



Research Paper

Stakeholder views of current laws surrounding alcohol at UK football matches: Is it a case of using a “sledgehammer to crack a nut”?



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ABSTRACT

Background: In 2021, a fan-led review of football governance in England recommended that legislation surrounding alcohol and football be reviewed to determine whether it is still fit for purpose, the first such review since the mid-1980s. Restricting football fans' alcohol consumption has been debated in the UK for over 40 years. However, more research is needed into the current attitudes of fans and influential stakeholders on this matter.

Methods: Focus groups with football supporters (n=79) and semi-structured interviews (n=15) with key organisational stakeholders were conducted between November 2019 and February 2021. Focus groups included fans who regularly attended matches and supported various teams from professional leagues in Scotland and England, casual fans who usually watched games at home or in bars, and fans who followed the Scotland and England national teams. Stakeholders were selected to represent organisations likely to be instrumental in any regulatory change, such as the UK and Scottish Governments, Police, football supporters' groups and safety organisations.

Results: The current law does not allow for alcohol to be consumed within view of the pitch. Participants from England suggested this could be changed. While in Scotland, where the legislation only allows alcohol to be sold in hospitality, most participants were in favour of allowing the general sale of alcohol at football stadia via a pilot scheme. The reasons for these changes included: reducing unhealthy drinking behaviours; minimising the health and safety risk of fans arriving at the stadium just before kick-off; and a potential increase in much needed revenue for clubs.

Conclusion: Our data suggests an evidence-based review of current laws regarding alcohol and football may be appropriate. However, any discussion regarding changes to the law regarding alcohol at football stadia, including potential pilot schemes, should be evaluated and monitored in terms of both financial impact and the impact on public health and safety.

Introduction

In April 2021, the UK Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) announced proposals for a fan-led review of football governance in England as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the threat of a European Super League (DCMS, 2021). The Review was commissioned to 'explore ways of improving the governance, ownership and financial sustainability of clubs in English football, building on the strengths of the football pyramid' (DCMS, 2021). The resulting report (DCMS & Crouch, 2021) (hereafter the Crouch Report) discussed opportunities for income generation for lower-league football clubs. This included a recommendation to amend current laws regarding alcohol

sales at football grounds to allow alcohol to be consumed within sight of the pitch at League 2 and National League level via a small-scale pilot scheme. Also recommended was a review of the legislation to determine whether it remains fit for purpose; this would be the first such review since the mid-1980s. Football leagues and club owners in England and Scotland have long called for such a review (Slater, 2018). In response to COVID-19 infection risks, the English Football League suggested allowing spectators to consume alcohol in their seats to improve operational flexibility and spectator safety, while noting the potential for clubs to increase match day revenue (Burt, 2020). Similarly, the American owner of Scottish Premiership club Hibernian F.C. called for match-day alcohol sales to be introduced in Scotland on a trial basis, to augment both the

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match day experience and club revenue streams (Rodger, 2020). This led to the announcement in September 2021 that the accountancy firm Deloitte had been commissioned by several Scottish Premiership clubs to undertake a review of the league's sources of income to identify additional revenue sources (Fowler, 2021).

Football-specific legislation on alcohol

Sport and alcohol consumption are often intertwined (Gee, 2020), in part because alcohol producers associate themselves with sport due to its global popularity and visibility and to capitalise on the established appeal and emotional bond that sports fans have with their teams (Purves & Critchlow, 2020). Within the broader social and sporting culture, football occupies a unique position, with its live events facing a more restrictive space than other leisure or sporting events. In England and Wales, the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol) Act 1985, makes it illegal to enter a football stadium whilst drunk, consume alcohol on official transport to matches, take alcohol into a stadium, and consume alcohol within sight of a football pitch. Alcohol is available on general sale within stadia up to 15 minutes before kick-off and at half time, but fans cannot carry alcoholic beverages on to the terraces or consume alcohol in view of the pitch. While similar legislation is in place in Scotland, set out in Part II of the Criminal Law (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 1995, Scottish law is more restrictive. Under Scottish legislation alcohol is only available to purchase within hospitality areas, and alcohol consumption in hospitality areas overlooking the field of play is prohibited unless the blinds or curtains are closed. The laws in Scotland and England are in place for all professional club and international matches, both men's and women's.

This football specific legislation has been justified on the need to maintain public order and to minimise the risk of violence. In Scotland, the McElhone Report 1977 recommended a ban on alcohol at football matches which was subsequently enshrined in law by the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980. An on-pitch battle between supporters that was cleared by mounted police at the 1980 Scottish Cup final between Celtic F.C. and Rangers F.C. (two Glasgow-based teams with a long-established rivalry), was widely attributed to excessive alcohol consumption (Robertson et al., 2014). In the same year as the 1985 Heysel stadium disaster and the Luton Town Vs Millwall riot, English legal and football policies followed the Scottish lead in restricting alcohol consumption more strictly at matches (Gould & Williams, 2011). The role alcohol played as a causal factor is disputed alongside other factors such as policing strategy and stadium design and some commentators have criticised the emergence of a 'alcohol plus hooliganism' narrative (Canning, 2018).

