

The Improvement Service

ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

Alcohol Harm in Communities



What is the purpose of the briefing note series?

The Improvement Service (IS) has developed an Elected Members Briefing Series to help elected members keep pace with key issues affecting local government.

Some briefing notes will be directly produced by IS staff but we will also make available material from as wide a range of public bodies, commentators and observers of public services as possible.

We will use the IS website and elected member e-bulletin to publicise and provide access to the briefing notes. All briefing notes in the series can be accessed at www.improvementservice.org.uk/elected-member-guidance-and-briefings.html

About this briefing note

This briefing note from [Alcohol Focus Scotland](#) aims to increase understanding amongst elected members of how alcohol consumption and harm impacts on local communities and across different areas of local authorities' work. It will examine the role elected members can play in tackling the harms caused in their communities and improving local outcomes.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

Alcohol is a legal, socially acceptable drug which is seen as an integral part of Scottish life, used to celebrate, commiserate and socialise. Its ready availability – from shopping centres to sports events, cinemas and coffee shops – creates the impression that alcohol is a normal part of everyday life. In reality, alcohol is a toxic substance that can create dependence and causes serious health and social problems.

Scotland is drinking at harmful levels, consuming more alcohol than we realise. The UK Chief Medical Officers' [low risk alcohol guidelines](#) advise against men and women drinking more than 14 units a week on a regular basis. However, despite an increasing prevalence of non-drinkers¹, in 2016 enough alcohol was sold in Scotland for every adult to drink almost 1.5 times the weekly guideline, every week of the year.² Around 73% of alcohol consumed is purchased from shops and supermarkets rather than pubs, clubs and restaurants.³

Alcohol harm costs individuals, families and communities dear, is a drain on our hard-pressed public services and a brake on economic growth. Harmful alcohol consumption, alongside tobacco use, physical inactivity and unhealthy diet, is a major risk factor for non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, chronic liver disease, and diabetes. These preventable diseases cause 89% of deaths in the UK,⁴ and are Scotland's biggest killers.⁵ In Scotland, 24 people die every week due to alcohol⁶, and alcohol-related death rates are 54% higher than in England and Wales.⁷

There is a strong association between alcohol consumption and crime, especially violence. Victims report that the offender was under the influence of alcohol in just over half (54%) of violent crimes in Scotland⁸, and in 2016, a third of emergency services workers were subjected to physical abuse while attending an alcohol-related incident.⁹ Moreover, whilst there is no causal link between alcohol misuse and domestic abuse, alcohol is known to be a factor that contributes to the severity and frequency of incidents of physical violence in relationships where abuse is occurring.¹⁰

In addition, alcohol is both a contributory cause and compounding factor in mental ill health.¹¹ There are strong links between alcohol misuse, self-harming behaviour and completed suicides.¹²

Harm from alcohol not only affects the drinker, but also affects others around the drinker including family members, friends, co-workers and the wider community. Half of Scots report being harmed as a result of someone else's drinking, and more than 1 in 3 report having heavy drinkers in their lives.¹³ As a result of parental drinking, children in Scotland have experienced physical abuse and violence, and a lack of care, support and protection.¹⁴ Such adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have profound and long-lasting consequences.¹⁵

Inequalities in alcohol-related harm are stark: those living in our most deprived areas are six times more likely to die and almost nine times more likely to be hospitalised due to alcohol than those in our least deprived communities.¹⁶

Alcohol harm costs local authorities millions of pounds each year and Scotland as a whole an estimated £3.6 billion per year.¹⁷ This includes an estimated £230 million of social care costs due to alcohol misuse; £727 million for alcohol-specific offences and crimes; and a loss of £866 million to the Scottish economy's productive capacity due to presenteeism, absenteeism, unemployment and premature alcohol related mortality. There is also little evidence to support arguments that lower spending on alcohol would harm the economy.¹⁸

Reducing how much alcohol Scotland drinks and targeting those particularly at risk will benefit everyone: drinkers and non-drinkers, children and families, communities, the NHS and emergency services, employers and the economy. Reducing overall consumption levels will have most benefit to Scotland's vulnerable communities.

There is a clear need for continued action to reduce alcohol-related harm in Scotland and to address the associated health inequalities.

What does this mean for elected members?

The negative impacts of alcohol harm are felt across every area of a local authority's work, on every budget line and throughout the communities we live in. All elected members should have an understanding of the wider impact of alcohol.

Key areas affected by alcohol harm include:

- **Crime and community safety:** There is a strong link between alcohol and crime, which plays a role in offending and disorder. This is an issue that is highly visible in communities, affecting both those who drink and those who don't. Given the increase in drinking at home there are likely to be increasing effects in private spaces too.
- **Health and communities:** In Scotland, 1 in 4 people (26%) drink at hazardous or harmful levels (defined as drinking more than 14 units per week).¹⁹ Local authorities have a key role in supporting adults who are affected by alcohol problems and mental ill health.
- **Children and young people:** Parental alcohol misuse is cited as a concern in 1 in 5 child protection cases in Scotland.²⁰ The effect of growing up in households where there are alcohol problems has knock-on effects to the social care system and to the life outcomes for affected children. On average, 18 young people under the age of 20 are admitted to hospital each week because of alcohol.²¹
- **Costs to local economy:** Alcohol harm costs businesses and affects the local economy in relation to healthcare, social care, productive capacity and crime.²²
- **Environment and transport:** The cost of cleaning up town centres and the recycling and rubbish generated by consumption is borne by local authorities. The consequences of drink driving also affect the local authority.

