

Title: *What drinking alcohol means to me: a qualitative exploration in middle-aged men's own words.*

Abstract

More men are drinking regularly and when they do, they are drinking more (and harmful levels) as evident from Irish quantitative data such as the Barometer and Healthy Ireland series. Men also over index in poor health outcomes, however, not all men's experiences with alcohol are the same. While existing quantitative research provides potential explanations for men's consumption patterns, there is specifically little understanding of how middle-aged men experience alcohol in their everyday lives in Ireland and ultimately what they need and where gaps in information exist. Qualitative research that listens to and captures middle-aged men's own voices is required. The aim of this research project was to explore the views and experiences of drinking alcohol among men aged 40-55 in Ireland. The specific objectives were to further investigate the data from the Drinkaware Barometer series regarding men's experiences of drinking alcohol by: 1. Gathering insight into the lived experiences of middle-aged men's drinking practices to create a better understanding of its prevalence and drivers; and 2. Exploring the specific gaps in knowledge, intent and behaviour among middle aged men and alcohol consumption. The core research question that guided this study was: *How do middle aged men engage with alcohol and what strategies do they use to reduce harmful drinking practices?*

A qualitative methodology using an ethnographic approach was taken putting voices of middle-aged men at the core by ensuring their lived experiences shaped the project. Following a similar approach to our qualitative study with young adults that we undertook last year, carefully listening to the experiences of a sample of 24 -year-olds in a non-prescribed manner through semi-structured self-video diaries (5-10 minutes per day) over the course of three days, again provided the best approach to enhance understanding in a way that is relatable to how middle-aged men live their lives, in their own words. Participants were also asked to undertake a pre-task of reducing their consumption one week prior to the main data collection phase.

For middle-aged men in this study, alcohol often plays a much bigger role in routines and social connections than they may realise. It is frequently the baseline requirement for a desired social experience; without it, many feel that occasions are simply 'not the same'. Opportunities to see friends can be infrequent, with social occasions often sporadic. As a result, alcohol-centred events become default within these limited windows, playing a significant role in how many friendships are maintained. A key finding was the rationalising and psychological framing of alcohol as a "trophy" for productivity. Middle-aged men often described drinking as something they have "earned" rather than "needed", a prize for surviving a long work week or a demanding day of parenting. Significantly the research also highlighted a disconnect regarding what constitutes "normal" consumption. Participants commonly cited 4-6 drinks as a typical session, particularly when drinking at home, frequently measuring their own behaviour against their immediate social circle rather than objective health guidelines, and often not recognising potential harm or increased risk. Despite the cultural entrenchment of drinking, the study also found a growing awareness of the benefits of cutting back. Those who reduced their intake reported immediate benefits, including better sleep, increased energy, and improved performance at work and in their home lives.

This project provides an extensive suite of rich qualitative data to support understanding of the role that alcohol plays in middle aged men's lives in Ireland with vital learnings into gaps in knowledge among a sample of men aged 40-55. Results are crucial to informing the development and roll out of focused information campaigns to assist with reducing alcohol misuse. Ultimately understanding the etiology of middle-aged men's drinking is important to facilitate development of targeted prevention inventions. In so doing, this body of work

has helped advance research to help understand how middle-aged men engage with alcohol and strategies that they use to reduce harmful drinking practices. To sustain the gains of cutting back, this research therefore suggests a shift toward a "Drink Less, Talk More" philosophy, prioritising the quality of connection over the quantity of consumption. The research identified several effective strategies for commencing behavioural change namely Filling the Gap; Non-Alcoholic Options; and The "Escape" Clause.

Table of Contents

Foreword	4
Introduction.....	5
Methodology.....	8
Sample.....	9
Findings.....	11
Conclusion	24
Next Steps	26
References	28
Appendices	29

Foreword

We are delighted to present the findings from Drinkaware's latest qualitative research which explores the relationship of middle-aged men across Ireland in 2026 with respect to alcohol- revealing underlying motivations, mental and emotional mindsets and identifying triggers for change.

This research is a continuation of our qualitative research series, building on over ten years of rich and informative quantitative data by using video diaries and personal testimony to bring to life the lived experiences of middle-aged men in their own words and on their own terms.

I would like to thank and acknowledge Dr Ann Stokes (Research Manager at Drinkaware) in advocating for and directing this qualitative body of work which ensures the voices of middle-aged men are heard and curated in a more holistic manner.

Tribute also must be paid to our research partners, Ipsos B&A, in particular Niall Brennan, Luke Harvery, and Cormac Gunning in how they carefully undertook this project and conveyed the findings in a compelling way, providing a vivid insight into the real-life experiences of middle-aged men in Ireland.

Statistics and percentages reveal essential socio-economic data but hearing from middle-aged men in person, speaking anonymously regarding their feelings, thoughts and beliefs around alcohol and its place in their lives really paints a detailed narrative giving rich context to the annual statistics. The findings are uniquely revealing, captured in a compelling form and provides Drinkaware with even more insights that inform how, where and when we need to reach middle-aged men with our messaging, our nudges for behaviour change and the encouragement required to make healthy personal choices. The data also proves hugely valuable in determining the creative look, feel and tone including language required to reach middle-aged men when influencing behavioural change. These findings will continue to inform Drinkaware's various social campaigns such as the "It's Good to Talk" digital campaign, and *Here's to Change* podcast series.

This research crucially supports Drinkaware in contributing to our strategic objective of changing Irish culture for the better, empowering society to write a different story in terms of alcohol and its place in everyday life in Ireland.

Dearbhla O'Brien,
CEO of Drinkaware

Introduction

More men are drinking regularly and when they do, they are drinking more (and harmful levels) as firmly established in Irish quantitative data as detailed below. Compared to women, international research has found that both historically and cross-culturally, men are also more likely to be current drinkers, engage in heavy drinking, drink alone and experience a greater prevalence of alcohol use disorders (GBD 2020, WHO 2018, Skrzynsk & Creswell 2021 as cited by Cook et al. 2025).

Key standouts from Barometer 2025 data:

- More men drink on a weekly basis (64%) vs 48% females. Men continue to report higher average consumption (4.1 drinks) and typical binge drinking (29%) than women (3.4 drinks, 18%)
- The weekly incidence of alcohol consumption continues to be much higher among Males, and broadly consistent from 35 years on.
- Frequency of binge drinking peaks among men (64%) (as well as younger adults) reporting at least one binge drinking occasion in the past 30 days.
- The 2025 incidence of AUDIT C 5+ score peaks among male drinkers (58%).
- Little understanding of HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines - only 2% of men got the correct answer for men and 3% got the correct answer for women when asked.
- Rise in drinking at home (and alone) - In 2025, 'drinking at home alone' is once again the most common drinking occasion with 31% of adults reporting that they drink at home alone at least once a week (32% in 2024). This rises to 34% of male drinkers (compared with 27% of female drinkers).
- At the same time, 36% of men report that they would like to drink alcohol less often in 2025, while 39% agree that they have made small positive changes to their drinking habits (i.e. drink less) in the past 30 days
- Collectively, this suggests a demographic focus for related interventions to guiding action and contribute towards changing (and sustaining) men's experiences with alcohol for the better.

Healthy Ireland 2025 data:

- Higher proportion of men drink alcohol across all frequency levels compared with women. Overall and as with previous years, men of all ages are more likely than women to binge drink on a typically drinking occasion (40% and 12% respectively). Men aged 15 to 24 (51%) are the most likely to binge drink on a typical occasion. Since 2015, rates of binge drinking have declined among men and women aged under 45, with the largest decline seen among men aged 25 to 34 (43% compared with 59% in 2015). Largest gap found among people aged 55 to 64, with 40% of men binge drinking on a typical occasion compared with 7% of women - 33-point gap.
- Men (29%) are more likely than women (11%) to be at risk of hazardous drinking (i.e. AUDIT score of 8 or higher). 31% of men aged 55-64 years are at risk of hazardous drinking (i.e. AUDIT score of 8 or higher).
- Men (47%) are more likely than women (25%) to drink at a harmful level (i.e. have an AUDIT-C score of 5 or higher). 50% of men aged 45-54 years drink at a harmful level.

Men and alcohol:

Alcohol consumption is a heavily gendered activity and historically alcohol consumption was considered the domain of men, with much of the research focused on men's drinking with

men as the prototype for typical drinking behaviours (Cooke et al. 2025). At the same time, there has been an overall increase in rates of alcohol consumption and related harms among midlife and older women reported in many Western countries (Kersey et al. 2022). Many men's friendships are intertwined with the use of alcohol (Olliffe et al. 2026). Alcohol use and intoxication have long been associated with men and masculinity through affirming male bonding and solidarity. (Hunt & Antin 2017). Conformity to traditional masculine norms is modestly associated with drinking behaviours and alcohol-related consequences among adult men (Zamboanga et al. 2024), as well as greater alcohol use (Patro Hernandez et al. 2020). From this perspective, male drinkers are viewed as manly not solely because they drink, but because their drinking is linked with other behaviours that are connected to being masculine (Hunt & Antin 2017). For instance, male-dominated industries have found higher levels of risky alcohol consumption and its associated harms such as among construction workers (Roche et al. 2020). Men also contribute disproportionately to many alcohol-related harms such as injuries, violence, as well as drink driving (Duncan et al. 2021).

