28 September 2017

Neil Findlay MSP
Convener of Health and Sport Committee
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Dear Mr. Findlay,

I am writing to you in response to the Committee’s request for evidence on the correlation between increased alcohol consumption and sport, following the oral evidence session on the Draft Budget 2018-19 on 19 September 2017.

As a public health advocacy organisation, Alcohol Focus Scotland (AFS) is supportive of attempts to increase levels of physical activity in Scotland, and notes the health and societal benefits to be gained from this. Physical inactivity and alcohol consumption are both major risk factors of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, chronic liver disease, and diabetes. These preventable diseases cause 89% of deaths in the UK\(^1\) and are Scotland’s biggest killers.\(^2\) We believe that the prevention of non-communicable diseases through tackling these risk factors is essential, and would save both lives and money in Scotland.

However, as I indicated at the evidence session there is evidence which suggests that participation in sport correlates with higher alcohol consumption. There is also evidence around exposure to alcohol sponsorship of sport and marketing more generally and increased alcohol consumption. This is summarised in the attached appendix. In putting forward this evidence, AFS recognises that whilst there appears to be an association between sports participation and alcohol consumption, the nature and reasons for this association are complex. Clearly physical activity and participation in sports have wider and important health and social benefits.

AFS’s view is that we need to address our problematic relationship with alcohol more generally, given that around 1 million of us drink above the low risk guidelines\(^3\) and 24 Scots are dying each week as a result.\(^4\) The commercial drivers of this consumption are clear: the extensive marketing of alcohol (including sports sponsorship), the widespread availability of alcohol and cheap prices. As I indicated at the evidence session, addressing these drivers is the most effective way to reduce alcohol consumption and harm - and would cost little or nothing to deliver.

reducing harm caused by alcohol

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Yours sincerely

Alison Douglas,
Chief Executive

Appendix – Evidence on the Correlation between Increased Alcohol Consumption and Sport

Participation in Sport
Research from a number of countries suggests that sportspeople are more likely to drink in a more hazardous manner than those who do not participate in sports, or the general population.¹

This general finding has been borne out in Scotland. A study conducted using the Scottish Health Survey² reported that those who participated in sports were more likely to drink alcohol than those who do not, including at levels risky or dangerous to health (over the recommended guidelines). Individuals who do not, or only occasionally drink, reported a lower propensity to participate in sports (29% compared to 41% who do not participate).

This has been supported by analysis published this week from the National Survey of Wales, which reported that only 58% of those who exercise three times or more a week drink within the recommended low-risk drinking guidelines, compared to 77% of people who do not exercise.³

It should be recognised however, that the link between alcohol and sport is dependent upon a number of factors, such as age, gender, the type of sport and the level at which it is played:

- Many of the studies in this field focus on **young people**. A number of systematic reviews conducted on the link between sport participation and unhealthy behaviours in adolescence generally conclude that although sport participation is associated with a lower use of tobacco and illicit drugs, it is associated with an increased use of alcohol.⁴

- Differences have also been found in relation to gender, with **male** sports players drinking in a more hazardous manner than females.⁵

- **Team sports** players are generally more likely to be categorised as hazardous drinkers, and report significantly greater rates of alcohol consumption, than individual sports players,⁶ and alcohol consumption differs across levels of sporting participation.⁷

There are a number of potential explanations as to why people involved with sport tend to consume higher levels of alcohol, from the ritualism associated with sporting events (where overindulgence is acceptable and expected)⁸ and alcohol marketing and promotion that targets sports⁹, to drinking used as a reward for sports participation and as a coping mechanism to deal with its stresses.¹⁰

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Many team sports also have “the added benefit of social networking and convey a sense of belonging to an environment that encourages social engagement ‘off the pitch’. In this sense sports may in fact impart an element of fostering risky health behaviour as well. For this reason a positive association between alcohol consumption and participation may be expected.”

This study goes on to suggest that alcohol consumption for those who drink over the recommended guidelines is not a deterrent to engage in sports, and refutes the idea that those who drink excessive amounts of alcohol have no preference for health.

**Alcohol Sponsorship and Marketing**

Research suggests that sports participants are more likely to drink alcohol due to alcohol marketing and promotions targeting sports clubs. A number of studies have been found to show a positive association between direct alcohol sponsorship and hazardous drinking among adult sportspeople. Alcohol sponsorship of sportspeople is associated with more problematic drinking amongst UK university sportspeople: receipt of alcohol sponsorship was associated with increased odds of being classified a hazardous drinker, and having alcohol dependence.

A systematic review conducted in 2016 looked at seven studies across a number of countries (including the UK), finding a positive relationship between exposure to alcohol sports sponsorship and self-reported alcohol consumption. Of most concern is the report from two of the studies that indirect exposure to alcohol sports sponsorship was associated with increased levels of drinking amongst schoolchildren.

Children find alcohol marketing messages appealing, and alcohol marketing influences their attitudes. Most significantly, alcohol marketing encourages children’s drinking: exposure to alcohol marketing reduces the age at which young people start to drink, increases the likelihood that they will drink and increases the amount of alcohol they will consume once they have started to drink.

Earlier this year Alcohol Focus Scotland published *Promoting good health from childhood: Reducing the impact of alcohol marketing on children in Scotland*, a report by the expert network on alcohol marketing. As well as pressing the UK Government to introduce restrictions on alcohol advertising on television and in cinemas, the expert network made a number of recommendations for action that are within the competence of the Scottish Government, including to: prohibit outdoor alcohol advertising and advertising in public spaces; and set out a timetable for ending alcohol sponsorship of sports events, music and cultural events.

**References**


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11 Eberth & Smith (2010), op cit.


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