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To cite this article: K.J. Maxwell, C. Emslie, R. O'Donnell, G. Mitchell, M. Cook, I. Uny, J. Lewsey, E. McIntosh, A. Mohan, C. Angus & N. Fitzgerald (18 Dec 2025): Public perceptions of harms and benefits of increasing alcohol venue trading hours: a deliberative focus group study, *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, DOI: [10.1080/09687637.2025.2599910](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2025.2599910)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2025.2599910>



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Published online: 18 Dec 2025.



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Public perceptions of harms and benefits of increasing alcohol venue trading hours: a deliberative focus group study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Late-night opening of alcohol venues is associated with increased intoxication, social disorder and burden on public services. From 2017, two Scottish cities—Aberdeen and Glasgow—extended venue trading hours, to 3am and 4am, respectively. This study aimed to explore (i) public perceptions of harms and benefits of later trading hours, and (ii) how related public health evidence is assessed and used by the public.

Methods: Eight groups of residents and venue-goers (n=42) participated in two deliberative focus groups over a two-week period. Evidence on the pros and cons of later hours was presented and discussed. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze data.

Results: Participants associated later hours with increased alcohol consumption and increased harms such as violence, antisocial behavior, crime and public disturbance. Harms were discussed more frequently than benefits. Venue-goers highlighted cultural and social benefits and suggested staggered closing times might reduce harms. Following consideration of public health evidence, participants' focus shifted from individual to societal impacts, such as increased burden on police, ambulance, and hospital services.

Conclusion: Exposing lay participants to public health evidence fostered more reflection on societal impacts of later trading hours, potentially providing policy-makers with strategies to increase public support for alcohol policies.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 August 2025
Revised 24 November 2025

Accepted 27 November 2025

KEYWORDS

Alcohol availability; alcohol-related harm; trading hours; public health; qualitative

Introduction

Late-night opening of alcohol venues is associated with increased intoxication, assaults, injuries, disorder, and burden on public services (Nepal et al., 2020; Sanchez-Ramirez & Voaklander, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2016). International evidence suggests that increasing hours of sale (trading hours), particularly late at night, increases alcohol-related harms (Kypri et al., 2016; Rossow & Norstrom, 2012; Wilkinson et al., 2016). For example, in a study across 18 Norwegian cities, each additional hour of trading (10pm to 5am) was associated with a 16% increase in police-reported assaults, with the converse being true for each one-hour reduction (Rossow & Norstrom, 2012). In the Netherlands, a one-hour extension to venue trading hours in Amsterdam was associated with a 34% increase in

alcohol-related ambulance call-outs from 2am to 6am (de Goeij et al., 2015). In Australia, reductions in hours of trading from 5am to 3am resulted in a one third reduction in assaults, sustained over 5 years (Kypri et al., 2016). In the United Kingdom, studies evaluating changes to licensing law in England and Wales to remove set hours of trading (allowing 24-hour opening of alcohol venues), implemented in 2005, suggested that following this change there was no overall increase in violence, though incidents of violence shifted to later at night (3am to 6am) (Humphreys et al., 2013; Stevely et al., 2021). However, this change in England and Wales coincided with a simultaneous increase in police numbers (see Local Government Chronicle, 2005) which is often overlooked in discussions of these findings.

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2025.2599910>.

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The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends reducing alcohol availability as one of their 'best buys' and recent work has confirmed that this continues to be a highly cost-effective way to reduce alcohol harms (Chisholm et al., 2018). Research has consistently shown that implementation of evidence-based alcohol control policies improves public health, whilst removing them has detrimental public health consequences (Babor et al., 2023). Despite compelling evidence that population-level alcohol control policies are effective, research on public attitudes to alcohol policies has suggested an inverse relationship between perceived restrictiveness of policies and public support (Bates et al., 2018; Moskalewicz et al., 2013). For example, research has found the public to be more supportive of policies aiming to inform and educate (i.e. alcohol labeling, public information campaigns), despite these having less evidence of effectiveness (Babor et al., 2023; Dekker et al., 2020) and less supportive of more restrictive policies such as increasing price and restricting availability, which have more evidence of effectiveness (Babor et al., 2023; Dekker et al., 2020; Tobin et al., 2011). Policies perceived as impacting others, such as those directed at 'harmful' drinkers and younger drinkers are also generally better supported by the public (Diepeveen et al., 2013; Li et al., 2017; Moskalewicz et al., 2013). Demographic differences in support for alcohol control policies are evident in that women, older adults and light drinkers/abstainers are more likely to support alcohol control policies (Dekker et al., 2020; Diepeveen et al., 2013; Greenfield et al., 2014; Kilian et al., 2019; Li et al., 2017; WHO, 2024).

Public support for alcohol policy remains important as it can influence political will to enact policies which address alcohol harms in society (Bates et al., 2018; Gage et al., 2024). Public support is at least partially dependent on an understanding that there is a 'problem' to be fixed (Grelle & Hofmann, 2024). There is currently a substantial gulf between public and expert understandings of alcohol harms, what causes harms, and what policies or other changes could reduce or prevent them (Fitzgerald et al., 2024). For example, public perceptions of the causes of alcohol harm often place strong emphasis on individual level deficits and othering (e.g. dependent drinkers) whilst public health experts are more likely to conceptualize alcohol as inherently risky and view harms as caused by a deficit in regulation (Fitzgerald et al., 2024). A key factor in increasing public support for effective, population-level policies may be increasing public awareness of alcohol harms and industry influence (Gage et al., 2024; Fitzgerald et al., 2024). Understanding how the public assess and weigh up public health evidence is

therefore critical to increasing public support for effective alcohol control policies.

