

Standardised Packaging for Tobacco Products in England

EVIDENCE OF POLICY IMPACT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL
TOBACCO CONTROL POLICY EVALUATION PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

Smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death in the United Kingdom (UK), accounting for over 77,000 deaths and an estimated £2.5 billion in health care costs each year in England alone.[1] On 20 May 2016, *The Standardised Packaging of Tobacco Products Regulations* came into force in the UK. The regulations aim to curb the tobacco industry's use of packaging elements such as colours, design, shape, and size in order to decrease the appeal of tobacco products, reduce misperceptions about the harm of tobacco products, and increase the effectiveness of the health warnings. Standardised packaging (also known as plain packaging) is recommended in the World Health Organization's Framework for Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) Article 11 and the Article 13 Guidelines.[2,3]

A growing number of countries have introduced standardised packaging legislation or are in the process of implementing legislation. As of January 2020, 12 countries have fully implemented standardised packaging: Australia (2012); France and the UK (2017); New Zealand, Norway, and Ireland (2018); Uruguay, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand (2019); and Turkey, Israel, and Slovenia (Jan 2020). By January 2022, Canada, Belgium, Hungary, and Singapore will have fully implemented their standardized packaging laws. [4] Numerous other countries are in the process of implementing laws or are formally considering legislation. There is some variation across countries in terms of what the regulations cover.[5] For example, some countries specify a pack structure and pack size, and in Canada and New Zealand, legislation includes restrictions on cigarette stick dimensions to ban slim cigarettes.

Since 2002, the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Policy Evaluation Project has conducted longitudinal surveys among representative cohorts of smokers in 29 countries to evaluate the impact of key tobacco control policies, such as standardised packaging. In 2014, the ITC Project and British Heart Foundation prepared a report urging UK policymakers to adopt standardised packaging.[6] The report presented evidence from ITC Project surveys of smokers in Australia showing stronger support for the law, more salient health warnings, and lower cigarette pack appeal after standardised packaging was implemented. The report also showed that UK smokers' support for a standardised packaging law was even higher than support among Australian smokers before their law was implemented.

This report is a follow up to the 2014 report to present ITC Project evidence on the impact of the UK standardised packaging law one year after full implementation. For more information on the ITC Project, see www.itcproject.org



Standardised Packaging in the United Kingdom



The Standardised Packaging of Tobacco Products Regulations 2015 require all packages of cigarettes and rolling tobacco to have a standardised colour, pack opening, and minimum pack size (20 cigarettes or 30g of rolling tobacco) with no branding elements other than the brand name, which can only appear in a mandated font and location on the pack. The regulations require cuboid shaped cigarette packs, but permit these to have rounded or bevelled edges, and allow flip-top packs or shoulder boxes—packs with a “clam shell” style hinged lid.[7] Tobacco retailers were given a one year sell-through period to comply with the law, so that all cigarettes and rolling tobacco products in the UK had to be sold in standardised packaging by 20 May 2017.

The regulations were implemented along with the European Union Tobacco Products Directive (TPD), which was incorporated into law through the *Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016* (TRPR). The TRPR mandated further restrictions on packaging and branding, including the removal of information about the tar, nicotine, or carbon monoxide content and the introduction of new, larger health warnings. As of May 2017, all tobacco packages in the UK required combined pictorial and text warnings covering at least 65% of the principal display areas and text warnings on at least 50% of the secondary display areas. This represents an increase in size from previous health warnings (text warnings on 43% of the front and pictorial warnings on 53% of the back of packs).

ITC PROJECT EVIDENCE ON IMPACT OF STANDARDISED PACKAGING

ITC Smoking and Vaping Survey

This report presents data from ITC surveys conducted in England in 2016 and 2018 among a sample of over 4,000 adult smokers to evaluate the pre-post policy impact of the standardised packaging regulations. Results are compared with data from three other ITC countries where parallel surveys were conducted over the same time period, and which vary in the status of their packaging laws (see Table below).

Country	Status of standardised packaging legislation	Status of pictorial health warnings (PHWs) on cigarette packs at time of 2016 and 2018 surveys
Australia	Implemented since December 2012	PHWs on 75% front/90% back
Canada	Will come into force in February 2020	PHWs on 75% front/75% back
England	Full implementation by May 2017	Change from text on 43% of front/PHWs on 53% back to PHWs on 65% front and back in May 2017
United States	Has not yet been proposed	Text only on sides of packs

Further details on the sample and survey methods in each country are available in the ITC Four Country Smoking and Vaping Survey technical report, available at <https://itcproject.org/methods/technical-reports/>. [8]

Did health warnings become more noticeable after the change in regulations?

