



SHAAP

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems

Tackling Scotland's alcohol problem

A five point plan for
better health and well-being

Introduction

Far too many Scots drink far too much, far too often. The more we drink, the greater the burden of harm we experience – to our health, to the well-being of our families and communities, and to society as a whole. The recent Alcohol Act passed by the Scottish Parliament is a step forward but much more remains to be done. In this document SHAAP sets five suggested priorities for reducing alcohol-related harm in Scotland in the short and long-term.

Consumption

Government figures show that UK alcohol consumption has almost doubled since 1950. Increases in consumption have been fuelled by increasing affordability and availability. Alcohol was 66% more affordable in 2009 than in 1987.

Numerous scientific studies show a direct link between *per capita* alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm in a population.

In Scotland, the amount of alcohol drunk per adult has gone up by 11% since the mid-1990s. Although consumption has stabilised over the past few years, nearly one million people in Scotland currently drink at hazardous and harmful levels.

Harm

Alcohol is a dependence-inducing, psychoactive drug that is linked to around 60 different diseases and conditions. Some problems can occur quickly, others develop more gradually. Long-term heavy drinking can lead to damage to the brain and liver. It is also a contributory factor in many other conditions such as certain cancers, abdominal disorders, stroke and heart disease. In addition to causing physical problems, excessive alcohol consumption can lead to mental health problems. Maternal alcohol intake in pregnancy can result in toxicity and damage to developing organs in the foetus with serious long-term consequences.

Figures published recently show the extent of the problem in Scotland:

- Almost 40,000 discharges from hospital in 2009/10 related to an alcohol-related admission.
- In 2008/09 approximately 107,414 consultations took place in GP practices relating to alcohol misuse.
- 50% of all prisoners said that they were drunk at the time of their offence.
- In 2008/09 there were 4,177 alcohol-related discharges from psychiatric hospitals.
- In 2009 over a third of both men and women exceeded the recommended daily limit on their heaviest drinking day in the past week.

Taken from *Alcohol Statistics Scotland 2011*, NHS Scotland Information Services Division, 2011

Statistics do not adequately capture the misery, pain and loss that many individuals and families experience as a result of alcohol. However, they make clear that for many, alcohol damages the quality of life in Scotland.

Cost

Estimates of the financial cost to Scotland of harm from alcohol are alarming. The annual cost of inpatient stays directly related to alcohol is estimated at £83.5 million. The annual cost of alcohol-related crimes and offences is estimated at £727.1 million. A mid-range estimate of the cost of alcohol misuse to Scottish business, the NHS, social services, police and courts is around £3.56 billion. The annual cost of alcohol-related ambulance journeys alone is thought to be £24.4 million. This is an unacceptable cost at a time when the public finances are facing significant pressures.

Taken from *The Societal Cost of Alcohol Misuse in Scotland for 2007*, York University 2010



So what can be done?

A five point plan

1

Increase the price of cheap alcohol

Recently we have seen a vigorous political debate on the impact of alcohol on the health and well-being of the Scottish people. Whilst we are disappointed that minimum pricing plans were removed from the Alcohol etc (Scotland) Bill, we are pleased to see the widespread agreement that price and availability are key factors in reducing alcohol-related harm.

Strong and extensive evidence indicates that one of the most effective and efficient means of reducing rates of alcohol-related disorder and health harm is by increasing the price of alcohol. Setting a minimum price of 45 pence per unit of alcohol or higher would deliver significant health and social benefits by selectively raising the price of the cheapest alcohol products that are linked with harmful consumption.

Action on alcohol price must form a central strand of any government strategy to reduce alcohol harm.

2

Carefully manage the availability of alcohol

Alcohol has become far more available in recent years – both in terms of drinking hours in licensed premises but also the number of outlets licensed to sell alcohol.

The Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005 clearly states the need to protect public health as a licensing objective. The inclusion of health representation on licensing forums is welcome, but commitment to protecting the health of the public must become a reality.

Politicians at a local and national level must reflect on the damage done by alcohol to their communities and ensure that public health is a prime consideration regarding licensing. Government must fully support the implementation of the Licensing Act provisions to ensure effective action can be taken at a local level to tackle overprovision.

3

Restrict the marketing of alcoholic drinks

Recent years have seen additional restrictions on the promotions that bars can run and we will soon see tighter controls on in-shop marketing of alcohol. We must ensure these laws are rigorously enforced .

Moreover, we cannot ignore the impact that alcohol marketing has in terms of reinforcing the idea that consuming alcohol is an everyday part of life and of our culture. Young people in particular are growing up at a time when alcohol marketing on the web, in social media, and through music sponsorship is becoming omnipresent. Not all of the legal powers regarding alcohol marketing are devolved to the Scottish Parliament but this does not mean the issue can be ignored.

Current rules governing alcohol advertising are inadequate and need to be strengthened. At the very least, action should be taken to reduce children's exposure to the marketing of alcohol products. Urgent consideration should also be given to improving alcohol product labelling and reviewing sponsorship of music and sports events by alcohol brands.

4

Ensure effective treatment for alcohol problems is available quickly

SHAAP has supported the introduction of alcohol brief interventions in a number of health settings in Scotland. These give professionals a framework to highlight harmful drinking and introduce positive ways of improving health by reducing alcohol consumption.

The benefits from brief interventions must be maintained and mainstreamed. In addition appropriate recovery programmes are required for those who have more advanced alcohol problems.

The focus on recovery must be maintained and supported with adequate resources to ensure evidence-based treatment is readily accessible and responsive to patients needs.

5

Challenge the culture that promotes heavy drinking

SHAAP recognises that many people enjoy drinking socially. However, we must continue to challenge the culture in Scotland which condones heavy drinking. We pay a very high price for excessive alcohol consumption which is felt by individuals, families and society as a whole.

Our current drinking culture should not be seen as a source of pride to Scotland but seriously damaging to our nation's health, wealth and well-being.

Summary

Tackling the problem – a five point plan

1. Increase the price of cheap alcohol
2. Carefully manage the availability of alcohol
3. Restrict the marketing of alcoholic drinks
4. Ensure effective treatment for alcohol problems is available quickly
5. Challenge the culture that promotes heavy drinking

SHAAP

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) was established by the Scottish Royal Medical Colleges and Faculties to raise awareness of the nature and extent of harm linked to alcohol use in Scotland, and to campaign for evidence-based measures to reduce this harm.

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