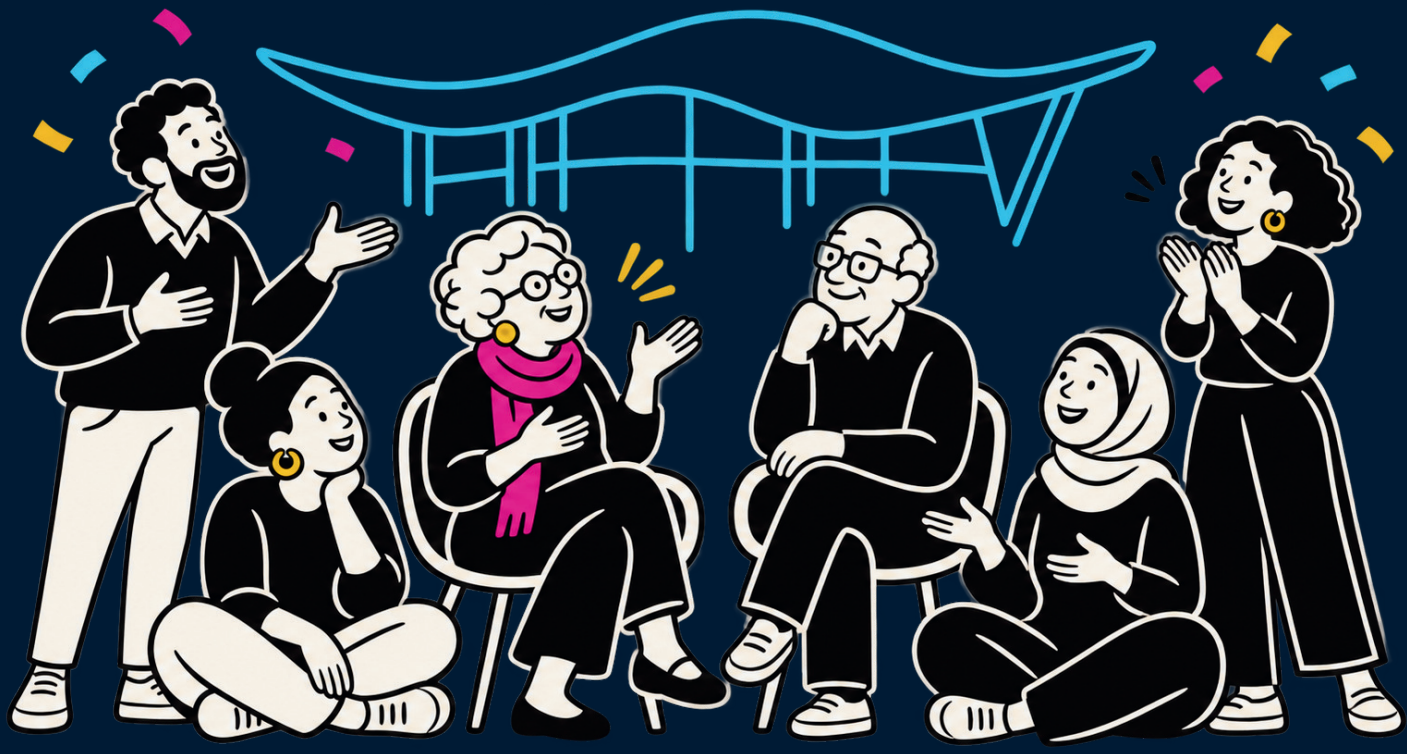
ash wales cymru
action on smoking and health

50 YEARS OF ACTION
1976 – 2026

Fifty years of action in Wales

The job is not done.



ANNIVERSARY REPORT

50 years to celebrate.

In the 1970s, around four in ten adults in Wales smoked cigarettes. By 2024-25, that had fallen to around one in ten.[2] This remarkable social change took people in communities, public services and politics working together, often for years before the changes they fought for came into effect. ASH Wales is immensely proud to have been at the forefront of that work since 1976.

