Alcohol Harms Matrix for Licencing Decisions in Bury and Bolton

What is it?

Across Greater Manchester, local authorities are increasingly harnessing health intelligence and spatial planning tools to inform alcohol licensing decisions and reduce alcohol-related harm. This data-driven approach targets new licence applications while addressing broader concerns such as crime, public safety, nuisance, and child welfare.

For example, Bury's Public Health Team developed a bespoke Alcohol Harms Matrix, inspired by models from Leeds and Tameside. Bury's matrix stands out for its granularity, ranking harm indicators per 1,000 population at the Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) level, providing precise evidence to inform Licensing Committee decisions. It draws on multiple data sources, including Greater Manchester Police (GMP) alcohol-coded incidents, hospital admissions, deprivation indices, outlet density, and local treatment data. The matrix is embedded on Bury's licensing application landing page, encouraging applicants to pre-emptively consider public health impacts.

An added benefit is its visibility—embedded directly on Bury's licensing application landing page—encouraging applicants to enter their proposed venue postcode and consider potential public health concerns before submission. The primary audience for this tool includes licensing authorities, responsible authorities, and prospective licensees, with a localised footprint focused on Bury, and wider applicability across Greater Manchester.

Similarly, Bolton Council employs an intelligence-led Alcohol Data Matrix to assess the cumulative impact of alcohol harms in specific areas and venues when licence applications are submitted. Public Health provides detailed data reports alongside formal representations to support the Licensing Committee's decision.

What was the timeline?

Both Bury and Bolton's Alcohol Harms Matrices are now fully operational and has influenced several positive licensing decisions for both on- and off-licence applications.

In Bury, from initial concept to implementation, the process took approximately 18 months.

The matrix has supported successful representations against independent off-licences, town centre bars, and supermarkets, helping establish benchmarks like midnight alcohol sale restrictions, though each application is assessed on its individual merits.

How did it happen?

Bury Public Health led the design of the Alcohol Harms Matrix by selecting data sets closely aligned with the four licensing priorities, ensuring the information could be effectively incorporated into licensing representations. The matrix's focus was regularly reviewed and refined through input from Bury's Alcohol Partnership and Tactical Licensing Partnership, helping keep it aligned with the statutory criteria licensing committees must consider when granting or refusing applications.

A strong working relationship with Bury's Licensing Team was essential to the matrix's development. The tool was also presented to Bury's Drug and Alcohol Partnership and Community Safety Partnership for feedback, broadening stakeholder engagement.

While no formal sign-off was required, portfolio leads for health and licensing were kept informed, and it was agreed the matrix would serve as an advisory resource to support licensing decisions.

Who was involved?

The matrix was co-produced through collaboration with multiple local authorities and data leads from Bury Council, Greater Manchester Police (GMP), Primary and Secondary Care, and other relevant services. Annual reviews ensure data remains current, with new indicators—such as Northwest Ambulance Service (NWAS) data—considered for inclusion.

Bury's multidisciplinary Tactical Licensing Partnership, which includes GMP, Licensing, Trading Standards, Highways, Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service (GMFRS), and Environmental Health, provided ongoing expert oversight. Their involvement was key to validating the data and establishing the matrix's credibility and practical value in the licensing process.

How did you involve the community?

Although people and communities were not directly involved in designing the matrix, the strong public mandate for reducing alcohol-related harm indicates broad support for measures that curtail alcohol licensing and promotion.

What were the challenges and how were they overcome?

Challenges with alcohol harm matrices include ensuring data is up-to-date and accurately reflects local conditions, which requires regular review and maintenance. Additionally, while the matrix provides valuable insights, it does not replace the need for careful, case-by-case consideration by licensing committees. Instead, it serves as a supportive tool to inform and strengthen decision-making rather than dictate outcomes.

What have you learnt?

Using alcohol licensing matrices, Bury Council and Bolton Council, as well as other Greater Manchester local authorities, combine data like alcohol-related crime, hospital admissions, and licensed premises density to identify high-risk areas already facing alcohol-related harm. This helps target new licenses or extended hours where they could worsen problems. Although challenges remain, data-driven approaches have proven effective—public health input has successfully influenced decisions to refuse licenses or reduce operating hours in well-established areas.

Bolton Council has received positive feedback on the influence of this evidence and has played an active role in shaping licensing outcomes.

Further information

Bury Council – Alcohol Licensing matrix

Further information at the bottom of this Bury Council page - Premises licence applications - Bury Council