



Queensland
Family & Child
Commission

Policy Submission

Vaping

An inquiry into reducing rates of
e-cigarette use in Queensland

May 2023

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Commissioner's introduction

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to inform the Health and Environment Committee's *Inquiry into Reducing Rates of E-Cigarette Use in Queensland*. The QFCC is a statutory body responsible for influencing change that improves the safety and wellbeing of Queensland's children and their families.

In Australia, daily smoking rates have declined over recent decades. Queensland's adult smoking rate has more than halved from 24 percent in 1998 to 10 percent in 2020.¹ This can be attributed to sustained tobacco control strategies such as raising tobacco taxes, mass public education campaigns and smoke-free environment legislation.

Since their introduction, e-cigarettes are used by millions of people around the world, particularly by younger people.^{2,3} In recent years, their use has grown, often positioned as a less harmful alternative to cigarettes or tobacco products. The direct health risks, the association of e-cigarette use with tobacco smoking, and the uncertainty among the general population about their impacts on health mean that e-cigarette use, particularly for children and young people, is an important public health problem.

Government is responsible for protecting children and young people from harmful drugs, including e-cigarettes, including by ensuring that sufficient legislation is in place and that children, young people and their parents or families are educated about their effects.

The QFCC welcomes the Committee's timely inquiry into e-cigarette use, and investigation of the health, social, economic and environmental impacts to inform initiatives and programs associated with their use. We note the recent announcement by the Commonwealth Government to strengthen legislation, enforcement, education and support as a positive step to reduce vaping in Australia and consider that actions stemming from the Committee's inquiry should complement these measures.

Our submission is informed by the views and perspectives of young people who participated in a small focus group or provided individual responses. Given the prevalence and impacts of vaping among young people, we believe their voices, insights and experiences should be actively engaged as part of this inquiry.

Summary of QFCC's submission

- There is currently a paucity of contemporary Queensland data in relation to vaping amongst young people in comparison to other jurisdictions. Increasing the evidence about the prevalence and characteristics of vaping in Queensland will assist in the development of targeted interventions.
- E-cigarette use is multi-faceted and associated with different motivations for young people. Discouraging the use of e-cigarettes needs to respond to the differing motivations of young people to be effective.
- There are documented risks associated with e-cigarette use, including creating a pathway to addiction, increased uptake of smoking, inhalation of chemicals and poisoning.
- Families and communities should be engaged in the responses and given sufficient resources and information to have their own conversations with their children.
- Measures to discourage use need to be supportive rather than punitive, particularly for young people suffering from withdrawal symptoms.

TOR 1a. Prevalence of e-cigarette use

E-cigarette use amongst young people

Summary statement: *There is currently a paucity of contemporary Queensland data in relation to vaping amongst young people, as such, our submission references national data and data from other Australian states. Given the self-reported prevalence of vaping among young people in other jurisdictions, we consider Queensland-specific data is needed to understand the prevalence and characteristics of e-cigarette use in Queensland.*

The prevalence of self-reported e-cigarette use varies between recent surveys and across jurisdictions. Although what is clear, is that e-cigarettes have become increasingly prevalent in recent years, particularly among young people.

A 2021 survey from New South Wales found that one-third (32 percent) of 14–17-year-olds had used e-cigarettes. More than half (54 percent) of respondents who had ever vaped had never smoked before they first tried vaping.⁴ In South Australia, a 2022 survey of 13–19-year-olds conducted by the Commissioner for Youth and Children found that two in three respondents had tried vaping. Among those who had tried vaping, almost one in four reported vaping on most days.⁵

Comparatively, in 2017, 14 percent of 12–17-year-olds reported ever using an e-cigarette, although use was higher among older adolescents—from four percent of 12-year-olds to 21 percent of 17-year-olds.⁶ Of those who reported having ever used an e-cigarette, about half (48 percent) reported that they had never smoked a tobacco cigarette before their first vape. A quarter of these students who had vaped but never smoked, reported later trying tobacco cigarettes.