Progress has been made but it has been uneven. In our 2026 survey, 28% of Welsh adults living in social housing said they smoked, compared with 8% of homeowners.[4] Wales is off track to meet its target of reducing adult smoking to 5% or less by 2030.[3] Even if we reach the 5% nationally target, some communities will be left behind. Closing the gap will take political commitment, sustainable funding and a willingness to do things differently.

For the next generation, the Tobacco and Vapes Act gives Wales its best chance yet to prevent a lifetime of tobacco addiction. By preventing young people from buying tobacco, taking action against illegal sellers and making sure people understand the harms of smoking, we can help break the generational cycle of addiction.

Making Wales smokefree now has to involve listening to people in the communities where smoking rates remain highest. People who smoke should be involved in designing quit services so we can find better ways engage and give them more choice in how they quit.

That same local knowledge matters on our high streets. Residents should have a real say in how councils, Trading Standards and businesses work together to tackle illegal tobacco and vape sales. We want high streets people are proud of, where businesses can thrive and families know their children are protected.

This is why Wales still needs ASH Wales. With the Tobacco and Vapes Act now law, it would be easy to think the job is done. People struggling to quit, young people worried about nicotine addiction and communities concerned about illegal sales know there is more to do. We are here to make sure their voices are heard. We will work with government, public services, young people and communities to put the Act into practice and use our independence to speak up when more action or investment is needed.

We honour the people who changed what it means to grow up in Wales by ensuring the next generation can grow up free from tobacco and nicotine addiction, wherever they live.



Nearly £50 every second

Smoking costs Wales an estimated £1.56 billion a year.[17]

1976–2026

50 years of action for a smokefree Wales

1976 **ASH Wales is founded.**

1999 Wales pilots local services to help people stop smoking.

2003 Most tobacco advertising is banned.

2005 The tobacco sponsorship ban extends to major international events.

2007 Wales makes indoor public places and workplaces smokefree.

2007 The legal age for buying tobacco rises from 16 to 18.

2012
2015 Tobacco disappears from open display in Welsh shops.

2013 The Filter takes advice and support to young people online and in the places they already go.

2015 Smoking in cars carrying children becomes illegal.

2017 Plain packs become standard for cigarettes and rolling tobacco.

2021 Wales extends smokefree protection to playgrounds, school grounds and hospital grounds.

2025 The ban on single-use vapes takes effect.

2026 **The Tobacco and Vapes Act becomes law as ASH Wales marks 50 years.**



Why Wales needed a campaigning voice

In 1962, the Royal College of Physicians called for restrictions on tobacco advertising, sales to children and smoking in public places.[1] When ASH established its Welsh branch in 1976, with Welsh Office support, many of those protections were still years away.[5] The evidence was already there. Wales needed a voice of its own to build support for change and keep pressing for decisions.

In 1989, our Bon Appetit campaign encouraged restaurants to go smokefree, long before the law protected the people who worked in them.[5] Our Smokers' Helpline for Wales took on a different problem, giving people who wanted to quit advice and putting them in touch with local services.[6] Both showed what campaigning could do, but also where it fell short. A helpline could help someone take the first step towards quitting but it couldn't protect a bar worker from breathing other people's smoke on every shift. For that, Wales needed a change in the law.

After becoming an independent Welsh charity in 2007, ASH Wales brought charities and professional bodies together through the Wales Tobacco Control Alliance. Cancer Research UK and British Heart Foundation Cymru have been long-standing partners in that work. Together, we pressed for a national plan to prevent children from starting to smoke, help people quit and protect them from second-hand smoke.[7]

Welsh Government's 2012 Tobacco Control Action Plan set a target to reduce adult smoking from 23% to 16% by 2020. A year later, Alliance members went to the Senedd to press ministers to deliver it, calling for smokefree playgrounds, protection for children in cars and plain tobacco packaging.[7] The target mattered, but those were the changes people would actually see.



