

Children, Young People and Education Committee Sixth Senedd Priorities Consultation

July 2021

Theme 3: Health and well-being, including social care (as they relate to children and young people)

In Wales 8% of 15 to 16-year-olds still smoke on a regular basis – a figure that has not fallen since 2013. Smoking rates are highest among young people from the most deprived backgrounds. According to the latest SHRN survey of 103,971 students in Wales, children from more deprived backgrounds are twice as likely to smoke as those from the most affluent backgrounds and were 12% more likely to have had their first cigarette before the age of 13.

Smoking prevalence among pregnant teenagers is alarmingly high with 35% of 16 to 19-year-olds smoking throughout their pregnancy, according to the latest Welsh Government Maternity and Birth Statistics.

Smoking is an addiction of childhood – ASH Wales’ 2021 YouGov survey found that 81% of current smokers in Wales tried their first cigarettes before the age of 18. Research has shown that the earlier children become regular smokers and carry on as adults, the greater their risk is of developing lung cancer or heart disease in later life. Children who smoke are two to six times more susceptible to coughs, wheeziness and shortness of breath. People who start smoking as children are often the heaviest smokers later in life and have the lowest chance of quitting. There is a strong correlation between cannabis use and tobacco smoking. According to the latest SHRN survey by DECIPHER more than 1 in 5 (23%) of Year 11 students reported first using cannabis before the age of 14. Almost 1 in 10 (8%) of young people in Wales reported having ever used cannabis in their lifetime. Combining cannabis with tobacco is a popular means by which to consume cannabis and any changes to youth cannabis also impact youth smoking uptake.

Smoking is a major cause of health inequalities in Wales. It is the leading cause of early preventable death and costs the Welsh NHS around £302 million a year. In order to address the devastating impact of smoking in Wales and to break the cycle of health inequalities, it is crucially important to tackle youth smoking prevalence and prevent today's children from becoming the next generation of adult.

ASH Wales is calling for the Committee to making tackling youth smoking prevalence a priority and to consider the following measures:

- **A national education programme to be delivered in all secondary schools with a revised approach to prevention and the impact of smoking**
- **A targeted approach to tackling smoking prevalence in the most deprived parts of Wales and among pregnant teenagers**
- **A tailored intervention and support programme for Pupil Referral Units and further education colleges**
- **The extension of smokefree policies for all further education settings**
- **A cross-governmental approach to address the co-use of tobacco and cannabis given the strong links between two substances**
- **The development of innovation digital solutions to raise awareness of the harms of smoking among children and young people**