Whilst there is a large literature on public attitudes toward alcohol control policies, less is known about how these views are formed and about public views on the likely societal impact of local policy changes. This research seeks to address these gaps by exploring public views on potential harms and benefits in a context where local alcohol policy change has directly impacted their local alcohol environment. In Scotland between 2017 and 2019, two Scottish cities – Glasgow and Aberdeen – made changes to their licensing policies to permit increased late-night trading hours for certain nightlife venues, increasing temporal alcohol availability. In Glasgow, 10 nightclubs were granted a one-hour extension, until 4am. In Aberdeen, 38 bars that had previously closed at or before 1am were granted permission to close later, up to 3am. This study sought to examine public views on potential impacts of these changes, as well as to present balanced evidence on the impact of later trading hours (including information on the benefits and harms of late-night alcohol trading hours) and examine public views in light of consideration of this evidence.

This study is part of a large mixed-methods evaluation of the impact of these local policy changes in Scottish cities: the 'Evaluating Later or Expanded Premises Hours for Alcohol in the Nighttime Economy' study (ELEPHANT) (see Mitchell et al., *forthcoming*). ELEPHANT evaluated the impact of increases in trading hours on ambulance call-outs, police-reported incidents, local communities and the nighttime economy (see Sheikh et al., *forthcoming*; Mitchell et al., *forthcoming*). The aim of this part of the study was to (i) understand the views of local venue-goers and residents on the potential harms and benefits of increasing alcohol trading hours and (ii) understand how public health evidence is assessed and used by the public in developing their views.

Methods

Study methodology

Deliberative focus groups were used to explore public views on the impact of increasing alcohol trading hours. Deliberative methods seek to facilitate evidence-based discussion, encourage active engagement with evidence and thoughtful deliberation, which can in turn provide policy-makers with well-informed public views (Guttman, 2007; Rothwell et al., 2016). The principles underlying deliberative methods emphasize involving the public in policy discussions, providing

participants with sufficient information to enable informed debate, and fostering both contribution and thoughtful revision of views through reflective interaction with others (Guttman, 2007; Parkinson, 2006). We were guided by these principles in the design and conduct of the deliberative focus groups in this study.

During deliberative focus groups participants are encouraged to ask questions to clarify issues, to discuss their views with each other and to engage with those who have dissenting opinions. Deliberative focus groups often take place over more than one session, to enable participants to reflect on their views between sessions. They are particularly useful when participants have limited subject area knowledge (Rothwell et al., 2016). In this study, participants may have experienced nightlife but were less likely to be familiar with public health evidence around ambulance call-outs, late-night violence and impact on public services from late-night trading hours. Through informing participants using both public health evidence and information on the benefits of nightlife and encouraging discussion and questioning of this evidence we aimed to promote more well-informed views on the impact of increasing alcohol trading hours. Given the strengths of this methodology, we also present and discuss how participants engaged with evidence and how this informed their deliberations on the harms and benefits of later trading hours.

Sampling and recruitment

We recruited participants living in Glasgow and Aberdeen, choosing to oversample two groups likely to be affected by changes in nightlife trading hours: 'residents' (those living in city center areas near nightlife venues) and 'venue-goers' (those regularly using nightlife). In each city, we purposively recruited for one 'residents' group, one 'venue-goers' group and two 'general population' groups. In practice, however, members of groups often overlapped in terms of their identities as 'residents' or 'venue-goers'.

We recruited for diversity in terms of age, gender and socio-economic status by monitoring participation and purposively recruiting to fill gaps. Further details about the demographics of participants in each group can be found in **Table 1**. Participants ($n=42$) ranged in age from 18 to 66 years, with equal numbers of men ($n=21$) and women ($n=21$), and a mix of sexual orientation, ethnicity, educational level and socioeconomic status.

Participants were recruited through social media and a professional research recruitment agency. Inclusion criteria were that participants must be 18 years or older and, for 'venue-goers' groups, be regular nightlife users. 'Regular' nightlife use was self-defined but participants were asked about their familiarity with each city's nightlife in a screening conversation with the main researcher

Table 1. Characteristics of participants by group.

	FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG5	FG6	FG7	FG8
City	Glasgow	Glasgow	Glasgow	Glasgow	Aberdeen	Aberdeen	Aberdeen	Aberdeen
Online / in-person	In person	In person	In person	Online	Online	Online	Online	Online
Recruitment category	Venue-goers	Residents	General population	General population	Residents	General population	General population	Venue-goers
No. of participants	3	6	4	6	6	4	6	7
Mean age (range)	29.6 (25–39)	41.3 (21– 58)	41.7 (29–65)	29.5 (22–39)	37 (22–50)	45.3 (23–66)	39.5 (18–56)	30.2 (19–46)
Gender								
Man	1	3	1	3	3	2	4	4
Woman	2	3	3	3	3	2	2	3
Sexual Orientation								
Heterosexual	2	6	2	4	5	4	6	5
Gay/ Lesbian	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1
Bisexual	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	1
Ethnicity								
Asian	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
Black	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
White	3	5	3	6	4	4	6	6
Occupation								
Student	0	1	0	2	1	1	1	1
Employed	2	5	3	4	5	1	1	6
Unemployed / not working	1	0	1	0	0	2	4	0
Venue-goer								
Yes	3	3	1	6	2	1	0	7
No	0	3	3	0	4	3	6	0
Resident								
Yes	1	6	1	4	6	3	3	5
No	2	0	3	2	0	1	3	2

prior to participation. For 'residents' groups, participants were required to live in a postcode including nightlife venues. All groups were mixed gender.

