



Response to the DoH Consultation

National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy

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BASW response to DoH consultation on national alcohol harm reduction strategy

The British Association of Social Workers is the largest professional association for social workers and social care staff in the UK. The Association's members are employed in frontline, management, academic and research positions in all social work settings. Many of the individuals, families and communities that social workers work with are impacted by the misuse of alcohol and therefore, the Association welcomes the Government's commitment to addressing this issue. Whilst we concur with the overall strategy of alcohol harm reduction we would urge the Government to also focus its attention and resources on tackling some of the root causes of alcohol misuse.

The introduction to the paper interestingly, emphasises in the opening sentence that the consumption of alcohol is something that the majority of the adult population engage in and therefore, plays a major role in our lives. A popular view would be that a young person's first drink is very much about their rites of passage. This gives a very clear message to the populace about alcohol and social conformity. It is important to look at this in the context of perhaps inadvertently, being an external pressure on people to drink alcohol as the consequences of not doing so can lead to social exclusion in all social strata. In other words not to drink implies abnormality. As a society should we also be communicating positive messages about those that abstain from drinking alcohol to lessen their stigma?

Page 5 of the paper outlines what direction the Government needs to be taking in developing this strategy. Poverty, deprivation and social exclusion need to be included as an area of enquiry. The bottom of the paper identifies the need to make international comparisons. However, there is also a need to make national comparisons between England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Responses to some of the questions

1. We would certainly argue that the Government has a key role to play in managing the harmful effects of alcohol misuse given that it has a responsibility to promote the wellbeing of its citizens and also has the power to affect social change.
2. The answer to this question and question three is effective risk assessment. The Government, agencies, commercial enterprises, voluntary groups and consumers need to have a shared consensus about at what point the state, the judiciary etc should intervene.
3. In order to achieve this, individuals need to have a sense of identity with their community. This is a particular challenge for those who feel very isolated and socially excluded.
4. At the moment, the roles and responsibilities of the groups that are mentioned would appear to be unclear and ambiguous. The situation is complex and has to be understood in terms of peoples' vested interests. A starting point therefore, would be to engage these groups meaningfully in this strategy.
5. It is important that the strategy is underpinned by principles and values that do not stigmatise individuals or groups, a commitment to identifying and addressing

- underlying causes, effective inter-agency working and working in partnership with individuals and communities.
6. One of the factors that needs to be taken into account when defining alcohol misuse, is the recognition of alcohol dependency and addiction.
 7. All individuals need good information about the harmful effects of alcohol consumption. In schools, this could form part of the PSE lessons. However, greater thought needs to be given to children and young people who do not attend school. On a wider scale, the message from the Government and the media needs to be a far more consistent one. It would also be helpful if the Government pursues a preventative strategy from more than just a punitive perspective.
 8. Alcohol is mainly associated with all of the examples given in a positive way. Perhaps there needs to be a greater awareness and education about the potentially damaging aspects that drinking can have on the individuals concerned and others in these settings. Are there enough support services available? At what point will individuals recognise their drinking as problematic to themselves or others?
 9. It is important that the Government firstly recognises the diversity that exists amongst various minority ethnic groups and is sensitive to the different attitudes that people may have to alcohol based on religious belief, popular culture, socialisation etc. There are a number of agencies that specifically address alcohol misuse in various communities; their input would be very valuable in any analysis carried out. The Government should also look at the incidence of alcohol misuse in terms of poverty and social exclusion.
 10. The availability of alcohol in society emphasises freedom of choice within certain parameters which is a fundamental aspect of democracy.
 11. English society is made up a variety of cultural groups so it would be discriminatory to say that there is a single English drinking culture. However, as stated previously, the consumption of alcohol is pervasive in English society and certainly promoted as a dominant value.
 12. Different factors influence different people. In general terms, we live in a highly consumerist society therefore, the marketing of a product is very influential.
 13. Attitudes to risk affect use of alcohol to a certain extent but there is probably not enough detailed information available to individuals about the risks of excessive alcohol consumption. Some of the advertising in the past has relied on using shock tactics which can lose their immediate impact over time.
 14. Drinking becomes harmful when it significantly reduces peoples quality of life on a number of different levels.
 17. Individuals need to be supported by agencies adopting a holistic approach to their dependency. Individuals therefore, need support in meeting their emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual needs, i.e. raising their self esteem, feeling of worth.
 18. Brief interventions will only have a certain amount of success. Again, it is important that the underlying causes of alcohol misuse are addressed and this is likely to necessitate a long term commitment.
 20. We know that campaigning against drug use has a much higher profile than alcohol misuse, yet more people are likely to have health and social problems as a result of alcohol dependency. Unfortunately, treatment for drug dependency does not have a particularly high success rate and therefore, current programmes need to be

looked at. There is a greater chance of success where there are more consistent services which can support drug users in a variety of ways.

