# Government’s 10-year health plan faces challenge over alcohol’s rising death toll and industry influence



When the government unveils its 10-year health plan this July, the emphasis on preventive measures in public health is anticipated to become a central theme. This focus is not new; for several years, ministers have highlighted the need for healthier lifestyle choices. However, with only weeks until the announcement, it remains to be seen how these ideals will translate into actionable policies, particularly regarding the public narrative surrounding health and wellness.

One topic expected to garner significant attention is alcohol consumption and its repercussions. In 2023, the UK reported an alarming 10,473 alcohol-related deaths—the highest toll in recorded history, reflecting a 4% increase from the previous year. Disturbingly, men are more than twice as likely to die from alcohol-related causes as women, with the most significant fatalities occurring among those aged over 55. Regions such as Scotland and Northern Ireland exhibit the highest death rates, highlighting stark regional disparities in alcohol-related harms. The North East of England bears the heaviest burden within England itself, with a rate of 25.7 deaths per 100,000 people.

In his recent review, Lord Darzi pointed out a troubling correlation: as alcohol has become more affordable, the incidence of alcohol-related deaths has similarly risen in England. Contrastingly, there is emerging evidence from Scotland suggesting that minimum unit pricing might have contributed to a decline in alcohol-related deaths and hospitalisations. This raises questions about the effectiveness of potential regulatory measures that might be considered as part of the upcoming health plan.

Internationally, the call for stricter alcohol regulations is gaining momentum. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently declared that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption, a stark claim that challenges the long-standing narrative that moderate drinking is harmless. This assertion is echoed by a newly formed European Health Alliance on Alcohol, which is set to advocate for policies aimed at curbing alcohol-related injuries and illnesses. Additionally, a UN General Assembly meeting scheduled later this year will address non-communicable diseases, with alcohol-related illnesses likely to feature prominently on the agenda.

Policymakers have a variety of options at their disposal to combat the alcohol crisis, ranging from minimum pricing to advertising restrictions and tax increases. Stricter guidelines also exist in the UK, where adults are recommended not to exceed 14 units of alcohol per week, while pregnant women are urged to abstain completely. Historically, Labour’s leadership had dismissed the introduction of minimum unit pricing in England, despite its successful implementation in Wales. With growing concerns about alcohol's impact on public health, it is vital for the government to revisit this decision.

However, the drinks industry is not standing idly by. A recent article highlighted how major alcohol companies are launching a systematic counteroffensive against tightening regulations and are using advertising campaigns to promote the idea that moderate drinking poses no significant health risks. This messaging runs counter to WHO guidelines, generating a potential conflict between public health imperatives and corporate interests. Furthermore, previous reports have illuminated how, under the influence of lobbyists, proposals to curb ultra-processed food marketing were weakened. This trend raises concerns about the influence of economic motivations in shaping health policy and the need for ministers to prioritise accurate health information over industry lobbying.

The potential for a shift in the government’s approach to alcohol policy is underscored by the continuing dialogue about the significant health risks posed by alcohol, including its classification as a Group 1 carcinogen by the WHO. As public discussion evolves, it is crucial for the government to engage with these insights meaningfully, ensuring that health guidelines are informed by scientific evidence rather than corporate influence. Catching public attention with a narrative that prioritises health over economic growth is a challenge that requires careful navigation.