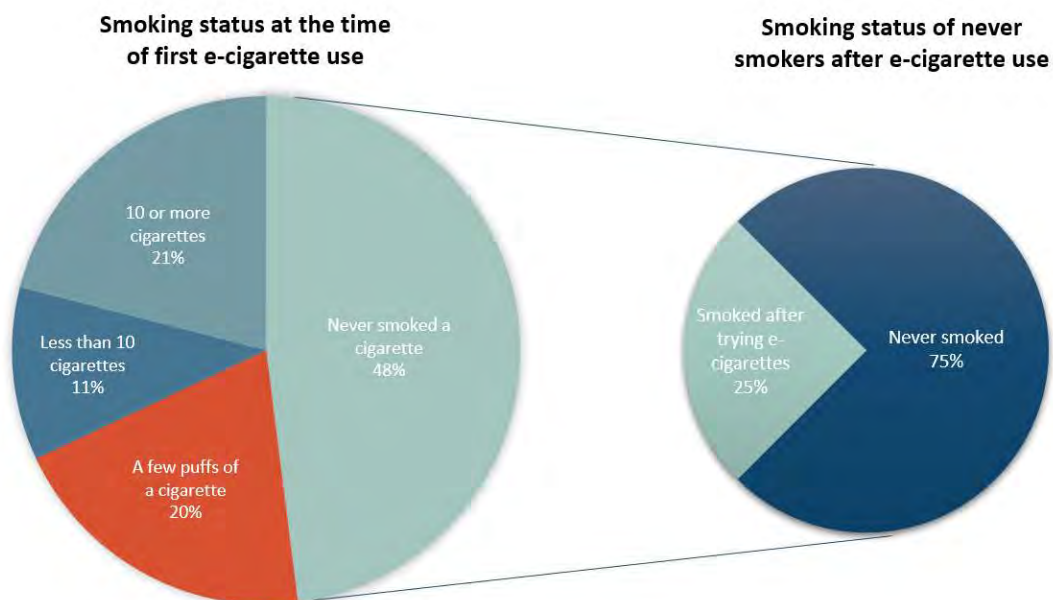


Figure 1: Previous tobacco smoking (before trying an e-cigarette) among ever e-cigarette users, Australia, 2017

These findings represent a marked increase in vaping among adolescents between 2017 and 2021.

Young people told us:

"It's pretty common among my peers—pretty much the majority of my friends vape, either socially or normally."

Vaping is often perceived as normal among young people, with cigarettes perceived to have more harmful consequences than vapes.⁷ Young people told us that vaping occurs in a variety of settings—in schools, at bars and clubs, at concerts, in the community and at home. There was a strong view that you can vape anywhere you want without repercussions.

Young people told us:

"I see vaping a lot in the community...you see it everywhere. The youngest person I've ever seen with a vape was about eight or nine years old – this little boy running around in my neighbourhood just smoking a vape. It's pretty prevalent."

Young people told us:

"I was at a concert and there were lots of people vaping...I don't like this is affecting my body and I don't consent to that. But how are you supposed to set those boundaries in a public space that massive? So, it's also an issue of bodily autonomy and consent culture and how we interact with people who have their own bodily autonomy and their own ability to consent or not consent in a public space."

Ease of access

Current regulations are not preventing access among children and young people.

A 2022 study of staff working in Australian schools found that younger students tended to have different ways of accessing e-cigarettes than those in secondary schools. According to teachers, primary school students were more likely to get e-cigarettes from siblings or to take them from home without permission. Whereas secondary school-aged children were more likely to get someone else to buy for them, receive them from a friend over 18 or via the internet.⁸

Sales of e-cigarette products through social media platforms has enabled access for young people. We were told that purchasing a vape is easy—that there is an established network of people and accounts who post new shipments, with flavours, prices and drop or pick up options.

