

**RECOVERY COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES:
ALCOHOL MARKETING RESTRICTIONS**

September 2026





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Introduction

This report outlines findings from community engagement sessions conducted with people who have lived experience of alcohol-related harm, including those currently in recovery and members of peer support groups. Participants were asked to reflect on how current advertising practices impact individuals, communities, and society more broadly, and to share their views on possible alcohol marketing restrictions that could be implemented in Scotland.



This report presents the key findings from those discussions, structured by theme, and includes direct quotations to amplify the voices and perspectives of participants. Where appropriate, the report also identifies patterns of consensus, divergence, and specific ideas for action or reform.

Methodology

The engagement process was conducted through a series of facilitated group discussions, each designed to allow participants to freely express their views and experiences related to alcohol marketing. Discussions were primarily structured around three key domains of alcohol marketing:

- Outdoor advertising - including billboards, bus stops, branded street furniture, and advertising near schools or on public transport.
- Sports and events - including alcohol branding in stadiums, on team kits, and at festivals and large-scale events.
- Retail environment - including visibility and placement of alcohol in shops, use of promotional displays, and the types of outlets allowed to sell it.

To help inform discussions, participants were also presented with examples of potential restrictions drawn from international and UK contexts. These examples illustrated a range of approaches already implemented elsewhere and are included in Appendices 1 and 2.

Sessions were hosted in partnership with 4 key organisations working closely with people affected by alcohol; 48 participants were recruited through each organisation's networks and included individuals at various stages of recovery. These sessions took place between March and May 2025. Qualitative data was collected through verbatim notes and anonymised quotes.

Participants' lived experiences and reflections offered a nuanced and often powerful account of alcohol marketing's real-world impact - insights that underpin the findings set out in this report.

Findings

Outdoor Advertising

Outdoor alcohol advertising was consistently identified by participants as one of the most intrusive forms of alcohol promotion. Many described how alcohol advertising saturates public spaces - from bus stops and billboards to branded umbrellas and shopfronts - making it virtually impossible to avoid. For those in recovery, this constant exposure was described as a powerful and often distressing trigger that could undermine progress and increase the risk of relapse.



"Three years into recovery and a single billboard can still stop me in my tracks and create intense cravings."

Participants expressed a strong desire to reclaim public space from commercial alcohol messaging. They spoke about how public spaces should feel safe and inclusive – including for children, people in recovery, and those attempting to reduce their consumption. Instead, participants felt that these spaces were increasingly dominated by alcohol brands. There was widespread concern that the visibility of alcohol advertising not only made recovery more difficult but also contributed to a cultural environment where abstaining from alcohol felt like the exception, not the norm.



"When alcohol is everywhere, sobriety feels like the deviation. Marketing reinforces the idea that drinking is normal and not drinking is strange."

"You see these big billboards right outside schools sometimes."

"Those branded barriers and umbrellas outside pubs became much more common during COVID. Now they're everywhere and it's just another form of advertising we're all exposed to."

"When you're in early recovery, seeing those big Tennent's ads on the bus stop can be a real trigger."

This context shaped how participants approached potential marketing restrictions. Some supported targeted restrictions on outdoor alcohol advertising, often as a pragmatic first step toward the ultimate goal of removing alcohol promotion from public spaces altogether. Others strongly advocated for a total ban from the outset, viewing it as the only approach proportionate to the scale of the problem.

Targeted restrictions

Some participants supported the introduction of targeted restrictions, particularly those aimed at reducing children's exposure to alcohol advertising. They emphasised that young people are highly impressionable and that the cumulative effect of seeing alcohol marketing in everyday environments normalises drinking from an early age.

"I think the Ireland model would work well here... it would cover a lot of urban areas."

"I think banning alcohol advertising within 200 meters of schools and hospitals would be a good start."

Specific proposals included banning advertising in places where young people are likely to be present - such as within 200 metres of schools, nurseries, and playgrounds - mirroring the approach taken in Ireland (see Appendix 1). Some advocated for these targeted limits as a starting point, hoping they would make it easier to build momentum for future change.

Others reflected on the French model, where alcohol advertising is only permitted under certain conditions - such as when it is connected to cultural heritage, history, or tradition (see Appendix 1).

"I think we should follow France's model where alcohol advertising has to be tied to cultural heritage. At least that would limit the types of ads we see."

Some participants saw this as a potentially useful way to limit the scale and nature of advertising.

However, others were more sceptical, expressing concern that such criteria could be vague or open to manipulation.