Broader national context

Population levels of alcohol consumption in the UK peaked in 2009 (Lifestyles Team & NHS Digital, 2020), although they remain high compared to historical estimates and consumption levels elsewhere in the world (World Health Organisation, 2014). There has been a shift in higher risk drinking away from younger groups; the group with the highest consumption now is the 55 to 64 age group amongst whom 38% of men and 19% of women drink more than 14 units a week. The health and social harm related to higher-risk drinking has been estimated to cost the UK Government £21bn per annum (Burton et al., 2017). It is argued that widespread acceptance of drinking and consumption patterns in the UK population, combined with liberal changes in government alcohol-related policy (e.g., extended opening hours), has created a 'culture of intoxication', where higher-risk consumption is a normalised and regular occurrence (Alcohol Health Alliance UK, 2013; Hutton et al., 2013). Other sports in the UK such as rugby, darts, horse racing and cricket allow fans to purchase and consume alcohol within view of the action (PA Media, 2021), and specifically Lord's Cricket

ground in London even allows fans to bring their own alcohol to some matches (Marylebone Cricket Club & Lord's, 2022).

Alcohol sales abroad

Approaches to the sale of alcohol in football and other major sports stadia also vary between countries outside the UK. In 2019, European football's governing body, UEFA, relaxed its rules, allowing alcohol to be consumed at Champions League and Europa League matches, subject to local laws (Whaling, 2018). While in Germany there are no restrictions (Merkel, 2012), in France alcohol is only permitted in hospitality boxes where it can be sold along with food (Bodet et al., 2020). In some countries there are restrictions on the alcoholic strength of drinks available within stadia. For example, Italian football stadia do not allow sales of beer stronger than 5 per cent alcohol by volume while only non-alcoholic beer is sold at Camp Nou, home of FC Barcelona (Taylor et al., 2018). In the United States, regulation is enacted by the relevant sport governing body. In 2018, the National Collegiate Athletic Association introduced a rule allowing alcohol sales at intercollegiate events, following a two-year pilot (College AD, 2021). In Major League Baseball stadia, the most common practice is to terminate alcohol sales after the seventh innings (Klick & MacDonald, 2020). A longitudinal study in the Brazilian state of Pernambuco found that legislation introduced in 2009 which prohibited alcohol sales in its football stadia had little influence on hooliganism and the violent behaviour of fans (Nepomuceno et al., 2017). The authors concluded their study supported a decision taken by the state legislature in 2016 to legalize the sale of alcohol in stadia.

Debates on football, alcohol, and legislation

There has been a significant volume of social scientific research which has engaged with a variety of themes and issues relating to football and alcohol, mainly focusing on the English or, to a lesser extent, the Scottish contexts. This diverse work has explored inter alia: the centrality of pubs and alcohol consumption within UK male football supporter culture, including young fan subcultures (Armstrong, 1998: 162-4, 194-8; Dixon, 2013; Gibbons, 2014; King, 1998; Marsh et al., 1979; Weed, 2006); high levels of drinking and drunkenness on fan 'away trips' at club and international levels (Giulianotti, 1991, 1995; Millward, 2009; Pearson, 2012; Sugden, 2002; Williams et al., 1989); the association of high alcohol consumption with diverse 'carnavalesque' fan practices and identities, ranging from violent and disorderly, to boisterous, sociable, and non- or anti-violence (Armstrong, 1998; Giulianotti, 1995; Pearson, 2012); and, the role of the police in seeking to enforce alcohol-related legislation while negotiating and maintaining public order in and around football stadiums (O'Neill, 2005; Stott et al., 2012, 2021). However, to date, there remains a dearth of research into different stakeholder perspectives – notably those of fans and relevant authorities such as government, safety officers, and the police – on the issue of alcohol within football.

In recent years, the continuing validity of the laws around alcohol sale and consumption at professional football matches in the UK has been questioned by politicians and football stakeholders in both Scotland and England. These debates have focused on the discrepancy between football and other sports and leisure activities, such as rugby and music concerts, as well as 'a class mentality' about a separate law specifically for football fans (Peterkin, 2014). In 2014, the then Scottish Labour Party leader suggested the ban on alcohol at Scottish football matches should be lifted (Brooks, 2014). This was supported by then UK Prime Minister David Cameron who argued it was time to "treat fans as responsible adults" (Roden, 2015). Following this, the 2016 Scottish Football Supporters Survey suggested that 67 percent of 14,500 supporters surveyed were in favour of a controlled pilot scheme to consider the introduction of alcohol in a responsible manner (Supporters Direct Scotland, 2016). Hence, the issue of alcohol consumption in and around football has been hotly debated in policy and public circles over recent

decades. Yet, there remains a dearth of research into different stakeholder perspectives, notably those of fans and relevant authorities such as Government, Safety Officers and the Police. Despite being a 'fan-led' investigation, the Crouch Report does not appear to have consulted fans on the issue of alcohol legislation specifically. It quotes Owen West, former Chief Superintendent, crowd policing specialist, and Senior Lecturer in Policing, Law and Criminology at Edge Hill University, as stating that the policing narrative on the sale of alcohol in sight of the pitch is "unevidenced" and lacks coherence (DCMS & Crouch, 2021). West has several peer-reviewed articles on the policing of football fans in the UK (Hoggett & West, 2021; Stott et al., 2018, 2021) and the Crouch Report states that West argues alcohol bans on transport to matches, or in the stadium, tend to lead to 'pre-loading' or excessive consumption before matches by supporters, which aligns with research by Pearson & Sale (2011). West also noted that current laws can lead to excessive and arguably dangerous congestion in the concourses at half time where hundreds, sometimes thousands, of fans rush into enclosed spaces to buy a drink. The congestion issue can be seen UK-wide when supporters rush to the stadium immediately before kick-off (Pearson & Sale, 2011).

