



Killer Tactics 2

BUSINESS
AS USUAL

How the tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink industries have used their killer tactics to undermine important public health policies since Labour have been in power

October 2025



Introduction

Each year, millions of lives in the UK are impacted or cut short from diseases linked to just three products – tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink. Although the products are very different, the operations of the multi-billion-pound industries that produce and promote them are strikingly similar with a tried and tested ‘playbook’ of tactics.

In 2024, Action on Smoking and Health (ASH), the Obesity Health Alliance (OHA) and Alcohol Health Alliance (AHA) published the Killer Tactics report.¹ This report showed that all too often, policies designed to improve the public’s health are delayed, diluted or entirely derailed by underhand tactics from industries focused on maximising profits at the direct expense of the public’s health and wellbeing.

In July 2024, a new government was elected in the UK, bringing with it new hope for public health policy and ambitious manifesto commitments on health. However, as we will see, it has not all been plain sailing.

Recent concerns about the rise in politicians’ attendance at events sponsored by businesses show that industry continues to find ways to influence the highest levels of government.² It is generally recognised that giving gifts and hospitality can create a conflict of interest for politicians and a recent poll showed that 83% of the public think that MPs should not accept this sort of hospitality from industry.³

About this report – Killer Tactics Bingo

Our original Killer Tactics report featured a bingo card with common industry arguments. For this report we have updated the card to include tactics and common claims made by the the industry, both of which are then highlighted throughout the text. You can find the full bingo card at the end of the report.

Our first Killer Tactics report demonstrated how the tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink industries:

- 1 Deny and play down the evidence of harms linked to their products
- 2 Position themselves as part of the solution
- 3 Distort the science about their products
- 4 Distort messaging about health risks and harms
- 5 Use legal threats and actions to interfere with and delay implementation of effective policies to protect public health
- 6 Use Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to signal their virtue at the expense of public health and wellbeing
- 7 Use proxies to communicate their messages without always being transparent about their funding
- 8 Give gifts, benefits and hospitality to MPs attempting to win their favour

This report tells the story of how these tactics and claims have been deployed by industry to undermine and weaken public health policies. We will show that these killer tactics are still very much alive and kicking, and we must do more to safeguard policy processes from their negative influence.

Tobacco industry attempts to undermine the Tobacco and Vapes Bill



The development of tobacco policy is protected from industry involvement by Article 5.3 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). Despite significant levels of industry activity detailed below to try and weaken and undermine the legislation in the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, the government has stood firm showing that it is possible to resist the pressure of big business.

The legislation to introduce a generational ban on smoking, first introduced under Rishi Sunak's Conservative government, was revived under the Labour Government. Labour's manifesto pledge was - "Labour will ensure the next generation can never legally buy cigarettes."⁴ Despite this clear statement of party policy, the Labour MP Virendra Sharma was co-opted by Japan Tobacco International (JTI) before the election to author a sponsored piece on Labour List arguing for raising the age of sale to 21 instead of a generational ban, which would constitute a significant weakening of the proposals.⁵ This was a clear demonstration of the tactic of using proxies to communicate industry messages.

Tactic!
Use
proxies

The first party conference season after Labour's election victory was a hive of industry lobbying activity. A retailers panel at Labour conference, advertised as a discussion of the challenges of life as a retailer in 2024, was funded by tobacco giant JTI as a platform to use retailers as a proxy to spread industry lines, including raising the spectre of a rise in the illicit trade in response to regulation.⁶ Staffers who were unable to fit into the main conference hall for Sir Keir Starmer's first conference speech as Prime Minister

Tactic!
Use
proxies

were treated by JTI to a free drink and watch along party, enabling the industry to gain access to the staff close to policy makers by providing hospitality.⁷

Tactic!
Gifts and
hospitality

Meanwhile, tobacco company Phillip Morris International (PMI) were active at the Conservative Party Conference, hosting a panel discussion titled "No one left behind: how do we accelerate the UK's smoke-free future for everyone?", making the case that they are part of the solution.⁸ Duncan Cunningham, Director of External Affairs for PMI, sat on the panel and spoke about the regulation of what they call 'low-risk' products such as heated tobacco (which are included in the generational sales ban), promoting the company's PR push on how they are "helping the country to go smokefree". Fellow panellist, former MP Steve Baker, made the industry argument that the generational ban policy restricts individual freedom, and the Chief Executive of UK Hospitality criticised proposals to extend smokefree laws to outdoor hospitality settings, arguing that this would harm the revenue of the hospitality industry. The latter policy had been floated by Labour but later dropped under pressure from industry, with Wes Streeting

