution I mentioned the various things we need to examine in order to protect our young people. I want to reiterate the point about nitrous oxide canisters. It is not a part of this debate but I want to keep throwing this issue out there as it is something that has caused damage as well.

What is happening internationally? There are countries that have a record of having zero tolerance on things such as litter, smoking and vaping. Singapore comes to mind, in particular, where it has brought in a total import and sales ban. However, because we are in the European Union that may be more complicated. To take an EU member state, Belgium has banned disposable electronic cigarettes. That is the first step, as well as banning flavours. Australia tried to have a total ban but saw it led to a black market situation so that is something to be aware of as well. We do not want dangerous products being sold to our young people through the back door, so the products have to be regulated and made accessible to adults - whether we like it or not - but made virtually impossible for young people to access so that sub-market is not created. Germany is considering a ban on flavoured vapes and restrictions on how and where the refillable vapes are sold so I would like there to be a specific tobacco-nicotine-vape shop and get those products out of all convenience and retail stores over a period of time. That might be a way of doing this as well as possibly having a licensing fee for retailers such as the likes of New Zealand is doing.

I welcome that HHC and some other drugs were classed as illegal earlier this year. Credit where credit is due. As some of my colleagues have mentioned, there is an issue with enforcement and some of these products still appear to be being sold to young people and adults, so enforcement is needed.

I also want to reference the pouches which, although it is a pure nicotine issue and their impact might not be to the same extent, they are still dangerous products for young people. They have knock-on effects and even nicotine itself as a pure drug has impacts on the cardiovascular system so we would not be encouraging young people to start to put it between their mouth and gums either.

I welcome the fact that this debate was facilitated. I reiterate, like everyone else, that first we need to get rid of the multicoloured and multi-smelling products and make them smell like tobacco. We have to get rid of the disposable vapes. Equally, it is not

good enough just to have statements on vaping. We need to have legislation and I hope that happens within the next three months or so.

Deputy Martin Daly

As both a legislator and a doctor, I cannot overstate my concern at the rise of vaping among young people in Ireland. What began as a tool to help adults to quit smoking has been transformed into a product designed to recruit a new generation of nicotine users. The industry has succeeded in making vapes appear harmless, fashionable and accessible and the result is a surge in adolescent uptake. The evidence is unambiguous. Almost four in ten Irish 16-year-olds have tried vaping and 15% of them use vapes. Disposable devices in particular, have exploded in popularity. A UK survey shows their use among 11- to 17-year-olds increasing ninefold in just two years. We now know the majority of Irish teenagers who vape have never smoked. Vaping is not a bridge out of tobacco; it is a gateway into nicotine dependency. As a clinician, I find this deeply troubling. Nicotine is not benign. In adolescence, it disrupts brain development, impairs concentration, fuels anxiety and entrenches addiction. The New England Journal of Medicine has already described cases of airway scarring linked to chronic vaping. International evidence confirms that young people who vape are several times more likely to progress to cigarette smoking.

The Government has acted, and rightly so. The ban on sales to under-18s, the curbs on advertising and the upcoming tax on e-liquids are all necessary steps. However, the reality is that the pace of change in the marketplace is outstripping the pace of regulation. A ban on disposable vapes, tighter controls on flavours and packaging and far stronger action on online promotion must follow. We should also recognise that policy alone is not enough. Prevention requires education in schools, in families and among health professionals. Young people need clear, credible information, not marketing masquerading as lifestyle advice. The decline in smoking rates during the past 30 years shows progress is possible but unless our new legislation anticipates and pre-empts the next wave of nicotine products - whether pouches, heated tobacco or other substitutes - we risk replacing one epidemic of addiction with another.

Deputy Peter Roche

I thank the Minister of State for bringing this debate to the Chamber. It is a very significant and important topic that we need to be honest about. If I remember the Minister of State's remarks, she mentioned vaping was both "lethal" and "addictive". Regrettably, many users of vaping products have no concept of those two words. I think they see it as cool and trendy to be using these very colourful vapes. Vapes come in all colours and all flavours which makes them a little more attractive. It is fair to say that when people are under the influence of alcohol, there is an even greater reliance on the use of vapes. That is pretty prevalent in clubs and pubs, etc. As previous contributors have said, the intent at the outset was that vapes would replace cigarettes but it has been counterproductive. We all know the consequences of cigarettes and anything pertaining to vapes because of those people who have respiratory issues such of

bronchitis and asthma. There will be consequences of continuing to use vapes, further down the road, and that is where the real issues will start to arise. There is also the litter issue. When one walks around the streets of my own city of Galway, one sees plenty of empty, or void, canisters which makes this a greater problem.