This paper contributes to addressing this research gap by investigating fans' and organisational stakeholders' attitudes towards the current laws surrounding alcohol and football and whether they are still considered fit for purpose. A key area of interest is fans' and stakeholders' perceptions of the laws, and appetite for change. The paper concludes by identifying that in contrast to "using a sledgehammer to crack a nut", the legislation should be proportionate to needs such as fan enjoyment, financial opportunity, and risks to public health and safety, but that both existing legislation and any alterations to this legislation should be evaluated in light of a shared set of priorities.

Methods

Overview

The analysis presented is based on data from focus groups with football supporters and semi-structured interviews with key organisational stakeholders. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Stirling's General University Ethics Panel (Reference GUEP 3677).

Focus groups

Sample and recruitment

In total, we conducted fourteen focus groups with football supporters in England and Scotland, to gain in-depth insight into: the importance and role of alcohol consumption for those watching football; how patterns of consumption differ from other leisure activities; how current laws surrounding alcohol at football matches influence the alcohol consumption of people attending matches; and to what extent football fans agree that existing laws are fair, effective or in need of change. To gather a range of views and experiences, our sampling strategy was designed to include groups of fans ($n=8$) who regularly attend matches and support teams from professional leagues in Scotland (Scottish Premiership, Championship, Leagues 1 and 2) and England (English Premier League, Championship, Leagues 1 and 2). We also recruited groups ($n=3$) of more casual football supporters who did not regularly attend matches in person but preferred to watch matches on television, at home or in pubs/bars. We also conducted focus groups ($n=3$) with supporters who followed the national teams of England and Scotland. Due to difficulties recruiting the final 'casual supporter' group post-March 2020, because of the COVID-19 UK 'lockdown', we decided to supplement our sample with an additional group of Scotland supporters. Focus groups were conducted with football supporters as these enabled participants to draw on shared experiences in the research setting. Our experience of using this method successfully to involve friends and colleagues in other alcohol studies (Emslie et al., 2015), demonstrates its potential for exploring

how established groups interact in relation to the social phenomenon under investigation here, football cultures and alcohol consumption.

Participants meeting our sample criteria were identified through referral and snowball sampling via supporters' groups networks such as the Football Supporters Association (FSA) and Supporters Direct Scotland (SDS). Groups were organised via direct email communication between the participants and research team. Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form which they either returned prior to the meeting or completed on the day if the group was conducted in person. Participants were offered high-street vouchers worth £30 as a thank you for taking part. Demographic information of focus group participants can be found in Table 1.

Data collection

Experienced qualitative researchers (RP, CB, JGM) conducted focus groups between November 2019 and February 2021. Before March 2020 groups were conducted face-to-face in neutral venues either organised by the fan groups or the research team. Groups conducted after March 2020 were facilitated online using Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Each focus group included 4-8 participants, lasting an average of 72 minutes. In-person focus groups were conducted in a private room to allow participants to speak freely. Focus groups were utilised as a way of exploring football supporters' opinions through their discussion with their peers (Cyr, 2016). While focus groups have been criticised for their dynamics, including social pressures, groupthink, and desirability bias, it is argued that the pressures and biases they entail are like the ones induced by everyday conversations (Oberschall, 1994; Hollander, 2004). As such, focus groups can be a useful tool in exploring people's understanding and interpretation of a phenomenon. The intention of using focus groups was to encourage fans to recount shared experiences and storytelling regarding alcohol and football.

The topic guide was designed to facilitate the conversation, with the researchers adopting the role of moderator, allowing the discussion to continue and develop freely and uninterrupted among participants. It covered: attending football matches, attitudes and understanding of current regulations, watching football at home, watching football in the pub, drinking during other sports/leisure pursuits and the role of alcohol in society. Specific sections of the legislation we looked at were: it is illegal to enter a football stadium whilst drunk; it is illegal to consume alcohol on official transport to matches; it is illegal to take alcohol into a stadium; it is illegal to consume alcohol within sight of a football pitch; and (in Scotland only) Alcohol is not permitted to be sold at football stadiums with the exception of hospitality areas.

Organisational stakeholder interviews

Sample and recruitment

We proactively sought and achieved interviews with key organisational stakeholders to gain in-depth insight into: the consequences of alcohol consumption for football spectators from the perspective of those responsible for match day safety and those who will be instrumental in any potential legislative changes; what the options for legislative change are and how these might be received by different stakeholder organisations; and the extent to which football stakeholders agree that existing laws concerning alcohol and football are fair, effective or in need of change. Stakeholders were selected to represent organisations likely to be instrumental in any regulatory change. This sample is not intended to be systematic but rather to represent a range to different perspectives. In total 13 stakeholder interviews were conducted with 15 individuals from organisations including the UK and Scottish Governments, Police, football supporters' groups, safety organisations and academics.

Stakeholder organisations were identified through direct contact, referral, and snowball sampling. Direct contact was used where the research team were familiar with the organisation and were able to obtain contact details for the organisational representatives via Google

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of focus group participants.

