

Protecting Children and Young People from Alcohol Marketing

September 2025

Summary

- Exposure to **alcohol marketing is a cause of youth drinking**. It leads young people to start drinking earlier, to drink more if they are already drinking, and to drink at heavy or problematic levels.
- Alcohol marketing **influences how children and young people think and feel about alcohol**. It develops brand preferences and positive expectations around alcohol, reinforcing social norms around drinking.
- Children and young people in Scotland recognise how highly visible and heavily marketed alcohol is and have **called for action**.
- **Self-regulation fails to protect children and young people** from regular exposure to alcohol marketing.
- Introducing **alcohol marketing restrictions is an effective way of reducing consumption**, including amongst children and young people, as recognised by Public Health Scotland.
- **Scotland is behind the curve** of other European countries – like Ireland – who have already restricted alcohol marketing.
- **Children and young people have a right to a childhood free from alcohol marketing**. The Scottish Government must meet its duties under the UNCRC Incorporation Act and fulfil this right.

Children, young people, and alcohol

Alcohol is an age-restricted, toxic substance that causes over 200 health conditions, diseases and injuries.¹ **Adolescents are more susceptible to the intoxicating effects of alcohol** due to their physical immaturity and lower tolerance levels.² Mental wellbeing is particularly affected, with young drinkers experiencing a higher risk of self-harm and suicide attempts.^{3 4} Drinking in adolescence also poses **risks to long-term health and wellbeing**: it affects important brain development processes which are still taking place up until the age of 25,^{5 6} and establishes drinking patterns that continue into adulthood.^{7 8 9} For example, those who start drinking at an earlier age have an increased risk of developing alcohol dependence later in life.¹⁰

Scotland's young people are drinking alcohol, often from an early age. In 2021-22, **one in three S4 students** (aged 14-16) and **one in ten S2 students** (aged 12-14) reported **drinking alcohol at least once a month**.¹¹

Alcohol marketing causes and drives youth drinking

The evidence is clear that **exposure to alcohol marketing is a cause of youth drinking**.¹² Reviews of decades of research have concluded 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.^{13 14}

Public Health Scotland's recent evidence review on alcohol marketing also reported that **exposure to alcohol marketing is associated with increased intention to consume alcohol, consumption itself, and harmful consumption, with the evidence of these effects mostly focused on children and young people**.¹⁵

"...contrary to some claims that marketing is about market share rather than increasing consumption, and that alcohol marketing does not appeal to young people."
Public Health Scotland

Alcohol marketing provides the building blocks for current and future behaviour by influencing how adolescents think and feel about alcohol, developing **brand preferences and creating positive expectations**:

- Young people exposed to alcohol advertising are **more likely to associate drinking with positive effects**,^{16 17} such as believing that alcohol helps you relax, enables you to be more confident, and makes parties more fun. These **positive expectations around alcohol use are strongly associated with drinking behaviour**.¹⁸
- Young people who are more aware of brands, or who have developed brand preferences, are **more likely to drink more alcohol**.^{19 20 21}

Children have a right to a childhood free from alcohol marketing

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has warned that the marketing of alcohol to children can have a long-term impact on their health, affecting their **right to life, survival and development**.²² **Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**, now incorporated into Scots law, the **Scottish Government has a duty to uphold every child's right to the highest attainable standard of health**. Protecting children and young people from alcohol marketing is a vital part of fulfilling that duty.

Self-regulation fails children and young people

The current self-regulatory approach in the UK is failing to protect children and young people from regular exposure to alcohol marketing. Public Health Scotland reports that **exposure is a weekly, often daily, occurrence** for most people, including children and young people.¹⁵ In a UK survey, 82% of 11-17-year-olds reported having seen alcohol advertising in the last month.²³

"Voluntary self-regulation of marketing is not effective in reducing exposure and protecting vulnerable populations."
Public Health Scotland



High levels of **brand knowledge and preferences for alcohol brands** have been demonstrated by under-18s even before they have started to drink.^{24 25} **90% of under-18s in the UK recognise at least one alcohol brand²⁶ and 9 in 10 children in Scotland recognised the beer brand Foster's**, a higher recognition rate than for leading brands of crisps, biscuits and ice-cream.²⁷

This is not incidental. Market research with children as young as 15 has been used to guide and inform alcohol marketing campaigns, and **new generations are a key target for the alcohol industry**.^{28 29}

Statutory restrictions are most effective

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends **marketing restrictions as one of the most effective ways of reducing consumption** and the health and social harms alcohol causes, with one of the key purposes to **prevent young people from being exposed**.³⁰

Public Health Scotland state that **"restricting alcohol marketing and advertising can be effective, and cost effective, in reducing exposure and consumption**. Evidence of effectiveness is particularly strong and consistent among children and young people, and when the measures are as comprehensive as possible."¹⁵

As [recommended](#) by the [Alcohol Marketing Expert Network](#) - a group of international experts in alcohol marketing research, law and policy - the **Scottish Parliament should use its significant powers to legislate to restrict marketing to protect the population**. This includes restricting:

- advertising outdoors and in public places
- sports and event sponsorship
- retail display and promotion.

Many countries across Europe have already taken action.³¹ For example, in 2018, Ireland introduced legislation to ban alcohol advertising in or on a sports area during a sporting event; ban alcohol advertising or sponsorship at events aimed children or where the majority of participants or competitors are children; restrict alcohol advertising on outdoor and on public transport; and restrict the display of alcohol in shops.³²

Support for change

Over 60 organisations and the majority of MSPs from across all parties support the [Alcohol-Free Childhood Campaign](#), believing that "alcohol marketing has no place in childhood. All children have the right to play, learn and socialise in places that are healthy and safe, protected from exposure to alcohol marketing".

Children and young people in Scotland recognise how highly visible and heavily marketed alcohol is and are calling for action on marketing:

- In 2019, members of Scotland's **Children's Parliament (aged 9-11)** called for **adverts to be removed so that children cannot see them and for alcohol to be less visible in shops**.³³
- In 2020, the **Young Scot Health Panel** (aged 14-25) recommended mandatory controls on alcohol marketing, including **restrictions on alcohol advertising** on TV, in cinemas and in public places.³⁴
- The **majority of the children and young people** who shared their views in 2022-23 as part of **Children in Scotland's youth engagement project** on alcohol marketing in Scotland **generally supported restricting alcohol advertising**.³⁵

"Children would be better and healthier because when they grow up, they wouldn't think it's cool to drink."

Member of Children's Parliament

There is **public support in Scotland for alcohol marketing restrictions**. A poll conducted by Public First in 2025 reported that **71% support restrictions to stop children seeing alcohol adverts** and **64% support restrictions on how alcoholic drinks are marketed and promoted**.³⁶ Similarly, a 2023 poll³⁷ found support for specific restrictions:

- 55% support not allowing alcohol advertising in outdoor and public spaces such as streets, parks and public transport
- 51% support not allowing alcohol companies to sponsor sporting events or teams
- 60% support ensuring that alcohol display and promotion in shops and supermarkets is only visible to people intending to browse or purchase alcohol

About Alcohol Focus Scotland

[Alcohol Focus Scotland \(AFS\)](#) is the national charity working to reduce harm caused by alcohol. We do this by campaigning for effective action that works for people and reduces inequalities. We develop policies informed by academic research and the real-life experiences of people affected by alcohol and provide accurate and accessible information about alcohol to the media, policymakers, practitioners and the general public.

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The picture featured was drawn by a member of Children's Parliament as part of their project investigating an alcohol-free childhood in 2019. Unreferenced quotations attributed to a child or young person derive from focus groups facilitated and supported by AFS.