



ALCOHOL
HEALTH
ALLIANCE

Pouring over public opinion:

Alcohol Policies in the UK

July 2023



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Executive Summary

In the UK, alcohol presents an urgent and growing problem: 70 people die due to alcohol every day. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated this crisis, with alcohol-specific deaths having increased by 27% between 2019 and 2021, reaching record highs.[1]

The estimated cost of alcohol on the UK healthcare system is £8.3 billion annually.[2] Predictions show that unless alcohol consumption returns to pre-pandemic levels, by 2034 it will cost the already-stretched NHS in England an additional £1 billion.[3] Although alcohol harms have increased, sadly the provision of treatment has not: only one in five people with alcohol dependence in England are estimated to be in treatment.[4]

This public health crisis is entirely preventable.

We know there are things policymakers can do to reduce the levels – and cost – of alcohol harm on society, and with the right political will and leadership, there is a real opportunity to turn the tide of our alcohol harm crisis. This isn't empty rhetoric: every week that the Government doesn't take action on this issue, another 490 people die from alcohol.

Bold, preventative public health policies could change this, and are gaining public support.

This Alcohol Health Alliance (AHA) report analyses recent public opinion polling data, carried out by YouGov Ltd. on behalf of Action on Smoking and Health (ASH). It shares insights into how the public currently view action on alcohol, and what public support there is for policies to tackle alcohol harm. It also sets out our 'AHA Manifesto' for policymakers, which centres around four focus areas that would have the biggest collective impact on alcohol harm:

1. Protect children and support people impacted by alcohol harm
2. Empower individuals and build thriving communities
3. Strengthen the NHS and frontline services
4. Preserve the public purse



Why now?

We are at a tipping point, and the public knows it. Whilst the Government continually delays its promised public consultation on alcohol labelling, our report found that 76% of those surveyed supported a legal requirement for alcohol labels to display the number of units in alcohol products.

One of the major barriers to progress is the influence of the alcohol industry. The public agree that it is time to put public health before private profit. Our report outlines how 70% of people surveyed support protecting Government policy from the influence of the alcohol industry and its representatives.

Why we have to talk about alcohol harm

We have already set out the growing alcohol harm crisis, and the rising costs both to individuals and to our already over-stretched public finances. The reality is that alcohol harm is not only a problem in isolation. There are also wider social, health and inequality impacts.

Alcohol harm disproportionately affects those in lower socioeconomic groups, with alcohol-related deaths and hospital admissions around 60% higher in the most deprived groups compared to the least.[5] Alcohol is also a contributing factor in crime and violence, domestic abuse, and family breakdown; its impacts can be felt throughout entire communities.

Alcohol is also a major cause of preventable premature death[6], playing a causal role in over 200 diseases and injuries including alcohol-related brain damage, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and at least 7 different cancers (including two of the most common cancers – breast and bowel).[7]

There has been brave, successful action on other risk factors like tobacco, obesity and gambling, yet action to reduce and prevent alcohol harm is lagging far behind. The same political determination to tackle other risk factors must now also be given to alcohol if we are to protect children and families, empower communities, reduce pressure on the NHS and support the economy.



What are some of the key findings in our report?

The survey results show that:

- 55% of those who expressed an opinion (excluding don't know) felt that the government was not taking enough action on alcohol
- 7 in 10 people wanted government policy to be protected from the influence of the alcohol industry and its representatives
- 76% of people thought the number of units in a product should be legally required on alcohol labels, with the majority of people supporting more and better labelling of alcoholic products overall
- Over half of people would welcome improved marketing regulations, especially the introduction of health warnings on marketing materials and separate display areas for alcohol and its marketing in shops, and
- There was also demonstrable support amongst respondents from all political backgrounds for tackling the affordability of alcohol.

Next steps for policymakers

The call for action is therefore clear: People in the UK want to see their politicians committing to stronger, bolder action to tackle rising UK alcohol harms.

The Alcohol Health Alliance calls on all political parties to commit to action on alcohol harm with a comprehensive evidence-based strategy, free from alcohol industry influence.