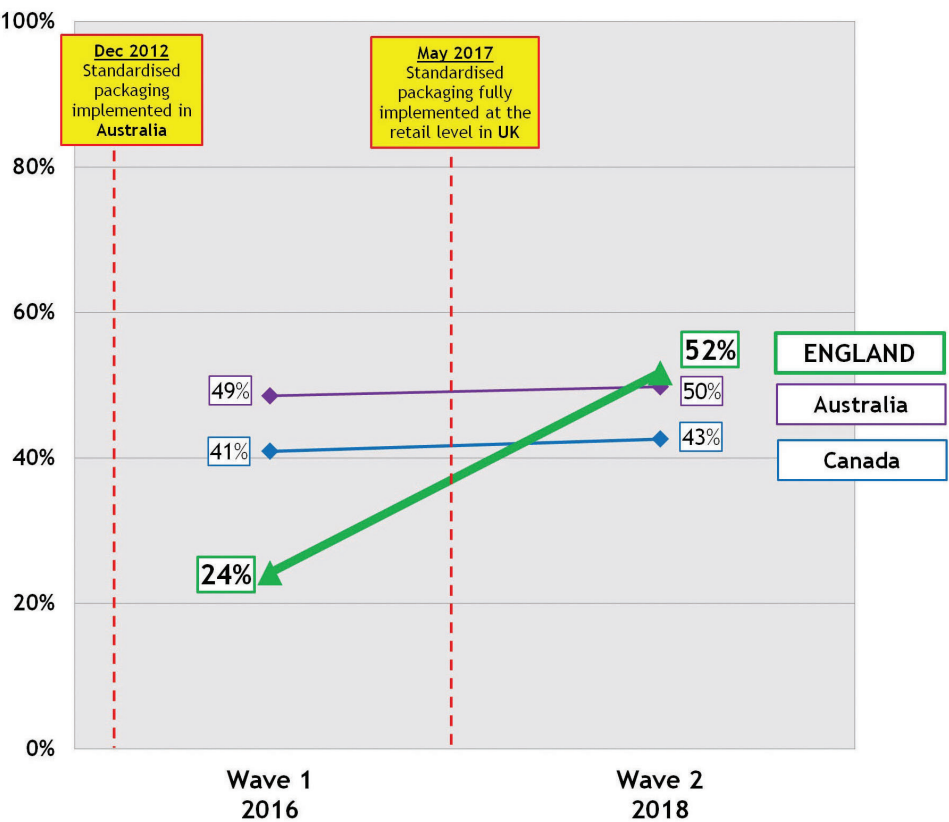
ANSWER: Yes

One of the aims of standardised packaging is to enhance the salience and effectiveness of health warnings. ITC evidence from England and Australia support this.

After the implementation of standardised packaging with larger health warnings in England, there was a dramatic increase in the percentage of smokers who said they usually notice warning labels first when they look at a cigarette pack (from 24% in 2016 to 52% in 2018), versus other aspects of the pack such as branding (see Figure 1).

Similarly, after the introduction of standardised packaging with larger health warnings in Australia in 2012, the percentage of smokers who reported noticing warnings before other aspects of the pack increased [6] and has remained high (50% in 2018).

Figure 1. Percentage of smokers who usually notice warning labels first when they look at a cigarette pack (vs. other aspects such as branding), by country and wave



Note: this question was not asked in the United States

After standardised packs with larger health warnings were introduced in England, smokers were more than twice as likely to notice health warnings on packs first before branding.

Did the change in regulations reduce the appeal of packs?

ANSWER: Yes

ITC results from England support evidence from Australia showing that standardised packaging with larger health warnings significantly reduces the appeal of tobacco packages.

Similar to previous findings from Australia,[6] there was a large increase in the percentage of smokers in England who said they did not like the look of their cigarette pack “at all” after the implementation of standardised packaging (from 16% in 2016 to 53% in 2018) (see Figure 2).

In contrast, the percentage of smokers who reported not liking the look of their packs decreased in both Canada and the United States over the same period.

The percentage of smokers who don’t like the look of their pack remains highest in Australia—where packs are not only standardised, but also have the largest health warnings of the four countries—and did not change from 2016 to 2018.

ITC cross-country data¹ from 13 countries also shows the effectiveness of standardised packaging legislation in reducing the appeal of packs, as Australia (77%) and England (60%) have the highest percentage of smokers who do not like the look of their pack (see Figure 3). In contrast, in the United States, which has not implemented standardised packaging nor pictorial warnings, only 11% of smokers dislike the look of their pack.

