

Alcohol strategy and the drinks industry: a partnership for prevention?

The Government's alcohol strategy for England identified the drinks industry as a key partner in preventing alcohol problems and reducing levels of harm. This study, by Rob Baggott of De Montfort University, examined the perspectives of a range of industry and non-industry stakeholders on this policy. It found that, although there was an expected polarisation on some issues, there was consensus on others. The research found:

- Most non-industry respondents in this study recognised that the industry had some part to play in national and local partnerships to combat alcohol problems.
- While accepting that the industry has a role to play, many of those outside the industry were sceptical about its social responsibility initiatives and argued that it could do more to change marketing practices, improve product development and shape the drinking environment. They also feared that its political influence would be increased by the new emphasis on partnership and self-regulation, and that effective public health interventions that do not fit in with the industry's commercial objectives will not be pursued.
- Industry respondents acknowledged problems associated with the misuse of alcohol and claimed that the industry had a clear incentive to act, in order to protect its brands and corporate reputations. They strongly favoured self-regulation and voluntary approaches over statutory and direct regulation.
- The government's proposals led to a new, industry-wide social responsibility standards document. This set out key principles and good practice but did not supersede existing codes. Nor did it set out new mechanisms for monitoring, implementation and accreditation, address acknowledged weaknesses of self-regulation or set out ways of strengthening enforcement.
- Interviewees, from both within and outside the industry, stressed the need for greater consistency between self-regulatory systems, and between these systems and statutory regulation. There was also wider support for industry initiatives in areas such as training and education.
- The industry opposed government plans to create an independent national fund for projects aimed at combating alcohol problems. Eventually, it agreed to reform an existing industry fund – the Drinkaware Trust – giving it greater independence from the industry.
- Further research is needed, including an independent evaluation of the implementation of the national standards and the Drinkaware Trust, an examination of the facilitators and barriers to socially responsible practice within the industry, and a comprehensive review of partnership working at local level.



Background

The government's Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England and the subsequent White Paper on Public Health, *Choosing Health*, both published in 2004, identified the drinks industry as a key partner in tackling alcohol problems. This aroused concern among professionals and agencies dealing with the consequences of alcohol misuse, who doubted the industry's willingness and ability to perform this role.

The study examined the perspectives of industry and non-industry stakeholders on this emerging policy. The key findings were as follows:

Alcohol strategy

The government's proposals changed considerably following the publication of its alcohol strategy. Initially, the government intended to create a national social responsibility scheme for alcoholic drinks producers to promote good practice among producers and down the supply chain, with an independent fund for projects aimed at combating alcohol problems. Following discussions with the industry, a national standards document for the production and sale of alcoholic drinks in the UK was eventually produced in 2005, but without any obvious mechanisms of monitoring, implementation and enforcement mentioned in the alcohol strategy.

The independent fund proposal was opposed by the industry. However, a compromise was eventually reached so that an existing industry charitable fund – the Drinkaware Trust – was reformed. It was given greater independence from the industry by including non-industry representatives on its governing body.

The government also proposed a code of practice for retailers, tailored to local circumstances, with local funds for managing alcohol-related crime and disorder. Subsequently, retailers were covered by the national standards document as well as other codes devised by the relevant trade associations. Meanwhile, the proposal for local funds was transformed into legislative proposals to create alcohol disorder zones (ADZs), which could force licensed premises to contribute to the costs of managing and reducing alcohol-related problems.

The industry and social responsibility

The drinks industry has openly acknowledged that the production and sale of alcoholic drinks carries with it important social responsibilities. Adverse media coverage of binge drinking in recent years, and explicit commitments to corporate social responsibility across the sector, have motivated drinks companies and trade bodies to develop policies on alcohol misuse. The larger producers and retailers have been inspired particularly by a need to protect brand and corporate reputations. These companies have led the industry on social responsibility issues but they acknowledge that social responsibility must become more strongly embedded across the industry as a whole.

