

Working with vape shops:

A guide for commissioners and stop smoking services

Date of last review: November 2024

NCSCT



Introduction

As more stop smoking service commissioners and providers become interested in including nicotine vapes as part of what they offer to people who smoke, a number of questions arise about the nature of relationships with vape shops:

- **How can vape shops support stop smoking services?**
- **How can stop smoking services work with vape shops?**
- **What does 'reputable vape shop' mean?**
- **Can vape shops be trusted?**
- **Are vape shops owned by or associated with the tobacco industry?**

Why engage?

It will improve your knowledge and give an insight into what consumers visiting vape shops will be told and how their questions will be answered, especially those who are still smoking and who are looking to switch.

Vape shops can also be a source of information about new products, regulation, costs and technical support.

Some services have set up schemes whereby they send clients to a particular vape shop for reduced-price devices. Others buy devices from vape shops, often at a discount, and give starter kits out to clients.

It is important to be clear about what you do and don't want to get from a relationship with a vape shop, and to make sure that the relationship serves public health goals.



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At the time of writing the Swap-to-Stop scheme is in place in England, and many services will be providing vapes and liquids either directly or via vouchers.

Some services will be using the Crown Commercial Services purchasing portals to order the vapes they need for clients. For more details please see [Advice to services on making vaping products available to clients](#).

There are good reasons to consider developing a relationship with a vape shop local to your service, as local residents may well use them for supplies after their treatment episode with you has finished.

Shops that just sell vapes or shops that sell other goods too?

Specialist shops that only sell vapes and associated vaping paraphernalia will be more likely to possess accurate knowledge, and have built up useful experience, than say a supermarket or newsagent where vaping equipment is just one of the things that they stock.

However, it must be remembered that some clients will not have access to a specialist vape shop, decide not to use one and/or simply want to buy the cheapest devices available. It is important not to put people off doing this once you know why they make these choices, but these generic shops will probably not be able to help you or the client a great deal. It should also be remembered that the less specialist the shop, the more likely they are to sell illegal vapes and sell to underage customers. If this is suspected, the retailer can be reported to your local Trading Standards team.

How long have they been trading?

An established vape shop will have greater experience of what works for different people, but they all have to start somewhere, and a newly-opened shop may have really good knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff.

Is the shop owned by the tobacco industry?

If you want to know about independent shops in your area, you can simply go in and ask. Discuss your needs with them face to face and make your own mind up whether you would be happy to send clients to them. An independent shop will be very quick to assure you that it has nothing to do with the tobacco industry (TI), and those who are part of the TI will tell you who owns the business.

Establishing the existing relationship between any shop and the TI would be important. This shouldn't mean not working with shops who happen to sell TI vaping products, but be wary about a public health team lending their brand to a shop selling heated tobacco. All of this is highly sensitive and public health teams need to be really careful about who they are working with.

Do they really want people to stop smoking?

There have been accusations that vape shops simply want to keep people coming back to their shops and are not concerned with the needs of the individual.

Most staff in these shops are vapers, having stopped smoking themselves, and they are generally keen to help others become ex-smokers. The attitude of those behind the counter is important and this is why it is necessary to visit shops and observe customer-staff interactions; ask yourself if you would be confident sending your clients to them.



Do they comply with the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016?

All vaping products that are legally sold in the UK will be registered with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). Your local Trading Standards Department will be monitoring compliance with regulations and should be able to advise if any shops have been found to be selling non-compliant goods. It is more likely that car boot traders, phone shops and mixed goods shops are selling non-regulated goods, as specialist retailers with premises have too much to lose. They will have invested heavily in ensuring compliance, so will be watching other traders for any breaches of the regulations.

It would be advisable to look for/ask for assurances around compliance with regulations – it would not be good for a service to be embarrassed by a collaboration with a shop that was then caught selling to under-18s, for example.

No substitute for personal experience

Finally, the best advice is to go in and talk to retailers. Many services have now done what Leicester City did in 2014 and invited vape shop owners to team meetings to share knowledge and points of view. Stop smoking service teams benefit through strengthening of their knowledge and confidence, while the owners are equipped with the facts about how stop smoking services work locally so that they can explain to their customers the benefits of attendance.

These guidance notes will not cover every situation, but our knowledge base is growing all the time, and at the NCSCST we welcome observations and comments from stakeholders to improve our guidance: enquiries@ncsct.co.uk



Further resources

Vaping: a guide for health and social care professionals (briefing)

www.ncsct.co.uk/publications/vaping_briefing

Vaping: a guide for healthcare professionals (learning module)

<https://elearning.ncsct.co.uk/vaping-launch>

Advice to services on making vaping products available to clients

www.ncsct.co.uk/publications/service_advice_vapes

Ward et al., 2018, A qualitative exploration of the role of vape shop environments in sustaining smoking abstinence, International journal of Public Health and the Environment.

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29425117