Our 2023 Manifesto for a future free from alcohol harm

Alcohol harm presents an urgent and growing problem: to families across the UK, to the NHS and the public purse, and for the widening inequalities within our society. Alcohol harm is preventable and there is a great opportunity for meaningful change that will significantly improve the lives of generations to come. The Alcohol Health Alliance calls on all political parties to commit to action on alcohol harm with a comprehensive evidence-based strategy, free from alcohol industry influence. **Our key manifesto asks for the UK Government are:**

Protect children and support people impacted by alcohol harm

Children have the right to grow up and live in a safe, nurturing, and healthy environment that is free from exposure to harmful marketing. However, the alcohol industry frequently places its adverts in bus stops near schools, on television before 9pm, and on websites and social media. There is no escape from alcohol marketing. Evidence shows that it encourages children to drink more and at an earlier age, exposing them to significant harm. Marketing also prolongs people's dependence and undermines their treatment and recovery.

By introducing higher standards for how the industry can market and sell its products we can provide children and people impacted by alcohol harm – including those in recovery – with better chances of leading healthier, happier, longer lives. Regulations have been developed to safeguard the marketing of 'unhealthy' food and soft drinks which, if applied to alcohol, would be a significant step forward.

We call on the government to take the following actions to protect children and support people impacted by alcohol harm:

- Include alcohol in the definition of 'unhealthy products' under the marketing regulations for products high in fat, sugar and salt
- Give responsibility for ensuring alcohol marketing practices adhere to higher standards to an independent body with no links to the alcohol or advertising industries



Empower individuals and build thriving communities

Everyone deserves the opportunity to make healthy choices for themselves, their families and their communities. However, current product labels are clearly failing consumers, with the alcohol industry continuing to keep people in the dark about the contents and health risks of its products. This is despite some alcohol products containing more than 100% of the daily recommended sugar intake, and alcohol being causally linked to over 200 illnesses including liver and heart disease, stroke and 7 types of cancer.

Local authorities want to make decisions in the interest of their communities, but there is no legal objective currently in place in England and Wales to consider public health when making decisions about the availability of alcohol.

We call on the government to take the following action to empower people to lead healthy lives and build thriving communities:

- Introduce mandatory alcohol product labelling that provides consumers with information relating to ingredients, calories, units, Chief Medical Officers' guidelines, and health risks such as alcohol during pregnancy and cancer
- Include 'public health' as a licensing objective in England and Wales so that licensing bodies have to consider local alcohol harm data when making their decisions

Strengthen the NHS and frontline services

The NHS has been providing world-class, life-saving care for 75 years – it's what 4 out of 5 people say makes them proud to be British. We all want an NHS that will meet our needs for the next 75 years and beyond. Alcohol is responsible for nearly 1 million hospitalisations every year, and is estimated to cost health services £8.6 billion annually. Alcohol thus places an enormous - but preventable - strain on our already stretched NHS and frontline services.

By promoting good health policies and investing in prevention, early intervention, and treatment, we can save lives and reduce pressure on the NHS, in both the short and long term. Evidence shows that every £1 invested in treatment yields £3 of social return in its first year, increasing to £26 over ten years.



We call on the government to take the following actions to strengthen the NHS and frontline services:

- Commit to introducing evidence-based prevention policies – including reducing the availability, marketing and affordability of alcohol – to save lives and reduce pressure on the NHS
- Scale up and commit to long-term funding of proven and cost-effective early interventions and treatment across the UK, and deliver on better coordination between alcohol treatment and other services such as mental health, domestic abuse, and housing support
- Bring forward an effective cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities, recognising the key role that alcohol plays in driving these inequalities

Preserve the public purse

At a time of extreme pressure on public finances, all avoidable health and social costs must be minimised. Alcohol harm is estimated to cost UK society upwards of £27 billion each year, including costs linked to health, crime and lost productivity.

The UK government can both save lives and reduce alcohol harm in a cost-effective way by introducing prevention policies such as minimum unit pricing (MUP) and a fairer tax system that ensures the highest strength products are always taxed more. Evidence shows that since Scotland introduced MUP in 2018 alcohol specific deaths fell by 13% and hospitalisations fell by 4%. Similarly, when alcohol duty in the UK kept pace with inflation, deaths from alcohol-related liver disease fell.

We call on the government to take the following actions to preserve the public purse:

- Introduce minimum unit pricing for alcohol in England, to prevent the sale of ultra-cheap high strength drinks that lead to high social costs
- Ensure alcohol duty at least keeps pace with inflation and that all stronger products are always taxed at a higher rate than lower strength products.

