



**Tasmanian Small  
Business Council**  
Uniting Small Business

## Legislative Council Sessional Committee Government Administration A -Sub-Committee

### Rural Health Services Inquiry

*This submission is a joint submission made by the Tasmanian Small Business Council and the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Jointly we represent more than 1500 individual businesses in Tasmania, including many retail sector operators.*

*While the TCCI and TSBC did not originally put in a submission to this Inquiry, we have been motivated to do so following the Inquiry's reinstatement after the election and the broadening of the terms of reference with the Minister for Health (the Hon. Jeremy Rockliff MP) also being the Minister for Wellbeing (which as we understand essentially involves preventative health).*

#### **Context**

As representative bodies based in Tasmania of which some of members sell tobacco products, we are concerned about the instances of tobacco related harm in our community, particularly in rural and regional Tasmania.

Tasmania has historically had high smoking rates, and even today continues to have the highest smoking rate of any Australian state at 16.4 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

Even more concerning, research conducted last year by the Mitchell Institute shows that the Bridgewater-Gagebrook area (just north of Hobart) has the highest smoking rate in the country, with a shocking 40 per cent of adults smoking on a regular basis.

Second worst in the nation is Risdon Vale, also near Hobart, where the smoking rate is over 34 per cent.

#### **The harm-reduction alternative - vaping**

We wish to be clear, while traditional tobacco products and cigarettes are legal products, we agree they are not just dangerous, they are deadly.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/health-conditions-and-risks/national-health-survey-first-results/latest-release>

Last year, the Legislative Council considered the Hon. Ivan Dean MLC's proposal to lift the legal smoking age to 21 and in our view, was correct to reject it.

As history has demonstrated, prohibition never works. Rather than trying to simply ban traditional cigarettes for under-21s, we should be looking to make available less-harmful alternatives.

In addition, increasing evidence suggests that these less harmful alternatives are also leading to a reduction in the smoking rate in places where they have been introduced.<sup>2</sup>

To our mind, the evidence is overwhelming that vaping is less-harmful than traditional cigarettes, to the point that it could almost be suggested that those who are against the introduction of vaping as a harm reduction tool are bloody-mindedly denying the science.

Even on the issue of youth vaping and the argument about whether legalising vaping might lead to people taking up vaping/smoking who otherwise wouldn't have, the evidence is strong that the proportion of "never-smokers" who take up vaping is very small and hasn't changed since 2016.<sup>3</sup>

Far from being a "gateway" to traditional smoking as is suggested by critics, vaping is demonstrably an "off-ramp".

### **Recent developments**

Late last year the Therapeutic Goods Administration made a significant decision to reclassify nicotine e-cigarettes and vaping products from the current effective ban to one of limited availability, which will make them available via prescription from the 1<sup>st</sup> October.

Very importantly, this decision recognises that these products are in fact a medicine which can assist in cigarette smoking harm reduction, and to help people quit smoking.

In fact, the categorisation and prescription method for nicotine vaping products will now be very similar to that for medical cannabis in Tasmania.

This will replace the current ambiguous system where it is illegal to purchase and use nicotine vaping products in Tasmania, but authorities nonetheless tend to look the other way while addicted smokers seeking a less harmful alternative source their products from off-shore.

Unfortunately, while well-intentioned this new prescription system will not be easy to navigate for most people and there are serious doubt about whether it will work; or instead drive smokers back to traditional cigarettes.

Under this new system, if you are a current smoker looking to quit, you will need to first find a GP who has the appropriate approvals to prescribe; then you will need to get a prescription from that doctor for a vaping product.

You will then need to find a local pharmacy which stocks the product to fill your script, which is not likely to be that easy given the regulatory impositions on pharmacies seeking to stock nicotine e-cigarette products.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, a recent report by Action on Smoking and Health suggests that vaping helped an extra 70,000 people quit smoking in the UK in 2017; and that of the estimated 3.6 million vapers in the UK in 2019, 54 per cent have given up smoking, 40 percent both smoke and vape, only 6 percent have never smoked.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020

For example, it is currently unclear to us whether local pharmacies will require a tobacco license to stock these products.

More likely, unfortunately, is that you will fill the prescription at an on-line pharmacy – which will do nothing for local businesses and local jobs.

There's no doubt this new system which acknowledges the relative benefits of e-cigarettes compared to traditional cigarettes is a positive development. However, it remains in our view a bizarre situation that you can buy traditional cigarettes at the corner store, but need a prescription for the much less harmful alternative (95 per cent less harmful according to Public Health England).

### **The benefits to rural and regional Tasmania of alternative nicotine vaping products**

With the highest smoking rate in Australia and geographic pockets of extreme high use, Tasmania and Tasmanians have much to gain from the legalisation and regulation of vaping products.

Analysis undertaken by the Australian Retail Vaping Industry Association shows that up to 73,000 current smokers in Tasmania could give up traditional cigarettes over a decade if vaping is legalised.<sup>4</sup>

The paper notes studies from New Zealand – who have recently legalised vaping – forecasting that the country is set to see the health system save NZ\$720 per citizen from their approach to vaping. There appears to be no reason why that saving to the health system couldn't be replicated here.

Importantly for smokers themselves, the paper suggests that legalising vaping would save the average Tasmanian smoker \$9,000 per year, due to the product being significantly cheaper (this is primarily due to a lower taxation regime). This is a significant figure, particularly when you consider that the areas with the highest smoking rates such as Bridgwater and Gagebrook are also relatively economically depressed.

At the same time, this would not disadvantage Tasmanian tobacco retailers as the majority of the price differential between the two products is due to differing tax rates – that is, the margin to retailers would be equal to or possibly even higher than traditional cigarettes, while still providing a cheaper and less-harmful alternative.

### **The need for a public education campaign**

That's why the TCCI is calling for the Tasmanian Government to run a public education campaign to make Tasmanians fully aware of the new laws around vaping products. Every smoker prescribed a vaping product is one person less smoking the more harmful traditional cigarettes.

The Tasmanian Government has run a very effective state-based advertising campaign urging Tasmanians to get vaccinated against COVID. A similar state-based campaign informing Tasmanian smokers of the availability and efficacy of vaping as an alternative to smoking cigarettes is now warranted.

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<sup>4</sup> "Tasmanian Vaping Industry Economic Impact Assessment", Australian Retail Vaping Industry Association, August 2020

Ultimately, it is our view that these products should be available on the corner-store shelf next to traditional cigarettes.

Now that the TGA has reclassified these products as a medicine, in our view there is no excuse not to make them as widely available as possible to smokers, in order to reduce smoking harm, and smoking rates.

### **Conclusion**

It is inarguable fact that traditional nicotine smoking is putting immense pressure on Tasmania's health system and particularly on Tasmanians in rural and regional areas.

While we would like to see alternative nicotine vaping products more widely available, we are encouraged that the Therapeutic Goods Administration has put in place a regime that allows them to be made available under prescription to existing smokers.

We encourage the Committee to closely examine the benefits of nicotine vaping and e-cigarette products to reducing smoking harm and drive down smoking rates for the benefit of rural and regional health in Tasmania.

Your sincerely,

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