With the greatest will in the world, we are bringing forward legislation - we all welcome that - but the focus must be on policing and enforcing that legislation. The same can be said for any other legislation; it is about who will be responsible for policing it. One of my staff members happened to be having a coffee in a busy Galway city establishment not too many weeks ago, and they witnessed a group of young people - much younger than one would expect to be using vapes - asking an older group of people to go to the vape shop for them and they successfully got them. It will be very difficult to police, in any case. When we talk about Galway city in the context of accessibility to vapes, it is interesting to note that according to my information, there are approximately 12 vape shops in the city, which in itself is a real issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle

I remind the Deputy of his time.

Deputy Peter Roche

Who is subsidising that? Who is policing all of that? What is coming out of this?

Deputy Shane Moynihan

Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as an ábhar seo a thabhairt faoi bhráid na Dála. As Deputy Daly said, vapes have inadvertently turned from a gateway out of nicotine to a gateway into nicotine. We need to see a step change in how we regulate and address this market to ensure that whatever consequences this leads to are not unintended.

At this point, I will recall my work with the junior safety forum in South Dublin County Council, which was an initiative of the joint policing committee. When we asked fifth and sixth class students to identify the burning issues in their communities, one of the top issues they chose was the prevalence of vapes. They referred not just to the single-use vapes that were littering their playgrounds but also to the fact that many of their peers were being attracted to vapes because they were seen as an attractive pastime without any consideration for the public health and health implications that come with it. As part of that work, the students developed an awareness campaign designed for their peers to show the negative physical, emotional and mental effects of vaping. That was quite an effective piece of work because it came from the ground up in terms of educating people about the dangers of vapes.

I will not repeat the points that have been made already about the prevalence of flavours being used to market these vapes to children so that they are attractive and have the gateway effect that leads to the unintended consequences I referred to earlier.

It has already been mentioned that the use of vapes has led to littering in villages, towns and cities around the country. I think there is a role for looking at our planning laws in this context. Just as we seek to prevent an overconcentration of off-licences in our towns and cities, we need to take the same approach to vape shops.

There are many areas in my constituency where there is an overconcentration of vape shops. We really need to stamp that out now in order to ensure that vapes are seen as a controlled product, that there is a public health aspect to their sale, that they are not the same as sweets and that this should be reflected in our planning code.

As we look towards a new set of development plans for our cities and counties, I encourage Members on the Government benches to take this into account in how we deal with it. Vapes are not supposed to be a stand-alone nicotine product. That should be reflected in every aspect of legislation designed to deal with them. I welcome the Minister's efforts in this regard.

Deputy Albert Dolan

We have a duty and a moral obligation to protect the long-term health of our young people. Right now, too many children and teenagers are being targeted in the context of, hooked on and harmed by vaping. Let us be clear; nicotine is addictive. The long-term health effects of these products are still unknown, and yet an entire generation is being lured in by colourful packaging, candy-flavoured liquids and the false belief that vaping is harmless. Ireland once led the world by introducing the first national workplace smoking ban. That bold step saved lives. We now face a new challenge, and we must act with the same courage.

Disposable vapes are cheap, easy to hide and deliberately marketed to appeal to children. They damage young hearts, lungs and blood vessels. They pollute our streets, our rivers and our environment. The companies behind them are using every tactic in the book to create new life-long customers out of our children. We cannot stand by while that happens and that is why we are bringing forward legislation that must ban disposable vapes, restrict flavours and packaging and remove these products from shop counters where young eyes see them every day. We must invest in public information campaigns, in school resources and in supports for young people who want to quit but who are struggling with addiction. This has to be about prevention. It is about making sure the next generation grows up free from the trap of nicotine addiction. It is also about giving parents peace of mind and ensuring that our communities are healthier, cleaner and safer. Fianna Fáil's record is clear. We put public health first. Today, we must do so again. Protecting the long-term health of our young people is not just good policy; it is the right thing to do.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle

I call on the Minister of State to make her concluding remarks.

First, I thank everyone for the points that have been raised and for this important debate. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and I are very much aware of the issues of bringing the legislation before the House. Some TDs said we are not moving quickly enough in respect of it, but we are. It is a priority. I assure Members of that.

