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# Evaluating the long-term impact of Scotland's Register of Tobacco and Nicotine Vapour Product Retailers – Literature Review

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# 1. Introduction

This review outlines the policy and literature context of tobacco retail licensing in the UK and Ireland, with insights from the implementation of retail registration and licensing schemes around the world. The Scottish Tobacco Retail Register (STRR) was introduced in 2011 and subsequently amended in 2017 to include e-cigarettes and vapes, becoming the Scottish Register of Tobacco and Nicotine Vapour Product Retailers (hereafter referred to as the Tobacco and Vapes register). It requires retailers to register in order to sell tobacco products and comply with statutory requirements such as age-restriction of sales and product display policies. The passage of the Tobacco and Vapes Act in 2026 provides the opportunity for a retail licensing scheme or similar to be introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in order to strengthen enforcement against illegal tobacco, and to restrict youth access to cigarettes and other nicotine products. Reviewing the impact of the Tobacco and Vapes register and other licensing and registration schemes will inform the policy perspective in England, and the potential development of a similar registration or licensing scheme to strengthen tobacco control and enforcement and effectively regulate tobacco and other nicotine products.

# 2. Methods

This review included publications in academic journals, grey literature, and research undertaken by specialist organisations. Although this was not a systematic review, specific search terms and combinations of search terms were used on a number of databases. Purposive searches of grey literature were also carried out, and key stakeholders identified further literature of interest during interview.

The main literature search was conducted in October 2025 across the following databases: PubMed, MEDLINE Complete, and Google Scholar. All English language documents were included, and any literature from before 2017 was excluded. Four search strings were used across these databases:

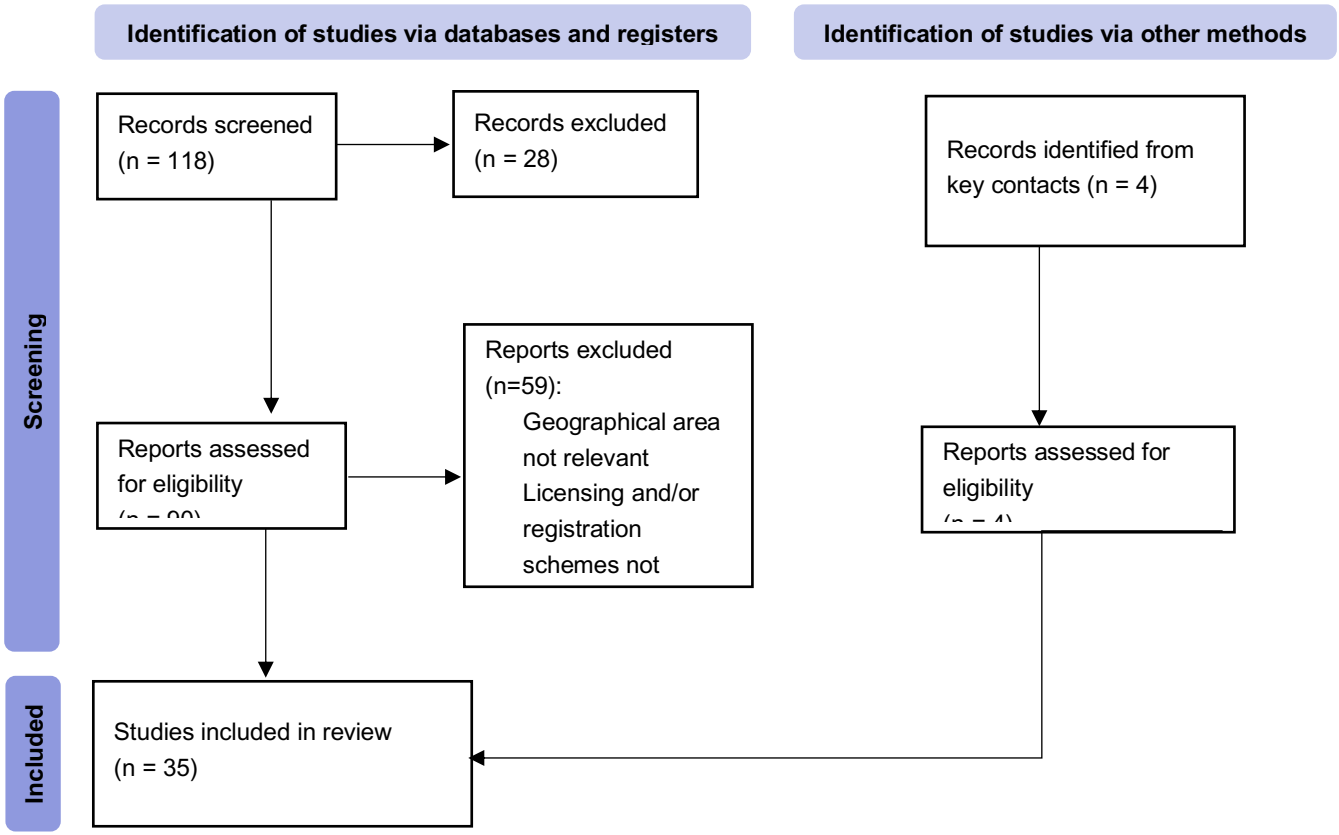
- String 1: Tobacco retail regist* OR Tobacco licen* OR STRR OR TRR OR Tobacco control
- String 2: Tobacco OR cigar* OR smok*
- String 3: Nicotine OR Vape OR NVP* OR pouch* OR vapour OR e-cigar*
- String 4: Retail register OR Licen* OR control register OR control OR regulat*