No Half Measures: Full alcohol survey report

Methodology

The findings of this report, unless otherwise stated, were collected through an online survey conducted by YouGov Plc, on behalf of Action on Smoking and Health. The total sample size was 12,271 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 22/02/2023 - 15/03/2023. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). Some figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

A note on the sample

The survey asked respondents about their average weekly alcohol consumption. Different surveys have found different drinking patterns among the UK population. In the findings reported here, 37% of respondents reported not drinking alcohol in an average week while 15% reported drinking above the weekly guideline. For comparison, in the Health Survey for England in 2021, 21% of respondents reported not drinking alcohol in the past year, and 21% were drinking above the weekly guidelines.[8] At the same time, the Alcohol Toolkit Study – which uses the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test to estimate increasing and higher risk drinking – has found 18.5% of the English population, 18.6% of the Welsh population, and 22.7% of the Scottish population to be drinking at increasing and higher risk levels in 2021/22.[9] Questions on alcohol use are phrased differently between surveys, so some differences are expected, but the YouGov panel's possible overrepresentation of non-drinkers and underrepresentation of heavier drinkers may have an impact on the general support figures.



Alcohol and the harm it causes

Alcohol (and its consumption) is a generally accepted and normalised part of daily life in the UK. The Chief Medical Officers' (CMOs') low risk drinking guidelines recommend not regularly exceeding 14 units per week. In terms of average units per drink in the UK, a large glass of wine is around 3 units, a pint of lager is around 2.5 units and 25ml of 40% spirit is 1 unit.

Survey respondents were asked about their drinking habits during an average week to compare these to the CMO' guidelines. Men reported drinking above the CMOs' guidelines at double the rate compared to women (22% of men vs 9% of women). Of all people who reported drinking at higher risk levels, 8% were drinking more than 50 units on an average week, although it is important to note that under-reporting is common in self-report surveys.[10]

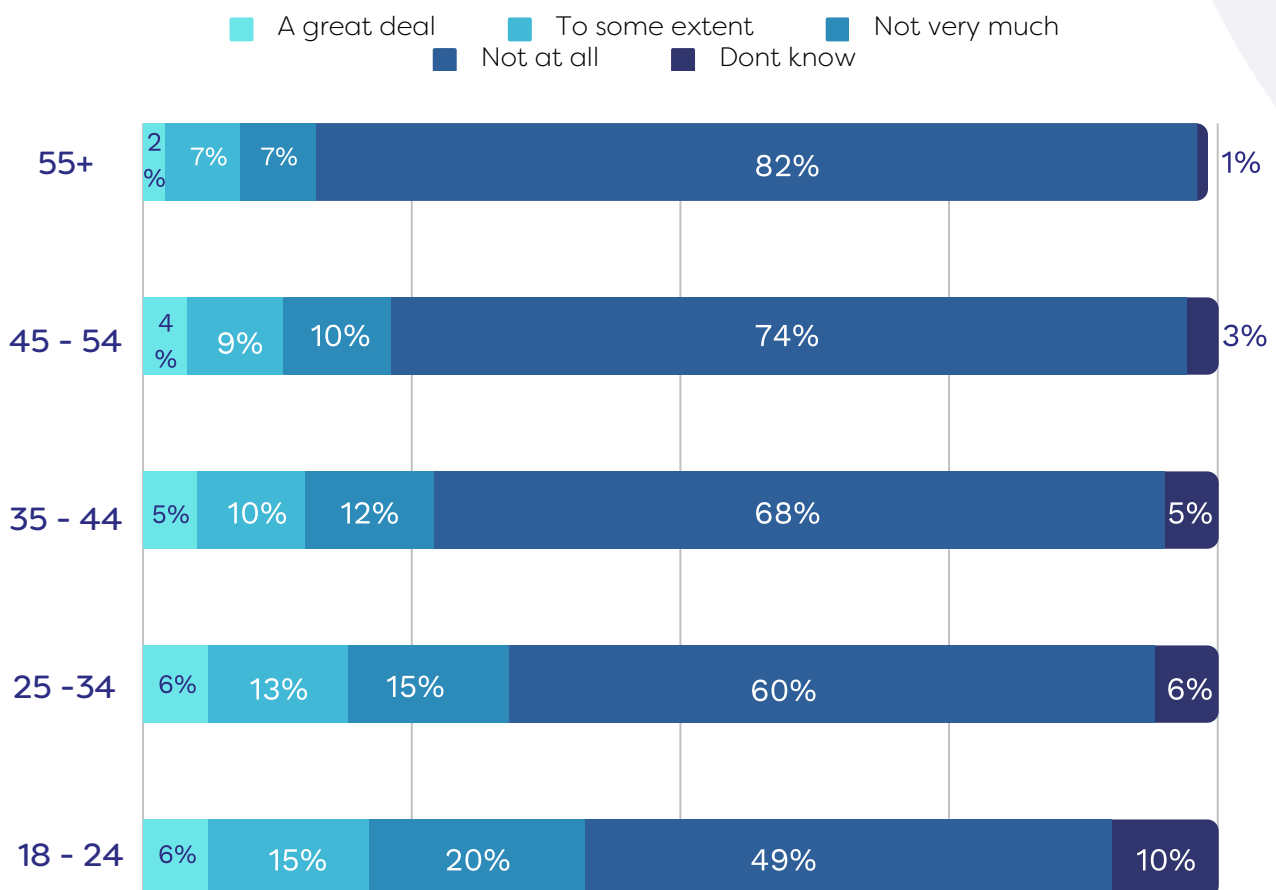
We also wanted to better understand people's experiences of alcohol harm.

