Exploring the accessibility of vapes to young people and adults across the UK: Summary and recommendations for policymakers

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Summary

In the UK, smoking is the biggest cause of cancer, and around 6 million people still smoke. [i] Smoking is an addiction and people need support to quit. Vapes (e-cigarettes) are an effective cessation tool, popular across all socioeconomic groups.[ii] But there are concerns about vapes being used by young people and adults who have never smoked.

To understand how legislation could reduce youth uptake of vapes, without reducing their accessibility to adults who smoke, it is important to explore what makes vapes appealing, which is why we commissioned new research by the University of Stirling titled "Exploring the accessibility of vapes to young people and adults across the UK" (VAYPA).

This study demonstrates the role the retail environment plays in the appeal and perceived accessibility of vapes to young people and adults through displays, pricing, availability of a range of flavours and product type, and an easy buying process in a convenient location. The findings of this report can be used by policymakers to ensure regulations (including the Tobacco and Vapes Bill) establish an appropriate balance between reducing youth uptake of vapes and ensuring they remain an accessible smoking cessation tool, without worsening harm perceptions of vapes.

Based on the findings of this report, wider evidence, and the overall policy context, CRUK recommends that Governments across the UK take action in these areas:

- **Vape placement and visibility inside shops:** Ban imagery and colouring on vape packaging and devices but allowing branding. Vapes should be behind the counter but remain on display.
- **Vape promotion and visibility outside of shops:** Restrict the type and appearance of posters that retailers can display on shop fronts so that they do not appeal to youth, but ensure it is still clear to adults who smoke where vapes are sold.
- **Flavours:** Maintain a range of flavours available, but to help reduce the appeal to young people, the way flavours are described could be restricted. *****
- **Type of products on sale:** Support those who are using vapes to quit smoking, by ensuring reusable vapes remain accessible.
- **Legal age of sale:** Require retailers to display the legal age of sale of vapes, as is the case for tobacco. Clearly communicate the penalties (such as the fixed penalty notices) for retailers breaking the law.
- **Price and affordability:** Maintain the price differential between tobacco and vapes.
- **Retail availability:** Ensure vapes remain more available than tobacco, and that government communications and mass media campaigns on vaping or smoking deliver accurate information about vaping.

*** Flavours:** This recommendation is based on additional research which shows that vape flavour descriptions are appealing to young people, coupled with the fact that the availability of a range of flavours can be helpful for adult smoking cessation.

Background

Current evidence

Smoking remains the biggest cause of cancer and death in the UK, causing around 160 cases of cancer every day.[iii] [iv] [v] Around 11.9% of the UK population smoke in the UK, and if recent smoking prevalence trends continue, England will not be smokefree until 2039, and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will not be smokefree until after 2040.[vi] But smoking is an addiction, and people who smoke need support to quit.

Evidence so far shows that legal vapes are far less harmful than smoking and are an effective and popular quitting tool in the UK.[vii] [viii] But vapes are a relatively new product and their long-term effects are unknown so they cannot be considered risk-free. Vapes should therefore not be used by children or those who have never smoked.

Vaping landscape

According to Action on Smoking and Health (ASH)'s 2024 survey, current vaping among 11–17-year-olds in Great Britain, which includes vaping less than once a month, is 7.2%, which has not significantly changed since 2022.[ix] The number of young people experimenting with vaping (trying once or twice) has also not significantly changed between 2023 (11.6%) and 2024 (9.5%).[x]

There are currently harm misperceptions relating to vapes. A recent survey from ASH shows that 50% of adults who smoke incorrectly believe vaping is more or equally as harmful as smoking; this is a significant increase on misperceptions found in 2023.[xi] Only one third of smokers understand vaping is less harmful than smoking.[xii] This is concerning; if adults who smoke think that vapes are equally, or more harmful than, tobacco, they may be less likely to switch to vapes - a far less harmful alternative.

A balance in vaping policy is also needed because we know that people who use vapes are not a homogenous group. From a public health perspective, the desired outcome for consumers is different depending on their age, and smoking and vaping status (amongst other factors). For example, for an adult who smokes but does not vape, it would be a positive outcome for them to quit tobacco and switch to vapes. However, a child or someone who has never smoked should be deterred

from vaping. It is important that Government policy considers the impact of policy changes on different groups.