Drinking at home and alone peaked among men in our 2025 Barometer. Solitary home drinking has been regarded as more socially acceptable for men than women according to qualitative research conducted in Australia (Cook et al. 2023). Many participants described a distinction between men and women's solitary home drinking, with men's consumption depicted as more acceptable, and in a small number of cases even viewed favourably. Adult solitary drinking has previously been identified a risky drinking behaviour that is associated with greater alcohol consumption and more alcohol-related problems (Skrzynski & Creswell 2021).

Harmful alcohol consumption among men is a major public health concern, yet not enough is known about the experiences of these men or the gender dynamics that shape their experiences of heavy drinking (Fomiatti et al 2020). However, not all men's experiences with alcohol are the same and in particular, there is limited qualitative understanding of middle-aged men's experiences. As well as gender, multiple factors influence men's experience of alcohol use, including their ethnicity and culture, age, sexual orientation and socio-economic background. (Hunt and Antin, 2017). The Movember Institute of Men's Health (2025) found that despite some reductions in overall consumption, alcohol-related issues persist across all ages of men in Ireland, especially among younger binge drinkers and middle-aged seeking treatment. Australian research found that consumption among men typically peaks in midlife (Zaccagnini et al. 2026). For many midlife adults, drinking alcohol is a habitual and routinised practice and specifically the normalisation of drinking within the home during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Lyons et al. 2023). Midlife is a transitional period of many men (for instance see [Understanding the Lifestage - setting the scene](#) on page 10) At the same time, middle aged-men also over index in poor health outcomes with high alcohol use being a contributory factor.

Why does this matter:

- Every decade brings its own physical and mental needs and challenges (Quinlan 2019). Middle-aged men also over index in poor health outcomes with high alcohol use being a contributory factor. Insights into midlife men's understandings of alcohol harm are limited (Larsen et al. 2022). UK research previously found that average weekly alcohol consumption is highest among midlife men, and they are disproportionately affected by alcohol harm (Parke et al. 2018). High alcohol use was found to be the second highest risk factor for disability-adjusted life years DALYs among men aged 15-49 and the 14th highest risk factor among women in the same age group (GBD 2020 cited in Cook et al. 2025).

- In Ireland, recent research found that two in five men die prematurely (before the age of 75) and the vast majority of these deaths are preventable (Movember 2025). The National Men's Health Action Plan 2024-2028 found that while men's health overall has improved, men still have a lower life expectancy than women and higher mortality rates for the leading causes of death such as heart disease, cancer and suicide. The Action Plan also identified significant disparities between different sub-populations of men. Middle-aged men have also been found to have a limited understanding of how alcohol affected their bodies (Larsen et al. 2022). While not aged specific, men aged 18+ showed significantly lower awareness for several health effects of excessive drinking including liver disease in the 2025 Barometer. At same time, openness to change is growing with 36% of men reporting that they would like to drink alcohol less often in 2025, while 39% agree that they have made small positive changes to their drinking habits (i.e. drink less) in the past 30 days (Drinkaware 2026).

Study Aim and Objectives:

The purpose of this body of work was to therefore advance research to help understand how middle-aged men in Ireland engage with alcohol and strategies that they use to reduce harmful drinking practices. This project was carried out in collaboration with Ipsos B&A ensuring that the project would benefit from the experience of one of Ireland's leading research and data analysis companies, and also its reputation.

The aim of this research project was to explore the views and experiences of drinking alcohol among men aged 40-55 in Ireland.

The specific objectives were to further investigate the data from the **Drinkaware Barometer series** regarding men's experiences of drinking alcohol by:

- Gathering insight into the lived experiences of middle-aged men's drinking practices to create a better understanding of its prevalence and drivers
- Exploring the specific gaps in knowledge, intent and behaviour among middle aged men and alcohol consumption.

From a qualitative perspective, this research set to explore the following:

1. Further investigate evidence gathered from the Barometer series
2. Men's experiences of alcohol from men themselves
3. The role that alcohol plays in men's lives
4. Men's decisions surrounding drinking/not drinking alcohol
5. Factors associated with men's drinking/not drinking alcohol
6. Key influences in terms of enabling, inhibiting and sustaining change

The core research question that guided this study was: *How do middle aged men engage with alcohol and what strategies do they use to reduce harmful drinking practices?*

Methodology

A qualitative methodology using an ethnographic approach was taken putting the voices of middle-aged men at the core by ensuring their lived experiences shaped the project. Storytelling was at the heart of this study and creating an environment where men felt comfortable and safe in speaking about their personal experiences - in so doing men's stories put faces to quantitative figures previously gathered in the Barometer series.

Similar to the Young Adults research conducted last year (Drinkaware 2025), Ipsos B&A recommended a digital ethnography approach for this project. A key objective of this research is to understand the 'wider picture' of middle-aged men's actual lived experiences when it comes to alcohol consumption. As such, deeply understanding the relationship between men and alcohol in Ireland requires a methodology in which participants feel that they can share their authentic thoughts and attitudes towards the topic. In many ways the choice of methodology is as important as the questions we ask them for this type of research topic. There are multiple reasons why the research team believed that digital ethnography is the right choice.

Benefits of digital ethnography as a methodology for this project

Digital ethnography enables the researchers to engage with participants in a naturalistic setting, ensuring authentic and unfiltered insights. The research meets participants where they are at; they engage with the platform and respond to tasks when it suits them, and quality of response is positively impacted by participants feeling relaxed and comfortable. By observing and interacting with men via selfie video, this methodology fosters higher levels of participant engagement and openness, making it particularly effective for exploring sensitive topics such as alcohol consumption. For example, from Ipsos B&A's extensive experience using this methodology, they consistently find that some things that they may be unwilling to share in a room with their peers are shared more easily through the format of a selfie video. This is key to building an understanding of the 'wider picture' of alcohol consumption. In contrast, traditional face-to-face focus groups can feel intimidating or intrusive, potentially limiting participants' willingness to share openly. Digital spaces offer a degree of anonymity and comfort, encouraging more candid discussions. This makes digital ethnography particularly effective for exploring the social and personal dimensions of alcohol consumption, as well as the complex interplay of factors that influence decisions to consume alcohol. Inclusivity and flexibility are also central strengths of this approach. By leveraging digital platforms, the research team were able to engage participants from across Ireland, overcoming geographical and logistical barriers. Additionally, the flexibility of digital ethnography accommodates participants' busy schedules, allowing them to contribute at their convenience during the day.

Ipsos B&A have used digital ethnography extensively over the past five years on a wide variety of research projects such as the Young Adults study for Drinkaware published in summer 2025 as well as clients such as AIB, RTE, NYCI, L'Oreal, countless FMCG brands as well as for their Sign of the Times and Covid Lockdown series which were published in the Irish Times.

It was therefore envisaged that digital ethnography was an appropriate methodology for exploring middle-aged men's experiences with alcohol in Ireland and would provide authentic, comprehensive, and actionable insights into their behaviours and attitudes. This approach not only met the research objectives but also offered a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding alcohol consumption, paving the way for informed strategies and interventions. The following sections will provide detail on how this process took place.

The qualitative research approach consisted of a 3-day digital ethnography with 24 participants, with a 1-week pre-task exercise to be completed in advance. The pre-task instructed all participants to reduce their drinking during a minimum of a 1-week period before the fieldwork. They were asked about this experience during the fieldwork period, and this provided insight into the strategies, challenges and experience of reducing consumption. Ipsos B&A highlighted that this 'deprivation' style pre-task can be extremely effective in uncovering core needs that consumers have and reveal deeper insight into the role of the product in their lives. In this specific content by getting participants to alter their behaviour (reduce alcohol consumption), the research team envisaged that this would assist them to identify what middle-aged men miss and therefore expose role of alcohol in their lives.

Following the pre-task of reducing consumption for a 1-week period, participants completed a series of tasks (via selfie video) over a three-day period between 5th - 7th March 2026 as part of the main data collection phase. An outline for the task list was used to guide the flow of topic areas in the individual video diaries over the course of the 3-day period (See Appendix 1 for full details):

Day 1: Where/When

- Introduction to themselves and their lives
- Their relationship with alcohol as they currently see it themselves
- Occasions for drinking alcohol

Day 2: Why

- Motivations for drinking alcohol
- Perspectives on the role of alcohol in their lives
- Evolution over time
- Review of pre-task experiences - what they noticed, what was challenging, how they implemented it, what was missed, what was gained.

