Alcohol Remote Selling Services: Perspectives of people on a recovery journey

Summary of key themes

Dr Eric Carlin

November 2026

This study draws on the perspectives of people trying to recover from alcohol problems on alcohol remote selling services[1], as well as academic and 'grey' literature, to understand key public health challenges.

The ease of access enabled by alcohol remote selling services makes harmful consumption patterns and behaviours more likely, causing serious harms to individuals' health and well-being.

These services enable their social isolation, reinforcing the most damaging impacts on their health and well-being and impeding their efforts to recover.

In England and Wales, existing licensing legislation may be inadequate to respond to existing challenges and to pre-empt problems in the future.

Public health policies require better data on the developing ecosystem and the policy options that ought to be explored.

Policy actions, based on the best available evidence, need to consider how to:

- restrict rapid deliveries
- improve age verification systems
- ban promotion of rapid deliveries
- restrict how much alcohol can be delivered to a household in a specified time period
- prevent targeted marketing of alcohol remote selling services
- enable individuals to disqualify themselves from being able to access alcohol remote selling services.

A separate, full report has also been produced.

1. e.g. selling online or by telephone, and associated delivery systems for alcohol

Key themes in literature reviewed

Alcohol is a leading risk factor for chronic non-communicable diseases.

The ready availability of alcohol makes increased population consumption and related harms more likely.

The ease of access enabled by alcohol remote selling services makes harmful consumption patterns and behaviours more likely.

Alcohol remote selling services are increasingly available in many countries, as well as in the UK.

Risks of harm related to these services are associated with specific business practices (in the UK and elsewhere), including:

- Rapid delivery times
- Inadequate age verification systems that enable young people to access alcohol easily, with consequent risks of harms to their health and development
- Inadequate ability to prevent deliveries to people who are intoxicated
- Services being geographically and temporally more accessible than more traditional alcohol retailing
- Online alcohol advertising, via algorithmic targeting and personalisation of messages, with evidence of targeting of 'high-risk' populations, as well as linkages to external events, such as sporting events
- Promotions, including discounting and use of buy-now pay-later schemes, with some evidence that 'high-risk' drinkers receive advertising for alcohol delivery more frequently than 'low-risk' drinkers
- Lack of restrictions on the amount of alcohol that can be delivered.

The ecosystem of alcohol remote selling commercial actors in the UK and elsewhere is becoming increasingly complex, including supermarkets, online-only grocery stores, on-demand retailers, online food delivery services, convenience stores and specialist retailers, with the relationships and boundaries between each often blurred.

Harms, particularly those related to underage and higher-risk patterns of alcohol consumption, are likely to be disproportionately experienced by already disadvantaged populations, including 'heavy' drinkers, with the effect of worsening health inequalities.

Use of alcohol remote selling services is associated with substantially increased risky alcohol consumption behaviours, including more frequent consumption and more risky drinking behaviours.

The Licensing Act (2003) sets out the provisions under which alcohol can be sold by retail in England and Wales (UK Government, 2003). This study suggests that the Act is, in several ways, inadequate to respond to challenges presented by alcohol remote selling services.

New policies to protect public health interests, notably vulnerable populations, are required.

Key themes from the focus groups

Key themes that came through the focus groups are discussed below, including with direct personal testimonies. Dominant themes included that:

1. Experiences of alcohol harms, notably their loss of connection with the rest of society, have been really severe for these people, leading many to consider that they have no option other than to abstain if they are to recover.
2. Recovery is a process in which they believe, with the rebuilding of social connections being a vital component in moving forward.
3. The promotion of alcohol and the availability of alcohol remote selling services interfere with personal efforts to recover, including reinforcing people's social isolation and sense of shame.
4. People feel that they are specifically targeted by algorithm-driven services that offer alcohol to be delivered rapidly to them at any time, day or night, with no checks in relation to the dangers that this might present.
5. The harms related to the promotion and availability of alcohol remote selling services are experienced as more severe when people are at their most vulnerable.
6. Current regulatory controls, such as age verification schemes, are inconsistently applied, failing to offer adequate protection for minors.
7. Policy makers urgently need to prioritise a range of actions to restrict alcohol remote selling services to save lives and to support recovery.

