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Online Alcohol Sales & Deliveries: A survey of young people in Scotland

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INTRODUCTION

Alcohol today is cheap, readily available and heavily marketed. As a result, children and young people are growing up in a pro-alcohol society where drinking is seen as the norm and they can feel pressured to drink at a young age. While alcohol can present risks for all age groups, young people's bodies and brains are more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol because they are still growing and developing.¹ Drinking alcohol can cause short and long-term harm to health and is associated with increased risk taking behaviour in young people.^{2 3 4} Research also shows that the earlier a young person starts drinking, the more likely they are to drink in ways that can be harmful later in life.^{5 6}

It is therefore essential that children and young people are supported to speak about their experiences of alcohol to public sector leaders and policy makers, and to participate in decisions about alcohol policy. This report presents the findings of a survey - conducted by Alcohol Focus Scotland (AFS) in February-March 2022 - which asked children and young people about their views and experiences of online alcohol sales and deliveries. Direct quotes from the young people who participated in the survey have been included throughout.

AFS would also like to acknowledge the support given by Alcohol Change UK's team in Wales to undertake this research.

BACKGROUND /CONTEXT

The majority of children and young people in Scotland report that they do not regularly drink alcohol and it has become much less common for young people to buy alcohol directly from a shop, supermarket, or off-licence.⁷ This would suggest that measures to prevent and discourage children and young people from purchasing alcohol within physical premises, such as laws restricting the sale of alcohol to minors and mandatory age verification policies (e.g., Challenge 25), have had some success. However, much less is known about the extent to which children and young people might be attempting to purchase alcohol online, for delivery, thereby negating the need to visit a licensed premise.

Alcohol deliveries and internet sales are not a new issue but are an evolving and expanding area of retail. The types of businesses that sell alcohol online now range from small independent traders, specialist drinks retailers/clubs, local convenience stores, and supermarkets through to multinational e-commerce companies (e.g., Amazon). There is also a growing variety of app-based retailers who have arrangements with restaurants, takeaways and off-licences to deliver alcohol directly to people's homes. The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions have accelerated the general trend to online shopping. Despite the reopening of physical stores, it is predicted that online sales will remain high as people have become more accustomed to online shopping.

There is currently a distinct lack of information available about the business operations of online retailers in Scotland. For example, there is no data available pertaining to their distribution areas, or the volumes and types of alcohol they sell. In addition, it is unclear how age verification can be effectively implemented when alcohol is being purchased on-line or delivered to people's homes. This has the potential to make alcohol much more readily accessible to young people and has led to growing concern about the potential impacts of on-line alcohol sales to children and young people.

In Wales, new research has identified major weaknesses in age verification, both online and on the doorstep when delivering alcohol to people's homes. This research has included police test purchase operations, qualitative interviews with delivery drivers, and an examination of online age verification

controls.⁸ However, similar studies have not yet been undertaken in Scotland, and the voices and experiences of children and young people have so far been missing from discussions about this issue.

ABOUT THE SURVEY AND RESPONDENTS

AFS ran an anonymous online survey for young people, under the age of 18, for four weeks in February-March 2022. It was widely promoted through social media and via youth sector organisations, Alcohol and Drug Partnerships, and local licensing forums.

A total of 215 responses were received, 196 of the which met the required survey criteria (aged under 18). The average age of respondents within the required age range was 14.7 years, and responses were received from 19 of the 32 local authority areas in Scotland, as shown in the table below:

Local authority area					
Aberdeen	2	Edinburgh	2	North Ayrshire	7
Aberdeenshire	3	Falkirk	1	South Ayrshire	5
Angus	7	Fife	4	South Lanarkshire	1
Argyll and Bute	16	Glasgow	6	West Dunbartonshire	25
Clackmannanshire	2	Inverclyde	1	West Lothian	55
Dundee	14	Moray	42		
East Ayrshire	2	Nah-eileanan siar	1		

Respondents were free to skip past any question they did not want to answer.

SURVEY RESULTS

Key findings

20% (40) of all 196 respondents reported that either they or a friend **had bought/tried to buy alcohol online**. The average age of respondents who had tried to purchased alcohol online was 15.5 years.