Helen Poole

Smoking Cessation Practitioner, University Hospital of Wales

ASH Wales has led and supported groundbreaking work, including campaigns that contributed to smoke-free cars and smoke-free public spaces, helping to create healthier environments for families and future generations. They have worked tirelessly with some of the most vulnerable groups in society, including people experiencing homelessness, housing association tenants, and communities supported by the Fire and Rescue Service, ensuring that tobacco-related harm is addressed where it is often most acute.

Winning protection and making it last

“It’s part and parcel of working behind a bar, you just get on with it.” That was how one person working in a Vale of Glamorgan pub described second-hand smoke to researchers in 2001.[8] For the people behind the bar, breathing other people’s smoke was part of going to work.

When the Welsh Assembly examined smokefree workplaces, opponents argued that ventilation could protect staff. ASH Wales gave evidence alongside other health organisations that it could not. The committee agreed: staff and customers could breathe in harmful substances before the equipment removed them. In 2005, it recommended that Wales seek the powers to make enclosed workplaces and public places smokefree.[8]

The law took effect on 2nd April 2007. In 2005-06, **66% of adults in Wales who didn’t smoke** reported regular exposure to second-hand smoke. In 2007, that figure was **42%**.[2] Researchers measuring the air in Welsh bars also found that fine-particle pollution fell sharply after the law came in.[8] Workers didn’t have to rely on their employer choosing to make the air safer.

That protection faced a new test in 2012, when ministers proposed allowing smoking in certain film and television scenes. The performer would light the cigarette, but the crew would breathe the same air. Through **#keeptheban**, we organised a petition and gave evidence to the Assembly alongside other health organisations. Ministers reviewed the evidence and announced in May 2013 that they would not go ahead.[9]

Hospital grounds show why winning a law is only part of the work. They became smokefree in 2021, yet Aneurin Bevan University Health Board has reported widespread smoking across its hospital sites. The health board promotes free nicotine replacement for patients staying in hospital.[8] Both sides matter: **patients should be able to reach care without walking through smoke, and people admitted to a ward should get help to manage withdrawal without having to commit to quitting.** A smokefree hospital has to make both possible.



What 50 years of campaigning changed

We ran the Welsh NHS Smokers' Helpline

From April 2002 to March 2003, our team handled 7,589 requests for information and 1,859 for further advice or counselling, and referred 121 callers to local stop-smoking services. Welsh stop-smoking specialists were still using the practical quit guide we published in 1994.[6]





We made the case for smokefree workplaces

Through Bon Appetit, we encouraged restaurants to go smokefree. We gave evidence that ventilation couldn't protect staff from second-hand smoke, and an Assembly inquiry cited our findings. In 2007, Wales made enclosed workplaces smokefree.[5] [8]

We defended smokefree protections for film and TV crews

When ministers proposed letting actors smoke on set, we launched #KeepTheBan, organised a petition and gave evidence alongside other health organisations. In 2013, ministers dropped the exemption. Smokefree protections stayed in place for the whole crew.[9]





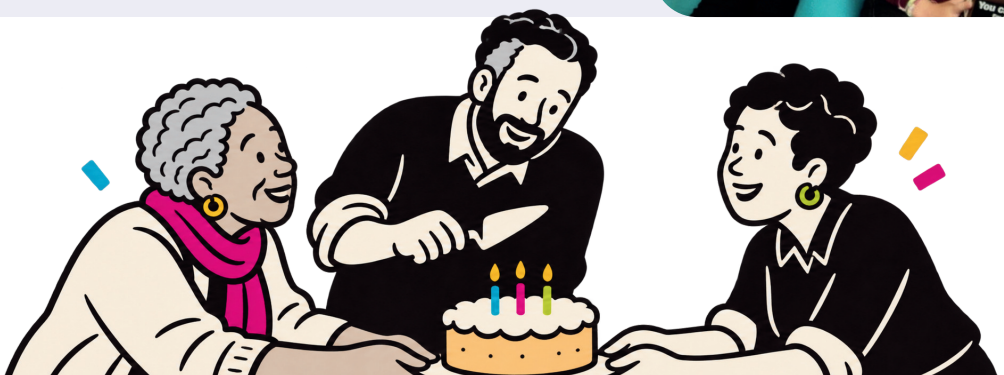
We took quit support to 12,500 young people

