

# The Numbers Are In – And So Is the Denial

Minimum Pricing, Maximum Spin: Scotland's Booze Policy Post-Mortem.

ANNEMARIE WARD

JUN 25

It's been seven years since Scotland implemented Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) for alcohol the so-called "world-leading" policy that was meant to save lives, reduce harms, and shift national drinking habits.

This week, Public Health Scotland (PHS) released its latest **Alcohol Consumption and Harms Dashboard** report. And it confirms what many of us on the ground have warned for years: **the policy has not worked** not for the people it was meant to help, not with the outcomes it was supposed to deliver, and not in a way that justifies the ongoing political theatre defending it.

But rather than admitting failure, PHS continues its impressive act of bureaucratic ventriloquism making poor data sound like progress, mass harm sound like success, and a 1,270-body death toll sound like a sign we're on the right track.

## What's New in the June 2025 Briefing?

Public Health Scotland's latest *Alcohol Consumption and Harms Dashboard* confirms what many on the frontline have known for years: **Minimum Unit Pricing is not reducing real-world harm**. In fact, the crisis is deepening.

- **1,270 people died in 2023 from alcohol-specific causes** one of the highest totals ever recorded. That's **24 lives lost every single week**.

- **29,829 hospital stays** in 2023/24 were for conditions wholly caused by alcohol. That's **100 people a day** two full busloads ending up in acute care due to drink.
- The poorest Scots are **six times more likely to die** from alcohol than the wealthiest. The death rate in our most deprived communities is now **54.4 per 100,000**, compared to **just 9.0** in the least deprived.
- Since 2012, alcohol deaths among over-65s have **risen by nearly two-thirds** — with older men particularly affected.
- And despite all the promises, **Scotland still drinks more per person than England and Wales**. Retail alcohol sales remain stubbornly high even after the price hike.

Yet amid all this, Public Health Scotland continues to promote its preferred narrative: that things would be worse without MUP. **Not because deaths have fallen they haven't but because a model says so.**

The truth is simple: **real harm is up, not down. And those suffering most are still being ignored.**

## **A policy built on modelling, defended by spin**

Let's be clear, this isn't an honest debate about mixed outcomes. This is a politically protected programme upheld by selective modelling, soft metrics, and civil service communications teams who now outnumber journalists six to one.

PHS continues to cling to a single, statistically dubious study led by one of their own advisors that claims MUP *may* have reduced deaths by 13.4%... if we ignore actual recorded deaths and instead rely on imagined counterfactual scenarios. The very same PHS report even admits there is "**no consistent evidence**" of impact on broader health outcomes.

This figure is derived not from actual death data, but from **counterfactual scenarios**: what they estimate "would have happened" in some alternate England-shaped parallel universe.

This is not science. It's **statistical fiction** masquerading as evidence. The

reality? Deaths have risen, inequality has worsened, and Scotland remains Europe's sick man when it comes to alcohol harm.

## How PHS Spins the Dashboard Positively

### 1. Framing language designed to distract from bad outcomes

They open with statements like:

"Alcohol is a leading cause of poor health and early death in Scotland... However, this is preventable."

"Reducing and preventing the harm caused by alcohol... is possible."

This kind of vague hopefulness is a rhetorical decoy, it **emphasises potential, not results**. The implication is that *they're on the right track*, regardless of what the data actually says.

### 2. Selective focus on falling consumption – not rising deaths

They highlight that:

"In 2024, 9.0 litres of pure alcohol were sold per adult, the lowest level in the time series."

But they **do not admit that alcohol-specific deaths remain at a 15-year high** (1,270 deaths in 2023) or that **Scotland still drinks more per person than England and Wales**. They frame this as a partial victory, rather than a policy failure.

### 3. Downplaying hospital admissions

They note:

"29,829 wholly attributable alcohol hospital admissions..."

But unlike their older MESAS reports, there's **no clear callout of the fact that this is still shockingly high** nearly 100 people a day in hospital for alcohol harm. They present the number but mute its significance.

### 4. Emphasis on "inequalities" to shield from system-wide criticism

Yes, they acknowledge that the poorest Scots suffer six times the alcohol

death rate of the wealthiest but they **frame this as justification to keep going** with the current approach, rather than as evidence that it has utterly failed those it's meant to protect.

## 5. Avoiding the real headline

The real story is this:

- Alcohol deaths are not falling.
- Hospital pressure remains high.
- Inequality in harm is deepening.
- Scotland still drinks more than the rest of the UK.

But instead of facing that, PHS distracts with:

“The dashboard presents data... to inform further action.”

Which is technocratic code for: *“We'll continue to monitor this mess we helped make.”*

## What PHS Doesn't Say

- That **the key evaluation they still cite (Wyper et al.) is old, modelled, and unverified against real-world trends.**
- That **MUP hasn't reduced alcohol deaths**, despite being sold as a life-saving measure.
- That **Public Health Scotland has a vested interest in defending the policy**, having led its evaluation and public promotion.
- That **calls for treatment investment, recovery, detox and rehab remain ignored** missing from both the dashboard and the debate.

