

Minute of the meeting of The Cross Party Group on Drugs and Alcohol

22 February 2023

Online meeting via Zoom

Convenor: Monica Lennon MSP

Co-convenor

Secretariat: Scottish Drugs Forum (Dave Liddell)

The meeting was chaired by Monica Lennon

1. Attendance

Monica Lennon MSP	Kira Weir
Maree Todd MSP	Nicole Merrin
Brian Whittle MSP	Mariana Marquadt
Stuart McMillan MSP	Duncan Stewart
Lorna Dougall	Alison McVeigh
Dave Liddell	Sandra Holmes
Austin Smith	Reuben Duffy
Sophie Milton	Hollie Cameron
Anthony Lehane	Jardine Simpson
Anne Hannah	Annmarie Ward
Euan Stainbank	Cameron Scully
Jane Gordon	Niamh Fitzgerald
Kira Watson	Laura Wilson

Minute

The Convenor explained that the minute of the previous meeting will be available but is being drafted.

The Convenor welcomed the Minister Maree Todd, Minister For Public Health, Women's Health and Sport.

The Minister:

The Minister expressed her gratitude for the invitation to speak to the CPG.

This is an area of personal as well as professional interest.

The Minister has responded in writing to the specific issues that the Convenor raised in her letter sent subsequent to previous CPG meeting.

That letter covered access to treatment services; the difficulty of accessing mental health support at the same time as alcohol treatment; the lack of investment in alcohol services; the need to give clear guidance to Alcohol and Drug Partnerships;

the need to identify people with alcohol problems sooner and how to prevent alcohol problems from developing.

The Minister is currently consulting on and meeting with stakeholders on the issue of alcohol promotion and sponsorship. This is a very broad-ranging consultation and at a very early stage. The consultation closes on the 9th of March. The Minister encouraged people to participate and respond to the consultation.

The Minister said that the Government knows it needs to strengthen and support services for people particularly for people with alcohol problems but we need to 'switch the tap off' - we don't need to not just lift people out of the water when they are drowning but we need to stop them falling into the water in the first place and the Scottish government are focused on that. The consultation on alcohol promotion and sponsorship is part of our developing our early thinking on what action we might potentially take and that's because alcohol is a very high priority.

Scotland loses 24 people a week directly to alcohol and that doesn't include the alcohol's contribution to cancers to heart disease. There are 700 alcohol-related admissions to hospital a week which at a time when our NHS is under immense pressure makes it a priority.

We need to prevent alcohol problems from developing and to ensure that we are able to recognise them and put in place a care package around people who need help.

The Minister confirmed that she is happy for her written response to be shared.

Jane Gordon, Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP)

Jane asked if the Minister had any indication or was able to share how she thought a new First Minister might affect the consultation currently underway and any of the outcomes of this

The Minister:

The Minister said she was not expecting or anticipating a significant change in direction of government policy while acknowledging that a new First Minister may have a different way of doing things or prioritising. She pointed out that there could be a change of Minister but did not expect change in policy pointing out that the party Manifesto set out a programme for government so she wouldn't expect a significant change of direction

Brian Whittle MSP

Brian asked in a comprehensive approach, the role of education, in terms of sport, music, art and drama, in attracting young people and educating them about issues like alcohol abuse.

The Minister

The Minister welcomed presence of MSPs from non-Government parties as she is seeking all party support.

This is a complex area and there's no single solution. We have to take a whole system approach - look at the whole system for various levers.

Education is not a panacea and need to look at the environment particularly that our children are growing up in. The link between sport and alcohol is unhealthy. The Minister instanced a televised rugby event where a child watching that match on television saw an alcohol prompt every 12 seconds. The Minister advocated creating

an environment where it's easy to be healthy where alcohol isn't ubiquitous it isn't a feature of everyday life.

I would say in alcohol we're not headed in the right direction fast enough and that's partly because we started from one of the worst positions in in the world in terms of our long-standing and unhealthy relationship with alcohol.

