

Alcohol Advertising in Outdoor and Public Spaces

April 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 marketing causes youth drinking and the inescapable nature of outdoor alcohol advertising causes difficulties to people in recovery.
- Other countries have banned alcohol companies from advertising in public spaces, such as Estonia, Finland, Lithuania and Sweden. Advertising restrictions in public spaces, such as on public transport, have been successful in reducing the consumption of other unhealthy products.
- The Alcohol Marketing Expert Network recommends restricting alcohol advertising in outdoor and public spaces as part of comprehensive alcohol marketing restrictions.

Background

One in four people in Scotland drink at levels that put their health at risk,¹ and it is estimated that **alcohol causes 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 In 2021, **the Scottish Government rightly recognised alcohol harm in Scotland as a public health emergency.**⁴ 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.⁵

Restricting alcohol marketing is one of the **most effective ways of preventing alcohol harms.**⁶ The **World Health Organization has identified restricting alcohol marketing** as one of their three ‘best buys’ for alcohol policy.^{7,8}



Advertising in outdoor and public spaces, also known as out-of-home advertising, is a key form of alcohol marketing. It includes **billboards, street furniture, transport, and place-based media, such as within cinemas or sports grounds.** Out-of-home advertising reaches an incredible 98% of the UK population at least once a week,⁹ promotes engagement with digital advertising more than any other media¹⁰ and encourages impulse purchasing when people are on the move.¹¹ **Advertising on public transport is particularly attractive to marketers, who consider passengers to be a captive audience.**¹²

Alcohol brands rely heavily on out-of-home advertising, to which they allocate around a fifth of their advertising budget – nearly four times as much as the average brand.¹³ Alcohol brands’ spending on this type of advertising is predicted to grow over the coming years, despite the reduced foot and road traffic from the pandemic.¹⁴

The impact of alcohol advertising

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.

The evidence is clear that **exposure to alcohol marketing is a cause of youth drinking.**¹⁵ 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.**^{16,17}

Children and young people are **regularly exposed to alcohol marketing in public places.**^{18,19} In a UK survey, **45% of young people reported having seen alcohol advertising on a billboard in the last month.**²⁰ The transport network is also a key source of exposure, as children in Scotland spend a significant amount of time around bus stops and roads,²¹ particularly those from more deprived areas.²²

“In Edinburgh, they have billboards everywhere. The one I saw most was...on a main bus route...I saw it practically every day.”
Young Person

Restrictions should go beyond focusing on places specific to children, as they live, play, and grow up in spaces not limited to parks and schools. Research has shown that alcohol adverts are already unlikely to be located around schools.²³

“It makes it harder to maintain recovery when visually seeing alcohol marketed and promoted on public transport. A visual trigger.”

Person in recovery

Alcohol marketing also **affects people with or in recovery from an alcohol problem.**²⁴ It encourages consumption and risk-taking behaviour among heavier drinkers,²⁵ causes higher craving levels,²⁶ and fosters positive alcohol-related thoughts and feelings which may make it difficult for heavy drinkers to reduce consumption.²⁷

People in recovery from an alcohol problem **tell us that alcohol marketing is a risk to their recovery.** They have **highlighted the inescapable nature of alcohol advertising in public spaces, such as on public transport.**

Other countries have acted

Many countries in Europe already have restrictions on alcohol advertising in outdoor and public spaces. For example, **Estonia, Finland, Lithuania and Sweden have all implemented an outright ban on outdoor alcohol advertising,** while France, Ireland and Sweden have introduced partial bans.²⁸ Several Australian states have restricted alcohol advertising on public transport and government-owned infrastructure,²⁹ and alcohol advertising was banned on New York City buses, subway cars and stations in 2017.³⁰

Advertising restrictions are effective

Restricting alcohol advertising in outdoor and public spaces has successfully reduced **awareness of alcohol advertising in Ireland,** where past-month awareness of public transport advertising among adults declined from 53% before restrictions were implemented to 40% two years after their introduction.³¹

Advertising restrictions in public spaces, such as on public transport, have also been successful in reducing the consumption of other unhealthy products. For example, the introduction of restrictions on the advertising of foods high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS) across the Transport for London network in 2019 was associated with significant reductions in energy, sugar, and fat purchased from these products,³² with no impact on advertising income.³³ A ban on tobacco advertising on posters and billboards in the UK was found to reduce awareness of such advertising among both adults and young people.^{34 35}

Recommendations for Action

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 alcohol advertising in outdoor and public spaces as part of comprehensive alcohol marketing restrictions.**³⁶

This would most effectively prevent exposure of vulnerable groups, such as children and people in recovery, from intrusive alcohol adverts in outdoor and public spaces, and reduce the volume of alcohol marketing messages experienced by everyone. In turn, this would reduce purchases, consumption, and alcohol harms.

A 2022 survey suggests there is **majority support in Scotland for a ban on advertising in outdoor and public spaces such as streets, parks and public transport;** 51% supported a ban, 18% opposed and 31% either did not know or neither supported nor opposed a ban.³⁷

Restricting alcohol marketing in outdoor and public spaces would be aligned with the wishes of children and young people in Scotland. **Children’s Parliament Investigators,** aged 9-11, felt that billboards and adverts promoting drinking should not be displayed in areas where children may see them.³⁸ Similarly, the **Young Scot Health Panel** of children and young people aged 14-25 years recommended prohibiting alcohol marketing on billboards and posters near to schools, nurseries and playgrounds, and on public transport vehicles, stops and stations.³⁹



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.

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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.

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