Personal testimonies from this study

Experiences of alcohol-related harm and recovery

"The reality of me drinking is something solo, isolating by myself, being violently sick, shaking, not washing, no hygiene, housing completed, and the doors locked, the curtains closed, pushing everybody away from me…it was a case of me not being able to deal with life." FG2

"When you're talking about recovery, it's not just about the drugs, nor the alcohol. It's actually about something more positive about your social connections and linking up with people, being with people and them using you and your use of them…even if you don't get it the first time, you might be a bit more encouraged to try the second time, because you've got other people there who share your priorities, they will all support everybody. There's no hierarchy, and so you're more likely to come back and try again and one day you will get it." FG4

Alcohol and Alcohol Remote Selling services promotion and availability

"You can get whatever you want. When I first picked up, I'd order so many bottles of wine and I'd get some toilet roll or something like that. But then at the end, I'm ordering three litres of vodka. And they'll come to the door." FG3

"It is a vast database that they're accumulating about your shopping habits, and each individual's shopping habits, so they can target you, that's essentially what they do." FG5

Pricing and promotions

"On Uber deliveries on Tuesday I got asked, I've got like a special offer, like, six bottles, I don't know how many times this week I've seen six bottles of wine for the price of five. In early recovery, it was a huge trigger." FG4

I'm a wine drinker, mate, but when you just see it there, the vodka, I'm thinking, "Oh, that looks, that's cheaper there than buying the 2 bottles of wine so that, like, oh, so you get the vodka, don't you?" FG1

Speed and times of deliveries

"They promote how quickly they deliver. It's all over the website, how long it's gonna take. And you can track it and everything...estimated delivery. It's 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes... I always used Uber because of that reason, 'cause sometimes other places would be up to an hour and then you go on Uber and they have 16 to 18 minutes for delivery." FG5

"If I've had a skinful during the day, which is never enough, I could walk into a pub and try and order a pint of beer, or lager, or whatever, and the landlord would say, "You've had too much to drink". I can walk into a supermarket and try to do the same, and the person behind the till would say, "We think you've had too much to drink, we're not serving you alcohol. But on the app, I can order there 24 hours a day and I'm never challenged about my mental fitness, how much I've drunk and that sort of thing." FG2

Age verification

"I used to be getting them to leave alcohol at 7 o'clock in the morning and they never once asked for a date of birth, and no one's asked to see ID. Never." FG4

Impacts of Alcohol Remote Selling services on health and well-being

"It destroyed me. Being able to get it, these services destroyed me, and that is God's own truth. Sorry, because I get emotional because I wouldn't have been able to drink as much if it wasn't so easy...you want the impact of it? This is the fucking impact. I could be mortgage free in 8 years and now I'm selling my house. It's too easy. You wake up at two in the morning and, "I want a drink", and then you can get access to it, within 15 minutes, half an hour... I'm starting to get a bit like agitated over it now because now I'm getting angry over it. How easy it is." FG1

"I was too sick to leave the house, so I need deliveries and there's no moderation here. I got deliveries from the Sainsbury's app on the 7th, the 9th, the 10th, the 11th. And I've got multiple bottles of spirits. You know, there's no moderation there, either, in terms of what you can buy. Well, there was no sane person ordering that volume. I know the responsibility is my fault, and I did it. But, you know, the marketing, you know, it is so easy to do, you know. I just order again. I order again. I got 3 bottles of vodka coming in 20 minutes." FG5

"Especially when you're in the madness, you don't want to leave the house. I drink an awful lot of alcohol in quite a short period of time. And so I'm not capable of making it to a shop. But once I start using delivery services, obviously, I keep going for longer. It's also the minimal interaction as well, because I've been in the shop before, and I've stumbled in, and I've been called out by a man behind the till. Only once, but he said, "You've had enough", whereas you're only answering the door, aren't you? And they're driving. And they don't give a fuck if you had enough anyway. No, no, no, I crawled to my front door. Opened it, and been, sort of, kneeling on the floor. And he still handed over the package, the brown bag. But he knows it's got bottles in, 'cause he can hear them clanking. Because I'm just sort of painted to the floor because I can barely talk. I'll get my date of birth out and the code. And that's it, but I'm not capable of standing. They still deliver the alcohol." FG4

"You know, I could drink myself to death very easily if I'm not careful, if I drink again. It's getting worse and worse. I could drink, it can be 30, between 30, 40 bottles of spirits in a week, two weeks. After about the first three days, it's all come by delivery. Because they deliver. It's facilitating your killing yourself." FG5

"It's a legal drug and it's an addictive drug that actually harms people...the drug dealers clock off earlier than the alcohol suppliers. I've talked to people in the past and they've said, "Oh I wanted something at 4 o'clock in the morning like looking to use cocaine, and I said, "Oh, well, why didn't you get it?" And they're like, the dealer turns his phone off at half past 12. He wants to get his night sleep." FG1