Young people told us:

"Vapes are really easy to access and get because it's not regulated. You can get them through like Snapchat and Facebook messages. You could use a service to buy vapes and they literally deliver it to your door. You can also buy it online and all you have to click is the yes, I'm 18 button."

We also heard that older adolescents buy vapes directly from retailers and are rarely asked for identification. These local experiences are supported by several recent studies in other Australian jurisdictions.^{5,7}

Motivations – why young people vape

Summary statement: *E-cigarette use is multi-faceted and associated with differing motivations for young people.* The young people we spoke to discussed a variety of motivations for people to use e-cigarettes.

Mental health and wellbeing

Vaping can be associated with other social, emotional or mental health concerns. Several recent studies of adolescents found that stress was the most prevalent reason for vaping.^{9,10} There is also evidence of a higher incidence of depression in adolescent users of e-cigarettes than in those who do not use these products.^{11,12} Adolescents who have pre-existing depression or depressive symptoms are more likely to begin using e-cigarettes, suggesting a two-way relationship between depression and e-cigarette use.^{13,14}

Recent research has also shown an association between eating disorders and vaping—as a means to suppress appetites.¹⁵

Young people told us:

“Young people with eating disorders replace the feeling of food with vaping, because it provides the same taste and flavour in the mouth.”

Social influence and peer connection

A young person’s peer group plays an important role in their likelihood of using e-cigarettes.^{16,17,18}

Adolescents’ attitudes toward and use of e-cigarettes can be influenced by how the products are perceived within their friendship group.^{19,20} For example, beliefs that vaping will increase a young person’s social status might increase their risk of initiating e-cigarette use.²¹ Perceptions that the products are cool, fun, and help a young person ‘fit in’ can promote greater use, while for some adolescents, perceptions among peers that vaping is uncool and unfashionable can help to prevent use.²²

Young people told us about the influence of indirect peer pressure, including being surrounded by people vaping, having friends who constantly vape and seeing other people who might be more prominent figures in their life vaping.

Appeal

We heard from young people that e-cigarettes are appealing due to their lolly-like flavours and low odour, as opposed to the strong smell associated with a cigarette.

In 2022, a study examining e-cigarette product preferences among young adults showed the majority of current users (89 percent) preferred flavoured over unflavoured e-cigarettes. E-cigarettes flavoured like fruits were most popular, followed by lollies and desserts.²³

Young people told us:

“One of the most appealing features of vape for young people is the cool flavours that they come in, like bubble gum. And the grape flavours, they're like really appealing to young kids. Because I think the grape one, it smells like Hubba Bubba. So, it's appealing cause kids like lollies.”

Young people also discussed the ability for children and young people to hide vaping from their parents and teachers, such as attachments that reduce the aerosol, or discrete e-cigarettes that look like USB flash drives, highlighter pens, or other items that could belong in a school pencil case.

Young people told us:

“Some parents are blind to them because they can look like highlighters. I've had vapes that look like highlighters. And they are easy to conceal, easy to hide and they don't smell. And if they do smell, they smell something like peach, which you can easily blame as incense or perfume. They don't leave the familiar stench of cigarettes.”

Influence of social media

Young people told us:

“I think social media has played a big impact. I remember back when JUULs were a big thing...everyone was smoking a JUUL and it was like such a popular thing to post about on Snapchat and Insta and you see all these people with stories on it.”