Day 3: Pre-activity

- Interest and motivations to cut back
- Barriers to reducing consumption
- Strategies used/envisioned (spontaneous)
- Prompted strategies feedback (to be agreed with team)
- Reflection.

Sample

Sampling was purposeful and aimed to ensure a good demographic spread of geographical location, gender, age category and social class in order to include a representative cross section of the population of men aged 40-55 in Ireland in 2026-2026. All participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and their ability to withdraw should they wish to do so.

Following informed consent, a series of qualitative, semi structured individual video diaries were conducted by a sample of 24 men aged 40-55 (Total n=24) with a mix of urban/rural; mix of ages of children at home, and single/empty nesters, See Table 1 below for full breakdown. At the end of filming, participants each received a financial incentive which was paid for five days of participation and as a token of appreciation for their involvement in the research project.

Measures were taken by the research team at the recruitment stage to ensure that the sample did not include anyone with dependency issues or problematic drinking habits. The research team also avoided recruiting any individuals that reported having sought or received professional help relating to alcohol use. Rigorous screening process was undertaken to ensure none met criteria for behaviours of concern. For instance, among the sample, half of participants reported as weekly in-home drinkers, while half less reported often or never. Some in the sample reported that they had made efforts to reduce consumption Half of the sample scored 1-4, while half to scored 5-7 on AUDIT-C¹.

¹ The AUDIT tool, developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Babor et al 2001), is used to measure an individual's level of risk and/or harm in relation to their alcohol consumption patterns. The AUDIT-C is a modified, three question version used to provide a measure of consumption only. A score of less than 5 indicates lower risk drinking and scores of 5+ AUDIT-C positive, a classification that indicates a propensity to increasing, or hazardous, drinking. Further details on the AUDIT and AUDIT-C are available here: <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/18727>

Table 1: Sample Breakdown (n=24)

Age group	In Home drinking	Region	Social Class
40-47	Weekly	Dublin	BC1
40-47	Weekly	Midlands	C2DE
40-47	Weekly	Connacht/Ulster	BC1
40-47	Weekly	Dublin	C2DE
40-47	Weekly	Munster	BC1
40-47	Weekly	Rest of Leinster	C2DE
40-47	Less Often	Dublin	C2DE
40-47	Less Often	Midlands	BC1
40-47	Less Often	Rest of Leinster	BC1
40-47	Less Often	Dublin	BC1
40-47	Less Often	Munster	C2DE
40-47	Less Often	Connacht/Ulster	C2DE
48-55	Weekly	Dublin	BC1
48-55	Weekly	Munster	C2DE
48-55	Weekly	Connacht/Ulster	C2DE
48-55	Weekly	Dublin	C2DE
48-55	Weekly	Midlands	BC1
48-55	Weekly	Rest of Leinster	BC1
48-55	Less Often	Dublin	C2DE
48-55	Less Often	Munster	BC1
48-55	Less Often	Rest of Leinster	C2DE
48-55	Less Often	Dublin	BC1
48-55	Less Often	Midlands	C2DE
48-55	Less Often	Connacht/Ulster	BC1

Participants used Indeemo, an online mobile based platform, to respond to the prescribed tasks (in the topic guide) by uploading selfie videos. Ipsos B&A followed participants for a total of five days, with the research team moderating in real time. A total of 12+ hours of video feedback from participants via selfie video was documented. Video content from the platform as well as a recording of the pilot focus group discussion were transcribed verbatim independently with all data anonymised. Visual and audio recordings as well as transcripts were stored securely on password protected devices used by Ipsos B&A and marked for deletion within the required timeframe. All data was carefully analysed. Thematic analysis was applied to examine the data to identify common themes and topics that were coming up repeatedly across the selfie videos and to interpret key patterns of meaning across men's stories of their experiences with alcohol.

Findings

This section of the report will present the key findings. First, it is important to set the scene, to help understand the specific life stage of middle-aged men that participated in this study.

Understanding the Life Stage - Setting the Scene:

40-45 years > These men are in the thick of intensive parenting with younger children "survival mode:"

- Their lives revolve around constant physical caregiving - school runs, homework battles, and weekend sports schedules: *Up until quite recently, I would say yes, definitely 100%. But as my kids have got a bit older, my weekends are busier. There's*

no lie on at the weekend anymore, Saturday morning, Sunday morning you're up really early to go to training or travel to a match.....So I wouldn't drink on a Friday night if I have an early start on Saturday, same as I would never drink on Saturday night If I'm up early on a Sunday...

- They speak of being "all go" and having "no social life" as they navigate toddler tantrums alongside early teen attitudes.
- Their social drinking is heavily restricted ("can count on one hand" the sessions), with babysitter logistics and harsh hangovers serving as powerful deterrents. Home drinking prominent.
- Adjusting to a new life context: *I mean to arrange a drink or a night out it's like trying to arrange to go on holiday like, it takes a month, everyone's busy etc...*

46-49 years > Their children are more self-sufficient (typically 10-18), bringing different challenges around teenage independence and even college planning:

- Career-wise, many have "found their level" - either comfortable in stable positions
- Or dealing with major transitions (career changes, job loss) - which can be highly stressful.
- Have established more sustainable social patterns - regular monthly meet-ups rather than trying to maintain their younger social pace.
- References to aging parents begin appearing, adding another layer of responsibility.

50-55 years > The oldest group demonstrates a notable shift in perspective

- With children often in late teens or flying the nest, they speak of "getting time back" and rediscovering couple time and their hobbies.
- Financial pressures ease for some (mortgages paid, kids becoming independent), though others face retirement planning anxieties.
- Health becomes a more prominent concern - heart conditions, weight management, and mortality references appear more frequently - parents, but also friends, family.

Eleven overarching themes guide middle-aged men's stories of the role of alcohol and cutting back and in so doing collectively provide key patterns of meaning to their experiences with alcohol in Ireland:

The role of alcohol in middle-aged men's lives:

1. ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION IS DEEPLY EMBEDDED AS PART OF THEIR WEEKLY RITUALS

2. DIFFERENT RULES FOR DIFFERENT OCCASIONS

3. FRIENDSHIP AND CONNECTIONS

4. DRINKING TO RELIEVE STRESS - STRESS RELIEF IN A GLASS

5. DRINKING AS A REWARD - YOU'RE WORTH IT!

6. CONSCIOUS OF RISK OF OVER-DOING IT

7. HOME DRINKING - A RELOCATED RITUAL

8. USING MATES TO MEASURE NORMAL

Cutting back:

1. A SERIES OF KNOCK-ON EFFECTS WITH A MONETARY "CHERRY-ON-TOP"

2. TIPS FOR CUTTING BACK SUCCESSFULLY

3. INTERVENTIONS AND GUIDELINES USED

The role of alcohol in men's lives

1. Alcohol consumption is deeply embedded as part of their weekly rituals:

For many men in this study, alcohol consumption is deeply embedded into their weekly rituals and routines. Alcohol plays a strong anticipatory role for many men in this study, and thus becomes a short-term goal to look forward to; the punctuation point to round off the working week. As such, consumption patterns become an important aspect of the rhythm of their week, with many men understanding what works, and what doesn't; the types of drinks chosen, the volume consumed, the shop or pub the alcohol is purchased in.

From the data collected in this study, a common pattern of consumption emerges, often linked to social permission and identity for many men:

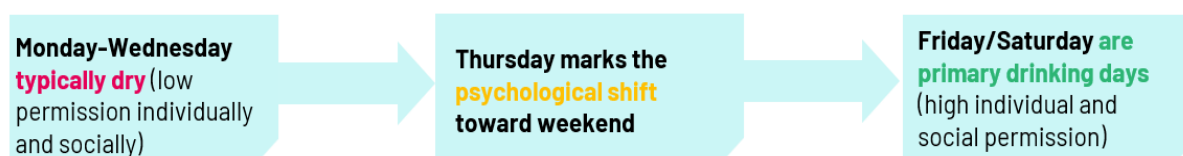
"Never really want for it Monday to Thursday. And it's just, I'd probably maybe feel guilty. Have it, and then I know my wife would probably tell me as well 'What are you drinking for, it's a weeknight' etc."

Monday to Wednesday was described as typically dry. As evident from the above quote, there appears to be low permission both individually from men themselves (guilt/shame) and socially (external criticism) to drink alcohol during the week. However, for many men in this study, Thursday marks the psychological shift regarding the consumption of alcohol during the work week. Due to its proximity to the weekend, and with many people working from home on a Friday following the COVID-19 pandemic, it appears that Thursday has become the new Friday:

"The most time I drink during the week would probably be a Thursday night because it's near the weekend. I work from the office most days except Friday, so I kind of always, like, park up the car, go down to the local for a few drinks with a few friends."

As expected, Friday and Saturday are the primary drinking days for many, as there is both high individual and social permission to do so.