Tactic!
Position as
part of the
solution

Claim!
Individual
choice

Claim!
Economics

Tobacco industry attempts to undermine the Tobacco and Vapes Bill



saying he “lost the battle”, despite 59% of people supporting the policy and no good evidence that smokefree legislation harms the hospitality trade.^{9, 10, 11}

**Tactic!
Distort
science**

Pressure continued when the Tobacco and Vapes Bill was introduced in November 2024, and through committee stage in January 2025. Analysis of the written evidence submitted to committee stage showed that 42% of the submissions to government came from tobacco companies or others with links to the tobacco industry.¹² The submissions included typical industry arguments such as calling for raising the age of sale for tobacco, which is a weaker alternative to the generational ban.¹³ These are classic examples of the industry distorting the science and messages.

Seeking exclusions for heated tobacco

**Tactic!
Deny
harm**

Throughout this period heated tobacco products have proven a particular battleground. These relatively new products heat rather than burn tobacco. Despite uncertainty about the harms of these products,¹⁴ the industry have continued to push for their exclusion from the generational ban in the bill. The Director of External Affairs at PMI argued that they should be seen as a part of a harm reduction strategy in his piece in Conservative Home.¹⁵ PMI have also established a campaigning website with the appearance of a grassroots campaign, calling for heated tobacco products to be

excluded from the ban on the basis of their role in smoking cessation, despite there being no evidence to suggest they have a role to play in helping people quit smoking.¹⁶

**Tactic!
Distort
science**

**Tactic!
Gifts and
hospitality**

PMI have heavily promoted heated tobacco products with parliamentarians, with Conservative peer Ed Vaizey submitting an amendment to delay the generational tobacco ban when it was debated in the House of Lords, just three weeks after PMI paid for his flights and accommodation on a trip to see their factory in Switzerland.¹⁷

The great cigarette filter fraud

In February 2025, the Conservative MP Caroline Dinenage introduced an amendment to the Tobacco and Vapes Bill to compel cigarette companies to use biodegradable filters. This amendment was ‘backed’ by Greenbutts, a company who make biodegradable filters, only sells their products to industry and has significant links at senior management level to the tobacco industry.¹⁸ The campaign collaborated with parliamentnews.co.uk to secure marketing coverage in the Independent around the campaign but didn’t mention that ecologists have criticised ‘biodegradable’ filters for being equally harmful to marine and freshwater life.¹⁹ They also didn’t mention that filters have no health benefits to

**Tactic!
Distort
messaging**

**Tactic!
Use CSR**

Tobacco industry attempts to undermine the Tobacco and Vapes Bill



smokers at all. In reality, they serve to give a false sense of protection and keep smokers from quitting.²⁰ This is yet another example of the industry using their killer tactics to distort the science and use corporate social responsibility style campaigns for reputation rehabilitation.

Illicit market arguments and cherry-picking data

As set out in Killer Tactics, a classic industry approach is to cherry-pick data to fit an agenda or distort the truth.¹ As a prime example, the tobacco industry has long raised concerns about the illicit market to undermine tobacco control measures.

Tactic!
Distort
messaging

JTI continue to fuel this narrative, recently launching a website, It Costs More Than You Think, with a link to book a political consultation with JTI and a downloadable political briefing in which they claim that “reports of illegal tobacco to HMRC are increasing year-on-year.”²¹ This claim is based on data obtained in a written question tabled by Reform MP, Lee Anderson, which asked for the number of reports for the last 5 years, starting in 2020.²²

However, data from the last 7 years shows that fraud reports were artificially lower in 2020/21 and 2021/2022, due to the pandemic and lockdowns.²³ Reports were actually highest in 2018/19 and the overall trend across the last seven years is one of decline. Nowhere in their report and research on the illicit market do JTI cite HMRC official data that shows that the illicit market is stable and has been on a declining trajectory for years.

So far, industry lobbying has not substantially altered the wording of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill and Government Ministers continue to abide by their responsibilities under Article 5.3 to protect policy from industry influence. However, opportunities missed, such as the potential to extend smokefree legislation, remind us that we must remain vigilant to industry tactics, and that there is still work to do in raising awareness of their vested interests amongst Parliamentarians and political actors to ensure that public health policy is protected.

How the alcohol industry weakened the new government's ambition on alcohol



Rates of alcohol harm have rapidly increased since the pandemic, with alcohol-specific deaths rising 42% in England between 2019 and 2023.²⁴ There's a long history of alcohol industry lobbying successfully derailing public health policy. The most recent UK alcohol strategy was published in 2012, but it was derailed 18 months later by intense alcohol industry lobbying.