21. In terms of home related accidents? (I think the work 'incidents' would be preferable here) it is important that society and agencies are more proactive in terms of recognising the incidence of domestic violence and providing individuals with effective support and protection. A good example of prevention has been the ban on alcohol consumption at football grounds which is conducive to a much safer environment. Public awareness also needs to be much greater in terms of the type of accidents that can occur at home and in the workplace in relation to alcohol consumption so that it is taken more seriously.

22. It is important that all the agencies work collaboratively when dealing with issues of alcohol misuse and mental health problems. Fundamental to good practice is the understanding agencies have of one another's roles and responsibilities and the common objectives they are all working towards.

26. Other factors that need to be considered include social deprivation. How many individuals, families and communities are there in England who are being failed by the system and consequently, disenfranchised? Unfortunately, there are too many examples of this. If we want to reduce alcohol related crime and disorder then we have to start by tackling some of the socio-economic inequalities.

30. Initiatives need to be inclusive and work with those who are involved in such activities, including young people. However, it is important to look at young people as individuals rather than 'en masse'. What does the term young people actually mean? Does it cover a specific age group? 'Young offenders' may also be 'young victims' of crime and abuse. Young people may also be legally defined as children and therefore, need to be afforded their rights as such.

34. Drink-drive policies to some degree demonstrate that imposing strict penalties works and that the devastating consequences of a person's actions can also be a powerful message.

35. It is important to point out that whilst there may be some links between domestic violence and heavy drinking, the misuse of alcohol should not be perceived as a mitigating factor for the perpetrator's use of violence. It is vital that the perpetrator takes responsibility for their violence even if their use of alcohol is a major contributor to their loss of self-control.

36. Any child could be vulnerable to the consequences of alcohol misuse, however attention needs to be given to children whose parents/carers have alcohol problems. Children who have been/are subject to abusive experiences may turn to alcohol as a means of escape and/or pleasure.

37. Groups that are subject to socio-economic disadvantage are likely to be high risk.

38. Essentially, these individuals are in need of support and services that will contribute to breaking down the stigma that is attached to them. They need to be supported in attaining the benefits and full rights of citizenship, for example, education, accommodation and employment.

39. Joined-up services are greatly hindered by complex and divisive funding arrangements. Service providers work well together when they share a common ethos, understand and respect one another's roles, responsibilities and differences. Another essential component of successful joint working is acknowledging and

dealing with the power differentials that exist between professional groups and operating in a framework that promotes equality.

40. There is a need for both to work towards social integration on behalf of the service user and recognise the strengths and limitations of their respective services. In the current climate, mainstream services are greatly hindered from delivering tailor made services to vulnerable groups because they are so overburdened, starved of resources and overly bureaucratic.

41. Currently, there appears to only be two messages communicated by the media in terms of alcohol consumption. On one hand, it is the 'cool' and 'glamorous' thing to do and enhances your personal and social appeal. On the other hand, too much of it is not a good thing if you are driving. This leaves a lot of gaps to be filled in terms of general awareness about the risks of alcohol consumption and how contrary to popular opinion, the use of alcohol can result in some people leading very unhappy lives.

42. An approach that incorporates more effective communication, information and education should ultimately enable consumers to make more informed choices.

45. Greater effort should be made to target groups and individuals that tend to be ignored by mainstream methods of communication. This may well include older people as they are often excluded by the media because of ageism even though they are an expanding group.

46. Schools, colleges and universities have a vital role to play in providing alcohol education to their students as well as providing in-house support and signposting individuals to other services. It is important that educational establishments are proactive in dealing with alcohol-related problems and do not minimise the issue.

47. This role will vary from family to family but families should at least be supported by agencies for example, in terms of having access to information.

48. Various initiatives would suggest that one of the most effective means of getting messages across is by employing individuals who have had alcohol related problems and can therefore, empathise with those that are affected. Autobiographies can be very powerful, particularly, those of well-known celebrities.

49. As above, we would advocate the use of peer education. Programmes need to be carefully constructed and evaluated as they could have the opposite effect i.e. glamorise something that is taboo and risqué.

50. Existing advertising unfortunately and inevitably promotes stereotypical images and beliefs about those who consume alcohol.

51. One can only imagine that the alcohol industry will expand over the next decade and its marketing will continue to be aimed at younger and younger people, i.e. alcopops.

52. Recent trends and fashions have helped to break down barriers in terms of female drinking patterns, i.e. it is now more socially acceptable for females to drink pints of beer which was always traditionally, the domain of the male. In this respect it can be argued that alcohol consumption has played a part in tackling sex discrimination. Conversely, the Government could pick up on some of the current trends and alert people to the potential risks, i.e. the use of alcopops.

53. I am not that optimistic as I think that there is more likely to be a preference to protect the profits of the alcohol industry. Market-led solutions will only surface if there is some financial incentive.
55. Damage to public houses, nightclubs and places of entertainment generally.
61. Positive measures in the workplace include the provision of confidential support services to employees. The practice of the organisation can also be a contributory factor to an individual's alcohol-related problems, i.e. the use of alcohol in business transactions can be a daily occurrence for some so the employer must also take some responsibility.

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