

Alcohol availability at Scottish Football

Insights from the 'Football and Alcohol Scoping Study (FASST)' project

Context

Alcohol availability at football matches in Scotland is subject to specific legislation which sets it apart from other sports and cultural events. Specifically, part II of The Criminal Law (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 1995 makes it illegal to take alcohol into a football stadium, consume alcohol within sight of a football pitch, enter a football stadium whilst drunk, and consume alcohol on official transport to football matches. Alcohol is only available within hospitality areas, although it is not permitted to consume alcohol in these areas while watching a match (i.e., blinds or curtains must be closed). This legislation was originally introduced in 1980 on the grounds of reducing football related violence and disorder (FRVD). Previous research has found that alcohol plays an important role for many fans attending football matches in Scotland. Drinking alcohol before matches was viewed by those who attend football matches as a normal and acceptable part of the match day experience¹⁻³. The availability of alcohol at football matches is a recurrent debate in Scotland, with arguments both in favour of and against liberalisation of current restrictions. Analysis of media reports conducted as part of this project found that examples of arguments for change focus on lower levels of disorder compared with the 1980s, fair treatment of football fans compared to other sports, and potential financial benefits of alcohol sales for football clubs. Arguments against change focus primarily on the persistence of FRVD.

The current legislative framework regarding alcohol at Scottish football matches was brought in more than four decades ago to address disorder; public health concerns do not feature in the contemporary rationale². Since then, public policy better recognises the links between alcohol and health, with the Scottish licensing system including 'protecting and improving public health' as one of five statutory objectives, and the Scottish Government committing to 'reduced availability of alcohol' in the national alcohol framework⁴. It is important that the debate surrounding alcohol and football in Scotland is informed by robust and concurrent evidence, regarding both implementation and about the potential consequences of changing the legislation.

Aim and Research Questions

This briefing is based on research funded by the Scottish Football Association (SFA) and Scottish Professional Football League (SPFL) and carried out by Dr Richard Purves and Mr. Jack Martin, Institute for Social Marketing and Health, University of Stirling. Both the SFA and SPFL have commercial partnerships with unhealthy commodity industry companies, including alcohol producers, which make up less than 10% of their income. The SFA are sponsored by Tennent's which includes exclusive supply rights for Hampden Park stadium. The SPFL are sponsored by Loch Lomond Group and have recently announced Carling as the official beer of the SPFL. This research was commissioned by the SFA and SPFL **to explore the issues which would need to be considered in a pilot trialling the general sale of alcohol at Scottish football grounds.**

This research sought to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What impacts (positive or negative) do stakeholders perceive may occur if alcohol was put on general sale at Scottish football stadia?

RQ2: What are the practical, safety or financial issues that may arise if Scottish clubs were to put alcohol on general sale?

RQ3: What data, methods and costs would be involved in designing a pilot to deliver robust and reliable findings, considering the answers to RQ1 and RQ2?

To answer these questions, this research adopted a mixed-methods approach incorporating two work packages:

1. Interviews (one paired and 10 one-to-one) with 12 key stakeholders exploring the feasibility and potential impacts of selling alcohol at Scottish football matches, including key questions for any future pilot. Stakeholders were purposively sampled to include the views of those involved in match day safety, public health, and alcohol licensing. This included 3x Safety Officers/managers, 2x Police Scotland, 3x Public Health/Advocacy, 1x NHS, 1x Scottish Government and 2x Alcohol licensing.
2. Site visits and on-site interviews at five Scottish (two Premiership clubs, one Championship club, one League 1 and one League 2) and two English League 2 stadia to explore the feasibility of selling alcohol at Scottish football stadia and practical implications involved. During the site visits, nine interviews were conducted with 10 staff (including at least one representative of every club) with responsibility for match day safety or managing hospitality/catering. This included 5x CEO/COO, 3x safety officers and 2x catering/hospitality managers.

Key Findings (RQ1)

RQ1: What impacts (positive or negative) do stakeholders perceive may occur if alcohol was put on general sale at Scottish football stadia?