We launched The Filter in 2013 and took prevention and quit support into youth clubs, colleges and pupil referral units. We then led The Filter Europe and produced a toolkit in seven languages, including Welsh.[14]

We took Welsh children's case for plain packs to Parliament

Children told us branded cigarette packs reminded them of perfume boxes, posh tissues and Lego. MPs heard their evidence in 2013. We followed up with a formal submission, and plain packs became mandatory in 2017.[11]

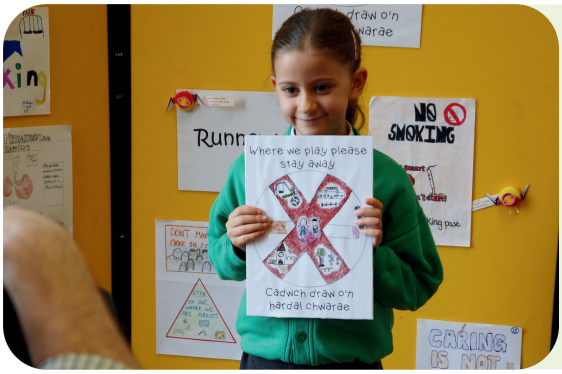




We brought smokefree beaches to Wales

We gave local partners signs and guidance to make beaches smokefree. From Little Haven and Caswell Bay to later work with National Trust Cymru and RSPB, the voluntary campaign reached nine named beaches.[10]





We took smokefree playgrounds from one council to all 22

We took children's views to councils and tracked progress on a public map. All 22 councils acted. The Welsh Government credited that work in the Bill, and smokefree public playgrounds became law in 2021, a UK first.[10]

We fought to make hospital grounds smokefree

The 2015 Bill left hospital grounds out. We challenged the omission and showed that 71% of people surveyed backed a ban. The Welsh Government cited our evidence. Hospital grounds went into the 2017 Act and became smokefree by law in 2021.[10]





We changed the rules on touchlines and campuses

We piloted smokefree sidelines in two leagues. In 2020, the FAW rolled out the policy, covering 522 junior clubs at launch. That year Cardiff Met made both teaching campuses smokefree after drawing up an action plan with us.[10]

We challenged Big Tobacco's access to the Senedd

In 2021, we wrote to Senedd Members urging them to boycott a Japan Tobacco International event and took our protest to the Senedd steps. John Griffiths MS raised our concerns in Plenary and asked the Llywydd to reconsider whether tobacco industry events should be held on the Senedd estate.



Giving children a different beginning

We showed children cigarette packs. They saw perfume boxes, posh tissues and Lego. On our 2012 roadshow, their answers showed what adults could miss: a pack didn't have to look like cigarettes to catch a child's eye. Those observations reached the House of Commons debate on plain packaging in 2013.[11] They helped make the case for taking away a space tobacco companies could still use to market cigarettes.

Children also helped change the places they played. In January 2012, our enquiries found just one Welsh council with a smokefree playground policy. We tracked every council's progress on a public map and took a film of children's views into council meetings. In several areas, children designed the signs for the playgrounds they used. By November 2015, **all 22 councils had acted**. Wales made smokefree public playgrounds a legal requirement in 2021.[10]

We backed the British Lung Foundation-led campaign to protect children from smoke in cars. When the law took effect in 2015, Welsh Government commissioned us to make films so primary school children could explain why it mattered in their own words.[12] We also worked with schools and councils on smokefree school gates, and with the FAW Trust on junior football. The policy announced in 2020 began with small-sided matches for five- to eleven-year-olds and was intended to reach more than 42,000 players.[10]

The protection children experience still depends on where they are. School grounds are smokefree by law, but that does not automatically cover the pavement where families wait. On the coast, we worked with National Trust Cymru and RSPB to help three North Wales beaches become voluntary smokefree spaces.[10] The difference between those approaches matters: a local agreement can start to change what children see, but it won't reach every place they spend time.