"France's approach is interesting - linking it to culture. But I think that's too vague, and companies would find loopholes."

Some participants also welcomed the idea of local authorities using their powers to restrict alcohol advertising on council-owned property and transport networks, as has been done in parts of the UK (see Appendix 1).

While some participants viewed these localised approaches as a practical and achievable first step, others argued that without national regulation, local measures risk being inconsistent or easily bypassed.

The prominence of alcohol advertising in public transport settings also highlights the potential role of transport authorities in driving change.



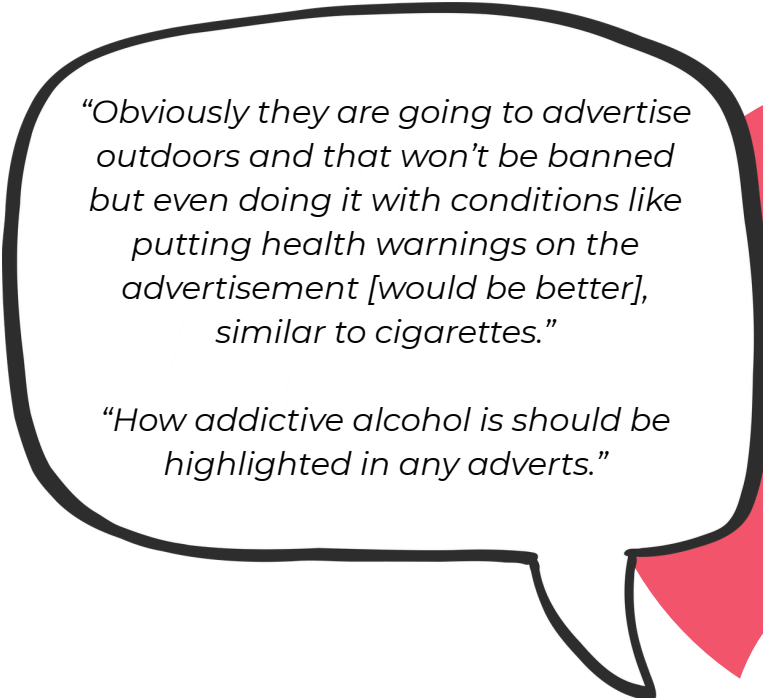
"Local councils should... restrict alcohol advertising on their property, like they've done in Bristol. Start local and build from there."



"Local councillors see firsthand the damage of alcohol in their local area. If they aren't interested in banning this then who is?"

As such, similar approaches to those used in other public health interventions - such as Transport for London's ban on high fat, salt, and sugar product advertising (see Appendix 1) - may be beneficial to explore in the context of alcohol marketing.

An additional suggestion raised by some participants was to allow outdoor alcohol advertising only if it included clear health warnings. They drew parallels with tobacco advertising, emphasising that while other restrictions might not be feasible, requiring warnings about the potential harms of alcohol could lessen the appeal and overall impact of alcohol marketing.



"Obviously they are going to advertise outdoors and that won't be banned but even doing it with conditions like putting health warnings on the advertisement [would be better], similar to cigarettes."

"How addictive alcohol is should be highlighted in any adverts."



Comprehensive Ban

While some participants favoured targeted or incremental restrictions, others strongly advocated for a total ban on outdoor alcohol advertising. For these individuals, the harms of alcohol marketing were seen as so pervasive and entrenched that only a comprehensive approach would be sufficient.

They described targeted measures as potentially helpful but ultimately limited, and argued that a full ban would send a much clearer message about Scotland's commitment to changing the culture around alcohol.



"They [children] might not see alcohol within the 200m [advertising restriction zone] but the minute they step out that for lunch they will just see it anyways."

"I'd prefer a complete ban on outdoor alcohol advertising. Why do we need to see it everywhere we go?"

Some participants pointed to international examples to support their call for a complete ban, citing countries like Estonia and Norway where outdoor alcohol advertising has been entirely prohibited (see Appendix 1).

"Banning advertising would have an impact in the long term... we need to stop attracting the younger generations to alcohol, so that in two generations' time this is no longer the culture."

These approaches were seen not only as more effective in reducing exposure but also as a clear public health statement. For many of those advocating this position, anything short of a full ban was viewed as inadequate in addressing the scale of the issue.

"I see every other country's approach, apart from Norway and Estonia, as putting a plaster on the problem."

"We need to eventually go the whole hog."

"The goal would be [a ban like in] Estonia and Norway, that would be the absolute benchmark."

