An evaluation of smokefree play areas in Cheshire and Merseyside
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I would also like to thank Jo McCullagh and colleagues from Heart of Mersey who established the smokefree play area initiative throughout Cheshire and Merseyside.
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Play Smokefree

Please don’t smoke near children and our play area
Summary

Children become aware of cigarettes at an early age. Three out of four children are aware of cigarettes before they reach the age of five, irrespective of whether or not the parents smoke. However, if young people see smoking as a normal part of everyday life, they are more likely to become smokers themselves.

Across Cheshire and Merseyside eight councils implemented a voluntary Play Smokefree code of practice within park playground areas between October 2011 and February 2013. The participating councils are Cheshire East, Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens, Warrington and Wirral.

The purpose of the Play Smokefree code is to:

- Reduce child exposure to smoking and help to decrease the number of young people starting to smoke
- Decrease cigarette litter such as cigarette butts, empty packets and wrappers to make play areas more pleasant and to protect wildlife
- Reduce the risk of children putting toxic cigarette butts into their mouths

In order to assess the efficacy of the Play Smokefree programme, and in particular levels of public compliance and satisfaction with the voluntary smokefree code, Heart of Mersey were asked to conduct an evaluation.

There is overwhelming support from the public including smokers for the Play Smokefree across Cheshire and Merseyside. However, awareness of the code is limited to just more than than one third of adults using the play areas (35.5%).

The impact of the code on smoking behaviour in the play area is encouraging. Just over a quarter of respondents (27.7%) reported that they had seen people smoking in the play area park, and among these respondents, 68.5% reported that the frequency of seeing people smoking was occasional, rare or very rare.

The report makes four recommendations:

1. Improve the awareness of the code among the public
2. Consider the feasibility of extending the coverage of the Play Smokefree code to skate parks and other areas used by children and young people
3. Establish the usefulness and feasibility of council staff approaching people who are seen smoking in the play area
4. Include electronic cigarettes in the Play Smokefree code
Background
Background

Smoking and children

The proportion of children who have ever smoked continues to decline. In 2012, 23% of 11-15 year olds had smoked at least once, the lowest proportion since the survey began in 1982 when 53% had tried smoking. In 2012 however, a similar proportion of boys and girls said they had tried smoking (23% and 24% respectively) and the same proportion overall were regular smokers.

Children continue to take up smoking. It is estimated that every year more than 205,000 children in the UK start smoking. The prevalence of regular smoking increases with age, from less than 0.5% of 11 year olds to 10% of 15-year olds.

Children who are regular smokers are likely to show signs of dependence. For instance 67% reported that they would find it difficult not to smoke for one week and almost three quarters (72%) would find it difficult to give up altogether. Almost two thirds of regular school aged smokers (63%) had tried to give up smoking. The vast majority of individuals start smoking before the age of 19; with two thirds initiating under the age of 18, the legal age of sale, and almost two-fifths under 16 years.

Children become aware of cigarettes at an early age. Three out of four children are aware of cigarettes before they reach the age of five, irrespective of whether or not the parents’ smoke. However, if young people see smoking as a normal part of everyday life, they are more likely to become smokers themselves. Both parental smoking and approval or disapproval of the habit are critical factors. Children who live with other smokers are more than twice as likely to smoke regularly compared to those living in non-smoking households.

Denormalisation of smoking

Denormalisation of smoking is a phrase used in tobacco control to refer to the breaking down of community acceptance and tolerance for smoking. Children, it is argued, are greatly influenced by their sense of what is normal and attractive, which is in turn influenced by the imagery and social meaning attached to different behaviours portrayed in media and youth culture.

Measures that discourage the use of tobacco in premises and environments
covered by smokefree legislation and prevent smoking activity in outdoor settings such as play areas by means of codes or norms also have a denormalising affect by reducing the exposure that children have to smoking. A Canadian study found that the more frequently young people observe smoking occurring in a range of settings, the more likely they are to have the view that smoking is both socially acceptable and normal.8

**Smokefree play areas**

The *Healthy Lives, Healthy People: A Tobacco Control Plan for England*, published in 2011 described what the Government would do to reduce tobacco use over the next five years.9 In the plan, support is given to local communities and organisations who want to go further than the requirements of smokefree laws in creating environments free from secondhand smoke, for example in children’s playgrounds, outdoor parts of shopping centres and venues associated with sports and leisure activities.

An increasing number of councils in the UK are creating smokefree playgrounds. The usual mechanism is by using voluntary codes; although some councils are considering whether seeking local regulatory powers would be practicable.

