

Scottish Government Budget 2024

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) is a partnership of the Medical Royal Colleges and the Faculty of Public Health in Scotland and is based at the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (RCPE).

Using the best available evidence, SHAAP provides the authoritative clinical voice on how policy makers and clinicians can reduce alcohol-related harms in Scotland.

Key points

- 1,277 people died as a direct result of alcohol in 2023, an increase of one death since 2022 and the highest number since 2008.
- The number of people accessing structured alcohol treatment has been in sustained decline and is now 40% less than in 2013/14.
- Alcohol funding ring fencing to ADPs should be re-established and funding should be restored to real terms equivalent of 2014/2015.
- To respond effectively to the impact of alcohol harm in the NHS, alcohol care teams should be established in all acute hospital settings and linked to high quality community alcohol services.
- The Scottish Government should develop alcohol treatment targets and standards which restores the availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of structured, tailored alcohol treatment.

Scotland's alcohol crisis

Alcohol harms are one of Scotland's most pressing health and social issues. In 2023 there were 1,277 deaths from alcohol in Scotland, an increase of one death compared to 2022 and now standing at the highest level since 2008.¹ Furthermore, in 2022/23, there were 31,206 alcohol-related hospital stays.² This means that every day in Scotland, more than three people lose their lives and almost 100 more are hospitalised because of alcohol. All of these devastating harms are avoidable.

Alcohol harms also put immense strain on our economy and overstretched NHS, costing Scotland an estimated £5 - £10 billion every year³.

Audit Scotland's 2024 audit of alcohol and drug services found that "the Scottish Government's increased focus on drug harm through its National Mission programme is shifting the balance of attention from, and effort on, tackling alcohol harm."⁴ This briefing sets out how the Budget for 2025-26 is an opportunity for the Scottish Government to re-commit to reducing alcohol harms in Scotland, building on previous bold and positive measures such as Minimum Unit Pricing.

Social responsibility levy

It is likely that MUP has led to increased profits for retailers as while the volume of sales fell when it was first introduced, the value will have increased. On this basis, it seems fair that a "polluter pays" principle is taken forward and a **social responsibility levy** introduced so that some of the money made from MUP by supermarkets is used at a local level to fund additional treatment services for people with alcohol problems. This could be in the form of a public health supplement on non-domestic rates for retailers of alcohol and/or tobacco.

¹ [Alcohol-specific deaths 2023, Report \(nrscotland.gov.uk\)](https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/alcohol-specific-deaths-2023-report)

² [Alcohol related hospital statistics - Scotland financial year 2022/23 - Alcohol related hospital statistics - Publications - Public Health Scotland](https://www.healthscotland.com/publications/alcohol-related-hospital-statistics-scotland-financial-year-2022-23)

³ Social Market Foundation [Getting in the Spirit 2023](https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/getting-in-the-spirit-2023)

⁴ Audit Scotland, [Alcohol and Drug Services 2024](https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/publications/alcohol-and-drug-services-2024)

We support the NCD Alliance's suggestion that the funds raised could be directed to supporting women to have healthier pregnancies by raising awareness of preconception health, including with regards to alcohol, and the early detection of liver disease through improved provision of targeted fibrosis assessments such as non-invasive liver scans in primary care, community settings and treatment services.

Alcohol Brief Interventions

Public Health Scotland published its review of Alcohol Brief Interventions on 29 October. This was clear that the Scottish Government needs to reaffirm its commitment to the ABI programme and set out the steps by which its vision of embedding conversations about alcohol can be achieved over 10 years. The Scottish Government must therefore devote sufficient resource to this programme to achieve these ambitions.

Alcohol and Drug Partnerships

ADPs have seen an **eight per cent decrease** in real terms funding over the last two years due to inflationary pressures.⁵ Short term funding settlements also make it difficult for ADPs to plan effectively which impacts both service provision and staff retention. Given the scale of the alcohol harms now being experienced in Scotland, SHAAP is calling for multi-year funding settlements and for ADP funding to be restored to the real terms equivalent of the 2014/2015 funding settlement, taking account of inflation, with plans to increase funding year-on-year to facilitate the delivery of the Scottish Government's planned National Service Specification for Drugs and Alcohol.

Alcohol treatment services

Alongside the maintenance and introduction of population-wide measures to prevent future alcohol harms, it is vital that effective alcohol treatment, support and recovery services are in place for people seeking help for an alcohol problem.

The treatment approaches for alcohol problems are generally different to those for drug problems, in particular opiates, so require different design and staff skills and competencies. The performance management of combined services is focused on opiates, and this has been increased by the introduction of Medication Assisted Treatment Standards. There is a risk that alcohol services will continue to take second place.

Instead, SHAAP would like to see more attention paid to alcohol harm specifically in the design of services:

- Fund work to develop Alcohol Treatment Targets to focus resources and improve access to community services
- Fund Alcohol and Drug Partnerships to carry out local needs assessments to establish the scale and nature of unmet need in relation to alcohol harms and then commission services to address this
- Fund the development of Alcohol Care Teams in all of Scotland's major hospitals so that people are screened for alcohol problems and if necessary, then supported by an Alcohol Nurse and proactively referred into community services

In conclusion, it has never been more urgent for the Scottish Government to devote sufficient resource to enable the development of a coherent plan of action to prevent people suffering from the many and varied harms caused by alcohol. The Budget provides the opportunity to upscale provision of specialist alcohol services for people who need support and treatment now.

For additional information on any of the points raised in this briefing please email Helen McCabe, Policy and Public Affairs Officer, h.mccabe@rcpe.ac.uk

⁵ Ibid.