- Of the 40 respondents who reported that either they or a friend **had bought/tried to buy alcohol online**, **38%** (15) were **not asked** to confirm that they were over 18 years when paying for alcohol online. A further 20% (8) were unsure if they were asked to confirm their age.
- Of the 37 respondents who reported that either they or a friend had tried to have **alcohol delivered**, **57%** (21) were **not asked** for proof of age when the alcohol was delivered. A further 19% (7) were unsure if they had been asked to prove their age.

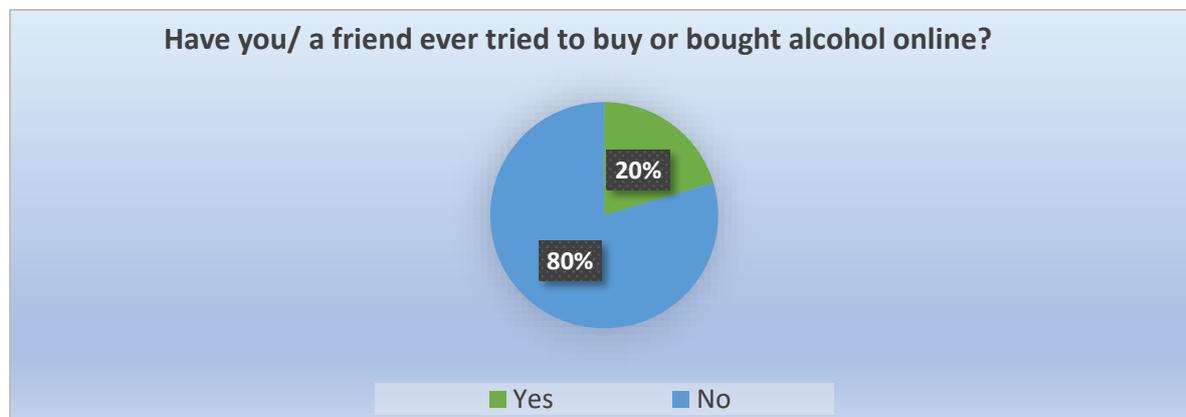
Many of the respondents were able to bypass or overcome online age verification checks if they did encounter them, with some reporting using an adult's credit card or store account to purchase the alcohol. In addition, several respondents reported that they were still able to take receipt of an alcohol delivery despite not being able to provide ID when asked.

“Yer prevention system is rubbish as it has been delivered and collected by me”

Age 16

Are children and young people trying to buy alcohol online?

The survey asked respondents whether they or their friends had ever bought or tried to buy alcohol online. In response, 20% (40) answered 'yes' while 80% (156) answered 'no'. The average age of respondents who answered 'yes' was 15.5 years.



When asked which companies they were aware of that sold alcohol online, the majority of respondents named large supermarkets and online retailers. However, a significant number also named third party food/drink courier services and specialist alcohol shops. Other types of retailers identified included subscription club retailers, brewery and pub chains, and local corner shops.

What types of alcohol are children and young people buying online?

The types of alcohol that respondents had bought or tried to buy online were varied, with spirits - particularly vodka - being the most commonly mentioned. A number of the young people also identified that they bought several different types of alcoholic drink, of markedly different strengths (ABV), online. The types of alcoholic drinks cited by respondents are shown below (including the names of any specific brands mentioned):

- Spirits - Jack Daniels, Captain Morgan's *"Usually vodkas, the other drinks we normally buy in store"* Age 17
- Beer *"Normal beers that aren't too strong but also like to buy stronger products such as Vodka"* Age 15
- Cider - Strongbow
- Wine/Port *"Tequila, Vodka, Whiskey, Gin, Wine, Cider, Spirit, Prosecco"* Age 15
- Alcopops - WKD, Mad Dog
- Caffeinated drinks – Buckfast, Dragon Soop
- Other e.g., test tube shots - Sourz, *"Vodka, tequila, WKD, VK, Buckfast"* Age 15

Why do children and young people choose to buy alcohol online?

When asked why they had chosen to purchase alcohol online, many of the respondents highlighted the perceived benefits of online sales when compared to in-person purchases.

A number of respondents indicated that they purchased alcohol online in order to circumvent age verification checks, to 'test' the effectiveness of online restrictions, or because they had been unable to purchase alcohol in-person. Other reasons included ease of access and increased convenience, a preference for home delivery, access to lower prices/discounts, access to a greater variety of products, and to conceal the purchase from adults.

