



## **Taking an alcohol free childhood approach to licensing: A toolkit Briefing for partners May 2022**

Balance is the alcohol programme based in the North East of England, the first of its kind in the UK. Balance aims to encourage people to reduce how much alcohol they drink so they can live healthier lives in safer communities. Balance is commissioned by seven local authorities in the region – Northumberland, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Gateshead, South Tyneside, Sunderland and Durham. This briefing outlines the evidence base for local authorities – and public health teams in particular – to support an Alcohol Free Childhood approach to licensing.

### **Alcohol causes preventable problems in the North East**

Alcohol use is harmful and is a significant cause of health inequalities. In the short term, the risks of alcohol use include accidents and injuries, violent behaviour, risk-taking behaviour and alcohol poisoning. In the long term, alcohol use increases the risk of serious health conditions including heart disease, stroke, liver disease and a number of cancers including liver, bowel and breast cancers.

The levels at which alcohol is being consumed in the North East is having an adverse impact on society which has worsened during the Covid pandemic:

- In the North East in 2022, nearly two thirds of men and a third of women report drinking at increasing and higher risk levels.
- Alcohol is the third most common cause of preventable death. The North East has the highest rate of alcohol related hospital admissions in England and alcohol specific deaths hit record levels during the 2020 pandemic with the North East suffering from the worst rates.
- Data suggests 4.5 million additional adults became high-risk drinkers during the first lockdown period in 2020
- The estimated number of lives lost every year due to alcohol-related conditions in the North East is nearly 1,500<sup>1</sup>.
- Alcohol misuse costs the North East region over £1 billion a year. Local businesses lose over one million productive days a year due to alcohol<sup>2</sup>.

### **Widespread availability of alcohol presents real problems for society – especially children**

The consumption of alcohol by children can be particularly hazardous to health. Children who drink increase their risk of involvement in a wide range of health and social problems. Alcohol can affect the entire body and, given that children's organs are still developing, they can be particularly vulnerable. Children are smaller, which means alcohol's effects work more quickly on them in the short-term. Alcohol poisoning can result in young people being admitted to hospital or worse. Other

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<sup>1</sup> Local Alcohol Profiles for England 2020

<sup>2</sup> Balance Alcohol Cost Profiles 2017

impacts include mental health problems, an increased likelihood to smoke and take illegal drugs, have accidents and be involved in risk taking behaviours.

Sadly, too many children in the North East are accessing alcohol. 16,500 children in the region drink on a regular basis (at least once a week)<sup>3</sup>. Although the proportion of boys who drank alcohol in the last week in the region fell from 12% in 2016 to 9% in 2018, for girls, the proportion increased, from 12% in 2016 to 14% in 2018.

One of the main problems with alcohol is its widespread availability. At present, alcohol is too available in too many places at too many times of the day and night. There are over 9,000 premises licensed to sell alcohol in the North East, giving the region one of the highest outlet densities in the country<sup>4</sup>. Alcohol is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days of the year. It is also often sold in inappropriate and untraditional locations such as petrol stations and soft play areas and is highly accessible: services such as 'Dial-a-Drink' deliver alcohol straight to households at any time of the day or night.

The easier alcohol is to get hold of, the more people drink: enough alcohol is sold for every drinker in the North East to consume 22 units per week, well above the low risk guideline of 14 units<sup>5</sup>. More and more people are choosing to consume alcohol at home, rather than in a more traditional setting like the pub and, in 2014, for the first time on record, beer sales in the off-trade exceeded those in the on-trade, 50.5% vs 49.5%<sup>6</sup>.

Home purchasing increased significantly during the Covid 19 pandemic, particularly amongst the heaviest drinkers. During the lockdown period between March and July 2020, sales data from 80,000 households found that the top fifth of householders that would consistently purchase the most alcohol bought around 17 times more from shops and supermarkets than the bottom fifth.

Worryingly, off-licenses are the predominant direct and indirect source of alcohol for under-18s, with growing international evidence linking off-licence density with a range of negative alcohol-related consequences. At the same time, alcohol has become much more affordable, 74% more so since 1987<sup>7</sup>. In particular, the affordability of wine and spirits bought in the off-trade has risen by 163% across the same time frame<sup>8</sup>. These shifts have contributed to a striking increase in alcohol-related harms across the North East, which suffers from some of the highest rates of alcohol-related hospital admissions, mortality and morbidity.

### **An Alcohol Free Childhood vision has been adopted in the North East**

The North East of England has adopted a vision of working towards an alcohol free childhood for every child growing up in the region to help de-normalise alcohol in families and communities. This is a vision that every child can grow up:

- free from the impact of other peoples' drinking

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<sup>3</sup> Office of National Statistics (2018): Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use Amongst Young People in England (2018)

<sup>4</sup> Home Office (2018): Alcohol and late night refreshment licensing, England and Wales

<sup>5</sup> MESAS data 2015 (2015)

<sup>6</sup> British Beer and Pub Association Statistical Handbook BBPA London, 2011

<sup>7</sup> <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/statistics-on-alcohol/2020/part-7>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ias.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Letter-to-Chancellor-Rishi-Sunak-Feb-2021.pdf>

- free from commercial, social and environmental pressure to drink
- free from health and social harms caused by drinking alcohol themselves
- supported and encouraged to make healthy positive lifestyle choices as they enter adulthood.