The benefits of stopping smoking in playgrounds have been identified as follows:10

- To support the denormalisation of smoking
- To reduce the risk of exposure to second hand smoke
- To reduce smoking-related litter and the threat of cigarette butts, which are non-biodegradable and toxic to children, wildlife and the environment
- To reduce fire risk
- To offer the potential for increased use of parks and recreation areas

Public support for smokefree play areas within England is high. A YouGov survey undertaken in 2013 found that three-quarters of the population within the North West supported a smoking ban in children's play areas.11 Similarly, local research undertaken in Cheshire and Merseyside has also highlighted support for this policy. A survey with 1,408 adult visitors to 87 park play areas across nine Cheshire and Merseyside Local Authorities, highlighted that 88.7% of the participants, of whom 32.8% were smokers, were in favour of a voluntary code of not smoking within the immediate playground area (Heart of Mersey, 2012).
The Play Smokefree programme in Cheshire and Merseyside

The Cheshire and Merseyside Tobacco Control Alliance (CMTA) in partnership with Heart of Mersey recommended the implementation of a voluntary smokefree code of practice within playground areas on council owned land across the Cheshire and Merseyside sub-region in 2011.12

Across Cheshire and Merseyside eight councils implemented the voluntary Play Smokefree code of practice within park playground areas between October 2011 and February 2013. The participating councils are Cheshire East, Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens, Warrington and Wirral. More than 600 parks across the sub-region have introduced the voluntary smokefree code.

The key aim of the Play Smokefree code is to deter children and young people from smoking. The objectives include:

- To reduce child exposure to smoking and help to decrease the number of young people starting to smoke.
- To decrease cigarette litter such as cigarette butts, empty packets and wrappers to make play areas more pleasant and to protect wildlife.
- To reduce the risk of children putting toxic cigarette butts into their mouths.

Heart of Mersey on behalf of CMTA and in partnership with local councils supported the implementation of the voluntary code in each local authority area by undertaking some or all of the following measures:

- Submitting a Cabinet Committee report to gain Council support.
- Providing smokefree training for Park Wardens and gardeners to enable them to respond to questions from the public and signpost them to Local Stop Smoking Services.
- Developing public information resources and play area signage.
- Organising the launch of the smokefree programme by preparing news releases, organising photo shoots and providing other logistical support (see overleaf).
Example news release

Purpose of the evaluation

In order to assess the efficacy of the Play Smokefree programme, and in particular levels of public compliance and satisfaction with the voluntary smokefree code, CMTA has commissioned Heart of Mersey to undertake an evaluation in the second half of 2013.

Report structure

This report presents the findings of the evaluation across Cheshire and Merseyside primarily on a local authority basis. When relevant information is also provided about specific parks across the sub-region. In addition to this report, supplementary reports have been produced for each local authority.
Methods
Methods

Data collection in parks

A questionnaire comprising 16 closed questions was administered in parks across Cheshire and Merseyside (see appendix 1). The questionnaire included nine questions from a questionnaire that was used in 2012 prior to the implementation of the voluntary code of not smoking within playground areas.

The questionnaire was administered by a researcher who approached individuals who appeared to be aged 16 and over and asked if they had time to fill in a short, anonymous questionnaire about their use of the play area and smoking. The researchers sought to approach all individuals in the play area except those who were engaged in childcare activities that would prevent them from completing the questionnaire. For instance, ensuring that children remained visible or safe on play area apparatus. The researcher maintained a respondent compliance log.

An observation exercise of behaviours in, and physical characteristics of, the play area was conducted during the two to three hours that the researchers were in each park to deliver the questionnaire. The observation included incidents of smoking by adults and children in the play area or near the play area; the extent of cigarette litter and visibility of smokefree signage.

The questionnaire and observation activities were conducted in a total of 22 parks across Cheshire and Merseyside. See Box 1 overleaf.

The parks were chosen by the commissioner to reflect the range in socio-demographic conditions and provide a geographical spread across the Cheshire and Merseyside. Three parks have been excluded from the analysis because of the small number of respondents, and in one case, no respondents. These parks are Phoenix Park, Halton; Bewsey Park, Warrington and Queens Park, Wirral.

Data collection in the East Cheshire parks was undertaken between the 15 to 22 August 2013 on weekdays during the school holiday period. Data collection in the other parks took place between 6 October and 11 November 2013 during the weekend or the school half-term holiday.
### Box 1: Local Authorities and parks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Authority</th>
<th>Parks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Cheshire</td>
<td>Congleton Park</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milton Park, Alsager</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Queen’s Park, Crewe</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sandbach Park</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>West Park, Macclesfield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halton</td>
<td>Phoenix Park, Runcorn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victoria Park, Widnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowsley</td>
<td>Henley Park, Whiston</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>King George V Playing Fields, Huyton</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Webster Park, Kirkby</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>Croxteth Park</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stanley Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sefton</td>
<td>Botanical Gardens, Southport</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Derby Park, Bootle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Helens</td>
<td>Menses Park</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taylor Park</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warrington</td>
<td>Bewsey Park</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orford Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>St Elphins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wirral</td>
<td>Birkenhead Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central Park, Wallasey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Queens Park, Hoylake</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to explore the questionnaire data. Differences in responses between locations (the five parks) and between respondents with different smoking behaviours (current smoker, non-smoker, ex-smoker) were analysed using Chi Square.