Figure 1: Common pattern to men's consumption behaviour:



2. Different rules for different occasions

Findings from the Drinkaware Barometer 2025 show that, of the men that drink, 70% drink weekly, compared to the national average of 56%. 33% of men who drink surveyed in the Barometer report having 6+ drinks in a typical session, compared to the national average of 24% (Barometer 2025). This qualitative study provides further insight into these statistics, as the findings below contextualise men's patterns of consumption found in our Barometer series.

Many men in this study mentioned that alcohol consumption was dependant on the context of the occasion. If drinking at home, or outside of the home, 4-6 alcoholic drinks appear to be the standard: *"I rarely go past the 5 or 6 mark. Very rarely. If I'm at home, you know, a six pack of beer, normally four or five beers"*. Many men in this study also note sharing a bottle of wine, or two, with their partner. The lower end of consumption is capped at 2-3

drinks, with the higher end, 7-8+ alcoholic drinks, typically saved for special events/occasions which can include *“meeting the lads”*.

3. Friendship and connections

For many men in this generation, alcohol has become the organising principle around which adult friendships are maintained:

“A couple of my close friends, they are the main people I drink with ... We’d always have a drink together weekly ... Drink will always be a factor when I’m seeing my friends ... it’s probably the main part of us meeting up. Without the drink, we probably wouldn’t see each other as often.”

Alcohol facilitates a deeper form of connection for many men in this study and becomes a baseline requirement for desired social experience. It can follow alcohol-free activities, such as *“a game of golf,”* or becomes the primary factor around which watching *“a big match”* is organised. Social occasions without alcohol *“wouldn’t be the same”*. In these occasions, alcohol isn’t just a social enhancer, it drives conversation: *“If you’re planning just to have a few drinks with someone, the conversation just rolls ... just happens”*. Outside of a pub/bar environment for a coffee, many men see social interaction to have an end goal, to discuss more serious matters: *“I think if I’m meeting somebody for a coffee I’m probably aiming to talk to them **about** something.”*

Many men at this life stage consider themselves immune to outside/peer pressure. Their identity is informed by the belief that they are self-directed and autonomous; confident to make their own choices and sticking to them. However, while pressure to drink is softening at this life stage, there remains an unspoken expectation to drink alcohol when socialising with peers within this age group as demonstrated here:

“I suppose with alcohol and friends, yeah, in groups it’s quite normal. It’s never spoken in a bad way or a good way, or, it’s never a negative/positive, it’s just you know, you go to the pub, you’re gonna have a pint. It’s just ehm automatic I suppose.”

Many men note being *“interrogated”* over their choice to not drink alcohol at any given social occasion and questioned whether they’re experiencing an illness. Or, they get *“caught in a round”*, and engage in alcohol consumption as a face-saving technique, to not appear *“tight”*. As a result, many men in this study display a strong desire to maintain their place in the in-group, which is further underscored by the inability to engage as much with their peers when sober compared to when they are drinking and *“being the same as everybody else.”*

Some men note they *“have to”* attend social occasions, and suffer a hangover, despite not *“looking forward”* to drinking alcohol: *“Hangovers are something I don’t wish on myself ... Saturdays in our house are busy, busy, busy, and a hangover is probably the last thing I want.”* There appears to be an obligation to drink, despite the consequences, further highlighting the desire to maintain their place in the ingroup. Men in this study will persevere through their reluctance to drink alcohol; in order to socialise, moderation is not an option.

4. Drinking to relieve stress - Stress relief in a glass

Many men in this study note that they drink alcohol to relieve stress; it’s their go-to *“unravelling”* tool, allowing them to *“wind down”* after a tough day, or a tough week. This typically occurs on a Friday and becomes embedded as a ritual for decompression; the work

week ends, and the bottle opens. Men in this study were refreshingly honest about this experience, with a *“hard day at work”* resulting in the exclamation: *“Jesus Christ I need a gin and tonic”*.

Some men note drinking alcohol during the work week to *“relax”* after a particularly stressful day. Men in this study provided several examples of the stress relief found in alcohol, with one noting that opening a bottle of wine to have a glass to relax in the evening often turns into finishing the bottle of wine.

However, there is a growing awareness that using alcohol as stress management isn't the best solution, with the urge to drink alcohol becoming an *“obstacle”* that *“comes out of the blue”*, leading some men in this study to seek healthier methods of coping.

5. Drinking as a reward - You're worth it!

Distinct from an antidote to stress, alcohol becomes something that is earned. Through this framing, alcohol becomes a trophy for surviving the work week, completing a project, or for making it through a tough day of parenting. Some men in this study note *“looking forward”* to the *“reward at the end of the hard day's work”*, feeling that they've *“earned”* a drink, punctuating the end of the day.

Rather than functioning solely to destress and unwind, Friday night drinks become a prize for productivity. This framing is a crucial psychological difference; they don't *“need”* a drink, they've *“earned”* a drink:

“Sometimes ... if I was doing something in the house here or a really hard day's labour or something like that, I'd sit down and maybe have a can afterwards, just as a reward and that would be my chill-out time.”

6. Conscious of risk of over-doing it

Men in this study are aware of the risk of the 'boiling frog'. They *believe* that they are conscious of not *“overdoing it”*, or displaying bad patterns of alcohol consumption. Some men note *“making a conscious effort ... to become more strict ... that alcohol should really be a weekend thing”*. Being 'sensible' with alcohol isn't solely about behaviours, but rather it's a carefully guarded identity that requires ongoing vigilance to preserve. As such, they create arbitrary rules to abide by to keep alcohol consumption in check:

“I enjoy myself, but I get to the stage where I've gone past the initial happy place, you know the craic and I like to hold it there. I don't like to go any further. I'm used to be able to tell when that time is so ...”

However, many men display a 'sunk cost fallacy' mindset when it comes to moderation. Men in this study note starting the week with *“good intentions”*, but once consumption occurs at all during the week, they *“tend to do it again the next night”*, further underscoring the inconsistency between their personal guidelines and intentions, and their behaviours.

7. Home drinking - A relocated ritual

For those who drink alcohol at home, alcohol functions as a symbolic marker separating the work week from the weekend, occurring typically on a Friday or Saturday night. According to data found in Drinkaware's Barometer 2025, 65% of men that drink report that *“at home”* is the most likely place for alcohol consumption (Barometer 2025). In this study, at-home drinking appears as a lower energy occasion linked to relaxing, and is genuinely enjoyed, as there is more control over one's environment, and consumption can stretched out over a longer period:

“I tend to drink alcohol now more at home than in the pub. I like nothing more than opening a bottle of nice red. Maybe two to three times a week and I sit down to watch rugby, a movie, a match, GAA, anything at all, golf, anything to do with sport. I like to good movie two late at night when the kids are gone to bed.”

Control over one’s environment extends to the product choice, further facilitating the genuine enjoyment of at-home drinking. 36% of men report purchasing alcohol from the supermarket weekly, compared to the national average of 26% (Barometer 2025). As a result, there is less of a financial constraint, leading to premiumised product choices of a “*nice bottle of red [wine]*” or “*craft beers*”. For many men in this study, the taste and quality of alcohol products is important, and acts to rationalise at-home consumption.

In terms of financial constraints, there is an increasing financial incentive for at home drinking due to the increased costs of drinking alcohol in a pub, bar, or restaurant. As a result, the expectation of what a drinking occasion looks like has been adjusted: “*We don’t go to the pub every week, we would go ... once, maybe twice a month. Again, the cost of it ... you’re looking at maybe a 100 quid for a night out.*”

Moreover, many men in this study recognise that opportunities for alcohol consumption outside of the home were limited due to parenting commitments: “*my social circle most of them are in the same boat as me: young family, young kids, busy times at home ... they don’t get the opportunities to get out as much.*”. Additionally, at-home drinking provides men in this study the opportunity to connect with their partner. After parenting duties cease for the evening, couples can connect, catch up, “*relax*”, and “just have the luxury of sitting down.”.

In terms of drinking alone at home, COVID-19 has had long-term behaviour impacts. For many men in this study, they note that at-home alcohol consumption “*dramatically increased*” from 1-2 nights per week, to 3-4 nights per week, with some noting alcohol consumption occurring “*nearly every second night*”. COVID-19 also led to opportunities to drink at home for those who previously didn’t engage in at-home drinking:

“I never would have drank cans or anything like that at home ... and that’s changed since COVID. Funnily enough it’s not that I prefer to drink at home it’s just because craft beers came out ... and every weekend, Friday nights ... if I’m at home here, I’ll have a couple of beers.”

For the men in this study, solo alcohol consumption is a “*rare, very rare occurrence*”, unless it can be qualified with an ‘except when’. Drinking at home alone is thus carefully rationalised by “*watching the match*”, or if they were “*working late*” and wanted to “*wind down*”. This careful framing converts a perceptually taboo behaviour into something palatable: “*Everyone was going to bed. That’s the only reason I had to have it on my own*”. As such, a gradual erosion of boundaries occurs; the qualifier for drinking at home, alone, transforms from ‘never’ to ‘never without a good reason’.

