

ALCOHOL AND COVID-19:

A PERFECT STORM

BALANCE 2021



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Public Health England data showed that the number of high risk drinkers increased from 4.8 million in February 2020 to 8.4 million in September 2020
- 2020 was the worst year on record for alcohol specific deaths – with the highest rates in the North East
- The pandemic has also been associated with increased parental drinking, domestic violence and tension within the family home
- Alcohol harms disproportionately affect the most deprived communities, which have also been worst hit by COVID
- The alcohol industry has fuelled the crisis with aggressive marketing strategies, encouraging people to drink during the pandemic
- We know the solutions - regulation around the price, promotion and availability of alcohol reduces consumption and harm – this should be at the heart of an evidence-based and well-resourced national alcohol strategy
- The majority of the North East public believes that the Government should do more to tackle alcohol harms



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THE BIG PICTURE

Alcohol is playing an increasingly central role in UK society. That was clear before Covid-19 reached our shores. But, as with everything else, the pandemic has shone a light on the impact that relationship has on individuals, communities and wider society.

From the outset, alcohol played a prominent role in media headlines. It began with stories about panic buying of alcohol. It continued with concerns about the future of our pubs and the wider hospitality industry. The fear is that it will escalate with increasing levels of alcohol harm, worsening health inequalities and further pressure being placed on our public services.

Government initially responded to concerns about the damage to the alcohol market by making off licenses 'essential retailers', just the same as pharmacies. They provided support for the industry. Most recently that has come in the form of relaxations to licensing regulations and yet another freeze on alcohol duty in the March budget.



As Covid took hold, the British public rushed to panic buy 'essentials', including toilet roll, hand sanitiser.... and alcohol

Meanwhile, the alcohol industry were quick to ensure that a good crisis didn't go to waste. As usual, they positioned themselves as part of the solution, being quick to emphasize their corporate and social responsibility activity. At the same time, their marketing teams worked overtime suggesting to people how they could occupy themselves during lockdown – and the solutions inevitably involved consuming alcohol.

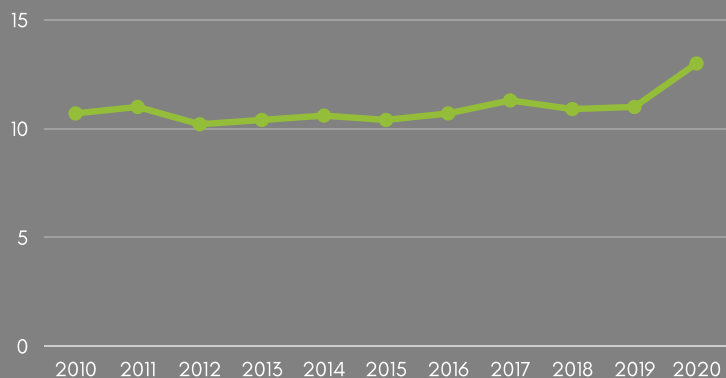


The hospitality industry needed help, but there is a real danger that some of the measures taken to support it will have repercussions elsewhere – mostly on the most vulnerable in our communities.

It has taken some months to understand just what is happening with overall alcohol sales and consumption during the pandemic, but that picture is becoming clearer. It seems likely that overall alcohol sales have been relatively stable or have reduced slightly, driven by successive lockdowns, which have clearly affected the on trade. However, the data under the headline figures is more worrying.

A report published by the Royal College of Psychiatrists in September 2020 used Public Health England data to show that numbers of high risk drinkers increased from 4.8 million in February to 8.4 million. University College London's Alcohol Toolkit Study monthly surveys showed a similar picture. And this increase in risky drinking comes at a time when already under-funded treatment services were presented with a unique set of challenges.

Most worryingly of all, new figures from the Office of National Statistics released in May 2021 on alcohol specific deaths, showed that 2020 was the worst year on record, with the rates the highest in the North East, with a particularly sharp increase in Q2. Overall, there were 7,423 deaths linked to drinking last year, which was a fifth more than in 2019 and the highest number since records began in 2001.



Age-standardised alcohol-specific death rates per 100,000 people, by sex; England and Wales, deaths registered between 2010 and 2020

There have been widespread reports of an increase in domestic violence and it is likely that children have been more exposed to home drinking during lockdown. For example, the NSPCC reported that concerns about drug and alcohol use have soared since the start of the pandemic, with latest figures showing that the monthly average number of contacts to the NSPCC helpline from people across the UK worried about parental substance misuse had increased by 66% higher since April 2020.



