

Alcohol Control Policies for Local Government



Building Healthier Communities

Local governments play a vital role in building healthy, vibrant communities by ensuring public spaces are welcoming and supportive for all. Thoughtful policies and regulations that promote health and well-being help to create the conditions for everyone to thrive¹.

Alcohol is a commonly consumed psychoactive substance in Canada and contributes to a wide range of health and social harms², from immediate impacts like poor sleep, hangovers, anxiety and injuries, to long-term risks like cancers and liver and heart disease. Alcohol also causes significant second-hand harms, including violence, reduced performance at work or school and strain on relationships and families³. These harms increase as alcohol use increases within communities.



Communities thrive when public spaces and social life are shaped by people and experiences, not alcohol. Over time, deregulation and widespread marketing have made alcohol more visible and accessible. This makes it harder for people who are trying to cut back and avoid exposure to alcohol's negative effects. Local policies that reduce retailer density, limit advertising and rethink alcohol's role in community events can shift social norms and reduce consumption⁴. When local governments enact alcohol control policies, they drive meaningful change – supporting people and communities to be more healthy, connected and resilient.



Policy Options: Gaps and Opportunities

Local action is needed to protect community health. Federal and provincial policy changes have increased alcohol availability. In British Columbia, this includes policies regarding density, proximity to sensitive locations, retail hours, delivery services and availability at events. These changes contribute to the normalization of alcohol use in daily life and public spaces, encouraging people to consume more. By adopting policies that shift social norms and limit alcohol availability, local governments can close policy gaps, strengthen regulations and inspire broader change.

The Municipal Alcohol Policy Continuum



Local governments can draw on a range of the policy tools on the **Municipal Policy Continuum**^[1], including advertising restrictions, event policies, land use planning, pricing approaches, and community-led, collaborative strategies. All policy options yield measurable benefits for communities and can be introduced gradually, building toward more impactful community-driven approaches.

Municipal Alcohol Policy (MAP)

MAPs set rules and standards for alcohol use in public spaces and at events. Many BC communities have adopted MAPs to shift drinking norms, reduce impaired driving, limit youth exposure to alcohol marketing and create more inclusive public spaces⁵⁻⁷. MAP strategies include:

- Strengthen Existing Policies:** Reduce alcohol availability, advertising and hours of sale.
- Alcohol-Free Public Spaces:** Maintain alcohol-free policies in public spaces such as parks, beaches, sport grounds and community centres.
- Event Regulations:** Create rules for alcohol management, security, signage and staff training.
- Sales Restrictions:** Limit alcohol sales in local facilities like parks and community centres.
- Advertising and Sponsorship:** Restrict alcohol ads on local government property and sponsorship of local teams or programs.






Community Spotlight: District of Tofino

The District of Tofino introduced a [Municipal Alcohol Policy](#)⁵ in 2021, one of the first on Vancouver Island. The MAP pertains to public events and municipal property and is grounded in three principles: 1) Community Health and Safety; 2) Engagement and Support; and 3) Inclusivity. Within the MAP, each policy provides a community benefit rationale linked to those principles.

[1] 'Municipal policy continuum' and 'municipal alcohol policy' are commonly used terms for policies that can be used by all forms of local governance.

Liquor Licensing Policy (LLP)

Local governments can adopt LLPs to guide approval processes for Liquor and Cannabis Regulation Branch (LCRB) applications, including strengthening application evaluation criteria to manage density, proximity and operating hours of licensed establishments. Policy options include:

-  **LCRB Application Review:** Opt-in to comment on LCRB applications with added evaluation criteria.
-  **Availability Restrictions:** Limit retailer numbers and locations/proximities in high-density areas; enforce minimum distances from sensitive locations like schools and parks.
-  **Late-Night Sales:** Limit operating and sales hours for licensed establishments and outlets.
-  **Pricing Tools:** Apply alcohol minimum unit pricing and taxation policies for licensed establishments.
-  **Oversight:** Strengthen business licensing regulations and criteria, enforce requirements and monitor outcomes.








Community Spotlight: City of Prince George

[Prince George's Liquor and Cannabis Licensing Policy](#)⁸ focuses on community impact, density, proximity to facilities and relevant socio-economic information. It also suggests operating hours and maximum occupant loads.

