

Exploring influences on the public health contribution to alcohol licensing processes in local government

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The role of public health in alcohol licensing

The relocation of public health into local authorities (LAs), and the designation of public health as a 'responsible authority' (RA) with a statutory responsibility to comment on alcohol licence applications, have provided increased opportunities for public health to shape the alcohol environment at local levels in England and Wales¹.

However, the success of public health contributions to the licensing process and the range of factors shaping how and when they seek to make representations (or comments) on applications are not clearly understood.

Furthermore, without a licensing objective relating specifically to health, there may be a range of constraints experienced by public health practitioners in seeking to influence alcohol availability through licensing².

Early findings

Pilot ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in two LAs in inner London between September and December 2017, observing public health practitioners conducting licensing work and engaging with the toolkit. Some emerging themes:

Evidence & resources: different resources are considered valuable for justifying public health representations. In one LA, practitioners often draw on data on local alcohol incidents, generated through the toolkit; in the other, the LA's Statement of Licensing Policy is regularly cited to justify comments and objections on applications.

Relationships: engaging other RAs plays an important role in the confidence felt by practitioners to pursue taking action on some licence applications. However, it also contributes to perceptions of risk connected to submitting representations, and wanting to avoid public health being the 'last one standing'.

Context: perceptions of broader council strategies towards local economy and regeneration shape public health assessment of when to submit representations, and perceptions of the risk and likely success of doing so.



Investigating local authority experiences in London

This study seeks to explore the range of influences on public health practitioners' contributions to alcohol licensing processes in LAs across London. We are:

- ❑ evaluating the use of a Public Health Alcohol Licensing guidance toolkit to inform how and when representations are made on alcohol licence applications;
- ❑ examining the data sources, types of evidence, relationships and broader political and organisational factors shaping public health licensing practice;
- ❑ exploring how public health 'success' in relation to alcohol licensing might be defined, and how it might be increased.

We are taking a mixed methods approach, exploring the experiences across different LAs in London through ethnography, interviews, focus groups, a questionnaire and prospective collection of licensing data. The study began in September 2017 and will continue until March 2018.

Engaging practitioners to identify useful outputs

Public health practitioners have been consulted since the beginning of the study to identify the most valuable outputs from this research for their practice, which include:

- ❑ a resource to share practice and learning across LAs, to identify new conditions and sources of data that practitioners can draw on to make successful representations.
- ❑ recommendations for guidance and training on improving 'soft skills' including engaging with other RAs and negotiating with applicants and solicitors.

References & more information

¹ Egan, M., A. Brennan et al. (2016). "Local policies to tackle a national problem..." *Health & Place* **41**: 11-18.

² Martineau, F. P., H. Graff et al. (2014). "Responsibility without legal authority?" *J Public Health* **36**(3): 435-442.

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