1. Note that the 2018 results presented in Figure 3 may vary slightly from the 2018 results in Figure 2 due to differences in adjustment methods.

Smokers in countries with standardised packs (England and Australia) are most likely to dislike the look of their cigarette pack. In contrast, in the United States, where cigarette packs have neither pictorial warnings nor standardised packaging, smokers are among the least likely to dislike the look of their pack.

Figure 2. Percentage of smokers who said they do not like the look of their pack at all, among those who have a regular brand of cigarettes, by country and wave

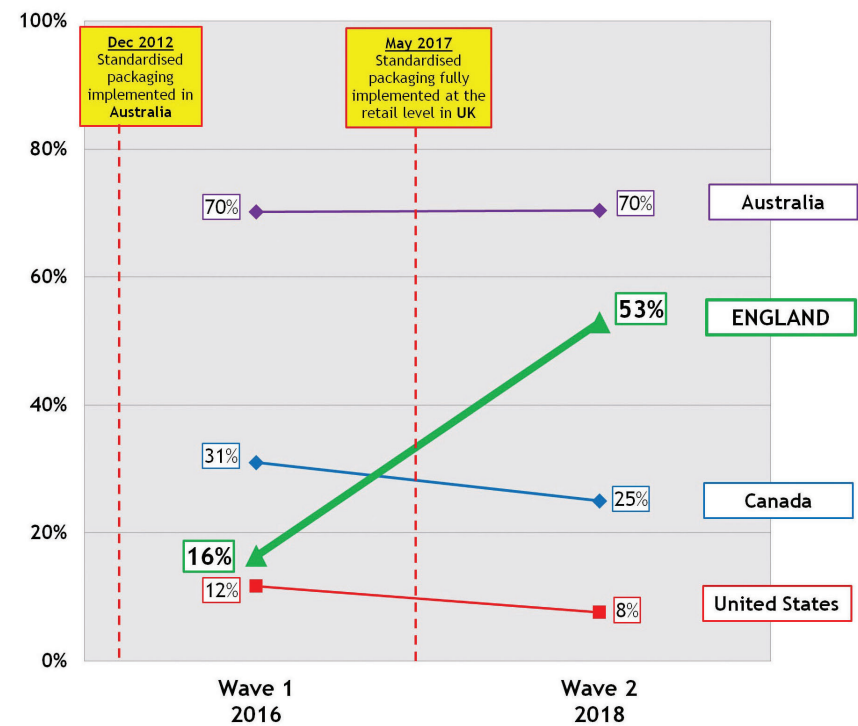
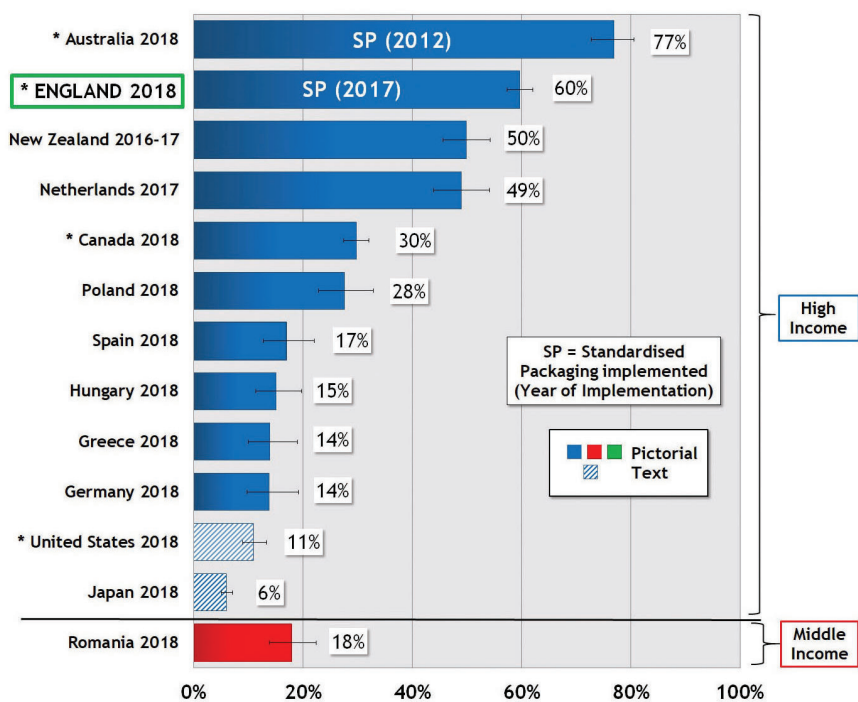
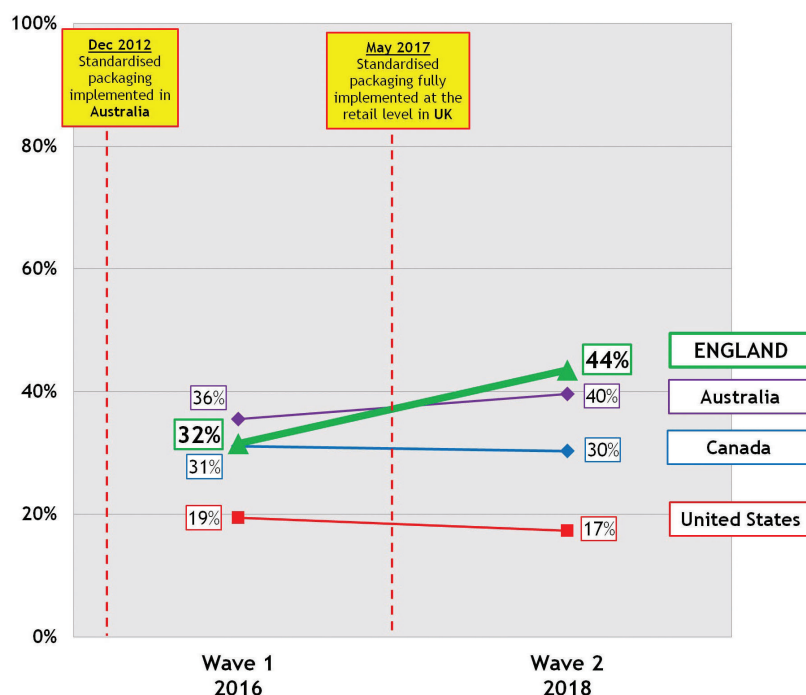