The lesson from the playgrounds is to listen to children, help communities act on what they say and check whether the change reaches the places still missing out.



We took pupils' evidence to Parliament

12,524 pupils took part in our survey. Among pupils who vaped and answered the question, 45% said they felt they couldn't get through a school day without vaping. We submitted the findings to the UK Parliament committee examining the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

Taking support to young people

When we launched Ffaith in 2007, young people helped shape campaigns on smoking in their own communities. They also told us who they felt comfortable asking for help: a youth worker they knew or someone their own age. In our 2011 survey, three quarters of young respondents who smoked had tried to quit, and 73% said confidentiality mattered.[14] Their answers showed us that support had to be private and easy to reach.

With support from the Big Lottery Fund, we launched The Filter in 2013 to take advice and stop-smoking support to young people. They could text us, message us on social media, read advice online or call a dedicated helpline. Our youth workers went to youth clubs, colleges and pupil referral units, so young people could ask questions face to face.[14]

We trained the adults young people already knew. The Filter reached 12,500 young people, and Cardiff University found that our team built strong relationships with them. We went on to lead The Filter Europe, where young volunteers helped create and test a toolkit published in seven languages, including Welsh. When funding ended in 2018, Wales lost that dedicated outreach.[14] That same approach shapes Nicofiends, our bilingual resources developed with youth workers to help young people talk about nicotine, peer pressure and cravings.



Helen Jones

Communications Officer, Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services

The Filter Europe was held up as a landmark example of a successful project. It was an inspiration and a case study we used to encourage other organisations to pursue international projects. In all my years promoting international work to the sector, it was apparent that organisations were often keen to learn but didn't fully realise how amazing their own practice was until they got insights into the work of others elsewhere.

The success of the Filter Europe wasn't just in the strong partnerships built up, but was built on the stellar legacy of campaigning, knowledge of public health and excellent participation work with young people that ASH Wales does day in day out. In an age of misinformation, increased pressure on people, a rise in vaping, there is still a crucial role for organisations like ASH Wales to play, their human and humane approach to communication and campaigning is needed now more than ever.A huge happy 50th to ASH Wales, what a milestone!

Today, the smokefree generation law and action on underage sales are important parts of prevention. So is giving young people ways to respond when they're offered a product or have questions about their own use. In our youth vaping survey, one in five respondents who vaped gave reasons related to mental health or wellbeing.[15] Prevention needs to take those experiences seriously, even as the products change.

Our relationships with schools help us keep that work relevant. When Cardiff and Vale colleagues asked for materials on sharing vapes and Cardiff High asked for resources on cannabis and nicotine pouches, they were bringing us questions pupils and staff were facing at the time. We turn those questions into activities young people can take part in, whether that means picking apart a marketing claim or practising what to say when a friend offers them a vape.[16]

ASH Wales turns what young people and schools tell us into practical prevention. The gap we still need to address is easy-to-find advice and support for young people who have questions about their own nicotine use. For some, that might mean asking a question online without giving their name. For others, it might mean talking face to face with someone they already trust. Young people should help decide what that support looks like. They shouldn't have to be ready to quit before they can get help.