CRUK believes in the need for balanced, evidenced-based regulation that prevents vapes from being marketed at young people and people who have never smoked, whilst still ensuring that these products are readily available for people who smoke to use as a cessation tool.

Policy context

The UK Government has recently set out plans to tackle youth vaping, including measures within the Tobacco and Vapes Bill to give powers to the Secretary of State to restrict the flavour, packaging, display, contents, and retail environment of vapes.[xiii] They are also introducing a ban on disposable vapes from June 2025 and a new duty on vaping liquid from October 2026.[xiv] [xv]

Research methodology for VAYPA

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Methods

This study adopted an explanatory mixed method design to explore views on the accessibility of vapes from the perspective of both young people (aged 11 to 17 years) and adults (aged 18 and over).

Work Package 1 (WP1): Surveys with young people and adults

Two UK-wide online surveys, one with young people aged 11 to 17 years (n=2,372) and one with adults aged 18 and over (n=2,185), to gather their views and experiences regarding smoking and vaping behaviour, perceived accessibility and purchasing experience of vapes.

Work Package 2 (WP2): Focus groups with young people and adults

Twelve focus groups were conducted with young people aged 14-17 who vape (n=27) and adults who currently vape and/or smoke (n=36) in England and Scotland to explore, in-depth, some of the key findings from the WP1 surveys and views on potential policy options.

Factors that affect the appeal of vapes

Findings within the VAYPA study show that vapes are appealing, but not necessarily to the right audience; that is to say, they are appealing to young people, rather than solely to adults who smoke and want a tool to quit. This can partly be attributed to 1) Vape placement and visibility *inside* shops (including displays and posters), 2) promotion and visibility *outside* of shops (posters and displays visible from outside shops), and 3) flavours.

1) Vape placement and visibility inside shops

VAYPA findings

- Some adults thought that the bright and colourful packaging of vapes made them too appealing to young people and should be hidden.
- Most adults (72%) thought it was acceptable for vapes to be placed next to tobacco products. *(Those that vaped and/or smoked were more likely to think this than those that neither smoked nor vaped).*
- Both adults and young people thought that the right and expected place for vapes was behind the counter (because they are age-restricted).
- Most adults thought it unacceptable for vapes to be near sweets/soft drinks.
- Young people (68%) were more likely than adults (41%) to think that having vapes behind the counter sent the message they are not for them.
- Placing vapes behind the counter made it difficult for adults to see the range of products available.

Policy discussion

Both this study and wider evidence suggest that shop displays with bright vape packaging make vapes visible and appealing to young people.[xvi] [xvii]

Changing the location of vapes, for example placing them behind the counter, could therefore help to reduce visibility to young people and send the message that vapes are not intended for them. Limiting the range of colours on packets could also help reduce the appeal to young people.[xviii] [xix] The role of health warnings on packaging in deterring young people should also be considered. While the TRPR requires packaging to display a warning: 'This product contains nicotine which is a highly addictive substance', some studies suggest that people do not look at health warnings or do not notice them at all.[xx] [xxi] [xxii]

However, policies must strike the right balance between reducing appeal to youth and ensuring they remain appealing and accessible to adults who smoke and

want to quit. In doing so, the Government must be careful to not worsen existing harm misperceptions for vaping. [xxiii] [xxiv]

If vapes were completely concealed (and behind the counter), this could remove the visual prompt for adults who smoke and want to quit. If vapes were standardised in the same way as tobacco packaging, this risks sending the message that vapes are equally, or more harmful than, tobacco. Such restrictions may unintentionally dissuade adults who smoke from buying and trying a vape to quit.

Recommendations

CRUK recommends that Governments across the UK:

- Make it a requirement for vapes to be behind the counter - to make them less visible and appealing to youth, but that they remain on display so adults who smoke can see the range of products available.
    - As part of this, Governments should consider how the arrangement of these displays could help reduce appeal to young people, while ensuring they remain visible to adults who smoke.
- Regulate internal displays so that they cannot be designed to appeal to children, for example, by restricting colourful lights and signs.
- Ban imagery and colouring on vape packaging and devices, to reduce the appeal to youth, but allow for branding. Branding should be allowed and vape packaging should not be fully standardised to look like tobacco, as this could worsen harm misperceptions.

