

Brexit opens the door to tougher anti-smoking measures

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Brexit offers the UK opportunities to strengthen its world-leading tobacco control measures, by creating greater flexibility to respond to industry action and market developments, according to new research from the University of Bath.

The UK is currently bound by EU rules, but will enjoy greater freedom to adopt types of [tobacco](#) tax that are more effective at lifting the price of cheap tobacco products, as well as more direct pricing policies such as minimum prices or the imposition of price caps. Higher prices are one of the most effective tobacco control measures.

Furthermore, with 96 per cent of UK tobacco products originating from the EU in recent years, a no-deal Brexit is likely to raise cigarette and tobacco prices. HM Treasury has committed to apply new UK import tariffs on tobacco from the 1 January next year which, if passed on to consumers, would increase the average price of a typical 20-pack of cigarettes by around 30 pence and a 30g pouch of roll-your-own tobacco by £1.77.

"Since higher prices are one of the most effective tobacco control measures, this might be a rare positive from having to trade with the EU on WTO terms. Brexit offers the chance to improve [public health](#) in the UK, but equally poses a threat to public health if rules are relaxed," said Dr. Rob Branston of the University's School of Management, lead author of the study 'What does Brexit mean for UK tobacco control?' newly published in *International Journal of Drug Policy*.

The benefits of Brexit related flexibility will not extend to Northern Ireland, which will be considered to be part of the EU customs union, following EU rules, and where imports to and from the EU will be tariff-free.

Northern Ireland will also retain the current photo health warning labels on tobacco packaging, whereas the remainder of the UK will switch to using Australian imagery.

An additional potential benefit of Brexit for tobacco control is an end to the import of cheap EU duty-paid tobacco and reduced smuggling due to tougher border checks. The cigarette allowance for travelers from the EU will fall from 800 cigarettes currently, or 1kg of roll-your-own tobacco, to a duty-free allowance of 200 cigarettes or 250g of tobacco.

"Duty-free allowances, tariffs, or regulatory differences will require customs checks at the UK border. Such checks might have the benefit of reducing the rate of illicit tobacco in the UK, boosting revenue to the UK government, and the effectiveness of UK tobacco tax policy," Branston said. He estimates higher tariffs would raise in the region of an additional £820 million per annum for the government.

However, the authors assert that the potential benefits of Brexit for UK tobacco control will only come to fruition if the government seizes the

opportunity by continuing to prioritize policy to address tobacco harms. Dr. Allen Gallagher, from the University of Bath's Department for Health, notes that senior members of the current UK government have links to neoliberal and free-market 'think tanks' like the tobacco-industry funded Institute of Economic Affairs which risks leading the administration to de-prioritize tobacco control.

"Ultimately, even if good trade agreements are reached, the benefits of Brexit for tobacco regulation will only be realized if there is the political intent to capitalize on the newly gained flexibility. There is a risk that this government's prioritization of business interests means that the negative health impacts of tobacco will be less of a priority for the government post-Brexit and that tobacco regulation in the UK will suffer as a result." he said.

Co-author Deborah Arnott, Chief Executive of Action on Smoking on Health (ASH) said: "With 14.1% of the UK population smoking as of 2019, tackling tobacco use must remain a public health priority if government aims to make our country 'smokefree' in the next decade are to become a reality.

"With the COVID-19 pandemic occupying most current health-related attention, it could easily be overlooked that smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death in the UK, and causes more deaths each and every year than the pandemic has to date."

More information: J. Robert Branston et al, What does Brexit mean for UK tobacco control?, *International Journal of Drug Policy* (2020). DOI: [10.1016/j.drugpo.2020.103044](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2020.103044)

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