



# Changing Scotland's relationship with alcohol

## Recommendations for further action

It is almost eight years since the Scottish Government published its ground-breaking strategy “Changing Scotland’s Relationship with Alcohol – A Framework for Action”. This report summarises recommendations to the Scottish Government as it refreshes its alcohol strategy.

Although levels of consumption and harm have declined since the Scottish Government published its alcohol strategy in 2009, 22 Scots die each and every week – fifty percent more than in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Hospital stays are more than four times higher than in the 1980s at almost 35,000 each year.<sup>2</sup>

The impact of alcohol harm is felt most acutely in our most deprived communities, with people who live there eight times more likely to die or be admitted to hospital because of alcohol than those in our least deprived communities.<sup>3</sup>

Half of Scots say they have been harmed by someone else's drinking.<sup>4</sup> An estimated 51,000 children – equivalent to one in every primary class – lives with a parent who has an alcohol problem.<sup>5</sup> The total cost to our public services and our economy is estimated as nearly £3.6bn each year;<sup>6</sup> £900 for every adult in Scotland.

Over the last eight years, the Scottish Government, with the support of the Scottish Parliament, has taken an evidence-based approach to tackling alcohol harm, recognising that reducing alcohol consumption across the population is key. However – as the persistently high levels of harm show – the scale of our response is not yet equal to the scale of the problem we face. Further action is required to prevent alcohol harm rather than simply treating the symptoms.

Fortunately there is strong international evidence of what works. This, combined with lessons from the evaluation of the current alcohol strategy,<sup>7</sup> points to a clear way forward. One which should improve the lives of millions of Scots, make our communities better and safer places to live, and reduce demand on our over-burdened public services. Introducing a clear target to reduce consumption would provide a focus for all those working to prevent and reduce alcohol harm, ensuring our collective efforts deliver positive and lasting impact.

#### **Recommendation:**

- ✓ Establish a target to reduce overall population alcohol consumption in Scotland by 10% over ten years.

## **What Works**

There is a wealth of consistent international evidence from the World Health Organization (WHO), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and others that the most effective and cost-effective measures to prevent alcohol harm are: increasing the price; reducing the availability; and restricting the marketing of alcohol. Alongside these preventative approaches, we also need to ensure that individuals and families have accurate and accessible information and advice to help them to make positive and healthy choices about alcohol, and that local treatment and support services are available and responsive to the individuals and families that need them.

## **Price**

It is possible to exceed the Chief Medical Officers' (CMOs) recommended weekly alcohol limit of 14 units for £2.52;<sup>8</sup> the price of a takeaway coffee. Evidence shows that reducing the affordability of alcohol reduces consumption, particularly amongst younger people, binge drinkers, and harmful drinkers.<sup>9</sup> Minimum unit pricing remains the single most effective measure to reduce alcohol harm. It specifically targets the cheap, high strength alcohol products that cause the most harm, and it has twice been found to be legal by the Scottish courts.

Price has also driven a massive shift in how alcohol is bought and consumed. Supermarkets and shops are now responsible for 74% of all alcohol sales in Scotland.<sup>10</sup> They benefit from a greater ability to offer price discounts that encourage higher volume sales whilst enjoying more favourable business rates than pubs and restaurants.

**Recommendations:**

- ✓ Implement a 50p minimum unit price as soon as legally possible.
- ✓ Encourage business models that better support health-promoting communities.
- ✓ Prohibit all price discounting.

**Availability & Licensing**

Widespread availability of alcohol makes it easy to obtain and gives the message that regular alcohol consumption is a normal part of everyday life. There are 16 times more licensed premises in Scotland than there are GP practices.<sup>11</sup> The number of licences in operation has increased in each of the last six years and 95% of new licence applications are approved each year.<sup>12</sup> Our current licensing system is not controlling availability and is not adequately equipped to deal with the rapidly evolving alcohol retail environment. There is currently limited transparency and accountability of licensing boards for their decisions.