"Easier to get larger quantities, sometimes for cheaper" Age 17

"Because they don't ID you" Age 17

"Convenient, no one will care about age" Age 16

"I don't want adults to see it" Age 16

"Can't buy it in person" Age 17

How effective are current measures at preventing children and young people from accessing alcohol online?

At the point of sale

In Scotland, it is an offence to sell alcohol to a child or a young person online.⁹ However, neither the relevant legislation or guidance provide any detail about what may be considered as 'reasonable steps' to prevent underage sales in the context of on-line purchases, or who is ultimately responsible for establishing the age of people buying alcohol online if the transaction is automatically processed by a computer.

In practice, online retailers may use simple 'honour' checks at the point of sale, such as asking the buyer to input their date of birth or tick a box to confirm they are over 18 years of age. Other online retailers may use card details or accept payment via credit cards as proof that the payee is over 18.¹⁰

The survey asked respondents whether they had been asked to confirm that they were over 18 years when paying for alcohol online. Of the 40 who responded to this question, 42% (17) answered 'yes', 38% (15) answered 'no', and 20% (8) were unsure.



When questioned about how they were asked to confirm they were over 18 years old, most reported that they were either asked for credit card details, to provide their date of birth, or simply select an option to confirm they were over 18. Some respondents also provided details of how they were able to bypass or overcome online age verification checks when they did encounter them, with several reporting using adults credit cards or store accounts to purchase the alcohol.

“[I paid by using] Amazon balance through buying a gift card on my own Amazon account and then redeeming the gift card balance on my mum's Amazon account” Age 16

“Used my mums friend’s bank card” Age 14

“Online banking for parents” Age 16

“Provide date of birth” Age 16

“Tick box” Age 17

The results of the survey suggest that the current point of sale measures intended to prevent children and young people from purchasing alcohol online are inadequate, with a significant proportion of young people either not being asked to confirm their age at all or being able to easily by-pass/overcome online checks.

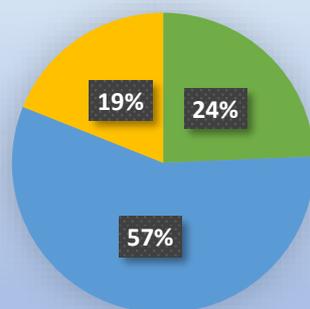
At the point of delivery

In Scotland, it is an offence to deliver alcohol, or allow it to be delivered, to a child or young person.¹¹ This would also apply in circumstances where a child/young person took delivery of alcohol ordered by an adult. The law does provide a defence to this if the person delivering alcohol believed that the person was 18 or over **and** either took all reasonable steps to establish the purchaser’s age or nobody could reasonably have suspected that they were under 18. However, there is no national requirement¹² for an age verification policy (e.g., Challenge 25) to be put in place for remote alcohol sales. All deliveries must also be properly recorded, and it is an offence for any person to deliver alcohol to an address other than that listed for delivery e.g., alcohol cannot be left with a neighbour.

At a local level, in an attempt to clarify or build upon national measures to prevent alcohol deliveries to minors, many licensing boards have set out their approach to this issue within their local licensing policies. For example, by making clear that delivery staff must be trained to the same level as those on licensed premises, that Challenge 25 checks must be conducted, and that alcohol must not be left at premises unless a responsible adult is present. Some also clarify that where licensees use a courier service, they must ensure that the service is compliant with the Board’s requirements.

The survey asked respondents whether they had been asked for proof of age when the alcohol was delivered. Of the 37 who responded to this question, 24% (9) answered ‘yes’, 57% (21) answered ‘no’, and 19% (7) were unsure.

Were you asked for proof of age when the alcohol was delivered?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Unsure

The vast majority of respondents who had tried to have alcohol delivered reported that they ordered the delivery to their home address, but a number also reported ordering deliveries to a friend or family member's address. Several, who had not been asked for proof of age, explained that this is because they were not at home at the time of delivery, and the alcohol was therefore left on their doorstep or nearby.

The respondents who were asked for ID but were unable to provide it described a number of outcomes: getting an adult to take the delivery on their behalf; being asked for their date of birth to prove their age instead; being handed the alcohol regardless; or having the alcohol taken away and the order cancelled.

"I wasn't in and they left it in my shed" Age 16

"Asked an adult" Age 16

"They never asked for ID" Age 14

"They had it delivered to their house but made it be delivered at a specific time when no one was in so they wouldn't get caught" Age 15

With over half of the respondents who took receipt of an alcohol delivery not being asked for proof of age, and others being handed alcohol despite not being able to provide ID when asked, it is clear that current legislation and national and local measures are failing to adequately prevent alcohol deliveries to children and young people.

