

Briefing – Restricting Alcohol Marketing in Scotland

February 2023

Alcohol harm in Scotland

Levels of alcohol consumption and related problems remain consistently high in Scotland:

- Around a **quarter of adults** in Scotland drink at levels that **put their health at risk**.¹
- It is estimated that alcohol kills **over 3,700 people each year (nearly 1 in 15 of all deaths)**.²
- The pandemic has added to existing problems, with a **22% increase in alcohol-specific deaths in the last two years**.³

This creates a huge burden on our health service.

- Every **15 minutes**, someone is **admitted to hospital** due to alcohol. Almost all (93%) of these are emergency admissions.⁴
- In 2019, an estimated **16% (over 85,000) ambulance callouts were alcohol-related**, rising to 18.5% at weekends, costing an estimated **£31.5m**.⁵
- Alcohol use costs the Scottish economy **between £5-10 billion** each year.⁶

In 2021, the Scottish Government rightly recognised alcohol harm in Scotland as a public health emergency.⁷

Why marketing restrictions?

Alcohol marketing causes us to drink more. It encourages positive attitudes towards alcohol, creating and sustaining social norms that alcohol consumption is normal and desirable. We are all regularly exposed to alcohol marketing, including those who are most vulnerable to its effects, such as children and young people and people in recovery from alcohol problems.

"We see alcohol every day, up to a few times a day but we are just kind of used to seeing it."

12-15-year-old

Exposure to alcohol marketing is a cause of youth drinking.⁸ 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**.^{9 10} The current self-regulatory approach in the UK is failing to protect children and young people from regular exposure to alcohol marketing. In a UK survey, **82% of 11-17-year-olds reported having seen alcohol advertising in the last month**.¹¹

Alcohol marketing also affects people with or in recovery from an alcohol problem.¹² It encourages **consumption and risk-taking behaviour** among heavier drinkers,¹³ causes **higher craving levels**,¹⁴ and fosters **positive alcohol-related thoughts and feelings** which may make it difficult for heavy drinkers to reduce consumption.¹⁵ People in recovery from an alcohol problem tell us that alcohol marketing is a **risk to their recovery**.

"It makes me want to have a drink when I'm trying so hard to stay off it."

Person in recovery

Restricting alcohol marketing is one of the **most effective ways of preventing alcohol harms**.¹⁶ The **World Health Organization has identified restricting alcohol marketing** as one of their three '**best buys**' for alcohol policy.^{17 18}

Alcohol-related harm is a **human rights issue**: people have both a need and a right to be protected from alcohol marketing. For example, the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** 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**.¹⁹

Alcohol Marketing Expert Network's Recommendations for Scotland

In September 2020, Alcohol Focus Scotland reconstituted the [Alcohol Marketing Expert Network](#) to update and expand on the recommendations made in its 2017 report on alcohol marketing, *Promoting Good Health from Childhood*,²⁰ and inform action by the Scottish Government. The Network ran to June 2022, involving international experts in alcohol marketing research, law and policy as they relate to the protection of public health.

The Network's report, [Realising our Rights: How to protect people from alcohol marketing](#), was published in June 2022. It recommends that 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;
- alcohol-branded merchandise;
- retail display; and
- advertising in print publications.

There is **broad public support for increased alcohol marketing restrictions** in Scotland.

- 73% of people support limiting children's exposure to adverts.²¹
- 62% of people support restricting advertising, sponsorship and promotion of alcohol products online, in public spaces and at sport and cultural events.²²
- 48% of people support a ban on all alcohol advertising - with higher levels of support than opposition for this measure.²³

Impact on the economy

All countries included in **research by the University of Stirling** faced opposition and challenges to the introduction of alcohol marketing restrictions from alcohol industry bodies, who continually test the boundaries of the legislation and challenge the proportionality of any restrictions and their effectiveness. However, the study found **no evidence of job losses and any difficulties regarding implementation proved to be minor or non-existent**.²⁴

Recent research by the Social Market Foundation found that the **alcohol industry costs the economy roughly the same amount as it generates for the economy**, and that policies such as restricting alcohol marketing are **likely to have only a modest effect on the economy**.²⁵

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.

For more information, please contact [Nicola Merrin](#), Policy and Research Manager.