Lauren Thomas

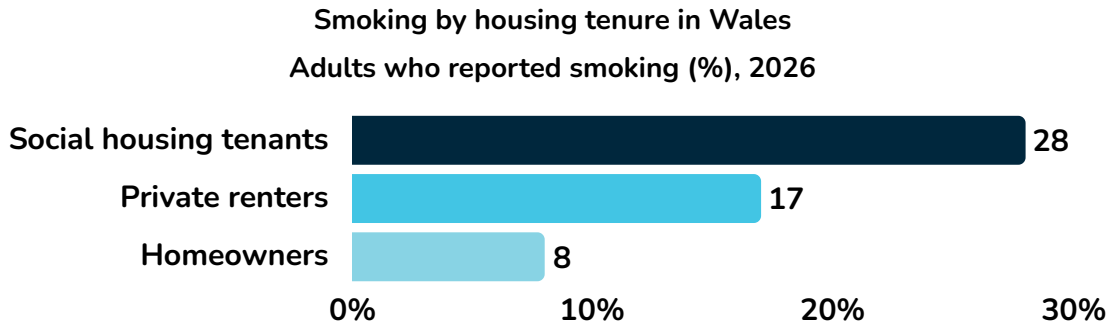
Public Health Practitioner
Cardiff and Vale Public Health Team

I work closely with ASH Wales, and their support is particularly valuable when schools raise concerns about smoking or vaping, with their approachable and responsive team providing specialist guidance and tailored resources to help address emerging issues. As a valued member of our partnership network, they work collaboratively with stakeholders to reduce smoking prevalence, prevent uptake among children and young people, and create healthier, smoke-free environments across Cardiff and the Vale. Their expertise and commitment make them a highly trusted partner.

The job is not done

Before Wales's smokefree law took effect in 2007, ASH Wales gave the Western Mail a feature called '**Beyond the Ban'**. Our 2008 briefing warned that 'there is a risk that many will believe the job is done'.[8] The 2007 law changed what people breathed at work and in public places. The smokefree generation law will change who can be sold tobacco.[3] Both are achievements worth celebrating. The warning we gave in 2008 still matters: a landmark law is a reason to build on progress, not assume it has reached everyone. Wales must protect the next generation while making it easier for people who smoke today to get help to quit, especially where smoking remains most common.

Smoking became less common in Wales after the ban. By 2015, 19% of adults reported smoking, down from 24% in 2007. But the national figure hid a wide gap between the most and least deprived areas.[2] The same divide shows up in who dies from smoking. Death rates attributable to smoking fell in both groups, but the relative gap widened.[3]



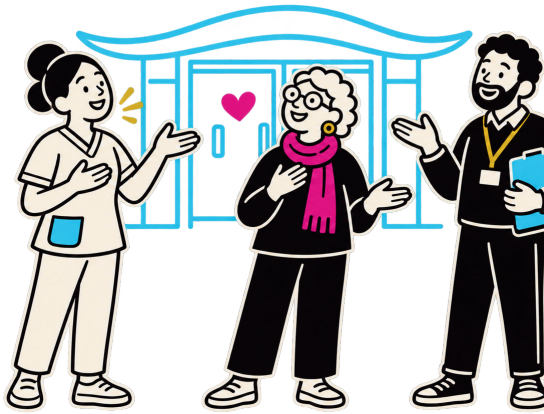
Source: ASH Wales/YouGov, 2026. Wales adults aged 18+: n=1,119; social housing: n=130.

In 2025, we worked with the Bevan Foundation to bring the Senedd cross-party groups on smoking and poverty together. They called for shorter waits for Help Me Quit and for support to be offered through services people already use, such as debt advice.[7] [17]

That first step can be harder when someone needs help with more than one addiction. At our Wales Prevention Network conference, people talked about how separate services and unclear referrals leave people without support. Clear referral routes could help housing officers and pharmacists connect people to stop-smoking support alongside help for alcohol, drug or gambling harms.[7]

Wales could reach its national smokefree target and still **leave the communities most affected behind**. We need to know who is offered help to quit, who takes it up and who manages to stop, by level of deprivation.

Making it easier to quit



In our 2026 YouGov survey, 53% of people who smoked said they wanted to stop.[4] Wales has an NHS stop-smoking service. The challenge is making it easier to get practical help, especially in communities where smoking does the most harm.

