

TITLE OF REPORT: Alcohol Related Harm

Purpose of the Report

- To provide information on findings from a recent study on the increase in alcohol related harm during the Covid pandemic, which has informed the addition of alcohol as a topic for presentations and discussion at Health and Wellbeing Board

How does the report support Gateshead's Health & Wellbeing Strategy?

- Measures to reduce alcohol related harm cut across all sections of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy

Background

- The latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) data shows there were 8,974 registered deaths from alcohol-specific causes registered in the UK in 2020, an 18.6% increase compared with 2019 and the highest year-on-year increase in almost 20 years.
- A report carried out by researchers at Newcastle University and the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) North East and North Cumbria (published in January 2022) highlighted that those already at risk of harm from drinking bought significantly more alcohol during Covid-19 lockdowns – with households in the North buying more than in any other part of Britain. The study helped to explain why the UK has seen the biggest jump in alcohol-related deaths in the UK in two decades.

The 'alcohol paradox'

- The study was carried out in an attempt to unravel what has been termed an 'alcohol paradox' – where overall shopping sales data had suggested that alcohol purchases in Britain did not appear to significantly increase after Covid-19 lockdowns were first announced in March of 2020, once the missing sales in pubs, clubs, bars and restaurants had been taken into account. However, many public surveys had suggested an increase in alcohol-related problems, and [ONS data](#) showed a sharp rise in deaths that were directly linked to alcohol misuse, indicating that some people were drinking a lot more. This new study looked at that data again - this time linking it more closely to factors such as household income, geographical location, alongside how much alcohol households would typically buy before lockdown.
- The new analysis showed that the top fifth of households in England that would normally buy the most alcohol in shops and supermarkets increased their purchases around 17 times more than the bottom fifth. Households in more socially disadvantaged locations also bought more.

- The study also found that households in the North of England - including the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humber regions - increased their purchases more than in any other part of Britain, with the suggestion that this is probably because the North has more disadvantaged and heavier-purchasing households.
- Significantly, the analysis also showed that the increase in purchasing was less pronounced in Scotland and Wales compared to England, which could be down to the Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) policy currently in place in both Scotland and Wales – which has already been shown to reduce supermarket and store purchases of alcohol, particularly amongst some of the heaviest-drinking households.
- When we look at the latest figures for alcohol-attributable deaths for 2020, most of these are related to chronic, longer-term conditions associated with continued misuse of alcohol. A large proportion of alcohol deaths during Covid have been fuelled by liver disease which is now the third leading cause of preventable death in the UK. Liver deaths have been rising in the UK for decades and the pandemic was a dreadful tipping point.
- Just like COVID, the vast swathe of alcohol harm falls on the most deprived people in our communities. This is especially worrying for regions like the North East where even before the pandemic we already suffered from the highest rates of alcohol-related death and illness in England.
- As alcohol has got cheaper, the harm to individuals and communities in England has got worse, whilst in Scotland, which has a minimum unit price for alcohol, has not seen such a rise in deaths. This increase in alcohol related harm is not a problem that will just come and go with the pandemic unless we take action.
- The findings suggests that a focus on policies to reduce high levels of drinking are even more important in extraordinary times, such as those we've seen since March 2020 - where a complex range of factors can lead to higher and potentially dangerous levels of longer-term drinking.

Proposal

- It is proposed that the board consider the information within this report and the presentations by speakers on 21.10.22 and today.

Recommendations

- The Health and Wellbeing Board is asked to consider the following actions
 - To continue to advocate for the introduction of MUP in England and consider writing to the Secretary of State to ask for a comprehensive review of the evidence and development of a national alcohol strategy
 - To continue to advocate for changes that restrict availability and promotion
 - To continue to advocate for changes which raise awareness of harms (i.e labelling, media campaigns)
 - For board members to review alcohol promotion within their own organisations to ensure that alcohol funded educational/training packages and resources are not delivered or promoted

- A review of the alcohol policy for events on council land with a focus on prohibiting alcohol consumption at family events which are aimed at children

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