2) Vape placement and visibility outside shops

Vape promotion and visibility outside of shops includes posters on shops' exterior, or posters and internal displays that may be visible from the outside, including window displays.

VAYPA findings

- Young people were able to recall features of posters, such as bright colours and the ranges of different products and flavours available.
- Some young people reported feeling tempted by posters to go into the shop and said that they took cues from the exterior of a shop.
- Adults who smoke did not identify with displays and posters and believed that young people were the target audience.
- Adults who smoke said that posters can make vaping seem overwhelming due to the range of choices.

- Adults who vaped (and formerly smoked) thought that posters didn't focus on harm reduction but enticed young people with colours and appealing flavours.
- Adults were less likely than young people to notice window displays and were less likely to express positive views about them.
- Young people thought that brightly coloured displays in shop windows, visible from outside, were 'eye-catching' and sent a signal that vapes may be 'for them'.

Policy discussion

According to regulations, vape retailers can display vape posters on the outside of shops, and these types of posters are available to buy online for a low price or are often free to download.[xxv]

The findings from VAYPA indicate that these posters are not appealing to the audience that we want them to (adults who smoked/smoke and want to quit) but are more likely to appeal to the group we do not want to vape (youth). Some adults in the study thought window displays and posters for vapes were not communicating a message of harm reduction.

Wider evidence also confirms that posters and advertising on the outside of shops are more noticeable to young people than adults. Overall, within England, a greater percentage of youth than adults reported noticing vape marketing through billboards or posters (31.4% compared to 5.9%).[xxvi] The same 2021 CRUK-funded study finds that among adults who currently or formerly smoked or vaped, there was a *decrease* in the noticing of vape marketing on posters, billboards, television, and radio between 2016 and 2018 in England; whereas there had been an increase for young people between 2017 and 2019.[xxvii]

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill will ban advertising and promotion of vapes, including posters. Banning posters that market and display vapes on the exterior of retailers may help to de-normalise and reduce the visibility of vapes for young people, particularly when walking past shops. Given that tobacco retailers are legally allowed to display an unbranded, generic sign that indicates they sell tobacco (for example, 'tobacco is sold here'), Governments across the UK should allow a similar sign for vape retailers.[xxviii]

As vape advertising and promotion is banned, it will be important for the UK Government to monitor whether this has an impact on the visibility of vapes for adults who smoke, and their awareness of where vapes are sold.

Recommendations

CRUK recommends that Governments across the UK:

- Restrict the type of posters that retailers can display on shop exteriors, so that they don't appeal to youth. However, Governments should allow a plain, unbranded sign to indicate whether a shop sells vapes.
- Ensures that vapes are not displayed in shop windows or put in displays that are prominent from the exterior.
- Monitor whether adults remain aware of where they can access and purchase vapes, and if they are not, consider whether national communications could facilitate this.

3) Vape flavours

VAYPA findings

- For young people, having a range of vape flavours was listed in the top five most important aspects of vape purchasing.
- Young people (71%) were more likely than adults (59%) to consider the range of flavours to be important.
- Adults who liked experimenting with flavours felt that placing vapes behind the counter made it difficult to see the full range of products and their flavours (although some said this would be easy to overcome).

Policy discussion

As it stands, there are no restrictions on vape flavours in the UK, but the Tobacco and Vapes Bill will give powers to the Secretary of State to regulate flavours (following consultation).

This study's findings supports other evidence to demonstrate that having a range of flavours increases the appeal of vapes to young people, but also to adults (including those who smoke).[xxix] [xxx] Wider evidence goes further to outline how flavours with attractive names and descriptions may be particularly appealing to young people.[xxxi] [xxxii] Given this, more needs to be done to ensure specific aspects of flavours (such as descriptions) do not target youth.

