

# Alcohol Sponsorship

October 2023

## Summary

- Alcohol harm in Scotland is a public health emergency.
- Restricting alcohol marketing is one of the most effective ways of reducing consumption and related problems, with outdoor and public space advertising a key form of alcohol marketing.
- Alcohol sponsorship is a form of marketing where alcohol companies associate their brands with sports, music, and other cultural events and activities to promote their products.
- Alcohol marketing causes youth drinking and the inescapable nature of outdoor alcohol advertising causes difficulties to people in recovery.
- There is public support for alcohol sponsorship restrictions.
- Restrictions on alcohol sponsorship should be introduced as part of comprehensive restrictions on alcohol marketing, as recommended by the Alcohol Marketing Expert Network.

## Background

One in four people in Scotland drink at levels that put their health at risk,<sup>1</sup> and it is estimated that **alcohol causes nearly 1 in 15 of all deaths.**<sup>2</sup> 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.**<sup>3</sup> In 2021, the **Scottish Government rightly recognised alcohol harm in Scotland as a public health emergency.**<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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

**Alcohol sponsorship** provides alcohol companies with a powerful means to **promote** their brands and **influence** people's behaviour. Sponsorship of sport by alcohol companies exploits people's **love** for sports and their **emotional connections** to teams and players, making them more **receptive** to marketing messages and extending their sporting **loyalties** to the associated brands. Similarly, alcohol sponsorship of cultural and music events helps send the message that alcohol consumption is **normal and necessary** to enjoy them.<sup>9</sup>



## The impact of alcohol sponsorship

**Alcohol marketing, including alcohol sponsorship of sports and events, causes us to drink more.** It encourages positive attitudes towards alcohol, creating and sustaining social norms that alcohol consumption is normal and desirable.

The evidence is clear that **exposure to alcohol marketing is a cause of youth drinking.**<sup>10</sup> 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.**<sup>11 12</sup>

Sponsorship is particularly powerful, with a **stronger relationship** found between exposure to **sponsored events** and drinking behaviours for adolescents and young adults than for advertising.<sup>13</sup>

Sponsorship activities achieve **high levels of brand recall** and have a significant impact on **attitudes toward the advertised brand and alcohol in general.**<sup>14 15</sup> Sport sponsorship has also been associated with **increased consumption** for people who play sport.<sup>16</sup>

*"The Champions League sponsor is Heineken. The logo is green and black. At the start of the match, they announce the sponsor and you can see the adverts all over the stadium."*

Sponsorship has an extensive reach. In a survey conducted in Ireland in 2019, **76% of adults recalled seeing at least one instance of alcohol sport or event sponsorship in the past month.**<sup>17</sup> This exposure also extends to young people, with **millions of children** being reached and influenced by alcohol companies through every year. Following four years of sponsorship of the Scottish national football team by Carling beer, almost half (47%) of all 10- and 11-year-old children, including 60% of boys, made this connection.<sup>18</sup>

Alcohol sports sponsorship creates a **misleading association** between alcohol and a healthy lifestyle by linking it to physical activity and high-performing athletes. Both children and young people and people in recovery have noted the **inherent contradiction** with associating alcohol with sport, often referring to tobacco restrictions that have been introduced.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, people in recovery from alcohol problems find alcohol sponsorship of sporting events **particularly problematic**, perceiving it as an **unhealthy association.**<sup>20 21</sup>

*“Alcohol is a really dangerous chemical that destroys people's health. Why are they trying to associate it with sport?”*  
Person in recovery

### Sponsorship restrictions are effective



Sponsorship restrictions have consistently proven to be **effective** in reducing the visibility and influence of alcohol marketing. There is evidence from the implementation of such restrictions in **tobacco sponsorship.**<sup>22</sup> The **effectiveness** of the French Évin Law is clearly demonstrated by a comparison with a **Scottish study**, which found more frequent and explicit alcohol marketing references during the UEFA EURO 2016 tournament held in Scotland.<sup>23</sup> The self-regulatory approach employed in including **Scotland** has shown to be less effective in controlling the extent of marketing.

### 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 – has recommended that **the Scottish Government should introduce statutory restrictions on sponsorship of sports, events and people as part of comprehensive alcohol marketing restrictions.**<sup>24</sup>

Restrictions should cover all forms of brand marketing, including **brand-sharing**, where non-alcoholic products and services are used to promote the brand,<sup>25</sup> and **alibi marketing**, where the brand's name or logo is replaced with key, identifiable components of the brand identity. Such tactics are commonly used to circumvent sponsorship restrictions in sports.<sup>26</sup>

### Support for restrictions

There is public support for restricting alcohol sponsorship of sports and events:

- **51% of people support not allowing alcohol companies to sponsor sporting events or teams.**<sup>27</sup>
- **More people support (43%) than oppose (29%) not allowing alcohol companies to sponsor music and cultural events.**<sup>28</sup>

This support extends to sports fans. **Two thirds (64%) of Scottish Football Supporters Association members agreed in a recent poll that Scottish football's reliance on the alcohol industry sponsorship is a 'bad thing',** and fans were more than three times more likely to believe that replacing current alcohol sponsorship with non-alcohol sponsorship would be a **positive change** rather than a negative one.<sup>29</sup> **Two thirds of members agreed with the decision of Scottish Women's Football not to accept sponsorship from alcohol companies.**<sup>30</sup>

**Children and young people** have also called for restrictions on alcohol sponsorship. One of several calls made by members of **Children's Parliament** (aged 9-11 years) to ensure that all children grow up in a Scotland free from the negative impact of alcohol, is to **stop alcohol sponsorship of events at which children may be present.**<sup>31</sup> Similarly, through **Children in Scotland's youth engagement project on alcohol marketing**, children and young people (aged 9-17) recommended that alcohol advertising and sponsorship linked to all sports teams and sports events **should be significantly reduced or completely prohibited.**

## 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.

## References

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<sup>25</sup> Alcohol Action Ireland (February 2022). Six Nations championship an opportunity for alcohol producers to obey the spirit of public policy. *Alcohol Action Ireland*. <https://alcoholireland.ie/six-nations-championship-an-opportunity-for-alcohol-producers-to-obey-the-spirit-of-public-policy/>

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<sup>27</sup> Conducted by YouGov for Action on Smoking and Health (ASH). Total sample size was 1031 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 22/02/2023 - 15/03/2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Scottish adults (aged 18+).

<sup>28</sup> Conducted by YouGov for Action on Smoking and Health (ASH). Total sample size was 1031 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 22/02/2023 - 15/03/2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Scottish adults (aged 18+).

<sup>29</sup> Scott, K. (05/02/2023). Scottish football fans 'exposed to high level of alcohol marketing'. *STV News*. <https://news.stv.tv/scotland/survey-by-shaap-reveals-scottish-football-fans-are-exposed-to-high-level-of-alcohol-marketing>

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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.*