

Alcohol Display and Promotion in Shops

October 2023

Summary

- Alcohol harm in Scotland is a public health emergency, causing 1 in 15 of all deaths.
- The visibility of alcohol in the retail environment influences shoppers to impulse purchase and normalises alcohol as an everyday product.
- Children and young people have identified shops as a key source of exposure to alcohol marketing, which causes youth drinking.
- People in recovery also say that how alcohol is displayed in the retail environment can cause them difficulties.
- Other countries have limited the visibility of alcohol in shops, such as Ireland, Northern Ireland and Estonia. Similar interventions have been successful in reducing the visibility and consumption of other health harming products.
- The international Alcohol Marketing Expert Network recommends introducing further restrictions in mixed retail environments to ensure that alcohol display and promotion is only visible to adults intending to browse or purchase alcohol.

Background

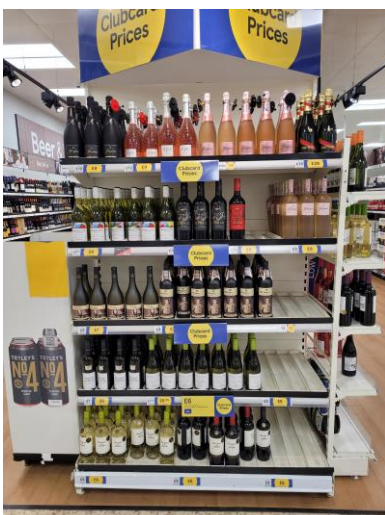
One in four people in Scotland drink at levels that put their health at risk,¹ and it is estimated that **alcohol causes nearly 1 in 15 of all deaths.**² The pandemic has added to existing problems, with a **25% increase in alcohol-specific deaths in the last three years**, reaching the **highest level in 14 years.**³ In 2021, the **Scottish Government rightly recognised alcohol harm in Scotland as a public health emergency.**⁴ Our high levels of drinking and alcohol problems have wider repercussions, with alcohol costing an estimated £5-10 billion to Scottish society per year, including up to £500 million in health and social care costs.⁵

Restricting alcohol marketing is one of the **most effective ways of preventing alcohol harms.**⁶ The **World Health Organization has identified restricting alcohol marketing** as one of their three **'best buys' for alcohol policy.**^{7,8}

Alcohol display and promotion in shops

The high visibility of alcohol displays and promotions in the retail environment is a **key form of marketing activity**, influencing shoppers to purchase more and normalising alcohol as an everyday product.

Strategic placement of alcohol products - locating alcohol in high traffic areas of a shop, such as beside essential items or near the checkouts – **increases the visibility of alcohol and drives impulse purchases.** For example, displaying alcoholic drinks at the end of aisles has been shown to **uplift sales in supermarkets by up to 46%.**⁹ In small shops, such as local convenience stores, alcohol is very often located behind the till and may be visible in or through the window, making it inevitable that every customer will see it.



This leads to **increased exposure to alcohol packaging and point-of-sale promotions**, such as price discounts, giveaways and competitions. A recent Scottish study has shown that **alcohol packaging influences purchasing decisions and encourages purchase.**¹⁰ Research also shows that **point-of-sale promotions** can influence the type and range of alcohol purchased and lead to the purchase of substantially **more alcohol than originally intended.**^{11,12}

The Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005 **currently restrict the display and promotion of alcohol in shops to a single display area** with the stated intention of ensuring that shoppers only encounter alcohol displays or promotions when they have a conscious intention to browse or select an alcohol product.¹³ In practice, evidence suggests that when **single display areas are located near high-traffic areas**, this **results in frequent exposure of shoppers**, including children, **to alcohol products and marketing messages.**^{14,15}

Children and young people



Children and young people regularly see alcohol products and promotional activity in shops and supermarkets. In New Zealand, over 90% of 11–13-year-olds making trips to supermarkets were exposed to alcohol marketing.¹⁶ Nearly three quarters (73%) of 11-19-year-olds in Scotland reported having seen special price offers for alcohol in the past month,¹⁷ which is most likely to have occurred in the retail environment.

"The alcohol aisle is in the same aisle as like the crisps and the biscuits and those kind of snacks."