Data collection

Each group took part in two deliberative focus groups facilitated by a researcher lasting two hours each over a two-week period, with a one-week gap designed to offer participants time to digest and reflect upon the evidence they had been shown. The first session (T1)

collected baseline views then provided evidence-based information (see [Box 2](#)) which was followed by an initial discussion of this evidence. The second session (T2) asked further questions and encouraged discussion of the evidence that had been introduced at T1, followed by a section of questions on the future of Scotland's nighttime economy (not discussed in this paper, see [Uny et al. forthcoming](#)). [Box 1](#) outlines the structure of the deliberative focus groups.

The materials shown to participants at T1 can be seen in [Box 2](#). These materials were developed over a

Box 1 Structure of deliberative focus groups

Session 1 (T1) – 2 hours

- Welcome
- **Initial views on later closing times** (30 minutes)
- **T1 Polls – 4 fixed choice, ranking and free text questions answered via phones.**
 - What time should bars/pubs be allowed to stay open until? [fixed choice]
 - What time should nightclubs be allowed to stay open until? [fixed choice]
 - If you were in charge of nightlife, what factors would you consider when making decisions about what time bars and clubs should close? [free text]
 - Some factors people mention are listed here. How would you rank these? [ranking exercise]
- **Questions on Alcohol & Nightlife** (10 minutes)

[5-10 minute comfort break]

- **Introducing the Evidence*** (50 minutes) [*See [Box 2](#)]
- **Reflections on the evidence** (15 minutes)
- **Close & thank participants for their time** (5 minutes)

[At close of T1 all participants provided with a PDF copy of the materials shown to read through at home]

Session 2 (T2) – 2 hours

- Welcome
- **Reflections on the evidence & evidence re-cap** (30 minutes)
- **Views on later closing times** (45 minutes)
- Previous week's poll results brought up on screen and participants asked 'what do you think now?'

[5-10 minute comfort break]

- **Looking to the future** (30 minutes)
- **T2 Polls – 4 poll questions from session 1 repeated**
 - What time should bars/pubs be allowed to stay open until? [fixed choice]
 - What time should nightclubs be allowed to stay open until? [fixed choice]
 - If you were in charge of nightlife, what factors would you consider when making decisions about what time bars and clubs should close? [free text]
 - Some factors people mention are listed here. How would you rank these? [ranking exercise]
- **Close & thank participants for their time** (5 minutes)

Box 2. Deliberative materials presented during Session 1 (T1) of the deliberative focus groups

THE DELIBERATIVE MATERIALS

SECTION 1: SETTING THE SCENE – THE PLACE OF ALCOHOL IN SCOTTISH SOCIETY

Evidence 1. The place of alcohol in Scottish society – Statistics on how much alcohol is consumed in Scotland each year, comparisons to rest of the world, percentage of the population nondrinkers etc. [[PRESENTATION](#)]

Evidence 2. How does alcohol affect the body and brain? [[VIDEO](#)]

Evidence 3. How does alcohol licensing work in Scotland? [[PRESENTATION](#)]

SECTION 2: EVIDENCE IN FAVOR OF LATER TRADING HOURS

Evidence 4. The 'Case For' later closing times in Glasgow – Local Licensing Board's rationale for Glasgow's 4am pilot scheme, which permitted some venues to open until 4am. [[PRESENTATION](#)]

Evidence 5. DJ speaking on the pleasures of nightlife [[VIDEO](#)]

Evidence 6. What is the impact of later closing times on business? International evidence on the economic impact of later trading hours. [[PRESENTATION](#)]

SECTION 3: EVIDENCE AGAINST LATER TRADING HOURS

Evidence 7. Later closing times and violence – International evidence on the impact on levels of violence when trading hours are increased. [[INFOGRAPHIC](#)]

Evidence 8. Later closing times and the health service – International evidence on the impact on hospital attendances when trading hours are increased. [[INFOGRAPHIC](#)]

Evidence 9. The impact of late-night drinking on the ambulance service – evidence from a qualitative study of Scottish ambulance clinicians. [[PRESENTATION](#)]

Evidence 10. The impact of alcohol on emergency services – Statistics on the proportion of time different emergency services (police, ambulance, A&E departments) spend on alcohol-related incidents. [[GRAPHS](#)]

Evidence 11. How do harms from later closing times come about? Public health evidence on the mechanisms through which alcohol-related harms arise. [[PRESENTATION](#)]

Evidence 12. What works to reduce alcohol harm in society? International public health evidence on what works to reduce societal alcohol-related harm. [[PRESENTATION](#)]

number of months through a process of assimilating international evidence, translating this into lay-friendly summaries and then creating user-friendly, accessible presentations of this evidence (e.g. infographics). Feedback on the materials to be used was received from the ELEPHANT study team and study PPI groups (see next section). Materials were refined and revised on the basis of this feedback. The final materials included lay-friendly summaries of international public health evidence, local licensing boards' rationale for the licensing changes (see O' Donnell et al, [forthcoming](#)) and lived experience accounts of the pleasures and harms of nightlife. Discussion topics explored in both sessions included: views on later nightlife trading hours, views on the impacts of later nightlife trading hours on consumer behavior, health, communities, the local economy and services, and views on the future of the nighttime economy post-COVID-19 (for full Focus Group Guide, see [Supplementary file 1](#)).

All groups were conducted between September and November 2022, online or in person (see [Table 1](#)). Participants were reimbursed with a £100 voucher for their time. Prior to participation all participants were provided with an information sheet and completed written consent. This study was granted ethical approval by Glasgow Caledonian University (HLS/NCH/21/018).