String 1 was used independently, while other searches combined either string 2 and 4 or 3 and 4. The initial search identified 165 items as potentially relevant through the database searches, purposive searching, and through stakeholders. The authors met and reviewed article titles, abstracts and, where necessary, findings and conclusions, to identify which items would be included in the review. The consolidated list included 35 items for full review. The documents reviewed included:

- 26 journal articles
- 4 pieces of grey literature
- 1 policy document

See Figure 1 for details on the document screening process. A full references list of the documents included in the review is included at the end of this review in the References section.

**Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of the document screening process of this review.**



# 3. Findings

## 3.1 Availability and coverage of literature

Very few items related directly to the Tobacco and Vapes register, and those which did were studies which used the register for its data on tobacco retailers, for example, to investigate the density of tobacco retailers in particular areas. The evidence found on nicotine products such as vapes was also limited, with the literature found in these searches focusing on vape shop density, the use of online vape shops for underage purchasing, with additional review of retail regulations and licensing of vapes. While there was reference to the existing registration schemes in Scotland and Ireland, much of the existing evidence focused on licensing schemes, primarily those in Australia, Hungary, and Finland. A significant portion of the literature also focused on registration and licensing schemes in the USA.

## 3.2 Literature on the effectiveness of retail registers

No literature which directly evaluates the effectiveness of the Tobacco and Vapes register and which has been published since 2017 was found in the review. More widely, the literature on registration schemes suggests that they primarily provide a means to monitor tobacco retailers and allow spot checks of registered retailers to ensure compliance with tobacco retailer regulations or tobacco control policies. Tobacco retail registers also enable government to prohibit tobacco retailers from selling if they are convicted of violating these regulations or policies.

Investigation into compliance with registration schemes has indicated that these reduce the potential for tobacco retailers to trade without government oversight. Baker et al. (2022) investigated tobacco retailers in an Australian state with no registration scheme, comparing an existing database of tobacco retailers with potential tobacco retailers identified through online searches and verified through in-person visits. They found that of the original list of 93 tobacco retailers, 24% had either closed or were no longer trading tobacco. An additional 54 retailers not on the original list were identified through online searches, accounting for 43% of the final list of tobacco retailers currently trading. This shows that a high proportion of tobacco retailers were unknown to the government and therefore could have been trading without governmental or public health oversight.

Fry et al. (2017) conducted a similar investigation in another Australian state which had implemented a registration scheme. They found that a much lower percentage, about 10% of their sample, were unlisted or unregistered tobacco retailers, demonstrating the importance of a registration scheme in reducing the potential for tobacco retailers to operate without

governmental oversight and enabling government to ensure compliance with tobacco control regulations and policies.

However, evidence from the Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland (SCOTSS) demonstrates that, despite the potential for registration schemes to be used for ensuring compliance, this is not reflected in their key figures. SCOTSS (2025) found that, although the number of premises selling tobacco has declined, only 3.7% of premises were visited for test purchases for violations of age restriction legislation, compared with the target of 10%. The failure rate on these test purchases was 14.3%, or one in seven, an increase from 2023/24. SCOTSS (2025) reported that more than half of local authorities did not conduct any test purchasing. Similarly, for vapes, one in five retailers was found to be willing to sell vapes to under 18s, again an increase from 2023/24.