Characteristics	Participants (n=79)
Gender	
Male	61
Female	6
Prefer not to say	12
Country associated with	
Scotland	42
England	37
Type of Fan	
Club	45
International	17
Pub/Casual	17
Age (years)	
18-24	4
25-34	18
35-44	11
45-54	20
55-64	11
65-74	3
75+	0
Prefer not to say	12
Ethnicity	
White	62
Asian/Asian British	1
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	4
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups	0
Other	0
Prefer not to say	12
Religious beliefs	
No religion	42
Catholic/Protestant/other Christian	15
Buddhist	0
Hindu	0
Jewish	1
Sikh	0
Other	1
Prefer not to say	20
Highest level of education	
Higher education & professional/vocational equivalents	45
Highers, A levels, vocational level 3 and equivalents	11
Standard grades, GCSE/O Level grades and equivalents	11
No qualifications	0
Other qualifications, level unknown (including foreign qualifications)	0
Prefer not to say	12

searches or through the organisations' websites. Interviews were organised via direct email communication between the participants and the research team. Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form which they returned prior to the interview or completed on the day if the interview was conducted in person. Participants were offered high-street vouchers worth £30 as a thank you for taking part. Demographic information of stakeholder participants can be found in [Table 2](#).

Data collection

Stakeholder interviews were conducted by RP between April and September 2019 either face to face at participants' place of work or by telephone, with both the interviewer and participant in a private setting where possible, allowing free speech.

Interviews were guided by a semi-structured topic guide designed to solicit views around stakeholders' background/main concerns, knowledge and attitudes towards current regulations and possible changes to regulations. As with the focus groups, the specific sections of the legis-

lation we looked at were: it is illegal to enter a football stadium whilst drunk; it is illegal to consume alcohol on official transport to matches; it is illegal to take alcohol into a stadium; it is illegal to consume alcohol within sight of a football pitch; and (in Scotland only) alcohol is not permitted to be sold at football stadiums with the exception of hospitality areas.

Analysis

Focus groups and stakeholder interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by professional transcribers. Each transcript was read by two researchers (CB & JGM). Framework analysis was employed ([Srivastava & Thomson, 2009](#)) because this method lends itself well to in-depth analysis of each transcript, summarising the data into a framework grid using NVivo 12 (QSR International Ltd., Melbourne, Australia). The wider context of participants' accounts is therefore retained across each transcript. A combination of deductive (guided by the topic guide and literature) and inductive (reading the transcripts

Table 2
Demographic characteristics of organisational stakeholder interviewees.

Characteristics	Participants (n=15)
Gender	
Male	13
Female	2
Country associated with	
Scotland	7
England	4
UK	4
Organisation	
Football Governing Body	5
Safety Organisation	1
Government	2
Football Supporters' Organisation	2
Academic	1
Police	4

and reflecting on the main themes) reasoning was employed. Within our framework grid (row=participant, column=theme) summaries of participants' accounts were written in each relevant cell. To assist with data management each summary was hyperlinked to the transcript. Following this, high level themes were identified by the principal investigator (RP) and discussed with CB and JGM who re-examined the data and conducted further in-depth analyses.

Results

The results focus on five key areas regarding current alcohol laws in relation to professional football across Scotland and England. These are: historical reasons for legislation; attitudes towards current laws; which elements of the current laws are still viewed as important; adverse consequences of current legislation; and factors to consider in any potential legislative change.

Historical reasons for legislation

Almost all participants expressed an understanding that the laws were implemented because of violence and anti-social behaviour amongst fans in the past.

"This legislation is over thirty years old and it was brought in for a specific purpose, to deal with disorder and anti-social behaviour." [DCMS]

Both fans and organisational stakeholders based in Scotland consistently pointed to violence during the 1980 Scottish Cup final as the reason these alcohol laws were put in place in Scotland. Some fans also stated that this had affected the public reputation of football fans ever since. These fans believed that any discussion of fans consuming alcohol in Scottish football stadia would be decisively rejected by decisionmakers, with some alluding to a class division between football fans and those who watch other sports.

"then there's this perception, you know, that we can't have alcohol in the grounds because we wouldn't be able to behave. And that sort of stigma, but that all went back to, was it a Celtic Rangers Cup Final (...) So there's still that stigma. So I do think that football fans are regarded as, you know, lower down the [social hierarchy]"

"It is almost like that cup final between Rangers and Celtic has kiboshed [rejected alcohol consumption in stadia] for everybody, for ever more." [Scotland fans]

Participants based in England also cited incidents of violence from the 1980s as the basis for implementing legislation concerning alcohol and football and criticised both the evidence base behind the laws and their applicability to a modern footballing context.

"Those laws were based...on a premise that we now know to be false and that is excessive drinking and violence was that cause of the Hillsborough disaster, that and one or two others were obviously the watershed moments to bring in what I believe to be quite draconian legislation." [Senior Football Executive (England)]

The Hillsborough disaster actually took place 4 years after the implementation of these laws, however the broader point was supported by an English Premier League club fan who said:

"Football violence, back in the day, used to be really bad and that has just stuck, even though it's not there anymore, that reputation is still there."

A representative from the FSA mentioned how the alcohol laws were passed very quickly to respond to the much-publicised hooliganism at the time, and how these may not have been fully scrutinised before implementation.