Public and patient involvement (PPI)

The ELEPHANT study had two PPI groups – one in Aberdeen, one in Glasgow – to provide input on the accessibility of research materials and communication of study findings. These groups were made up of local residents across a range of ages, socioeconomic status, nightlife experience and background. The materials proposed for the deliberative focus groups were shared and discussed with PPI groups ($n=9$) during two online meetings. On the basis of feedback, changes were made to materials to make language more accessible and to include more information on the pleasures of nightlife. Following feedback, one PPI participant, a part-time DJ, provided a short video describing benefits of nightclub culture which we used in our final deliberative groups.

Data analysis

Focus groups were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed in full by a professional transcription agency. Anonymized transcripts were entered into NVivo 12 to facilitate data management and analysis.

Data were analyzed using a form of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, [2019](#)). An initial coding framework was generated based on research questions with further codes added inductively as coding proceeded. Data were coded to this framework. Coding nodes were then examined, and interpretive themes developed by examination of the data within each node. In keeping with reflexive thematic analysis, themes are conceptualized as meaning-based, interpretive categories defined by the researcher following thoughtful examination of the data (Braun & Clarke, [2023](#)). In this case, multiple 'nodes' from the initial data analysis were examined to develop the interpretive themes discussed in this paper. Themes, their meanings and the relationships between themes were discussed in regular meetings with the ELEPHANT qualitative team. In reporting of findings, all participant names are pseudonyms.

Results

1. Perceived harms of later trading hours

1a) impact on alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harms

Whilst participants recognized both harms and benefits of later trading hours, harms were spoken about more frequently and at greater length. Later trading hours were equated with increased alcohol consumption, which was associated with increased harms in terms of violence, antisocial behavior, crime and public disturbance. Harms were raised both before and after discussion of evidence and discussed in depth by participants in all focus groups, across time 1 (T1) and time 2 (T2) groups. Participants explicitly linked later trading hours with increased opportunity for alcohol consumption and related this to greater harm. For example, Mary (FG5) and Daniel (FG8):

You've got longer to drink, and having longer to drink just allows you to get drunk more.

(Mary, resident, 40s, FG5 Aberdeen, T2)

The main thing, I guess, being that the longer places are opened and the more people are drinking, there is a direct correlation that more alcohol equals more badness.

(Daniel, venue-goer, 30s, FG8 Aberdeen, T2)

In all groups, participants raised negative consequences of increased opportunity for alcohol consumption, including increased aggression, antisocial behavior and violence. There was a perception that the later the hours, the more intoxicated people were, with increased potential for antisocial behavior and violence.

The later on it gets, the more drink they've had, the more people they get together, the more wound up they get, as the night gets on. They get more rowdier, more aggressive.

(Aisha, resident, 50s, FG2 Glasgow, T1)

Violence was perceived across all groups to be associated with the end of the night. Potential for violence and public disturbance was seen as greatest at times and in places where high volumes of people accumulate, such as taxi queues and outside venues as they close. Almost every group in both cities discussed violence in taxi ranks, with descriptions of frustrations running high as people tried to get home amidst high demand for limited transport.

I would argue that the clubs closing at three and there being no transport would be where loads of the crime will happen.

(Alex, venue-goer, 20s, FG1 Glasgow, T2)

One of the other factors is transport. [...] You can't get home, so people are at risk because they're on the streets longer, and then obviously, that also leads to potentially more violent acts happening, simply because people are agitated because they're standing there, and they can't get transport.

(Rory, resident, 60s, FG6 Aberdeen, T2)

Some participants argued that venues closing at the same time, leading to a high volume of intoxicated people leaving venues at the same time exacerbated violence. Staggering closing times was proposed by some as a potential solution (see section 2c).

As well as increased aggression and violence, resident participants suggested a link between increased alcohol consumption and vandalism. Others highlighted increased levels of extreme intoxication with descriptions of people staggering or lying in the street ('they end up on the street, young people, absolutely intoxicated. And they're lying in the gutter' – Lorraine, FG7).

Harms relating to increased alcohol consumption as a result of later trading hours were readily recognized by participants and were discussed across T1 and T2 groups. For example, the public health evidence relating to increases in violence when trading hours increase was not contested by participants. The link between longer hours and increased opportunity for alcohol consumption was also seen as clear by participants. Most related personal experiences of witnessing alcohol-related harm late at night. Perhaps as a result of the evidence shown, in the T2 groups (or post-evidence sharing in T1), participants were more likely to discuss Scottish/British drinking culture and attempt to unpick the reasons why late-night venue

opening leads to problematic alcohol consumption. For example:

The issues [the evidence] presents are definitely not to be ignored, but I think that the framing of this is a bit unfair. It's talking about later closing times, linking with increased violence and assaults. It's not to do with the later closing times, it's because of the alcohol... I think it speaks to a wider issue of Britain's problem with alcohol...

(Matthew, venue-goer, 20s, FG4 Glasgow, T1, post-evidence)

Women and those from sexual minorities spoke frequently about the threat of (sexual) violence and safety at night. Almost every woman who used nightlife described a feeling of having to keep themselves, and their friends, safe late at night. Journeys home and the end of the night were highlighted as times at which they felt most at risk. This was felt by some (both residents and venue-goers) to be increased by later trading hours. These risks were mentioned at both T1 and T2 groups, highlighting again how these risks inherent to late-night drinking environments were clear to participants even without being exposed to public health evidence.