Although evidence on the implications of tobacco registration schemes is limited, sources which address this often note the potential impact of registration schemes, for example, the impact on retailer density and potential for their use in ensuring compliance with tobacco control policy. Baker et al. (2022) propose that a more accurate database of tobacco retailers would allow researchers and government to determine whether further research or tobacco retail policy development is needed.

Caryl et al. (2021) investigated the potential impact of the addition of conditions to the retail register in Scotland, for example by capping the number of retailers per 1,000 population, requiring minimum spacing between tobacco retailers, and restricting tobacco sales to particular types of retailers (e.g. supermarkets, pharmacies). Their modelling found that more restrictive conditions such as limiting tobacco sales to a single outlet type were most effective in reducing retailer density. However, some conditions, while reducing retailer density, increased inequalities by area deprivation. Caryl et al. (2021) note the importance of balancing density reduction and inequality reduction when considering tobacco control policies associated with registration schemes. They found that policies such as removing outlets that are more prolific in disadvantaged areas, allowing sales at supermarkets only, and prohibiting tobacco sales within 300m of child-centred spaces would reduce both overall retailer numbers and outlet density, and could reduce inequalities in tobacco retailer density. A number of authors propose other conditions which could be added to the Tobacco and Vapes register, citing the potential impact of these on public health. For example, NCD Alliance Scotland (2022) calls for making registration conditional on adherence to age restriction laws and the importance in conditions in order to react to the development of new nicotine products, therefore protecting children and young people. The NCD Alliance Scotland argues that a conditional register would improve enforcement of tobacco control regulations

without the need for additional legislation, and cites evidence that there is strong public support for stricter enforcement of age restriction policies.

## 3.3 Literature on alternative approaches to tobacco retail control

The literature on tobacco control approaches used in regulating tobacco retail suggests some important considerations and alternative approaches which are relevant to the development of a potential registration or licensing scheme in England.

It has been established across the literature identified in the review that tobacco retailer density is associated with smoking behaviours such as current smoking, lifetime smoking, and smoking cessation. Increased density of tobacco retailers is associated with difficulty in cessation attempts and decreased cessation attempts (Chaiton et al., 2018), and with current smoking in both adults and adolescents (Travis et al., 2022; Glasser & Roberts, 2021). It is also well established that tobacco retailer density is higher in more disadvantaged areas and areas with higher proportions of ethnic minority residents, with retailers in these areas more likely to breach in-store regulations (Canty et al., 2024; Fry et al., 2017; Glasser & Roberts, 2021; Lawman et al., 2020; Melody et al., 2018). There is also some evidence that more disadvantaged areas have higher vape retailer density, with one study finding that over half of vape retailers in one Australian city were located in the most deprived areas (Scott et al., 2023). These findings highlight the importance of considering health inequalities and deprivation in development of any tobacco retail control initiatives in the UK.

Although test purchasing is not routinely carried out on online retailers at present, evidence from academic studies from the USA suggest that there is low compliance with age restriction legislation among online tobacco and vape retailers. Studies from Bertrand et al. (2025) and Williams et al. (2017) investigated the effectiveness and stringency of age verification processes in online tobacco and vape retailers, with Bertrand et al. (2025) finding that approximately three quarters (76%) of online vape retailers allowed customers to pass age verification checks by manually selecting a date of birth or selecting a ‘21 or older’ option to access the website. Williams et al. (2017) investigated online tobacco retailers, finding that although only one-third (32.4%) of underage cigarette purchases resulted in underage customers receiving the cigarettes, none of the failed purchases were due to age or ID verification, instead failing due to payment processing problems. The inclusion of online retailers may require consideration in the development of a registration or licensing scheme for England.