1 in 5 respondents aged 18-34 reported that someone else's alcohol consumption had impacted their life in a negative way.

14% of respondents felt that someone else's alcohol consumption has impacted their life in a negative way at a great deal or to some extent over the past year. Reporting a negative impact due to someone else's alcohol consumption is more prevalent among younger age groups, with 1 in 5 respondents aged 18-34 reporting that someone else's alcohol consumption had impacted their life in a negative way.

Alcohol harm is not spread equally and those in the most deprived areas are more likely to be admitted to hospital and/or die due to alcohol. Despite this, similar rates for experiencing alcohol harm were reported across geographical locations and socio-economic classes.

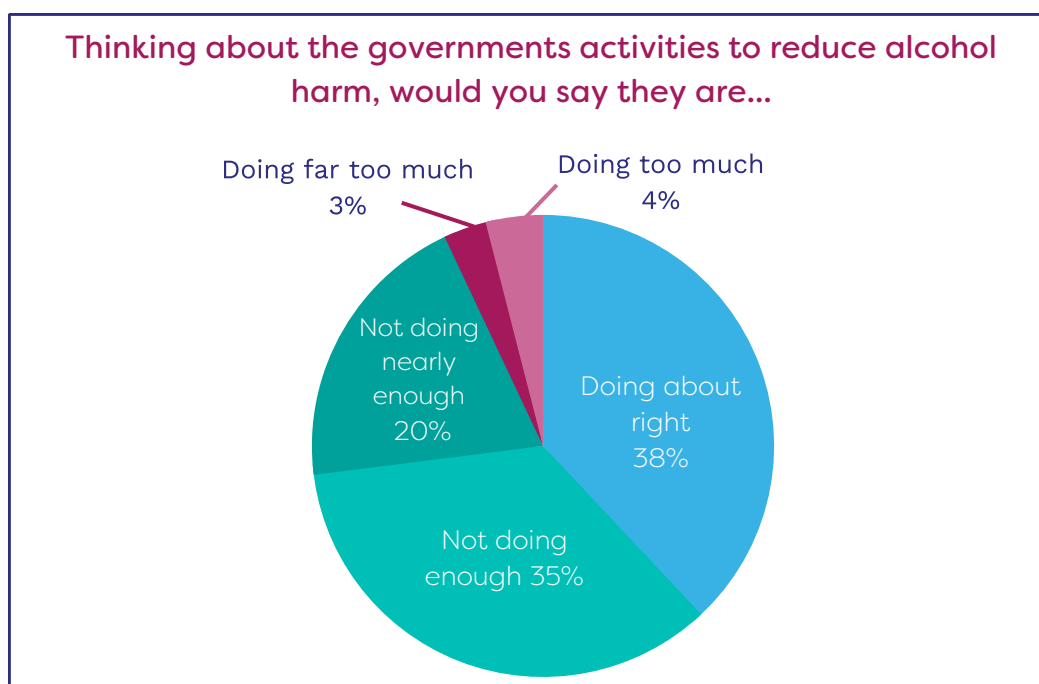
In the last 12 months, has someone's alcohol consumption impacted your life in a negative way?



Alcohol Policy

Given the considerable harm that alcohol causes across the UK, we wanted to know what people thought about Government action to address alcohol harm.

55% of those who expressed an opinion (excluding don't know) felt that the government was not taking enough action on alcohol, while just 7% believe that the Government is doing too much.



This view is largely held across the major political party lines*: roughly half of people that were surveyed who voted in the 2019 General Election for the Labour Party (53%), Liberal Democrats (48%) and the Scottish National Party (47%) believe that the Government needs to do more to reduce alcohol harm. Of those who voted Conservative, a third of people (35%) believe that the Government needs to take more action, while 40% believe that the Government is taking the right amount of action at the moment.

