

Action on alcohol during the next Senedd 2026-2030



A joint call to action by Adfam, Adferiad, Alcohol Change UK, Barod and Kaleidoscope



What we are calling for:

As the Senedd elections approach, five leading charities working on alcohol issues in Wales are calling on Members of the next Senedd from 2026 to 2030 to ensure:

- A clear direction for reducing alcohol harm – through an updated Welsh substance use strategy.
- Trauma-informed approaches to alcohol issues, and respectful and compassionate language about people who experience them.
- Outreach to find and support the most vulnerable alcohol-dependent people.
- Access to safe detox for alcohol-dependent people, to avoid life-threatening withdrawal symptoms.
- Consistent identification and treatment of people with alcohol-related brain damage (ARBD).
- An end to the requirement for sobriety before being eligible for mental health support.
- Consistent support for children and families affected by alcohol use.
- More joint working between domestic abuse services and alcohol treatment services.



Taking alcohol harm seriously

Wales' relationship with alcohol has been long and complex: sometimes positive, too often negative. That's why Members of the next Senedd from 2026 to 2030 need to be having well-informed and honest conversations about alcohol: the roles it plays in our society, and the effects it has on all of us. That includes talking honestly about the harm that alcohol causes.

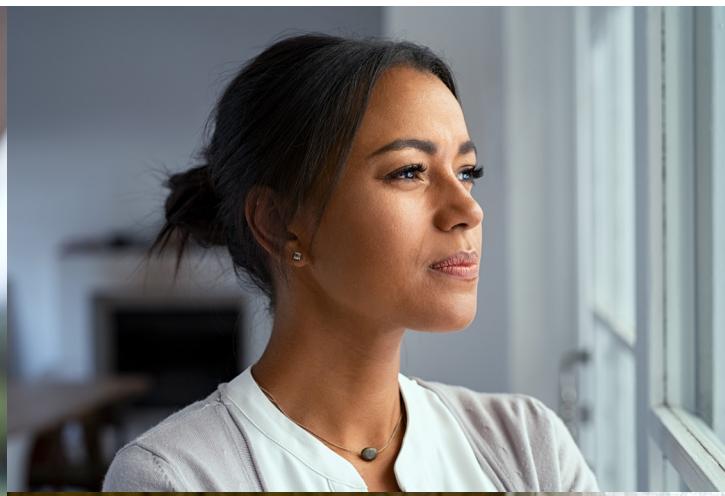
Alcohol-specific deaths in Wales have doubled in twenty years, including an unprecedented 28% increase during the Covid-19 pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. According to the latest annual data – from 2023 – more than 550 people in Wales died from causes wholly attributable to alcohol, and alcohol is a contributing factor in many other cases of death, injury and illness. Even at lower levels of consumption, alcohol is linked to poor sleep, low mood, and greater risk of cancer and heart disease.

Setting a clear direction for reducing alcohol harm

There is lots of great work happening across Wales – in the statutory and voluntary sectors – to reduce alcohol harm and support people into recovery. What services on the frontline need is a statement from the next Welsh Government that alcohol harm is a priority, and a clear direction of travel.

The last substance use plan for Wales expired in 2022. As recommended by the cross-party Senedd Health and Social Care Committee in June 2025, the next Welsh Government must bring forward an updated substance use strategy to ensure that reducing alcohol harm remains a priority.

The strategy should include measures for preventing harm as well as treating it. It should make clear the need for trauma-informed approaches and for respectful and compassionate language about alcohol use – and substance use in general – avoiding defining people by the substances they use.



Reaching the people with the most serious alcohol problems

Amongst the many people who experience alcohol problems, there is a smaller number – estimated to be around 4,000 people in Wales – who are acutely vulnerable and alcohol-dependent. They often have chronic mental and physical health problems and are open to abuse or exploitation by others. They have frequent unplanned contact with a range of public services – particularly the emergency services – as they go from crisis to crisis.

People working at the sharp end of alcohol harm know that even people in this apparently hopeless situation can and do turn their lives around. In many parts of Wales, drug and alcohol treatment agencies, the NHS, police, and local authorities are working together to reach these vulnerable people through assertive outreach and co-ordinated multiagency support. It's an approach that reduces harm and brings enormous savings for the public purse. It's approach that needs to be adopted across all of Wales.

Access to safe alcohol detox

For people who are physically dependent on alcohol, suddenly stopping drinking without support can lead to dangerous, even deadly, withdrawal symptoms. That's why in-patient alcohol detox, with proper clinical support, is an important part of the treatment pathway, offering a safe and effective way of managing alcohol withdrawal. To reduce the risk of illness and death from alcohol withdrawal, it is imperative that adequate funding is allocated to ensure that safe alcohol detox is available across Wales.

Addressing alcohol-related brain damage

Work with vulnerable drinkers has to include an understanding of the long-term damage that alcohol-dependency can do to the brain. One reason people with long-term alcohol problems often struggle to overcome them is that alcohol has impaired their mental capacity to engage in treatment. On the other hand, we know that alcohol-related brain damage (ARBD) is a condition that many people can recover from with the right treatment and support. We need to work to make that available consistently throughout Wales.



