

Department of Health
National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy
Consultation Document

The following is a response to the consultation from Nottingham City Council in conjunction with its partners in alcohol agencies across the city.

PRINCIPLES THAT SHOULD UNDERPIN THE STRATEGY (Questions 1-5)

Government Involvement – there is an issue of personal choice and personal responsibility in how one behaves towards oneself and also other people. However, when the wider community is involved, in whatever way, government, both local and national, has to respond as that is one of its functions. A harm reduction strategy should be underpinned by providing equitable and comprehensive services for those who have addiction problems, as there would be for any other health problem.

The problems which result from binge drinking in inner city areas are a cultural issue within the British Isles and particularly amongst younger people. This is a longer term issue and involves education in self-care and citizenship not only at school but also within the home.

THE CULTURAL AND BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES AROUND ALCOHOL USE AND MISUSE (Questions 6-13)

There are clear differences between alcohol addiction and alcohol misuse and both bring their share of problems. Addiction is assessed by means of specific tools used by alcohol agencies. Misuse is often more of a sporadic or binge nature but can also have a huge impact, i.e. on city centres at weekends. Social changes have effected women's drinking patterns, many women do not realise that alcohol has a major impact on them due to their physiology, this is another area for education as it is not well known. It is more common knowledge that heavy drinking is more common in the north of the country. Attitudes to risk clearly affect alcohol consumption, in that people do not see the same risks with alcohol as they do with drugs and young people, men especially, are more willing to take risks in general. The advertising of alcohol has aimed itself at young people, i.e. with alcopops and 'buzz drinks' (See Youth, Alcohol etc. Kevin J. Brain).

There is some evidence of difference in patterns amongst ethnic minorities in the UK, e.g. Scots and Irish people have a higher alcohol consumption. Alcohol misuse problems may be more hidden in Asian communities where drinking is seen as less acceptable. The reasons for these differences are not immediately evident, but obviously services need to investigate these situations further and react accordingly.

HEALTH, PREVENTION, TRTREATMENT AND THE IMPACT ON THE NHS (Questions 14-22)

The proven health benefits of alcohol are very specific and apply only to a small minority of people. Even this research is now being eroded with research showing that in the case of women (only those aged over 44) may benefit from small amounts of alcohol. The advantages of promoting such benefits thus seem rather dubious, especially when set against the vast amount of harm and cost to the NHS and the country, both directly and indirectly, caused by alcohol. Many admissions to A&E and general hospitals, up to 50% at weekends are caused by alcohol misuse. In Nottingham, an alcohol arrest referral worker is available to assess and offer treatment at the point of contact, thus enabling the client to curtail the progress of their problems and also save NHS resources. Two specialist nurses are employed within the general hospital for the same purpose, and in particular to ensure that beds are not being taken up with alcohol problems which could be better dealt with elsewhere, However, more training and resources need to be made available at primary care level, which is where most alcohol problems are missed.

The injuries presented to A&E could be reduced considerably by the compulsory use of toughened glass and also by changing bar layout – people drink less when sitting down.

CRIME, DISORDER AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOURS, THE EFFECTS ON OUR SURROUNDINGS AND THE COMMUNITY (Questions 23-35)

Domestic Violence – The links between alcohol and abuse and domestic violence are becoming more widely acknowledged. Current knowledge and debates by John Jacobs (December 1998) establishes this link. APAS in Nottingham suggest as a protocol that everyone who is involved in domestic abuse should also be screened for alcohol problems. See APAS document. What every woman is entitled to know about the relationship between alcohol and domestic violence.

Nottingham has a “no drinking on the street zone”. This helps to limit difficulties to within a certain area but does not control disorder at closing time. It also means that street drinkers have moved to the periphery of the city where they also have problems and are out of sight of services.

We hope that the strategy identifies funding to tackle the growing problem of alcohol related crime and disorder in Nottingham.

Drink Driving – As the number of deaths from alcohol related incidents has risen, would it be wise to review the current maximum blood alcohol level for driving? It may be simpler just to make it as near zero as possible.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS

CHILDREN (Question 36)

Consideration should be given not only in terms of the effects of drinking parent son children, but also the links with future addiction problems for such children. The Nottingham drug and alcohol team have a past specifically set up to deal with these complex interactions within families.

The problem drinking of teenagers is now becoming well documented – the figures releases in December 2002 show that young people's drinking has increased significantly in the last 10 years. Moreover, it is a binge nature. Alcopops have been pinpointed. The strategy needs to confront the alcohol industry directly on this. Sadly, alcohol abuse has been linked to the rise on suicide rates amongst teenage girls.

The risks to children are two-fold:

1. In terms of the neglect and stigma which can occur if one or both parents drink. These effects can range from physical harm to psychological damage.
2. The effects on young people if they start to drink – physically, psychology and socially. The service providers in Nottingham feel very strongly that central government must take responsibility.

OTHER AT RISK AND VULNERABLE GROUPS (Questions 37-40)

Those who have other mental health problems as well as alcohol problems – often these clients fall between two stools in terms of services as professionals struggle to identify the primary problem. Nottingham Drug and Alcohol Team have set up a dual diagnosis service particularly to try to resolve these complex situations and help the client more quickly. Other at risk groups are those excluded from school or who do not have employment or training.

JOINED UP SERVICES

Joined up services can be impeded by agencies with different philosophies who are unwilling to share information with clients about other services.

Clients in Nottingham have requested a central information point where all agencies and services are represented.

EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION (Questions 41-50)

Clearly education campaigns can have some effect as past experience in the health service has shown. Some of the leaflets and other information of safe levels of alcohol consumption vary on what they advise for sensible drinking levels. Some of the indicators are very low and so are ignored by people who feel that they are too unrealistic.

THE SHAPE OF THE MARKET AND MARKET SOLUTIONS AND THE ECONOMIC COSTS AND BENEFITS OF ALCOHOL (Questions 51-61)

The alcohol market is the area of most concern for people working in the alcohol field in Nottingham. Our concerns fall into two broad areas.

1. The sale of very cheap and very strong lagers and ciders at most shops in some areas of Nottingham. These are directed at street drinkers in those areas.
2. Licensing Laws – Certainly within Nottingham there is a trend of opening increasing numbers of bars and large capacity nightclubs. These are largely aimed at young people and are leading to escalating binge drinking in that group and also disorder on the streets, particularly at weekends. There is undoubtedly a relationship between trends and fashions and market response, otherwise the companies would not spend such a huge amount on advertising.

In Nottingham we feel that this is where government can make a real impact on the problems caused by alcohol, by rigorously controlling both advertising and licensing. We feel that there is a direct link between liberalisation and the increasing amount of alcohol abuse and addiction.

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