

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

WRITTEN STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY HEALTH MINISTER, MIKE NESBITT UPDATE ON ENACTMENT OF THE TOBACCO AND VAPES BILL

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Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health): I am making this written statement to notify the Assembly that the Tobacco and Vapes Bill has become an Act of Parliament.

The Tobacco and Vapes Act is one of the most significant public health reforms in a generation. It provides us with an opportunity to reduce preventable deaths and health inequalities across Northern Ireland and protect our children, young people and future generations from the harms of tobacco and nicotine addiction.

As members will recall, in February 2025 you voted in support of a Legislative Consent Motion to extend the Tobacco and Vapes Bill to Northern Ireland. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you again for supporting this milestone legislation.

Smoking is the number one preventable cause of death, disability and ill health in the UK and kills over 2,000 people in NI every year. It is a major cause of health inequality, with smoking rates in areas where deprivation is highest three times that in the least deprived.

The Bill's generational approach to eliminating tobacco use provides a groundbreaking way to address this public health threat. It will create a smoke-free generation, making it an offence from 1st January 2027 for anyone born on or after 1st January 2009 to be sold tobacco products.

The Bill will address growing concerns about the harms of vaping, particularly the increasing use by children and young people. Whilst vapes may have a role in helping some people stop smoking, the marketing of these devices to children and young people is unethical. The Bill will reduce exposure to these products in everyday settings by providing powers to regulate the display of vapes and to ban the advertising and sponsorship of these products.

Whilst the tobacco age of sale measures commence on 1 January 2027, a number of other measures commence six months after the Bill is made. This includes a ban on the sale (& proxy sale) of non-nicotine vapes to under 18s, a ban on the sale of nicotine products e.g. nicotine pouches to someone who is under the age of 18 and the extension of the tobacco vending machine ban to include cigarette papers, vapes and other nicotine products. My department is working closely with the Public Health Agency and local councils to ensure that a robust program of enforcement is in place.

The legislation also provides powers to make smoke-free places also vape-free and heated tobacco free, as well as powers to introduce a retail licensing scheme, which will commence on a day appointed following public consultation and subsequent regulations. In the meantime, Northern Ireland's existing Tobacco Retailer Register will be extended to include businesses which sell vapes and / or other nicotine products.

My department will continue to engage with key stakeholders, who have demonstrated unwavering support for the Bill and in taking action to address this important public health challenge.

Once again, I thank you for supporting this legislation and I will continue to engage with this Assembly as work on implementation progresses.