The findings from the questionnaire data and the observational activity were analysed and presented as a draft report to the local Tobacco Control commissioners. Following this, amendments and corrections were made and a final report produced.
Findings
Findings

Number of respondents

A total of 665 individuals completed a questionnaire across 22 parks in Cheshire and Merseyside. Overall, 689 individuals were asked to take part in the survey. The overall compliance rate was 96.5%. See box 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Park</th>
<th>Complete</th>
<th>Approached</th>
<th>Compliance %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Congleton Park</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>87</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milton Park, Alsager</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Queens Park, Crewe</td>
<td>50</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sandbach Park</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>West Park, Macclesfield</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halton</td>
<td>Phoenix Park, Runcorn</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victoria Park, Widnes</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowsley</td>
<td>King George V, Huyton</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Webster Park, Kirkby</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>86</td>
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<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>Croxteth Park</td>
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<td>Stanley Park</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sefton</td>
<td>Botanical Gardens, Southport</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Derby Park, Bootle</td>
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<td>Menses Park</td>
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<td>96</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taylor Park</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrington</td>
<td>Bewsey Park</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orford Park</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Respondent demographics

The majority of respondents were aged between 20 and 50 years old (80%), with just over a third falling within the 31-40 years age bracket (35%). See figure 1. Whilst 11.7% of respondents were reportedly 61 years of age and over, only a small percentage were under 19 years of age (3.6%). Sixty three percent of respondents were female. A majority of respondents reported having or caring for children at home during the week (83.2%).

Figure 1: Respondents by age

Smoking behaviour of respondents

The number of people reporting that they had ever smoked did not differ significantly between local authority areas. Just over half (51.9%) of all respondents reported that they had ever smoked. The number of respondents identifying themselves as current smokers of cigarettes was almost a fifth (19%).
This differed significantly between local authority areas. See figure 2.

The number of current smokers in the sample is lower than the most recent estimate in Cheshire and Merseyside (22.2%) and England (20.7%).\textsuperscript{13} It is notable that there are significant variations in smoking behaviour across England that are primarily attributable to socioeconomic factors. For example, in 2011, 29% of men and 26% of women in routine and manual occupations smoked compared to 14% of men and 12% of women in managerial and professional occupations.\textsuperscript{14} Such variations will exist throughout Cheshire and Merseyside.

**Figure 2: Respondents smoking behaviour by local authority**

The number of respondents reporting that they had ever smoked tobacco differed significantly between parks. For example over two thirds of respondents in Congleton Park (66.7%); Stanley Park, Liverpool (74%); Webster Park, Kirkby (75%); and Menses Park, St Helens (71.4%) report having ever smoked, compared with less than one third in West Park, Macclesfield (33%); and the Botanical Gardens, Southport (25%).

Similarly, the number of respondents reporting that they currently smoked tobacco differed significantly between parks. For example 30 percent or respondents or more in Derby Park, Bootle (30%); Central Park, Wallasey (32%); Stanley Park, Liverpool (44%); and Webster Park, Kirkby (50%) report current smoking, compared with less than 10 per cent of respondents in Sandbach Park (7.8%); West Park, Macclesfield (4.4%); and Botanical Gardens, Southport
Almost one in five current smokers (18.8%) report having or caring for children at home during the week.

The number of people reporting that they had ever used electronic cigarettes differed significantly between local authority areas. Across Cheshire and Merseyside almost 15 percent of respondents reported having ever used electronic cigarettes. In Warrington 27.2 per cent or respondents report ever using electronic cigarettes, whilst in Cheshire East the comparable figure is 8.9 per cent. The number of people reporting that they currently use electronic cigarettes across Cheshire and Merseyside is 6.2 per cent. This figure did not differ significantly between local authority areas. See figure 3.

**Figure 3: Respondents use of electronic cigarettes by local authority**

Fifty four percent of current smokers and 14.2 per cent of ex-smokers report using electronic cigarettes. Among current smokers 25.4 per cent report current use of electronic cigarettes, whilst among the ex-smokers, 4.1 per cent report current use of electronic cigarettes. No non-smokers reported having ever used electronic cigarettes.

**Frequency of play area use**

Almost half (49.3%) of respondents report using the play area at least once a week. Patterns of park use were found to differ but not significantly between local authority areas. For example, In Wirral 62.4 per cent of respondents report using the play area at least once a week compared to 43 per cent in Liverpool. See Figure 4.
There was no significant difference between the frequency of playground use of respondents who had never smoked, those who were ex-smokers, and reported current smokers.

Figure 4: Frequency at which respondents reported visiting the play area by local authority

Awareness of the Play Smokefree code

Just over one third of respondents reported that they knew about the Play Smokefree voluntary code of not smoking within the immediate playground areas of its local parks (35.5%). Levels of awareness differed significantly between the parks surveyed and local authority areas. In Liverpool (52%) and Warrington (54.2%) over half of those surveyed stated that they knew about the code. Awareness of the code was lowest in Knowsley (18.6%) and Wirral (20.3%). See Figure 5.
some parks across Cheshire and Merseyside the reported levels of awareness of the code among respondents was less than one in five. In Queens Park, Crewe the figure was 12 percent; in Sandbach Park, 17.6 percent; Henley Park, Whiston, 10.5 percent; Webster Park, Kirkby, 16.7 per cent; and Birkenhead Park, 17.6 percent. Two parks had levels of awareness of the code among respondents greater than one in two. In Stanley Park Liverpool the figure was 58 percent; and in St Elphin’s Park, Warrington, 52.6 per cent. See the individual Local Authority reports for more information.