The average number of contacts to the NSPCC about parental substance misuse increased by 66% since the start of Covid

In the North East and Cumbria, the average monthly number of child welfare referrals about parental alcohol or substance misuse made by the NSPCC helpline rose by 120% - from an average of 31 per month between January and March 2020, to 69 per month between April 2020 and January 2021. In the last 10 months, there were a total of 687 referrals in the North East and Cumbria alone.

Finally, a separate survey by Balance released in November 2020 found that one in five drinkers (18%) had experienced more arguments and tension in their family home during the pandemic because of alcohol – highlighting the potentially negative impact upon thousands of children in the region.



1 in 5 drinkers experienced more tension in the home during the pandemic due to alcohol

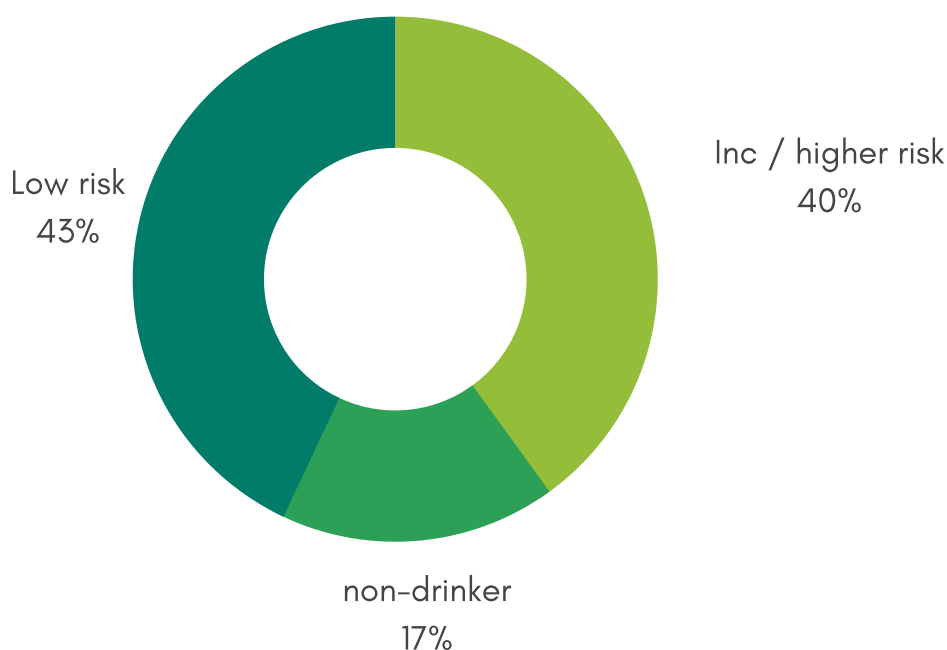
What happens next will be critical, not least for areas like the North East of England which has high levels of deprivation and the highest rates of alcohol deaths and hospital admissions in England.

CONSUMPTION IN THE NORTH EAST

For 12 years Balance has been carrying out an annual public opinion survey in the North East of England to help understand the region's relationship with alcohol – but never in circumstances such as these. Yet on the surface, not much has changed.



In 2020 four in 10 adults in the region were drinking above the low risk drinking guidelines of 14 units a week. That is consistent with consumption rates in previous surveys. Since Balance first launched its annual survey in 2009, risky consumption has ranged between 36% and 45% when Audit C has been used, with no overall trend being apparent. That consistency comes despite the change in the low risk drinking guidelines in 2016 and a change from street to online surveys.



