



About SHAAP

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) is a partnership of the Medical Royal Colleges in Scotland and the Faculty of Public Health and is based at the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (RCPE). SHAAP provides the authoritative medical and clinical voice on the need to reduce the impact of alcohol-related harm on the health and wellbeing of people in Scotland and the evidence-based approaches to achieve this.

This briefing has been prepared for MSPs in advance of the debates 'COVID-19: Next Steps for the NHS' and 'COVID-19: Next Steps for the Economy' in the Scottish Parliament on Tuesday 2nd June 2020.

Introduction: COVID-19 and alcohol

Scotland is internationally recognised as a leader in advancing evidence-based alcohol policies that protect people's health and reduce harms from alcohol. However, COVID-19 has presented unprecedented challenges to public health in Scotland, with important relevance to alcohol issues. It is vital that we do not lose sight of long-term public health measures that will allow Scotland to continue reducing harm from alcohol, and meet its goals as laid out in the 2018 *Alcohol Framework*¹.

A recent article in the *British Medical Journal* noted that alcohol sales rose dramatically in the run-up to the lockdown – up 67% compared to a rise of 43% for overall supermarket sales – in the week to 21 March². Research from Alcohol Change UK, and Alcohol Focus Scotland (AFS) in Scotland has also shown that, while roughly 33% of people are drinking less in lockdown, 21% are drinking more than they would usually, and 15% are drinking more per session³. A recent report from drug charity Crew noted that alcohol was the drug most mentioned by people they surveyed, in terms of an increase in use during the lockdown⁴.

¹ Scottish Government. (2018) *Alcohol Framework 2018: Preventing Harm*:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/alcohol-framework-2018-preventing-harm-next-steps-changing-relationship-alcohol/>

² Ilora Finlay and Ian Gilmore (2020) "Covid-19 and alcohol – a dangerous cocktail" *BMJ*; 369

<https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1987>

³ Alcohol Change UK (2020) *Drinking during lockdown: headline findings*

<https://alcoholchange.org.uk/blog/2020/covid19-drinking-during-lockdown-headline-findings>

⁴ Crew 2000 (Scotland) (2020) *COVID-19 Drug Market Survey Summary: Month 1 – April 2020*

<https://www.crew.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Crew-COVID-19-Drugs-Market-Survey-Month-1-Summary-April-2020.pdf>

The impact of COVID-19 on alcohol treatment services and support for recovery

COVID-19 has presented significant challenges for people seeking treatment and support in relation to alcohol. The emergency has shone a light on the patchy and often disjointed nature of alcohol treatment service provision prior to lockdown. As Scotland looks towards a 'new normal', it is vital that alcohol treatment services and support for recovery are improved. SHAAP has produced guidance for services⁵, as well as for heavy drinkers⁶ in the context of COVID-19. Both of these documents have been downloaded thousands of times from our website since they were published. They have clearly been needed and found useful by service providers and individuals.

The work that the Scottish Government alcohol and substance misuse teams and Public Health Scotland (PHS) have done to bring together relevant stakeholders in the health and voluntary sectors to inform public health responses and messaging around alcohol and drugs during the lockdown should be acknowledged. National contingency planning meetings have been especially useful in this regard, and are an exemplar of what joined-up working across the sector can look like. These meetings and the approach they embody need to continue as part of the 'new normal' going forward.

We strongly welcomed the guidance from Joe Fitzpatrick MSP, Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing, to make clear to health boards and social care partnerships in a letter sent on 16th April that alcohol and drug services should remain open during the pandemic. However, it was clear that management decisions had been made before this time which included transferring staff out of alcohol services and closing services down, so as to be able to deal with the challenges presented by COVID-19. For example, the Lothians and Edinburgh Abstinence Programme (LEAP), a life-saving residential service, was closed with no consultation and patients had to complete treatment early. Several LEAP service users now waiting for treatment have had to be admitted to hospital during the closure. LEAP remains closed with no date for reopening in sight. The Ritson Unit at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, which offers assessment, detoxification and relapse prevention interventions was also closed at short notice. It has now reopened, though at reduced capacity.

Recovery groups have played an important role in supporting people in and entering recovery during this challenging time. Both the 12-step movement (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous) and the visible recovery movement (e.g. Scottish Recovery Consortium) have put invaluable efforts and resources into ensuring that recovery programmes and communities can remain virtually available to as many people as possible. Not only have these actions helped guard against a loss of progress in supporting recovery in Scotland, they come at the same time as the publication of a new Cochrane Review that found high certainty evidence that Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programmes are a cost-effective way to help people to recover from alcohol problems⁷. It is important that the contribution of the recovery community and those with lived experience to Scotland's ability to effectively support people seeking help for alcohol problems is acknowledged and built upon post-lockdown.

⁵ Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) (2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19) and People with Alcohol-related Problems: Recommendations for Services*: <https://www.shaap.org.uk/downloads/238-new-guidance-for-covid-19-and-people-with-alcohol-related-problems/viewdocument/238.html>

⁶ Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) (2020) *Advice for heavy drinkers who are thinking about cutting back or stopping drinking alcohol*: <https://www.shaap.org.uk/downloads/240-covid-advice-for-heavy-drinkers/viewdocument/240.html>

⁷ Kelly JF, Humphreys K, Ferri M. "Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs for alcohol use disorder" Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2020, Issue 3 <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/cdsr/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD012880.pub2/full>

Members of the Scottish Parliament may also be aware that SHAAP has been a sponsor of Scottish Women's Football (SWF) National Performance League and NPL Cup since March 2019⁸. SHAAP continues to celebrate SWF's principled position not to accept sponsorship from the alcohol or gambling industries, but we are acutely aware of their precarious financial position. SWF's position is built on strong evidence that alcohol sports sponsorship increases awareness among children and young people of alcohol brands, and acts as marketing for the industry⁹. Participation in sport can be an important preventative activity for young people when it comes to their relationship with alcohol, and SWF should be commended for promoting football as an avenue for promoting health and wellbeing for young women in Scotland. Support for similar initiatives should be made available as Scotland enters a 'new normal' post-lockdown, especially given the uncertainty that many sports teams now face as a result of COVID-19.

Conclusion and recommendations

SHAAP is making the following four recommendations to ensure that Scotland does not lose sight of its commitment to continue reducing harm from alcohol, despite the challenges of COVID-19:

- The Scottish Government must meet its commitments as laid out in the 2018 *Alcohol Framework*, and make alcohol a public health priority going forward. Actions such as the Scottish Government consultation on alcohol marketing – planned for this year – should continue to go ahead.
- Treatment services and support for recovery must be improved in the wake of COVID-19. In order to do this, we need better collaboration, co-ordination and integration between NHS Scotland, local ADPs and those with lived experience in the recovery community.
- The alcohol industry should be strongly encouraged to contribute to reducing alcohol harms by sharing their knowledge of sales volumes and patterns, both during the lockdown and beyond.
- Innovative activities and partnerships such as that between SHAAP and Scottish Women's Football contribute to a culture change around alcohol in Scotland, as well as to preventing and reducing alcohol harms. The Scottish Government should find ways to support these kinds of activities going forward, to prevent big business from filling the gap and manipulating young people's awareness and view of alcohol brands.

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⁸ <https://scotwomensfootball.com/swf-shaap-npl/>

⁹ SHAAP and Alcohol Focus Scotland (AFS) (2020) *Time to blow the whistle on alcohol sports sponsorship: Recommendations for action* <https://www.shaap.org.uk/downloads/231-time-to-blow-the-whistle-on-alcohol-sports-sponsorship/viewdocument/231.html>