Some participants also highlighted the inconsistencies they perceived in allowing alcohol advertising to continue while placing restrictions on other harmful products such as tobacco, where stronger public health measures had been accepted over time.

While some acknowledged that a full ban might face political and industry resistance, they felt it was important to keep this option on the table – both as a long-term goal and as a signal of the level of ambition needed to reduce alcohol harm at a population level.

Sports and Events

While views on alcohol marketing at events such as music festivals were more mixed and often seen as context-dependent, the presence of alcohol promotion in sports was consistently and strongly challenged.

Protecting Sport from Alcohol Marketing

Participants felt that sponsorships, pitch-side advertisements, and alcohol branding on kits were out of step with the values of sport – particularly its connections to health, youth, and positive role modelling. For many, this disconnect made such advertising feel inappropriate and harmful.

Participants highlighted the visibility of alcohol advertising to young audiences in particular, whether through watching games in person, on television, or through branded merchandise.

This was seen as contributing to early brand recognition and normalising drinking from a young age.

"If you look at the tobacco industry, there are a lot of lessons to be learned from how they brought in marketing restrictions really successfully".

"The best solution is an outright ban, absolutely no doubt. In terms of achievable, the best option would be allowing the adverts but with restrictions."

"Sporting events are about keeping active, keeping fit. Alcohol does not go with that."

"There should be no alcohol sponsorship of sports teams or sporting events. It's completely contradictory to promote alcohol alongside healthy activities."

"My kids know all the alcohol brands from watching football. They can recognise Heineken just from seeing that star logo during Champions League matches."

"Kids going along to these football matches - the minute they see alcohol on shirt sponsors, that's them exposed to alcohol right away."

"I'd like to see restrictions on digital advertising during sports broadcasts, especially when children might be watching."



Several participants spoke from personal experience about the difficulties of navigating sporting environments while in recovery, citing the prevalence of alcohol marketing as a significant trigger. Some described avoiding sports entirely because of it.

The idea of banning alcohol sponsorship and advertising in sport - including shirt sponsorships and digital pitch-side adverts - was frequently proposed.

In discussing possible approaches, several participants pointed to the French Évin Law, which prohibits alcohol sponsorship in sport. This was seen as a viable and proven model that Scotland could consider. Some participants also challenged the common industry argument that such restrictions would harm sports financially, noting that evidence from countries like France shows sports can thrive without alcohol sponsorship.

"In recovery, I had to stop watching certain sports for a while because the constant beer adverts were too triggering."

The Évin Law – Alcohol and Sport in France

France's Évin Law, introduced in 1991, is one of the most comprehensive pieces of legislation regulating alcohol marketing in Europe. It includes key provisions that effectively prohibit alcohol sponsorship and advertising in sporting contexts. Specifically:

- Alcohol brands are banned from sponsoring sports teams, events, or athletes, preventing direct promotion through these channels.
- Alcohol logos and advertisements are prohibited on sports kits, in stadiums, and on pitch-side advertising boards.
- All alcohol advertising must be factual, meaning it cannot associate alcohol with sporting success or health benefits.

"If France can ban alcohol sponsorship in sports, we can too. Their sports industry hasn't collapsed."

"I support Celtic but see when they go into Europe to play, the gambling and alcohol sponsorship gets taken off and replaced – so it can be done!"

"The French model seems to work – they still have sports but without the alcohol branding everywhere. We should look at that."



Alcohol Marketing at Events

Views on alcohol advertising at events like music festivals and concerts were more varied among participants. Some had come to accept alcohol promotion as part of the party or social atmosphere commonly associated with these settings, feeling it was somewhat expected or less intrusive compared to other environments.

However, even within this context, concerns were raised about the extent and nature of alcohol marketing at events, particularly regarding its reach to younger audiences.

Some questioned why alcohol advertising is allowed so prominently at festivals and other events where large numbers of young people are present, highlighting the risk of glamourising alcohol consumption among youth.

Others questioned the need for alcohol advertising at events like music festivals, noting that alcohol is already widely available and expected in those settings. For these participants, the presence of advertising was not only unnecessary but made such environments more difficult for those in recovery or trying to cut down. Some felt they had no choice but to avoid these events altogether, raising concerns about exclusion and asking why people should feel unwelcome or unable to attend simply to accommodate alcohol marketing.

"I find alcohol advertising less annoying at music festivals than all the other areas... it's a party environment so I feel like I just need to accept that"

"I think alcohol advertising belongs in party environments, not in sports or healthy activities."