Importantly, irrespective of political affiliations, a minority of all parties believes that the Government is doing too much on alcohol: this comes to 8% of SNP voters and 7% of Conservative voters, and falls to 4% for both Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters. This suggests the 'nanny state' argument that is often used to oppose calls for public health measures that would tackle alcohol harm, is not supported by a majority of the public.

*Sample of respondents not designed to be a politically representative sample of 2019 voters

Engaging with industry

There is wide recognition in the public health sector that engagement with the alcohol industry has an impact on how governments choose to tackle alcohol harm. The inherent conflict of interests between commercial and public health goals means that the alcohol industry cannot be a legitimate partner in trying to reduce alcohol harm, as their profitability depends on recruiting and maintaining heavy drinking populations[11].

There is significant support amongst the public on this, with 70% of respondents being supportive of protecting Government policy from the influence of the alcohol industry and its representatives. This support is significant irrespective of political affiliation: 66% of those surveyed who voted Conservative in the 2019 General Election support the measure. This rises to 78% and 79% amongst Labour and SNP voters respectively, and 83% for Liberal Democrat supporters.

Alcohol duty

Alcohol harm levels are directly linked to its affordability: the cheaper alcohol is, the more alcohol is consumed, and therefore the more harm caused. The World Health Organisation (WHO) highlights increasing alcohol taxes as one of the most cost-effective measures to tackle alcohol harm. However, in the UK alcohol duty has been cut or frozen in most years since 2013 and as a result, it has become 14% more affordable since 2010.[12] Cuts to alcohol duty since 2012 have cost the public purse a total of £10.6 billion.[13]

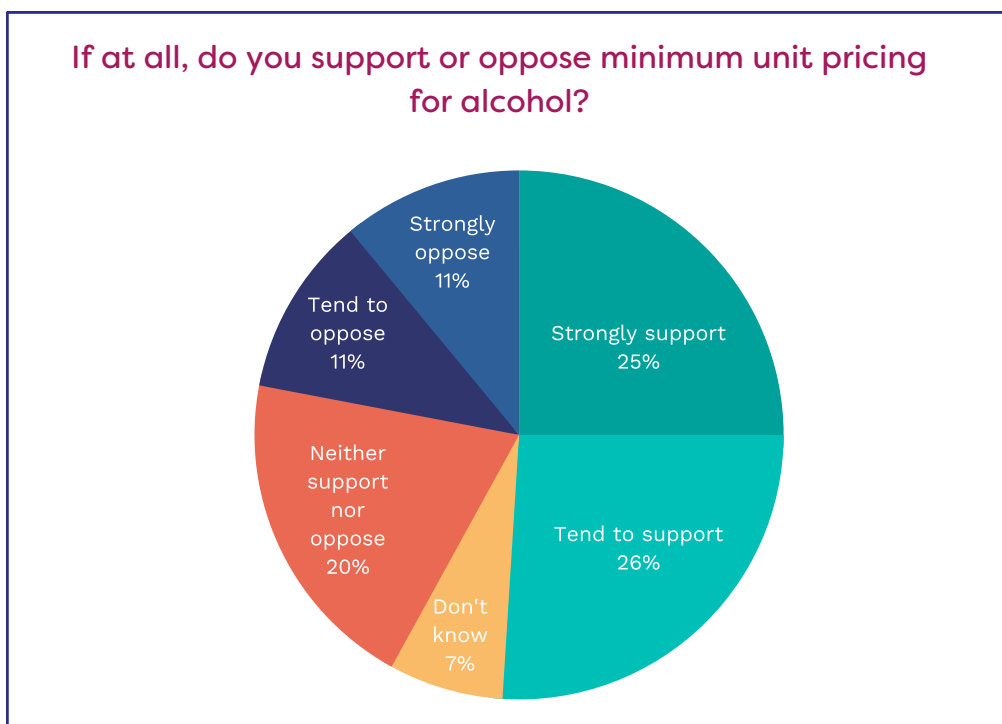
The UK government is implementing a new reformed alcohol duty system, which will simplify alcohol duty by taxing products according to strength and reducing the number of different duty rates, coming into effect on 1 August 2023. While this is a welcome first step, the general rate of alcohol duty needs to keep pace with inflation to maintain its effectiveness over time.

