



GENERAL ELECTION 2024



TOPIC BRIEF



The Manifestos: Policies addressing public health & health inequalities in Scotland

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In recent weeks, the main political parties released their 2024 election manifestos. These provide an outline of the policies they intend to implement if elected, or push for in opposition. [Polling figures](#) have been changing frequently, but the four largest parties - the [Labour party](#), the [Scottish National Party \(SNP\)](#), the [Liberal Democrats](#), and the [Conservative party](#) - are likely to win Scottish seats in the general election.

This topic brief examines the policies that these four parties discuss in their manifestos that explicitly focus on public health and health inequalities, and are relevant to Scotland. Health policy is, in general, a devolved power, meaning that responsibility sits with the Scottish Government. However, changes in NHS funding in England and Wales will result in changes to the funding available in Scotland, and some health policies may be replicated in Scotland. The UK Government also reserves some powers relating to important public health issues, such as food, drugs, alcohol, tobacco, vapes and gambling (and for some of these issues, there is an agreed four nations approach).

As set out in our [previously published election brief](#), the key drivers of health inequality relate to household wealth/income and living standards, which feature in all manifestos. This brief is published alongside a [companion piece](#) which examines the way each party has addressed these socioeconomic inequalities.

Although we primarily focus on national manifestos, we have highlighted areas where the Scottish branches of the [Labour](#), [Conservative](#), and [Liberal Democrat](#) party manifestos differ from their parent party, either in the prioritisation of policies or in the proposed goals, content or design.

This is part of a work programme funded by [the Health Foundation](#) on improving health and reducing inequalities in Scotland.

HEALTH
INEQUALITY
AND PUBLIC
HEALTH

DRUGS AND
ALCOHOL

TOBACCO
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HEALTH INEQUALITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH

In terms of high level messaging, **Labour and the Liberal Democrats both discuss improving public health and tackling health inequalities**, though the focus on reducing health inequalities centres on England (reflecting the fact health is a devolved policy area). Overarching commitments to improving public health and tackling health inequalities are absent from the SNP and Conservative manifestos, and from the Scottish Labour and Scottish Liberal Democrats manifestos. This is an important gap since many health outcomes are worse in Scotland, including healthy life expectancy and health inequalities between more and less advantaged communities.

Policy	Party
<p>Prioritise reducing health inequalities <i>While Labour’s ‘mission’ (target) to tackle health inequalities focuses only on England, the policies required to achieve this may include UK-wide policies, so this focus could impact on Scotland (though the Scottish Labour manifesto is silent on health inequalities)</i></p>	Labour
<p>Increase the Public Health Grant and set aside funding for those experiencing the worst health inequalities <i>The Public Health Grant is a grant paid to English local authorities by the UK government. Any additional expenditure in devolved policy areas results in an increase in the block grant, which is the amount of funding available to the Scottish Government. Unlike in England, the Scottish Government would not need to spend this additional amount on health policies.</i></p>	Liberal Democrats

Labour and the Liberal Democrats both include a policy proposals that could contribute to reducing health inequalities, some of which they echo in their Scotland-specific manifestos. For example, **both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have plans to reduce inequalities in oral health among children**. In Scotland, children in deprived areas have poorer oral health than those in non-deprived areas. The cost of toothbrushes and toothpaste play into a concept called “hygiene poverty,” where people trade off buying hygiene products, including essential dental products, in order to afford other necessities.

The Liberal Democrats also propose a policy addressing air pollution and air quality in public buildings. Indoor air pollution affects children and the elderly more severely than working age adults, and people living in deprived areas are likely to experience higher rates of indoor air pollution.

HEALTH INEQUALITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH

The Scottish branches of the Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat parties all include specific goals for the Scottish healthcare system in their manifestos. These goals often mirror policies stated in UK party manifestos, but discuss the context for Scotland. Some proposals target population groups facing health disadvantages, such as women, children living in deprived areas, people with disabilities, and minority ethnic communities. Women in Scotland live longer than men, but a smaller proportion of their life is spent in good health. Women are also more likely to experience medical discrimination. People from an ethnic minority background generally have a longer life expectancy than people from a white background but have higher rates of certain diseases, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Maternal mortality rates are also higher for some minority ethnic women in the UK, especially black women.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats include a specific commitment to addressing ethnic inequalities in maternal mortality, though this is only likely to apply in England. None of the other parties say much about health inequalities among ethnic minorities, though the Labour and Scottish Labour manifestos make a general commitment to tackling racial inequalities, and the Conservatives manifesto commits to tackling unfair ethnic disparities in health and other areas.