In our small 2020 survey with Public Health Wales, 60 of the 104 social housing tenants who smoked said free stop-smoking medication might help. In a separate question, just 22 said they would try an NHS stop-smoking service. The survey could not explain why, but it raises the question. **Do people know what help they can get, and how to access?**[6]

Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board's lung cancer screening pilot offered help at several points. Of the 341 people who smoked and completed the initial phone assessment, 85 accepted a stop-smoking referral. Almost a third did so outside the main route through the nurse assessment. **Give people more than one chance to take up help**.[6]

At our 2026 CPG on Smoking and Health, we heard evidence on nicotine vapes for quitting and Greater Manchester's hospital programme. Wales could test an approach informed by existing evidence and learn from its own pilots, including Allen Carr's Easyway in Cardiff and the Vale and Betsi Cadwaladr's pregnancy voucher scheme. In the Betsi pilot, 72 of the 213 women who received vouchers had a carbon monoxide (CO)-validated quit at 12 weeks after birth. **Innovation is key to success**.

In 2025-26, 15,471 people started NHS stop-smoking treatment and set a quit date. Of those, 3,606 had a CO-validated quit at four weeks.[6] We need to know who was offered help, who never reached an appointment and where those gaps were greatest. That means consistent CO testing and separate reporting of self-reported and verified quits.

Political commitment and sustained funding would give local teams room to test new approaches with people who smoke and learn openly from what falls short.

Tessa Craig

Principal Public Health Practitioner and tobacco lead, Powys Teaching Health Board

As Tobacco Lead for Powys, I consider ASH Wales to be an invaluable partner in supporting our work to reduce the harm caused by smoking and tobacco use. ASH Wales provides trusted, evidence-based information, up-to-date policy briefings, and high-quality resources that help inform local planning, service development, and public health campaigns. Their publications, training opportunities, and advocacy work ensure that we remain informed about emerging issues and best practice, enabling us to deliver effective tobacco control initiatives across Powys. ASH Wales also acts as a reliable source of information and practical resources that can be shared with partners, communities, and individuals, helping us to strengthen our approach to prevention, smoking cessation, and the wider goal of creating a smoke-free Wales.

Making Welsh evidence count

When Parliament examined the Tobacco and Vapes Bill in 2025, we showed the committee a gap Wales could no longer afford to ignore. We did not have a reliable picture of who sold tobacco and nicotine products or where they sold them. Without that, Wales could not tell whether outlets were more concentrated in the communities already experiencing the greatest harm. That was part of our case for retail licensing.[15]

Our Youth Vaping Survey showed why a list of shops would only ever be part of the picture. Friends and family were the most common sources of vapes, but pupils also reported getting them from shops and online. We took that evidence to Parliament alongside practical proposals: make retail licences conditional, strengthen age checks and fund bilingual communications so people understand the rules.[15]

Before the Senedd's consent vote on 9th December 2025, the Wales Tobacco Control Alliance wrote to every Member of the Senedd. Its case was cited in the debate before the Senedd gave its consent. We brought evidence to Parliament and worked with partners to make the case for action in Wales.[15]

The Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026 provides for a Welsh retail licensing scheme. The regulations will determine whether it closes the evidence gap we took to Parliament. Wales needs a reliable picture of where these products are sold, and councils and public health teams need to be able to use it to see where outlets are concentrated and decide where to act. ASH Wales will keep bringing Welsh research and young people's experiences to those decisions, so the scheme is shaped by what is happening in communities, not just by what is easiest to count.