We all want our children to have the best start in life, and that is why it is important that we, as legislators, take action that will make it easier for our children and ourselves to make healthy decisions. As Minister of State with responsibility for public health, tackling the use of vapes is a top priority for me and for the Government. Like many Members, I hear the concerns of parents, teachers and coaches. I also know that the number of these vape shops in our towns and villages is a concern. The array of colours and flavours on display seems determined to affect our children. I will be writing to all local authorities to ask them to consider provisions in their development plans that would limit the number of vape shops for which planning permission can be granted in our towns and villages. That is a real priority for me.

So many questions were asked by Members. On the proposed legislation relating to vapes and the colours and flavours of vapes, one of the proposals is that we would look at introducing shutters - such as we have with cigarettes - in vaping shops in which vapes of all colours are currently on display. Another proposal is to have a campaign in this regard. As Minister of State, I am very mindful that we have to have an awareness campaign. Information will be crucial. Education came up a lot during the debate, as did how we might deal with the matter in our schools. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in respect of that matter. We are looking at a ban on disposable vapes.

I need to get clarification on one point. One Member brought up the fact that he had been speaking to people and discovered that 17 shops had sold vapes to minors. It has been illegal to sell vapes to minors since 2023, so these shops are breaking the law. I hope the HSE has been contacted about this and that the law is being enforced. The shops in question are breaking the law. It is important for us, as legislators, to highlight that. If shops sell to minors, they are breaking the law.

Another issue that came up is enforcement. The national environmental health service is responsible for enforcing the legislation that prohibits the sale of tobacco to minors. That is hugely important. Our environmental officers in each county are carrying out a test purchase programme in respect of retailers of tobacco and nicotine-inhaling products using volunteers who are minors. Retailers who are selling to minors will be prosecuted. If nothing else goes out from this debate, it is extremely important that this message does go out. Another way of monitoring this is the new licensing system that will come into force next year. This will also help to monitor vaping shops and will allow us to be aware of what is going on within them. That is really important.

Nicotine pouches were referred to. I will explain where we are at the moment. The introduction of laws on these products has already been discussed at EU level in the

context of a revised tobacco product directive. An EU-wide public consultation was carried out in 2023 to obtain views on the regulation of novel products such as nicotine pouches. I understand people's concerns, but using EU-wide measures is the most effective way to proceed. The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has called on the Commission to introduce a revised tobacco products directive as soon as possible and for this to cover all nicotine products, including pouches. It is so important that this information gets out there.

Another matter that was raised was that relating to services to help people quit vaping and what is currently in place in this regard. The HSE has submitted a request for funding to establish a pilot service to help people stop vaping. This includes research into the types of support that will be safe, effective and clinically sound for vaping. The request will be considered as part of the broader Estimates process relating to budget 2026. For adults, the HSE provides safe, effective and clinically sound services for those who want to stop smoking. These are both free and easy to access. They have been designed for people who smoke cigarettes and incorporate behavioural support and access to free medicines to help people stop smoking. The adult service is currently able to support smokers who also vape, so it is a dual-user service. It is about stopping smoking, and vaping is including in that.

The vaping prevention campaign also came up. Funding was allocated in budget 2025 for a youth vaping prevention media campaign. I am very much working on this. It is all about information, awareness and the media campaign. That campaign is being developed by the HSE. It is intended that it will come into operation by the end of this year. As part of the process, research is being conducted with young people to ensure that the messaging is helpful, effective and relevant for the target audience. This campaign will provide evidence-based messaging to young people and information and support to parents and guardians who are concerned about vaping. It may also contribute to the continuing decline in tobacco use among young people, given the association between vaping and subsequent smoking in adolescence.

Reference was made to smoke-free areas. I am trying to get in as much information as I can into the answers I am providing. The tobacco-free Ireland policy is being updated. We are looking at policies in respect of smoking areas for vaping and cigarettes.

The tobacco-free Ireland policy is being updated.

Some Deputies asked about tobacco industry lobbying in relation to the two forthcoming Bills. That is prohibited. It is prohibited and cannot happen. It is important to say that the reason I wanted to come in today and speak about this is because I have huge concerns about vaping. As has been said, the targeting of younger age groups has been very effective. I want to make sure that this House knows that a great deal of work is being done by the Department, the Minister and me. We are working on this. There are two Bills that will be coming in. One will deal with the ban on disposable vapes and the other relates to colours and packaging. It is very visual when you walk into a shop. We will also look at the introduction of shutters. These are all proposals and Bills that are

being prioritised by the Government. I assure everyone that I am doing my utmost to get those Bills before the House as soon as possible. The commitment will be, hopefully with all of us working together, to get both passed in order that we can have more enforcement and give a commitment to the future children of Ireland and everyone else. We are very much aware that we need to get the legislation done.

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