"The sort of 80s, the hooliganism, knee jerk reaction because of the huge moral panic at the time around hooliganism. Which in itself has always been there lingering in the background to a greater or lesser degree (...) And when the legislation was put through parliament there weren't, to the best of my knowledge, there was nobody in the background, likes of liberties groups or and me at that time saying 'Hang on a minute! What do you think you are doing?' It was done you know to use a cliché, a classic sledgehammer to crack a nut." [FSA]

It was notable that stakeholders did not believe current laws had any basis in public health or attempts to lower overall alcohol consumption more generally within the wider population. According to them, legislation was brought in solely as a response to high-profile incidents of violent behaviour at football matches.

Attitudes towards current laws

The majority of participants expressed a feeling that at least some elements of the current laws needed changed. The representative from SDS reasoned that society, football in general and the stadia have all changed and improved since these laws were introduced. Stadia in the 1980s were predominantly terraces, where fans had no designated seat. Nowadays stadia, particularly higher up the football pyramid where crowds are bigger, must have designated seating or safe-standing space for every supporter and stewards in every stand.

"I think football has changed a lot in the forty years since then and society has also changed a lot (...) So the laws were designed with a different society, a different game of football and (...) a different physical environment in mind. I think the legislation is probably, it's there in place of fear of what is going to happen if you relax it" [SDS]

A Senior Football Executive from England also believed that current laws regarding alcohol sales were no longer appropriate as the behaviour of football fans has improved and society has moved on. This could be in part due to the level of surveillance and CCTV and the likelihood of being filmed by other members of the public and reprimanded for misbehaviour or shared on social media. This stakeholder also touched on how the treatment of football fans today is based on the actions of those in the past and that fans react badly to pre-emptively being treated as if they have done something wrong. This continued the narrative that football fans feel the current laws are unjust.

"No, they were definitely in date then, but nearly, over thirty years ago they are absolutely not, society is more sophisticated, I don't think people are prepared to behave as badly. Don't forget how football fans were treated then. Compared to where they are treated now. You know it's the age-old adage that if you treat people like animals they will behave like animals." [Senior Football Executive (England)]

A representative from the DCMS wanted to see a more thorough review of the legislation, one that looks at the laws in and out of stadia.

"I think it is certainly worth reviewing them, not just the rules around alcohol within the stadium, but I think the Act does cover alcohol on coaches, on trains. It's specifically related to travelling to football games. For me, I'm not sure that sits right. I think that it might go a bit far, in terms of a blanket ban." [DCMS]

However, there was a view from a minority that the current laws still work well. One group of fans from a Scottish League 2 club all agreed that they would not change any of the current laws because a more liberal approach might lead to an increase in alcohol consumption.

"R4: Personally, I think its fine the way it is."

R2: Aye, I'm quite happy the way it is too, aye.

R3: Yeah. I know there's always been arguments when they extended the hours, licensing hours, that people drank less. You don't really have that, what are you going to do? Open pubs at nine o'clock so people don't drink quite as much before three o'clock? They'll just go in earlier and drink more (...) I think the current rules that we've got are actually very good rules, for 99.995 per cent of fans. But you can't judge for every single person, unfortunately." [Scottish L2 club fans]

One member of this group went on to say they did not want the laws to change because they liked the community feel of their current match-day routine. They said that changing laws could lead to bigger crowds of more casual fans who would be there to drink rather than support the club.

"R2: I think we can take pride in the fact that we are a community club and we do all get on together, and it is a social event on a Saturday afternoon, whether home or away. If there was more and more bigger crowds at our place, would it be the same, I don't know. But I would hope so." [Scottish L2 club fan]

In England, a small number of organisational stakeholders also believed that the current laws should not be changed. A strong advocate was the Police Football Lead for England and Wales who believed that the legislation preventing alcohol from being sold in view of the pitch had made it much safer for fans attending matches.

"That is why I get really nervous, when you hear people calling for different strands to be unpicked, because it presents a significant risk and I think there needs to be really heavy evidence base before we unpick something, that in effect took us from a really perilous position, where people were dying every decade at football, to one where it is an awful lot safer."

This view was supported by the UK Football Policing Unit who described the existing legislation in England as follows:

"I think they're there for a reason and for me, there is no evidence to suggest that they are not valid. (...) In terms of drinking inside the pitch, I think that, to me, would be a really retrograde step, if we got rid of that, because you're going to create yourself even bigger problems, because you have then got people with glasses of beer, you've got people who can drink throughout the game, rather than having to have that forty-five minutes respite at least. You have also got the problem of beer being thrown over and so you're going to get confrontation, in-fighting and all sorts of problems. (...) I wouldn't advocate. I think it's a proportionate step to stopping people drinking fully for another three hours in a row."

Despite there being support for a change to current laws, there were also those who strongly believed alcohol should be restricted at football matches.

Elements of current laws viewed as important

Participants were asked about specific elements of the legislation and whether they felt they were still necessary or important. An example of a specific element that participants thought should remain was that it is illegal to enter a stadium whilst drunk. Some participants questioned what 'drunk' actually meant or how the authorities would assess if someone was drunk or not, but the general agreement across all stakeholders was that this element was fair and important for the safety and enjoyment of spectators at matches.

