

# Smokefree 2025: Policy experts' views on radical policy options

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## Background

Tobacco use in New Zealand has declined in recent years, but modelling<sup>1</sup> shows we will not achieve the Smokefree 2025 goal if we continue to do what we are doing now, and the gap between Māori/Pacific and the general population is likely to widen. New, "game-changer" policies are needed...but which should we prioritise? This research explored the pros and cons of five radical policy options from the perspective of i) policy experts, ii) Māori leaders, and iii) Pacific leaders. The Māori and Pacific interviews are in progress, so we present preliminary findings only from the policy expert group.

## Methods

We conducted in-depth interviews with three groups of key informants: policy experts and Māori and Pacific leaders in tobacco control, community and political realms. Policy experts (n=6) were selected based on their seniority and relevant national-level policy, regulatory and technical expertise. They included members of parliament, senior public servants, and consultants. We asked participants their views on the political and technical feasibility of five radical policy options currently under consideration in the tobacco control sector, and the pros and cons of each in terms of impact on smoking, impact on ethnic disparities, and unintended outcomes. Interviews were conducted in July and August 2015. We present a preliminary 'top line' analysis. A final report presenting findings from all three strands and highlighting commonalities and differences between them will be available later in 2015.

## Preliminary findings

Key informants in the policy expert group overwhelmingly viewed dramatic tax increases as the most promising of the five options. Opinions on the other four options were mixed, and were particularly polarised on retail restrictions and denicotinisation. Key informants noted that the current government has little political appetite for introducing further tobacco control measures, and this may affect the political feasibility of any new measure: *"There's a sense that things are [already] being done and therefore a dramatic step is not needed"* (Member of Parliament)



### 1. Dramatic tax increase

We defined 'dramatic tax increases' as one or more one-off tax increase of at least 40%, and/or regular large increases of at least 20% per annum. Almost all ranked this as their number one option, citing political feasibility and demonstrated effectiveness as its key advantages. It was also seen as the option most likely to close the gap in smoking prevalence between Māori/ Pacific and the general population. Key informants raised concerns about potential negative impacts on low income families, but this was not seen as a reason to back away from further taxation. Rather, they emphasised the need to combine tax with other interventions to encourage and support cessation. *"There's an existing system, it's administratively efficient, its shown to be effective, politically the community's already bought into it, and it's not a big step for government"* (Senior Public Servant).

### 2. Comprehensive retail restrictions

We defined a 'substantial reduction in availability' as a 90% or more reduction in the number of retailers selling tobacco (to less than 600 nationwide), plus a ban on mail-order retailing of tobacco products. Some key informants were supportive of introducing supply side measures, and saw potential public appeal in the idea of eliminating tobacco sales near schools. However others questioned its effectiveness, saying smokers would simply travel further to buy tobacco, and few saw this option as politically feasible in the current environment, since it would be seen as 'anti-business'. *"Look I think if there was a bit of goodwill, it would be really easy but I think politically it's going to be almost impossible in the short term."* (Senior Public Servant)



### 3. Denicotinisation

Denicotinisation means mandating a maximum nicotine content for all cigarettes sold in New Zealand that would make them minimally addictive (e.g. 2mg/cigarette). Many were concerned about unintended negative health consequences. They pointed out that denicotinisation does not remove the toxic and carcinogenic substances in tobacco, and that people may inhale more deeply, continue smoking for social reasons, or perceive smoking to be 'safer' as a result of this intervention. Others, however, saw this as a promising option, since it would dramatically reduce the addictiveness of cigarettes. Most saw it as politically feasible, however challenges from the tobacco industry were seen as a likely barrier, and uncertainty about the impact on behaviour was a sticking point: *"Politically I wouldn't push it until I'm clear on the evidence, and if the evidence showed that - if a reduction in nicotine doesn't have the adverse effect of pushing up consumption then it would be something I'd be prepared to look at"* (Member of Parliament).



### 5. Tobacco free generation

The Tobacco Free Generation idea proposes that the age of legal purchase of tobacco is increased each year (from the current 18 years), with the result that people born after a certain date will never legally be able to buy tobacco products. Many key informants were attracted to this idea, but none thought it was politically feasible and most also questioned its effectiveness. *"In the New Zealand mindset [there's] a good number of people, not necessarily the majority but a good number of people who say, yeah you're either an adult or you're not. This product's either legal or it's not. And if it's legal and you're an adult, then you should have access to it"* (Member of Parliament).

### 4. Regulation of permitted additives

We asked participants' views on the introduction of comprehensive restrictions to ban all additives that plausibly have the effect of a) increasing addictiveness; b) increasing toxicity; c) increasing attractiveness (particularly to young people) and d) increasing palatability of tobacco products. The onus of proof would be on the industry to show that additives were safe, non-addictive, and did not increase attractiveness or palatability. Participants raised similar issues to those for denicotinisation. On the positive side some thought this could be framed in public health terms, and could potentially gain public and political support. However perceived political feasibility limitations included uncertainty around effectiveness, and the possible 'chilling' effect of potential tobacco company litigation. *"I think of all the interventions, this is the one where probably you'd face the biggest challenge from the industry - the whole intellectual property thing. They'd argue that you're destroying their brand"* (Consultant).

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**References** 1. Cobiac IJ, Ikeda T, Nghiem N, Blakely T, Wilson N. Modelling the implications of regular increases in tobacco taxation in the tobacco endgame. *Tob. Control.* 2015;24(2):139-145.



### What does it mean?

*The preliminary findings suggest that national-level policy experts view dramatic tax increases as the most politically feasible and most likely to be effective of the options. Māori and Pacific interviews are in progress, and a final report presenting findings from all three strands will be available later in 2015.*