38% of people surveyed support using tax to increase the price of alcohol while 34% oppose it. Analysis of the responses broken down by political affiliation reveals that while more Conservative voters oppose than support an increase in alcohol duty to raise alcohol prices, among Labour, Liberal Democrat and SNP supporters more are in favour of tax increases than oppose them.

Minimum Unit Pricing

Another measure for reducing the affordability of alcohol is minimum unit pricing (MUP), which sets a baseline price for a unit of alcohol sold. Both Scotland and Wales have introduced MUP. Evaluations of MUP are showing a significant impact: there have been successful implementations in both nations, with reductions in alcohol sales and deaths from alcohol in Scotland[14], and interim findings from Wales broadly echoing those from Scotland.[15] In Scotland, estimates show that MUP has prevented 268 deaths and avoided 899 hospitalisations each year.[16]

A 2021 YouGov survey found that 51% of the public support introducing MUP, with the majority supporting the measure irrespective of their voting intention. While 44% of Conservative voters were in favour (as opposed to 29% against), the support increased to 56% amongst Labour voters, and 62% and 65% for Liberal Democrat and SNP voters respectively.[17]



Data presented is from an online survey conducted by YouGov Plc, on behalf of Action on Smoking and Health. The total sample size was 12,247 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 18/02/2021 - 18/03/2021. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

Alcohol labels - our right to know

Awareness of the health risks associated with alcohol consumption is low. Just a quarter of people in the UK know that alcohol is a causal factor in breast cancer and only a fifth can correctly identify the Chief Medical Officers' (CMOs') low risk drinking guidelines.[18] In contrast to tobacco products, alcohol labels are not legally required to display any health warnings.

Alcohol packaging also does not have to include information such as ingredients, calories or sugar content, unlike other food and drinks. In fact, alcohol products are only required to display the volume of the container, the drink's strength (alcohol by volume, ABV) and whether any of the 14 most common allergens are present. All other information is provided voluntarily. The impact of this is clear – more than a third of products fail to inform consumers of the CMOs' low risk drinking guidelines, just 20% include a full list of ingredients and less than half display the products' calorie content.[19]

Providing health and nutritional information on alcohol labels is an easy and effective way to increase the awareness of alcohol harm.[20] Furthermore, people have a right to this information as it enables them to make informed decisions about their health.

Polling results reveal a noticeable appetite for more mandatory information on alcohol product labels, particularly for the number of units in a drink and a pregnancy warning. Around half of respondents support legally requiring alcohol products to display nutritional information such as sugar and calories, and a list of ingredients.

1/3 of alcohol products fail to display CMO's low risk drinking guidelines

Table 1. Which, if any, of the following pieces of information do you think should be legally required to include on the labels/ packaging of alcoholic drinks?

Number of units in a product	76%
A Pregnancy warning	56%
Nutritional information (such as calories and sugar)	51%
Ingredients	49%
Calories	47%
Don't know	6%
Not applicable - I don't think any information should be legally required	6%

Just 6% of people surveyed believe that no information should be legally required on the label. Split by political affiliation, this comes to 7% of those respondents who voted Conservative in the 2019 General Election, 5% of SNP voters, 4% of Labour supporters and falls to just 3% for those who voted for the Liberal Democrats.

Alcohol Marketing

Alcohol marketing is commonplace and prevalent in the UK. From bus stops and billboards, to sponsored social media posts and TV adverts, to our favourite music venues and sports kits – as one person put it: “Alcohol and its marketing is everywhere and is difficult to get away from.”[21]