"No I think it's entirely fair. I can't say with 100% certainty that no drunk person has ever entered the grounds since that was introduced. Like any licensed premises you shouldn't be allowed into a pub when you're drunk, you shouldn't be served alcohol when you're drunk. I don't see why football should be any different. You could maybe argue it should be more robust, given potentially, walking up and down stairs and these sort of things are more complex and more challenging if you are under the influence of alcohol. I think it's entirely fair and I would hope that that is enforced by football clubs. The conversation I have had with clubs and with the football authorities, with football safety officers, they take their obligations really seriously and I'd be surprised and disappointed if that wasn't the case." [Scottish Government]

Stakeholders also felt it being illegal to take alcohol into the stadium was important and should not be changed, because bottles and cans could be used as missiles to throw at players or other fans.

"Yeah, that's pretty fair at the moment. (...) 'cause you don't want to see...although they do get in the stadium but, yeah, bottles and...things that could be thrown on the park or be used as weapons of, you know, anything at all." [Scottish Premier club fan]

Specifically related to the legislation in England, several institutional stakeholders thought that the element regarding drinking alcohol within view of the pitch should not be changed because this could encourage greater levels of consumption and disrupt the viewing experience for others.

"I'm all for if you want a drink, you can have a drink, down in the concourse areas, however, not to be able to bring it to your seat. I think it works very well at the moment." [British Transport Police]

Adverse consequences of current legislation

It was suggested that some elements of current laws in both Scotland and England were counter-productive and could be doing more harm than good. A senior Football Executive in Scotland suggested that the current legislation meant fans were consuming high-strength alcoholic drinks very quickly and then arriving at the stadium just before kick-off. They felt that the consequences of consuming these drinks in a short space of time were not felt until fans were already in the stadium and the football clubs were unable to regulate this, creating an environment which had negative consequences for fans' safety, disorder and health.

"At the moment, we have a system of laws surrounding alcohol and football, which encourage strange behaviours and those behaviours, I believe, are very damaging, in terms of safety, disorder and health." [Senior Football Executive (Scotland)]

The belief that the law restricting the availability of alcohol at football grounds encouraged fans to consume more alcohol and consume alcohol quickly in a short space of time was common. The majority of fans, in Scotland and England, believed that restricting their access to alcohol encouraged spectators to drink more alcohol faster than usual.

P1: The fact that you've got fifteen minutes to get a beer. If you want to get a beer, generally, you need to leave your seat before half time. You invariably get back to your seat after half time, so you're not only annoying people before half time and after half time, but.

P2: ...yeah you see people at half time, chucking – getting two bottles down them as quickly as they can." [English L2 club fans]

"I think part of the problem is when you take away the alcohol in the stadium, everyone rushes out to drink as much as they can before the game, because they know they're not getting one for two hours, so that's where you've got to get it in, because I can't get one at half time, I can't get one halfway through, it's the, "right, leather it [drink it quickly]" [Scottish Premier club fan]

Another issue identified was that current legislation caused a late rush of fans to the stadium shortly before kick-off – this was mentioned more by participants based in Scotland due to the element of the law which stipulated that alcohol not be available for general sale at Scottish football matches. Many believed that allowing alcohol sales within Scottish grounds may encourage fans to arrive at the grounds earlier rather than stay in the pub until just before kick-off.

"Getting back to the point about people turning up late and at last minute and the queues at the turnstiles, it would be safer in my opinion if people could turn up earlier because they were getting their drink in the ground." [Scottish Premier club fan]

Factors to consider in any potential legislative change

All participants provided views on potential changes to the legislation and how this could be enacted. In Scotland, the most frequently suggested element of the legislation to change was to allow alcohol to be on general sale at Scottish football grounds, bringing it in line with current

laws in England. Stakeholders in Scotland said that any such changes to legislation would need to be tested or piloted first, initially introducing alcohol sales at 'lower-risk' games where the rivalry between teams would be less intense.

"That's why I think they'd start with the friendlies and the testimonials and that. 'Legends matches' (former professional football players) where there's not an intense atmosphere or a rivalry involved." [Scottish casual fan]

Others suggested that one way to ensure a safe environment for families and other spectators who did not want to consume alcohol, or be around others who were drinking, would be to limit alcohol sales to certain areas of the stadium.

"It would be interesting if they brought in sections of the ground where you could get alcohol and sections of the ground where it was dry, see what people chose." [Scotland fan]

"I've always thought if they went to try and trial serving alcohol, they should maybe only do it for home fans, because probably most away fans who do come up, to wherever they're going in Scottish football, it's a day out and they're on the piss, but for home fans, it's not so much." [Scottish Premier club fan]

However, some fans questioned how this would be received by supporters and whether it was fair to allow some fans to purchase alcohol when others could not. It was felt this would be particularly unfair to travelling supporters who are often viewed as 'higher-risk' than home fans.

"Are we going to have a situation where away fans wouldn't be allowed to buy alcohol? It would only be home fans? I think it would be a ridiculous situation if that's what they did." [Scottish Premier club fan]

Instead, these fans thought a system where individuals were restricted in the number of the purchases they could make would be better, regardless of the magnitude of the match and even if fans were travelling long distances.

P1: *"Perhaps limit the amount that you can be sold and the, sort of, alcohol level. So maybe only under four per cent [alcohol by volume] and somehow monitor how many's been sold to each person."*

P2: *I think it was said before, using the ticket. You need to scan the ticket before you can get sold and then...just govern it."*

I: *Do you think it's a good idea for [club] to travel all the way down to Hampden [Glasgow] on buses and then be able to buy a pint during the game as well?*

P2: *I mean, yeah, like, that should be allowed."*

P3: *And also the limit...the...if the limit is in place then we're talking about, like...it's equality. Like, you're not going to...you can't have one rule for one team and one rule for the other just 'cause they're travelling from further."* [Scottish casual fans]

Many fans and some stakeholders pointed out that allowing alcohol to be sold at Scottish stadia would mean it was being consumed in a controlled, regulated environment which would be safer than the current situation where fans drink large amounts of high-strength alcohol before entering the stadium.

