

This is a review of the responses to the consultation – it is not a statement of Government policy.



National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy Main themes of the joint consultation carried out by the Department of Health and the Strategy Unit

Introduction

This document sets out the main themes to emerge from the consultation carried out as part of the government's work on the National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy. It is a summary of the views expressed at the consultation and is not a statement of government views or policy. It is deliberately limited in scope and length, and all interested parties are encouraged to view the individual submissions.

The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (SU) was commissioned to produce a cross-cutting strategy to reduce the harm caused by alcohol. As part of this process the Unit has carried out a public consultation jointly with the Department of Health on the issues which the strategy needs to tackle.

The consultation ran from 15 October to 15 January. It contained two elements. The Unit and DH jointly produced a consultation document. Four consultation events were also held during the autumn in London, Manchester, Newcastle and Bristol. We are grateful to all those who responded to the document and those who attended these events.

270 organisations and individuals responded by the deadline of 15 January 2003. Including those received shortly after the deadline, the total number of responses is 319. All of these are available on the SU web site, with the exception of submissions specifically marked as confidential by their senders. Any responses received at a later stage will be taken into account as far as possible.

The responses contained a wealth of information around alcohol misuse, the way problems are currently handled and suggestions for future policy. This will be incorporated in the interim analysis paper and will be used to inform the strategy. All the responses are being reviewed by the team and specific points considered, even if they are not expressly referred to in this paper.

This document is a summary of the views expressed in the consultation process and is not a statement of UK government views or policy.

This is a review of the responses to the consultation – it is not a statement of Government policy.

The principles that should underpin the strategy

- The need for clearly set out principles to act as the planks of the strategy was expressed in the majority of responses.
- Policies for harm reduction need to be firmly embedded in existing culture and consider the implications for change; it is important to acknowledge the diversity in society.
- Most respondents thought it was necessary for government to have a strategic long-term approach, rather than merely react to short-term pressures.
- The place of alcohol within wider substance misuse strategies should be clearly defined.
- Most respondents believed that a long-term strategic approach is paramount if alcohol misuse is to be tackled effectively.
- Individual choice was seen as central. Alcohol misuse is the responsibility of the individual drinker: being drunk is no defence when an offence is committed. There was a call for promoting a greater sense of responsibility and awareness of consequences.
- The enabling of individual freedom has to be balanced by agreed social constraints: individuals should be free to choose their own drinking behaviour but not in a way which infringes the rights of others.
- An area of debate was whether the government should intervene in cases where only the drinker is harmed. A large number of respondents argued that addiction undermines personal capability and thus the government has an important role to play here.
- The drinks industry defined its main responsibilities as follows:
 - to produce good-quality products safely packaged, properly labelled and responsibly marketed;
 - not to sell to under-age and drunk people;
 - to undertake promotional activity and manage drinking premises in a responsible manner;
 - to acknowledge the potential for harm caused by the misuse of alcohol and work with those seeking to minimise such harm; and
 - to act as a good employer, e.g. fully training staff.
- The voluntary sector was seen as having a central role, being responsible for providing treatment and support against the harmful consequences of alcohol misuse and for working in partnership with others.
- Government was perceived as having a variety of roles, including to:
 - ensure provision of adequate information and education;
 - regulate where the industry is not behaving responsibly, e.g. curb harmful advertising;
 - protect those that are vulnerable
 - ensure treatment for those who need it and their families;
 - intervene directly to prevent alcohol misuse causing harm to others;
 - join up provision; and
 - provide strategic direction
- Local communities were seen as central in dealing with the consequences of alcohol misuse.
- The importance of partnership was highlighted, reflecting the fact that individuals, the industry and the government all have responsibilities and need to work together to tackle alcohol misuse.
- There were varying views on the best way to implement the strategy. For example, some claimed that alcohol ought to be included in the National Treatment Agency's (NTA) remit while others disagreed.

This is a review of the responses to the consultation – it is not a statement of Government policy.

- There was a call for clear and reliable information to allow individuals to make choices responsibly, as risks are often poorly understood and not given weight in decisions about drinking.

The cultural and behavioural issues around alcohol use and misuse

- Alcohol misuse was defined differently by different respondents, with some focusing on levels of consumption and others on social and/or individual impacts.
- Regarding drinking patterns, the majority saw a need to change those of the most problematic drinkers – some respondents claimed the aim should also be to reduce consumption across the population.
- There was a significant focus on young people and the need to fundamentally change the binge-drinking culture.
- It was also recognised that there is not just one but many ‘drinking cultures’, which generally differ from the ‘Mediterranean’ culture of moderation.
- Respondents thought that a multitude of factors affect drinking behaviour, but had differing opinions on the relative importance of each one.