The awareness of the Play Smokefree code among non-smokers, ex-smokers and current smokers differed significantly. There is a stepwise increase in awareness across the range from non-smokers, where 30.6% were aware of the code, to ex-smokers (35.6% awareness) and current smokers (47.6% awareness). See Figure 6 overleaf.
Levels of awareness of the Play Smokefree code also differed significantly by frequency of park use. The more frequently respondents visited the park the more likely they are to be aware of the voluntary code. For example, 54.5 percent respondents visiting the park everyday were aware of the park compared to 29.4 percent who visit on a monthly basis. See Figure 7 overleaf.
Among respondents who did know about the smokefree code across Cheshire and Merseyside (n=236), a majority reported that this was as a result of the Play Smokefree signage in the park (73.3%). Other reasons for knowing about the smokefree code included an assumption or common knowledge about the code’s existence (13.6%); word of mouth (8.9%) and news coverage (3.8). See figure 8.

**Figure 8: How do you know that there is a voluntary code of not smoking within the immediate playground area?**

![Diagram showing how respondents learned about the smokefree code](image)

The effectiveness of the Play Smokefree signage in making people aware of the voluntary code was highest in West Park, Macclesfield (48.9% of respondents knew of the code from signs); Congleton Park (48.5%); St Elphins, Warrington (47.4%); Orford Park, Warrington (44.4%); and Stanley Park, Liverpool (44%). The effectiveness was lowest in Sandbach Park (7.8% of respondents knew of the code from signs); Milton Park, Alsager (4.2%); Birkenhead Park (2%); and Webster Park, Kirkby (0%).

**Smoking behaviour in the play area**

Overall, just over a quarter of respondents reported that they had seen people smoking in the immediate playground area of the park in which they were interviewed during the previous 6 months (27.7%). Significant differences between local authority areas were identified. For example, over a third of respondents reporting seeing people smoking in Cheshire East (34.5%); Warrington (37.5%); and Wirral (38%) during the last six months. Smoking was observed much less common in Halton, where 9.3 percent of respondents reported seeing people smoking in the immediate playground area. See Figure 9.

**Figure 9. Percentage of respondents who indicated that they had seen people smoking in the immediate playground area in the past 6 months by local authority**
Significant differences between parks were also identified. For example, half or more respondents reporting seeing people smoking in Queens Park, Crewe (52%); and Webster Park, Kirkby (50%) during the last six months. Smoking was observed less in the immediate playground area in Victoria Park, Widnes (9.3%); Henley Park, Whiston (15.8%); Stanley Park, Liverpool (14%); and Botanical Gardens, Southport (11.4%). See the individual Local Authority reports for more information.

Respondents, who reported seeing people smoke in the immediate playground area in the past six months, were asked to indicate how frequently they had observed smoking. Less than a third (31.5%) observed people smoking either very frequently or frequently; 42 percent observed smoking occasionally and 26.5 percent rarely or very rarely. See figure 10. The differences among local authority areas was not significant with the exception of Halton, where observations of smoking were reported as occasional, rare or very rare.
In Milton Park, Alsager (54.5%) and Queens Park, Crewe (56%) reported observations of smoking within the immediate play area were reported as very frequently or frequently by over half of the respondents. See the individual Local Authority reports for more information.

Reported sighting of smoking in the immediate playground area differed significantly by respondent’s own smoking behaviour. Forty five percent of current smokers reported seeing people smoking in the immediate playground area in the past 6 months, compared to 26 percent of ex-smokers and 21.9 percent of current smokers.

Forty-eight respondents (7.3%) reported having seen people using electronic cigarettes in the immediate playground area of the park in which they were surveyed. See figure 11.
Attitudes to smoking

Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with statements relating towards smoking behaviour. The opinions of respondents across Cheshire and Merseyside and by smoking status (non-smoker, ex-smoker and current smoker) are shown in Figures 12-19.

Attitudes to smoking in front of children

Ninety six percent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that it is important not to smoke in front of children across Cheshire and Merseyside. See Figure 12. There was no significant difference between local authority areas.

Figure 12: It is important not to smoke in front of children by local authority
There was a difference between non-smokers and ex-smokers when compared to current smokers in terms of their attitude towards smoking in front of children across Cheshire and Merseyside. Almost 99 percent of non-smokers and 97 percent of ex-smokers strongly agreed or agreed that it is important not to smoke in front of children. Among current smokers the comparable figure was 88 percent. See Figure 13. There was also a difference in the strength of the agreement between non-smokers and ex-smokers, and current smokers. For example, almost 98 percent of non-smokers and ex-smokers strongly agreed that it is important not to smoke in front of children compared to 59.5 percent of current smokers.

**Figure 13: It is important not to smoke in front of children by smoking status**

At t it u d e s t o wa r d s t h e v o l u n t a r y c o d e  o f n o t s m o k in g wi t h i n  t h e  i m m e d i a t e  p la y g r o u n d  a r e a

Almost all respondents (99%) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement ‘I am in favour of a voluntary code of not smoking within the immediate playground area’ across Cheshire and Merseyside. See Figure 14.

