

HOME SECRETARY'S FOREWORD

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Citizens and visitors to this country alike want – and should have – the opportunity to enjoy themselves with a drink or meal at any time, reasonably close at hand, without fear of violence, intimidation or disorder. But alcohol and crime have always been linked; and public order issues have always arisen whenever large groups of people gather together, particularly at night, to enjoy popular pastimes. This is why, among its wider responsibilities for law and order, the Home Office is responsible for the law on licensing the sale of alcohol and public entertainment. We now need modern laws to deal with what is a very old problem. They should allow people to enjoy their leisure as they wish, provided that this does not disturb others. A priority, too, is to make

sure that the laws provide effective protection for children. In this White Paper, we therefore propose a radically new system which carefully balances rights and responsibilities. We intend to do this by matching greater freedom and flexibility within sensible boundaries with tough and uncompromising powers for the police, courts and licensing authorities to deal with any individuals or businesses failing to be socially responsible and abusing these freedoms.

The current alcohol licensing system is an amalgam of 19th century legislation, intended to suppress drunkenness and disorder, and later additions. The law is complex, and involves a great deal of unnecessary red tape for business. We owe the magistrates and the police a large debt of gratitude for doing their best to make the system work; but it has been impossible to prevent inconsistencies and arbitrary decisions from arising. At the same time, there are too few effective sanctions against premises attracting trouble. The rules governing the admission of children to licensed premises are obscure and deeply confusing. The controls on under-age ‘off sales’ are inadequate. It is also difficult to find in the present arrangements for licensing the sale of alcohol any real accountability to local residents whose lives are fundamentally affected by the decisions taken. The time has come to develop a better system.

Most adults take alcoholic drinks: approaching 90% of the population. We spend around £25 billion a year on this. There are about 78,000 public houses and bars; 25,000 restaurants; nearly 4,000 nightclubs and discotheques; 23,000 registered clubs; and 45,000 shops, stores and supermarkets, all engaged in the business of selling alcohol to us. The pub is a crucial focus for community life in cities, towns and villages across the nation. Around 1 million people work in the industry. It is one of the biggest areas of employment growth. An estimated 2.3 million people work in the wider hospitality, tourism and leisure industry. A sector of the economy which is this important and which has so great an impact, deserves as good a system of regulation as we can provide. We also need to make sure that the system we envisage can be fully integrated into our national alcohol strategy which takes account of health as well as crime prevention initiatives.

There is a parallel and separate system of public entertainment licensing, under which local authorities issue licences for premises that may or may not also have a liquor

licence. These laws too are complex and riddled with anomalies. The intersection of the two licensing systems imposes unnecessary costs and burdens on business.

To complete the picture we are proposing to reform the regulation of late night refreshment services (night cafes) which are subject to yet another separate licensing system, also complex and out of date. Licensing here is meant to prevent disorder and unreasonable disturbance to residents in the neighbourhood, and needs to be re-focused on these key issues.

Our overall aim is to bring about reform which assures the safety of the public, better protects children and safeguards all against crime, disorder and disturbance; the decisions we make on these issues will in turn help to shape the future of our villages, towns and cities.

Modernising licensing laws should not put unnecessary obstacles in the way of the industry's further development, but this must not be at a price of weakening its social responsibilities. Our proposals will provide industry with greater freedom and flexibility to meet the needs of its customers, but balance that with tough and uncompromising powers for the police to control any disorderly premises and for local authorities to protect residents from disturbance. There are many difficult balances to be struck. This is a debate in which everyone has an interest. We therefore want to hear your views.

Jack Straw