Community Alcohol Strategy (CAS)

A CAS is a broader, community-led approach that combines health promotion policies and regulations from MAPs and LLPs with treatment and intervention strategies. While a CAS requires significant time and coordination, it can address local needs, promote health equity and support long-term change. CAS elements may include:

-  **Build Strong Coalitions:** Engage diverse community groups and local leaders.
-  **Shift Social Norms:** Raise awareness of alcohol's risks and the benefits of reduced use.
-  **Support Business Responsibility:** Encourage alcohol-free options and enhanced safety.
-  **Use Local Knowledge:** Align actions with community needs and priorities.
-  **Advocate for Policy Change:** Support policies at provincial and federal levels.



Community Spotlight: City of Prince Albert & Area

Developed through an inclusive, collaborative and data-informed process, [Prince Albert's Community Alcohol Strategy](#)⁹ focuses on minimizing harms and building a healthier, more equitable community, presenting a vision and actions to reduce consumption and provide education and services to address multifaceted issues related to alcohol use.



Impacts of Alcohol Policies

Alcohol-related harms do not affect all groups equally; social, economic and structural factors mean some groups bear a heavier burden. Effective policies must address the impacts of stigmatization, marginalization and social exclusion^{1,10}. Using community knowledge and diverse perspectives can lead to more inclusive policies, for example:

- **Limiting outlet density:** Neighbourhoods with a high concentration of alcohol establishments often experience greater harms and long-term disinvestment. Using zoning tools to limit outlet density and support balanced, healthy neighbourhood development can address these disparities across different community settings^{11,12}.
- **Reducing exposure to alcohol advertising:** Limiting advertising in only certain areas (e.g. near schools) can lead to advertising being concentrated in other areas of the community, disproportionately affecting residents in those neighbourhoods. A community-wide alcohol advertising policy informed by community engagement can help prevent this shift while also protecting youth and supporting adults trying to reduce their use or exposure to alcohol.
- **Limiting late-night sales and serving hours:** Reducing late-night sales can help lower noise, disturbances and related harms in nearby areas. Pairing these policies with incentives for community programs and alcohol-free events can help support both community well-being and local businesses.
- **Implementing pricing and taxation policies:** Pricing strategies can reduce alcohol use, especially among youth, but may also place a greater burden on lower socio-economic groups. Collaborating with other levels of government, providing education and strengthening community programs and services can help mitigate these effects.

Keeping diverse community needs central through planning and implementation helps ensure alcohol policies reduce harm while building more connected and inclusive communities.





Getting Started: Practical Steps

✔ Review Existing Policies, By-Laws and Evaluation Criteria

- Review current bylaws and statutory documents related to parks, open space, signage and land use, as well as business licenses and special occasion licenses.
- Assess how liquor license applications are evaluated, including strength of current criteria¹³.
- Review standard or common liquor-serving hours and recent extension requests.

✔ Gather Information About Local Context

- Use data from [BC Liquor and Cannabis Regulation Branch \(LCRB\)](#)¹⁴ to map existing liquor-licensed establishments and outlets. Identify areas with high outlet densities or those near sensitive locations such as schools, community services or parks.
- Look into alcohol policies adopted in communities with similar size, needs and readiness to identify approaches that may be a good fit for your community.

✔ Learn From Community

- Connect with residents, service providers and local partners to identify community norms around alcohol as well as alcohol-related concerns, especially those raised to political leaders or staff.
- Use consultation approaches that involve diverse groups, including those with lived experience affected by alcohol-related harms, to gain broad understanding of community perspectives on the proposed policy or criteria.

✔ Building Inclusive and Responsive Policies

- Consider how new policies may impact different groups or neighbourhoods, such as those facing social or economic barriers. For example, reducing alcohol exposure in public spaces may benefit youth, people in recovery, and those without access to private gathering spaces.
- Build awareness of how shifting current alcohol norms can benefit community well-being.
- Evaluate trade-offs thoughtfully, such as replacing alcohol industry sponsorships with alternative funding sources that align with community health goals.



Looking for Help?

By implementing targeted policies, local governments can improve well-being, shift social norms and support healthier, more inclusive communities. The Healthy Public Policy team at Island Health can support local governments in the Island Health Region by:

- Providing local health data
- Helping with public consultations and educational materials
- Providing policy development materials, assistance and advice
- Reviewing potential equity impacts of new policies, practices and tools.

For any inquiries reach out to HPPS@islandhealth.ca



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