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Scottish public health experts call for ban on alcohol sponsorship of sport

- New research shows for the first time the high levels of exposure to alcohol sport sponsorship in professional football and rugby union in Scotland
- Alcohol marketing references featured once every 15 seconds in live Six Nations rugby match and once every 98 seconds in a live Scottish Premier League match
- Exposure to marketing activity is linked with drinking initiation and increased alcohol consumption
- A minority of clubs have alcohol sponsors and only 7% of overall sponsors were alcohol companies

Alcohol Focus Scotland and Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) are calling for the Scottish Government to curb sponsorship of professional sport by alcohol companies following new research into the extent, nature and frequency of the practice.

The new research from Institute for Social Marketing and Health at the University of Stirling highlights that where alcohol companies sponsor clubs and tournaments there is high frequency of alcohol references, and advertising is sophisticated and integrated into the club identity.

Sponsors are visible throughout match-days with pitch-side hoardings and shirt sponsors but also in the pre-match build-up over days and weeks before competition with extensive social media activity, product endorsement from players, competition tie-ins and limited edition products.

Millions of people – including children and young people – are exposed to alcohol sponsorship. The evidence is clear that alcohol marketing exposure is a cause of binge drinking and drinking onset among young people. It also influences their attitudes and increases their likelihood of developing problems with alcohol later in life.

Given the billions of pounds alcohol companies pump into advertising it is naive to assume there is no impact on the drinking behaviours of the rest of the population.

Alison Douglas, chief executive of Alcohol Focus Scotland said, “Sponsorship by alcohol companies has been woven into the fabric of the sports we love capitalising on our emotional connections to our teams and players, so that we associate certain alcohol brands with healthy activity and high-performing athletes.

“Sport should be clean – it should inspire good health and active participation - and to use it as a promotional vehicle for an addictive and health-harming product is simply unacceptable. The current system of self-regulation is no regulation. It is failing to protect people – especially our children and other vulnerable people. The Scottish Government needs to act.”

Dr Eric Carlin, Director of SHAAP said, “It’s easy to understand why many clubs are attracted to the income alcohol sponsorship can provide but we need to look to clubs and organisations who are managing well without this sponsorship and move away from products, like alcohol, which cause huge problems in Scotland.

“Scottish Women’s Football have shown leadership in rejecting alcohol and gambling sponsorship. It’s time for others to follow their lead and protect their fans and players. The Scottish Government needs to introduce comprehensive and robust restrictions on alcohol sport sponsorship.”

Dr Richard Purves, from the Institute for Social Marketing and Health at the University of Stirling said, “This new research provides, for the first time, insight into the extent, nature, and frequency of alcohol sponsorship within two of Scotland’s most popular spectator sports, football and rugby union.

“Alcohol sponsorship was particularly visible in rugby union, both in terms of the number of sponsorship relations with alcohol companies and how often alcohol marketing references appeared in the television broadcasts analysed. For football, alcohol sponsorship appeared to be more prevalent amongst larger or more successful teams, for example those playing at the top-level, compared to clubs which offered fewer opportunities for national and international exposure, such as those in the lower-leagues.”

This research comes at a time when the place of gambling in sport has been called into question and we need to consider the propriety of linking any addictive and health-harming product with sport.

In Scotland, one in four of us are drinking above the Chief Medical Officer’s low-risk guidelines and every year alcohol is responsible for almost four thousand deaths, over thirty-thousand hospital admissions and countless problems for families and communities.

Investigators from Children’s Parliament found that 9-11 year olds had awareness and knowledge of alcohol sport with one child able to give specific details of pitch-side advertising and sponsorship activity he had encountered.

This week, Members of Children’s Parliament met with the First Minister and the Cabinet and called to make alcohol less visible for children. This includes ending sponsorship of sports and events at which children may be present in order to ensure all children grow up in an environment free from the negative impact of alcohol.

Alcohol Focus Scotland and SHAAP recommend that the Scottish Government should end alcohol sport sponsorship of professional sport, ensuring that comprehensive and robust restrictions form part of a broader strategy to control alcohol marketing in Scotland.

The Scottish Government’s upcoming consultation on marketing restrictions provides a timely opportunity to consider comprehensive regulations to protect people from alcohol marketing.

ENDS

For further information, contact Rebecca Sibbett, Alcohol Focus Scotland, 0141 572 6293, 07519121782 or Rebecca.sibbett@alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

Interviews are available with Alison Douglas, chief executive of Alcohol Focus Scotland, Dr Eric Carlin, director of SHAAP, Dr Richard Purves from the Institute of Social Marketing and Health at the University of Stirling **on Tuesday 4th March 2020 at 11:00 at Hampden Park, Glasgow.** Interviews may be available at other times, get in touch to discuss.

Notes to editors

- The research from the Institute for Social Marketing and Health at the University of Stirling included three interlinked studies. They looked at: the number of alcohol sponsors held by teams and associations; four in-depth case studies; and an analysis of all verbal and visual references to alcohol marketing observed in seven televised broadcasts.

Key findings from the research

- While only a small proportion of football and rugby union sponsors are alcohol companies, the wraparound nature of alcohol sponsorship means that when it is present, it is frequent and pervasive.
- Overall, alcohol companies represented only 7% of the main sponsors or partners recorded in the audit, with support received from a diverse variety of other companies (ranging from construction and building firms to IT and digital services).
- The proportion of alcohol sponsors was higher among rugby union teams (15% of all sponsors) than for football teams (4% of all sponsors).
- On average, an alcohol reference featured approximately once every 15 seconds in the live Six Nations rugby union match between Scotland and England.
- On average, there was an alcohol marketing reference approximately once every
 - 98 seconds in the live Scottish Premier League match,
 - 71 seconds in the live Scottish Cup Final; and
 - 57 seconds during the highlights of Scottish Premier League football.
- See attached research report ‘The extent, nature, and frequency of alcohol sport sponsorship in professional football and rugby union in Scotland’ for further details of the studies.

The Children’s Parliament

- In 2019, Children’s Parliament Investigators found 9-11 year olds had awareness and knowledge of alcohol sport sponsorship
- [In the final report](#) the Children’s Parliament Investigators called for an end to alcohol sponsorship of events at which children may be present in order to ensure all children grow up in an environment free from the negative impact of alcohol.

About Alcohol Focus Scotland and Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP)

- Alcohol Focus Scotland (AFS) is the national charity working to prevent and reduce alcohol harm. We want to reduce the impact of alcohol on individuals, families, communities and Scotland as a whole, through the implementation of effective alcohol control policies and legislation. For more information, please visit: www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk
- Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) represents the Medical Royal Colleges in Scotland and the Faculty of Public Health in Scotland, providing the authoritative medical and clinical voice on the need to reduce the impact of alcohol-related harm on the health and wellbeing of people in Scotland and the evidence-based approaches to achieve this. For more information, please visit: www.shaap.org.uk