

Episode 19: 'Alcohol Everywhere'

Podcast Transcript

Life with Alcohol and Drugs

Host: Rebecca Bradley

Guest Speaker: Rebecca McColl

Introduction:

Welcome back to another episode of Life with Alcohol and Drugs, from the charity Scottish Families.

Interview Begins

Rebecca Bradley:

Today we're joined with Rebecca McColl, who is our Policy and Research Assistant here at Scottish Families, and who has recently taken on the reins of the Alcohol Action group, which has been around for quite a few years now, but do you want to talk a wee bit about the group? How it came about and things that you've been doing.

Rebecca McColl:

The Alcohol Action Group was established in 2020, after a series of Alcohol Shorts. I think there was a group of people who were quite interested in taking that a bit further and taking a bit more action on alcohol harm specifically. The group is quite a mixed group; there are people there from other organisations who maybe do it as part of work. There are people with lived experience, including families as well.

The group's chaired by ourselves, but it's a collaborative effort. Everything the group does is very much decided by everyone in the group, and the report was exactly the same. The group decided what they wanted to do and what they wanted to look into, and the report developed from there.

Rebecca Bradley:

Yes, so the report you are talking about is the Alcohol Everywhere report, which got published, I'm going to say a month ago. Maybe August 2022 I think?

Rebecca McColl:

September.

Rebecca Bradley:

September, close enough! And that had been a collective effort of surveys that had been sent out through lockdowns and things like that, and it was really looking at specifically where people were seeing alcohol advertising and how it was impacting them. The report was looking at a better idea of how why the spread of alcohol messages are in our homes, online, in our communities. If you think of shops, if you think of social media and various things like that.

The report, obviously, it has had quite a good response. Obviously, you'll know yourself because you've had to talk about it at some events, which has been exciting, and recently we've also had quite a few mentions about it in the media as well. So, it's good to know there's definitely an interest in alcohol marketing and how it's impacting people.

Do you want to tell us a wee bit about the top findings from the report? What came out of it?

Rebecca McColl:

I'll give you a little bit of context before I talk about this finding. During the survey, people were asked to spend an amount of time of their choice particularly looking for alcohol references. We didn't ask them to do anything different; just go about their normal day, their normal business, and just to be a little more on alert for any alcohol references that they saw, and to think about that and to count how many they saw, take reference as to where that was or what the reference was. When people were taking part in the survey, when they were looking for alcohol references, respondents noted quite a large number over a short period of time. Most of the respondents did the survey over around an hour, so between the 35 people in the first survey, they noticed over 350 alcohol references. So, in quite a short period of time, a lot of alcohol references between 35 people.

In the second survey, 20 people took part in that, and they noticed over 199 references around the same time. Some people chose to do 24 hours, but most people chose to do around an hour. So that was that approach.

I think that was quite a strong finding as to just how strong the presence of alcohol is everywhere really and in our communities. Like I said, we didn't ask anyone to do anything different; they were just going to work, going to uni, going on the train or doing whatever they would normally do during the day, and alcohol was really one of the most common references that people noticed. It's not really a surprising when you think about it, but we weren't really expecting that to come up, that was the second most spotted reference to alcohol in the first survey and the most spotted reference in the second survey.

Alcohol advertising and references to alcohol are extremely prevalent online and on social media, with the majority of respondents seeing references in the first survey, and it was second in the first one. Alcohol references were noted from other daily tasks, such as conversations, emails, taking a trip to the shops, on TV. Our survey respondents noted that alcohol is very much 'in your face' wherever you go. That was a direct quote from someone who took part and left a comment.

Opinions kind of differed on the impact of lockdown restrictions on the consumption of alcohol. Some participants perceived that people were drinking less than in the height of lockdown, while others thought that people were drinking more as restrictions eased. Others noted no change at all, so it was quite mixed there.

In increased drinking, alcohol alone was highlighted as well, I think people noticed that people were in the house by themselves and were drinking alone. In the first survey, 60% of respondents perceived the experience that people were drinking more pre-pandemic, and 100% of respondents in the second survey agreed that with that finding.

So, those were some of the key findings that came from the report.