Health: prevention, treatment and the impact on the NHS

- An important point was that costs to the NHS are not only caused by dependent drinkers, as there is also a huge burden on the A&E due to accidents, more visits to GPs etc.
- Various preventive measures were discussed, ranging from control of availability of alcohol to better screening and early interventions.
- At the same time, many respondents highlighted the need for more training and information for GPs and nurses.
- Treatment was seen to be working in general. Some correspondents also thought that there were some problems that needed to be addressed, such as insufficient tailoring to specific needs, access problems for some groups and inadequate prioritisation of alcohol.
- Although rural and urban areas were described as having some problems in common, a different approach was still needed in some areas: e.g. in rural areas alcohol services tend to be far more scattered and thus difficult to access.
- There was a consensus on the link between mental health and alcohol; however the exact nature of the relationship is difficult to establish.

Crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour: the effects on our surroundings and community

- Respondents pointed out that there is a strong link between alcohol and crime/violence/antisocial behaviour, based both on research and anecdotal evidence.
- Problems associated with alcohol misuse include: domestic and late-night violence (actual bodily harm, grievous bodily harm, assault and even murder) and disorder, child abuse, drink driving, anti-social behaviour, criminal damage, aggressive begging, broken bottles and litter, racial harassment and arson.
- There appears to be a lack of research on how much of a factor alcohol is in violence and disorder, as opposed to the proportion of violent offenders who have been drinking.
- The importance of effective city planning in reducing alcohol-related disorder was stressed by a significant number of respondents, with Manchester city centre being cited as an example.

This is a review of the responses to the consultation – it is not a statement of Government policy.

- It was pointed out that alcohol-related crime may be lower than is perceived, but that at the same time this may have an effect on people who avoid city centres at night due to fear.
- Underage binge drinking was also portrayed as a significant problem, especially in rural areas.
- Most respondents agreed that the drinking patterns of the most problematic drinkers should be targeted in order to tackle alcohol-related violence and disorder problems most effectively.
- A number of respondents highlighted the need for more co-ordination and information-sharing between treatment agencies and parts of the criminal justice system that see people with problems related to alcohol, especially in the domestic violence field.
- Suggested initiatives to alleviate the harms of alcohol included: use of CCTV and street lighting, higher-visibility policing, more frequent and greater choice of late-night transport, broader range of venues and clientele in city centres at night, alcohol arrest referral schemes, prohibiting street drinking, use of Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act¹, bottle bans, reinforced glasses, staggered closing times, ‘wet areas’ for street drinkers.
- Given the scale of impacts, alcohol initiatives, agencies and research were generally thought to be under-funded compared to drugs. Some respondents argued for a comparative assessment of the impacts of alcohol and drugs in order to inform new developments.
- It was suggested that new initiatives, such as the proposal for an Alcohol Treatment Requirement in the Criminal Justice Bill, need to be rigorously piloted before any national rollout.
- Drink-driving was presented as an example of how things can be changed for the better through the use of persistent media campaigning, strict enforcement by police and courts, and education of the public. The need to do more in this area, however successful policies have been so far, was also highlighted.

The implications for vulnerable groups

- Most respondents believed that more should be done to address the needs of vulnerable groups, as well as pointing out the need to join-up services, consider local differences in provision of services and effectively disseminate best practice.
- Many alcohol users also experience problems with drug use and there was a call to take this into account when designing policy.
- There was disagreement as to how to define ‘vulnerable’ groups, with different organisations adopting different approaches. Young carers, young offenders, children with learning disabilities, homeless people or those vulnerable to homelessness, refugees and asylum seekers were some of the groups seen as being at increased risk.
- There was widespread concern that children of problem drinkers are also at risk. This includes the direct experience of domestic violence, which may be heightened if they live in an isolated or a single-parent family.
- Alcohol services need to be able to meet the needs of a diverse population (in terms of age, gender, sexuality, culture, co-morbidity etc.)
- There was a call for services to work more towards meeting the needs of lesbians and gay men.

¹ The Local planning authority must have regard to the likely effect on crime and disorder when determining a planning application.

This is a review of the responses to the consultation – it is not a statement of Government policy.

- Victims of sexual abuse were another group seen to be in need of better access to services.
- Many argued for increased emphasis on the provision of support and information to families, friends and carers of those who misuse alcohol.
- Most respondents highlighted the role of factors other than alcohol misuse. Although some saw alcohol as a generator of problems, others as a catalyst and others as a consequence, there was a consensus on the need to see the full picture and address the multitude of problems faced by ‘vulnerable’ groups.
- There was a call to look at the needs of children and young people beyond issues of vulnerability and with a longer-term preventive strategic approach. Many claimed that alcohol and drugs should be addressed within the same integrated framework.
- Many respondents claimed that effective links, communication and agreed protocols between specialist and generic services are required, together with agreements about confidentiality and information sharing.
- Close inter-agency working was seen as a requirement in order to meet the range of varied and complex needs of vulnerable groups with some needing care planning and care co-ordination.
- It was widely advocated that intensive multimodal therapies are more effective than brief therapies for more established problems.
- Drug Action Teams (DATs) and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHSs) were seen as crucial services in meeting the needs of vulnerable people.
- Respondents thought that existing partnerships were working well and that the strategy needs to build on Drug and Alcohol Action Teams (DAATs) and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs).
- A significant number of respondents called for the inclusion of alcohol in the remit of the National Treatment Agency (NTA).
- There was a call for more and, most importantly, consistent funding for services aimed at vulnerable groups, as well as a diversion of some resources from drugs to alcohol.