The illegal trade doesn't stop at the shop door

In Gwynedd, a report through No Ifs. No Butts. prompted a Trading Standards inspection that uncovered around £30,000 in hidden cash.[18] Through Operation CeCe, Trading Standards Wales has shown how organised crime groups supply illegal tobacco and vapes across council boundaries. Closing one shop does not necessarily stop the trade behind it.[18]

ASH Wales built No Ifs. No Butts. to connect what people see locally with what officers know elsewhere. People can report suspected sales anonymously. Authorised Trading Standards officers can bring together reports about the same premises or online seller, check them against intelligence they already hold and record what happens next. We run the service and track emerging products and enforcement activity across Wales.[18]

Reports relating to Wales rose from 15 in May 2025 to 150 in May 2026.[18] What makes that increase matter is how the information is used. Trading Standards partners have said it helps them decide where to carry out test purchases and has contributed to wider investigations, seizures and shop closures. What Wales still cannot consistently show is whether illegal sales stopped after officers acted, or whether the same suppliers carried on elsewhere.[18]



More than 1,100 reports relating to Wales

We built No Ifs. No Butts. so residents could report suspected illegal sales anonymously. Trading Standards uses those leads alongside its own evidence. In Gwynedd, one report prompted an inspection that uncovered around £30,000 in hidden cash.[18]

Residents, councils, Trading Standards and responsible businesses all have a part to play in making high streets places people are proud of and where children are protected from illegal sales.

Welsh Ministers must back both the service that brings this evidence together and the officers who act on it. Without sustained funding, Wales risks losing a dedicated way to connect what communities report with what enforcement teams know. People have shown they are willing to tell us what is happening. They should not have to keep reporting the same problem in a different shop.



Heather Sawyer

Investigations and Intelligence Manager, Newport City Council

ASH Wales has been a valuable partner in supporting our Trading Standards work across Newport. Through initiatives such as No Ifs. No Butts., intelligence sharing, awareness campaigns and partnership working, they have helped strengthen our response to illegal tobacco and underage sales.

A practical example has been their support in raising public awareness and encouraging community intelligence, which has complemented our enforcement activity and contributed to identifying and disrupting the supply of illicit tobacco within the city. Their collaborative approach has helped bring together key partners to tackle tobacco-related harm more effectively.

50 years of progress. The job is not done.

People in Wales fought for protections that children growing up today will take for granted. That is an extraordinary achievement. From 1st January 2027, it will be illegal to sell tobacco to anyone born on or after 1st January 2009.[3] But a child can be born into the smokefree generation and still grow up surrounded by tobacco. That is the gap Wales now has to close.

Children learn what feels normal from the people they love and trust, and they grow up in the same communities where cheap illegal cigarettes can keep tobacco within reach. Organised crime profits from that trade, and some sellers target children directly. In the Rhondda, Trading Standards secured a closure order against a shop officers suspected of using the appearance of a sweetshop to draw children in to buy tobacco and vapes.[18] Making the law work means disrupting that trade and working with the people who shape children's lives. Families and local groups need to be able to talk honestly about nicotine without anyone feeling judged, and children's protection cannot wait for the adults around them to be ready to quit.

That is where an independent ASH Wales belongs. The youth worker who hears what's being passed around and the resident who sees what's being sold know things that don't always show up in national figures. We use what young people and local workers tell us to shape prevention. Through No Ifs. No Butts., we give residents a way to share intelligence Trading Standards can act on.[16] [18] We take that evidence to ministers, work with the people who can make change happen and speak up when the response falls short.

Welsh Ministers must publish and fund the tobacco control plan through to 2030, with named leads, deadlines and public reporting. Death rates attributable to smoking fell in both the most and least deprived areas, yet in 2020-22 the rate in the most deprived fifth was still more than three times as high as in the least deprived fifth.[3] Wales must judge success by whether it narrows that gap as well as by whether it reaches its 5% target.

50 years of progress have given children in Wales a different start in life.

Now we have to make sure that **progress reaches every child**, especially those growing up in **places where smoking has taken the most.** They deserve more years with the people they love and the chance to grow up without tobacco taking the same toll on their generation.



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About the figures

Historical smoking estimates use different surveys and are not directly comparable. Youth survey findings describe the pupils who took part; programme totals record reach. No Ifs. No Butts. figures count reports, which may include duplicates, not confirmed offences.

The £50-per-second figure is rounded from Public Health Wales's estimated £1.56 billion annual cost, including health, social care, productivity and environmental costs.