"From a safety perspective, you're in a controlled environment so the clubs can control it. The volume...the amount of alcohol that one person is downing in a game could be controlled, cause it could be you have to be a season book holder and you're only allowed to get X units of alcohol. They can limit the number...they can change how much alcohol you buy, so when we're playing [a rival club], there's less alcohol available that you can buy or the unit content of the alcohol is reduced." [Scottish Premier club fan]

An interviewee from Police Scotland suggested that changing the laws to align more closely with regulations in England could enhance safety for fans.

"It would also potentially stop the mad rush of fans trying to get into the stadium close before kick-off. Rather than being in the pub, trying to time it so they can get in -if the turnstile is open an hour and a half before kick-off and fans know that if they want that alcohol, they can get the drink in the stadium, it would probably have an effect on the flow of fans getting into the stadium. You could argue that could make it a bit safer."

Several stakeholders based in Scotland also suggested changing the law to allow the introduction of alcohol sales could be limited to lower ABV (Alcohol by volume) drinks, as happens in some European countries/clubs. This was believed to be a more public-health focused approach which could help to reduce fans' overall alcohol consumption if it is being substituted for higher-strength drinks.

"If you ban people from bringing alcohol in, then you can be sure that what is being consumed in the ground, is low alcohol and low strength beer and it's going to be healthier and less issues" [Senior Football Executives (Scotland)]

"We are, effectively, through the current system of laws, encouraging the quick consumption of high strength beer as opposed to consumption being spread out over the period of the event, in plastics, low strength and in a regulated environment and without the security and disorder implications that arise from numbers of fans arriving late on and trying to get in just before kick-off." [Senior Football Executive (Scotland)]

Some stakeholders suggested that reviewing the current alcohol laws could help clubs to increase their revenue. A casual fan in Scotland mentioned how changing the legislation could be particularly important to the small clubs in the football pyramid

"with these smaller teams, they are the ones that could benefit the most if they were selling alcohol at the stadia from a monetary point of view" [Scottish casual fan]

In one stakeholder interview, a lecturer in sport finance discussed how clubs are continually searching for ways of getting fans to spend more of their money when attending matches.

"If the clubs can have the fans inside the ground for longer, they've got more chance to squeeze a little bit more money out of them and that's just the way it is and I don't think that will change any time soon, especially when clubs are going to be looking to claw back some lost revenue from COVID." [Senior Lecturer in Sport finance]

Since alcohol is already available for general sale in England, suggestions for change were focused on reviewing the element of the legislation related to drinking alcohol within view of the pitch.

"I would like to see them bring something in where, on a trial basis, would allow you to drink at a football stadium, just on the short term, to see if it worked. To see if it reduced trouble, whether it made it worse. Is it any worse to go down the back of a stand and have two pints at half time in fifteen or twenty minutes, than it is to sit there with a pint that lasts forty-five minutes? What has got the worst effect on you?" [English Premier club fan]

This was supported not only by institutional stakeholders but also the majority of fans in the focus groups. For example, an English Premier League club fan expressed the belief that the current laws are outdated, whereas trusting fans to take alcohol to their seats would enhance the behaviour of fans over time.

"By allowing people to come up, yes with plastic bottles or whatever, but allowing people to come up, it just makes a more relaxed environment I think. You trust people to do it. Yeah, it might take a while for people to get used to it, but I think, down the line, if you give them permission to be able to drink in their seats watching the game, I think you'd find that cramming it in and the rush and everything else would subside and become more normal. You go to a game and have a few drinks at half time. It should be a case of you'd be allowed to - it's more like a nanny culture where they don't trust anyone."

The data from participants in this study suggest, that despite the different laws in Scotland and England, there is an appetite for some change in both countries.

Discussion

These findings provide new evidence about the attitudes of football fans and organisational stakeholders regarding alcohol laws at football matches in the UK. These are highly pertinent as the UK and Scottish Governments consider how to support football clubs in the wake of COVID-19 and the negative health impacts of high-risk alcohol consumption. They are also of particular relevance as the recently published Crouch Report made recommendations relating to alcohol sales at foot-

ball, and it is expected that the Deloitte Review in Scotland will consider the merits of in stadia alcohol sales. Regarding the current law in England on not being allowed to consume alcohol in sight of the pitch, The Crouch Report concluded that *“in light of the potential benefits to club sustainability and doubts about the effectiveness of the current law, the possibility of amending the law should be explored via a small scale pilot scheme at League Two and National League level carefully designed in conjunction with police advice alongside a possible review of the legislation, which would be the first such review in nearly 40 years of its existence.”* (DCMS & Crouch, 2021).