The following potential impacts were identified by stakeholders during the work package 1 interviews:

- **Impact on disorder** – public disorder and FRVD emerged as a major concern for stakeholders with many hesitant about legislative change due to the potential for increased availability of alcohol within the stadium leading to increased levels of disorder. Stakeholders recognised the improvements made to stadium safety and security since legislation was brought in, but were concerned about the impact any increase in alcohol availability could have on fans' behaviour, citing it as an additional risk factor which could lead to increased levels of disorder within the stadium. However, there was a view that offering alcohol sales within the stadia could encourage some fans to arrive at stadia early, helping to reduce late arrivals. Participants from Police Scotland were also mindful of the drain on police resources presented by football matches which can divert resources from other community activities.
- **Impact on alcohol consumption** – There were concerns from stakeholders that increasing availability of alcohol at football stadia would increase overall levels of alcohol consumption on match days by providing match-goers additional opportunities to consume alcohol.
- **Normalisation** - Stakeholders also expressed concern that by having alcohol on general sale at football matches, there was a risk of further normalising alcohol in an environment where it was previously restricted which could impact on fans' long-term alcohol consumption, contributing to increased levels of alcohol-related harm.
- **Exposure of children to alcohol consumption** – Although some stakeholders believed that selling alcohol at family-focused areas was a way of mitigating disorderly behaviour, other stakeholders raised concerns over the impact of children being exposed to adults consuming alcohol, pointing to evidence that exposure to alcohol at an early age increases the risk that young people will drink more and drink at an earlier age^{5,6}.
- **Marketing and sponsorship** – Stakeholders raised concerns about the potential for increased availability of alcohol within stadia to lead to increased marketing and sponsorship activity at the point of sale and the potential for vulnerable groups (e.g. children, people in recovery) to be exposed to this marketing. There were also concerns that promotional material and logos at additional points of sale within stadia would provide a means of circumventing any wider restrictions on alcohol sports sponsorship or other marketing, lessening their effectiveness.

Key Findings (RQ2)

RQ2: What are the practical, safety or financial issues that may arise if Scottish clubs were to put alcohol on general sale?

The data gathered from the site visits in Scotland and England provide a degree of insight on the practical, safety and financial issues that Scottish clubs would need to consider ensuring the sale of alcohol was feasible and done safely. This included:

- **Additional risk factor** – Our data suggests that the selling of alcohol in stadia would be an additional risk factor for stadium safety teams to manage. Strong safety concerns remained around selling alcohol in stadia with bigger crowds and at high-risk matches. It is not currently known whether changing the legislation to allow alcohol to be sold in the concourses at football matches in Scotland would result in fans arriving at the stadium earlier and this would also have to be closely monitored in any pilot. If fans were to arrive earlier at the stadium, there could be positives in terms of safety at the turnstiles. However, many Scottish stadia are not large enough to accommodate increased numbers of fans gathering on the concourse and this has important implications for the safety of spectators.
- **Financial investment and profit** - Despite some data from this study suggesting that the sale of alcohol out with hospitality areas could bring additional income for clubs, there was uncertainty over whether clubs would make any profit due to the considerable investment needed for mitigation measures, crowd management, meeting licensing standards, staff training, additional risk management criteria as well as improving the physical infrastructure of stadia. The ability to make profit on alcohol sales also has implications for increasing overall alcohol consumption – e.g. it was suggested that individual fans would need to consume more than the recommended guidelines for clubs to have the desired financial benefits.
- **Local licensed premises** - If fans do attend matches earlier to drink alcohol in stadia, it would likely be to the detriment of drinking in local pubs, which would have a negative impact on pub income, viability and employment.
- **Utilising external space** – The English clubs visited had utilised external areas to sell alcohol. This could present a more financially viable solution for those Scottish clubs who have space around the perimeter of the stadium and would also allow fans to have more space in which to stand, avoiding the overcrowding seen in internal areas. It would not require a change in legislation but would require a licence to serve alcohol from the local licensing board.
- **Increase in marketing** – Marketing for alcoholic products was evident in both the English site visits where alcohol products were marketed at the point of sale and around the ground, and at the internal areas of one Scottish stadium where alcohol was permitted to be sold.

Key Findings (RQ3)

RQ3: What data, methods and costs would be involved in designing a pilot to deliver robust and reliable findings, considering the answers to RQ1 and 2?

The findings from WP1 and WP2 were synthesised and discussed with experts at the University of Stirling who provided input on what data, methods and costs would be involved in designing a pilot to deliver robust and reliable findings.