"Enablement. Enabling our isolation. Damaging. Isolating, definitely." FG4

"It probably increases domestic situations as well. If you're drinking late, some people get rowdy, and they're gonna start fighting at 4 o'clock in the morning, if they've got a partner who disagrees with the drinking and things like that. So it affects other people as well." FG4

Recommendations from research participants

A total ban on all Alcohol Remote Selling services

"The government should put new laws in. Because when you've drunk, drunk, drunk, and you think, "Fuck it, I've had enough and you go and take an overdose". That would be prevented. Every time I've ordered online I've been drunk, not thinking straight." FG3

"Why don't they just stop doing it altogether? Like, just get rid of it. Personally, I think it should be banned until they can prove how they're gonna regulate themselves. How are they going to prove that a driver has enough knowledge to recognise that someone's already intoxicated and he's at risk? How much are we going to pay the driver to do that? So if you must be able to demonstrate that when you are selling alcohol, you need to be able to assess whether that person is fit to actually consume alcohol. Then the pressure will go down to the driver, who personally, I think, who will be someone on a minimum wage working for cash in hand or something as a delivery driver." FG2

Actions short of a total ban

Time restrictions

"The longer you put between the orders and the delivery, the less people are wanting it. I wasn't capable of thinking past the next five minutes. You know, if you said, oh, I'll drop you three bottles of vodka in two days, I'd have thought, "Oh, I'll see you later"." FG4

Limiting how much alcohol can be delivered to a household in a specified time period

"The shops must know who's getting it regular? Can't they report thinking that there is wine ordered there every day? There could be some things in place where you think, I know she, she's getting wine, wine again where they could put a stop on it." FG1

Enabling people to choose not to be able to access these services

"When you go on, obviously you've got a history of all your orders, and they will as well. So maybe, could you make a request for them for you not to be able to buy this? For me, I think it would help my recovery. For me personally, I'd, at the moment say, "Just block me. Okay. Block me". FG1