Fee-paying licensing schemes facilitate government oversight and enforcement of tobacco control policies (Baker et al., 2022), and provide leverage for control and enforcement, with government bodies able to use licence availability and fees to control retailers and generate revenue for tobacco control (Kuipers et al., 2022). The effectiveness of fee-paying licence schemes is reflected in their popularity, with nations across the world implementing these schemes (Canty et al., 2024). Compared with the literature on retail register schemes, the literature on licensing schemes provides a more comprehensive overview of their implications and effectiveness and has shown that implementation of these schemes is associated with reductions in tobacco retailer density and tobacco and e-cigarette use. For example, a case study of a US city pre- and post-implementation of a licensing scheme showed a 21% decline in tobacco retailer density three years after the implementation of a tobacco retailer licensing scheme, with greater declines in lower income areas (Lawman et al., 2020).

This is also demonstrated by Ziesing et al. (2023), who compared retailer density in South Australia before and after a significant increase in tobacco licence fees, and 11 years after this. They found that the increase in annual tobacco retailer licence fees led to a 24% decline in the number of licences in the following two years, but tobacco retailer density reduced only incrementally in the 11 years since, during which fees were only raised slightly. Ziesing et al. (2023) also found that tobacco retailer density reduced proportionately across all levels of area deprivation, meaning that those in the most deprived areas continued to have the highest tobacco retailer density.

Similarly, Kuipers et al. (2022) noted a European example in Hungary's licensing system, which requires retailers to submit an application which includes a business plan, and pay a licence fee, after which licences are auctioned. Licences are restricted to one licence per 2000 residents, and retailers are heavily fined (up to $2.2 million (US)), depending on retailer revenue) if found selling tobacco without a licence. The implementation of this licensing scheme significantly reduced the number of tobacco retailers in the country (from 40,000 to 6,300 between 2013 and 2016) (Canty et al., 2024; Kuipers et al., 2022).

The efficacy of implementing a licensing scheme in reducing tobacco retailer density in Scotland was explored by Valiente et al. (2024), who modelled the effects of three different types of licensing scheme on tobacco retailer profits in Scotland: a universal (flat) fee, a volumetric fee (per unit), and an urban/rural differential fee. They modelled fee levels ranging from 10% of retailers' median profits up to 100%, and found that the universal scheme consistently led to the highest proportion of retailers likely to make a loss at all fee levels. The effect of these fees on profit reduction differed by rurality and area deprivation. Retailers in rural areas and areas of lower deprivation suffered greater profit reduction due to fees than those in urban or highly deprived areas. Valiente et al. (2024) proposed that this could be due

to the fact that retailers in urban or highly deprived areas have higher sales and profits from tobacco which absorb the cost of the fees. They also suggested that this disparity could perpetuate existing health inequalities by socioeconomic status.

Valiente et al. (2024) found that volumetric fees and urban/rural differentiated fees did not reproduce this geographical disparity in their modelling study, but these fee schemes were less effective in reducing tobacco profits among retailers. The authors noted that a combination of approaches (i.e. a moderate universal fee which varies by urban/rural status combined with an additional volumetric fee) could be effective in reducing tobacco profits and subsequently tobacco retailer density without perpetuating inequalities.

This proposal is supported by evidence from Melody et al. (2020), who conducted qualitative interviews with former tobacco retailers in Tasmania, an Australian state which requires a licence to sell tobacco. Low profitability of tobacco was commonly cited as a reason for licence cancellation among retailers, along with concerns about security (i.e. due to fears over or experiences of burglary), and the additional burden of compliance with tobacco licensing regulation.

Valiente et al. (2024) also suggested that non-fee based interventions such as financial or tax incentives to give up tobacco sales may further encourage retailers to cease tobacco sales. Smith et al. (2022) conducted qualitative interviews with tobacco retailers in Tasmania who had been part of an intervention which aimed to encourage tobacco retailers to surrender or not renew their tobacco licence. Retailers were sent a number of materials focusing on the business benefits of ceasing tobacco sales, case studies of businesses which had ceased tobacco sales, and information on misperceptions about ceasing tobacco sales. Retailers were also offered free promotion of their business by the Cancer Council Tasmania (CCT), a government commissioned not-for-profit organisation, if they did not renew their licence. 11% of retailers who were part of the intervention ended tobacco sales, with qualitative data suggesting that the intervention served as a reminder and prompt for retailers to re-evaluate the profitability of selling tobacco.