What does good practice look?

International evidence clearly indicates that 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.²³ Conversely, whilst education and public information campaigns are important in raising awareness, they are ineffective in changing long-term behaviour and reducing consumption and harm.²⁴

Elected members are instrumental to improving outcomes at a local level. Because of their local knowledge and role as community leaders, elected members have a key role to play in preventing and reducing alcohol harm in their communities.

Strategic recognition of alcohol harm

Elected members can use their influence to ensure that prevention and reduction of alcohol harm, alongside treatment and recovery, are key priorities embedded across all local strategies. Amongst others, this should include the local authority's vision, the Local Outcome Improvement Plan, Locality Plans, Community Justice Outcome Improvement Plan, Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy and Economic Plan. Elected members should ensure that these different strategies are not working against each other. It is also good practice to complete an impact assessment of alcohol harm on each policy.

Leading by example

The environments where people live, work and play should be supportive of people's health and wellbeing. With 16% of adults describing themselves as non-drinkers²⁵, elected members need to ensure that, for example, the development of the night-time economy encourages diversity.

Elected members can lead by example in de-normalising alcohol consumption and contributing towards a culture shift; local authority receptions and events could be alcohol-free and/or include a wide selection of non-alcoholic options. The local authority should ensure it has a robust workplace alcohol policy for its own staff that provides support for those who need it.

Championing action and raising awareness

The stigma that surrounds problem drinking can prevent friends, family and colleagues from asking important questions to identify issues and can prevent those with a problem from seeking help. Elected members can use their public profile to tackle stigma by speaking out about the harm alcohol causes local communities.

Elected members can champion the need to ensure that there is political and financial support for early identification and intervention where alcohol harm is suspected, for example children living with problem drinkers.

Taking on the role of alcohol champion can help ensure that alcohol harm is considered in all local policies and that action is joined-up across all local authority departments and across other local agencies.

Community involvement

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 emphasises strengthening of community involvement in local decision-making. Local residents will have first-hand experience of how alcohol harm affects their family, friends, businesses and the wider community and this knowledge must be taken into account by local authorities seeking to tackle alcohol harm.

Local licensing forums are made up of local stakeholders, including business owners and residents. By meeting with the local forum, elected members can build up a picture of alcohol harm in their local area. Licensing forums are made more effective by strong representation from the local community, so elected members also have a role to play in encouraging the local community to attend forum meetings and feed in their experiences.

Elected members are also well placed to speak to the communities they encounter in their day-to-day work directly about the problems they face. This information should be passed on to the relevant department or local licensing board so that solutions can be developed.

To help local people to have their say on how alcohol affects their community, Alcohol Focus Scotland has created a [Community Toolkit](#).

Support national action to reduce alcohol harm

The most effective policy measures to reduce alcohol harm are also those that are the most cost-effective: increasing price, reducing availability and controlling marketing.

The Scottish Government's 2009 alcohol strategy, Changing Scotland's Relationship with Alcohol, is internationally recognised as being one of the most forward-thinking and ambitious responses to alcohol-related harm but more action is now needed. Elected members have a key role to play in highlighting the harm alcohol is causing in communities across Scotland and calling for action to prevent this.

This could be achieved through ensuring that Alcohol and Drug Partnership Delivery Plans are fully supported by relevant partners and endorsed by all elected members.

Key questions and actions for elected members to consider

Key questions

1. Does your local area have a joined up alcohol strategy?
2. Is the relationship between alcohol availability, consumption and harm reflected in your local licensing board's policy statement?
3. How much time does your local police force spend dealing with alcohol-related incidents?
4. How does alcohol impact your local health and social care services?
5. What's the cost of cleaning up your town centre after the weekend?
6. What are the experiences of children and families in your area living with someone who drinks too much?
7. Are local services meeting the needs of, and involving, service users and their families?

Actions for local elected members on alcohol-related harm

1. Meet with your local Alcohol & Drug Partnership to find out what's being done to reduce alcohol harm in your community
2. Attend your local licensing forum or licensing board meeting
3. If you sit on the licensing board, pay particular attention to undertaking a robust assessment of overprovision for statements of licensing policy
4. Champion the inclusion of measures to reduce alcohol harm in local strategies
5. Use your local media to raise awareness of alcohol-related harm
6. Visit a [local alcohol support service](#) explore ways of promoting and celebrating recovery
7. Find out more about alcohol harm in your community by reading Alcohol Focus Scotland's [local alcohol harm factsheet](#)
8. Keep up-to-date with alcohol news, research and events by signing up to [Alcohol Focus Scotland's monthly newsletter, eFocus](#).

Summary

Alcohol harm negatively affects local communities across Scotland, putting a drain on our hard-pressed public services and a brake on economic growth. But it is preventable. Nearly every local authority department's work will be impacted by alcohol consumption and harm. Elected members should understand the full impact of alcohol on the local community and champion action both locally and nationally to reduce this burden, making their local area a healthier, safer, and fairer place to live.

Contact

Alcohol Focus Scotland's website contains a range of information and resources including [local support services](#), [local harm and cost profiles](#), and [community toolkits](#).

Alcohol Focus Scotland
166 Buchanan Street
Glasgow
G1 2LW

0141 572 6700

 @alcoholfocus

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iHub
Quarrywood Court
Livingston
EH54 6AX

Tel: 01506 282012
Email: info@improvementservice.org.uk
www.improvementservice.org.uk

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