## Bottom line:

**PHS is desperately trying to spin it positively.**

They've become experts at **using data dashboards as rhetorical shields** hiding behind averages, pointing to "trends", and leaning on modelling to avoid accountability for failure.

The policy hasn't worked but the *presentation of it* continues to function beautifully.

*Just don't look at the bodies.*

## Who's benefiting from the delusion?

- Not the families burying their loved ones each week.
- Not the long-term dependent drinkers now turning to stronger spirits, cheaper drugs, or skipping meals to fund addiction.
- Not the frontline services who've seen funding slashed and detox beds removed.

Instead, it's:

- Pharmaceutical interests who benefit from endless maintenance prescribing,
- Government-funded quangos who echo the party line to preserve their budgets,
- And a growing communication apparatus (175 government PR staff vs 34 at the BBC in Scotland) rewriting the story before the public even sees the data.

## What we should have done and still must do

The failure of MUP is about more than a flawed policy. It reflects a deeper sickness: **a system that punishes the poor while protecting the narrative.**

We need proper investment in **detox, rehab, housing, and recovery pathways** — not abstract pricing levers. That's why the **Right to Recovery Bill** is so crucial: it offers a path rooted in dignity and choice, not bureaucratic gatekeeping.

Until that happens, we'll keep mistaking policy for progress and modelling for morality and the deaths will keep rising.

## The Price of Illusion

Seven years on, the scoreboard is in. Deaths are up. Inequality is up.

Hospital beds are full. And Scotland for all its grand declarations of world-leading virtue is still drinking like it's trying to forget something.

Minimum Unit Pricing was sold to us as public health alchemy: take a broken system, add a price tag, and *abracadabra* national wellbeing. What we got instead was a policy so allergic to scrutiny it now survives entirely on **counterfactual modelling**, circular press releases, from the quangos and the sort of statistical optimism that would make a roulette addict blush.

Public Health Scotland, with all the sincerity of a man rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic and declaring a victory over water displacement, continues to insist that things would have been worse without MUP. This, despite a death toll of 1,270 a number they now treat not as a public health emergency, but as a footnote in a modelled success story.

Let's call it what it is: **a case study in bureaucratic gaslighting**. A state-funded exercise in *saying something must be working* because to admit otherwise would be to unravel years of political ego, institutional inertia, and policy capture.

And no doubt, in the coming days, **Public Health Scotland and the other government-funded addiction quangos** will be out in full PR formation, waving their charts, grinning for camera, and telling us with straight faces —that this is all going beautifully. That up is down, more deaths are fewer deaths, and the cost of living crisis is somehow a health intervention.

**Well, they would say that. Their livelihoods depend on it.**

But ours don't.

Scotland deserves better than this grinning absurdity disguised as governance. We need to stop letting these unelected, unaccountable institutions dictate our policies and write our press releases. If we want truth, recovery, and accountability we're going to have to vote for it.

**2026 is our chance.**

**Let's get shot of the quangocracy and finally return public health to the public.**

---

## Further Reading & Sources:

- National Records of Scotland – *Alcohol-specific deaths in Scotland 2023*  
<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/alcohol-specific-deaths-2023>
- Public Health Scotland – *Alcohol-related hospital statistics 2023/24*  
<https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/alcohol-related-hospital-statistics/alcohol-related-hospital-statistics-scotland-financial-year-2023-to-2024/>
- Public Health Scotland – *Alcohol Consumption & Harms Dashboard*  
<https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/alcohol-consumption-and-harms-dashboard/alcohol-consumption-and-harms-dashboard-20232024/>
- Public Health Scotland – *June 2025 Briefing on Alcohol Deaths*  
<https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/alcohol-consumption-and-harms-dashboard/alcohol-consumption-and-harms-dashboard-24-june-2025/>
- Christopher Snowdon – *Minimum Pricing, Maximum Gaslighting*

---

### Minimum pricing, maximum gaslighting

As the Scottish government prepares to raise the minimum price for alcohol to 65p, there was one last chance for the reality-based community to point out that the emperor is wearing no clothes. It fell to Conservative MSP Dr Sandesh Gulhane to ask Justina Murray, the CEO of Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs, about the claim that minimum pricing...

[Read more](#)

- The Times – *Civil servants altered official alcohol pricing report*  
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tories-attack-snp-as-officials-change-claims-on-alcohol-pricing-qlkff0972>
- UK Statistics Authority – *Minimum Unit Pricing: Official complaint by Sandesh Gulhane MSP*  
<https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/letter-from-sandesh-gulhane-msp-to-sir-robert-chote-minimum-unit-pricing/>
- Minimum pricing, miserable results
- <https://thecritic.co.uk/minimum-pricing-miserable-results/>
- McTernan, J. (2021) *Nicola Sturgeon's secret state*. The Spectator, 6 February. Available at: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/nicola-sturgeon-s-secret-state/>

---

*Annemarie Ward is CEO of FAVOR (Faces & Voices of Recovery UK), the leading addiction advocacy and recovery charity in the UK. She prefers laws to vibes, facts to feelings, and public service to public scolding.*