8. Using mates to measure normal

One of the many benchmarks used by the men in this study to gauge drinking habits is the behaviour of those in their immediate social circles. This is used as a reference point to measure their habits against their peer group, rather than any objective standard, such as the HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines. The sentiment that many of these men are “*typical for someone [their] age*” appears repeatedly; in this age group, being average automatically means being acceptable.

As noted previously, many men in this study display a desire to be ‘in-group’. There appears to be a comfort in their collective behaviour, with sentiments of “*all my friends are the*

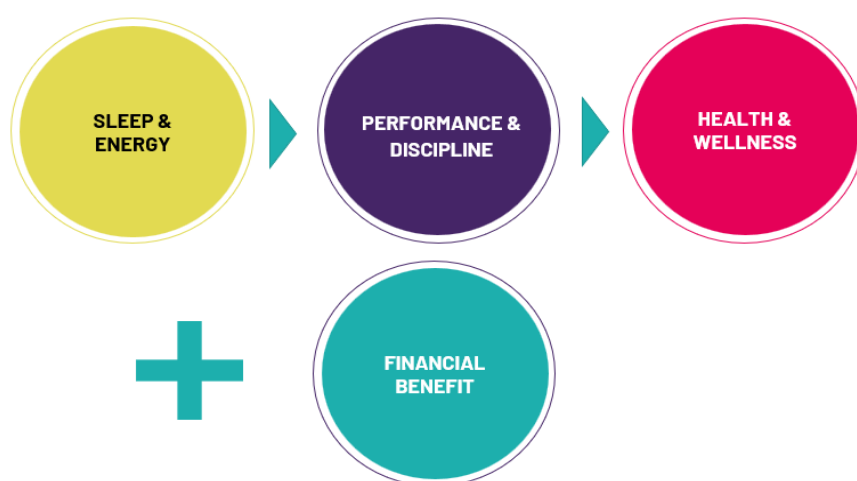
same”, “everyone’s in the same boat”, and “we’re all kind of on the same wavelength” appearing frequently across this cohort.

Men in this study also typically reference the outlier behaviour of others in their peer group to position themselves safely in the moderate middle. In this way, the social circle becomes both mirror and shield. The behaviour of their peer group reflects an image of acceptability, while also protecting against uncomfortable questions about the objectivity of their consumption levels.

Cutting Back

Men spoke about the effects of cutting down as well as recalling about cutting out consumption both following the pre-task request one week prior to the main data collection phase as well as more generally. Men also highlighted a range of tips for cutting back successfully based on their own experiences.

1. A Series of Knock-on effects with a Monetary “Cherry-on-top”



Many benefits of reducing alcohol consumption were noted by the men in this study, with better sleep and more energy coming up consistently. This resulted in a series of subsequent benefits; increased energy levels often coincided with better performance at work and at home, with many men in this study noting the completion of tasks that had previously been procrastinated.

This increased performance is also felt psychologically, with participants noting an increase in patience and mood, which subsequently led to improved quality time spent with family, and an increased capacity and desire for exercise. These were further supported by the financial benefits, with participants noting additional “*money in the pocket*” at the end of the week.

1. Sleep and Energy

One of the most cited effects of alcohol consumption, regardless of the amount, is depleted energy levels the following day, following poor sleep:

“from a beneficial perspective, sleep is so much better. You know, it’s actually ironic you say ‘Oh I’ll have a nightcap and it will help me sleep’ and you know, it really doesn’t. Alcohol doesn’t do anything good for your sleep pattern.”

Men in this cohort are time-poor, and thus, high energy levels are vital to maintain one's work, family, exercise, and a social life. However, many men in this study note that they don't get a "good night's sleep" when they consume alcohol before bed. As such, following the pre-task of moderating their alcohol consumption, men in this study cite "more energy" and sleeping better, leading sleep and energy to form a strong basis for subsequent key benefits of alcohol moderation.

II. Performance and Discipline

One such key benefit recognised by the participants in this study was increased performance both in work and at home. A higher level of performance in work, or at home, allows one to maintain a level of discipline that helps contribute to important aspects of life, such as one's health. This discipline manifests itself in several ways: completing tasks around the house, increased exercise, and improved diet.

At work, many men report a noticeably different level of effort could be achieved in comparison to a day whereby alcohol consumption had occurred the night previous:

"I've noticed totally dry that I'm more productive. If you've drink in your system and you're working ... the next morning, there's a space between being not quite hungover ... You might make it through your day's work. But when you go home in the evening you're useless."

A key consideration for the decision to drink alcohol for many men in this study is the capacity to face energetic children the following morning. Following alcohol consumption, some men note that "going out the back for 10 or 15 minutes with the kids is often a struggle ... when you don't drink you find it a lot easier to go out in the back and roll around on a trampoline." Participants note that increased energy allowed them the capacity to be more patient and play with their children. This increased energy also allowed men in this study to better participate in their children's busy weekend routines:

"There's nothing worse than a Saturday full of activities, matches, training, going around driving kids here and there with a bit of a head on ya. Standing on the sideline, not the nicest when you have a bit of a hangover."

III. Physical Health

The short and long-term health benefits of cutting back are recognised:

- Diet: The calories in alcohol do not go unnoticed and losing weight acts as an incentive to cutting back:
'I suppose one of the main benefits and the area that surprised me was the calories that were in alcohol. And you know you have a flabby old chin body you know and and people say to you like, gosh, you look well, did you lose weight? And unknown like to yourself you have'.
 - Opting for junk-food the day after drinking adds to this negative dietary impact.
- Exercise: Cutting alcohol out generally results in increased activity, whether this is from people getting active as a substitute for alcohol-based activities, or a lack of hangover enabling exercise the day after:
'When you drink, the next day you generally kind of, well I generally tend to eat a lot more crap food, and I certainly don't feel as motivated to go to the gym, or exercise, or take the dogs out, or workout, or do whatever'.
- Body: The effects of alcohol on the heart and liver are named by some participants and act as a reminder to refrain from excessive consumption

IV. Financial Gain - “Cherry on Top”

With the price of alcohol at an all-time high the financial benefit to cutting back is recognised:

‘Do you know one thing I did notice is my pocket. Drink is quite expensive now, to go to the off licence to get a four pack of Heineken or something, I think it's about 12 euro or something.’

- **Out-of-home** drinking expenses are not contained by the pub, there are associated costs that are also substantial; taxis, babysitters etc.
- **In-home:** Some participants are at an age where they have developed a taste for the finer things in life, this may include more expensive bottles of wine.

2. Tips for Cutting Back Successfully

Filling the Gap

For the men in this study, it is not just about cutting it out, it's about filling that gap. Without anything in place of alcohol, cutting back becomes significantly more difficult. There have to be substitutes as documented in this quote:

*‘A big trick that I find is, if you were going home in the evening and drinking. Just going home and thinking I won't drink is not the answer. The answer is if there's pressure points or pressure valves that would send you to drink normally, My view is you have to **fill that gap**. You can't just say well I used to drink on a Friday evening, so I'll just go home and I won't drink. That won't break the habit, you have to say I'll do Something else instead. I've a kayak And in the summer, I like to go out on the lake. I make a point of doing it on a **Friday** evening. I'll go for a long walk, I want to get back into running soon so that would be the main habit, **fill the gap!**’*

Filling the Gap Activities - Having an alternative activity to drinking is a key method to make it easier to cut back. Men spoke about using an activity not only as a **gap filler**, but something to **replace the routine-based attraction of drinking alcohol**. In the case of this participant, decompressing with a walk every Friday and learning to enjoy that instead of drinking:

‘I wouldn't say I necessarily missed the drink, but I missed the routine of it. You would miss going for a drink together on a Friday night. After a week in work. But then again, she came on a walk with me. It was nicer like, you know? The thing that was missing was a bit of a release, now again that might just be because I was used to it, I suppose if I was walking every Friday or Thursday evening for the next two years and I stopped doing it I'd probably find similar, something was missing’.

Filling the Gap - No/Low alcohol drinks - This group tend to be advocates for NA drinks - whether or not they consume themselves or not, they are understanding of their benefits.

This group are less likely to criticise NA beverages, they recognise that they serve a particular purpose. The greater selection nowadays of non-alcoholic drinks is a welcome change and some are developing favourites:

‘It's definitely a strategy i would use and have used but not too often and I suppose the range is getting better. Like you see the supermarkets they've full aisles dedicated to non-alcoholic drinks.’

Some participants also mentioned drinking more water, switching to soft drinks, and even switching to herbal tea to make cutting back easier:

'Believe it or not, where I thought of having a drink, I actually drank water and I drank herbal tea.'

Avoiding alcohol friendly social events

Staying away from alcohol and alcohol friendly environments altogether was seen by some as a key method to reduce consumption altogether:

'I suppose the best trick and the best habit is keeping away from that social habit.'

'It might be a case of trying to avoid social occasions for a while.'