An issue impacting the prevalence of vaping is the way they are marketed to adolescents across social media platforms. Social media plays an important role as both an information source and as a means of exposure to e-cigarette promotion.²⁴ Adolescents exposed to e-cigarette content on social media are more likely to try e-cigarettes.²⁵

TOR 1b. Risks of vaping to individuals and communities

Summary statement: *Evidence is increasingly emerging of the harms associated with vaping, including creating a pathway to addiction, increased uptake of smoking, inhalation of chemicals and poisoning which are documented below. The QFCC considers that accessibility of this information is critical to informing an individual's decision about vaping. The young people we spoke with considered there was an absence of mainstream evidence about the risks and advocated for better communication of information and research about the impacts of e-cigarettes.*

Pathway to addiction

Many e-cigarettes contain nicotine. Testing conducted by the New South Wales Department of Health found that of 929 samples of e-liquids tested, 61 percent contained nicotine – even if they were labelled as not containing nicotine. Another study of e-liquids available to purchase over the counter in Australia found 1 in 5 contain nicotine, among a concoction of other chemicals.²⁶

Nicotine is highly addictive and exposure during adolescence can have damaging effects on brain development.²⁷

Young people told us:

"I got a nicotine vape and it became so convenient for me to use my nicotine vape that I stopped smoking. But now if I don't get a nicotine vape, I go through withdrawals. For my friends and I, we actually are that addicted to it. So, we need to talk about breaking the cycle of addiction. They're so cheap, cheaper than cigarettes. They are something that I can literally go into a tobacconist and ask do you have any nicotine vapes? And they'll open up a cabinet and show me. It's a bit of a gateway into ending up with an addiction."

When a person is dependent on or addicted to nicotine and stops using it, their body and brain have to get used to not having nicotine. This can result in symptoms of withdrawal. These symptoms include irritability, restlessness, feeling anxious or depressed, trouble sleeping, problems concentrating and craving nicotine.²⁸ One of the young people we spoke to told us about a conversation they had with their parents about wanting to quit vaping:

"My brain was not functioning because all I could think about is how much I'm missing vaping. I was not able to give my parents informed decisions or even have a conversation. I was very emotionally aggressive and I was going through all the stages of being like OK, well, I want to quit, but I don't really know how to. We couldn't find information. I really struggled, I didn't sleep, my heart took a massive hit and I passed out a few times. I had no appetite and my moods were absolutely shocking. It was really not a great time."

Uptake of smoking

In addition to the health harms specific to nicotine, the evidence also suggests that use of e-cigarettes by non-smoking youth predicts future smoking.^{29,30,31,32} As Australia has a national smoking rate of less than two percent among 12- to 17-year-olds³³ and one of the world's lowest adolescent smoking rates among comparable nations,³⁴ this is of significant concern.

Studies consistently observe increased risks of smoking uptake with e-cigarette use. A recent systematic review conducted by the Australian National University for the Australian Department of Health found that young non-smokers who vape are around three times as likely to take up smoking as non-vapers.³⁵

Young people told us:

"It frustrates me that we've gone through the same story with smoking 50 years ago and now we are doing it again. What's the point of history if we're just going to ignore it?"

Inhalation of chemicals

E-cigarettes may expose users to a range of chemicals and toxic substances at levels that have the potential to cause adverse health effects. Even without nicotine, e-liquids contain a mix of chemicals and additives that are potentially harmful. Some chemicals that have been found include volatile organic compounds (common in paint and cleaning products), ultrafine particles (which are damaging to lungs), metals such as nickel, tin and lead, 2-chlorophenol (used in disinfectants) and certain carcinogens.³⁶

Ingredients in e-cigarette aerosol could also be harmful to the lungs in the long-term. For example, some e-cigarette flavourings may be safe to eat but not to inhale because the gut can process more substances than the lungs.³⁷

There is emerging evidence of other immediate health risks associated with e-cigarette use, including immediate inhalation toxicity (such as seizures) and e-cigarette or vaping use-associated lung injury (EVALI).³⁸

Poisoning from e-liquid

According to the National Health and Medical Research Council, e-cigarette-related poisonings have substantially increased over the past five years. E-cigarette related calls to Australian Poisons Information Centres more than doubled between 2020 and 2021. Most poisonings are occurring in toddlers and adults.³⁹ Of the calls reported, 40 percent related to poisonings in toddlers, 40 percent in adults and the remainder in infants, children and adolescents. It is difficult to determine whether the poisonings are solely a result of nicotine as e-cigarettes and/or e-liquids often have unreliable product labelling.⁴⁰