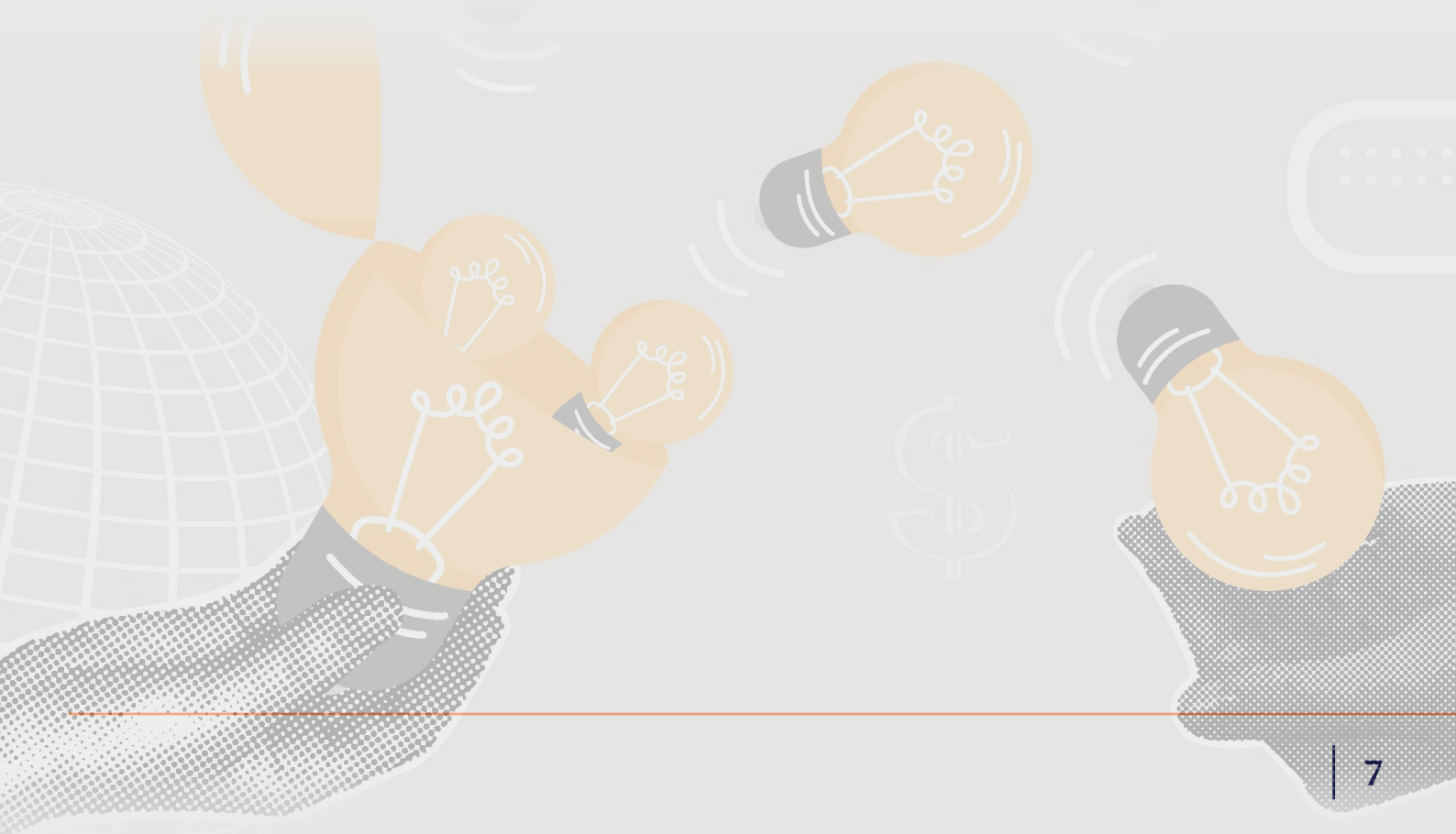
Improved age verification systems

"They should be getting ID, but I can't see where there could be rolling out some kind of system that the delivery drivers are going to be able to efficiently do that. Because they're going to want to get to the door, get it dropped off, get back to whatever base, get another delivery and get it out. So I can't imagine none of them are doing efficiently." FG1

"I think it's an unsafe situation for a delivery driver to be refusing alcohol because we would attack him. I'd kick off. I know. I've done it before with my date of birth, I went mad and he was like, "I'll come back. I'll come back", and then he ran to his car. I was gonna jump on him." FG2

Awareness raising

"I think it should be, even if you haven't got a problem, every alcohol delivery has a leaflet in the bag - not about drinking responsibly. Something with the services because it might not be a problem that day, but further down the line, they might just look in the drawer, and there's that leaflet, it might help." FG4



Study conclusions

The participants in this study described in detail serious harms to their health and well-being that they attribute to the advertising and availability of alcohol remote selling services that they have used to have alcohol delivered within a short period of time and at any time, day or night. They provided evidence that these services enable their social isolation, reinforcing the most damaging impacts on their health and well-being as a result of their dependence on alcohol. They also emphasised that the promotion and availability of alcohol remote selling services interfere with and impede their efforts to recover. Many described the impacts as life-threatening, leading them to argue that, for the sake of public health and the protection of vulnerable populations (like themselves), a total ban on all alcohol remote selling services should not be ruled out of policy consideration.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has highlighted policies to restrict alcohol availability, including remote selling services, as an essential strategy for reducing alcohol-related harms.

The challenge remains how to achieve that ambition in the complex, dynamic contexts where alcohol is sold remotely, including in England and Wales where existing licensing legislation may be inadequate to respond to existing challenges and to pre-empt problems in the future.

Public health policies, including understanding what regulations are required and within which legal framework, require better data on the developing ecosystem and the policy options that ought to be explored, and on how to overcome opposition from commercial operators, drawing on national and international evidence, as well as lived experience accounts.

Policy makers are urgently asked to consider the need for policy actions, based on the best available evidence, to:

1. restrict rapid deliveries
2. improve age verification systems, including providing clarity on who is responsible in ways that do not create unsafe situations
3. ban promotion of rapid deliveries (with a clear definition and rationale for what is considered 'rapid')
4. restrict how much alcohol can be delivered to a household in a specified time period
5. prevent targeted marketing of these alcohol remote selling services
6. enable individuals to disqualify themselves from being able to access alcohol remote selling services
7. ban deliveries outside licensing hours that are enforced in other retail contexts
8. mandate the provision of public health messaging about alcohol harms and signposting to alcohol support services in all packages of alcohol that are remotely delivered.

The issues covered in this study are complex and dynamic, and also human. Effective policy solutions will require drawing on a wider range of evidence than is presented here. It is vitally important that actions to develop and implement future policies to prevent and reduce harms caused by alcohol remote selling services are co-produced with people with personal experience of harms due to their own (and others') alcohol consumption, including people engaged in recovery journeys.