Peer pressure, whether active or passive can turn even a sober occasion into an occasion with alcohol:

'I just try to avoid circumstances where a drink is involved for the start of it I think it's hard to try and go and cut back and put yourself in those situations. You're just going to be tempted it's always the hardest so it's just trying to remove myself from those situations. Let everyone know. Tell the people that you're going to do it. So they're not annoying you then to go for drinks and go for pints, putting it in your head. Just let the people know that you normally drink with say look, I'm going to Go off it for a couple of weeks and So don't be giving me texts or phone calls looking to go to the pub? Still do the other things with them, Go out for a game of golf or whatever. Just trying to avoid the situations where there is drink.'

Larger social events cause more attention and there is a sense of the event being “wasted” if alcohol isn't being consumed:

'I think the hardest part are social circles or social occasions whether it is celebrating a birthday ... if we go away on holidays with our friends, drink does play a big part in that.'

Ruling Yourself Out by Driving

Abstaining and not driving - This raises questions among others, leading them to wonder “Why?”, when cutting down for the sake of cutting down is not seen as a good enough reason

Abstaining and driving - Driving instantly puts these questions in the minds of peers at bay. This is a sharp contrast to peer behaviour in abstaining and not driving:

'Driving to and from social events. Yeah absolutely that's a great idea. Look at you get home, you've no worries about taxi. And you're back in your own bed. And one of the great things about it is 'Are you drinking?' 'No, actually, I'm driving tonight so I won't have a drink'. People won't press you on that, they're not going to go on, you'll have one, you'll have one, ah sure look it. I'll leave the car here. You can get a taxi. Sure. The answer 9 times out of 10 is 'Oh ok cool'. See you're on the 00 or something else?' Brilliant yeah good idea, that kind of works.'

Not only are peers refraining from questioning the decision of men in this study to not drink, but are discouraging any irresponsible consumption:

“Where we are out the country you nearly need someone to be the designated driver all the time ... by doing that you kind of escape”

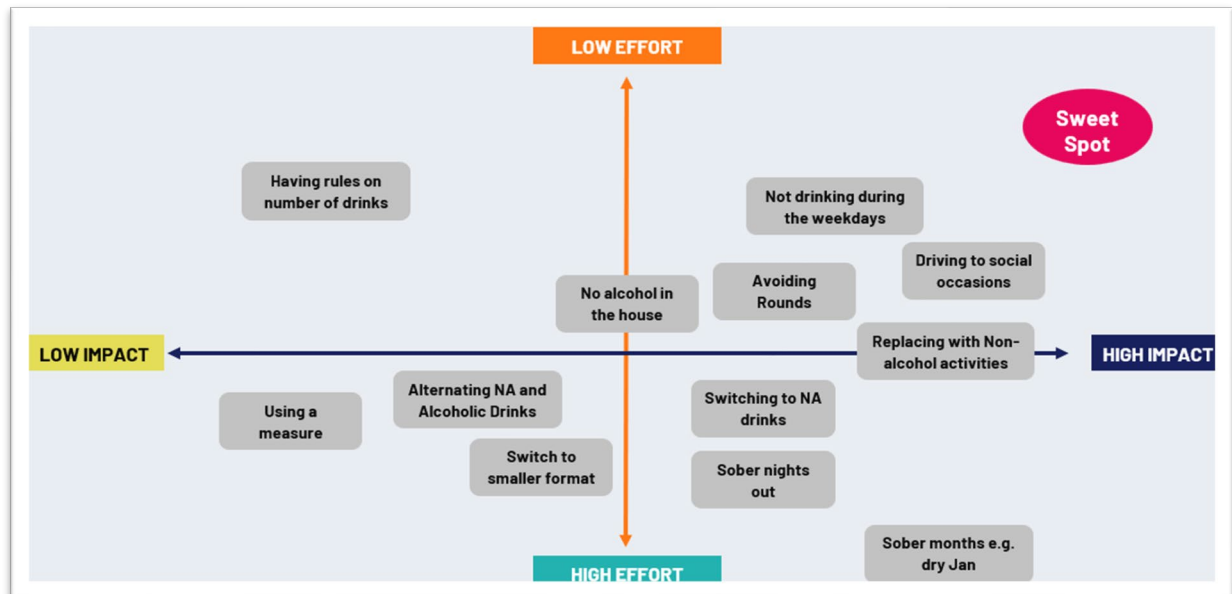
3. Interventions and Guidelines used

In men's stories the key interventions that they outline that they used when cutting back on consumption of alcohol are divided across four categories. These different intervention strategies involved both low or high effort as well as having a high or low impact. The interventions are described further in the two figures below.

Figure 2: Interventions - Divided by Category

Substitution Strategies	Rule-Base/Quantity Limits	Time-Based Abstinence	Situational/Environmental Changes
- Switching to non-alcoholic drinks. - Alternating alcoholic drinks with soft drinks/water/non-alcoholic drinks. - Switching to a smaller format (cans to bottles, pints to glasses).	- Having rules on the number of drinks per sitting. - Using a measure to control consumption. - Following HSE low risk weekly guidelines.	- Not drinking during weekdays. - Not drinking for a specific month/period (Dry January, Sober October).	- Avoiding rounds when drinking with others. - Avoiding having alcohol in the house. - Driving to/from social occasions more. - Sober nights out. - Replacing social drinking with non-alcohol focused activities.

Figure 3: Intervention strategies



a) Substitution strategies

- Interestingly, switching away from alcohol overall is more favourable than reducing via methods like alternating or 'down-sizing'.
- **NA drinks** are viewed as an increasingly popular strategy, although the price benefit is not there

Alternating drinks is met with mixed opinions, some participants thought that it is a good method to control intake, others felt that if they are going out for a drink then that's what they plan to do:

'If I'm going out to have a few beers, I'll have a few beers. If I'm going out to have water, I'll have water or soft drinks.'

- Switching to a smaller format is complicated for men in this study. For instance, **bottles** were still expensive if drinking out of home:

'And I did find in the pubs rather than having pints, started having bottles. Look it's an expensive task and sometimes the bottles they don't taste the same rather than the draft and they're bloody expensive as well so having a couple of pints you might save yourself. I found that kind of hard to keep that discipline when I was in the pub getting bottles so, that was something I tried myself. Definitely as a group, with friends I hang around with.'

- With **glasses**, some men expressed how they don't want to be the one having a half pint at a table of pint drinkers:

'I think it's a manly thing having a pint of Guinness ... having three or lads there drinking Guinness and then one lad saying "Lads I'm changing to glasses" ... I think always lads get pints.'

b) Rule-based/Quantity limits

- Men highlighted that rules, if you can stick to them, might be effective, but the general consensus is that they don't withstand the effects of alcohol:

'I don't think setting yourself a limit works I think you'll always go past it if you're enjoying yourself.'

- The general feedback on rule and quantity-based limits is that it is a good idea in theory, but after consuming alcohol the rules go **Out the window**:

'House measures are all well in ground, but the problem is you lose the run yourself far too easily. Far too quickly you've no idea how much you've drunk'

- **HSE Guidelines:** Following the HSE Guidelines to help cut down receives similar criticisms to other rule and quantity-based limits. Generally, there is a **disconnect** or **disagreement** with the HSE guidelines. The definition of binge drinking is seen as too low, some in this group would consider 3 pints in one sitting a small amount:

'Ah, no. Either feel it yourself or you don't, I think. Someone elses guidelines really aren't going to change my mind too much.... Binge drinking is 10 pints in my opinion, I don't think going for 3 pints is binge drinking, three pints is barely going for one pint.'

c) Time-based abstinence

- Large events are a key obstacle for time-based abstinence. Consideration of these periods of cutting back increased among men in this study as a result of the pre-task and sparked an interest in extended periods of cutting back among the participants.

- **During the week:** This was viewed as a highly manageable, many are "pretty much doing this anyway" but would be willing to make the switch to stricter timelines:

'Not drinking alcohol during the weekdays will be the big one for me yeah I definitely agree with that that would work for me I think if I stayed out for during the weekdays and just went out on a Friday or Saturday one weekend I think that's very reasonable Obviously it benefits you with your health and give you plenty of time to do family activities so I think the main thing for me is to make sure I'm able to get up and get out with the kids and the missus.'

'Don't stick exactly to that rule but again I think for the mass of people that work Monday to Friday it's nearly a given for most, very simple way of doing it.'

