Alongside a robust approach to treatment and care, preventative measures have a pivotal role to play in preventing alcohol-related deaths. For example, the implementation of minimum unit pricing for alcohol will have both an immediate and longer-term effect, with 58 lives expected to be saved in the first year alone, and 121 per year by the twentieth year of the policy.  

Preventative action in Scotland should focus on creating environments that enable people to make healthier choices around alcohol and protect vulnerable groups to whom the alcohol environment poses a higher risk. Reducing exposure to alcohol through tackling its availability and marketing would ensure a comprehensive and effective approach to preventing alcohol-related deaths.

Alcohol-Related Deaths in Scotland

- After a decline from the early 2000s, the number of alcohol-related deaths in Scotland is now at the highest annual total since 2010.  
- There were 1,265 alcohol-related deaths registered in 2016 – 24 people a week. This was a 10% increase (+110 deaths) from the previous year. This is the third largest annual increase in numbers.  
- Alcohol-related death rates are 54% higher in Scotland than in England & Wales.  
- Alcohol-related deaths are often viewed as a proxy measure for a country’s overall alcohol harm.

Preventing Alcohol Deaths

Reducing exposure to alcohol

International evidence clearly indicates that the World Health Organization’s ‘three best buys’ of increasing price, reducing availability and restricting marketing are amongst the most effective and cost-effective policy measures to reduce alcohol consumption and harm in a population.

Preventative action in Scotland should focus on creating environments that enable people to make healthier choices around alcohol, and that protect vulnerable groups to whom the alcohol environment poses a higher risk.

- Those in recovery from alcohol dependence have cited “the persistent availability and marketing of alcohol” as the largest place-based risk that they face.  
- Exposure to alcohol marketing reduces the age at which young people start to drink, increases the likelihood that they will drink, and increases the amount of alcohol that they consume if they already drink. Early age of drinking onset is associated with an increased likelihood of developing alcohol abuse or dependence in adolescence and adulthood, and also with dependence at a younger age.  
- As well as being 6 times more likely to die due to alcohol, those living in our most deprived communities have easy access to considerably more places to buy alcohol than those in our most affluent areas. Those with the lowest incomes are most affected by high concentrations of places to buy alcohol in their neighbourhood, with more alcohol outlets associated with higher levels of problem drinking.
**Alcohol strategy refresh**

Alcohol Focus Scotland, BMA Scotland, Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs (SFAD) have set out a comprehensive set of policies focusing on these areas to inform the next phase of the alcohol strategy, due in Spring 2018. Alongside implementing a 50p minimum unit price as soon as possible, key recommendations include action to reduce high levels of exposure to alcohol in Scotland:

- Developing a strategic approach to reducing the availability of alcohol
- Reducing exposure of children and young people to alcohol marketing

**Reducing the availability of alcohol**

Living in an area with a high number of places selling alcohol is associated with higher rates of problem drinking and alcohol-related deaths.8,9 We have seen some concerning developments around the sale of alcohol in Scotland:

- Enough alcohol is sold to enable every adult in Scotland to drink on average 1.5 times the low risk guidelines every day.3
- There has been a dramatic increase in the amount of alcohol bought for consumption at home, with 73% of alcohol now sold in shops and supermarkets.3
- 92% of residents in Scotland think there are enough or too many places selling alcohol in their local area.10

Strong national direction is required from the Scottish Government on reducing the availability of alcohol. We need to improve the licensing system so it fulfils its potential to prevent ongoing increases in alcohol availability, and take action to actively reduce availability through changes to how and when alcohol is sold.

**Improving the licensing system**

- In Scotland, there are approximately 16,700 licences in force11 – 16 times more licences than GP practices.12
- Since 2011-2012, an average of 95% of licence applications have been granted each year.13

Scottish Government commissioned evaluations of the alcohol licensing system identified it as a key contributor in managing availability to improve public health.14 However, they found that progress was being hampered by a number of challenges within the system.

As indicated in our new report, ‘Taking Stock: Views and experiences of alcohol licensing in Scotland in 2016/17’, people involved in the licensing system across Scotland are calling for action to address these challenges at a national level. Recommendations include: reviewing the function of local licensing forums, improving licensing data, and creating a national licensing database.

The licensing system also requires the infrastructure to enable it to play its pivotal role in responding to the fast-moving alcohol retail environment, such as the upward trend in off-sales and the continuing development of online alcohol sales.
**Actively reducing alcohol availability**

Although the alcohol licensing system has potential to prevent ongoing increases in alcohol availability, it is unable to *reduce* alcohol availability. Alongside improvements to the licensing system, changes should be made to how and when alcohol is sold to ensure that alcohol availability is actively reduced.

Although local licensing boards have the power to restrict hours of sale in off-sales, they tend to offer the maximum available hours of 10am to 10pm as standard. It is recommended that legislation is used to *reduce the permitted hours of sale of alcohol in off-sales, to reduce availability*.\(^\text{15}\)

The restrictions on multi-buy price promotions on alcohol through the Alcohol etc. (Scotland) Act 2010 have been associated with reductions in alcohol sales and consumption.\(^\text{16}\) To build on this progress, the Scottish Government should **explore other ways to reduce the accessibility of alcohol in off-sales**, such as: alcohol-only check-outs, banning the sale of alcohol at self-service check-outs, and alcohol-only outlets.

**Restricting the marketing of alcohol**

To ensure that vulnerable groups such as children and young people and people in recovery are adequately protected from alcohol marketing and to prevent future alcohol-related deaths, the alcohol strategy refresh should take action to restrict alcohol marketing.

**Protecting children and young people**

- Alcohol marketing messages are appealing to children\(^\text{17}\), and influence their attitudes.\(^\text{18}\)
- Exposure to alcohol marketing *reduces the age at which young people start to drink*, *increases the likelihood that they will drink*, and *increases the amount of alcohol that they consume* if they already drink.\(^\text{6}\)
- Early age of drinking onset is associated with *an increased likelihood of developing alcohol abuse or dependence* in adolescence and adulthood, and also with dependence at a younger age.\(^\text{7}\)
- Children in Scotland have *high levels of awareness and familiarity with alcohol brands*: a survey of Scottish primary schools found 10 and 11 year olds were more familiar with certain beer brands than leading brands of biscuits, crisps and ice cream.\(^\text{19}\)

At the Global Alcohol Policy Conference in 2015, the then **Minister for Public Health, Maureen Watt** tasked an expert group on alcohol marketing to consider the top policy options for a range of areas in advertising and sponsorship, and how these might be implemented in Scotland.

*‘Promoting good health from childhood: Reducing the impact of marketing on children in Scotland’* was published in February 2017. The group recommended that the **Scottish Government** should:

- **Prohibit outdoor alcohol advertising and advertising in public spaces**;
- **Set out a timetable for ending alcohol sponsorship** of sports events, music and cultural events; and
- **Press the UK Government to prohibit alcohol advertising on TV between 6am and 11pm**, and **to restrict alcohol advertising in cinemas** to films that have an 18 certificate

**Protecting people in recovery**

Although places can be restorative for people in recovery from alcohol dependence, they can also be risky. ‘Environmental triggers’ are common in relapse, and can include alcohol advertising and marketing, which cue the desire for alcohol.\(^\text{5}\)

Restrictions on alcohol marketing are crucial to ensure that people in recovery and those with alcohol problems more generally are not living in environments which ‘keep them unwell’.


