

## PAYING THE PRICE: NORTH EAST AMBULANCE SERVICE PARAMEDIC SURVEY 2015 - A SUMMARY

This summary report, produced by Balance, the North East Alcohol Office, details the impact of alcohol misuse on our region's paramedics.

It's well documented that the North East has an alcohol problem and we're all paying the price. In 2013/2014 Balance estimated that alcohol-related harm cost the region £911 million, with the NHS picking up more than a quarter of the bill. Few organisations feel the burden as much as North East Ambulance Service (NEAS), which deals with the impact of alcohol misuse on a daily basis.

Between April and December 2014, Balance surveyed 358 paramedics, representing 32% of the NEAS workforce, to establish how they perceive the impact of alcohol misuse on their lives. Throughout the report the term 'paramedic' includes the roles of emergency care support workers, technicians and urgent care assistants.

### A 24/7 burden

No matter what time of day, or day of the week, NEAS receives alcohol-related call outs. The survey revealed that:

- One in 10 paramedics stated that at least 50% of their workload on weekdays is alcohol-related.
- A quarter of paramedics stated that at least 50% of their workload on weekday night times is alcohol related.
- Two-thirds of paramedics stated that alcohol-related incidences account for at least 50% of their workload during weekend evening shifts.

### Putting others at risk

Frustration sets in when intoxicated patients are given the same priority as those suffering from serious life threatening conditions such as a heart attack or stroke.

**“An incident that stands out for me was being called to an emergency in Newcastle for a male who had chest pain at home in the city centre. We were almost on scene when we were diverted to another call of someone collapsed on the other side of the town. This patient was lying in the middle of the road, drunk and abusive. We took him up to hospital to sober up and saw another crew coming in with a patient in cardiac arrest. I realised this was the patient we were sent to originally. The patient had arrested in the ambulance and did not survive.”**

Female paramedic, more than 10 years of service

### KEY FINDINGS

- \* Almost half of paramedics have been physically assaulted at some point while on duty.
- \* Two in five paramedics have at some point been sexually assaulted / harassed while on duty.
- \* Nine out of ten paramedics agreed that dealing with alcohol-related callouts places an unnecessary burden on their time and resources.
- \* Three in five paramedics believe they shouldn't have to deal with the consequences of the excessive consumption of alcohol.
- \* Two-thirds of paramedics stated that alcohol-related incidences accounted for at least 50% of their workload during weekend evenings.
- \* Two-thirds of paramedics stated that they felt at risk of physical assault when working in the night time economy.
- \* Two-thirds of paramedics stated that in excess of 75% of callouts for assault were alcohol-related.

## Breeding violence

When callouts are broken down into incident types, it is clear that alcohol plays a huge part in cases of violence. The survey revealed that:

- 88% of paramedics stated that at least half of assault callouts were alcohol related.
- 64% of paramedics said at least 75% of assault callouts are alcohol-related.
- 73% of paramedics stated that at least half of domestic violence callouts were alcohol related.

**“The domestic violence fuelled by alcohol stands out, as many a time the female is also intoxicated and won’t press charges. One incident that stands out was when the female had been so badly beaten with a plank of wood, she was covered in blood and had teeth missing. It’s hard to understand how someone who is supposed to love and protect this girl could do something like this!”**

*Female paramedic, more than five years of service*

## Enough is enough

The majority of paramedics feel that they should not be responsible for dealing with drunken patients. Alcohol adds to the daily workload, placing stress and strain on resources and the paramedics themselves. The survey revealed that:

- 59% of paramedics said they shouldn’t have to deal with the consequences of excessive alcohol consumption.
- Only 12% agreed that dealing with excessive alcohol consumption should be part of their role.
- 92% of the paramedics surveyed 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that dealing with alcohol related callouts places an unnecessary burden on their time and resources (see *Figure 1: Does dealing with alcohol-related callouts place an unnecessary burden on your time and resources?*)

## Living in pain and fear

Paramedics regularly face the threat of injury and physical assault from drunken patients and the public. The threat of assault often turns into a reality, with paramedics feeling at greatest risk in private residences, town and city centres and inside their own ambulances (see *Figure 2: Places in which paramedics feel most at risk from drunken members of the public.*) The survey revealed that:

- 94% of paramedics have received at least one threat during their career from an intoxicated person.
- 46% have been threatened six or more times by an intoxicated person.

- 54% of males and 33% of females have been threatened six or more times by an intoxicated person.
- 47% of paramedics have been physically assaulted while on duty (see *Figure 3: Percentage of paramedics who have been physically assaulted by drunken members of the public while on duty*) by an intoxicated person.
- 42% of paramedics have been sexually assaulted/harassed by an intoxicated person.
- 30% of male and 63% of female paramedics have been sexually assaulted/harassed while on duty.
- 44% of paramedics stated private homes to be the most risky location for them whilst on duty.