Claim! Economy

The key commitment in the 2012 strategy was Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) for alcohol. However, the policy faced strong industry opposition, with the Wine and Spirit Trade Association claiming that it could present a barrier to trade at the Health Select Committee in 2012.²⁵ A consultation was launched to seek views on the level at which MUP should be set, not whether or not to implement the policy. But following further industry lobbying, plans were dropped. Despite being rolled out in Scotland and Wales, and widely accepted to be an effective response to reduce alcohol harm, MUP has still not been implemented in England.²⁶

Tactic! Gifts and hospitality

In the run up to the General Election in 2024, the alcohol industry went into overdrive to remind politicians of their supposed contribution to the UK's economy, with the Wine and Spirit Trade Association commissioning a report suggesting that the trade contributed £76 billion in economic activity in 2022.²⁷ The Budweiser Brewing Group sponsored fundraising events for prospective parliamentary candidates, four of whom won their elections.²⁸

A few months later, ahead of the Autumn Budget, claims of the importance of the industry to the economy were recycled in the media. The British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA) used this opportunity to argue that the trade is a major contributor to employment in the UK.²⁹ This is despite evidence that shows jobs in the alcohol industry are some of the lowest paid, undermining claims that the sector makes a significant positive contribution to employment opportunities.³⁰

Claim! Job losses

The new Labour Government was quick to identify tackling alcohol harm as one of five key priorities for shifting from sickness to prevention and improving healthy life expectancy. In December 2024, the Public Health Minister stated: "For too long there has been an unwillingness to lead on issues like smoking, alcohol harm, and obesity. It is unacceptable that alcohol deaths are now at record high levels".³¹ Public health experts were pleased to see this commitment and hoped that it would lead to concrete policy change in the face of escalating alcohol harm.

How the alcohol industry weakened the new government's ambition on alcohol



Industry lobbying right up to the wire on the health plan

The publication of the government's 10-year health plan in July 2025 was expected to include plans for preventing alcohol harm. Early drafts were rumoured to include MUP, but as publication neared it became clear that this had been dropped.³²

Media reports in the days preceding publication, reportedly based on a leaked draft, claimed the plan would include alcohol advertising restrictions similar to those currently in place for unhealthy food.³³ The Department for Health and Social Care responded, confirming that such advertising restrictions were under consideration: "The 10-year health plan will not include a ban on alcohol advertising. We are exploring options for partial restrictions to bring it closer in line with advertising of unhealthy food."

However, by the time of publication, all reference to alcohol marketing restrictions had been removed from the health plan. The Times reported that this backtracking on alcohol policy followed intense industry lobbying.³⁴ In a letter to the Health Secretary in the run up to the publication of the plan, the BBPA strongly opposed the advertising proposals saying that they were "disproportionate, misguided and economically damaging" and drew on common industry arguments about damage to the pub trade.³⁵

**Claim!
Economy**

In the end, the plan contained very little on alcohol beyond a commitment to introduce new standards for alcohol labelling. Public health experts responded with disappointment at the lost opportunity.

Alcohol licensing taskforce with no health input?

In April 2025, the government established a taskforce to review alcohol licensing. This taskforce was led by the Department of Business and Trade, excluded health experts while including 'industry representatives', and was co-chaired by the Chief Executive of pub chain and brewer Greene King.³⁶ The taskforce published its report in July 2025 and unsurprisingly it was disappointing for health experts. It focused on deregulation, economic growth and reducing red tape for the industry, with no mention at all of off-trade licensing (covering places where people can purchase alcohol for drinking off site such as supermarkets and corner shops) which makes up 75% of alcohol sales.³⁷ This oversight missed an important opportunity to recommend measures that could reduce alcohol harm by integrating health into the objectives of alcohol licensing, as has been done Scotland.

**Claim!
Self-regulation**

How the alcohol industry weakened the new government's ambition on alcohol



Tactic! Use proxies

Blocking a solution for safer roads

Industry have also been busy undermining other potentially game changing policies on alcohol. In August 2025, the government announced plans to lower the drink drive limit in England and Wales.³⁸ This would bring policy in line with Scotland and the rest of Europe and will save lives.

However, the industry, especially via proxies in the hospitality industry, have responded predictably by making claims that this will bring about the end of the rural pub and damage post-covid recovery.³⁹

Claim! Economy

Setting the scene on the global stage

It's not just UK policy in the crosshairs – the alcohol industry has been lobbying hard to weaken global commitments on health.⁴⁰ The language in the final draft of the UN Declaration on Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health was significantly diluted on taxes on unhealthy products.⁴¹ This comes after sustained lobbying efforts from the likes of alcohol company Diageo, who in early 2025 advertised for a global policy influencing position, highlighting the UN's policy plans as “unprecedented challenges” to their business.³⁰ This declaration will set the tone for how member states adopt policies – potentially further weakening the UK's response to alcohol harm.