In addition, the respondents were asked if they had ever accepted an alcohol delivery on behalf of someone else (e.g., a family member and friend); 18% (27) of those who answered this question indicated that they had, and 82% (126) that they had not.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the survey involved a relatively small and self-selecting sample, the findings help provide some insight into the views and experiences of children and young people in Scotland in relation to this issue, and raise questions about the adequacy of current measures intended to prevent alcohol being sold and delivered to minors both at the point of sale and at delivery. It is concerning that over half of the children and young people taking a delivery of alcohol were not asked for proof of age, while others were handed alcohol despite being unable to prove their age when asked. This suggests

that efforts to prevent children and young people from purchasing alcohol may be being undermined, placing their health and wellbeing at risk.

It is perhaps not surprising that the children and young people surveyed had polarised views about how this issue should be approached, ranging from those who would welcome tighter controls to those who considered access to alcohol online as a positive development. This underlines the importance that children and young people continue to be involved in discussions about alcohol and have access to reliable and independent information about the potential risks it can pose.

“Being able to buy Alcohol online should require a “Verified Age” by having an official document uploaded to the website, such as a Birth Certificate, where a real-life person that works for that company would review and accept if it meets the guidelines, as this would massively stop the growth of young teens buying alcohol as well as the sales to young teens.” Age 15

“Don’t go changing any of it because it’s convenient” Age 17

Further action is needed to better understand the extent and impact of online sales on children and young people, and to develop an appropriate response. This should include:

- Scottish Government commissioned research to investigate how easily and to what extent children and young people are purchasing alcohol online. This could form a component of existing plans to scope research into online and telephone alcohol sales to better understand these growing markets (Commitment 4 of the Scottish Government’s 2018 Alcohol Framework¹³).
- Scottish Government consideration of whether companies making remote sales and deliveries of alcohol ought to be required to put in place age verification policies, equivalent to those already required for in-person purchases. Any relevant legislation should make clear where responsibilities lie and make clear requirements both at point of sale and at point of delivery.
- An exploration of the feasibility of police test purchasing initiatives in Scotland.
- The inclusion of measures relevant to online sales and deliveries within local licensing policies. For example, it could be specified that certain checks should be carried out such as Challenge 25, and that orders cannot be left in nominated ‘safe places’.
- The inclusion of questions about online alcohol sales and deliveries within future surveys and health and wellbeing censuses of children and young people.
- Ongoing engagement and dialogue with children and young people and their representative organisations about this issue.

¹ Newbury-Birch, D. et al (2009). Impact of Alcohol Consumption on Young People. A Systematic Review of Published Reviews. Newcastle University.

² Squeglia LM et al (2009) The influence of substance use on adolescent brain development, Clin EEG Neuroscience, 40 (1) 31-38

³ Bava S and S Tapert (2010) Adolescent brain development and the risk for alcohol and other drug problems, Neuropsychology Review, 20 (4) 398-413

⁴ Eloffson J et al (2013) Alcohol use and cerebral white matter compromise in adolescence, Addictive Behaviours 38 (7)

⁵ McCambridge J et al (2011) Adult consequences of late adolescent consumption: A systematic review of cohort studies. PLoS Med, 8 (2)

⁶ Hingson, R. W. et al (2006). Age at drinking onset and alcohol dependence: age at onset, duration, and severity. Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, 160(7), 739-746.

⁷ Scottish Government (2019). Scottish Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey (SALSUS) 2018: Alcohol Summary Report. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

⁸ Alcohol Change UK (2022). Delivering a problem? Alcohol Change UK in Wales.

⁹ The Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005 – Section 102

¹⁰ Under the terms of the Consumer Credit Act 1974 under-18s are not permitted to take out credit cards

¹¹ The Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005 – Section 108

¹² Section 6 of the Alcohol etc. (Scotland) Act 2010 amended the Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005 Act to impose a mandatory licence condition in relation to both premises and occasional licences that there must be an age verification policy in relation to the sale of alcohol.

¹³ Scottish Government (2009). Changing Scotland's Relationship with Alcohol – A Framework for Action. Edinburgh: Scottish Government; and Scottish Government (2018). Alcohol Framework 2018: Preventing Harm, Edinburgh: Scottish Government