- **Sober months:** Extended periods of time away from alcohol are tempting for those who are more serious about cutting back. Dry January is most tempting, while many name the Christmas season as ‘heavy’.
 - **Large Events** still act as obstacles for both forms of abstinence for men in this study:
‘Not drinking during the weekdays, yeah, I totally agree with this, but then you have the likes of even Cheltenham next week ... you’ll have occasions like that.’
- d) Situational/environmental changes**
- Some men spoke about how putting yourself in a situation with alcohol while abstaining can be difficult on account of others getting messy:
‘All of these are fine for one or two ... but everyone I know and me included... if you’re out for a while ... people around you start to get messy, and they start to irritate you.’
 - **Avoiding rounds:** This is viewed as an easy adoption by reducing consumption as well as reducing money spent but there is FOMO of the ritualistic or social side of rounds:
‘I wouldn’t avoid being in rounds I just I’d get my round and I wouldn’t get one for myself Alright, say to people, no, leave me out of this one. So it definitely wouldn’t be the speed at which other people drink would affect me.’
 - Avoiding having alcohol in the house is viewed as effective although some feel that it could result in being viewed **as a bad host**.
 - Replacing social drinking with non-alcohol focused activities is seen as more favourable alternative to sober nights out because you don’t have to endure others drinking, but a “**hard sell**” for men in this study if friendships revolve around alcohol:
‘If it’s a work thing yeah, but if it’s with pals. Being the pals tends to revolve around drinking so it might a hard sell.’
 - **Driving to social events** is seen as effective and shuts down any questioning from peers before they pop up:
‘Have done the odd sober night out and that would probably work. Again bring the car, especially if I’ve to go somewhere.’

Conclusion

The findings from this project provide an extensive suite of rich qualitative data on understanding the role that alcohol plays in middle aged men’s lives in Ireland today and in their own words, with vital learnings into their experiences of cutting back among a sample of 24 men aged 40-55 years.

Ultimately, the stories put faces to figures collated through previous quantitative research such as in the Barometer series. In so doing, this body of work has helped advance research to help understand how middle-aged men engage with alcohol and strategies that they use to reduce harmful drinking practices. Eleven overarching themes guide middle-aged men’s stories of the role of alcohol and cutting back in this research project and in so doing collectively provide key patterns of meaning to their experiences with alcohol in Ireland.

This research is about moving beyond the ‘what’ of our Barometer statistics to understand the ‘why.’ For middle-aged men, alcohol often plays a much bigger role in routines and social connections than they may realise. We know from quantitative research that more men are drinking regularly, and when they do, they are drinking more. Alcohol functions as a central element in the social and emotional lives of middle-aged men in Ireland, revealing

its role as the "organising principle" for friendships and weekly rituals among this sample of men aged 40-55. Frequency of seeing friends can be low, and social occasions sporadic. Alcohol-centric occasions become the 'default' in these limited windows, and it plays a significant role in how friendships are maintained.

This study provides an intimate, first-hand look at a generation of men, many of whom are navigating the "survival mode" of intensive parenting, the stress of maintaining established careers, and the evolving health concerns of later life. Using digital ethnography and video diaries, the research explored the "why" behind men's drinking habits, allowing men to tell their own story and, in so doing, uncovering a complex relationship where alcohol is frequently used as a tool for "unravelling" after a tough week. Hobbies take a hit when balancing busy careers and young families among the sample. Alcohol can act as an outlet for unwinding or destressing and become further embedded in routines as a weekly point of punctuation.

A key finding was the rationalising and psychological framing of alcohol as a "trophy" for productivity. Unlike younger cohorts who may use alcohol for escapism, middle-aged men often describe drinking as something they have "earned" rather than "needed", a prize for surviving a long work week or a demanding day of parenting.

Vitality this research also highlighted a disconnect regarding what constitutes "normal" consumption. Participants commonly cited 4-6 drinks as a typical session, and particularly when drinking at home, frequently measuring their own behaviour against their immediate social circle rather than objective health guidelines, and often not recognising potential harm or increased risk. These insights directly reflect findings from Drinkaware's 2025 Barometer, where it was found that binge drinking remains entrenched, with 29% of men reporting that they typically binge drink (6+ standard drinks in one sitting) on a day they consume alcohol.

Much of this "new normal" is shaped by home drinking as a relocated ritual, with drinking routines that were once associated with pubs, social occasions or external rewards now increasingly embedded within everyday domestic life. Men in this study were less forthcoming about home drinking, which is influenced by changing social habits, cost considerations and convenience, with drinking at home often seen as easier, more affordable and more compatible with family life, particularly when children are in bed. However, after further reflection, the men in the study admitted to drinking at home, with rationale behind their choices, aligning with Drinkaware's 2025 Barometer's findings, which showed that home drinking was the most common drinking occasion, with 55% of adult drinkers being most likely to drink at home rather than in pubs or group settings. Many reference premium choices, provide justifications for home drinking, and frame consumption as reward.

Reflecting on the pre-task, participants listed a number of key benefits to cutting back. Despite the cultural entrenchment of drinking. Participants who reduced their intake reported immediate benefits, including better sleep, increased energy, and improved performance at work and in their home lives. Filling the gap is a core tenet to cutting back successfully. This can take many forms, it can mean using an activity to take one's mind off drinking, using an activity as a reason to abstain or even using an activity to replace the routine-based attraction of alcohol. HSE guidelines including binge drinking definitions are met with disagreement and disconnect of the other prompted strategies to cutting back, most viable options include driving to social occasions, not drinking during the weekdays and avoiding rounds with other methods such as switching to NA drinks and socialising with non-alcohol activities also showing promise.

Ultimately the results are crucial to informing development and roll out of focused information campaigns to assist with reducing alcohol misuse through providing insight into

the lived experiences of middle-aged men's drinking practices. Ultimately understanding the etiology of middle-aged men's drinking is important to facilitate development of prevention inventions.

Next Steps

The findings from this project provide Drinkaware with a valuable opportunity to strengthen our efforts to reduce alcohol harm among middle-aged men in Ireland. By listening directly to their lived experiences and how middle-aged men engage with alcohol and strategies that they use to reduce harmful drinking practices, we can ensure that future campaigns, tools, and interventions are grounded in real life, speak in relatable terms, and meet men aged 40-55 years where they are.

Our goal is to meet men where they are, providing the tools to help them maintain those vital social connections while making small, meaningful changes to their drinking habits.

Despite the cultural entrenchment of drinking, the study found a growing awareness of the benefits of cutting back. Participants who reduced their intake reported immediate benefits, including better sleep, increased energy, and improved performance at work and in their home lives. To sustain these gains, the research suggests a shift toward a "Drink Less, Talk More" philosophy, prioritising the quality of connection over the quantity of consumption.

This approach challenges the cultural reliance on alcohol as a social lubricant, encouraging men to move beyond surface-level "small talk" about sports and lean into more authentic engagement. By focusing on the conversation rather than the round, men can maintain vital support networks while navigating the stressors of middle age.

Drawing on the insights gained from this research, Drinkaware will therefore prioritise the following actions as effective strategies for embedding behavioural change:

- **Filling the Gap:** Replacing the drinking ritual with a new activity in place of consumption and encourage doing this at an allotted time (such as a weekly walk every Friday evening/replacing with other interests) to further solidify this activity as a substitute for alcohol is more effective than willpower alone and appeared as the core tenet to cutting back successfully
- **Non-Alcoholic Options:** The rise of 0.0% options offers a practical way for men to stay socially included while feeling in control of their health. Encourage men to keep an open mind and try different NA options until they find one they enjoy.
- **The "Escape" Clause:** Ruling oneself out by volunteering to drive is a highly effective way to shut down peer questioning. Emphasise the change in the minds of others when this strategy is used, peer pressure inverts from discouraging to encouraging abstinence.
- **In-Work Performance:** Emphasise the impact that alcohol can have on performance in work. Less attention to detail, missed opportunities, overall decrease in output. Additionally, colleagues are more aware of someone's state than people realise
- **At-home Performance:** Having greater patience and energy at home enables men to maintain healthier relationships with spouses and enables parents to match the high energy levels of their children and maintain a vital connection. Framing these benefits as "The important things in life", makes abstaining from alcohol seem like a small step in pursuit of something much more meaningful.

- Encouraging a Short Cutting Back Period: Participants in this study who completed the pre-task were open to cutting back for a period in future. Propose a cutting back for one week through outreach and engagement to highlight the benefits of abstinence in the mind of the public.
- Consider New Definitions for Excessive Consumption: There is disagreement and disconnect with the current HSE guidelines identified among the sample. Consider developing new terms for excessive consumption that strike a chord with the Irish public as part of the upcoming review on Ireland's low-risk alcohol guidelines that the Department of Health is currently undertaking. The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) (2026) published a new report supporting an update to the guidelines and this forms part of the wider base that will be considered as part of that process.