Tactic! Distort messaging

Progress on alcohol policy has been particularly poor in the UK, and industry lobbying is likely to be a major contributor to this.⁴² Safeguards must be put in place to ensure that the alcohol industry are not around the table when health policy is being drawn up.

How the unhealthy food and drink industry delayed the junk food ad ban



For many years the proposal to ban junk food marketing to children has been treated as a political football, despite being a strongly supported and evidence-based policy. In 2020, following his own experience with Covid-19, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a series of commitments including a ban on junk food advertising before 9pm on television and online at any time.⁴³

The policy was then included in the Health and Care Act of 2022, during the passage of which there was intense lobbying by industry. During committee stage of the bill, a small group of peers led by Lord Moylan and Lord Vaizey tabled several amendments reflecting industry concerns that would weaken or delay the proposals. These amendments saw Lord Moylan speak in the House of Lords on behalf of the company Grenade, owned by Mondelez, who had approached him to make the case for exemptions for their products on the basis of their 'low-sugar, high-protein' health claims.⁴⁴ This

Tactic!
Use
proxies

is a clear example of the industry distorting messages about the harms of their products, and co-opting politicians to act as their proxies.

Tactic!
Deny
harm

Once the bill passed into law in 2022, the government announced that they would be delaying the ad ban initially by a year to 2024 and eventually until 2025, after they had 'listened to the concerns that have been raised'.^{45, 46}

Early in 2024, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) ran a consultation on the guidelines to industry on proposed

restrictions. However, the draft of the guidelines had been shaped by private consultation with industry before they were publicly consulted on, further demonstrating how the industry are positioned as part of the solution in making health policy and why businesses are so keen on self-regulatory schemes.⁴⁷

Claim!
Self-
regulation

When Labour swept to power in July 2024, they did so on the back of a manifesto that read: "We face a childhood obesity crisis. So, Labour is committed to banning advertising junk food to children." Shortly after the election, the government confirmed they would introduce the ban in October 2025.⁴⁸

In Autumn 2024, the House of Lords launched a report into the UK's food system, calling for the government to go even further than they were proposing on unhealthy food advertising and to ban it entirely across all media at all times.⁴⁹ In response, the Advertising Association made the extraordinary claim that "Investment in health advertising campaigns has a much greater positive impact on people's health than advertising bans and restrictions, where the evidence to support further

Claim!
Education

How the unhealthy food and drink industry delayed the junk food ad ban



restrictions is lacking.”⁵⁰ This is an example of the industry claiming that education is better than regulation, despite evidence that education alone is not enough to change behaviour and strong regulatory responses are essential.⁵¹

Cherry-picking examples to undermine policy proposals

The unhealthy food and drink industry, and proxies such as the broadcasting industry, continued to seek to undermine the restrictions. ITV Chief Dame Carolyn McCall spoke out to deny unhealthy food advertising has an impact on child obesity and warned it could lead to the channel cutting programming (an empty threat they also made when restrictions were introduced to remove junk food adverts from children’s TV in 2007).⁵²

Tactic!
Deny harm

In December 2024 a media storm erupted when the government confirmed the product categories subject to the new restrictions, with media attention focused on the inclusion of porridge and crumpets (some versions of which do meet the criteria of being high in fat, salt or sugar due to the way they are made). An industry funded Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) spokesman fanned the flames with inflammatory comments misrepresenting the policy and accusing the government of having a hidden agenda.^{53, 54}

Claim!
Complexity

This is a classic example of distorting policy in order to delay and this tactic forced the government to clarify their position, further distracting from the implementation of this important policy.⁵⁵

In February 2025 it was reported that industry were considering legal action over the restrictions on ‘brand’ advertising in the ban, with The Grocer magazine reporting that companies would hold back on legal action if they clarified that ‘brand’ advertising would not be included.⁵⁶ Following these legal threats, in April 2025 the government confirmed that ‘brand’ advertising was excluded from the regulations, despite being linked to consumption of unhealthy food.⁵⁷ And despite these assurances having already been issued, in May 2025 the ban was yet again delayed, to January 2026, following further intense industry lobbying around the clarity of the regulations.⁵⁸ Initial Freedom of Information requests have revealed that the Department of Health and Social Care hold a total of 13 documents relating to correspondence from the Advertising Standards Authority and Food and Drink Federation about the regulations over six months in 2025, although they are currently declining to release these.⁵⁹