Drinker type across the North East



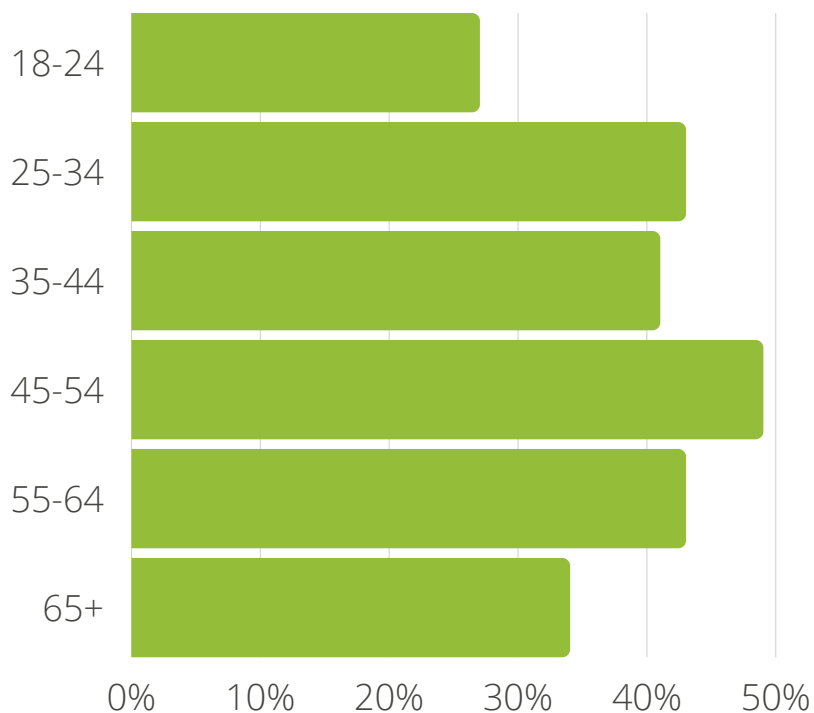
However, the devil is in the detail. In 2020, half of men were drinking at risky levels, that's six out of every 10 male drinkers. One in four drinkers were bingeing weekly, with the figure for men rising to one in three.

In contrast, women are much more likely to be non-drinkers (21%); less likely to drink at risky levels (28%); and only 15% are bingeing on a weekly basis. Still worryingly high, but lower than men.



In 2020, 6 in 10 North East men were drinking at risky levels

Age also makes a difference. Young adults (18-24) are as likely to be non-drinkers as risky drinkers (27%), confirming a pattern we have seen in recent years. Risky drinking peaks amongst 45-54-year-olds, almost one in two of whom are consuming at levels which increases their risk of a range of medical conditions. Even in retirement (65 plus) one in three adults are consuming above the low risk drinking guidelines.



Increasing / higher risk drinkers by age

THE COVID EFFECT

For most people, the pandemic has had little impact on their drinking behaviour, with six in 10 registering no change. Of those making changes, they are marginally more likely to have increased how often and how much they drink and are slightly less likely to be binge drinking.

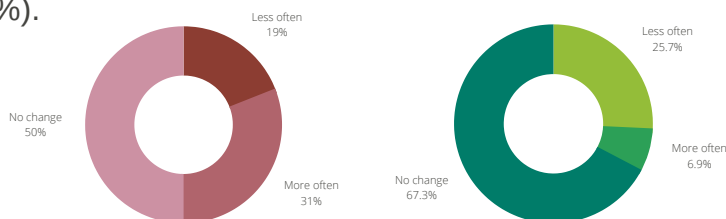
The overall figures are hiding a more worrying pattern which shows that consumption levels in the North East have changed in certain groups during the pandemic.

The good news is that low risk drinkers are more likely to have reduced than increased the volume and frequency of their drinking. They are also almost four times more likely to have reduced than increased how often they binge drink. Some have even stopped altogether. When it comes to alcohol, it seems the 'worried well' are looking after their health during the pandemic.



Many low risk drinkers have reduced their drinking over Covid, or stopped altogether

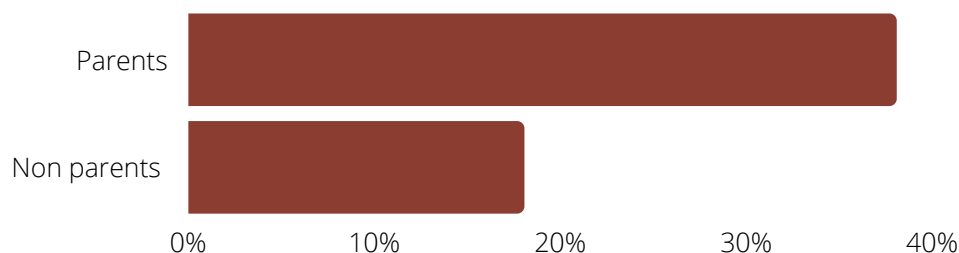
The picture amongst people drinking at increasing and high risk levels is different and seems to be consistent with national surveys. They are three times more likely to have increased than decreased how often they drink, with 38% increasing and only 12% reducing their drinking occasions. Similarly, over a third (34%) have increased how many units they consume during a session while only 13% have cut down. How often they binge is also more likely to have increased than reduced (31% vs 19%).



Change in bingeing since lockdown; Increasing higher risk drinkers (Red) Vs low risk drinkers (Green)



With school closures during the pandemic, this has been a difficult time to be a parent. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that we are seeing signs of increased alcohol consumption amongst those with children under the age of 18.



