

Factors influencing public health engagement in alcohol licensing in England and Scotland including legal and structural differences: comparative interview analysis

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Plain language summary

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When alcohol becomes more widely available, harms tend to increase. In England and Scotland, this availability is controlled by local councils. They 'licence' shops, bars and other venues to allow them to sell alcohol. Local health teams, including doctors, often advise councils on licensing. In earlier work, we found seven differences in what Scottish and English health teams do on licensing.

In this study, we explore these seven differences and why they came about. To do this, we interviewed 94 professionals working in public health across both countries.

Scottish health teams got involved in licensing earlier than in England. This was partly because of when certain laws changed. Also, they were helped earlier by national organisations that try to reduce harm from alcohol. Scottish teams were more involved in local policies on licensing. This was probably because these policies changed more often in the Scottish system. Scottish teams involved the public more. This was partly because Scottish councils must set up 'local licensing forums'. Scottish teams also objected more often to licence applications. They generally felt that they could be more actively involved, because of a law in Scotland that says licensing must protect public health. This law does not apply in England.

In England, health teams were more likely to talk to businesses that wanted licences. They were less likely to try to block applications. When they agreed changes to applications with businesses instead of objecting, fewer formal licensing meetings were needed. This was not the case in Scotland. Also, Scottish teams did not feel it was okay for them to talk to businesses.

In summary, there are important differences in licensing law between Scotland and England. These matter for how health teams in the two countries engage with local councils, businesses and the public on licensing matters.