Rebecca Bradley:

When you look at, let's say, media, newspapers, journalists writing about the things that we are getting asked at Scottish Families, they're saying, oh, we know there were more people that were drinking

during lockdowns, and then never asking us, what's the impact now, a year or 6 months on, or things like that? I think it matches quite well to know that that's what people were seeing as well, even though we were saying, it's people's perceptions of that, it's like a fact now that that was true, that that's always happening. Even that consideration of saying litter - alcohol litter - but you're absolutely right. It's like discarded bottles in bins or the glass ones that are smashed on the street or the ones that are just left behind, that's absolutely true. That is there. Everybody's saying that, so it's just even shows you that that's there, and if you think of young people, that they're seeing that when they're going out on walks or going to school. It's a bit of a scary thing, I guess, to hear about but it's absolutely true. It is everywhere, and as you said in that quote, it is completely in your face. Even in conversations as well, it's true: people talk about going to a pub or what they're having to drink.

If we talk about lockdowns again, I remember I went to a meeting with Alcohol Action Group, and one of the people there said that they were in the supermarket and because you had in wait in queues and things like that, one of the queues went down the alcohol aisle, and they said that their children were with them and asking them all these things. Do you think that, obviously at the time the surveys were taken, there was lockdowns and it was when there were restrictions in place, did that play in role in how people responded?

Rebecca McColl:

Yes, both surveys were conducted in 2021, so we were well into the pandemic by this point, but January, I think was very different from September/October. Things with the virus were really quite bad that winter, we had the lockdown on Boxing Day, there were quite harsh restrictions at the time the first survey was taken. Last Autumn, things were much more relaxed, it kind of transitioned more into normal life, whatever that means. But most of society was functioning again as it was pre-pandemic, but obviously we still had isolation rules in place and things like that. So, things had changed quite drastically in those couple of months.

Questions were added about the pandemic conditions in the second one. As a group, we wanted to know if they had impacted on their alcohol consumption or how alcohol was being marketed as things had changed. And naturally, I do think that that played a role in how people responded, and some people did reflect on their own drinking as well during Covid. They said that they'd caught themselves saying, 'There's nothing else to do but drink, especially on the days where they found the lockdown to be quite deflating. So, I think there was a lot of that in both surveys, a reflection on themselves as well as much as general society, and I think that really did impact how people responded and how maybe people interpreted the questions.

Rebecca Bradley:

There was also a part of it that said, if we're going to go back to the references themselves, I know you've mentioned some of them, but it said that 35 people from, I think it's the first survey, together they noted 350 alcohol references, I think that's the final total, which, again, is quite scary. If you think about it, it's quite telling as well of how bombarded we truly are with alcohol marketing. For example, when I'm on my phone, if I go on Twitter or Instagram or something like that, you're getting sponsored posts, and today it was gin that was getting advertised to me. I don't drink, so it's kind of strange that the algorithm would send that to me, but I think it just shows you that that's how it goes; they send them out to anybody.

We have spoken about some of the references, for example, the litter and things, but do you want to give maybe a few more examples? I think it's quite good to know what people are actually seeing, because it might have been something that a person didn't consider was alcohol marketing, but it actually is.

Rebecca McColl:

Yes. Litter was obviously the big one in both surveys. Online followed quite closely behind. On TV as well, both in adverts and within programmes, people had noticed in the soaps, going to the pub and obviously, alcohol is involved. It's quite embedded in quite a lot of programmes that might be on in the evening.

In food as well. People noticed in the supermarket, maybe chocolates that have alcohol in them or like beer-battered fish, things like that. And 28% of people also said in both the surveys, 'other'. There's a comment box for people to leave comments, so 28% in both surveys said, 'other', they'd noticed other things than what we'd listed. Some examples that were left in the comment boxes were, rubbish, which is quite similar to litter, but household waste, skips, actually in bins, if they were putting something in a bin. In conversations, on different types of cards as well. If there were shopping and they noticed congratulations cards, birthday cards, little cocktail on the front, or a beer, things like that.