The downfalls of the later opening times would be the safety issue, particularly for women who are going to stay out late, maybe break up from their friend groups and walk home alone.

(Sadie, venue-goer, 40s, FG8 Aberdeen, T1)

Men also spoke about sexual violence in relation to their female friends, daughters and partners, but did not perceive themselves to be at risk. The heterosexual men in the groups generally presented themselves as less worried about violence late at night, despite frequent allusions to violence in discussions of the 'chaos' on the streets in the early hours of the morning. In this way, gender played a key role in men's and women's presentations of the perceived harms of later trading hours. For example, Alan, a student and regular venue-goer in Glasgow described witnessing fighting and extreme intoxication but maintained that he personally did not feel unsafe. This positioning was common amongst the younger men in the groups.

I rarely feel unsafe going out, whether that's going to the club or coming back from the club, but I think [area], maybe three, four, five in the morning... it's definitely chaotic. You've got all the clubs closing, and there's everyone kind of spilling out and sort of different types of folk. Everyone tends to be pretty steaming [intoxicated] [...] you'll see folk fighting and all that sort of stuff... It's almost like folk are so steaming that it's not like a threat per se, it's more just kind of chaos.

(Alan, venue-goer, 20s, FG4 Glasgow, T1)

Later trading hours were perceived to be linked to increased public disturbance and antisocial behavior affecting city center residents (via increased alcohol consumption). These points were raised by residents, who had experienced the negative effects of late-night nightlife, but also by venue-goers who recognized these negative effects. Beth, a long-time resident in Aberdeen city center, described her perception that public disturbance had worsened with the introduction of later trading hours in Aberdeen:

It's horrible. Hearing noises, pressing buzzers, smashing things, you know. Vomiting, doing the toilet. I mean, you look out your window and you'll see people doing the toilet. [...] It's awful to be honest. It is bad, there's a lot of fighting, and shouting, screaming. It's not really singing, it's shouting, and screaming, and fighting, that you're hearing. It has gotten worse.

(Beth, resident, 40s, FG6 Aberdeen, T1)

However, many, including residents themselves, argued that those living near venues should expect a certain degree of disturbance when living in a city center. There was a perceived degree of choice over where one lived, and therefore less sympathy toward those living near venues. This cut across age and 'type' of participant (residents and venue-goers).

If you opt to rent a flat in town, knowing there's night-clubs, and then proceed to complain about it, it's a bit counterintuitive.

(Aidan, venue-goer, 20s, FG6 Aberdeen, T2)

1b) impact on public services

The consideration of public health evidence shifted participants' discussions on the impact on public services such as the police, ambulance service and hospitals. Very few participants spontaneously raised concerns about the impact of later trading hours on public services. This theme became evident in participants' discussions post-evidence sharing in the T1 groups and in T2 groups.

Initially, in T1 groups, participants discussed potential impacts of later trading hours from an individualistic perspective, for example, personal experiences of witnessing extreme intoxication or violence and antisocial behavior late at night. After being shown evidence on the impacts of late-night trading hours during the T1 group (see Box 2), discussions shifted, with frequent and detailed allusions to the impact on public services. For example:

I was one of the few people that voted last week for 4am closures for the club and now I've definitely changed my

opinion. I think it [should be] earlier [...] the effect that has on the NHS, ambulance services. It makes you think, if they [ambulance service] are going to go to someone that's just passed out on the street and just needs a taxi home, over the elderly person that's having a heart attack, I mean, that's just not right. It's definitely changed my opinion.

(Jude, venue-goer, 20s, FG8 Aberdeen, T2)

The evidence, along with the gap of one week between groups, gave participants the opportunity to reflect on the societal impact of later opening hours, prompting more nuanced and population-level reflections at the T2 groups. For example, Heather and Alex (venue-goers) in their T2 group:

HEATHER: I think the stats we got... They make me think we need more sort of ambulance and police and public service funding... and transport for getting home. You should be able to get home safely after whatever you've been doing.

ALEX: In the first part of it, a lot of what we said was kind of "five, six in the morning, it'd be so much better", and then when you see it from the side of law enforcement and the stats for crime and the weight that has on the policing services and stuff like that, it's kind of totally contrasting kind of viewpoints. So if you can try and merge that in the middle, I think it is lack of funding for policing and services like that, that mean that it's such a strain and such a stress for people to deal with that [the impact of nightlife].

(Heather & Alex, venue-goers, 20s & 30s, FG1 Glasgow, T2)

Many participants were surprised at the amount of time emergency services such as police spent on alcohol-related incidents and by increases in police-reported assaults and hospital attendances when trading hours increased. This evidence served to prompt consideration of the impact of late-night trading hours on public services.

For me it's definitely the...because I was more in favour of relaxed regulations on it, it was definitely the stresses on the emergency services was the thing that stood out that I really hadn't considered as much.

(Alan, venue-goer, 20s, FG4 Glasgow, T2)

Notably, the shifting of views to encompass more societal-level thinking was more noticeable amongst younger and venue-going participants. In both Glasgow and Aberdeen groups, and amongst older and younger participants, public services (police, ambulance service and hospitals) were perceived as underfunded and overstretched. Whilst older participants suggested the solution to the burden on public services might be to reduce trading hours ('you limit the time, until it gets better' – Jonas, FG7), younger participants saw the

solution as better funding for services, rather than restricting nightlife, as illustrated by Alex and Heather's interchange above. Similarly, Susie and Matthew, venue-goers in the mixed Glasgow group, were keen to suggest alternatives to reducing trading hours:

MATTHEW: I think that if shortening licensing hours does actually have that big an impact, that's maybe how it has to be but [...] I think we're getting a bit quick to pin blame on the licensing laws, specifically when really we should be taking a look at why folk drink that much in the first place. Also why do folk get violent when they drink?