Policy	Party
Tackle air pollution and poor air quality in public buildings with a Clean Air Act <i>Scotland is able to set its own air quality targets, but must meet UK-wide air quality minimum targets.</i>	Liberal Democrats
Scrap VAT on children's toothbrushes and toothpaste	Liberal Democrats
Extend mental health support in schools <i>The school system is devolved, but both parties echoed this policy in their Scotland manifestos</i>	Labour, Liberal Democrats
Ensure mothers are given access to good healthcare to reduce inequalities	Labour & Scottish Labour
Increase uptake and access to screening services for women to reduce gendered inequalities	Scottish Labour
Expand and target dental care outreach to children in deprived areas	Labour & Scottish Labour
Increase the capacity of mental health services in a variety of ways, including for women, children, and people with learning disabilities and autism	Scottish Liberal Democrats
Take greater account of women's health needs such as dementia or Alzheimers disease; deliver more maternity services locally	Scottish Conservatives



DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Policies relating to alcohol and drugs are important for Scotland as key policy levers sit at UK level and **alcohol and drugs play an important role in Scotland's relatively poor health and wider health inequalities.**

Of the four UK nations, Scotland has the highest rates of drug deaths and the highest alcohol-related mortality rates. The unequal harms caused by these substances partly reflects the fact that people in Scotland report using alcohol and drugs as 'coping' mechanisms in response to high levels of stress, anxiety, hopelessness and depression (and evidence reviews show that poverty causes stress).

Proposals for tackling drug use and drug related vary by party. The SNP, Liberal Democrats, and Scottish Labour party all propose a public health, preventative approach to tackling drug use, while the UK/English arm of the Labour party opts for a more criminal justice focused approach. For example, Labour party plans for new 'Respect Orders' in England signal a criminal justice led approach to drug use, with no commitments to investing in drug treatment, prevention or rehabilitation (despite multiple commitments to preventative public health measures), while the Scottish Labour party manifesto focuses on rehabilitation and treatment.

Surprisingly, few of the manifestos include any commitments to tackle health harms caused by alcohol. The exception is Scottish Conservative plans for a legal right to recovery treatment for those struggling with drugs and alcohol addiction.

Drug deaths, in particular, are of major concern in Scotland, with an exponential increase over the past decade, largely concentrated in men. **People living in the most deprived fifth of areas of Scotland are 20 times as likely to die from a drug-related death compared to those living in the least deprived fifth of areas.** The current policy system also means that many drug users in Scotland end up in the criminal justice system, a trajectory with negative health and social consequences.

Available evidence suggests that policies to divert people from prosecution into treatment (favoured by the Liberal Democrats, the SNP and the Scottish Labour party) show promising health improvement, whereas policies to increase criminalisation of drug use (favoured by the Labour party in England) are likely to have negative health and social consequences. Since drugs policy is only partially devolved, the contrasting approaches of the Labour party manifestos for England and Scotland could play out in complex ways for Scotland if, as expected, Labour form the next UK Government.

Alcohol-related mortality declined between 2007 and 2014 but has since stalled and remains the fourth leading cause of death in Scotland. Alcohol-related mortality is, like drug deaths, concentrated among men and more deprived communities in Scotland. The dearth of policy proposals to tackle alcohol harms across all manifestos (with the exception of a proposal for a legal entitlement to treatment in the Scottish Conservatives manifesto) is therefore an important policy gap for health inequalities in Scotland.



DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Policy	Party
Create a legal, regulated market for cannabis; divert drug users from the criminal justice system to support services; treat Scotland's drug deaths as a public health emergency and devolve powers for better solutions where necessary	Liberal Democrats
Take a harm reduction approach to drugs, including prioritising local recovery services, piloting safe consumption and drug testing facilities, and providing greater access to naloxone	Scottish Labour
Take a public health approach to the drug death crisis; decriminalise drugs for personal use	Scottish National Party
Introduce 'Respect Orders' banning adults deemed persistently 'anti-social' from town centres, to reduce public drinking and drug use in town centres. <i>Policies on antisocial behaviour are likely to fall under criminal justice, which is devolved, although some aspects of criminal justice related to drug and alcohol policy are reserved.</i>	Labour
Invest in rehabilitative drug treatment services	Conservatives, Liberal Democrats
Introduce a legal right to recovery treatment for those struggling with drug and alcohol addiction.	Scottish Conservatives
Maintain the 'Brexit pubs guarantee.' This means the tax duty on draught alcoholic drinks (e.g. beer and cider) will be less for pubs than for supermarkets	Conservatives
Deploy GPS tracking technology and Remote Alcohol Monitoring of people convicted of criminal offences	Scottish Conservatives



TOBACCO AND VAPING

The Conservatives, Labour and SNP all propose pursuing existing UK Government legislation to create a ‘smokefree generation’ by gradually increasing the legal age of purchase for cigarettes. Although a devolved issue, there is a UK-wide agreement to take a four-nation approach. All four parties plan to curb the use of ‘vapes’, especially for children, including by banning (cheaper) single use vapes.

Smoking rates in Scotland are higher than in England and, while smoking rates in Scotland continue to decline, they remain highly unequal; **in 2019, 32% of adults living in the most deprived fifth of areas were current smokers, compared to 6% in the least deprived areas.** [Survey data](#) from 2019 suggests children’s use of vaping products (many of which contain nicotine) follow the same unequal pattern.

Cross-party support for legislation to create a smokefree generation by gradually increasing the legal age of purchase has the potential to help reduce health inequalities in Scotland (at least, if young people do not substitute smoking for other health-harming products).

Policy	Party
Commitment to UK-wide legislation to create a ‘smokefree generation’ by gradually increasing the legal age of purchase	Conservatives, Labour and Scottish National Party
Introduce a new levy (tax) on tobacco company profits to help fund healthcare and smoking cessation services	Liberal Democrats
Ban single-use vapes	Scottish National Party and Liberal Democrats
Ban vapes from being branded and advertised to children	Labour
Ban vaping in indoor public places	Scottish Conservatives
Restrict vape flavours and packaging, strengthen local powers to enforce underage sales of tobacco and vaping products, outlaw vaping alternatives	Conservatives

DIET AND OBESITY

The Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats address advertising junk food in various ways, and these policies are echoed in their Scottish manifestos. The Liberal Democrats also propose extending a levy on high-sugar beverages to all products, not just carbonated ones (as is the case currently). In Scotland, **children living in deprived areas are more likely to suffer the ill health effects of a poor diet, and are more likely to be at risk for obesity.**

Policy	Party
Restrict advertising of products high in salt, fat, and sugar	Conservatives
Restrict outdoor advertising of junk food; restrict TV advertising of junk food to post-watershed	Liberal Democrats
Ban advertising of junk food to children; ban sales of high-caffeine drinks to under-16s	Labour
Extend the soft drinks levy to juice-based and milk-based drinks that are high in added sugar	Liberal Democrats

GAMBLING

Gambling is the final addictive issue that parties address in their manifestos. SNP and the Liberal Democrats both suggest treating gambling as a public health matter and suggested implementing a levy to fund research, prevention, and treatment. Labour furthermore addressed reforming gambling regulations, although they were not specific about what that would entail.

Harmful gambling is associated with psychological and physical health. Gambling centres are disproportionately located in the most deprived areas in Scotland. **Like other addictive products, the ill effects of gambling harm people living in deprived areas significantly more than those in wealthier parts of the country.**

Policy	Party
Treat gambling as a public health matter and implement a gambling levy to fund research, prevention & treatment.	Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats & Scottish Liberal Democrats
Reform gambling regulations, while working with the gambling industry to 'ensure responsible gambling'	Labour & Scottish Labour
Restrict gambling advertising, implement affordability checks and Establish a Gambling Ombudsman to redress wrongs.	Liberal Democrats & Scottish Liberal Democrats