"If we can't eliminate it entirely, we should at least ensure advertisements don't glorify drinking culture or target vulnerable populations."

"TRNSMT [music festival] is marketed completely at young people and so is all the advertising."

"Why advertise it at music festivals or events though? Everybody there knows they can get alcohol."

"Just because I am in recovery, why shouldn't I go to these events?"



Retail environment

Participants described the retail environment as one of the most difficult spaces to navigate when trying to reduce or stop drinking. Supermarkets and local shops were widely seen as saturated with alcohol promotion, from end-of-aisle displays and signage at the entrance, to offers and branding at the checkout. These were not viewed as neutral design choices but as deliberate strategies to drive impulse purchases.



Many participants described supermarkets as a source of distress or even a place to avoid altogether. Alcohol was experienced not just as present, but inescapable - a constant visual and emotional trigger.

"When I was trying to stop drinking, going to the supermarket was a nightmare."

"I've had to abandon shopping trips because the alcohol promotions were too overwhelming - It shouldn't be this hard to buy groceries!"

"When I'm well, I don't even see the bottles of wine. But when I'm not well, it all looks nice and makes me think it will make me feel better."

"When I first came into recovery, I just stayed out of shops."

Several people felt small local shops posed even greater challenges, especially when alcohol was placed directly behind the till, often right at eye level.

"The small local shops are worse because it is behind the till in your smaller stores. Even buying a packet of chewing gum you are met with an array of alcohol."

"It's even worse in small shops – the alcohol is behind the counter, so you're staring at it the whole time you're waiting to pay."

"Wee shops are the worst, when you are paying for things and it's right at your eye level"

Structural Separation

A strong and recurring theme across the discussions was the call for structural separation in retail settings - such as physical barriers or clearly designated alcohol zones within shops.

Participants felt these changes could reduce the prominence and visibility of alcohol, making it easier for children, people in recovery, or anyone trying to cut down to avoid unwanted exposure.

"Structural separation is what I'd prefer – having alcohol in a completely separate section of the store gives you the choice whether to go in there or not."

"The separation of alcohol from everyday shopping completely changes your relationship with it. It becomes a conscious choice rather than an impulse purchase."

Barriers

Participants responded positively to models introduced elsewhere - particularly Ireland's retail regulations, where supermarkets are required to cordon off alcohol sections using barriers at least 1.2 metres high, with separate entrances and exits (see Appendix 2). This approach was frequently cited as both practical and effective

"I love this [separation with barriers like Ireland] and I think it's really realistic."

"You know clearly there [in Ireland] that you are about to see alcohol and can choose to or not."

"A barrier has a bit of authority to it - a kind of 'no-go zone' effect."

"Even a start is the barriers – that would work best in my opinion, block those aisles off for people."



Participants emphasised that these proposals were not about prohibition or making alcohol inaccessible.

Instead, they were seen as low-cost, proportionate, and overdue measures that could help shift norms and reduce alcohol-related harm, particularly by reducing impulse purchasing and minimising exposure in everyday settings.



'Shop-within-a-shop'

Some participants also expressed support for a 'shop-within-a-shop' model, where alcohol is sold in a clearly separate section of the store with its own entrance and checkout. This approach was seen as a way to reinforce clear boundaries between alcohol and everyday grocery shopping. For some, this level of separation offered a practical balance between accessibility and reducing harm.

"Have a separate till within the second store, and to purchase your alcohol it needs to be in the second store within a store."

"Make a separate store within a store and that's the only place you can have any alcohol advertising, nowhere else in the shop."

While structural separation was seen as harder to implement in smaller shops, participants still emphasised the need for consistent standards and a degree of predictability across retail settings.

Some participants also suggested that smaller stores should be required to place alcohol behind the counter within covered units or behind barriers, similar to how tobacco is currently displayed.

"There should be a certain part of the shop that I know not to go near – and it should be the same in every store."

"I'd like to see alcohol behind barriers like tobacco products. If you want it, you have to specifically ask for it."

Monopolies and Controlled Sales

While less frequently raised, some participants supported more far-reaching reforms to how and where alcohol is sold, such as removing it from general retail settings (e.g., supermarkets) and restricting sales exclusively to government-run or specially licensed stores. Participants referenced models used in countries like Sweden, Canada, and some U.S. states (see Appendix 2), where alcohol is not available in ordinary retail environments but only through standalone outlets subject to strict controls.

For some, this approach represented a robust and effective way to reduce harm by preventing alcohol from being treated like an everyday consumer product. These participants felt that alcohol sales should occur in settings that reflect the health risks associated with its use. Many saw the current system - where alcohol is widely available in supermarkets, corner shops, and petrol stations - as sending the wrong message about its potential for harm.

