

## **National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy: Consultation Response**

1. This response is made on a personal and entirely non-professional basis, without connection to any statutory or voluntary body. My interest lies in the fact that I have long felt that a national strategy in relation to alcohol harm is required. I welcome this opportunity to comment on the consultation questions. I served as a magistrate for ten years (1984/94) and so have some insight into the criminal and anti-social consequences of excessive drinking. It also seems to me that the - arguably - over promotion (by advertisers and popular culture) of the importance of alcohol in relation to relaxing and having fun runs counter to building a truly civil society and developing caring communities. It is entirely responsible and legitimate for government to be concerned with alcohol harm given its widespread effects on society.
2. The extent to which alcohol is central to so much popular culture, social behaviour and relief of stress is evidence of human dependence on this 'most social' of drugs. This means that to bring about change in the use of alcohol nationally requires long-term, well-resourced and multi-faceted strategies. There are, as the consultation document points out, pros and cons, benefits and harm that accrue from the widespread use of alcohol. There are also of course considerable commercial and financial interests in preserving the status quo, not least those of the Treasury itself.
3. There is an urgent need for high quality research to establish the link between health care and other costs of excessive alcohol use. Detailed analysis of these costs in relation to alcohol tax revenues needs to be carried out, as this would form the basis of a coherent and sound strategy. It would provide the evidence base for 'joining up' different aspects of social policy in the same way that the link between smoking and serious disease has been made.
4. Excessive use of alcohol has widespread negative impact upon society and on individual lives including increased levels of domestic violence, child abuse, anti-social behaviour, general levels of violence, crime and health costs. I am concerned about policing costs - both financial and human - the impact on health workers (the Friday and Saturday night A&E reality) and the probable causal links between the incidence of handicapped births and drinking alcohol during pregnancy. There must already exist a case, based on existing evidence, for establishing some form of health warning (in the same way as the warning on tobacco products) on alcoholic drinks. National disability charities (Scope, Mencap and Sense) are likely sources of such evidence. This needs to be coupled with extensive education and awareness raising strategies starting at key stage two.
5. Resources should be targeted on research and education, in particular drawing out the long-term health risks from excessive or 'binge' drinking especially in relation to creating long-term dependence and in relation to childbirth risks. This needs to establish much more clearly the relevance

of `units' of alcohol, how they are measured in relation to drinks consumed and the negative effects of over consumption on health. The current health message about safe numbers of units of alcohol is almost `invisible'. The Government should concentrate its efforts on early and sustained education; the young in this respect are a more important audience than the elderly. With regard to educational content there are important and useful lessons to be learnt from the experience of drink driving campaigns. The aim must be to modify behaviour through increased awareness.

6. Widespread excessive drinking is linked to general levels of economic prosperity and fuelled by aggressive marketing. There should be careful consideration of the possibility of increased regulation of the alcohol advertising industry.
7. Review of current licensing controls should take place alongside consideration of tighter control of the sale of alcohol to underage drinkers.
8. Employers have a key role to play (and benefits to derive) from supporting alcohol awareness raising campaigns. The alcohol industry must also recognise its wider social responsibilities and play a greater role than at present in education programmes. A proportion of alcohol tax revenues could be ring-fenced to support a public awareness campaign/

John Adams

(I would be pleased to contribute in other ways to the development of this strategy and would welcome being kept informed of developments)