Working at the interface of alcohol use and mental health

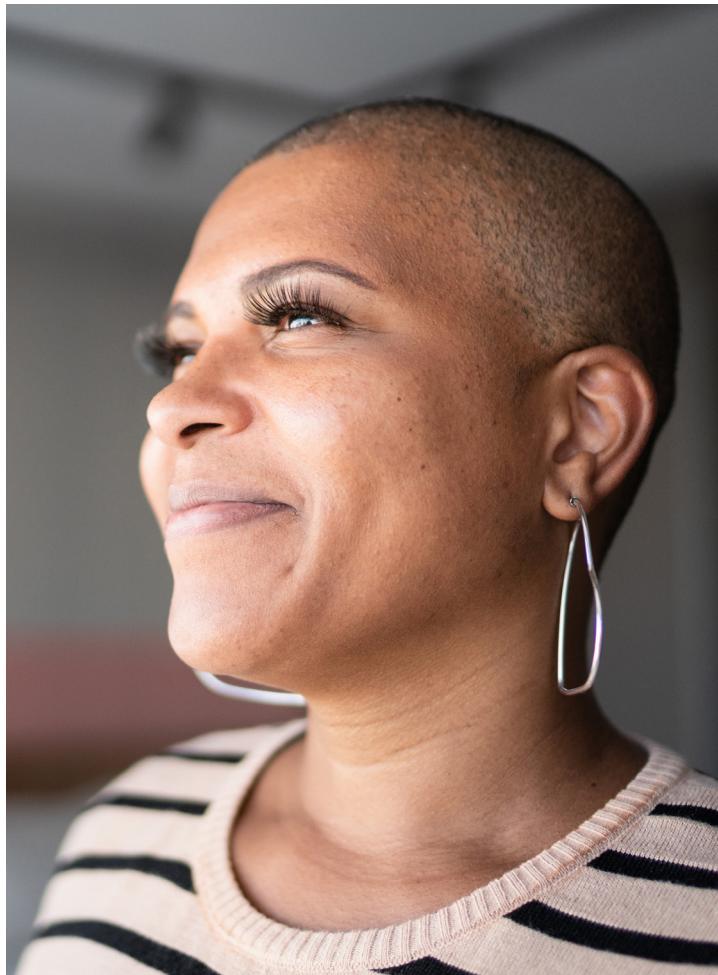
Alcohol problems are rarely simple, and drinking is often a way of coping with mental distress. The challenges in a person's life cannot always be untangled and parcelled out for a range of specialist services to work on one at a time – alcohol issues over here, mental health over there.

To be effective, services need to see and support the whole person: to take a "no wrong door" approach, in which every door in the system leads to the necessary support. As the Royal College of Psychiatrists stated in May 2025, we must "move on from the current system of siloed care, which creates unnecessary barriers to access and generates further stigma". In particular, we need to see an end to the requirement – still found in some services – for people to address their use of alcohol (or any other drug) in order to be eligible for mental health support.

Protecting children and families

Alcohol causes profound harm not only to individuals but also to their children and families, who often bear the emotional, psychological, and financial consequences of a loved one's drinking. Family members may experience chronic stress, anxiety, trauma, and a range of other mental and physical health problems. They also often face challenges such as stigma, isolation, abuse, neglect, broken relationships, and financial hardship.

Despite the scale of these impacts, the experiences and needs of families frequently go unrecognised. There is currently no national protocol for supporting people affected by someone else's use of alcohol (or any other substance), meaning support is often inconsistent across Wales. It is essential that families receive the recognition and tailored support they need to cope with the effects of alcohol harm, and rebuild their lives.



Tackling domestic abuse

One of the reasons alcohol often takes such a toll on families is the connection between alcohol use and domestic abuse. Alcohol does not cause abuse, and it is never an excuse for it. However, it is a factor in many cases of domestic abuse and can make abuse more severe. Perpetrators may be more aggressive when drunk. Victims may use alcohol to cope with abuse. Perpetrators may also use alcohol as a tool of abuse: both bullying victims to consume it and controlling their access to it.

To reduce this toll of pain and distress, services need to work together better across professional boundaries. Domestic abuse services need to better understand the use of alcohol by both victims and perpetrators. Alcohol treatment services need to be alert to the signs that the people they see are either suffering domestic abuse or perpetrating it. Both sets of services need to work together in all parts of Wales to seize opportunities to intervene and reduce harm.

The next steps

The next Senedd term from 2026 to 2030 offers an opportunity for Wales' decision-makers to talk honestly and seriously about alcohol, and to take definite steps to reduce alcohol harm. That's why we are calling on politicians from all parties to make reducing alcohol harm a priority, and to making sure that the right support is reaching everyone who needs it, including the many people currently falling through the gaps.

Learn more and get involved by contacting us

adfam.org.uk

adferiad.org

alcoholchange.org.uk

barod.cymru

kaleidoscope68.org