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Public health engagement in alcohol licensing in England and Scotland: the ExLEnS mixed-method, natural experiment evaluation

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Plain language summary

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Research finds that when alcohol is more easily available, because more places sell alcohol or have longer opening hours, people tend to drink more and harms tend to increase. In England and Scotland, 'Licensing Committees' in local governments have power over which venues are given a licence to sell alcohol legally. They make decisions based on local policy and on licensing goals set out in law. Licensing laws are slightly different in both nations, and health representatives are often involved in trying to influence local licensing decisions and policies, to reduce alcohol-related harms.

We aimed to find out what public health teams have done to influence alcohol licensing and whether their actions have affected alcohol-related harms. We recruited 39 public health teams (Scotland: 12; England: 27) and measured how active they were on licensing matters. We gathered detailed information (from interviews and papers) about their actions from 2012 to 2019, and asked them and others involved in licensing (including police, and local authority licensing teams and lawyers) about how their efforts might make a difference to harms. We gathered local data on alcohol-related health harms and crimes during 2009–19. We analysed whether any changes in these harms were related to the level of public health team activity, and explored differences between Scotland and England.

Public health teams across Scotland and England took varied approaches to engaging in alcohol licensing, and their work was often welcomed by others working in the licensing system. However, we found no clear relationship between the level of licensing-related activity that public health teams engaged in and the levels of alcohol-related health harms or crime. This may be because their actions make only a modest difference to licensing decisions, or because it may take longer than the study period for them to have a sizeable impact. Reducing alcohol-related harms through licensing may require strengthening national licensing laws and the powers of public health teams, including by addressing online sales and home deliveries.