Emails, as well, someone brought up that they'd been involved in their teaching as well; it was a globalisation topic that the person had mentioned that alcohol had been mentioned there. And at the shops as well, going to the supermarket and walking past the alcohol aisle.

It was also noticed at events and concerts, such as an alcohol brand sponsoring the team on their shirts or they sponsored the venue, and on billboards and posters as well. But those were less common, just because I don't think everyone was going to an event on the day on the timeframe that they were asked to do the survey, so I suppose that's a bit of a limitation, but in terms of the day-to-day stuff, litter, online and on TV were the most popular ones.

Rebecca Bradley:

Yes, and you can imagine that in lockdown, people were watching their TVs more and then every advert break has got some alcohol advertisement in it. It's constant messaging, and I suppose that's what it's supposed to do; that's the marketing point, it's there to get you to go out and but this brand so that they can earn money. That's the whole point of it.

There was also, I think it's towards the end of the report, but it talks about how alcohol advertising really has an impact on people in recovery, so it would be good if we could hear a wee bit about that, but also, it impacts families, it impacts people affected as well. For example, I know that on our young person's group, Routes, one of the team members put something out about how she was in a shop with one of the young people, and when they walked by the alcohol aisle, one of the young people whispered, I think it was, 'Three weeks' or something, they kept saying as they walked by it, and that was how long it had been since their parent had had a drink. What experiences are people sharing about the impact it has on people in recovery, but also, how are families and people affected?

Rebecca McColl:

Yes, that came through really strongly towards the end of the report. There were random comments, and people reflected on how difficult that must be for people in recovery or people who are maybe drinking actively as well, or maybe trying to avoid it for their families too, and when they're walking past alcohol adverts. People did note how difficult that must be in terms of advertising if a family member or friends are just scrolling on social media, there's really little escape from alcohol whilst you are doing your everyday normal tasks. Responses also highlighted how alcohol is perceived in terms of socialising, birthdays and things like that; there's always an expectation that alcohol is going to be involved.

There are a few quotes from this section where people said that alcohol is everywhere, you're in your local corner shop or your supermarket, it can just make shopping a hazard for someone in recovery or if you're trying to control or abstain.

There is in Scotland, just harking back to the references, the prevalence of litter, walking past that in the street might be quite triggering for someone. You don't know how that might make someone feel. It's really prevalent everywhere. Also, on a more positive note there, 100% of survey participants said they don't think it's essential to drink alcohol to have a good time. And there was a quote here where somebody said, 'I'm living proof of that. My life has definitely been brighter without. I still enjoy music, gigs and going to the pub, even though I'm in recovery it doesn't impact me enjoying my life.' So, a bit more of a positive spin on the end there, but I think the impact is really difficult for families of people in recovery as well.

Rebecca Bradley:

Definitely. I think even it's safe to say that we see alcohol marketing or alcohol references every single day. I think we can safely say that. If you are at home, on social media, if you have a TV, anything like that, if you go to the supermarket to get your usual shop, you are always going to see alcohol, it doesn't matter. And as we're getting closer now to the Christmas period, you know you're going to see alcohol and you know you're going to see shops with the deals on the alcohol you can drink and things like that.

I think it doesn't matter what time you do this survey; you're always going to get a high volume of references to alcohol. Also, I know it wasn't really the biggest part of the report, but there were little bits in there about alcohol marketing, things like labelling on, I think it was health information labelling that's on alcohol labels, do you want to share anything from there that came out of that?

Rebecca McColl:

Yes, the group were interested in labelling and advertising because these can be small things that can be done that can have a really big impact. We did ask a few questions about labelling and advertising. 24 people answered a question about health warnings. These questions were only included in the second survey - just to put that out there before we go any further, just because, on reflection, the first survey, the group decided they wanted to add some of these ones in. 100% of the people who answered that question thought there should be a health warning included on every alcohol product on the label.

92% of people thought the number of units should be included. 83% thought a warning, not to drink when pregnant or trying to conceive was really important, and 75% of people felt really strongly that having a drink driving warning should be included. 71% thought that weekly low-risk drinking guidelines should be included as well. 62% thought that a cancer warning should be included as well. Exactly half thought that nutritional information should be included on the labelling of alcohol products.