According to an article published by ABC News, in 2022 Queensland Poisons information Centre received calls about more than 80 children exposed to e-cigarette liquid or fumes, with almost a quarter referred to hospital. These figures have increased substantially since 2020, when the number of calls was just 15.⁴¹

TOR 1c. Current approaches taken to discourage uptake and use in school or other settings

Summary statement: *At a local level, schools are employing a range of actions to discourage the uptake and use of vaping among students. Measures to discourage e-cigarette use should be supportive rather than punitive, particularly for young people suffering from withdrawal symptoms.*

Young people told us:

“It’s quite common amongst students, last year grade 9 students were repeatedly caught vaping. There were some students as young as grade 6 that have been using vapes as well.”

One-quarter of staff working in Australian primary schools, and three-quarters of staff working in secondary schools reported that vaping among students had escalated in the two years to 2022.⁴²

Schools play a critical role in helping children and young people to make healthy and safe decisions and have already begun taking action to address vaping in schools at a local level. In a survey of Queensland’s parents’ views on vaping, one-third of parents reported that their child’s secondary school had provided information about vaping, however this was higher among families living in urban areas (42 percent for major cities) than regional areas (23 percent for inner regional and 16 percent for outer regional areas).⁴³

Young people who the QFCC spoke to described that they were aware of the following approaches being used to discourage uptake and use of e-cigarettes in some schools:

- locking the toilets during class times, and monitoring them during students’ lunchbreaks
- suspending students found with vapes or using vapes
- some schools have installed vape-detection sensors in bathrooms to deter the behaviour
- one-on-one conversations with young people vaping

- positive educational campaigns with staff, students and parents.

These measures were not employed consistently across schools. While young people told us that some schools or teachers use the curriculum to talk about harmful effects of vaping, in general they perceived there was an over-reliance on punitive approaches in the absence of other alternatives or guidance for schools.

Recent media coverage has reported an increase in drug-related disciplinary absences over recent years. Figure 2 shows that drug-related disciplinary absences have close to trebled at Queensland state schools in the past five years. During 2022, there were 8,654 drug-related suspensions and exclusions, representing an increase of 1,140 on the previous year. This compares to 3,143 suspensions and exclusions in 2017.

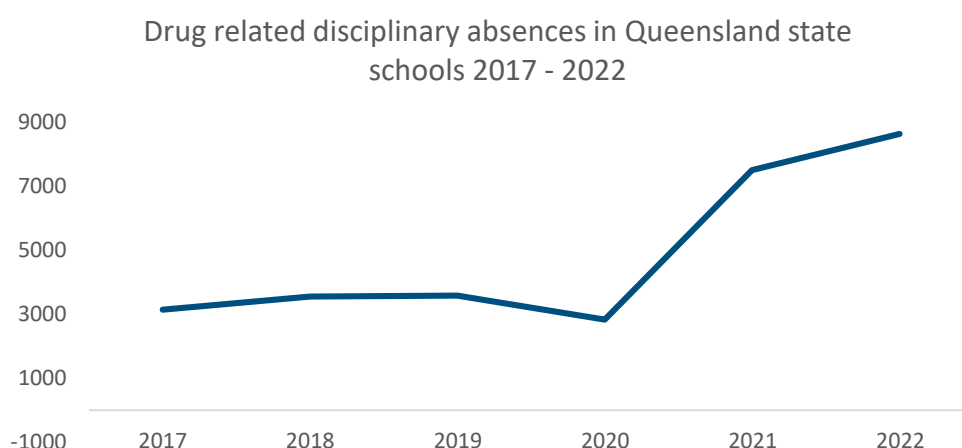


Figure 2: Drug related disciplinary absences in Queensland state schools 2017 - 2022⁴⁴

While disaggregated data is not available for disciplinary absences related to vaping, a recent article by ABC News quoted the education department as saying the ‘increase in suspensions can primarily be attributed to the rise in students vaping or possessing vapes and e-cigarettes – despite the devices being banned in schools.’⁴⁵

Other government agencies have also been taking steps to discourage use of e-cigarettes, such as the Queensland Police Service’s “Think twice before vaping” videos and Queensland Health’s “Vape truths”. The videos aim to empower young people to make better choices. While this is a positive step, young people discussed opportunities for Government to better target campaigns specific to young people and families and to communicate evidence-based information to discourage uptake and use (see ToR 2a for further information).

