



## **Response to Consultation on the National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy**

Northampton Borough Council welcomes the development of a National Strategy aimed at reducing the harmful effects of alcohol.

### **Government Involvement**

As with many areas of life where there is the potential for harmful effects it is legitimate for Government to be involved in researching, identifying and publicising the risks so as to enable individual lifestyle choices to be made on sound information. In addition where the effects of alcohol have an adverse effect of other people there is an obvious case for legislation and regulation e.g. drink driving offences and licensing laws.

However, it is this Council's belief that Government intervention should be restricted to those areas where there is evidence, based on sound research, of negative effects.

### **Principles underpinning a national strategy**

This Council believes that the principles should be:

- That there is a recognition that alcohol has an important role to play in society.
- That individual freedoms to drink alcohol should not be unduly curtailed by excessive regulation.
- That the freedom from the negative effects of alcohol (e.g. ill health, violent crime, poverty, physical abuse etc) should be equally important.

### **Definition of Alcohol Misuse**

Alcohol misuse could be defined as being where the use results in negative effects (e.g. ill health, violent crime, poverty, physical abuse etc)

## **Crime and Disorder**

Since 1999 the Crime and Disorder Strategy for Northampton has contained a target about the establishment of a forum to jointly address alcohol issues. While the current strategy contains reference to the development of action plans in relation to alcohol this remains aspirational at present because voluntary and statutory agencies seem reluctant to engage without a firm and clear steer from Government. There is also an issue about limited resources/funding for tackling the problems. It is hoped that with a national strategy in place funding to address these problems would also become available.

Locally we have already been proactive in addressing some of the issues in regard to alcohol related anti-social behaviour in the town centre.

- A street drinking ban is in place in the town centre, with an allocated wet area for 'street drinkers' who are offered support by an outreach worker from a local drugs and alcohol agency (CAN).
- A late night bus service for Fridays and Saturdays is currently being piloted in the town centre. There is already evidence from this pilot that this results in speedy dispersal of late night revellers from the town centre entertainment and leisure zone, therefore reducing the incidents of anti-social behaviour.
- A town centre pubwatch scheme is in place, which is based on a ring round system, along with a radio link to the Borough Council's CCTV control room. This is of particular use to the staff when they are confronted with anti-social behaviour caused by drunken persons. This scheme also has a multi-agency approach to its management, and includes banning individuals from all member licensed premises.
- The Northampton Doorwatch scheme involves the use the radio link to the CCTV scheme; the staff are licensed and receive training on conflict resolution and first aid.
- Funding is in place for a proof of age scheme, which is being promoted and administered by Trading Standards, targeting schools and colleges.

## **Vulnerable Groups**

We would argue that there are a number of vulnerable groups in this respect as follows:

- Children who are or have been within the care system excluded from school or youth offenders are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of alcohol misuse, as are homeless young people or those living on the streets.

- Older street drinkers are particularly at risk. This group has particularly high care and support needs which cannot be met by the provision of housing related support alone. Partnership support and joint commissioning of services is required.
- In Northampton Borough Council we have developed a Floating Support scheme for older people in sheltered schemes who present with problematic alcohol usage. This provides a package of tenancy sustainment/compliance measures delivered by a voluntary sector organisation working closely with the Sheltered Housing Warden.
- There are often individuals with multiple needs of alcohol/drugs/offending/homelessness which require specialist provision tailored to individual need.
- The requirements of the Homelessness Act 2002 for local authorities to produce a Homelessness Strategy by July 2003 presents opportunities for agencies to work together to resolve some of the issues faced by vulnerable groups. The Supporting People programme and local Supporting People Strategy also brings together local authorities and Health and Probation and presents a further opportunity for tackling such issues in a more strategic way.

## **Education and Communication**

While there is a requirement by law to address the issue of alcohol in the workplace, we feel that there is a strong case for employers to take a more proactive role in this area of activity. It is important to recognise that alcohol is for the majority of people an accepted part of social life and is normally a personal matter. However, alcohol can impair performance, safety and interpersonal work relations, making it a workplace issue.

There is evidence from surveys to suggest that 25% of accidents at work are alcohol related, with up to 14 million working days lost each year due to alcohol related sickness absence. Around 75% of problem drinkers are in full time employment, and 45% of males and 28% of females report that the after effects of drinking affected their work. However, just under 8% of individuals referred for help, support and/or counselling were unable to remain at work.

Our experience is that employees seen generally fall into five groups:-

- The majority who consume alcohol within current guidelines and/or without risk to themselves or others.

- Those who use alcohol to excess which potentially is harmful to health and may reflect other situations e.g. stress, depression problems at home or work.
- Those who use alcohol which may be consumed in public places and therefore associated with smoking and the known harmful effects of this.
- Those who consume drugs and alcohol.
- Those who do not drink alcohol at all.

A general area of growing concern is an apparent increase in 'binge' drinking, particularly by young people and an increase in the consumption of alcohol in females.

The aim of this Council's employee welfare arrangements is to work with individuals, groups and organisations to promote a responsible and informed approach to drinking alcohol.

This is achieved from an integrated approach starting from induction of employees. Covering information, education, health and safety issues, promoting policies and procedures and working with external agencies, occupational health, primary care trusts and local firms and industry. The programme is regularly reviewed and consistent in an open and trusting environment.

The approach for the few employees affected by alcohol problems is to maintain a positive and sympathetic programme of identification (and if accepted) help and/or referral for treatment if appropriate.

For employees who choose to drink alcohol, the promotion of sensible drinking is achieved by short-term and long-term plans. These are centred around how, why and when people use and possibly misuse alcohol and/or other substances and how they see themselves. Methods used must be in a format that people can easily identify with to enable the goal to be achieved. This is to change attitudes and opinions in a supportive way so that sensible drinking becomes acceptable as the normal thing to do.

Northampton Borough Council, via health promotion, promotes healthy lifestyles throughout each year which include alcohol awareness. Special focus is in December which is allocated specifically as Sensible Drinking month. This year with Health promotion specialists and Tesco's, employees have been offered further information and help and the opportunity to sample low and non-alcoholic drinks.

### *Ideas and Solutions*

Local issues need identifying by working together and a programme devised which includes education, prevention, intervention, treatment and policing.

*What could work better?*

Informed health promotion programme linked to the workplace to meet employees needs, health and safety issues and occupational health requirements.

*What has worked well?*

The Drink-wise campaign launched in 1989, centrally run by the then Health Education Authority and an advisory committee of representatives from national organisations and regional network. The main aim was the promotion of sensible drinking by raising awareness of units of alcohol and recommended weekly limits.

### **Market Issues and Economic Costs**

One of the major employers in Northampton is a brewer which employs a highly skilled work force. This is a valuable contributor to the local and sub regional economy and it is understood from discussions with that Company that the industry is likely to continue to grow during the course of the next decade. Whatever national strategy is adopted it must recognise, support and encourage the legitimacy of such economic endeavour.

Northampton has a very high percentage of pubs and nightclubs in the Town Centre, which can create a drain on Police and other resources, but nevertheless provides a great deal of pleasure and enjoyment to many thousands of people who attend. It is difficult to be clear about the wider economic costs and the benefits of alcohol and more research would be needed to achieve this.

**Northampton Borough Council  
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### **Contact Details**

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