References

- ¹ Hinchliffe, S. et al. (2022). [The Scottish Health Survey 2021 edition. Volume 1, Main Report](#). Scottish Government.
- ² Tod, E. et al. (2018). [Hospital admissions, deaths and overall burden of disease attributable to alcohol consumption in Scotland](#). NHS Health Scotland.
- ³ National Records of Scotland (2022). [Alcohol specific deaths 2021](#).
- ⁴ Public Health Scotland (2023). [Alcohol related hospital statistics. Scotland financial year 2021 to 2022](#).
- ⁵ Manca, F. et al. (2021). Estimating the Burden of Alcohol on Ambulance Callouts through Development and Validation of an Algorithm Using Electronic Patient Records. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(12), 6363.
- ⁶ Bhattacharya, A. (2023). [Getting in the spirit? Alcohol and the Scottish economy](#). Social Market Foundation.
- ⁷ Scottish Government and COSLA (2021). [Scottish Budget 2022-23](#). Scottish Government.
- ⁸ Sargent, J. D. & Babor, T. F. (2020). The relationship between exposure to alcohol marketing and underage drinking is causal. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, Supplement*, (s19), 113-124.
- ⁹ Jernigan, D. et al. (2016). Alcohol Marketing and Youth Consumption: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies Published Since 2008. *Addiction*, 112, 7–20.
- ¹⁰ Anderson, P. et al. (2009). Impact of Alcohol Advertising and Media Exposure on Adolescent Alcohol Use: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies. *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, 44(3), 229-43.
- ¹¹ Youth Alcohol Policy Survey (2019). Online survey carried out by YouGov Plc. for Cancer Research UK between September and November 2019. Total sample size was 2,603 young people aged 11-17 living in the UK. The figures have been weighted and are representative of 11-19-year olds in the UK by age, gender, ethnicity, region and Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) deciles.
- ¹² Murray, R. et al. (2022). [The effect of alcohol marketing on people with, or at risk of, an alcohol problem: A rapid literature review](#). Alcohol Focus Scotland.
- ¹³ Alhabash, S. et al. (2016). Saw it on Facebook, drank it at the bar! Effects of exposure to Facebook alcohol ads on alcohol-related behaviors. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 16(1), 44-58.
- ¹⁴ Witteman, J. et al. (2015). Cue reactivity and its relation to craving and relapse in alcohol dependence: a combined laboratory and field study. *Psychopharmacology*, 232(20), 3685- 3696.
- ¹⁵ Stautz, K. et al. (2017). Impact of alcohol-promoting and alcohol-warning advertisements on alcohol consumption, affect, and implicit cognition in heavy drinking young adults: A laboratory-based randomized controlled trial. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 22(1), 128-150.
- ¹⁶ Babor, T. F. et al. (2022). *Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity. Research and Public Policy*. Oxford University Press.
- ¹⁷ World Health Organization (2018). [The SAFER initiative: A world free from alcohol related harm](#).
- ¹⁸ World Health Organization (2017). [Tackling NCDs: 'Best buys' and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control noncommunicable diseases](#).
- ¹⁹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (17 April 2013). General Comment No. 16 regarding the impact of business on children's rights, CRC/C/GC/16. United Nations. The child's right to life, survival and development is enshrined in Article 6 CRC.
- ²⁰ Alcohol Focus Scotland (2017). [Promoting Good Health from Childhood: Reducing the impact of alcohol marketing on children in Scotland](#).
- ²¹ Alcohol in Scotland (2022). Annual Findings. *Alcohol in Scotland*. <https://www.alcoholinScotland.info/graphs/annual-findings>. See Kock, L. et al (2021). Protocol for expansion of an existing national monthly survey of smoking behaviour and alcohol use in England to Scotland and Wales: the Smoking and Alcohol Toolkit Study. *Wellcome Open Research*, 6.
- ²² NCD Alliance Scotland (2022). *Non-Communicable Disease Prevention: Mapping Future Harm. A case for action on health harming products*.
- ²³ Survey carried out online by YouGov Plc. for NCD Coalition Scotland between 10th - 14th March 2022. Total sample size was 1,002 adults. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Scottish adults (aged 18+).
- ²⁴ Purves, R.I. et al. (2022). [Alcohol Marketing Restrictions: Learning from International Implementation](#). Alcohol Focus Scotland.
- ²⁵ Bhattacharya, A. (2023). [Getting in the spirit? Alcohol and the Scottish economy](#). Social Market Foundation.

Unreferenced quotations attributed to a child, young person or person in recovery derive from focus groups facilitated and supported by AFS in late 2021 and 2022.