Another group that we're considering approaches to a sponsorship and promotion is people in recovery. to watch sport or go shopping and finding that they are being faced with advertising that's encouraging them to consume.

The Minister pointed out that education may mean people know about health behaviour and choices but not that they act on that knowledge. Advertising is a factor in that. Can the government do anything to help support people to make it easier to make different decisions and behave differently?

Lorna and Fergus, Family members

Asked the Minister - Should we not be trying rather harder to ensure that people understand that alcohol abuse is something that happens in virtually every household?

We keep coming up against stigma that even the professionals within organisations display stigmatizing behaviors - this is one of the underlying issues that the government really has to address

Fergus also instanced poor messages to young people: schools handing out shot glasses as farewell presents to pupils leaving school.

The Minister:

The Minister stated that she had been been working along with Angela Constance, The Minister for Drug Policy, around stigma.

But there are issues with different analyses - people say it's poverty that causes alcohol problems. As far as I understand, there are alcohol problems right across the socio-economic spectrum. But it is true that the people who are most likely to die from alcohol-related problems directly from alcohol related harm are poor but the incidence is pretty similar across the board.

The Minister shared her own family experience and suggested there was a consensus amongst, for example, people at a constituency surgery, that something should be done about alcohol use.

Cllr Euan Stainbank (Falkirk Council)

Euan raised the issue of a lack of non-alcohol based night-time activity in city and town centres. In terms of local government and Scottish Government support to centres to transition from a retail-based economy a concern is that hospitality is more viable than any other business but comes with its own problems. Town centres need a nightlife which isn't focused around exclusively alcohol - we need to do is change the culture we need to change the ubiquity of alcohol.

The guidance of the World Health Organization is to deal with affordability, availability and accessibility and accessibility is the one we should address in our town centres, which are not welcoming to people who don't want to drink alcohol

Nicole Merrin, Alcohol Focus Scotland

Thanks to the Minister for the response to the letter from the CPG Co-convenor. Nicole offered support to anyone interested in responding to the consultation.

Preventative policies and the availability of adequate timely and quality treatment are crucial. The burden that alcohol use currently places on the National Health Service and current concern re resourcing that. What are the Minister's views on retailers and profit from minimum unit pricing that has been put in place could be used for local prevention treatment and care services

The Minister

In terms of the problem with town centres intoxication is the problem and implementing the licensing conditions and rules that are already there is the answer. We need to think more carefully about how the licensing system works and I think that we need to reflect on whether it's delivering the outcomes that we want. That this is an area where central government and local government need to work together and make sure that there's really clear guidance

I want local government to be confident that they can make decisions with public health considerations at the heart of them and that they are not going to have to carry the responsibility or the burden of that I am contemplating how can we in central government support them better to make sure that good decisions are made for local communities.

On the alcohol harm levy, I am open to considering that. We're reviewing the whole policy of minimum unit pricing and that will come back to the Parliament. Once we've completed that review, then, should the Parliament agree that that's been a successful policy, we're going to continue it then review the actual minimum unit place

Convenor Monica Lennon withdrew from chairing the meeting at this point and was replaced as chair by Co—Convenor Stuart McMillan MSP

Niamh Fitzgerald, University of Stirling

I'm aware of the strong reaction to the announcement of the consultation on the marketing measures from commercial sectors and others who are funded by commercial sector organisations.

Public Health doesn't have the same resources to shout quite as loudly and I just wondered if you can give us any reassurance about how the volume of responses to the consultation will be considered and sort of quality as well as quantity.

The Minister

I always reassure people whenever we have a government consultation that it's not a referendum - it's not about seeing how many people respond positively or negatively and making a decision. It is about gathering data and information to inform our policy choices

I have to take account of the economic impact of any public health policy that I might um consider bringing

As Public health Minister and I heard you know I think we're all as a nation quite familiar with the concept of social determinants of Health I think we're less familiar as a nation with the concept of commercial determinants of health

The meeting was formally closed.