Education and communication

- Most respondents recognised that there are mixed messages communicated on alcohol and believed that there is relative ‘confusion’ about the dangers and their probabilities. It was also pointed out that this is very hard to achieve – unlike e.g. smoking, abstinence is not the goal.
- The messages going out on alcohol have to be relevant to the target groups, consistent and not solely focused on health. A number of respondents added that the messages also need to be well-funded and effectively marketed if they are to contribute to reducing alcohol misuse.
- There was a call for more to be done by the industry towards informing people about the risks of alcohol, advocating measures such as unit labelling and warnings on bottles and advertisements. Some argued that the government should also allocate more resources to communicating the risks of alcohol.
- The current ‘sensible drinking’ message was thought by many to be ineffective.
- The high level of unit awareness was seen as an asset, although the difficulty of assessing what a unit is was recognised.
- Some respondents thought there is a need for more information and training for medical professionals, police officers, teachers, social workers, as well as others who are helping to disseminate messages around alcohol.

This is a review of the responses to the consultation – it is not a statement of Government policy.

- Many argued for providing more incentives to medical professionals to carry out alcohol misuse education.
- A number of respondents believed that alcohol education should play a more important role in schools. There should also be attempts to reach people in colleges and universities, as these groups of students often have serious alcohol problems.
- It was widely advocated that education on alcohol in schools should start earlier.
- Some respondents claimed that Personal Social and Health Education should be made statutory, however others pointed to increased pressures on schools and the lack of evidence on its effectiveness in changing behaviour.
- Sufficiently engaging the family and the community was also a concern, given their importance in educating and shaping attitudes around alcohol.
- At the same time, many people warned that adults need to be informed too, and some – especially those with the most problematic behaviours – may not have access to mainstream sources of information.
- Regarding advertising, views ranged from the importance of free speech and commercial communications to the need to regulate more fiercely - or even ban - alcohol advertising, mostly to protect vulnerable groups, such as children.
- Several respondents expressed concerns about the impact of alcohol advertising. Many felt that advertising deliberately targeted young people and portrayed drinking in a glamorous context and that there was a strong argument for more effective regulation, with many arguing that statutory requirements are essential.
- It was claimed that advertising regulation tends to be more focused on whether offence is caused rather than the potential to encourage alcohol misuse.
- Warnings on advertisements and labels were advocated by many, while others proposed funding sensible drinking messages through a levy on alcohol advertising.
- Other respondents argued that self-regulation and adherence to codes of practice are the most effective means of achieving more socially-responsible advertising.
- There was widespread concern about the way alcohol is portrayed in the media, for example in popular TV soaps.

The shape of the market and market-based solutions

- There were varying feelings about the role of the industry: some argued that it should be at the heart of the strategy while others were hostile.
- Most respondents stressed the importance of a socially responsible industry, while many argued that the government should back this effort by having clear incentives in place to prevent alcohol misuse.
- The importance of the proposed licensing law reform was highlighted, as it will significantly change the shape of the night-time economy. More specifically, many expressed concern that there will be more excessive drinking amongst young people and increased disorder in city centres, although some believed that crime and disorder will be reduced as a result of the reform.
- There was generally a call for more affordable soft drinks/alternative entertainment for those who do not wish to drink, as well as restricting "bad practice" such as serving to underage drinkers and having extended 'happy hours' or 'all you can drink' offers.
- There were references to the importance of the drinks industry as a generator of employment.
- Some respondents expressed the view that policies with the sole goal of reducing overall consumption would reduce employment and tax revenues.

This is a review of the responses to the consultation – it is not a statement of Government policy.

- Some respondents argued that that the industry should be responsible for warning consumers of the risks involved in drinking, as well as contribute towards meeting the costs of the negative consequences of alcohol consumption, for example by funding alcohol treatment services. There was also reference to examples of current industry good practice in this area.

The economic costs and benefits of alcohol

- Most respondents noted the relative lack of work in this important area.
- There was also a call for the strategy to examine the issue carefully, paying attention both to the costs and the benefits.
- Regarding the issue of who should bear these costs there was a multitude of views – some claiming it should be the industry, others arguing that the industry is already heavily taxed and the costs should fall on the government and some claiming that the responsibility should fall on the drinkers themselves.
- On the issue of workplace policies, the majority of respondents advocated complete abstinence, other than in a few special occasions, especially for jobs that require dexterity and concentration.
- There is a need to have mechanisms in place so that occupational health and other support mechanisms can play a full part in supporting staff at a local level.
- It was suggested that although more research could usefully be carried out, it is not possible to translate and compare the social costs and benefits in purely economic terms. An example of that would be placing a value upon drinkers' enjoyment of the product and the settings in which it is served.