**“I’m regularly sworn at by patients, their friends or relatives. The fear of being assaulted or sustaining injuries is increased when dealing with intoxicated patients as they are more unpredictable.”**

*Female paramedic, more than 10 years of service*

**“As a female I’m less at risk of physical assault from drunk patients. However, the sexual harassment can get out of hand. I tend to ignore this so to not start any conflict but sometimes I do say to stop or I’ll get the police. The threat of police can calm them but it can make things worse. We have conflict resolution training but we have no self-defence training. We tend to just remove ourselves from a risky situation. Easier said than done though at times.”**

*Female paramedic, more than five years of service.*

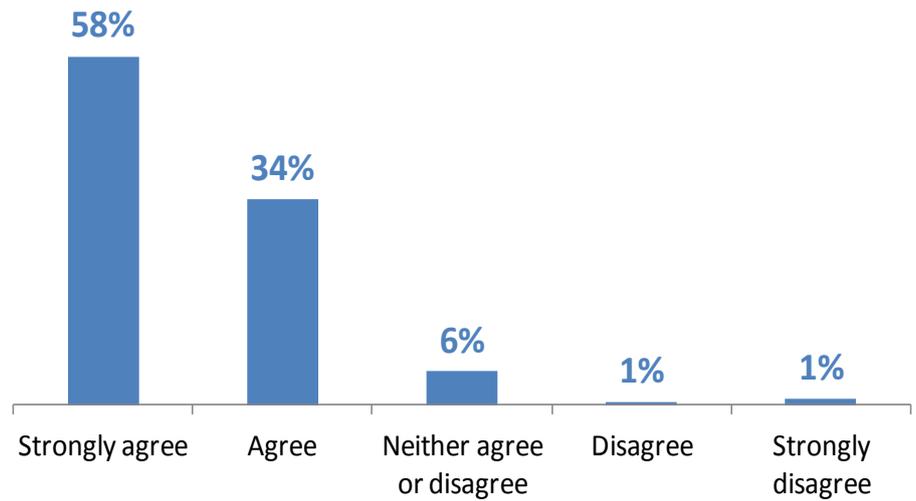
## CONCLUSION

Alcohol misuse has a huge impact on NEAS, placing an unsustainable burden on paramedics and services, day and night. Paramedics regularly face the threat of harm, actual physical harm or sexual assault from drunken members of the public.

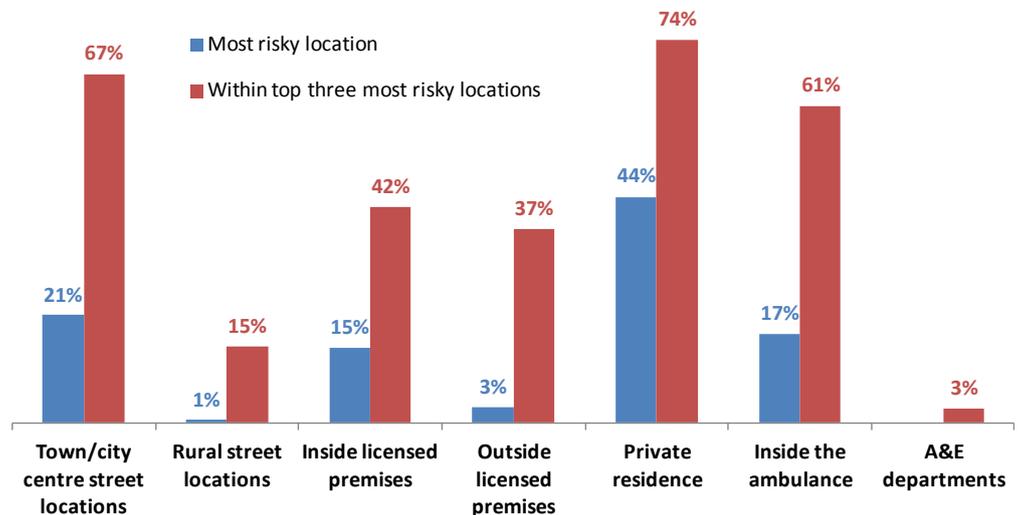
NEAS paramedics, the majority of whom believe they shouldn’t have to deal with the consequences of excessive alcohol consumption, have clearly had enough.

To reduce the burden alcohol places on our frontline services, alcohol should be less affordable, less available and less widely promoted. The Government needs to support a range of targeted, evidence-based measures such as a minimum unit price, which has been shown to save lives, reduce hospital admissions and lessen the financial burden alcohol places on frontline services.

**Figure 1:** Does dealing with alcohol-related ambulance callouts place an unnecessary burden on your time and resources?



**Figure 2:** Places in which paramedics feel most at risk from drunken members of the public



**Figure 3:** Percentage of paramedics who have been physically assaulted by drunken members of the public while on duty