"There's just too much alcohol in supermarkets. It doesn't make sense - it's not like buying bread."

"The Swedish model makes the most sense – government-controlled shops with limited hours. It works for them, why not for us?"

"Canada have liquor stores – my uncle comes over and is so confused that you can buy whisky in a supermarket."

"I really like this [monopolies]. It's a shop where you know the minute you step in, you're buying alcohol - you're not going in there for a loaf of bread."

Government-run or strictly regulated alcohol retail systems were also seen as a way to reduce commercial pressures to promote alcohol sales. Some participants noted that such systems could remove the profit motive from alcohol sales and place harm reduction at the centre of alcohol retail policy.

This discussion also led some participants to reflect on the timing of alcohol availability. For these individuals, it wasn't just about where alcohol was sold, but when. Limiting sales hours - such as earlier closing times for alcohol retailers - was seen as another way to curb impulsive purchasing and reinforce the idea that alcohol should not be treated like an ordinary consumer good.

"Having government-run shops would make it less about profit and more about responsible sales."

"10pm is far too late to still be able to buy alcohol. Change it to 8pm."

"What works about the Swedish system is the limited hours. Shops closing at 8pm weekdays and 3pm Saturdays means you have to plan to buy alcohol - it's not just an impulse thing."

Although these suggestions sit slightly outside the scope of traditional marketing policy, they reflect the same underlying concern: that the widespread availability and promotion of alcohol normalises its presence in daily life and increases the risk of harm.

An Emerging Consideration: No- and Low-Alcohol Products

The discussions about alcohol marketing also included reflections on the branding, visibility, and placement of no- and low-alcohol products. Although frequently presented as harm-reduction tools by the alcohol industry, participants questioned the way these products are marketed and displayed, particularly when they closely resemble alcoholic versions.

For many, no- and low-alcohol products were seen as a form of 'surrogate marketing': a way for alcohol brands to maintain visibility and reinforce brand recognition without overtly advertising alcohol. Participants noted that these products often carry identical packaging, logos, and advertising styles to their alcoholic counterparts, blurring the line between alcoholic and non-alcoholic products.

"You still see the logo and the brand - you don't even notice the wee 0%."

"Just because there's a wee zero on the end, it doesn't mean you're not promoting the brand."

"See these adverts where it's for 0% alcohol - you don't see the 0%, you just see the alcohol logo. You're still being force-fed the Guinness brand, for example."

"The non-alcoholic versions keep the brand in your mind. It's still marketing for the alcoholic products."

Participants also raised concerns about retail placement. Many noted that no and low-alcohol products are typically shelved directly next to alcoholic drinks or advertised together, reinforcing the association between the two and making it harder to clearly distinguish between them. At the same time, some participants felt that no- and low-alcohol products should also be separated from general groceries, to reduce exposure to alcohol branding and cues that can be triggering for people managing their intake or in recovery.



These insights raise broader concerns about the place of no and low-alcohol products within the wider alcohol marketing landscape. For some, these products required the same level of regulation and scrutiny as alcoholic beverages.

"Advertising of non-alcoholic products should have the exact same rules as advertising alcohol products. They both put the idea of alcohol in your head."

A Call for Change

There was a call from participants to keep pushing for change - to keep conversations about alcohol marketing alive and make voices heard. Many expressed the need for sustained effort and collective action, recognising that progress depends on ongoing public pressure and advocacy.

"One thing that will definitely not help make change is if we stop talking about it. If we keep talking about it then there's always a chance of change. If we stop trying, nothing will change."

People living with the realities of alcohol harm, including those in recovery, spoke about the challenges of constant exposure to alcohol marketing and the urgency of reducing its influence.

"I've been in recovery for three years now, and I still find it difficult when I see alcohol advertising everywhere."

"We once thought cigarette advertising was untouchable too. Now we look back and wonder how we ever allowed it."

Some participants also highlighted the tension between government revenue and business profits from alcohol sales and marketing, and the urgent need to prioritise public health and wellbeing over financial gain.



"The problem is that the government gets so much money from alcohol companies, so these alcohol companies are pushing the government to 'do this, do this.'"

"The economic costs of alcohol harm far outweigh any benefits from advertising revenue. We need to shift the conversation from jobs in advertising to healthcare costs and productivity losses."

"People need to understand why these changes matter. The health arguments need to be as visible as the industry pushback will be."