One study shows that the main criteria when buying vaping products were flavour and ease of use.[xxxiii] For participants using refillable devices, finding flavours that they liked was very important, and participants using disposable devices liked the wide range of flavours available and intensity of the flavour.[xxxiv]

A recent study from Switzerland suggests that flavour preferences can change over time, and people who have switched from tobacco to vapes use different flavours

concurrently.[xxxv] It also found that having a variety of flavours available can help people who smoked to remain abstinent, with some suggestions that limiting the flavours may drive people who used to smoke back to cigarettes or dissuade people who smoke from quitting and switching to vapes.[xxxvi]

Given that adults (in the VAYPA report) who liked experimenting with flavours thought that placing vapes behind the counter could limit their accessibility, coupled with wider evidence, it is important that any policy restricting flavours strikes a balance between dissuading uptake in young people and maintaining appeal to those who smoke and could switch to vapes.

Recommendations

CRUK recommends that Governments across the UK:

- Strike the balance between reducing youth appeal to flavours, while ensuring adults who smoke still find vapes appealing. To achieve this, Governments should restrict the way flavours are described, but maintain a range of flavours for cessation purposes.

Type of vaping products

The accessibility and appeal of vapes is also related to the type of products available and which people choose to buy, such as disposable vapes.

VAYPA findings

- Disposable vapes are the most popular product for both adults and young people; 52% of adults and 72% of young people who had vaped in the past 12 months were mainly using disposables.
- Adult participants perceived rechargeable products to be cheaper *overall* and more cost-effective than disposable vapes.

Policy discussion

This report confirms findings from wider evidence that disposables are popular with both adults and young people who use vapes.[xxxvii] This suggests that there could be unintended consequences of the UK Government's disposable vapes ban (from June 2025), particularly for adults who smoke/ smoked. To mitigate this, it will be important that refillable and rechargeable vapes must remain accessible to adults who smoke.

CRUK-funded studies suggest that disposables are perceived as being designed specifically for young people with bright displays and colours that imply a lack of risk or 'playfulness and fun',[xxxviii] and that teenagers like these products because their small size and lack of long-lasting odour making them easy to conceal.[xxxix] In the 2024 ASH youth survey, more than half of 11-17 year olds who currently vape said disposables were their most used product.[xl]

These products are an affordable, accessible tool to quit smoking as their initial cost is cheaper than a reusable vape.[xli] They can currently be accessed through the Government's 'swap-to-stop' programme (England).

Given that disposables are popular, in part because of their price point, people in low socioeconomic status (LSES) groups, particularly those who smoke and use disposables to quit, could be disproportionately affected by new restrictions.

Consideration should be given to those in mental health and custodial settings, and people with dexterity issues who use disposables to quit smoking. One study shows that people with mental health conditions may be disproportionately affected by restrictions on single-use e-cigarettes, as this group have higher rates of smoking and vaping compared with the general population.[xlii]

When the ban on disposable vapes comes into force, the UK Government should mitigate the potential unintended consequences for adults who smoke and use disposables to quit (such as relapse or deterrence from cessation).

Recommendations

CRUK recommends that Governments across the UK:

- Ensure that reusable vapes remain affordable and accessible for people quitting smoking (maintaining the clear price differential from tobacco), including on the swap-to-stop scheme.
- Consider how to support those switching from disposable to reusable vapes during any implementation period, particularly those in low socioeconomic status groups.
- Mitigate potential harm misperceptions, clearly and accurately communicating the relative risk of vapes compared to tobacco, to ensure that people who smoke are not discouraged from switching to vapes.
- Monitor industry trends to ensure compliance with legislation banning disposable vapes, including steps to close any loopholes, and prevent them finding new ones.

Awareness and enforcement of the legal age of sale of vapes

VAYPA findings

- Awareness of the age of sale of vapes is low: 44% of adults and 55% of young people know that the minimum age is 18.
- Young people say that the likelihood of being asked to show proof of age is an important consideration in their purchasing decision.
- Young people are aware of the type of shops that are more likely to sell to underage people.
- Young people in LSES groups are more likely to try to buy vapes underage.
- 3% of young respondents said that they had received a free vape sample from a shop; however it is unclear if this was a nicotine vape.

Policy discussion

In the UK, it is illegal to sell nicotine vape products to anyone under the age of 18, or for adults to buy them on behalf of under-18s. Findings within this report indicate that awareness of this legislation is relatively low.

