

Protecting young people through strong alcohol age limits

Adopted by the NordAN General Assembly | 8 October 2026 | Tórshavn, Faroe Islands

Age limits are one of the basic safeguards of alcohol policy. They recognise that children and young people are particularly vulnerable to alcohol-related harm and should be protected from early exposure, easy availability and alcohol-centred environments.

However, alcohol-related age limits are increasingly being questioned or weakened in different ways. Proposals may concern lowering the minimum purchase age, allowing younger people to sell or serve alcohol, or expanding their employment in bars, restaurants and other settings where alcohol use is central.

These changes may be presented as practical solutions to labour shortages, employment barriers or inconsistencies in existing legislation, and are sometimes framed as helping young people gain their first work experience or as an expression of trust in young people. However, economic and administrative arguments should not outweigh the protection of young people. Lowering age limits may increase young people's exposure to alcohol, place them in situations involving intoxicated customers, increase the likelihood that they start drinking at an earlier age, and weaken the wider public health message that alcohol is not an ordinary product.

Strengthening the evidence base for alcohol policy

In recent years, the scientific evidence on the negative effects of alcohol has grown significantly. Research continues to demonstrate clear links between alcohol use and a wide range of health and social harms, including impacts on brain development, mental health, injury risk and long-term disease. Young people are particularly vulnerable, as their bodies and brains are still developing, making early exposure especially harmful.

This expanding evidence base reinforces the importance of maintaining strong and effective alcohol policies. Rather than providing justification for weakening existing measures, it clearly supports the need to uphold and, where necessary, strengthen protections such as age limits.

In light of this, there is no evidence-based rationale for lowering age limits or otherwise reducing safeguards that protect young people from alcohol-related harm. On the contrary, policy decisions should reflect the growing body of knowledge and prioritise prevention, health and safety over short-term economic or political considerations.

While it is important to recognise and support young people's growing independence and capacity for responsibility, trust should be expressed in ways that do not expose them to unnecessary risk, especially in a field where there are already longstanding and widely recognised problems related to youth and alcohol. Providing safe, age-appropriate opportunities for work, participation and decision-making is a more constructive way to build trust than placing young people in environments where

alcohol use is central. Protecting young people through clear age limits does not undermine trust; rather, it reflects a commitment to their wellbeing and acknowledges that safeguarding their health and development must remain the priority.

NordAN calls on governments and legislators in the Nordic and Baltic countries to:

- maintain strong minimum age limits for purchasing alcohol, and in countries with low limits, work towards increasing them;
- prohibit the employment of young people in conditions that require them to sell, serve or handle alcohol in inappropriate or unsafe environments;
- assess proposed changes from a public health, child protection and occupational safety perspective;
- Ensure effective age verification and enforcement where alcohol is sold legally;
- Reduce distance sales and home delivery;
- and avoid weakening established safeguards in response to short-term economic or commercial interests.

Strong and consistent age limits are one of the cornerstones of effective alcohol policy, helping to delay the onset of alcohol use, reduce harm and make clear that the protection of children and young people must remain a central priority of alcohol policy.