Ultimately, the forthcoming health plan may mark a significant Milestone in the UK’s public health strategy, but it will be the effectiveness of its implementation that determines its success. As the government prepares to make public its strategies and commitments, the true test will lie in its ability to counteract corporate narratives and protect the health of its citizens.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/01/the-guardian-view-on-alcohol-and-public-health-the-drinks-industry-must-not-control-the-narrative), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/7694549e-08e5-434e-b331-03b1327304dd)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/01/the-guardian-view-on-alcohol-and-public-health-the-drinks-industry-must-not-control-the-narrative), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/feb/05/alcohol-related-deaths-in-uk-hit-record-high-of-10473), [[5]](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/alcohol-profile-february-2025-update/alcohol-profile-short-statistical-commentary-february-2025)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/04-01-2023-no-level-of-alcohol-consumption-is-safe-for-our-health), [[6]](https://www.ias.org.uk/news/alcohol-specific-deaths-in-england-rise-by-4-6-in-2023/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.ias.org.uk/news/alcohol-specific-deaths-in-england-rise-by-4-6-in-2023/), [[7]](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2024/06/12/four-industries-are-responsible-for-2-7-million-deaths-each-year-in-europe-who-says_6674571_114.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/01/the-guardian-view-on-alcohol-and-public-health-the-drinks-industry-must-not-control-the-narrative), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/7694549e-08e5-434e-b331-03b1327304dd)
* Paragraph 6 – [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/7694549e-08e5-434e-b331-03b1327304dd), [[3]](https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/04-01-2023-no-level-of-alcohol-consumption-is-safe-for-our-health)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/01/the-guardian-view-on-alcohol-and-public-health-the-drinks-industry-must-not-control-the-narrative), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/7694549e-08e5-434e-b331-03b1327304dd)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/01/the-guardian-view-on-alcohol-and-public-health-the-drinks-industry-must-not-control-the-narrative> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/feb/05/alcohol-related-deaths-in-uk-hit-record-high-of-10473> - In 2023, the UK recorded a record high of 10,473 alcohol-related deaths, marking a 4% increase from 2022. The rate of alcohol-specific deaths decreased slightly to 15.9 per 100,000 people. Men were more than twice as likely to die from alcohol-related causes compared to women. Scotland and Northern Ireland had the highest rates, with 22.6 and 18.5 deaths per 100,000 people, respectively. The North East region had the highest rate in England at 25.7 per 100,000 people, while the East of England had the lowest at 11.5 per 100,000 people.
3. <https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/04-01-2023-no-level-of-alcohol-consumption-is-safe-for-our-health> - The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption, as even small amounts can lead to health risks. Alcohol is classified as a Group 1 carcinogen, causing at least seven types of cancer. The WHO emphasizes that the risk of developing cancer increases with the amount of alcohol consumed, and no level of alcohol consumption is free from risk. The statement underscores the importance of reducing alcohol intake to lower health risks.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/7694549e-08e5-434e-b331-03b1327304dd> - Major global alcohol companies are strategizing a counteroffensive as public health authorities adopt increasingly stringent positions against alcohol consumption, akin to past tobacco regulations. The World Health Organization (WHO) intensified scrutiny by stating there is 'no safe level' of drinking and listing alcohol among industries causing significant harm. In response, leaders at major firms like Diageo, Asahi, and Heineken are challenging the accuracy of health studies and promoting the positive social aspects of moderate drinking. Advertising campaigns now emphasize real-world social benefits, downplaying health risks. Industry leaders fear being sidelined in policymaking and likened to the vilified tobacco industry of previous decades. The expected release of updated U.S. dietary guidelines and an upcoming UN meeting on non-communicable diseases could further tighten alcohol regulations. Some countries, such as Ireland, are already mandating health warnings on alcohol labels. Industry lobbyists express greater concern over shifting public opinion than regulatory changes, as debates continue over how best to communicate the benefits of moderate drinking without triggering backlash.
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/alcohol-profile-february-2025-update/alcohol-profile-short-statistical-commentary-february-2025> - In 2023, there were 8,274 alcohol-specific deaths in England, marking a 4.6% increase from 2022 and the highest rate since 2006. This equates to a rate of 15.0 per 100,000 population. The North East region had the highest rate at 25.7 per 100,000, while the East of England had the lowest at 11.5 per 100,000. The mortality rate in the most deprived areas was double that in the least deprived areas, highlighting significant health inequalities.
6. <https://www.ias.org.uk/news/alcohol-specific-deaths-in-england-rise-by-4-6-in-2023/> - Deaths from conditions wholly attributable to alcohol have increased by 4.6% from 2022 to 2023, reaching the highest number for the fourth consecutive year. The death rate is at an all-time high of 15 per 100,000 people. The majority of these deaths are from alcohol-related liver disease, with a 93% rise compared to 2001. Experts express concern over the rising trend and advocate for preventive measures to address the growing health crisis.
7. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2024/06/12/four-industries-are-responsible-for-2-7-million-deaths-each-year-in-europe-who-says_6674571_114.html> - The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that four industries – tobacco, ultra-processed food, fossil fuels, and alcohol – are responsible for approximately 2.7 million deaths annually in Europe. Tobacco leads with over 1 million deaths, while air pollution, alcohol, and unhealthy diets contribute to the remaining fatalities. The report highlights how these industries manipulate health, political, economic, and media systems to their advantage, increasing non-communicable diseases, which cause 90% of deaths in Europe. It appeals to European policymakers to counteract these industries' influence and implement effective regulations, calling out misleading practices such as targeting vulnerable populations, spreading false information, and undermining public health laws.