Figure 3. Percentage of smokers who said they do not like the look of their cigarette pack “at all”, by country



*In these countries, the question was only asked to smokers who have a regular brand

Figure 4. Percentage of smokers who “agree” or “strongly agree” that tobacco companies should be required to sell cigarettes in standardised packages, by country and wave



Smokers’ support for standardised packaging is highest in England post-legislation.

SUMMARY OF ITC EVIDENCE

- Evidence from the ITC surveys in England shows the effectiveness of standardised packaging with enhanced health warnings in the first year of implementation. After standardised packs with enhanced health warnings were fully implemented in May 2017, smokers’ support for standardised packaging increased, health warnings became more salient than other pack features, and appeal of tobacco packs decreased. These findings add to evidence from ITC Project studies and other research from Australia demonstrating the positive impact of standardised packaging.
- The scientific literature has clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of pictorial health warnings that align with WHO FCTC Article 11 guidelines [4,11-12]; and evidence from Australia and England has shown the potential for enhanced impact of standardised packaging when implemented with larger pictorial health warnings.
- The finding that smokers’ support for standardised packaging is high and increased after implementation in both England and Australia shows that even many smokers agree that all tobacco products should be sold in standardised packaging. ASH (UK) data indicate that support for the policy is growing not only among smokers, but across the general population in Great Britain.[10]

Did smokers’ support for standardised packaging change in England?

ANSWER: Yes, support increased

In 2018, support for standardised packaging among adult smokers in England was the highest of the four countries and increased from 32% before the law to 44% after the law was fully implemented in 2017 (see Figure 4). The percentage of smokers who disagreed that cigarettes should be sold in standardised packages also decreased after the law (from 32% to 18%).

Support was also high in Australia, where standardised packaging has been in place since 2012, and was lowest in the United States, where there are no plans to introduce standardised packaging legislation.

These results are similar to the increase in support that was found in Australia after the introduction of their standardised packaging legislation. [6,9] The findings are also consistent with surveys of more than 12,000 adults in Great Britain conducted for Action on Smoking and Health (ASH (UK)) in 2018 and 2019². [10] These show that support in the adult population overall continued to increase after the law was fully implemented in 2017 (from 58% in 2018 to 63% in 2019). Support continued to increase among both smokers (from 29% to 33%) and non-smokers (62% to 68%). The overall percentage of adults opposing the law in Great Britain after it was implemented remained at 11% in both 2018 (32% of smokers and 8% of non-smokers) and 2019 (34% of smokers and 8% of non-smokers in 2019). Thus, only a minority were opposed to the law. The survey question and set of possible response options in the ASH survey were slightly different than in the ITC survey, leading to slightly different results.