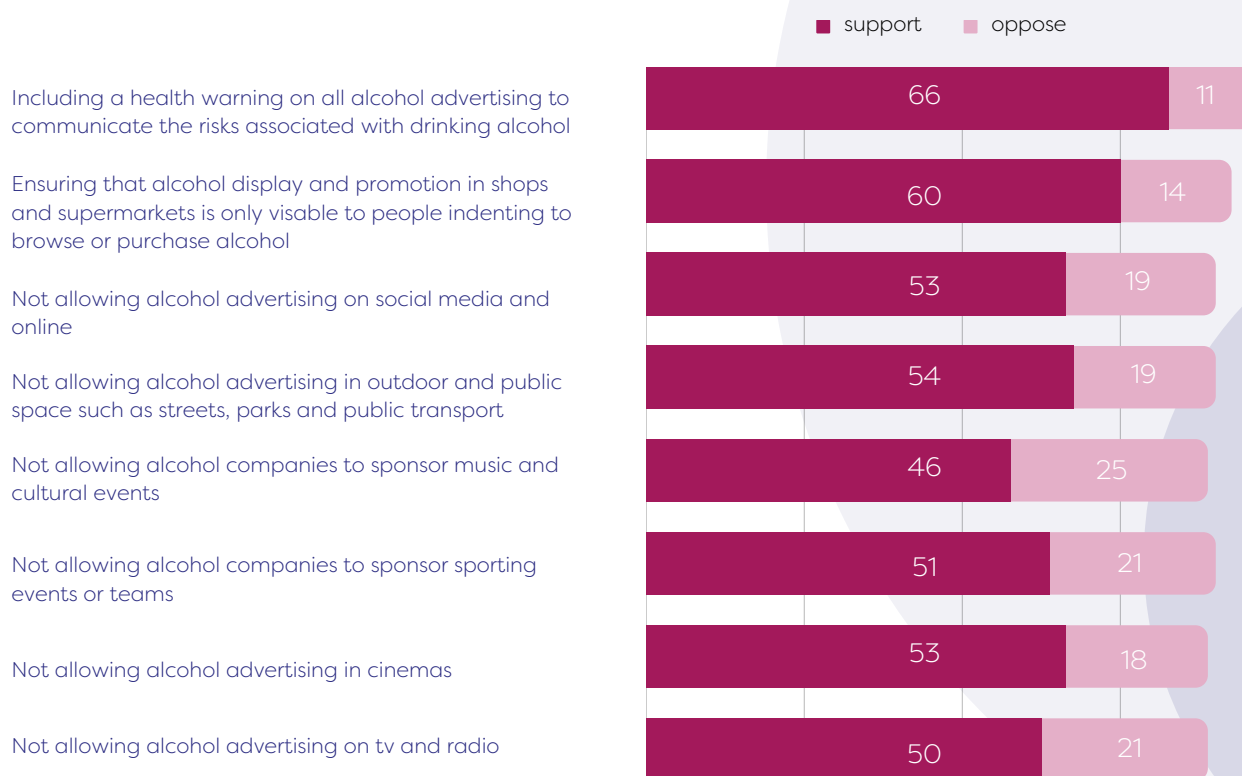
Alcohol marketing contributes to alcohol use being seen as a normal and even an essential part of everyday life in the UK. The alcohol industry claims that the purpose of advertising is solely to inform existing drinkers and increase brand share, however the ultimate goal of marketing is to ensure the profitability of producers and retailers. Marketing therefore includes encouraging someone to try a product – or alcohol in general – for the first time, and to drink more or more frequently than consumers otherwise would have chosen to.[22]

There is overwhelming evidence that being exposed to alcohol marketing and advertising leads children not just to start drinking earlier but also to drink more than they otherwise would.[23] Furthermore, alcohol marketing has also been found to pose a risk to recovery for people with (or at risk of) an alcohol problem.[24]

Alcohol marketing is currently subject to a mix of advertising codes either wholly or partially regulated by the alcohol industry. However, these codes are inadequate as they fail to protect children, vulnerable groups such as those in recovery, and the general public from being exposed to large amounts of alcohol marketing.[25] There is a need for comprehensive marketing restrictions that ensure that alcohol marketing does not contribute to the normalisation of alcohol consumption, as recommended by the WHO.

This is also supported by many of those surveyed: half of respondents support measures to restrict alcohol advertising.

