

Frequently Asked Questions: Proposals for a Smokefree 2025 Action Plan

The Government's proposals for a Smokefree 2025 Action Plan present several important and far-sighted measures and it's important discussion about these is informed by evidence. The Action Plan sets out comprehensive and bold measures that would reduce smoking prevalence and the profound health inequities caused by smoking.

The ASPIRE 2025 Centre at the University of Otago, Wellington, has prepared this Frequently Asked Questions document to explain the Action Plan's strengths and provide background on three key proposed measures: reducing the availability of tobacco; reducing the nicotine content in tobacco products to minimal levels, and introducing a Smoke Free Generation.

We have also written several blogs in which we outline evidence for measures outlined in the Smokefree 2025 Action Plan; links to these blogs are on our [website](#).

1. What are the key strengths of the Smokefree 2025 Action Plan Discussion Document?

The Action Plan Discussion Document sets out clear and wide-ranging proposals that, collectively, could realise the 2025 goal. The proposals are bold, innovative, and reflect recent findings from national and international research. Integrating the ideas proposed into a detailed strategy and implementation plan provides a realistic prospect of achieving the 2025 goal and reducing the terrible health inequities caused by smoking.

Reducing tobacco availability

2. How would reducing the availability of tobacco contribute to achieving a Smokefree Aotearoa?

Although tobacco kills two thirds of its long term users, it is still available at around 6000 retail outlets where it is sold as though it is an ordinary consumer product. This widespread availability makes smoking appear normal. Young people who live in areas where there are many tobacco retailers are at greater risk of starting to smoke than young people who live in areas where there are fewer tobacco retailers. People trying to quit smoking are at greater risk of relapse if they live in areas where tobacco is easily available. Reducing the availability of tobacco is thus a key intervention.

3. How would greatly reducing the number of outlets selling tobacco products affect small retailers?

Ending sales of tobacco products in dairies and convenience stores is very unlikely to have the adverse impacts sometimes claimed. Margins on tobacco products are much lower than on most other items sold by small retailers, so the contribution tobacco products make to store profits is typically small. Tobacco products also represent a small proportion of most smaller retailers' overall sales (around 14% on average) and most tobacco sales are single-item transactions. The research evidence thus does not support arguments that tobacco products increase store footfall and lead to sales of higher margin products. Nonetheless, it is important to support small retailers and help them transition out of tobacco products. For example, providing business development advice could help retailers re-allocate the physical retail space used for tobacco products to higher profit products, which could increase store profitability.

4. **Won't reducing tobacco supply increase crime?**

Media reports suggest that tobacco products are commonly stolen in retail robberies, and there is a perception that such robberies are increasing, though we lack robust data about trends in retail crimes. Reducing the number of outlets selling tobacco would reduce opportunities for crimes; this measure would thus improve retailers' safety and reduce their security and insurance costs.

5. **But won't there be a black market for tobacco once it's not as easily available?**

As a small island nation with strong border security, New Zealand is well-placed to minimise the illicit tobacco trade and the illicit market has remained small, despite several years of tobacco excise tax increases. Implementing the full set of proposals outlined in the Action Plan is likely to greatly reduce smoking prevalence and demand for smoked tobacco products; as demand for tobacco reduces so too will the potential for a black market. In addition, the proposed Action Plan recommends investigating and implementing additional measures that could further strengthen border surveillance, which would also help prevent any growth in the black market for these products.

Reducing the nicotine in tobacco products to minimal levels

6. **How will reducing nicotine in tobacco products work?**

Reducing the nicotine in tobacco products to non-addictive levels means smoking will become unsatisfying, which will encourage people to quit or transition to other nicotine products. Reducing nicotine in cigarettes to very low levels will also mean young people who experiment with tobacco are at much lower risk of becoming addicted to smoking.

7. **Won't reducing the nicotine in tobacco products just mean that people smoke even more?**

Although it seems logical that people would try to compensate for reduced nicotine levels in their cigarettes by smoking more, in fact, the research shows that reducing nicotine levels to very low concentrations means that it is not possible to obtain a satisfying nicotine dose, and people who continue to smoke actually smoke less. Furthermore, research studies show that many other people lose interest in smoking and either quit or move to other alternatives.

8. **But what about people who can't stop using nicotine?**

In New Zealand, we have approved nicotine replacement therapies that can provide people with alternative nicotine sources; these options include patches, gum and lozenges. In recent years, other products, including vaping products, have become widely available; as well as providing nicotine, these products also mimic aspects of smoking that are important to some people. The proposed Action Plan also suggests increasing the cessation support available to people who smoke; providing more intensive, culturally appropriate, and easily accessible support will also help increase quitting.

Smoke Free Generation

9. **How will a smokefree generation work?**

This proposal recognises that almost all people start smoking when they are young. This proposal increases the legal age at which people can purchase tobacco every year and will create a generation of young people who have never been able to buy tobacco.

10. **Doesn't this idea unfairly constrain the autonomy of young people by taking away their choice to smoke?**

Tobacco companies have often framed smoking as an informed choice but research shows that young people who take up smoking do not make an informed choice. For example, they often start while under

pressure from their peers or when alcohol has compromised their thinking; most have no understanding of addiction until they are addicted and cannot stop. Creating a smokefree generation would stop thousands of young people from becoming addicted; addiction takes away young people's autonomy and becomes a trap from which many never escape. Instead of questioning why young people should continue having access to a lethal product, we need to ask why we still allow a highly addictive product that kills two thirds of its long term users to be freely available in around 6000 retail outlets. We would never allow a product like tobacco to be sold if someone was trying to introduce it today; the Smoke Free Generation idea will fix an anomaly and protect current and future generations of young people from addiction, preventable illness and premature death.

11. But won't all of these proposals impinge on people's freedoms?

There's nothing that impinges on people's liberty more than addiction. Over 80% of New Zealand smokers regret starting to smoke; most are desperate to stop smoking and over half have tried to quit in the last year. Research with people who smoke has found they often talk about never being able to plan their day without factoring in when they will be able to smoke. Making time to smoke often means taking time away from their children or leaving social settings. This plan will give people back freedom many have not had for a long time; it will mean they have greater control over their lives, their finances and their day to day activities. This measure will create liberty not take it away.

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