Parents are twice as likely as non-parents to be drinking more since the pandemic

Compared with non-parents, those with children under the age of 18 are more likely to have increased their frequency of drinking; the number of units consumed when drinking; and are bingeing more often. They are also more likely to be concerned about their drinking and more likely to be trying to do something about it. Let's hope they succeed, not just for their own health and welfare but to protect their children who are likely to be exposed to more drinking in the home.

With treatment services disrupted and significantly under-resourced and hospital services facing a huge backlog of cases, these are incredibly worrying trends. Perhaps most concerning is the impact that will be felt in the most deprived groups which have suffered worst during the pandemic. While managerial and professional groups tend to consume the most alcohol, it is more deprived communities which suffer the greatest harm from alcohol. These figures suggest that could get worse, with health inequalities widening and further exacerbated by the COVID pandemic.

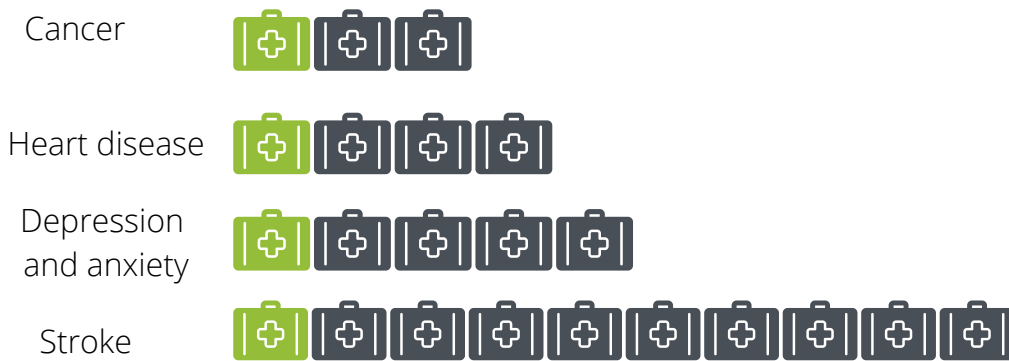
"The last year has been very challenging for those of us dealing with alcohol-related problems in what nationally was a record year for deaths from alcohol. Although fewer people came into A&E with injuries from being out and binge drinking, it is as much the hidden harms from alcohol and the longer-term consequences of increased drinking at home which concern me - the cancers attributable to alcohol, the high blood pressure and strokes that can result - will all land in the future. We have also had to navigate the difficulty of keeping in touch with dependent drinkers with face to face visits from alcohol care services drastically reduced and a lot of people trying to manage their alcohol intake on their own. One of the most upsetting things is the number of people presenting with advanced liver disease who have not previously been known to our services - and many of them are frighteningly young. Our alcohol care team is expanding and as restrictions lift we will be in a much better position to provide more integrated care. Alcohol hits us in A&E possibly harder than any other area of the hospital so my real hope is that we do not see a return of the pressures caused by binge-drinking. It is vital then that we see national action to tackle this."

(A&E Consultant based in the North East of England)

ARE WE CONCERNED?

Drinking levels are not the only cause of concern revealed by the survey results. Not for the first time, they show that the impact alcohol can have on individual health and wider society is poorly understood by the general public.

While most people mention, when asked, that alcohol is linked to liver disease, only 1 in 3 are aware of the link to cancer; 1 in 4 that it increases the risk of heart disease (27%); 1 in 5 (19%) that it is associated with depression and anxiety; and fewer than 1 in 10 (7%) that it is linked to stroke.



Awareness of alcohol-related harms in 2020

People are also unlikely to know the low risk drinking guidelines. The Balance survey indicates only around one in eight adults can correctly identify 14 units as the weekly limit set by the UK Chief Medical Officer before drinking is classed as being risky. This is perhaps not surprising when the guidelines have not been actively promoted by the UK Government and when most alcohol products do not display the guidelines on their labels.

Perhaps the low levels of awareness of health harms coupled with little understanding of the low risk drinking guidelines accounts for the fact that very few drinkers are concerned about how much they drink. Only one in 10 drinkers are very or fairly concerned about how much they consume. This has halved since 2019, perhaps because their worries are very much focused on the virus.



Even when you look at those consuming over 14 units a week, only 15% are showing any level of concern about their drinking.

Much of the problem comes from the fact that drinking – sometimes at fairly heavy levels – has been normalised. But part of the problem may be that we are generally very vague when we talk about levels of drinking which may cause harm. And we are not very self-aware when it comes to our own drinking.