The cost of tobacco licences was also noted as a key reason for ceasing tobacco sales. Watts et al. (2020) collected open-ended survey data from tobacco retailers in three Australian states, one with a fee-based licensing scheme and two without. They found that in the state with a fee-based licensing scheme, tobacco licensing and the cost of the licence were commonly cited as a key reason for stopping or reducing sales of tobacco (Watts et al. (2020). This was not cited in the two non-licensed states. This supports the view that an annual licence fee may limit numbers of tobacco-sale outlets. Contrary to this evidence, Burton et al. (2021) compared tobacco retailers across three states in Australia with different licensing schemes (no licensing or registration scheme, a no-fee registration scheme, and an

annual fee-based licence) and did not find that a licensing or registration scheme had a significant effect on tobacco retailers' choices to sell or stop selling tobacco. However, the authors argue that this is likely due to differences in population density across the three states, stating that their results do not necessarily support current evidence on the effectiveness of licensing or registration schemes.

Licensing schemes in combination with penalties have been shown to be associated with reductions in tobacco use in the USA. Astor et al. (2019) investigated tobacco use among young people in areas with and without licensing schemes which required retailers to pay annual licence fees and included a graduated penalty system for those who do not comply with legislation, with penalties such as fines or licence suspension or revocation. Tobacco use among young people was lower in areas with licensing schemes with annual fees and graduated penalties for violations. Evidence from Azagba et al. (2020) demonstrates similar effects of retail licensing on electronic vapour products use in adolescents. They compared use of products including e-cigarettes, e-cigars, e-pipes, vape pipes, vaping pens, e-hookahs, and hookah pens at two time points across three states in the USA. One of the states introduced a fee-paying licensing scheme between the first and second time point. Their analysis found that although vape use decreased in all three states, the introduction of the licensing policy was significantly associated with a reduction in use of electronic vapour products, which dropped by 12.8 percentage points between the two time points, compared with 7.2 and 5.0 percentage points in the other two states. This evidence suggests that the effectiveness of licensing schemes in reducing tobacco use may also be applicable to use of vapes and other products.

Overall, this evidence suggests that in a fee-paying licensing scheme, larger fees, fee increases, or a combination of licence fees with other tobacco control policies may discourage retailers from selling tobacco or encourage retailers to re-evaluate their decisions to sell tobacco. Evidence from Hungary (Kuipers et al., 2022) also suggests that the implementation of a licensing system with the aim of reducing the number of tobacco outlets and preventing adolescent tobacco use, rather than with economic aims, is key to reducing the number of tobacco retailers successfully. Kuipers et al. (2022) also note the importance of strong political will in successfully implementing the licensing scheme in the face of civil and retailer opposition.

# 4. Conclusion

There is some evidence from the review of the literature that both registration and licensing schemes can be effective in reducing tobacco retailer density. Reductions in tobacco retailer density are associated with decreased smoking prevalence. This review builds on the research team's previous work conducted in 2017 for Cancer Research UK to evaluate the register, which found that the implementation of the tobacco register was well received overall and was not seen to have had a negative impact on retailers.[a] While direct evidence on registration schemes is limited and no evaluations related to the Scottish Tobacco and Vapes register were identified since the 2017 report, registration schemes were found to be important for maintaining oversight of tobacco retailers and ensuring compliance with tobacco control policy and regulations, and have been associated with reductions in tobacco retailer density.

It should be noted, though, that conditions could be added to registration schemes to further address tobacco regulation and enforcement. The extension of the scope of registration schemes could include measures such as including a wider range of tobacco and nicotine products, prohibiting their sale in proximity to child-centred spaces, limiting the number of tobacco or nicotine products a consumer can buy at one time, or limiting the type and size of tobacco retailers. However, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of conditional registration schemes as these specific additional measures have not been adopted yet in Scotland or elsewhere.

The literature review also highlighted evidence regarding alternative models, in particular licensing schemes. Those which implemented annual fees and associated licence restrictions and enforcement measures such as penalties have been shown to significantly reduce tobacco retailer density in countries such as the USA, Australia, and Hungary. This is supported by qualitative evidence from the literature review that annual licence fees or increases in licence fees can encourage tobacco retailers to stop selling tobacco. It has been proposed that licensing schemes also provide greater leverage and financial support for enforcement of tobacco control policies.

[a] Delaney H, Bardsley D, MacGregor A (2017) Evaluating the Scottish Tobacco Retail Register. ScotCen Social Research and Cancer Research UK

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