Almost 99% of non-smokers and ex-smokers strongly agreed or agreed with the voluntary code of not smoking in immediate playground areas. The corresponding percentage figure for current smokers is 96%. There was also a difference in the strength of the agreement between non-smokers and ex-smokers, and current smokers. For example, almost 91 percent of non-smokers and ex-smokers strongly agreed that it is important not to smoke in front of children compared to 71 percent of current smokers. See Figure 15.
Attitudes towards a voluntary code of not smoking within 10 metres of the playground area

Eighty seven percent of respondents strongly agree or agreed with the statement ‘I am in favour of a voluntary code of not smoking within 10 metres of the playground area’ across Cheshire and Merseyside. See Figure 16.
Attitudes differed among non-smokers, ex-smokers and current smokers when presented with the notion of a voluntary code spanning 10 metres around the playground area. For example, 92.5 percent of non-smokers either strongly agreed or agreed with the proposition of extending the smokefree area. The corresponding figures for ex-smokers and current smokers were 83 percent and 76 percent respectively. There was a significant difference in the strength of the agreement between non-smokers and ex-smokers, and current smokers. For example, 76 percent of non-smokers strongly agreed that it is important not to smoke in front of children compared to 67 percent of ex-smokers and 48 percent of current smokers. See Figure 17.
Attitudes towards a voluntary code of not smoking within the entire park

Almost 56 percent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement ‘I am in favour of a voluntary code of not smoking within the entire park’ across Cheshire and Merseyside. This differed significantly by local authority area. See Figure 18. Almost 15% or respondents said they were uncertain and 29% said they disagreed or strongly disagreed with a code of not smoking within the entire park across Cheshire and Merseyside.

Figure 18: I am in favour of a voluntary code of not smoking within the entire park by local authority

Attitudes differed among non-smokers, ex-smokers and current smokers when presented with the notion of a voluntary code of not smoking within the entire park. For example 70 percent non-smokers either strongly agreed or agreed with the proposition of extending the smokefree area. The corresponding figures for ex-smokers and current smokers were 52 percent and 30 percent respectively. Fifty six percent of current smokers either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposition. See Figure 19 overleaf.

Attitudes to smoking in front of children; the voluntary code of not smoking within the immediate playground area and the proposed extension of the voluntary code area did not differ significantly by the respondent’s age or their childcare responsibilities within the home.
Figure 19: I am in favour of a voluntary code of not smoking within the entire park by smoking status
Observation in parks

Signage

Eighteen out of the 22 play areas visited displayed at least one of the CMTA Play Smokefree signs, which were developed for the launch of the smokefree programme across Cheshire and Merseyside. See Photo 1. Many parks displayed multiple Play Smokefree signs.

Photo 1: Play Smokefree sign in Queens Park, Crewe

The Play Smokefree signs were not visible in the Birkenhead Park; Sandbach Park; Taylor Park, St Helens; and Webster Park, Kirkby play areas. In Sandbach Park and Taylor Park a general information sign at the entrance of the play area included a ‘No Smoking’ message. See Photos 2 and 3. In the King George V Park, Huyton there was evidence that a CMTA Play Smokefree sign had been destroyed.
Photo 2: Signage in Sandbach Park

SANDBACH PARK
TODDLERS PLAY AREA
Please use this site with respect
- No Dogs
- No Alcohol / Glass
- No Smoking
- Play Equipment For Children Up To 8 Years Only
Please be considerate to local residents and other park users
Young children to be accompanied by carers
Place your litter in bins provided

Contact No. 0300 123 5500
This Play Area has been Funded By Sandbach Town Council, August 2011

St. Helens Council

This play area is intended for use by children
and young people up to the age of 12
All children should be closely supervised by an
adult at all times whilst using this play area
In the event of an accident or damage occurring to
the play area, please contact:

ST. HELENS COUNCIL: 01744 456789

In the interest of public health, dogs are excluded from this area
Most Play Smokefree signs were located on the play area entrance gates or by the fence adjacent to the play area entrances. In most play areas the Play Smokefree signs face away from the play area. See photos 1 and 2. This means that once inside the play area the information on the signs is no longer visible to the play area users. See photo 4.

A small number of play areas are not completely surrounded by a fence, which means that the play area can be accessed by entrances that do not have a Play Smokefree sign nearby. This situation is exacerbated when a play area does not have a fence that surrounds the whole area. This is the case with Queens Park, Crewe, Milton Park, Alsager and the Sandbach Park play area for older children. In the case of Henley Park, Whiston, which has no fence around the sizeable play area, a Play Smokefree sign is displayed on a pole. See Photo 5

**Photo 4: View of signage from within a play area**
Many parks have a general public information signs and/or noticeboards at various locations. These tend to contain notices about opening hours, health and safety and byelaws relating to the control of dogs, littering, alcohol consumption
and motor vehicles. With the exception of Sandbach Park and Taylor Park, St Helens (see Photo 6), these signs do not include information about the Play Smokefree code or a ‘No Smoking’ message.

