

research snapshot

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Local government policies to restrict advertising and sponsorship of harmful commodities in England

What this research is about

Harmful commodities include tobacco, alcohol, less healthy foods, and gambling. Marketing of harmful commodities can increase their acceptability, desirability, and consumption. But the use of these products is harmful to health. In the United Kingdom, local authorities (LAs) have legislative and regulatory power to protect and promote the health of their local population. For example, LAs can restrict advertising and sponsorship of harmful commodities in their local area. This study examined the presence of local policies for restricting the advertising and sponsorship of harmful commodities across all English LAs.

What the researchers did

The researchers searched for advertising and sponsorship policies across all LAs in England using a three-step process. This process took place from July to December 2022. The authors looked for information around restrictions or considerations of such restrictions for four harmful commodities: (1) tobacco, (2) alcohol, (3) less healthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages, and (4) gambling.

The authors first searched the websites of all 333 LAs for online documents using pre-identified search terms. For each LA where the online search did not identify relevant information, the authors emailed the LA Chief Executive. The authors sent 264 emails. A total of 30 LAs replied to the email. Finally, the authors sent a Freedom of Information request to the remaining 234 LAs who did not respond.

The authors conducted a documentary analysis to describe LA policy restrictions around advertising or sponsorship of harmful commodities. The authors

What you need to know

Harmful commodities include tobacco, alcohol, less healthy foods, and gambling. In England, local authorities (LAs) can restrict advertising and sponsorship of harmful commodities in their local area. This study examined the presence of local policies for restricting the advertising and sponsorship of harmful commodities. The authors searched for such policy documents across all 333 LAs in England. They found that 32% of LAs had a local policy. But 63% of LAs did not have a local policy, and 5% did not respond. The most common harmful commodity considered was tobacco (91%), followed by gambling (79%), alcohol (74%), and less healthy foods (24%).

The definitions of each harmful commodity varied across policies. But definitions of tobacco and gambling were mostly consistent across policies. Across the nine regions of England, the two most northern regions of England and the East of England had the lowest number of policies per LA. Most policies were found in predominantly urban areas (36%). The most deprived LAs were more likely to have a relevant policy compared to the least deprived LAs (38% vs. 27%). Five of the top 10 most deprived LAs had a policy that covered one or more harmful commodities.

classified each LA by region. They also classified the LAs into three groups using the 3-fold 2011 Rural Urban Classification of the LA District boundaries, 2021. The three groups were predominantly urban, predominantly rural, and urban with significant rural areas. LA deprivation was determined using the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019.

What the researchers found

Out of 333 LAs, the authors found data for 314 (95%). A total of 106 LAs (32%) had a relevant local policy. But 63% of LAs did not have a relevant local policy, and 5% did not respond. Of the 106 policies identified, about half (54%) had a clear date of policy publication, which ranged from 2009 to 2022. The most common harmful commodity considered was tobacco (91%), followed by gambling (79%), alcohol (74%), and less healthy foods (24%).

The definitions of each harmful commodity varied across policies. Tobacco was the most clearly and consistently defined. Definitions of gambling were also mostly consistent. Policies on alcohol varied widely in terms of prohibited products or consumption. Definitions of less healthy foods were often not clear.

Most policies applied to all types of out-of-home advertisement and sponsorship spaces owned by the LAs. Some policies (12%) applied only to specific areas (e.g., bus shelters, roundabouts, highways, and council website). The policies often referred to national regulations or guidance.

Across the nine regions of England, the two most northern regions of England and the East of England had the lowest number of policies per LA; less than 30% of LAs in these regions had a policy. Most policies were found in predominantly urban areas (36%). There were fewer policies in areas that were predominantly rural (28%) and urban with significant rural areas (26%). The most deprived LAs were more likely to have a relevant policy compared to the least deprived LAs (38% vs. 27%). Five of the top 10 most deprived LAs had a policy that covered one or more harmful commodities.

How you can use this research

LAs can use this research to develop a consensus and unified approach to support locally acceptable population-wide action on harmful commodities.

About the researchers

Sarah McKeivitt, Anthony A. Lavery, Christopher Millet, and **Eszter P. Vamos** are affiliated with the

Public Health Policy Evaluation Unit in the School of Public Health at Imperial College London in London, UK. **Martin White** is affiliated with the MRC Epidemiology Unit in the School of Clinical Sciences at the University of Cambridge in Cambridge, UK. **Mark Petticrew** is affiliated with the Department of Public Health, Environments & Society in the Faculty of Public Health and Policy at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine in London, UK. **Carolyn Summerbell** and **Milica Vasiljevic** are affiliated with the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health at Fuse in Newcastle, UK. For full author affiliations, please see the original article. For more information about this study, please contact Sarah McKeivitt at s.mckeivitt@imperial.ac.uk.

Citation

McKeivitt, S., White, M., Petticrew, M., Summerbell, C., Vasiljevic, M., Boyland, E., Cummins, S., Lavery, A. A., Millett, C., de Vocht, F., Junghans, C., & Vamos, E. P. (2023). Characterizing restrictions on commercial advertising and sponsorship of harmful commodities in local government policies: A nationwide study in England. *Journal of Public Health, 45*(4), 878–887. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdad155>

Study funding

This study was supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) School for Public Health Research.

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