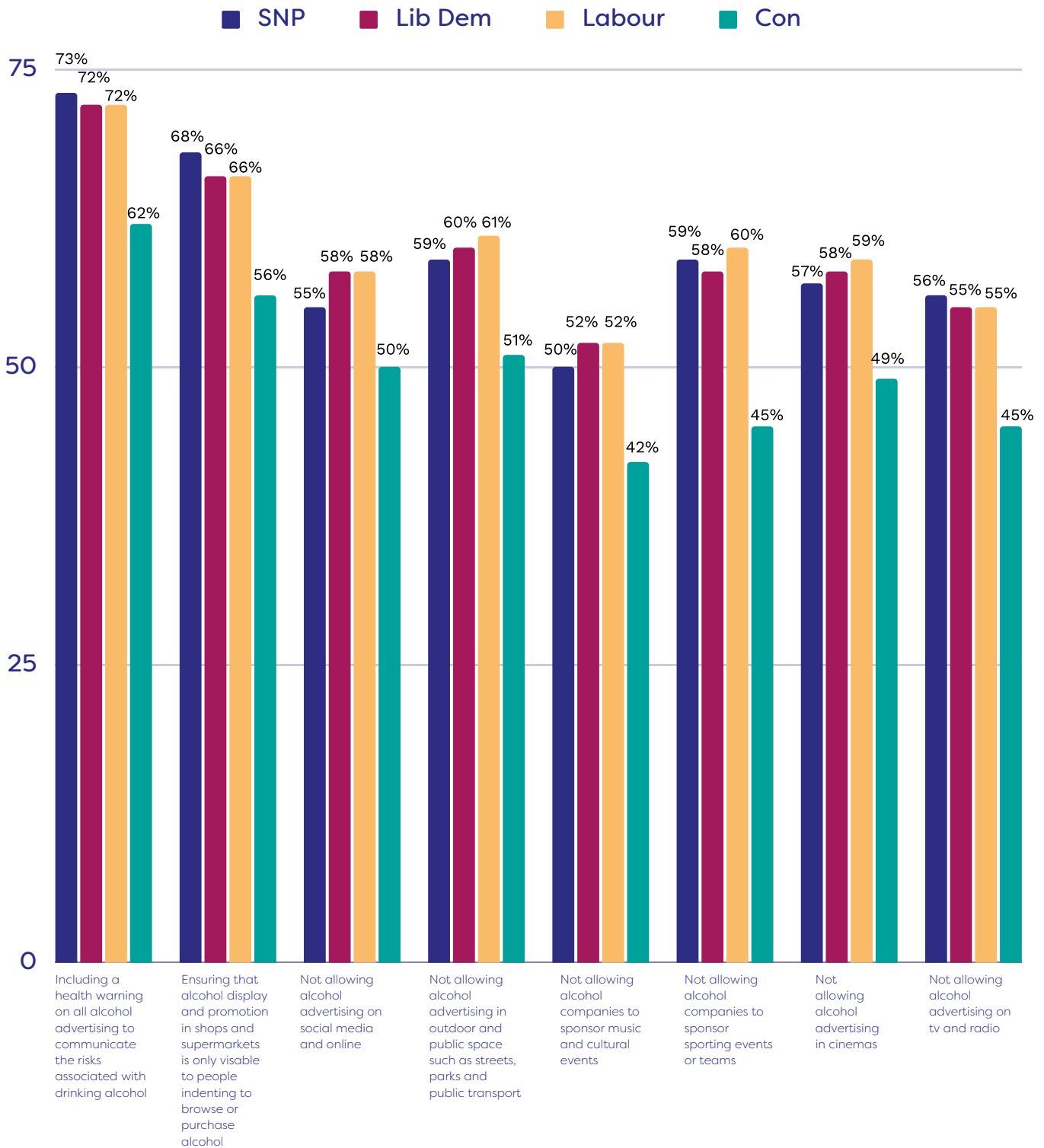
How strongly, if at all, would you support or oppose the following measures?



There is once again strong support for marketing restrictions irrespective of political affiliation. However, support for marketing restrictions is stronger among current opposition parties. For example, 62% of Conservative voters support including health warnings of alcohol ads. However, this rises to 72% for Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters and 73% for SNP voters. The support for each marketing measure by political affiliation is reported in the graph below.

"Alcohol and its marketing is everywhere and is difficult to get away from."

Support for alcohol measures by political affiliations



Conclusion

Action on alcohol presents a real opportunity for impactful change that will – in the short and long term – protect children and those with experience of alcohol harm, empower individuals and build thriving communities, strengthen the NHS and frontline services, and preserve the public purse. This report paints a picture of the public opinion on policies that tackle alcohol harm.

55% of those who expressed an opinion (excluding don't know) felt that the government was not taking enough action on alcohol. Irrespective of their voting histories, people are supportive of policies that would help to reduce alcohol harm in the UK, including:

- Introducing more and better labelling for alcoholic products;
- Better advertising regulations, such as including a health warning on all ads and limiting the alcohol marketing in public or online spaces;
- Policies to reduce the affordability of alcohol – such as alcohol duty and minimum unit pricing – in some instances.

70% of people support protecting Government policy from the influence of the alcohol industry and its representatives. The call for action is clear: political parties can commit to action on alcohol with support from many people in the UK.

The country will head to general election polls in 2024 and political parties are setting out their vision for a post-pandemic Britain, with a bolstered health service, less inequality, and better opportunities for everyone. Tackling alcohol harm will significantly contribute to this.

The Alcohol Health Alliance calls on all political parties to commit to action on alcohol harm with a comprehensive evidence-based strategy, free from alcohol industry influence.

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