SUSIE: Yeah, it's probably a minority of people, but that's enough to impact on the services, you know, that are maybe already stretched, and see if they're open later, it's giving people that...just more of a chance to be out drinking more.

(Susie & Matthew, venue-goers, 20s & 30s, FG4 Glasgow, T1, post- evidence)

Others pointed out the additional costs for funding services and questioned whether this cost for later nightlife trading hours was desirable:

At the end of the day...if there's extra ambulances, and whatever they're going to use, who's paying for it? It comes off local services. Which everybody has to pay for. So why should I have to pay more, and lose out on other things like libraries or swimming pools, simply to accommodate and compensate for drunk people having to be taken care of?

(Rory, resident, 60s, FG6 Aberdeen, T2)

2. Perceived benefits of later trading hours

2a) social and cultural benefits

The perceived social and cultural benefits of later trading hours were raised mainly by younger and venue-going participants. Whilst for some the primary benefit of later trading hours was assumed to be economic, for younger participants and venue-goers, later trading hours brought social and cultural benefits such as increased opportunities for socializing and self-expression, and increased nightlife culture.

I'd say that it is worth having that extra hour just kind of for the culture, for people to be able to stay out dancing, I don't think that increasing the profits should be the main reason for these clubs to stay open.

(Christie, venue-goer, 20s, FG4 Glasgow, T1)

Venue-goers perceived nightclubs and late-night venues as spaces for people to relax, socialize and express themselves, and thus having longer in these spaces increased opportunities to enjoy these benefits.

One of the biggest things when I go out is, I go and dance, and sing to the type of music that me and my mates love. [...] I'll go to the smoking area, and I'll meet heaps of new

people. There's a lot of ways that I blow off steam, but there's nothing that makes me blow off steam like that. That is one of the best things for my mental health.

(Kyle, venue-goer, 20s, FG5 Aberdeen, T1)

Venue-goers highlighted the potential that later trading hours brought for nightclubs to attract a higher caliber of DJ, creating more diverse nightlife culture and thus enhancing the nighttime economy.

The quality of the people [DJs/artists] that will come to play in Glasgow will change, and therefore the people that go out will change too. If you think about London, for example, or other big cities, they attract artists that come. [...] You will have more space to bring more people. And people will go out to see those artists or DJs.

(Steph, venue-goer, 30s, FG4 Glasgow, T2)

Venue-goers argued that nightclub culture was important and valuable to individuals and society. In two groups (FG4 Glasgow and FG6 Aberdeen), the loss of nightlife during the COVID-19 pandemic was raised by venue-goers, alongside the impact this had on mental health, in particular for groups such as LGBTQ+ communities.

Thinking about in COVID, when the clubs were shut, I know a lot of people, it really impacted their mental health. So you do have to think about that side of things as well, not giving people a place to dance.

(Christie, venue-goer, 20s, FG4 Glasgow, T2)

There have been quite a few [studies] on LGBTQ+, on how COVID responses took away spaces for them. I think that it has quite a big effect on them because it's one of the few places they can actually express themselves.

(Matthew, venue-goer, 20s, FG4 Glasgow, T2)

Participants suggested differences between regular venue-goers and the general population, with venue-goers seen as motivated by DJs and style of music, whilst the majority were seen as going out, at least in part, to consume alcohol. This is illustrated by Joanne, a Glasgow resident, who commented on a video we showed, of a DJ talking about the benefits of nightclub culture (including safe LGBTQ+ spaces):

I agree with everything [the DJ] says [...] I agree with all his points of positivity, but he's in a minority. People are going out to get drunk. He doesn't seem the type of person that was going out to get drunk. He's listening to live music and wants to dance and...so he sees it different[ly].

(Joanne, resident, 40s, FG3 Glasgow, T1, post-evidence)

Those who perceived cultural benefits to later hours were more likely to attribute harms of nightlife (such as increased violence) to a minority of 'problem drinkers' – see Susie and Alex's excerpts above – and also to

suggest that solutions involved increasing funding for services, rather than restricting nightlife.

2b) economic benefits

One of the arguments for increasing trading hours is that this will support the nighttime economy and that venues will benefit, in terms of increased profits, from additional late-night hours. This assumption was echoed in our focus groups, with the majority of participants (residents and venue-goers) believing that later trading hours would lead to economic gain for venues. This assumption was raised in both T1 and T2 groups, with it often being raised early on in the T1 groups.

Money's a big thing. They know after twelve they're going to make more money because the people that stay out after twelve are the ones that want to drink and spend money.

(Sophie, venue-goer, 20s, FG1 Glasgow, T1)

They [venues] get more money, more chance of getting more money, because obviously they've lost a lot of money during COVID.

(Phil, resident, 40s, FG7 Aberdeen, T1)

However, the size of any profit generated late at night was questioned by Christie, who worked in a nightclub granted later trading hours in Glasgow. She highlighted how the final hour of the night was often not as profitable as others assumed:

The thing I'd say about the profits is that at the last hour of working generally, you get some nights that the bar stays busy, but generally it gets so, so much quieter between three and four [AM], and actually, the amount of profit increase is probably not that much.

(Christie, venue-goer, 20s, FG4 Glasgow, T1)

2c) staggered closing times

In every Glasgow group and half the Aberdeen groups, the 'staggering' of closing times through allowing some venues to close later was suggested as a way of mitigating the harms discussed in Section 1. Staggering closing times was suggested to lead to a reduction in violence and pressure on transport by spreading out demand for transport home (particularly taxis) and reducing the potential for violence at taxi ranks.

