

**The Northern Echo**  
The North's campaigning newspaper

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## COMMENT

### Devolution in context

IT is a couple of weeks since the long-awaited devolution deals were announced for North-East, with £30m a year going to the north of the region and £15m a year going to the southern swathe labelled the Tees Valley.

The region has played the Government's game in order to get that money, and the devolved powers that go with it, by conditionally agreeing to accept elected mayors.

We say 'conditionally' because the people of County Durham are to be given a vote on whether they wish to proceed with the deal, although it is far from clear what would happen if they voted 'no'.

In the meantime, the extra cash awarded to this part of the country is quickly being put in context. The financial boost from devolution coincided with the collapse of our steel industry and the lost wages alone represent an £80m a year hit to the region's economy.

North-East council budgets also continue to be cut by tens of millions of pounds a year in the region.

And last night it emerged that Durham Constabulary – recently branded the most efficient police force in the country – is to lose £10m a year due to a change in the Government's funding formula.

Durham Police and Crime Commissioner Ron Hogg is right to be angry and bewildered by the calculation because it is hard to see how front-line policing can be unaffected by such a financial blow, with North Durham MP Kevan Jones suggesting that 200 officers are now at risk.

We said at the time of the devolution deals that the North-East had to do what was necessary to be at the table when powers and additional funds were handed over to the English regions.

The worry is that the legs of the table are being chopped off before the ink has even dried on the devolution deals.

**What do you think?**  
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### The Northern Echo Daily average audience

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#### QUALITY

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# Raise a glass to drinking sense



**MEASURED:** Alcohol remains a huge bone of contention, costing the NHS billions a year

Picture: DAVID JONES/PA

**W**ITH Sober for October just finished, congratulations to those who managed to keep their promise to themselves or to others, and went the whole month without alcohol passing their lips.

And even if you didn't manage to last the entire month, you'll still have noticed some of the benefits of reducing how much you drink. You've probably found that your clothes fit better, you feel lighter on your feet and you wake from sleep more refreshed. Friends and family may have commented on the fact that you're complexion has improved and that you've regained that sparkle in your eye.

These are just some of the benefits of reducing your alcohol intake, and after recent research from a leading London university demonstrated that stopping drinking alcohol for just one month noticeably improved blood pressure, liver function and even your ability to regulate your body's sugar levels, it's clear that the gains are much more than skin deep.

This article doesn't seek to propose complete abstinence, after all life is for living and enjoying.

Indeed light to moderate alcohol consumption has been linked with various improvements in health, including reduced risk of coronary heart disease and diabetes, increased longevity, and it has even been suggested that the antioxidant properties of red wine may help fight the common cold. In small amounts, alcohol may promote psychological wellbeing and relaxation. And there's the taste; a nice glass of red perfectly complementing a steak done to your liking, or the crisp cool tingle of a chilled lager at a summer barbecue.

At harmful levels of consumption, all this is undone. Acutely, high levels of alcohol are associated with mental slowing, impaired judgement and increased risk of accident and injury to self and others. Although initially excess alcohol may promote feelings of euphoria and carefree, once these effects wear off it becomes a depressant. Alcohol is generally high in calories and overindulgence may cause weight gain, or hinder at-



Alcohol abuse costs the NHS £3bn a year with more than 28,000 hospital admissions for alcoholism or alcohol poisoning. So should we give up drink altogether? North-East GP **Zak Waqar-Uddin** looks at the pros and cons

#### Useful websites

- drinkaware.co.uk
- alcoholconcern.org.uk
- Smartrecovery.org.uk
- Drinkline – National alcohol helpline; 0300 123 1110

tempts at weight loss. Chronic excess alcohol is linked to disease of every organ system in the body, either directly through its own toxicity, or by its effects on other organs. Higher rates of heart disease, stroke, dementia and all cancers are observed in those who drink at harmful levels. The considerable psychological effects of alcoholism include relationship breakdown, loss of employment and earnings and even homelessness.

With all this in mind, thankfully the guidelines about what constitutes sensible alcohol limits are crystal clear.

Men should not exceed twenty-one units of alcohol per week with no more than three to four units in any one day. For women the weekly recommended limit is fourteen, with three or less units in any given day. Put simply, a unit is half a pint of standard strength beer, 125 ml of wine or a 25 ml measure of spirit.

Practical solutions to staying within your recommended weekly allowance may involve drink-free days; authorities promote at least one alcohol-free day after consuming alcohol. Another suggestion is avoiding alcohol on a weeknight or a work night,

depending on if your job involves shift or weekend work. Alternating alcoholic beverages with soft drinks when you are out not only cuts down the total amount of alcohol consumed, but means you can enjoy the night more safely. Filling in an alcohol diary for just a few weeks may show you how much you are actually drinking on a day-to-day basis.

If you do think you have a problem with alcohol and feel too scared or embarrassed to seek help, be reassured, there are numerous agencies geared up to assist you confidentially in a non-judgemental manner. Many of these can be accessed online, but if you feel you want to talk to someone face-to-face, your family doctor is a good first port of call, for support as well as guidance. If you are drinking very heavily; i.e. more than 20 units per day, current advice is not to stop abruptly but to try to reduce by one to two units every couple of days, whilst accessing professional help at the same time.

In summary, the organisers of the first Sober for October found that although those who completed the challenge did not all go on to complete abstinence from alcohol, participants were more aware of their consumption and were better able to include alcohol in their lives in a beneficial rather than harmful way. Now that's something to raise a glass to.

■ Dr Zak Uddin is a general practitioner in the North-East with a diploma in obstetrics and gynaecology.

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