- **Club selection** - A pilot should be designed to maximise the feasibility of robustly evaluating the impact of the increased availability. It would be essential that availability only changed in some clubs during the pilot (pilot clubs), whereas other closely matched clubs could continue as normal (control clubs). Random allocation may not achieve adequate matching of the two groups, given the relatively small number of available clubs from which to choose. However, both pilot and control clubs should be clubs which want to avail of the new policy (to avoid self-selection bias), and the two groups should be matched in terms of key characteristics. The pilot and control stadia would need to be suitably distanced from each other to avoid cross-contamination with fans at a pilot match leading to impacts on a control stadium.
- **Theory of change** - The data generated in this study could be used to inform a robust theory of change to underpin any evaluation. A theory of change normally sets out (hypothesises) what is thought will happen following an intervention – in this case the intervention would be the change in availability of alcohol. This allows consideration of the sequence of events that will follow the intervention ultimately leading to certain outcomes over the short, medium or long-term.
- **Robust data collection** - The evaluation design would allow robust judgement of whether any change in measured outcomes can be attributed to the change in the availability of alcohol. Data would be needed on the outcomes of interest (police incidents, disorder, antisocial behaviour, alcohol sales/ consumption, ambulance callouts, income to clubs and local businesses (see below), exposure to marketing, fan experiences) and where possible those data need to be gathered in consistent, objective ways before and during the pilot across both pilot and control clubs.
- **Transparent co-operation from clubs** - Other potential outcomes which should be examined include the economic impact on local pubs, the experience of fans and the revenue and profit of the clubs. Full and transparent co-operation from football clubs would need to be agreed to obtain the data relating to income and profits prior to, during and after the pilot period. This data would also need to be carefully evaluated, considering the concerns of participants in this study as to whether football clubs actually retain profits by executing such a venture and how much alcohol is sold.
- **Evaluating long term impact** - A further important outcome to evaluate is the impact of the changes on normalisation of alcohol consumption and exposure of children and young people to alcohol, alcohol branding and marketing. The latter is not straightforward to measure, but important to include as a key concern of public health stakeholders and more broadly the Scottish Government.

- **Unbiased and independent** - The pilot and its evaluation would need to be led by an independent research team, with funding from an independent source such as the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) or UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). It is important that a pilot not be designed with a biased aim, nor should any evaluation of a pilot be funded by football or other organisations that have an expressed preference and/or financial interest in the outcome of the pilot. Any organisations or individuals with a financial or other significant interest in the outcome of the pilot should sit only on a reference group, be consulted only on matters specifically within their unique expertise such as the running of football clubs, and have no power to influence the pilot, its design, choice of clubs or any other aspect in any other way. The independent research team should have final say over all decisions.

Conclusions

Permitting alcohol to be on general sale in football stadia brings increased risk in relation to fan safety and public disorder. The level of risk is greatly dependent on the individual match and based on factors such as crowd size, category of match and time of kick off. The long-term effects of increasing the availability of alcohol, and its links to increased consumption and health harms, are at odds with the Scottish Government's aims to reduce the societal normalisation of alcohol and reduce overall alcohol consumption and related harms as stated in its Alcohol Framework 2018. Any future pilot of greater availability of alcohol in football grounds would need to be evaluated to consider the impacts and issues identified in this study, and the evaluation would need to be sufficiently robust and independent to provide credible findings that are trusted by policymakers.

References

1. Bandura, C. T., Giulianotti, R., Martin, J. G., Bancroft, A., Morrow, S., Hunt, K., & Purves, R. I. (2023). Alcohol consumption among UK football supporters: Investigating the contested field of the football carnivalesque. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, pp. 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2023.2219370>
2. Martin, J.G., Giulianotti, R., Bandura, C., Morrow, S., Hunt, K., Bancroft, A. and Purves, R.I. (2022) Stakeholder views of current laws surrounding alcohol at UK football matches: Is it a case of using a "sledgehammer to crack a nut"?, *International Journal of Drug Policy*, Volume 107, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2022.103789>.
3. Purves, R. I., Critchlow, N., Giulianotti, R., Hunt, K., Morrow, S., & Bancroft, A. (2022). Sport Fan Attitudes on Alcohol: Insights from a Survey of Football Supporters in Scotland and England. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 46(2), pp. 199-218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01937235211067192>
4. Scottish Government. (2018) *Alcohol Framework 2018*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/alcohol-framework-2018-preventing-harm-next-steps-changing-relationship-alcohol/pages/4/>
5. Finan, L.J., Lipperman-Kreda, S., Grube, J.W., Balassone, A., Kaner, E. (2020) Alcohol Marketing and Adolescent and Young Adult Alcohol Use Behaviours: A Systematic Review of Cross-Sectional Studies. *J Stud Alcohol Drugs*. Published online 2020.
6. Noel JK, Sammartino CJ, Rosenthal SR. (2020) Exposure to Digital Alcohol Marketing and Alcohol Use: A Systematic Review. *J Stud Alcohol Drugs Suppl*. 19 (Suppl 19):57-67. doi:10.15288/jsads.2020.s19.57