Photo 6: Public notice board displaying a Play Smokefree notice in Taylor Park, St Helens

Cigarette litter

Across the play areas a small amount of cigarette litter, usually in the form of cigarette butts, was visible. In most cases the litter would be near the entrance, by a seated area or a grass area adjacent to the play apparatus. See photo 5. It is also likely that some of the litter had been in place for a long time. Cigarette litter was not visible in four of the play areas – Stanley Park, Liverpool; Taylor Park, St Helens; St Elphins Park, Warrington and Victoria Park, Widnes.
**Smoking behaviour**

People were observed smoking tobacco cigarettes in eight of the 22 play areas during the time the researchers were delivering the questionnaires. Three people were seen smoking in Queens Park, Crewe; two people in Sandbach Park and Derby Park, Bootle; and one person in King George V Park, Huyton; Webster Park, Kirkby; Milton Park, Alsager; Congleton Park and Mesnes Park, St Helens. In most cases the smoking took place away from the play area apparatus and in an adjacent seated or a grass area.

One person was observed using an electronic cigarette in Sandbach Park.

All the smokers including the electronic cigarette user were approached and asked to take part in the survey. One person declined to take part in the survey. During the questionnaire process the respondents indicated that they did not know that a code was in place or were unsure about the play area boundary. Most were supportive of the Play Smokefree code and apologised for smoking.
The electronic cigarette user in Sandbach Park asked if the Play Smokefree code applied to e-cigarettes.

In Milton Park, Alsager two adults were seen smoking in the adjacent skateboard park at a time when at least 15 young people were using the park including six children aged six or under using scooters. Similarly, in St Elphins Park, Warrington two adults were observed smoking in an open, unfenced play area for older teenagers containing a slide, climbing frames and zip wire.

The researchers did not set out to document comments made by the respondents. However, two instances are noteworthy.

A respondent in Webster Park Kirkby who was smoking prior to completing the questionnaire placed the cigarette in a litter bin without prompting. The respondent's daughter was insistent that people could smoke in the play area because there was no sign telling you not to do so. This started an argument with another woman who said, “It’s obvious you shouldn’t smoke around children.”

A young boy aged around five years old, whilst his father was completing the questionnaire said, without prompting, “You shouldn’t smoke in front of children.”
Discussion
Discussion

Awareness of the Play Smokefree

Just over one third of respondents (35.5%) reported that they knew about the Play Smokefree voluntary code of not smoking within the immediate playground areas of its local parks. Levels of awareness differed significantly between the parks surveyed and local authority areas.

The reasons for the low awareness of the code across the parks cannot be ascertained from this evaluation. It is likely that a number of factors are important. Encouragingly, 18 out of the 22 play areas visited displayed the CMTA Play Smokefree signs; another two parks displayed a ‘No Smoking’ message as part of a public notice. However, the visibility of the signage does appear to limited due to the fact that in most instances the signs can only be seen at the point that people access the play area. Once inside the play area, the signs cannot be seen.

The size or the play area and the points of access to it, may contribute to the variations in awareness of the Play Smokefree code. For example, the Queens Park play area covers a large area; the vast majority of it without fencing. This means that people can access the play area from many points, thus avoiding the signage. Park users may also be uncertain about the play area boundary limits. Milton Park, Alsager and Henley Park, Whiston, although smaller in size to Queens Park, can also access from many points. Respondents from these parks reported low awareness of the Play Smokefree code. However, awareness of the code was also low in Sandbach Park; Webster Park, Kirkby and Birkenhead Park despite the fact that the play areas are entirely surrounded by fencing.

What does seem to be clear is that for those respondents that knew about the Play Smokefree code, the display of the signage was the key factor across Cheshire and Merseyside. Among this group almost three out of four respondents (73.3%) reported that the Play Smokefree signage was the reason who they knew about the smokefree code.

Other reasons for knowing about the smokefree code included an assumption or common knowledge about the code’s existence (13.6%); word of mouth (8.9%) and news coverage (3.8). Although the publicity surrounding the launch of the smokefree code and the ongoing presence on some council websites does not seem to have made a significant contribution to the overall awareness of the code, these activities may have contributed to the assumption about the code or word of mouth communication channels.
The awareness of the Play Smokefree code among non-smokers, ex-smokers and current smokers differed significantly. There is a stepwise increase in awareness across the range from non-smokers, where 30.6% were aware of the code, to ex-smokers (35.6% awareness) and current smokers (47.6% awareness).

Levels of awareness of the Play Smokefree code also differed significantly by frequency of park use. The more frequently respondents visited the park the more likely they are to be aware of the voluntary code. Awareness of the voluntary code of not smoking within the immediate playground area did not differ significantly by the respondent's age or their childcare responsibilities within the home.

Smoking in the parks

Overall, just over a quarter (27.7%) of respondents reported that they had seen people smoking in the immediate playground area of the park in which they were interviewed during the previous 6 months. Significant differences between local authority areas and individual parks were identified.