In terms of advertising, 25% of the respondents were really strongly supportive of restricting online advertising, and 32% were very strongly supportive. There was general support for that overall. A high percentage of respondents were also in favour of restricted TV advertising before the watershed, with 53% being very strongly supportive of that, and restricting cinema advertising to only 18 certificate films. That received the highest percentage of support and was the most popular measure.

Sports sponsorship was a bit of a mixed one: 21% of respondents showed little to no support for that, but 43% of respondents were very strongly supportive, so that was quite an interesting one about sports sponsorship. Just a little quote to finish off, someone said, 'There's too much advertising that

promotes alcohol as a way to relax, reduce stress and have fun as a way to reward yourself for working hard or achieving a goal. Alcohol advertising implies that social occasions and holidays require drinks, to be enjoyable.' Which is what we discussed before that marketing and how advertising plays a part in that.

Rebecca Bradley:

Definitely. Yes. If you look at alcohol advertising, it often is fun, it looks sociable, it's all very colourful, very pretty, it's always people having a great time, the time of their life, but we know that that's not entirely true. I think if you really wanted to go down that alcohol marketing route, there are so many great reports out there, great campaigns and stuff, that are looking into that. With this report, it is quite a short report, it is very easy to read, and I highly recommend that people do go and have a wee read of it and see what's come out of it. But I think we can definitely say that's been a successful report, and it's been excellent to see the positive responses to it and various things like that.

What's really next for the Alcohol Action Group?

Rebecca McColl:

We had our first meeting in a while last week. That was good, to get the group back together, get to know each other and think about what we're going to do next. One of the main things that came out of the survey was that, I think, 2% in the first survey and 3% of participants in the second survey were in the 18-24 age bracket. The Group's really interested in trying to engage with that age group, and even younger young people, in order to find out what their views are on alcohol being everywhere, marketing, advertising, and the impact alcohol has on their lives and how that impacts them. So, we're looking at that at the moment. We're working on changing the survey a little bit, so it's more appropriate for young people. Our next move is hopefully a report on alcohol advertising, labelling, and just the impacts of alcohol on young people. We'd quite like to do a bit on families as well.

I was thinking about being a little bit creative, but I don't know how this will turn out, for the next survey we are asking people to submit a photo so that in the end, maybe we can have a little collage of all the things that people have spotted over however long they decided to do it. We thought that might be quite a good visual to show just how everywhere alcohol is.

That's where we're at at the moment. Then we're waiting patiently for the alcohol marketing consultation to come out with the Scottish Government, which they've said will be later on. That's our next project, responding to that, responding to the proposals, and we're going to use the report to inform that as well. It's been quite useful. Those are our next steps.

Rebecca Bradley:

A lot is happening. But it is good. I think it's exciting to hear about the young people as well, because just when you were talking about what restrictions, etc, should be in place, I feel like a lot of it was tailored towards protecting young people, especially the one that was talking about after the watershed and things like that. So, there does seem to be more of a sense that young people are exposed to alcohol marketing constantly, it doesn't matter where they are.

Yes, I think that's going to be really exciting, and I can't wait to hear more about it. Obviously, there's a Twitter feed for the Alcohol Action Group - that's how people can stay up to date and things like that with it.

Rebecca McColl:

We're on Twitter @alcsfad, if you want to follow us and keep up to date with what we're doing, or if you want to join the group you can get in touch with us on Twitter or you can send me an email: rebeccamc@sfad.org.uk

Rebecca Bradley:

Brilliant. Thank you. You know what to do to go and read the report. Thank you so much for your time.

Rebecca McColl: You're welcome.

We are here to support you if you are concerned about someone else's alcohol or other drug use. We can chat, offer listening support and information, and link you either into our own services or services local to you. Contact our helpline on 0808 0101011. Email is: helpline@sfad.org.uk. Or you can use the webchat on our website, at sfad.org.uk.

Interview Ends

Exit:

Thank you for listening, if you're worried about somebody else's alcohol or drug use you can contact Scottish Families on 08080 10 10 11 or by email at helpline@sfad.org.uk. We also have webchat and further information on our website www.sfad.org.uk.