– Young person

Exposure to alcohol displays in shops has been shown to **predict the age of drinking onset** for 13-year-olds.¹⁸ The evidence is clear that **exposure to alcohol marketing is a cause of youth drinking.**¹⁹ Reviews of decades of evidence have shown that alcohol marketing leads young people to start drinking earlier, to drink more if they are already drinking, and to drink at heavy or problematic levels.^{20 21}

People in recovery

People recovering from an alcohol problem have noted how **difficult it is to go shopping for food and essential items when most shops sell alcohol**, often placed in areas that are clearly **visible and unavoidable.**^{22 23} A Scottish study has highlighted the high visibility of alcohol and advertising in shops as one of the **biggest barriers to recovery**, with people actively avoiding the alcohol aisles in bigger stores as well as small shops where alcohol is often located in full view behind the till.²⁴

"I have relapsed a couple of times because of queuing next to it."

– Person in recovery

Action has been taken in other countries

- ✓ **Canada, Finland and Sweden** have a government monopoly over elements of alcohol retail, with alcohol sold in separate shops.
- ✓ **South Australia** has a 'shop within a shop' model whereby alcohol is kept separate to the rest of the store.
- ✓ **Estonia** requires alcoholic drinks to be placed separately from other goods within mixed retail outlets, not visible from the rest of the store or from outside. This resulted in a 15% decrease in the visibility of alcohol and halved the proportion of impulse buyers.²⁵
- ✓ **Ireland** has required all mixed-trade retailers to physically separate alcohol products from other grocery items since November 2020.²⁶
- ✓ **Northern Ireland** requires alcohol to only be displayed in specified areas, separated by a gate or turnstile.²⁷

Similar interventions have been successful in reducing the visibility and consumption of **other health harming products.** English supermarkets with a policy not to locate confectionery, chocolate and crisps at checkouts saw a **17% reduction in purchase** of these items in the four weeks after implementation, with a **15% reduction still present after a year.**²⁸ The Irish tobacco display ban had an immediate **impact on young people's attitudes** towards smoking²⁹ and the UK tobacco display ban was followed by a **reduction in smoking susceptibility** among adolescents, potentially driven by decreases in brand awareness.³⁰

Recommendations

The [Alcohol Marketing Expert Network](#) – a group of international experts in alcohol marketing research, law, and policy as they relate to the protection of public health – recommends that, as part of comprehensive restrictions on alcohol marketing, **the Scottish Government should introduce further restrictions in mixed retail environments to ensure that alcohol display and promotion is only visible to adults intending to browse or purchase alcohol.**³¹ This would realise the Scottish Government's original intention when introducing single display areas in 2008.

For larger shops, this could be done via a 'shop within a shop', or by limiting alcohol display and promotion to a **designated area separated from the rest of the store by an appropriate physical barrier.** For smaller shops, where options such as separate alcohol areas may be impractical, **alcohol could be kept behind the counter but concealed**, as is the case with tobacco products. In all cases, **alcohol should not be visible from other areas of the shop or from outside.**

Public support

Among the public, **60% support ensuring that alcohol display and promotion in shops and supermarkets is only visible to people intending to browse or purchase alcohol.**³²

Children’s Parliament Investigators, aged 9-11, felt that alcohol should not be advertised or displayed in shops and called for alcohol to be sold in adult-only sections of shops, separate rooms in regular shops, and supermarkets dedicated to alcohol sales.³³ Similarly, **Children in Scotland’s youth engagement project on alcohol marketing** (children and young people aged 9-17) recommended that the Scottish Government should **further restrict the visibility of alcohol in shops**, suggesting similar restrictions to introduced in shops in Ireland to prevent more children and young people seeing alcohol products, promotions, and advertising.

Calls have been made by people within **the recovery community** to separate alcohol from other products in shops.²²

Time for action

In 2022, **the Scottish Government committed to introducing alcohol marketing restrictions within the lifetime of this parliament**, subject to the outcome of consultation.³⁴ The alcohol advertising and promotion consultation closed in March 2023, with further consultation and engagement on specific proposals to follow.

Restricting alcohol marketing in Scotland offers an opportunity for us to be ambitious and to **put people’s right to health before company profits**. To help address the public health emergency of alcohol harm, the Scottish Government **should bring forward their legislative proposals on alcohol marketing as soon as possible**.

About Alcohol Focus Scotland

[Alcohol Focus Scotland](#) (AFS) is the national charity working to prevent and reduce alcohol harm. We want to see fewer people have their health damaged or lives cut short due to alcohol, fewer children and families suffering as a result of other people’s drinking, and communities free from alcohol-related crime. Our work involves gathering and sharing evidence of the harm caused by alcohol; promoting effective policies to prevent and reduce this harm; and developing learning opportunities and resources to support best practice.

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Quotations derive from focus groups with children, young people and people in recovery facilitated and supported by AFS in late 2021 and 2022.

The picture featured was drawn by a member of Children’s Parliament as part of their project investigating an alcohol-free childhood in 2019.