We talk about 'light' or 'moderate' drinkers. Unfortunately these terms are almost meaningless. Almost all drinkers (94%) believe they drink at 'light' or 'moderate' levels. Almost 90% of risky drinkers (89%) say the same. It seems you can still be a 'light' or 'moderate' drinker and be increasing your risk of heart disease, stroke and seven different types of cancer.



Light **54%**
Moderate **40%**
Heavy **4%**

Drinker self-categorisation

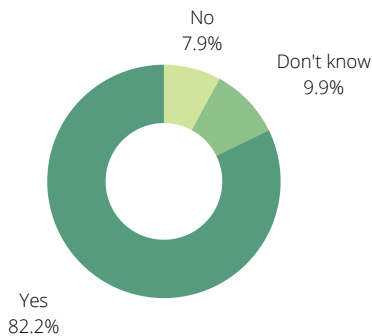
The language used by the industry is also highly problematic. They commonly urge people to 'drink responsibly', but they never say what it means. The vast majority of drinkers believe they are 'responsible' – nine in 10 according to our survey. Even amongst increasing and higher risk drinkers, 83% would describe themselves as 'responsible'. A third who recognise they drink at 'heavy' levels say they 'drink responsibly.'

This confusion suits the alcohol industry very well. After all, if everyone drank within the low risk guidelines alcohol companies in England would lose £13 billion a year in revenue.

WE HAVE THE ANSWERS

Successive Governments have largely relied on urging individual drinkers to be 'responsible' in order to tackle the problems caused by alcohol. It is clearly not working.

We are long past the time when asking individuals to 'drink responsibly' will solve our problems. In truth that time never existed. The North East and the wider country had serious problems with alcohol before the pandemic. Judging by the figures we are seeing now – and the lack of understanding about the harm alcohol causes – that is about to get worse.



Even amongst higher risk drinkers, 83% would say they drink 'responsibly'

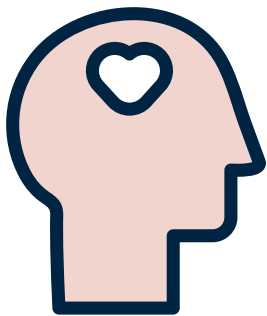
For many years we have known what needs to be done. The Alcohol Health Alliance set out a clear, evidence-based programme in its report 'Health First' back in 2013. In essence, the UK Government needs to intervene to make alcohol less affordable, less available and it needs to restrict alcohol marketing. More money should be found to invest in specialist alcohol treatment services. And Government should inform the public of the low risk drinking guidelines and the dangers of drinking above it, a process which should include forcing the alcohol industry to put health warnings and low risk drinking guidelines on their product labels.



51% agree that more should be done to tackle alcohol harm, such as reducing affordability, including health warnings on alcohol labels and investing in specialist treatment services



While the North East drinkers don't always recognise issues with their own drinking, they do recognise that society has a problem – and they broadly support many of the solutions outlined in 'Health First'. Drinking is associated with many of the ills in society, including anti-social behaviour (79%); domestic abuse (72%); violent crime (68%); sexual assault (60%); and child abuse (57%). One in two even link it to the spread of COVID while 68% associate it with our inability to adhere to social distancing rules.



56% associate alcohol with mental ill health



54% associate alcohol with physical ill health

Given these high numbers it is not surprising only 5% of survey respondents thought the Government was doing too much to tackle alcohol harm, while 51% thought it needed to do more. And the public would support a range of evidence-based policy interventions.

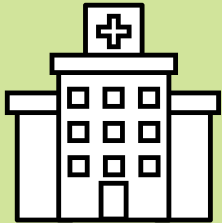
Perhaps surprisingly, as many people would like to see alcohol duty increased as want to see it cut. In fact, increases would be supported by 48% of the public if the revenue collected was invested in those services such as the NHS and police that have to deal with alcohol harm.

Currently alcohol harm costs society a minimum of £27bn a year yet alcohol duty brings in less than half of that. Sixty-four per cent of people in the North East believe it should cover the total cost of alcohol harm.



64% of the North East think alcohol duty should cover the cost of the harm it creates

A report recently published by Sheffield University shows that the North has the most to gain from the introduction of a minimum unit price in England in terms of deaths prevented and hospital admissions avoided. It would only affect the heaviest drinkers and would help to tackle health inequalities. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that over half of the North East public (52%) support its introduction while only 18% oppose it.

