

Replied via email 30/1/03



Aiming For Change

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Friday 13<sup>th</sup> December

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find enclosed my agency's response to the National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy Consultation Document.

Project 6 has welcomed the opportunity to take part in this vital piece of research, and hope that our response will be useful towards developing a workable, effective strategy.

Yours sincerely,

Allison Downing  
Drug & Alcohol Worker

## Foreword

Having read the Consultation Document, a number of worries become immediately evident:

- That the consultation will not reach all those it aims to, in particular, drinkers themselves
- That the document will receive disproportionate attention from statutory services, e.g. the NHS, the Police
- That, as a result, this consultation will concentrate on the monetary costs of alcohol misuse and the impact on the wider community
- That the experiences of heavy drinkers, their families and friends will be overlooked
- That the sheer size of the document will restrict those responding to their specific areas of knowledge

6) I would define alcohol misuse as the use of alcohol that is problematic and detrimental to the life of the drinker. Aspects of life that may be affected by alcohol misuse are family and social relationships, physical and emotional health, finances, housing, work, etc. Factors to take into account are how often people drink and how much, the occurrence of accidents, time off work, feeling withdrawal symptoms, having financial difficulty, troubles within relationships, legal troubles, accommodation difficulties and self-care in general.

24) Alcohol is often a factor in such crimes as violence, disorder, drink driving and vandalism. Due to its action of reducing inhibitions, it may also lead to one-off crimes, such as shoplifting, petty theft, drink driving and sexual offences. Alcohol can potentially contribute to the sustained behaviour of those people already inclined towards violence. Although the drink-drive message is heeded by the large majority, a small minority of people who do drive under the influence of alcohol will perhaps not change their behaviour until they are caught.

36) The children of heavy drinking parents are perhaps those most vulnerable to the consequences of alcohol misuse. They are most likely to witness, and be affected by, the harmful effects of alcohol, e.g. domestic arguments, ineffective parenting, abuse, neglect, poverty etc. Added to this is the possible burden placed on children to be carers of their drinking parents. Furthermore, the use of alcohol as a coping strategy is, potentially, learned behaviour, which is passed from parent to child.

43) It can be argued that the sensible drinking message is not effectively reaching its audience. The limit figures are confusing and often misinterpreted. In my experience, clients do not generally know safe limits of alcohol intake. The cost of alcohol leads many people to drink at home, where measures are larger and more difficult to keep track of. The range of different lagers, beers and ciders and their alcohol by volume percentages is also a confusing factor when people are counting their units. The UK drinking culture of weekend and concentrated, 'closing time' focused sessions leads to binge drinking by people who would not otherwise consider themselves to be drinking harmfully. This behaviour would suggest that the sensible drinking limit message is not reaching its audience, and, furthermore it is not reducing the alcohol consumption of those people who are at risk of alcohol misuse.

50) In my own personal view, alcohol has the capacity to be universally harmful, i.e. affecting the work-based economy, health, family and social relationships, etc. Tobacco has been shown to be harmful to both smokers and non-smokers, and advertising has been banned, almost across the board. Also, tobacco products are labelled with Government Health Warnings. It seems almost remiss that the same is not done for alcohol products.

52) The relationship between market trends and consumer fashions seems to be symbiotic. Drinking behaviour changes, and the market appears to respond. For example, young women in particular mix spirits with fruit juices, and the market responds by creating pre-mixed drinks aimed directly at this consumer group. Similarly, the use of Ecstasy in clubs impacted on alcohol sales in clubs, which lead manufacturers to design 'energy' drinks containing alcohol. Increasingly, alcohol appears to be specifically designed to taste of fruit juices or 'pop', as a response to the tastes of young people and women, arguably the two groups who are most at

risk of alcohol misuse. As new products become available, the consumers then change their buying habits to match their taste. Cost, fashion, advertising, bottle design and taste are all factors in the popularity of new drinks. Government has opportunities to intervene and change the marketing process, by restricting advertising and closely controlling the cost of new products.