TOR 2a. Increasing awareness of the harmful effects of e-cigarette use

Summary statement: Children and families should have access to evidence-based information about issues impacting their health and wellbeing. This should be tailored to their needs, taking into account the many reasons people have for vaping. To address vaping in school settings, schools require adequate guidance and resources. Increasing the contemporary evidence of vaping in Queensland, with Queensland-specific data collection will assist in the development of targeted interventions.

The young people we spoke to perceived that there was generally low awareness of the potential harmful impacts of e-cigarette use.

Young people told us:

"I think a lot of young people see it as a healthy version of smoking, especially the younger you are and the earlier you start, I think young people who vape don't really see it as something negative or bad for their health. They just see it as like a fun thing to do."

In a 2022 South Australian survey, young people expressed their concerns about the lack of information about vaping and the short- and long-term health consequences as well as unhelpful school and community responses.⁴⁶ They also identified a range of support programs, resources and services they would like to see in relation to vaping. These included programs 'to quit smoking', 'easy support services' similar to those created for drug and alcohol misuse, and a helpline to ensure '24/7 support'.

Young people are aware that vaping can cause harm to their health but are not convinced of the immediacy, severity and personal susceptibility of the health consequences.⁷ However, this may begin to change, the longer e-cigarettes are on the market and young people share their adverse experiences.

Young people told us:

"More people who have battled with collapsed lungs or other health issues are going to TikTok or Instagram and recording videos...the shock factor of them hooked up to a ventilator in the hospital being like this is what happened, this is a direct result of vaping."

In general, young people who the QFCC spoke to said that they wanted greater communication of evidence-based information about the adverse impacts of vaping. In addition, they encouraged that any campaigns or programs intended to discourage uptake or use should be:

Designed or led by people with lived experience

- Young people said they would like to see awareness messages delivered by young people with lived experience, rather than teachers or other sources who may not have a full appreciation of the appeal of vaping or have first-hand experience of its impacts.
- Recent findings published by AMA New South Wales indicated that senior students were identified as important influences on the vaping behaviours of younger students, both through role modelling, and the distribution of vaping information.⁴⁷

Recognise that e-cigarette use is multi-dimensional

- Young people identified multiple motivations for vaping—mental health-related, peer connection, addiction and external influence (from peers or social media). Accordingly, information about the harmful impacts of vaping and other preventative activities to discourage use must take into account and align with the differing reasons people choose to vape. For example:
 - providing mental health supports or coping strategies to reduce stress and boredom or alleviate anxiety;
 - promoting awareness of the financial impact over a long period of time;
 - promoting awareness of the environmental impacts of vaping;

- educating young people on how to recognise, critically analyse and respond to industry marketing including social media;
- providing vaping education as an alternative to suspension for students caught vaping at school.