The Crouch Report also claimed that there would be a significant (40%) loss of revenue for clubs in the National League South were they to get promoted to the National League. This would be due to the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol etc.) Act 1985 prohibiting the sale of alcohol in sight of the pitch. This loss was predicted to be so severe that a club may not be able to afford to get promoted. Our findings suggest that there is support for the recommendations from the Crouch Report to consider amending the law via a pilot scheme and for a review of the legislation in general, but not solely for financial reasons. Alcohol sales can bring a much-needed source of revenue, but this should not be at the expense of public health and safety. It is important to note that the focus of the Crouch and Deloitte reviews is on business and governance, not public health or maintaining public order. This highlights how the focus of government regulation is perhaps changing from a concern with public order, to a more economically focused view and the financial sustainability of clubs.

Our findings provide evidence about the attitudes of a range of influential stakeholders. We have shown an appetite for change among these stakeholders, an argument which has previously only played out in the media (The BBC, 2018). If a review of current legislation were to take place, we suggest that public safety needs to be a chief consideration. As the Police Football Lead for England and Wales identified, it is difficult to unpick which parts of the legislation, if any, have contributed to a decrease in disorder. However, laws need to align with the modern-day football experience. Stadia are now all seated (or have designed safe standing areas), in stark contrast to the terraces of the 1980s. The reason these laws were put in place was to maintain public order and minimise the risk of violence, but the Crouch Report cites a lack of evidence linking sales of alcohol to increased disorder and asserts that the current legislation may contribute to greater risk of disorder (DCMS & Crouch, 2021). Our findings echo this and suggest that changes to legislation could positively impact on safety by encouraging people to arrive earlier and discourage the last-minute rush to get in. In England, our findings suggest selling alcohol in view of the pitch could lessen congestion at half time. Our findings also highlight concerns that the current laws may contribute to binge drinking and over consumption from fans; such behaviour has been widely reported to have negative health consequences (Twigg & Moon, 2013). However, as with other people in society, some football fans may just want to binge drink pre- and post-match, regardless of the legislation within football stadia.

Our data suggest that, overall, most stakeholders interviewed believed that the current laws around alcohol and football in Scotland and England should be reviewed. However, all stakeholders believed that some aspects of current legislation were still necessary and should be enforced. Sub-sections of the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol) Act 1985 and the Criminal Law (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 1995, such as taking alcohol into a stadium and entering a stadium whilst drunk, were unanimously identified as important in enabling supporters to attend matches safely. Other areas of these laws, such as it being illegal to consume alcohol on official transport to matches, consuming alcohol within sight of a football pitch and, in Scotland, only being able to purchase alcohol within hospitality areas, were identified by those in favour of altering the legislation as being aspects no longer fit for purpose.

There was agreement between stakeholders from Scotland and England as all participants understood that current laws came into force as a result of historical instances of violence and anti-social behaviour. Par-

ticipants from both countries identified specific events that they thought had precipitated the implementation of current laws, such as the 1980 Scottish Cup final, with many stakeholders agreeing that the implementation of these laws was necessary at that point in time. Direct comparison on opinions on laws between stakeholders based in Scotland and in England is difficult when they were talking about different legislation. However, there was general support to review the legislation that each country currently abides by.

As previously mentioned, the laws in Scotland are stricter and so it is perhaps unsurprising that more stakeholders in Scotland were in favour of change. The few fans who felt current laws did not need to change at all tended to be older, aligning with previous research which reported that older supporters are more resistant to changing current legislation (Purves et al., 2021). Importantly, institutional stakeholders such as Senior Football Executives, SDS, the Chief Safety Officers Association, as well as most fans, supported a review of current legislation and thought the best way forward was a pilot to test how best to proceed.

The opinions from stakeholders based in England were mixed. Institutional stakeholders from the Police and Corporate Security were all quite strongly of the opinion that the laws on alcohol and football in England should not change. However, the Corporate Security Manager was open to a review of the legislation. All the fan groups of English clubs and the national team, a Senior Football Executive in England, a representative from the FSA, and a member from the DCMS favoured a review of the current legislation in England.

These findings should be considered in light of some limitations. First, although we employed purposive sampling to reach a geographical spread of football fans in Scotland and England and a spread of leagues in the respective football pyramids, findings from these focus groups may not fully represent the behaviours and attitudes of the broader football fan community. Similarly, individuals interviewed from the institutional stakeholders may hold differing views from those of their organisation as a whole. Fans were categorised as regularly attending matches, casual supporters or national team supporters based on self-identification, which could have resulted in some fans being incorrectly categorized. Furthermore, some of the data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic when stadia were not open to fans and so although these participants were categorised as ‘regularly attending matches’, they may not have attended a match for some months.

Conclusion

Football stakeholders participating in our research mostly favour reviewing current legislation, considering significant aspects as no longer fit for purpose. These findings have implications for existing laws in Scotland and England, which were conceived and passed when the experience, culture and infrastructure at football matches was very different. An evidence-based review of current legislation may be appropriate. However, any future discussion regarding the laws surrounding alcohol at football grounds, including the possibility of a pilot scheme, must be evaluated, and monitored by the clubs and the authorities. This means not only evaluating in terms of the financial impact but also in terms of the impact on public health and safety, such as the number of incidents that require intervention from the authorities and general behaviour and alcohol consumption of fans. These laws should be proportionate to needs, such as fan enjoyment, financial opportunity and risks to public health and safety and therefore should be evaluated considering this shared set of priorities.

Credit author statement

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Ethics approval

The authors declare that they have obtained ethics approval from an appropriately constituted ethics committee/institutional review board where the research entailed animal or human participation.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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