Currently, non-nicotine vapes can be legally sold to under-18s, and a legislative loophole means that the vaping industry is able to give free samples of vapes to under-18s. The Tobacco and Vapes Bill will ban both the sale of non-nicotine vapes, and the free distribution of vape products to under-18s. Legislating so that the sale of both nicotine and non-nicotine products is illegal to under-18s could help remove confusion about the legal age of sale of various products, and thus ensure the law is better followed.

It is not currently a legal requirement for vape retailers to display a poster advising customers that they will not sell nicotine-containing vapes (or nicotine refills) to under-18s.[xliii] Whereas for tobacco, retailers must display a clear, A3-sized sign with the legal age of sale where tobacco products are sold.

The findings within this report suggest that action is needed to increase the awareness and visibility of the legal age of sale of vapes for the whole population. This could improve public understanding that vapes are intended for adults (namely, those who smoke) and that retailers should not be selling to under-18s.

It is unclear whether this poor knowledge of the legal age of sale is replicated amongst retailers. Findings suggest that some are aware of the law, but choose to

break it, as young people report retailers asking them to wait outside the shop until it is empty, when they can (illegally) sell vapes without others seeing.

However, some retailers may be unaware of the legal age of sale (and penalties for breaking the law) and are thus unknowingly contributing to underage sales. There is also the risk that sanctions might not be meaningfully deterring non-compliance with the law.

Recommendations

CRUK recommends that Governments across the UK:

- Make it a requirement for retailers to display signs with the legal age of sale of vapes, in line with legislation for other age-restricted products (clear and A3-sized) and placed where retailers sell these products.
- Ensure communication of the consequences for breaking age of sale laws, including new fixed penalty notices (from Tobacco and Vapes Bill), is regular, clear and well-understood by retailers.
- Ensure that mass media campaigns for smoking cessation clearly communicate the legal age of sale of vapes.
- Maintain the additional £30m a year investment (UK-wide) in enforcement agencies, including Trading Standards who issue fixed penalty notices, to help prevent illicit sales.
- Introduce, with consultation on the conditions, a licensing scheme for tobacco and vape retailers. This license should be removed for breaching point of sale laws. The list of retailers should be made publicly accessible.

Price and affordability

VAYPA findings

- Vape prices are an important factor for both young people (75%) and adults (72%) in their respective decision to buy vapes.
- 46% of young people found it easy to afford vapes.
- Adults who had previously smoked said they thought that vapes were still more affordable than tobacco.
- Adult participants supported and expected an increase in vape prices.

Policy discussion

The findings within VAYPA highlight how price and affordability (of both vapes and tobacco) play a key role in the accessibility and appeal of vapes.

It is encouraging that respondents perceived vapes to be more affordable than tobacco, given the UK Government's deliberate price differential between the two products. The cost of smoking is often an important factor in people wanting to quit tobacco, so a price differential helps to ensure there is a financial incentive to switch from tobacco to vaping.

Maintaining the differential could also help prevent the worsening of harm misperceptions; if vapes and tobacco are the same price, this could send the message they have the same harms/ risks, which could push people back towards tobacco or deter people from buying a vape to quit smoking. VAYPA's findings on price appeal align with wider evidence, such as a CRUK-funded study showing that young people are attracted to vapes, particularly disposables, for their low price point.[xliv] We also know that price is an important factor in adults' decision to buy vapes.[xlv] They are currently a popular and effective smoking cessation tool across all socioeconomic groups, with some evidence that, amongst those who have tried to quit smoking, vapes are more commonly used by people who report facing financial difficulties.[xlvi]

Although we know price is an important factor in the purchasing process, there is currently not enough evidence to determine whether, and to what extent, price increases would encourage vaping cessation for young people who vape, and/or affect people who smoke's intention to quit smoking by vaping.

The UK Government is introducing a new duty on e-liquids. This will be a flat-rate tax (following concerns that a tax based on nicotine content could exacerbate

harm misperceptions and reduce access to appropriate vapes). As the price of products increases, sufficient enforcement will be needed to ensure that a new duty does not lead to a rise in the illicit trade of vapes.

Given the importance of price for both young people and adults, it is necessary to strike the balance between making vapes less affordable to young people, while ensuring they are available and affordable to those who smoke and want to quit, particularly those in LSES groups.