CONCLUSION

This report highlights a strong call for enhanced restrictions on alcohol marketing and sales to protect public health and wellbeing. Participants articulated serious concerns about the pervasive presence of alcohol marketing - across outdoor spaces, sports and events, and retail environments - and the role advertising practices play in normalising drinking and driving consumption.



There was clear support for a range of regulatory measures, from restricting where and when alcohol can be advertised, to structural changes in retail settings, and even exploring government-controlled sales models. These potential restrictions were viewed as essential steps to reframe how Scotland perceives and interacts with alcohol; moving away from a culture of impulse, profit, and normalisation, toward one that prioritises health, safety, and informed choice.

Many participants emphasised the importance of restrictions that are consistent and clear, ensuring that alcohol is not treated like any other everyday commodity but recognised for the potential risks it poses. They called on policymakers to balance the competing interests of government revenue and commercial profit with the urgent need to reduce alcohol-related harm.

The insights captured here offer a vital foundation for shaping effective and impactful restrictions. The Scottish Government has a responsibility to listen to the views of people with lived experience of alcohol harm and to respond to calls to implement meaningful marketing restrictions that benefit individuals and Scotland as a whole.

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We Are With You
Abbey Care
North West Recovery Community



APPENDIX 1: Outdoor Alcohol Advertising - International and UK Context with Policy Options

Table 1: Examples of Action Taken

Jurisdiction	Examples of Action Taken
International Approaches	
Estonia & Norway	Complete ban on outdoor alcohol advertising.
Finland	Outdoor advertising is banned except at some public events.
France	Outdoor alcohol ads require permission and must be linked to French culture, heritage, or tradition.
Ireland	Ban on outdoor alcohol advertising within 200 metres of schools, nurseries, childcare centres, and playgrounds.
UK Local Authority Action (Not all alcohol-specific)	
Transport for London (TfL)	Ban on high fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) product advertising across the TfL network.
Bristol City Council	Ban on advertising for alcohol, gambling, and unhealthy food across council-owned advertising spaces.
Other Local Councils	Councils including Norwich, Merton, Southwark, and Sheffield have adopted similar advertising restrictions.
Edinburgh City Council	Advertising ban on vapes and fossil fuels (including flights, airports, non-electric vehicles) on council-owned spaces.

Table 2: Policy Options for Scotland

Policy Option	Description
1. Full Ban	A complete ban on all forms of outdoor alcohol advertising, similar to Estonia and Norway.
2. Conditional Restrictions	Restrictions like those in France or Finland, where advertising is only allowed in specific contexts with government approval.
3. Child-Focused Buffer Zones	Prohibit outdoor alcohol advertising within [X] metres of schools, playgrounds, nurseries, and childcare centres.

APPENDIX 2: Retail Alcohol Availability and Marketing – International Context with Policy Options

Table 1: Examples of Action Taken

Jurisdiction	Examples of Action Taken
Ireland	Larger shops must cordon off alcohol sections with a barrier at least 1.2m high, with separate entrances/exits. Smaller shops must store alcohol in covered units; alcohol behind tills is regulated.
USA (selected states)	Spirits must be purchased in separate liquor stores; only beer and wine may be available in general supermarkets.
Canada	Most provinces operate a government-owned alcohol retail monopoly, with some (e.g. British Columbia and Saskatchewan) allowing both public and private outlets. In Alberta, alcohol is sold through privately-owned stores attached to supermarkets or petrol stations, but with separate entrances and licensing.
Sweden	Government monopoly (Systembolaget) controls alcohol sales above 3.5% ABV. Alcohol is sold only in dedicated stores with restricted hours. Minimum age of 20 to buy alcohol in stores.

Table 2: Policy Options for Scotland

Policy Option	Description
1. Structural Separation	Require alcohol to be sold in cordoned-off areas with barriers (as in Ireland). Designated entrances/exits separate alcohol from general products.
2. Shop-within-a-Shop	Alcohol is only available in a designated section with its own checkout. Advertising is restricted to this area.
3. Ban Self-Service Checkout Sales	Alcohol cannot be purchased through self-checkout machines, requiring staff interaction for sales.
4. Tobacco-Style Sales	Alcohol is stored behind the counter in covered units (like tobacco). Products are only visible upon request.
5. Separate Stores	Supermarkets and convenience stores are prohibited from selling alcohol. All alcohol is sold only in standalone stores.
6. Government Monopoly	Create a government-run alcohol retail system (e.g. Swedish model), with alcohol sold only in state-owned outlets.



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