

# **National Harm Reduction Strategy**

## **Comments from Alcohol Focus Scotland**

### **Introduction**

Alcohol Focus Scotland is Scotland's only national voice on alcohol issues. Its purpose is to improve the quality of life for the people of Scotland, by promoting a responsible approach to the use of alcohol by raising awareness, and stimulating debate.

Our main aims are to promote a responsible attitude to drinking, and to reduce the effects of alcohol problems on those affected by their own or another's drinking.

We achieve this through the provision of training, information and support services, including public health and information campaigns.

### **Underlying principles**

It is Alcohol Focus Scotland's view that Government has a role in tackling alcohol related problems. We believe this should be done by funding various alcohol services that provide support for those affected by alcohol misuse. We also believe that this can be done through the regulatory mechanism of licensing law, which is both a means of controlling and regulating the sale of alcohol, and as a consequence addresses some of the problems associated with alcohol misuse. Perhaps this highlights one of the principal weaknesses of the consultation document, in that it offers little in the way of enlightenment about the clear links between services, support and licensing.

Government has a duty to inform the public of the implications of problem drinking. Surely it would be somewhat irresponsible of Government to conclude that it did not have a role to play in education, information, setting a legal framework, providing services, and in the prevention of problems. Furthermore, funding for services is drawn from taxation revenue, and Government has a duty to ensure that best value is secured on expenditure.

Alcohol consumption is a matter of individual choice. Most people manage their consumption in a manner which is not problematic, but some do not. To ensure that people are aware of whether or not they are drinking within recommended limits, it is essential that they are provided with good, reliable and useable information. The provision of good, reliable, balanced, and useable information on alcohol is the responsibility of government, in partnership with other stakeholders.

The underpinning principles of a national harm reduction strategy should include:

- Building upon what works
- Creating effective partnerships
- Ensuring that alcohol problems are considered holistically, and not solely from a health perspective.

## **The cultural and behavioural issues around alcohol use and misuse**

One of the major problems in this area is the difficulty in defining what the 'wider canvas of behaviour and attitudes' is. For example, in the UK it is clear that there exists a wide range of cultures and attitudes. Depending upon how this issue is approached – ethnicity, religious beliefs, age, gender, socio-economic factors – all of which have a bearing on how and why some people consume alcohol in a problematic way. Furthermore it should be acknowledged that tackling culture and behaviour is a long term project, and should not be considered in quick fix terms.

Tackling alcohol culture is a major priority which could be easily derailed if the sole focus is on young people. Admittedly they need to be targeted but other generations also need to be targeted, otherwise there is every possibility that young people will feel scapegoats and consequently will react against any attempts to influence their behaviour. Problem drinking is not just restricted to the young.

It may be helpful to seek to identify the key aspects of alcohol misuse which are problematic in our society, such as binge drinking patterns across different age groups, community safety problems which include an alcohol element, impact of licensing decision making on communities, impact of alcohol related problems on children and families, etc.

Drinking patterns such as binge drinking, the impact of promotions and deep discounting, alcohol consumption as an attractive 'risk taking' activity, the worrying trends being evidenced regarding young people's drinking, are all drinking patterns of major concern.

Much more needs to be known about the differing patterns of alcohol consumption by different groups in the UK. For example, there could be, even within what appears to be homogeneous groups, a wide variation in the ways in which alcohol is used. As indicated above, the key point is to ensure that no one group is targeted in a way which will lead them to conclude that they are being considered the source of all problems.

In so far as influencing factors are concerned, this is an extremely **complex** question. Indeed all the matters referred to in the document will exert influence in different ways, with different impacts, and with varying degrees of influence at different times.

Attitudes to alcohol vary according to age, knowledge, and experience. It seems to be the case that most young people are aware of risk and find risk taking behaviour attractive. Other age groups may be aware of risks, but are willing to take it despite the dangers.

## **Health: prevention and the impact on the NHS**

The Scottish plan for action on alcohol problems addresses many of these issues in some detail in its supporting papers.

There are a number of strategies which can be adopted with regard to training; however, it is not only alcohol professionals who have to deal with alcohol related problems. In addition, those making decisions on approving licenses, licensees and those who serve alcohol all have a crucial role to play. We would argue strongly that training for licensees and servers in alcohol knowledge, the law, and how to deal with difficult issues at the point of sale are important elements of a strategic approach to tackling alcohol related problems. Furthermore it could be argued that non-alcohol professions such as youth and community workers, teachers etc. also have a role to play in addressing alcohol related problems, and that training should be offered to them in alcohol issues.

Care needs to be taken when considering drawing parallels with drugs prevention and treatment. Alcohol is a legal substance; it is used legally, so the approach to tackling the problems of misuse have to be considered within a different attitudinal and legal framework, which undoubtedly will have an impact on approaches to treatment.

Information from the Police indicates that they have concerns about serving alcohol in a bottle, which they state can easily become a weapon. If the law states that people who are intoxicated should not be served alcohol, then this should be rigorously enforced. Properly framed and implemented policies on alcohol in the workplace would also have a positive impact.

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

There is considerable evidence of the link between alcohol misuse and crime and public disorder, but is not the only factor. The issue is about looking at problems in an inclusive manner; in other words finding the links between commercial competition, price and deep discounting, and its impact on drinking behaviour; the links between disorder and availability of alcohol products; the impact of socio-economic factors on drinking behaviour; the impact of personal problems and alcohol consumption.

Because of the complexity of alcohol problems, it is widely acknowledged that no one approach or agency can be solely adopted. The value of partnership working can be evidenced in Scotland in the Drinkwise and ServeWise initiatives, amongst others.

It would be a strategic error to target young people for anti-crime and anti-social behaviour initiatives. It would risk scapegoating them and could potentially further alienate them from influence. It is important to address problems of crime and anti-social behaviour in an inclusive manner, to ensure that young people are only seen as part of the problem, but not the only problem, as well as part of the solution.

In AFS view, the most important lessons to be learned from drink driving policies are;

- cultural change takes a long time to achieve
- there are a variety of ways of putting over a message
- underpinning the message with legislation which is enforced is essential – in this instance, linking licensing law review with any developing plan on alcohol problems

## **Education and communication**

All of the approaches outlined in the consultation document have a value, but the approaches need to be prioritised and connected for maximum impact.

There is a need to ensure that different sections of society are targeted in different ways, and that this should be clearly outlined in the strategy/plan in order to ensure that no one sector feels it is being selected for special attention. So, by examining the nature of the problems and how they impact on different groups should allow for the development of different targets.

Families and parents play a crucial role, HEBS, AFS are designing a leaflet for parents to assist them address alcohol related issues with their children. However this needs to connect with other educational programmes to ensure, as best we can, that there is consistency in approaches.

Care needs to be taken about what can be drawn from tackling illegal drugs. In the preparation of the leaflet referred to above, it was clear that tackling alcohol is considerably more complex than drugs issues, and requires close attention.

## **The shape of the market and market based solutions**

As indicated in the consultation paper, the alcohol industry does have a major part to play in the nation's economy. However it could play a more prominent part in addressing alcohol related problems by perhaps working in partnership with government on communications issues, linking advertising with responsible drinking messages. AFS considers that there would be considerable difficulties in relying solely on market led solutions to the many problems faced in tackling alcohol misuse.

The alcohol industry has considerable influence and experience in communicating with its consumers; it would be a significant step were it to find ways of using its expertise to assist in tackling alcohol related problems.

Jack Law  
Chief Executive Alcohol Focus Scotland  
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