

Community action making a positive difference for our most vulnerable communities in Tāmaki Makaurau

Sitting in traffic one morning in October 2020, Ngaire and Sam* noticed a giant advertisement for an alco-pop splashed across a [billboard](#) outside Ōtāhuhu College.

They were shocked. Ōtāhuhu is home to some of Auckland's most vulnerable communities. It has a large number of liquor outlets, and its children bear the brunt of the many problems that stem from alcohol misuse. Now an ad had appeared that seemed to be targeting the community's teenagers. How could anyone think that was okay?

The two friends certainly didn't; they wanted the ad gone.

Not knowing if this was possible, or how to make it happen, Ngaire contacted Alcohol Healthwatch (AHW), a government-funded organisation that works with communities across Aotearoa New Zealand to reduce and prevent alcohol-related harm.

She discussed her concerns with Nathan Cowie, AHW's Health Promotion Advisor, who recommended laying a formal complaint about the billboard with the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA).

Given how close the billboard was to the school, Nathan thought it was unlikely that the ad met the ASA's guidelines for alcohol advertising. In particular it seemed to violate the rule that neither the content nor the placement of alcohol ads should be 'directed at minors'. View the old ASA code for alcohol advertising [here](#) that was in place at the time of this example.

Although the idea of making a 'formal' complaint sounded a little scary, once Ngaire and Sam realised the process is anonymous and could be as simple as putting their concerns and a few supporting facts into an email, they got cracking.

First, they found the parts of the ASA's code that the ad appeared to violate, so they could quote the text in their complaint.

Next, they used Google Maps to confirm the address of the school and the precise location of the billboard, as well as to estimate the distance between them.

Along with these important details, Ngaire and Sam mentioned the shops beside the billboard, because students from Ōtāhuhu College often gathered there before and after school.

Finally, they attached a photo which showed the ad in front of the school, and a screen grab of the Google map, and hit 'send'.

A few weeks later, the ad disappeared. The advertiser had [removed the ad from the billboard](#) in response to their complaint.

Ngairé and Sam now keep a close eye on the advertising around their local schools, and strongly encourage others to do the same.

Making a quick complaint about a poster, billboard or other sign near a school is one of the easiest ways for individuals to reduce the alcohol harm in their communities.

Exposure to such advertising might not seem like a big deal, but studies have linked it to young people starting to drink at younger ages and consuming larger amounts of alcohol if they already drink.

As Sam says, when alcohol advertising is placed around a school, “It’s right in the face of children. Some children have parents drinking in their homes, so that’s normalised. Then they see it outside their school too; that makes it worse.”

*Not their real names.

Ngairé, Sam & Nathan’s top tips for others learnt from this experience:

Jump to it: If you see an advert you don’t like, complain straight away. The only thing ASA can do is have the ad removed, and its complaints’ process can take weeks. Use the [guides and tools at ActionPoint](#) to get started.

Make it easy for the ASA: Explain your concerns clearly, politely and include all supporting facts and details. See examples of successful (AKA ‘upheld’ or ‘settled’) complaints at <https://www.asa.co.nz/decisions/search-browse-decisions/>

Watch that space: Even if the ad you complain about is taken down, another one may appear! (Google Street View captured at least three previous alcohol ads outside Ōtāhuhu College in February 2012, June 2019 and December 2019.)