Tactic!
Legal threats

It’s not just advertising restrictions that industry bodies lobby against. In Autumn 2024, the Treasury announced plans to build on the success of the soft drinks industry levy (SDIL)

Claim!
Economy

How the unhealthy food and drink industry delayed the junk food ad ban



by reviewing the sugar threshold from 5g to 4g of sugar per 100ml and removing the exemptions for milk and milk alternative drinks. The British Soft Drinks Association (who campaigned hard against the introduction of the SDIL back in 2016) formulated a misleading attack line designed to undermine the impact of the policy, that they then rolled out on social media and at Parliamentary events.⁶⁰⁻⁶² They used

Tactic!
Deny harm

a figure that estimates the average calorie reduction across the whole population – comparing it to half a grape. But as government data makes clear, consumption of sugary drinks is highly skewed across the population with some people consuming very little or none, while others are consuming hundreds of millilitres, equivalent to several large sugary drinks per day, meaning that for those people, this change would potentially make a large difference to their sugar consumption.⁶³ Coca-Cola recently used the half a grape line and attacked the proposed changes in a campaign email to MPs saying: “These changes would damage businesses, cost jobs, and add to household bills at a time when families are already stretched – all for virtually no health benefit.”⁶⁴ This is yet another example of how the industry denies harm and distorts the science and messaging.

Local authorities not escaping industry attention

It's not only national restrictions that industry have targeted. A recent analysis by the BMJ found that local authority attempts to introduce healthier advertising policies, which would allow them to restrict advertising for HFSS foods on council owned property, are being targeted by industry.⁶⁵ Companies were warning councils that their advertising revenues will plummet if they go ahead, despite evidence from Transport for London, who were among the first to introduce such restrictions, showing that they saw no impact on revenue as a result of the ban.⁶⁶

Claim!
Economy

Almost six years on from the initial government commitment to this vital public health policy it has still not been implemented, and children are still bombarded with junk food adverts.⁶⁷ Industry have taken every opportunity to delay and weaken the advertising ban, and without a significant shift in the way the government approaches relationships with industry they will continue to undermine vital public health policies like these in the future.



What needs to change to fix this broken system?

It is vitally important that public health policy-making is safeguarded against the vested interests of the tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink industries. In our first Killer Tactics report, we called on MPs to avoid conflicts of interest, such as gifts and hospitality, and equip themselves to challenge common industry arguments. In addition to this we are calling on the government to:

- 1 Ensure full compliance with Article 5.3 of the FCTC** – ensuring that the tobacco industry is kept away from health policy.
- 2 Develop and adopt new guidelines to limit alcohol and unhealthy food and drink** industry engagement in policy making.
- 3 Require transparency on conflicts of interest** at all levels of government including advisors and parliamentarians.



Killer Tactics 2

BINGO

TACTIC

Deny and play down the evidence of harms linked to their products

TACTIC

Position themselves as part of the solution

TACTIC

Distort the science about their products

CLAIM

Unfounded claims about importance to the economy

CLAIM

Suggesting, against the evidence, that policies will lead to job losses

CLAIM

Misleading use of 'individual choice' and nanny state claims

TACTIC

Distort messaging about health risks and harms

TACTIC

Give gifts, benefits and hospitality to MPs attempting to win their favour

TACTIC

Use legal threats and actions to interfere with and delay implementation of effective policies to protect public health

CLAIM

Baselessly suggesting issues are 'complex'

CLAIM

Arguing for self-regulation, when this has been shown to be ineffective

CLAIM

Wrongly suggesting education is better than regulation

TACTIC

Use Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to signal their virtue at the expense of public health and wellbeing

TACTIC

Use proxies to communicate their messages without always being transparent about their funding

Throughout this report we've shown you how these tactics and claims are employed by industry to undermine public health. **See if you can spot them for yourself!**

Acknowledgements

Funding

This work was funded by Cancer Research UK.

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With oversight and input from:

- Dr Katherine Severi, Chief Executive, Institute of Alcohol Studies
- Lisa Erlandsen, Policy and Advocacy Manager, Alcohol Health Alliance
- Samantha Hilton, Communications and Campaigns Manager, Alcohol Health Alliance
- Katharine Jenner, Director, Obesity Health Alliance
- Alfred Slade, Government Affairs Lead, Obesity Health Alliance
- Caroline Cerny, Deputy Chief Executive, Action on Smoking and Health
- Hazel Cheeseman, Chief Executive, Action on Smoking and Health
- Helen Duffy, Public Affairs Lead, Action on Smoking and Health
- Halle Breed, Public Affairs Intern, Action on Smoking and Health

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October 2025