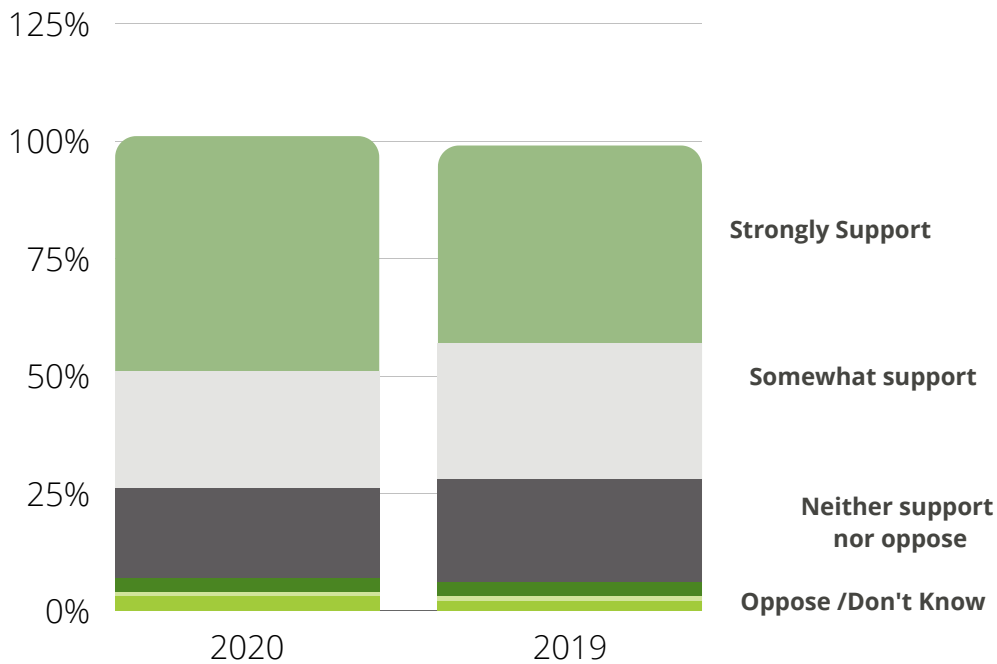


The introduction of a 50p MUP would prevent 1,970 deaths in the North East over the next 20 years...



...And would reduce alcohol-attributable hospital admissions by 3,255

There is also strong public support for restrictions on alcohol advertising to protect children (75%) and for more information on alcohol product labels, including drink drive warnings (82%); warnings that alcohol can damage your health (76%); advice not to drink during pregnancy or when trying to conceive (78%); and information on how to stay within the low risk drinking guidelines (74%).



Support for measures to limit children's exposure to alcohol advertising

The notion that people wouldn't support further regulation of the alcohol market is a myth – and it is damaging thousands of people's lives.

CONCLUSION

For many years England has had a problem with alcohol - a problem which is felt most acutely in the North East, especially amongst our most deprived communities.

Successive Governments have failed to prioritise tackling alcohol harm. They have relied on industry partnerships to tackle the problem. Those efforts have failed. It's not surprising when you consider that the alcohol industry relies to a large extent on risky drinking to deliver a substantial proportion of its revenue.

Successive Balance surveys have shown that large numbers of North East drinkers are consuming at levels which increase their risk of contracting a range of health conditions. Yet the Government has failed to provide the information they require to drink at low risk levels. And they have failed to adequately communicate the consequences of not doing so.

The alcohol industry has also made the situation worse. For over 20 years they have been promising to improve information on their labels, by including the low risk drinking guidelines, for example. They have largely failed. Instead, they call on people to 'drink responsibly', a phrase which is deliberately ambiguous and which puts the emphasis upon individuals to control their drinking, rather than acknowledging that alcohol is 'no ordinary commodity'.



The Balance survey, in addition to various other sources of evidence, such as ONS deaths data, indicate that rates of alcohol harm have already increased because of changes in drinking habits during the pandemic. As a consequence, the pressure is being felt in under-resourced treatment services and under-pressure NHS hospitals. And it will increase health inequalities, making the region even more vulnerable to pandemics such as COVID-19.



Reducing alcohol harm is a test of the Government's 'levelling up' plans

The time for Government action is now. The blueprint and evidence-base are there – particularly in respect to regulation around the price, promotion and availability of alcohol. Reducing alcohol harm requires resources and, most of all, political will. Addressing alcohol harm is a test of the Government's 'levelling up' plans. It is a test that the North East can't afford to fail.

