A qualitative study of support provided by vape shops to people wanting to use e-cigarettes to quit smoking

**Background**
E-cigarettes are the most popular method of help to give up smoking in the UK and most e-cigarettes are bought in specialist vape shops. Vape shops are the ‘front line’ of smoking cessation advice for consumers who choose not to access formal medical advice. The support given is not standardised and content varies between shops. Some evidence that quitters’ interaction with vape shops can reduce the risk of relapse back to smoking.

**Method**
The data presented here are a part of the wider ongoing ECtra qualitative study exploring in-depth participant perspectives of e-cigarette use over time.
- In-depth interviews with 40 e-cigarette using quitters
- Observations in 6 urban and rural vape shops
- Interview transcript data (relating to shops) and observation notes analysed using inductive thematic analysis and triangulated.

**Emergent findings: Thematic map with illustrative quotes**

**Commercial Environment**
Making vaping accessible and affordable

- Normalisation of e-cigs
- Value for money
- Regulation impact
- Accessibility

**Supportive Environment**
Ensuring a satisfying, functioning vaping setup

- Those little shops have popped up everywhere so it’s really accessible. (Int)
- With the new TPD they have still got 100ml bottles of 0mg nicotine liquid. The manufacturers of this liquid have made a bottle where it has space for you to add your own nicotine shots. (Staff quote, Ob)
- Most customers came to enjoy the flavours and got into vaping as being different from smoking, so if relapsed, found they hated the taste of tobacco and would probably go back to the vape. (Staff quote, Ob)

**Navigating product choice**

**Advice and guidance**

**Ongoing support**

**Promoting health benefits**

**Welcoming Environment**
Creating a shared, social vaping experience

- Friendly personal service
- Socialising and relaxation
- Gateway into vaping subculture
- Masculine territories

**RQ: How do vape shops support smoking abstinence?**

- The shop owner took the time to meet with the local GP when he first opened the store and said the GP was “fully on-board”. (Ob)
- The shop were helpful in terms of finding something usable and reliable and had a big battery in it, so you don’t have to constantly charge it, which is very important actually because I forgot to charge it and then I’m in trouble because I don’t have my fall back. (Int)
- When customers relapse [shop staff] find out why, “usually this is stress or because of drinking alcohol, sometimes because their coil started burning or liquid started leaking... We can help with all those sorts of things”. I ask how he advises about stress or a night out, “that can be a good time to use the device more or maybe go up a level of nicotine”. He also tells me that “most people think their device is broken and they have relapsed, but if they bring it in and show us, then we can fix it”. (Ob)

**Conclusions**
Vape shops provide a competitive commercial environment, adapting to legislative changes, to ensure that quitters have easy access to value products. Rather than smoking cessation medical advice, attempts were made by shops to understand customers’ smoking preferences in order that advice could be tailored about the most appropriate product, strength, and liquid. Vape shops offer an ongoing point of contact for experimenting with devices and liquids to suit individual needs, offering practical help and maintenance, and providing important safety advice. The social environment of shop offers an identity related aspect to vaping that may support long-term smoking abstinence. Local policy and partnership working between health professionals and vape shops should be explored. For example, Leicester Stop Smoking Service have vape shop staff helping with volunteer outreach and a discount scheme for homeless people.