Reach young people in a variety of settings

- Information needs to reach young people where they spend most of their time – such as at home, in school and online. As part of this, there would be benefit in increasing parents' awareness of the prevalence and harms of vaping.
- In a Queensland-based survey, more than 90 percent of parents agreed (44.1 percent) or strongly agreed (46.6 percent) that secondary schools should provide more information about e-cigarettes to their students.⁴⁸

In relation to increasing awareness in school settings, it is critical to gain a better understanding of students', teachers' and parents' knowledge, attitudes and experiences of e-cigarette use to inform school-based prevention strategies. The key messages we heard from young people during our consultations were:

- Schools are not currently equipped to respond well to vaping and the associated addiction, for example:
 - gum not allowed, but young people may be using nicotine gum to help manage withdrawals
 - children are punished for behaviours associated with withdrawals (i.e. lack of concentration)
- There needs to be improved resourcing and skills in schools to educate children on impacts of vaping, and to deal with withdrawal symptoms (a lack of school nurses was cited as a potential issue)
- There needs to be strong focus on supporting young people to quit the behaviours, in a non-judgemental way, rather than punishing them for using e-cigarettes
- Young people would support people with lived experience or youth organisations to run school-based education programs
- Any programs to reduce vaping need to be supplemented by other programs, initiatives or supports to address underlying causes of vaping - i.e. mental health/anxiety.

What we heard:

"Teachers aren't often told, hey, this kid is actually going through withdrawal, which is a serious health issue, and if they're already struggling with the symptoms of trying to quit it, then the teacher getting angry at them for a lack of focus or fatigue, this is not going to help, it's going to make the situation worse. Actually helping them to quit would be good because we actually don't do that. We just say it's bad. Go home for a week and think about what you've done, but that's not rehabilitation."

Providing information and resources to parents

Young people considered that in many cases, parents may not know if their child is vaping, or not have the information or resources to prevent or deter them. This concern was echoed in a 2020 survey, finding that the majority of parents (73 percent) were concerned that their children might try e-cigarettes yet more than half of parents (57 percent) had not discussed this with their children.⁴⁹ The survey further indicated that:

- One in three parents (31 percent) did not know that e-cigarettes contained toxins and chemicals and 40 percent are unaware that e-cigarettes can cause death.
- A third of parents (38 percent) did not know that in most states and territories it is illegal to use e-cigarettes in places where smoking is illegal.

The QFCC considers that efforts to discourage uptake and use of e-cigarettes among children and young people must also be complemented by efforts to equip parents and families with the knowledge and resources to educate and support their children.

TOR 3 Environmental impacts

Summary statement: *The safe disposal of e-cigarettes needs to be a priority and must be widely communicated. Communicating the environmental impacts of e-cigarettes may have a strong deterrent effect on young people, given their collective level of concern about the environment.*

E-cigarette litter is emerging as a new and serious environmental issue. Most e-cigarettes cannot be recycled—they are made of single-use plastic and contain batteries that cannot be removed. They are simultaneously classified as e-waste because of their electronic components, and as hazardous waste due to the liquid nicotine residue, making recycling impractical.

While the young people we spoke to were able to identify the environmental impacts of vaping, they noted a lack of widespread information or awareness about how to dispose of vapes.

Young people told us:

"I do it and I know a lot of my friends do it—we hold out like dead vapes because we don't know what to do with it because we want to be able to safely environmentally dispose of them. But there's no actual way of disposing them. But also I just have like a complete fire hazard in my house."

TOR 4 Jurisdictional analysis

Summary statement: *The recent announcement by the Commonwealth government to strengthen legislation, enforcement, education and support as a positive step to reduce vaping in Australia. Actions stemming from the Committee's inquiry should complement these measures.*

The QFCC is aware of, and has referred to throughout this submission, activities across Australian jurisdictions to identify the prevalence of e-cigarettes and its impacts. The increased use of e-cigarettes across Australian jurisdictions indicates that coordinated legislative, regulatory and policy solutions are required to better understand and communicate harms associated with their use and regulate their importation, packaging and sale in Australia. The QFCC believes that for state-based preventative measures to be effective, this must be coordinated with responses at the national level.

The QFCC will keep watch of the progress of national activities as they impact upon Queensland children and families, such as the *National Tobacco Strategy 2023-2030* and outcomes of the national E-cigarette Working Group which aims to review and advise on measures to protect young people from the harms of e-cigarettes by addressing the increasing availability, appeal, and uptake of vaping products.

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