Recommendations

CRUK recommends that the UK Government:

- Maintain the price differential between vapes and tobacco so that vapes remain more affordable. The Government should maintain the tobacco duty escalator (increase the price of tobacco of a minimum of 2% above RPI).
- When communicating any price changes for tobacco and vapes, the Government should mitigate potential harm misperceptions by accurately stating the relative risk of vapes compared to tobacco, to ensure that people who smoke are not discouraged from switching to vapes.

Retail availability

The retail environment is an important factor in the accessibility of vapes. This includes the quantity (how many shops sell vapes), the density (how close vape shops are together), the proximity (how close vape shops are to places that young people are), and the type of retailer that sells vapes.

VAYPA findings

- Vapes are accessible for young people, with 34% of under-18s who had vaped in the past year having purchased vapes themselves.
- 75% of adults felt that there are too many shops selling vapes (hairdressers and tech stores, for example), and many supported a policy to reduce the number and/or type of retailers that sell vapes.
- There is an overlap in the type of shops that young people and adults buy vapes from: newsagents, corner shops, convenience stores, and supermarkets.
- Some adults perceived supermarkets to have a limited range of products.
- Specialist vape shops were often perceived as overwhelming, intimidating, and judgemental for those buying disposables instead of rechargeables.
- Corner shops and newsagents were perceived as a more convenient place to purchase a vape and adults could rely on vapes being sold there.
- Knowledge that vapes are sold in chemists and pharmacists was low, and there were negative views about this (closely associated with participants' misperceptions of harm):
    - Many believed it was contradictory for vapes to be sold in a place that medicines are sold;
    - Others thought that chemists selling vapes could positively influence people's perception of these products.

Policy discussion

Currently, there are fewer shops that sell tobacco than vapes in the UK. There are stringent regulations for retailers that want to sell tobacco products. Tobacco must be behind a counter, out of sight (with a legal age of sale sign); businesses must register with the UK issuer and have an economic ID and facility IDs; tobacco products must comply with TRPR and be scanned as part of the UK track and trace system.[xlvii] [xlviii]

In the UK, there is currently no legislation to restrict the number of tobacco or vape retailers, nor is there a licensing scheme, meaning any retailer can legally sell tobacco and/or vapes. The Tobacco and Vapes Bill will, however, give powers to

the Secretary of State to introduce (subject to consultation) a licensing scheme for tobacco and vape retailers.

The findings in this report highlight the availability of vapes to both young people and adults via a range of outlets. Governments across the UK could consider whether preventing retailers that currently sell youth-friendly products, particularly those near schools, from selling vapes, could help reduce accessibility for young people.

However, Governments need to strike a balance with regulations. It is crucial that people who smoke are not discouraged from switching to vapes. They should ensure vapes are at least as available and accessible than tobacco; at the very least, wherever tobacco is sold, vapes should continue to be sold.

Governments should therefore consider how a policy that intends to reduce availability to young people could have unintended consequences for adults who smoke and want to quit.

This is important given that this report shows there is an overlap in the type of shops that adults and young people buy vapes from, as well as a lack of awareness of certain vape retailers, such as chemists, and concerns around visiting others such as specialist vape shops.

There is therefore a risk that if a policy limited vape sales to only supermarkets, chemists, and specialist vape shops, adults who smoke could be deterred from buying vapes. Given this, and the fact that tobacco is sold in newsagents and corner shops, it is important that vapes remain available in these places.

Governments across the UK also need to consider the impact that restrictive policy changes could have on harm misperceptions. For example, if vapes are only sold where tobacco is, or if vapes are significantly less available than before, it could send the message that vapes and tobacco have equal risks. This could potentially remove the incentive to quit tobacco with vapes.

Ultimately, when Governments across the UK consult on a licensing scheme and if they consider changing the retail environment in the UK, they should first and foremost focus on tobacco – the biggest cause of cancer and death in the UK.

Recommendations

CRUK recommends that Governments across the UK:

- Ensure vapes remain more available than tobacco, so that people who smoke and want to quit have access to a smoking cessation tool.
- Ensure the government communications do not worsen harm misperceptions. Mass media campaigns about smoking cessation should deliver accurate information about vaping. These messages should, as much as possible, be consistent across the 4 UK nations.

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