Among respondents who reported seeing people smoke in the play area, more than two thirds (68.5%) reported that the frequency of seeing people smoking was occasional, rare or very rare. Given that almost half (49.3%) of the respondents use the play area on at least a weekly basis, this is encouraging. This positive indication, however, needs to be considered alongside the researcher's observation of smoking in eight of the 22 play areas during the relatively short time period they delivered the questionnaires. The observation of adults smoking in the skateboard park at Milton Park, Alsager and the play area for older teenagers in St Elphins Park, Warrington is also concerning; especially given its popularity among children of all ages.

Although not statistically significant, it is notable that Queens Park, Crewe (12%) and Webster Park, Kirkby (16.7%) had second and third lowest reported awareness of the Play Smokefree code and the highest sightings of people smoking in the play area during the last six months - 52 per cent and 50 per cent respectively. Henley Park, Whiston (10.5%) had the lowest awareness of the Play Smokefree, however, sightings of people smoking in the play area during the last six month was relatively low at 15.8 per cent.

Two play areas had no Play Smokefree signage or 'No Smoking' messages visible. Although not statistically significant, Webster Park, Kirkby (50%) had the second highest level of sightings of people smoking in the play area during the last six months; and Birkenhead Park (39.2%) the sixth highest.
Reported sighting of smoking in the immediate playground area differs significantly by respondent's own smoking behaviour. Forty five per cent current smokers report seeing people smoking in the immediate playground area in the past 6 months, compared to 26 per cent of ex-smokers and 22 per cent of non-smokers. It is open to conjecture whether current smokers taking part in the survey had themselves smoked in the play area at some point.

Support of the Play Smokefree code

There is an overwhelming level of support among the public for the voluntary code of not smoking in play areas in Cheshire and Merseyside. Almost 99 percent of respondents support the code, which is a significant increase on the comparable figure of 88.7 per cent from the Cheshire and Merseyside Playground Survey Results conducted in 2012 prior to the launch of the programme.

The support for the Play Smokefree code among ex-smokers and current smokers is also high at 99% and 96% respectively.

Support for not smoking in front of children

Almost 95 per cent of respondents including non-smokers strongly agreed or agreed that it is important not to smoke in front of children. There was a difference in the strength of the agreement between non-smokers and ex-smokers, and current smokers. For example, almost 98 percent of non-smokers and ex-smokers strongly agreed that it is important not to smoke in front of children compared to 59.5 percent of current smokers. This raises concern about children’s potential exposure to secondhand smoke in the home and car.

Extending the Play Smokefree code

Eighty five per cent of all respondents are supportive of extending the reach of the voluntary Play Smokefree code by an additional 10 metres around the play area and 63% of all respondents are supportive of extending the code to cover the entire park. The support among current smokers, however, is less than the support among ex-smokers, which in turn is less than support among non-smokers. See figure 20.
Figure 20: Support for the existing and extension of the Play Smokefree by smoking behaviour

The relatively low level of support amongst current smokers does raise questions about the likelihood of current smokers complying with an entire park extension of the Play Smokefree code. Whilst delivering the questionnaires, it was observed that among some respondents who strongly agreed with the proposition of extending the Play Smokefree code to cover the entire park, concerns were expressed about the usefulness and feasibility of doing this. Although the frequency of this view cannot be quantified, it is noteworthy nonetheless.

The findings from a focus group interview with Park Management Officers in Cheshire East demonstrated that the Officers were reluctant to extend the coverage of the smoke free code. They raised concerns about the feasibility of enforcing the code. At present, they argued, it is clear as to what area the smokefree code applies to. The Parks Management Officers believed that most people including smokers understood why a smokefree code was needed in play areas. They surmised that this support would fall as the size of the smokefree area increases. The Parks Management Officers also had concerns that an extension of the code might deter smokers from using local parks.
Electronic cigarettes

Public awareness of electronic cigarettes has grown substantially in recent years. According to one survey the number of people reporting having tried electronic cigarettes has increased significantly from 9% in 2010 to 35% in 2013.\(^\text{16}\)

Among all the respondents of this survey 14.9 per cent had used electronic cigarettes and 6.2 per cent were current users of electronic cigarettes. Seven percent of respondents reported sightings of people using electronic cigarettes in the play area during the last six months.

The potential health risks and benefits as a smoking cessation aid remain uncertain at present. There are wider issues relating to the role that electronic cigarettes play in renormalizing and stimulating interest in smoking among children and the wider public. There are also concerns relating to the impact electronic cigarettes might have on smokefree legislation in enclosed public places and workplaces that came into effect in England on 1 July 2007 and voluntary codes such as those in play areas. A number of workplaces, sport stadia, entertainment venues and transport providers have banned electronic cigarettes because of the management problems associated with distinguishing electronic cigarettes from tobacco cigarettes. Given the rapid penetration of electronic cigarettes among adults, the continued use of the devices will potentially impact on the smokefree code in play areas and present problems to local authorities in managing electronic cigarettes in enclosed public places, workplaces and play areas.
Conclusions and recommendations
Conclusions and recommendations

There is overwhelming support from the public including smokers for the Play Smokefree code in Cheshire and Merseyside. However, awareness of the code is limited to just a little over one third of adults using the play areas.