2. The ASH Smokefree GB Survey 2018 was undertaken by YouGov online from 8 February to 6 March 2018. The total sample size was 12,767. The ASH Smokefree GB Survey 2019 was undertaken by YouGov online from 12 February to 10 March 2019. The reported data have been weighted and are representative of all adults in Great Britain (aged 18+).

OVERVIEW OF OTHER GLOBAL EVIDENCE

Summary of evidence on the impact of standardized packaging from other countries

- There is strong evidence from other studies, including several major systematic reviews, demonstrating the effectiveness of standardised packaging.[13-18]
- Most evidence thus far comes from Australia, where the introduction of standardised packaging with larger health warnings in 2012 has achieved its aims of reducing the appeal of packages, and increasing the salience and impact of health warnings; as well as other positive outcomes such as increasing cessation-related thoughts and behaviours, and reducing brand awareness and identification.[19-22]
- Few studies have examined the impact of standardised packaging on smoking prevalence, but preliminary evidence from both Australia and France indicates that standardised packaging may have helped to reduce prevalence. Further research is needed to evaluate longer term effects of standardised packaging laws on smoking uptake, consumption, and cessation. [16,23,24]

Tobacco industry responses to standardised packaging laws

- Countries have varied the length of their transition period for all tobacco products sold in the country to fully comply with standardised packaging legislation, ranging from only 2 months in Australia to 12 months in the UK and Norway. The longer transition period in the UK benefited tobacco companies by allowing them to continue to promote their products through branding as long as possible. For example, new packs (i.e., brand variants, name changes or pack redesigns) were introduced at the start of the transition period in the UK and standardised packs were mostly delayed at the retail level until later in the one-year period.[25-27]
- Surveys conducted one to three months prior to full implementation of the UK legislation showed that most people (about three-quarters of adults in Great Britain) were aware of the new law, but many had not yet noticed or used the new packs.[7,28]
- After the regulations became mandatory at the retail level in May 2017, compliance was strong – studies have shown that 97% of cigarettes and 98% of rolling tobacco packs were compliant within one month of full implementation; and within 10 weeks after implementation, almost all (99.5%) cigarettes and rolling tobacco sold were in standardised packs.[26,27]
- Variation in pack sizes has been found in both Australia and the UK after implementation of standardised packaging laws.[25,29] While both countries specify a minimum number of 20 cigarettes per pack, there is no maximum. This has resulted in a proliferation of larger and non-standard pack sizes, which serves as a form of price-related marketing and brand differentiation for tobacco companies.[5] In contrast, New Zealand has specified a pack size of either 20 or 25 cigarettes as part of their 2018 standardised packaging law. Further studies are needed to determine the impact of measures to standardize the pack size of both cigarettes and loose tobacco. [29,30]
- Variation in pack structure is also permitted under the UK standardised packaging regulations. In the UK, and indeed all European countries with standardised packaging laws in place, standardised cigarette packs can have slim designs, and different edge types (straight, rounded or bevelled) and opening styles (flip-top or shoulder box). In contrast, Australia and New Zealand require only straight-edged flip-top packs, which have been shown to be less appealing, particularly among youth.[5,31]
- There are no restrictions on the use of colour descriptors within brand or variant names in any country that has implemented standardised packaging, including the UK. As a result, tobacco companies have increasingly included colours in existing brand and variant names, which may increase the appeal of tobacco products and increase misperceptions of harm. [5,29]

There is strong evidence from the ITC Project and other studies, including several major systematic reviews, demonstrating the effectiveness of standardised packaging. The evidence thus far should encourage other countries to accelerate implementation of this policy with short transition periods for full compliance at the retail level and the UK to maintain or even enhance its policy. Standardised packaging legislation should be as comprehensive as possible, including measures to curb the appeal of brand and variant names, pack dimensions and structures, and cigarette designs.

The global evidence base on the effectiveness of this policy will continue to expand as more countries implement standardised packaging laws and as more studies become available evaluating the longer-term impact of such laws. Future studies should help to differentiate the effects of standardised packaging from enhanced health warnings. The ITC Project is evaluating the impact of the 2018 standardised packaging law in New Zealand and will evaluate the impact of Canada's law after its full implementation in February 2020. Evaluations are also being planned in several other ITC countries where standardised packaging is under formal consideration.

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British Heart Foundation: <https://www.bhf.org.uk/>

International Tobacco Control (ITC) Policy Evaluation Project: www.itcproject.org

For further information, please contact:

Helena Kipling

Policy & Public Affairs Coordinator, British Heart Foundation

kiplingh@bhf.org.uk