**There is broad public support among North East adults for the government to do more to reduce alcohol-related harm, particularly for children.**

- 95% feel that there are enough or too many places selling alcohol
- 62% agree with the Chief Medical Officer guideline that states ‘An alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option’
- 51% think the government should be doing more to tackle alcohol-related issues, compared to just 5% who believe the government is doing too much.<sup>9</sup>

**There is evidence that local licensing frameworks can positively impact on the problems of availability**

Evidence suggests that controlling availability is one of the most effective mechanisms for reducing alcohol-related harm and licensing can play a key part. For instance, experience from Australia has shown that implementing licensing restrictions such as earlier closing times alongside a package of preventative measures can have a hugely positive impact at a local level, from a point of view of reducing crime, creating a more vibrant night-time economy and building public support for restrictions on the availability of alcohol.

Furthermore, a study published in 2020<sup>10</sup> demonstrated for the first time the positive effects that can be achieved through local level licensing interventions. The UK study looked at the closure of a large town centre pub and club with a nightclub in the basement following a licensing committee review; the closure of a co-located restaurant and nightclub following review, and the introduction of new local licensing guidance and increased inspections in a city centre.

The closure of the nightclub had resulted in a temporary, 4-month reduction in anti-social behaviour of about 60 incidents averted, but a return to 'normal' afterwards. Closure of the restaurant and nightclub did not result in any measurable changes in outcomes in the 12 months after closure. The new licensing guidance led to small reductions in drunk and disorderly behaviour (9 of a predicted 21 events averted), and the unplanned end of the guidance coincided with an increase in domestic violence of 2 incidents per month (an 11% increase).

The study concluded that the impact of local alcohol policy, even at the level of individual premises, can be evaluated and, importantly, that local government actions such as closure or restriction of venues and licensing can have a positive impact on health and crime in the surrounding area. This approach can potentially bridge the gap between the predominantly data-oriented approach by public health teams and the need for contextualised evidence for presentation to councillors.

**The North East is committed to promoting an alcohol free childhood**

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<sup>9</sup> Balance Public Perceptions Survey 2020

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ias.org.uk/Blog/Evaluating-the-effect-of-individual-alcohol-licensing-decisions-on-local-health-and-crime.aspx>

Many children in the North East are choosing not to drink alcohol. However, a significant proportion continue to consume alcohol weekly, sometimes to excess, leaving them exposed to short and long term risks. Recent survey data suggests that around 1 in 3 North East children who drink (36%) are drinking more since the pandemic and that spirits such as vodka are the main choice of alcohol for around 1 in 4 (26%) North East children aged under 18 who drink. For children who drink, parents or older family members are the main source of alcohol for nearly 4 in 10.

Evidence suggests that later adolescence (15-19 year olds) is one of three periods of dynamic brain changes that may be particularly sensitive to the neurotoxic – or brain/nervous system-damaging – effects of alcohol<sup>11</sup>.

Yet children are growing up in an environment where alcohol is ever-present and always available. During the Covid pandemic, it is likely that the visibility of alcohol in the home has increased for young people. They are also exposed to alcohol marketing which encourages them to drink at a young age and, once drinking, to consume more. At the same time, the vast majority of parents are unaware of the Chief Medical Officer's Guidance about drinking in childhood, which recommends that no alcohol is consumed before the age of 15 and that an alcohol free childhood is the healthiest and best option. What's more, too many parents believe the myth that it is best to provide alcohol to under 18s at home in order to teach them to drink 'responsibly'.

Many of our children are making healthy choices in spite of the alcogenic environment in which they live. Policies are needed to ensure that young people delay drinking as long as possible which will allow them to have the best start in life through having an alcohol free childhood.

### **An alcohol free childhood approach can be taken in local licensing processes**

Achieving an alcohol free childhood requires a partnership approach between all those with an interest in protecting children from alcohol-related harm. This includes a range of local authority services including public health, licensing, children's services, education departments as well as the NHS, schools, charities and others. All will have different roles to play in the issue.

In terms of licensing specifically, there are tangible ways in which an alcohol free childhood can be supported. 'The protection of children from harm' is one of the four licensing objectives within the Licensing Act 2003 and there are many ways in which local authorities can use local licensing processes as a means of securing an alcohol free childhood for young people in their populations. This briefing is part of a toolkit to support an alcohol free childhood approach to local licensing policies. Other resources include:

- Five recommendations for taking an Alcohol Free Childhood approach to licensing
- A PowerPoint briefing for elected members and others engaged in local licensing decisions

Please contact [info@fresh-balance.co.uk](mailto:info@fresh-balance.co.uk) for more information.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m4691>