

Reducing Alcohol Harm – A blueprint for national action

Briefing, September 2024



Introduction

Since 2009, Balance and partners in the North East have been striving to reduce the impact of alcohol harms in the region.

In July 2024, Balance launched a blueprint for national action, endorsed by regional leaders, including Directors of Public Health – County Durham, Northumberland, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Gateshead, South Tyneside, Sunderland.

The Case for Action

1 million people in the region drink alcohol at levels which increases their risk of health harms. Alcohol is a major driver of long-term conditions including cancer, cardiovascular disease and liver disease.

Alcohol harm costs the English economy £27.4 billion each year and the North East economy £1.5bn every year - equivalent to £562 for every person in the region.

The burden on the NHS is unsustainable – almost one million hospital admissions a year with one in three A&E attendances linked to alcohol.

Like tobacco, alcohol harms are rooted in inequalities and fuel them further. People living in the 20% most deprived local authorities are more than 5 times more likely to die due to alcohol than those in least deprived.

The Call for Action

Following a survey of North East residents carried out by Balance in April 2024, a call for action, blueprint for reducing alcohol harm has been produced by Balance, calling on the government to carry out the following actions –

1. Commit to the introduction of an evidence-based national alcohol strategy for England, free from alcohol industry influence.
2. Take steps to raise awareness of alcohol harms, via –

The delivery of public education campaigns such as Balance's 'Alcohol is Toxic' campaign.

The introduction of mandatory health warning and nutritional / unit information on alcohol labels.

3. Introduce pricing policies which improve public health and protect the public purse, including:

A minimum unit price (MUP) for alcohol in England

A fairer alcohol duty system which at least keeps pace with inflation

4. Introduce restrictions on alcohol marketing to protect children and vulnerable people, including:

The inclusion of alcohol in the definition of 'unhealthy products'

Appointment of an independent body with no links to the alcohol or advertising industry.

5. Introduce a 'public health objective' in England and Wales and consideration of a wider overhaul of the Licencing Act, including:

Introducing 'public health' as a licensing objective in England and Wales

Consideration of a wider overhaul of the Licencing Act 2003, including a review of the 'presumption to grant'.

6. Invest in prevention and early intervention and improving access to specialist support for at-risk drinkers, including improved coordination between alcohol treatment and other services such as mental health, domestic abuse and housing support.
7. Ensure that the alcohol industry is prohibited from involvement in the development of public policy.

County Durham Approach

Locally we endorse this blueprint and are working to reduce alcohol harms through the County Durham and Darlington Combatting Drug and Alcohol Strategic Partnership and operational group.

County Durham's Health and Wellbeing Board has identified reducing alcohol harm as a priority and has supported the implementation of Minimum Unit Pricing locally.

The main way to influence pricing at a local level is to include a recommendation within Statement of Licensing Policy. This could stipulate that premises within certain geographical areas should not sell alcohol below a stated MUP. However, within current national legislation, this would not be legally binding.

This approach has been effective when implemented in other local authority areas (e.g. Grey Street in Newcastle), but it is dependent on licensed premises abiding by the recommendation. As pubs, clubs bars and restaurants (On-trade) already charge over and above the MUP price of 0.50p (set in 2018), any changes will be of limited practical impact within this setting, but would begin to set a precedent.

County Durham's Licensing Policy does not currently include any recommendation stipulating a MUP for alcohol for licensed premises, but this can be reviewed within the next 5-year period.

For Off-sales, which includes off-licenses and major supermarkets, a national drive for MUP would be needed to effect changes in MUP within the retail sector to reduce cut-price offers and the sale of high-strength lagers and ciders.

However, a level of influence can be exerted within Licensing Reviews for those premises undermining licensing objectives. A recommendation for an increase in MUP for the Off-sale of alcohol on the grounds of reducing crime and disorder in an area can be implemented as part of the notification from a Public Health perspective and will be taken forward.