The impact of the code on smoking behaviour in the play area is encouraging. A quarter of respondents reported that they had seen people smoking in the play area park, and among these respondents, almost 70% reported that the frequency of seeing people smoking was occasional, rare or very rare. Without baseline data however, it is impossible to assess whether the introduction of the Play Smokefree code has reduced the frequency of smoking in the play areas.

Smokefree play areas are an important component of tobacco control policy in helping to reduce the health and economic burden of smoking in our communities. Evidence suggests that decreasing the visibility of smoking among children will lessen the likelihood of them viewing smoking as a socially acceptable behaviour, and thereby reduce the chance of them beginning to smoke.\textsuperscript{17,18} There is also persuasive scientific evidence that smoking in crowded outdoor areas can lead to harmful levels of secondhand smoke exposure.\textsuperscript{19}

The Play Smokefree code is an important aspect of tobacco control and health inequality activities in Cheshire and Merseyside. Councillors, staff and other partners should be congratulated for implementing the voluntary code as soon as was feasible. A number of local authority areas in the UK are still at the planning stage.

It is recommended that Cheshire and Merseyside local authorities consider the following recommendations.

1. Improve the awareness of the code among the public

In some parks, more Play Smokefree signs should be placed around the play area, especially in the larger play areas and where the fencing permits. Some of the signs should be placed so that they face inwards and are visible to people in the play area. Consideration should also be given to placing Play Smokefree stickers or ‘spray painted stencil messages’ similar to those that are sometimes used to deter dog fouling near seating areas in play areas. However, it is recognised that that this will not be practical in all play areas and may affect the overall aesthetic look of a park.
The Play Smokefree signs were not visible in four parks. Routine checks should be made to ensure that the signs remain on display and are not damaged or defaced.

The Play Smokefree brand and message should be included in the signage that is situated at the entrances of parks. It is recognised that this may only be feasible when the signs are renewed.

Promotion of the Play Smokefree code should be included in appropriate tobacco control communications in Cheshire and Merseyside. For example, at a local authority level, councils, schools and Stop Smoking Services could promote the Play Smokefree code on their websites and other media. This would be especially relevant as part of tobacco control activities that aim to reduce secondhand smoke and the visibility of smoking including initiatives to promote smokefree homes and cars.

2. Consider the feasibility of extending the coverage of the Play Smokefree code

There is a majority of non-smokers and ex-smokers who support the extension of a smokefree code within the entire park. However, the support for an entire park smokefree code among current smokers is low. Whilst the extension of the code could be useful in reducing exposure to smoking among children, the enforcement could prove difficult. The support of smokers could not be relied on.

The message on the Play Smokefree sign reads, ‘Please don’t smoke near children and in our play area.’ An alternative to a park-wide code could be the promotion of the message, ‘please don’t smoke in front of children’. This could be highlighted on the main signage situated at the entrances of parks. This survey has shown that over four out of five current smokers strongly agreed or agreed that it was important not to smoke in front of children.

Messages concerning the appropriate disposal of cigarette litter could also be included on the park entrance signs and in wider Cheshire and Merseyside tobacco control communications.

It is recommended that consideration of the Play Smokefree code be extended to skate parks and other play or recreation areas for older teenagers. There is no reason to think that the support will be less among such target audiences. The tone of the message needs to collaborative and the recipients of the message need to feel it is a request rather than an order. For example messages along the
lines of, ‘Please don’t smoke in this skate park, especially near children’, may be appropriate.

3. Establish the usefulness and feasibility of approaching people who are seen smoking in the play area

At the launch of the Play Smokefree initiative it was envisaged that the Parks Maintenance Officers, gardeners and other staff would approach people seen smoking in the play area. At present it is unclear whether council staff do this. It is recommended that Cheshire and Merseyside councils establish whether staff do this; under what circumstances they do it and whether smokers take notice.

The success of Play Smokefree largely depends on the support of the public to adhere to the code. It is unrealistic to expect council staff to be the sole enforcers of the voluntary code. However, if it is seen to be relevant for council staff to intervene, they should be supported to do so. There may be occasions when the public are looking for the council to take a lead in challenging people who are smoking.

This report demonstrates that there is overwhelming support from the public including smokers for the Play Smokefree code in Cheshire and Merseyside. However, it is very important that individuals are approached in the right way. The code is voluntary in nature. Council staff should ask individuals if they know about the code; its role in protecting children’s health and request they would consider not smoking in the play area. Arguments should be avoided. The approach needs to be perceived as a request rather than an order. In some cases it may be appropriate to ask if an individual would consider not smoking when they next come to the play area.

4. Include electronic cigarettes in the Play Smokefree code

It is recommend that the Play Smokefree code include electronic cigarettes. A number of workplaces, sport stadia, entertainment venues and transport providers have banned electronic cigarettes because of the management problems associated with distinguishing electronic cigarettes from tobacco cigarettes. It is feasible that the public and council staff will face similar problems.

The inclusion of electronic cigarettes in the Play Smokefree code will also
continue to support the denormalisation of, and exposure to, smoking behaviour among children.

The production of new Play Smokefree signs and new park entrance signs should state that electronic cigarettes are included in the Play Smokefree code. This change to the code could also be communicated on local authority websites and via other appropriate communications.
References
References