I do think that's why a lot of trouble or damage happens, whether it's just damage to the streets or buildings, is because they all shut at the same time. [...] you're always going to get a large group of people. Whereas if it is staggered around a certain area, you're going to minimise it [trouble].

(Rob, resident, 20s, FG2 Glasgow, T1)

There was also a perception from one or two female participants that staggering closing times could make

people feel safer in city centers late at night because there would be more people on the streets throughout the night.

I just think it'll be more staggered, like when people are going home, everyone's not going home at the same time, and I think people probably might even feel actually safer, because there is more people in the town a bit later as well.

(Gemma, resident, 30s, FG3 Glasgow, T1)

Discussion

This paper set out to answer two questions: firstly, what do the public perceive as the potential harms and benefits of increasing venue trading hours, and secondly, how do the public respond to public health evidence and use this in developing their perceptions of potential harms and benefits? In this study, participants in all groups saw potentially harmful impacts of later trading hours; articulated as increases in violence, antisocial behavior, crime and public disturbance. These were raised spontaneously and explicitly linked with increased alcohol availability. Potential outcomes not so readily perceived by participants, but discussed following the sharing of evidence, were negative impacts on public services, such as increased burden on police, ambulance service and hospitals. Venue-goers highlighted social and cultural benefits of later opening hours, such as more diverse nightlife and mental health benefits from opportunities for self-expression and socialization. Economic benefits were assumed by participants but questioned by those with experience of working in the nighttime economy. These insights highlight the importance of recognizing potential benefits as well as harms from later trading hours and seeking policies which balance societal benefits whilst minimizing harms (Fitzgerald et al., 2024a; Nicholls & Hunt, 2025).

The evidence on increasing public health harms such as violence, hospital attendances and ambulance call-outs when alcohol trading hours are increased is well-documented (de Goeij et al., 2015; Nepal et al., 2020; Rossow & Norström, 2012; Sanchez-Ramirez & Voaklander, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2016). This study adds to this literature by demonstrating that the public are aware of these harms and do link these with increased alcohol availability. This finding points to a wider societal normalization and acceptance of alcohol-related harms—such as aggression, violence, harassment, and injury—which often go unquestioned. In our study, participants generally didn't appear to view the harms raised as problematic until they reflected on the impact on services. These findings

raise critical questions about how much harm society is willing to accept for the perceived benefits of nightlife culture.

In relation to violence, men and women reported different levels of concern about violence and sexual violence linked to late-night trading hours. Women and those from sexual minorities were more likely to report feeling at risk of violence and sexual violence late at night. Whilst there is a broad literature on violence, harassment and aggression affecting women in the nighttime economy (e.g. Graham et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2021; Quigg et al., 2020), men are also at risk from violence late at night (Donkin & Birks, 2007). That men did not perceive themselves to be at risk from late-night violence is interesting, and perhaps relates to resistance to being seen as 'victims' and notions of masculinity (Hunnicutt, 2009; Mardorossian, 2014). This perception of safety is in direct contrast to findings from another part of the ELEPHANT study, demonstrating that ambulance call-outs increased in Aberdeen following the introduction of the later trading hours, *particularly* amongst men (Sheikh et al., *forthcoming*).

Another negative regularly raised by participants in this study was public disorder and disturbance linked to later trading hours. Participants attempted to explain these issues and propose solutions—most commonly attributing violence and disorder to the combination of high intoxication levels and high volumes of people. One frequently suggested solution was staggering venue closing times. However, research on this is mixed and indicates that shifting to more staggered closing times does not reduce violence, only shift timings to later in the night (Humphreys et al., 2013; Humphreys & Eisner, 2014; Stevely et al., 2021). It is also of note that, in both cities where the changes had taken place, natural staggering of closing times after midnight already exists due to bars and nightclubs having different closing times, without any consequent reduction in harms. Therefore, although staggering is often proposed as a solution, it is poorly defined and does not provide the reduction in harms assumed by participants. This likely reflects a broader disconnect between public and expert understandings of alcohol harms and effective solutions (Fitzgerald et al., 2024).

The sharing of public health evidence in this study prompted a majority of participants to shift their thinking from the individual level to a broader, societal perspective on the impact of increased trading hours. This aligns with previous work showing that framing approaches which explain diverse alcohol harms effectively improve public understanding and increase support for population-level alcohol policies (Fitzgerald

et al., 2024b). This study provides support for this approach as presenting the public with accessible public health evidence explaining the links to broader societal harms (e.g. burden on public services) did prompt most participants to adopt a broader focus when thinking about the likely impact of later trading hours. However, whilst discussion of evidence did prompt a majority of participants to consider societal-level impacts, a minority of participants retained their original perspectives regarding causes and solutions to alcohol harms being at the individual level. This suggests a need for further research into which framing approaches are effective with different population groups.

Prior to discussion of evidence, some participants in all groups suggested harm was caused by a small minority of 'problem drinkers' and blamed national drinking cultures for any alcohol harm. Both narratives are commonly seen in media and industry representations of alcohol harm (e.g. European Centre for Alcohol Marketing, 2021; Nicholls, 2011; Ulucanlar et al., 2023). Thus, the public's understanding of alcohol harms and their causes are likely influenced by media and industry framings with much less familiarity with public health framings of alcohol harms. This is hardly surprising given that alcohol licensing stakeholders are sometimes unfamiliar with public health evidence on alcohol and struggle to articulate the mechanisms through which increased alcohol availability may lead to alcohol-related harm (O' Donnell et al., 2024). Participants were notably surprised by evidence on how later trading hours increase burden on public services, highlighting the potential of accessible public health information to broaden public perspectives and strengthen support for effective alcohol control measures (Fitzgerald et al., 2024b; Gage et al., 2024; Li et al., 2017).

