

Remote and Rural Healthcare Inquiry

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.
- Remote and rural communities across Scotland face unique challenges when it comes to prevention and support of people with alcohol problems.
- Alcohol and Drug Partnerships should carry out a needs assessment of rural communities and work to ensure that people living in rural communities can access specialist care and support.

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.

Remote and rural communities across Scotland face unique challenges when it comes to prevention and support of people with alcohol problems. Approaches to reducing these harms tailored to fit their needs are required by service and healthcare providers, as well as policymakers.

Social norms in rural communities

- Alcohol use is disproportionate in rural communities, given the lack of alternative recreational activities and increased risk of social isolation.
- Alcohol is entrenched in cultural and social norms due to traditions, hospitality and economic dependence on tourism and alcohol production.
- SHAAP research from our "[Rural Matters](#)" report found that participants argued that non-drinkers often feel ostracised from social gatherings and few alcohol-free spaces, if any, exist in their communities.

Challenges in accessing alcohol services in rural communities

- Local service provision is limited and where travel is required to access services, public transport is infrequent and expensive – particularly problematic for island populations.
- Healthcare & service providers face difficulty in recruiting/retaining/developing staff in alcohol service specialisms.
- Funding models often related to population size, which does not account for the added costs of providing services in a rural population of fewer, harder to reach people.

Stigma

- Stigma is made worse by living in a small community where privacy is difficult; this is a major barrier in accessing services.

¹ [Alcohol-specific deaths 2023, Report \(nrscotland.gov.uk\)](#)

² [Alcohol related hospital statistics - Scotland financial year 2022/23 - Alcohol related hospital statistics - Publications - Public Health Scotland](#)

- Participants in our 'Rural Matters' study expressed fears of social, professional or family consequences if they were found to be seeking assistance.
- Stigma in healthcare settings was also described by research participants, who spoke about what they felt were judgmental or unhelpful attitudes of GPs and A&E staff when seeking support for alcohol-related problems. This was described by people with lived experience of alcohol problems and their family members.
- Participants also described situations where their care was delayed or compromised given that they had a reputation as someone with an alcohol problem in their community and they felt they were ignored or dismissed by healthcare providers as a result of this.

Recovery

- Recovery communities offer opportunities for social interaction, support & provision of safe, alcohol-free spaces & activities for people in recovery, but are less common in rural communities.

National Centre for Remote and Rural Health and Care

SHAAP is supportive of the development and implementation of the National Centre for Remote and Rural Health and Care. It is essential that this centre addresses the issues above in order to protect the health of the remote and rural populations of Scotland. Individuals living with alcohol problems should be considered as a group with specific needs by the Centre, who are faced with particular barriers to accessing services, including those resulting from stigma. The Centre should also give consideration to prevention of alcohol-related problems in remote and rural areas. Island populations and their unique environment should also be considered as a sub-group with specific needs.

SHAAP's recommendations

- Alcohol and Drug Partnerships should carry out a needs assessment of rural communities and work with the Centre to ensure that people living in rural communities can access specialist care and support.
- Young people should receive information about alcohol harms and support available in school, building on the substance misuse programme included as part of Curriculum for Excellence. Support and education should be tailored to local circumstances and needs to be linked in with communities, families and local youth services.
- Links should be improved between the NHS, treatment and support services, mutual aid groups and visible recovery communities. This includes raising awareness about what is available in terms of service and support for alcohol problems, addressing gaps in care and resourcing recovery communities to offer peer support.
- It is essential to provide adequate training, education and networking opportunities for service providers and healthcare professionals on trauma-informed approaches, avoiding stigma, support for people with alcohol problems and their families and information on available services and support. Training opportunities must be inclusive, including either an online option or travel budget for rural workers.
- Investment should be supported in alcohol-free recreational activities and spaces in rural areas, including those targeted specifically at young people.
- Support for and investment in social spaces that do not provide or market alcohol should be actively encouraged. These spaces could include sports clubs, community centres/hubs, cafes, leisure centres etc.

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