**Recommendations:**

- ✓ Develop a strategic approach to reducing availability in Scotland.
- ✓ Improve existing licensing regulation to strengthen its role in controlling availability.
- ✓ Improve local accountability of the current licensing system to enable public engagement in, and proper scrutiny of, licensing policy and decision-making.

**Marketing**

Children have the right to grow up free from exposure to alcohol marketing in places where they play, socialise and learn. However, the world in which they live is saturated with positive messages about drinking. There is clear evidence that children who are exposed to alcohol marketing are more likely to start drinking and to drink more,<sup>13</sup> with consequences for their brain development, risk-taking behaviours and long-term physical and mental health. The content of alcohol advertising can be very appealing to children. A Scottish study found they recognised

alcohol brands more than leading crisp and ice cream brands.<sup>14</sup> On top of this, the sponsorship of sports and music events exposes children to positive associations of alcohol with role models, health, glamour and success. Existing advertising regulations consistently fail to protect under 18s from exposure to appealing alcohol marketing.

**Recommendations:**

- ✓ Prohibit outdoor alcohol advertising and advertising in public spaces.
- ✓ Phase out alcohol sponsorship of sports events, music and cultural events.
- ✓ Restrict alcohol advertising content to factual information, such as composition, origin and means of production.

**Supporting Families & Communities**

Every child in Scotland should have the right to an alcohol-free childhood. This is integral to ensuring that every child has the best start in life, able to grow up free from the emotional and physical impact of other people's drinking; free from commercial, environmental and social pressure to drink; free from health and social harms caused by consuming alcohol themselves; and supported and encouraged to make positive, healthy lifestyle choices as they enter adulthood.

With the majority of all alcohol now sold in off-sales for consumption at home, more children are potentially exposed to adults drinking. Around 30% of children live with at least one binge drinking parent.<sup>15</sup> We need to better understand the impact of the shift in home drinking on children's and families' lives, to make sure we offer responsive and appropriate support to those families and children who need it.

**Recommendations:**

- ✓ Include the aspiration to an alcohol-free childhood in the forthcoming Child and Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- ✓ Build a better understanding of the impact of home drinking on children and families.
- ✓ Improve the identification of and support for children affected by parental drinking.

## Positive Attitudes, Positive Choices

Every adult should have access to accurate and independent information and advice to enable them to make informed choices about their own and their family's health. Labels on alcoholic drinks are not currently required to provide any information about ingredients or to warn of the health risks associated with alcohol. Research suggests very few people are aware of the link between cancer and alcohol consumption,<sup>16</sup> and many do not understand alcohol units<sup>17</sup> and significantly under-estimate how much they are drinking.<sup>18</sup>

### Recommendations:

- ✓ Promote awareness of the Chief Medical Officers' low-risk drinking guidelines amongst the public and health professionals.
- ✓ Require all alcohol product labels to include: a health warning; a message that alcohol should be avoided completely when pregnant or trying to conceive; and ingredient, nutritional, calorie and alcohol content information.

## Improved Treatment and Support

For those already experiencing alcohol problems, it is vital they have access to early intervention or to appropriate support and treatment services. Currently only one in four people who are alcohol dependent are accessing specialist alcohol services.<sup>19</sup> Pressures on public finances often mean cuts to services, but failure to provide treatment and support can mean greater harm is experienced by the drinker and their family, resulting in a increased long-term cost to public services. It is estimated that every £1 spent on treatment saves £5.<sup>20</sup> It is, therefore, essential that people are able to access the right help at the right time.

### Recommendations:

- ✓ Reinstate investment in alcohol and drug prevention, treatment and support services to 2015/16 levels.
- ✓ Continue the national programme of early Alcohol Brief Interventions (ABIs) and assess their impact in different settings.
- ✓ Ensure timely access to quality treatment that is family inclusive – recognising that families can be assets to entering treatment and supporting recovery.

## References

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