While this study highlights that the general public readily identified the harms associated with later trading hours, it is important that alcohol research also considers the reasons why some members of the public may support more relaxed alcohol regulation. Nightlife culture was strongly valued, particularly by venue-goers, who emphasized its role in supporting socialization, relaxation, and offering a 'third space' away from the pressures of everyday life. Alcohol researchers must acknowledge that, to the public, pleasure and fun are often central motivators for participation in the nighttime economy (Nicholls & Hunt, 2025). Interestingly, in our study, participants rarely linked the perceived benefits of nightlife (such as socialization) directly to alcohol, whereas harms were directly linked to its consumption. This suggests potential for a vibrant

nightlife culture without an inevitable link to increased public health harm. However, in this study, as in other work, participants struggled to imagine a future nightlife not inextricably linked with alcohol (see Uny et al, *forthcoming*), including in part, because they perceived the economic viability of late-night trading to be tied to alcohol sales.

A key theme emerging from this study is the question of who should pay to police and service the nighttime economy. While participants recognized both value and costs associated with nightlife, many preferred to see better resourcing of emergency and public services rather than limiting late-night alcohol availability. This reflects the value of the nighttime economy to the general public and echoes our earlier point about what level of harm—and what level of public resourcing to manage it—is societally acceptable. However, this study also highlights opportunities for policy-makers and advocacy groups in terms of strategies to shift public opinion in favor of population-level alcohol regulation. In this study, framing alcohol-related harms in terms of broader societal impacts, such as NHS and police burden, helped to shift public focus to the societal level potentially generating greater support for more restrictive alcohol policy.

Lastly, participants often presumed that extended trading hours would bring economic benefits, but the evidence here is mixed. Some studies suggest businesses may benefit or remain unaffected by changes in trading hours (Ferris et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2021), while others point to limited or no economic gain (Miller et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., *forthcoming*), with industry stakeholders themselves expressing concerns about the costs of staying open later and questioning profitability (Cook et al., *forthcoming*; Mitchell et al., *forthcoming*). This raises further questions about whether late-night trading without alcohol sales would be economically viable.

Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study is the deliberative design. This illustrates to policymakers and advocacy organizations how public opinion can be shaped through the provision of relatively simple public health evidence on the likely harms and benefits of increasing alcohol trading hours. Another strength is the thoroughly researched, iteratively designed, lay-friendly materials, shaped by public involvement, which were used in this study. This enabled well-informed discussions on local policy decisions and the issues surrounding later trading hours. In longer-form deliberative techniques (such as citizens

juries) participants often also have the opportunity to shape the agenda of discussions and the information they are presented with. Although this was not possible in this study, future work could go further by increasing the input of participants as to what information they would like to see.

A further strength of the study is that participants were diverse and had local knowledge of the two cities where the changes had taken place. This enabled realistic perceptions of likely harms and benefits to be captured. Furthermore, although groups were designated as 'resident' or 'venue-goer' groups, many residents also identified as venue-goers and vice versa, thus enabling views from multiple perspectives to be captured. Finally, having a short, one-week gap between groups aimed to reduce attrition, which was successful as all participants attended both sessions.

One limitation inherent in the design of this study is that it is impossible to separate the impact of consideration of public health evidence from the impact of participation in this process. In other words, even without the evidence, taking part in the process may have made people think and discuss issues more deeply. Future work could add value by including questions intended to understand *how* participants experience the deliberative process, process evidence and use this to influence their views, to understand better which elements of participating in a deliberative process are most influential. A further limitation is that the nature of the study inevitably led to a focus on short-term acute harms and impacts, and not on longer-term ones (for example cancers linked to alcohol) which are at least of equal concern for public health. As with all qualitative research, the views represented in this study are those of a limited number of individuals but as described, care was taken to recruit a diverse sample in terms of age, ethnicity, sexual identity, socioeconomic status and engagement with nightlife.

Conclusion

Local residents and venue-goers reported perceiving potential harms from later alcohol trading hours including greater incidence of violence, crime, antisocial behavior and public disturbance. These harms were explicitly linked with the prolonged opportunity for alcohol consumption inherent in later trading. Venue-goers also emphasized social and cultural benefits to later opening hours, including increased opportunity for socialization and diversifying nightlife culture. Harms were more readily reported and given more

weight than benefits in participants' discussions. The provision of lay-friendly public health evidence generated nuanced reflection on the wider societal impact of later trading hours, including burden on public services such as the police, ambulance service and hospitals. Providing the public with high quality information, presented in accessible ways, therefore has the potential to influence the conversation on nightlife and its benefits and harms, providing policy-makers with strategies to increase public support for specific alcohol policies.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank study participants for their time and contributions, and the PPI groups in Aberdeen and Glasgow for their contributions to developing research materials.

Author contributions

NF, CE, JL, EM and CA were involved in conceptualization of the research idea and funding acquisition. CE, NF, KM, ROD, GM and IU were involved in study design, development of research questions and data collection. KM, CE, NF, ROD and GM were involved in analysis of data. KM wrote the original manuscript. All authors were involved in the revision and finalization process. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical statement

This study was approved by Glasgow Caledonian University's Health & Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HLS/NCH/21/018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This project is funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) [Public Health Research programme (129885)]. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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