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Appendices: 3-Day Task Guide for Participants

Drinkaware Men and Alcohol Research Programme

TasGuide Indeemo

Task list introduction	Hello! Welcome to our mobile app! Our names are Cormac, Luke and Niall, and we are looking forward to getting to know you over the next few days through this app. Over the next three days, we want to learn as much as possible about you. Specifically, we would like to learn about your life, your views about alcohol and what kind of role it plays in your life. We also want to understand you as a person (treated with utmost confidentiality) in terms of you, your outlook in general, and how you feel about life today. You have been chosen to reflect life today for many men across the country, so we'd ask that you be as forthcoming as you deem comfortable. You will be a key part of our team on this important research, helping us to understand the different perspectives of people across the country. You will be taking part in video tasks, and we will provide you with support along the way. Please make sure you set enough time each day to fully take part and respond to questions. Please upload to the app using a selfie video for each task. Each of your videos should be between 5-10 minutes long. All of your uploads will only be viewed by the Ipsos B&A and the wider project team, so please feel free to tell us your honest thoughts and feelings on the topic. If you have any questions or issues before or during this research, please reach out to support@indeemo.com or contact Cormac at cormac.gunning@ipsos.com. As a reminder of our GDPR compliance procedure (which you have already seen and signed via email), could you please read the below to confirm you have read and accepted: • Ipsos B&A is the Data Controller for this project and is responsible for handling and securing any personal data you share through the diary app. This includes your selfie video recordings, text messages and other information that you post. • You will be asked to share your thoughts about alcohol and what kind of role it plays in your life. • Should you wish to exit the project, you are free to do so at any time. Our privacy policy can be viewed here: https://banda.ie/privacy-policy/. • Any video footage you upload with your image on screen is seen as Personal Identifiable data. Your full name and any other personally identifiable data will not be linked to any of the responses you submit. • All video footage is retained for 12 months and electronically shredded thereafter. • Please only include videos and pictures of you. Do not include pictures or videos of other adults or any children when uploading to the app. We look forward to speaking with you over the next week! Kind regards, Cormac, Luke and Niall
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Task Title	Day 1 Task 1: Getting to know you
Goal/Theme (Internal)	Day 1: Where/When • Introduction to themselves and their lives <i>MODERATOR NOTE: Probe on relationships, social circles and relationships with women</i>
Task List	<i>Please answer all of the questions below. You can cover everything in 1 selfie video, but please keep your video to between 5 and 10 minutes (note 10 minutes is the max length you can upload, and 5 is the minimum!)</i> Today's first task is about getting to know you and your world. • Tell us your name, age and where you are in life right now? • If you are in employment, what you do for work? • Please walk us through a 'typical' day in your life, if such a thing exists. • Tell us a bit about your home life - Who is at home with you? ○ Are you in a relationship? ○ Have you any children? • What are your main hobbies and interests? What do you like most about each? • Tell us about your social life, who do you hang out with most on a regular basis? • What are your 3 favourite activities to do when socialising with these people? Which of these happen often and which are less frequent? • What takes up most of your headspace these days? How has this changed over time? • What do you enjoy most about your day to day life? What do you look forward to most and why? • What do you find drains you? Why is that?
Required Responses	1 Video
Start date / time	TBC
Task Title	Day 1 Task 2: Alcohol
Goal/Theme (Internal)	Day 1: Where/When • Their relationship with alcohol as they currently see it themselves • Occasions for drinking alcohol

Task List	<i>Please answer all of the questions below. You can cover everything in 1 selfie video, but please keep your video to between 5 and 10 minutes (note 10 minutes is the max length you can upload, and 5 is the minimum!)</i> • tell us about the types of occasions in your life when you tend to drink alcohol? • Do you consider alcohol a part of your weekly routine? • Roughly, how often does alcohol tend to be part of your social plans? • Where does drinking usually happen for you? When are you most likely to have a drink at home vs somewhere else (e.g. pubs, bars, restaurants, events). • Who do you tend to drink with? • Do you ever enjoy a drink in your own company? If so, when? • When you do drink, about how many drinks would you usually have? What influences that (e.g. occasion, who you're with, how you're feeling, etc.) • What alcoholic drinks do you usually drink (beer, wine spirits, etc)? What do you like about each? • How is alcohol viewed in your social circles? What is the 'role' of alcohol in your friend groups? • If someone close to you described your drinking habits, what do you think they'd say? Do you see yourself as typical for someone your age, or a bit different?
Required Responses	1 Video
Start date / time	TBC
Task Title	Day 2 Task 1: Alcohol in your life
Goal/Theme (Internal)	• Motivations for drinking alcohol • Perspectives on the role of alcohol in their lives • Evolution over time
Task List	<i>Please answer all of the questions below. You can cover everything in 1 selfie video, but please keep your video to between 5 and 10 minutes (note 10 minutes is the max length you can upload, and 5 is the minimum!)</i> • How would you characterize the role that alcohol plays in your life? • What are the main reasons you decide to have a drink? How does this differ by occasion? • On a typical week, when do you most feel like a drink? When do you least feel like a drink? Why is this?

	• When is drinking planned vs more spontaneous? When planned, how often in advance do you decide to have a drink? • What do you like most about drinking alcohol? • What do you usually do the day after a typical drinking occasion? • what are the downsides of drinking, if any (beyond hangovers!)? • are there ever times where you feel pressured to drink? or pressured to not drink? • Do you set yourself any personal 'rules' around drinking alcohol? • Do you recall a specific period of your life when the role that alcohol plays in your life changed? If so, what brought about this change? • Has the way your social circle drinks alcohol changed throughout your adult life?
Required Responses	1 Video
Start date / time	TBC
Task Title	Day 2 Task 2: Experience of cutting back
Goal/Theme (Internal)	• Review of pre-task experiences – what they noticed, what was challenging, how they implemented it, what was missed, what was gained.
Task List	<i>Please answer all of the questions below. You can cover everything in 1 selfie video, but please keep your video to between 5 and 10 minutes (note 10 minutes is the max length you can upload, and 5 is the minimum!)</i> • Thanks again for making the effort to reduce your alcohol consumption as a homework task. We'd like to hear about how you found the experience: ○ Tell us all about your approach – how did you go about this? Did you avoid alcohol altogether or try to drink less? ○ Did you set specific rules? ○ What was easy? What was challenging? ○ Did anyone close to you mention it? ○ Did you find anything beneficial/enjoyable?

	○ What aspects of reducing your alcohol intake did you enjoy the least? Did you feel like anything was missing from your week? ○ Did you notice any difference in your attitudes, perspectives, or behaviour? ○ If you had to do this for longer (3 months) how would you feel about it?
Required Responses	1 Video
Start date / time	TBC
Task Title	Day 3 Task 1: Experiences with cutting back
Goal/Theme (Internal)	• Interest and motivations to cut back • Barriers to reducing consumption • Strategies used/envisioned (spontaneous)
Task List	<i>Please answer all of the questions below. You can cover everything in 1 selfie video, but please keep your video to between 5 and 10 minutes (note 10 minutes is the max length you can upload, and 5 is the minimum!)</i> • Before this research, has cutting back or reducing your alcohol consumption been something of interest? Why/why not? • have you made efforts to cut back on alcohol consumption in the past? If so, what were the reasons for doing this? • Can you see yourself doing this again in the future? ○ If so, why? ○ If not, why not? • Can you give examples of any obstacles you faced while reducing, or times where it was particularly difficult to do so? • Would there be any benefits to you if you cut down on your drinking? What might the short term and longer-term benefits be and would they be worth it? • If you wanted to cut back in future, what methods, tricks or habits would you use to make it easier? • How comfortable would you feel not drinking when those around you may be doing so? • What are your thoughts on the definition of 'binge drinking'? – 6 or more standard drinks (i.e. 3 pints of beer or 6 small glasses of wine) in a single occasion • What are your thoughts on the current HSE recommended low risk guidelines for men? Less than 17 standard drinks spread out over the week, with at least two alcohol-free days.

	Do you find these guidelines helpful? do you ever use them?
Required Responses	1 Video
Start date / time	TBC
Task Title	Day 3 Task 2: Looking ahead
Goal/Theme (Internal)	- Prompted strategies feedback (to be agreed with team) - Reflection.
Task List	<i>Please answer all of the questions below. You can cover everything in 1 selfie video, but please keep your video to between 5 and 10 minutes (note 10 minutes is the max length you can upload, and 5 is the minimum!)</i> - We'd like to get your thoughts on some potential approaches people could use to cut back. what are your overall thoughts on each of the below? what do you think could work for you? And why? What wouldn't work? - Switching to non-alcoholic drinks - Alternating alcoholic drinks with soft drinks/water/non alcoholic drinks - Having rules on the number of drinks you consume in a sitting - Avoiding taking part in rounds when drinking with others - Abstaining from drinking alcohol during weekdays - Abstaining from drinking alcohol for a specific month or period of time (e.g. Dry January, Sober October) - Using a measure to control how much alcohol you consume - Avoiding having alcohol in the house - Switching to a smaller format of alcohol e.g. switching from cans to bottles or pints to glasses - Driving to and from social occasions or events more - Replacing social drinking occasions with non-alcohol focused activities - Sober nights out - Do you have any thoughts on challenges in keeping up positive changes over time? - Over the past few days, we have discussed different aspects of drinking alcohol. has your experience with this research sparked any thoughts for you that we haven't heard about men and alcohol today?

Required Responses	1 Video
Start date / time	TBC