The industry is diverse and there are differences of view between various sectors (producers, retailers, on- and off-licence trade). However, these differences rarely become public, enabling the industry to provide a united front on alcohol misuse issues. Internally, the industry is quite critical of companies and trade bodies that 'break ranks'.

The industry is opposed to policies that seek to control overall levels of alcohol consumption. It rejects evidence linking levels of alcohol consumption to levels of harm. The industry's critics are concerned that it can discredit and resist public health interventions which threaten profitability, and believe that it has substantial political influence over policymakers.

Many non-industry respondents were highly critical of the Portman Group, a body established by alcohol producers in the late 1980s to act on their behalf on social responsibility issues. Some critics saw it as a lobbyist for the industry, which the Portman Group vehemently denied. The industry's critics argued that the Portman Group's educational and regulatory roles should be removed. Most of its educational activities will in fact be transferred to the reformed Drinkaware Trust, although the Portman Group will retain a self-regulatory role in relation to drinks producers.

Competitive pressures within the industry are strong and can operate against socially responsible practice, even with the larger established companies. There is a tendency for the industry to blame 'rogues and cowboys', particularly among new entrants to the industry, for worsening alcohol problems. However, this is too simplistic. For example, new entrants have often set trends (in product development and marketing) which the more established businesses have found difficult to resist. Critics believe that the quest for profit limits the ability of the industry to act responsibly and that drinks businesses could do much more to improve marketing practices and product development processes and to shape the drinking environment.

The industry has long supported and funded educational initiatives in the alcohol field, such as to combat drink-driving. Critics believe that, although education can form a useful component of an alcohol strategy, it is ineffective on its own.

The industry has also supported and funded alcohol research. Critics were concerned about the possible manipulation of research agendas and project findings. They pointed out that research, particularly when industry-funded, must protect the independence of researchers. It would appear that clearer criteria are needed for research governance in the alcohol field.

Self-regulation

Respondents from within and outside the industry agreed that self-regulation has an important role in improving standards of social responsibility. There was a difference in emphasis, however, with those from the industry preferring a higher degree of self-regulation and non-industry respondents tending to see this as an addition to state regulation.

Despite the attempt to introduce national industry-wide standards for social responsibility, self-regulation remains fragmented. Separate codes govern different sectors, such as the off-licence trade, pubs and bars, the Scottish whisky industry, packaging and marketing by producers, broadcast advertising, and non-broadcast advertising.

In addition, the larger producer and retail companies have their own internal codes of practice. There is some confusion about how these codes relate to each other, despite the recent efforts to create a single national code. There are substantial variations in these self-regulatory systems according to their scope, inclusiveness, independence and lay input, proactive monitoring, sanctions and public accountability. Most self-regulatory systems are seen by critics as quite weak, especially in terms of their ability to enforce rules and effectively sanction those who break them.

Both industry and non-industry respondents stated that more could be done to improve co-regulation – the interaction between statutory and voluntary systems of regulation. In particular, there was wide support for clarifying the legality of voluntary socially responsible practices (notably with regard to competition laws).

Training

Respondents from both within and outside the industry argued that training has a crucial role to play in supporting both statutory regulation and self-regulation. They felt it was important that training should be evidence-based and informed by research into the impact of training programmes on socially responsible practice, self-regulation and law enforcement.

Partnerships

Partnership with the industry has advantages. The industry has resources and expertise. Even critics of the industry acknowledged that it is short-sighted to exclude the industry from partnership arrangements where it could make a potential contribution to reducing alcohol problems. 'Pubwatch' schemes, which harness the efforts of local retailers, and community partnerships led by local authorities and the police, were highlighted as examples of effective partnership working.

However, it was also recognised that there must be a review of the impact of such schemes and widespread dissemination of good practice and the lessons learned. There was concern about the potential of the industry to dominate partnerships and to gear partnership working to narrow commercial aims. Some respondents called for a coherent framework to clarify the scope and purpose of partnerships and arrangements to protect weaker participants and the public interest. This might include a national alcohol forum involving all stakeholders, including the industry.

Future research

Many areas need further research, including:

- An independent evaluation of the impact of the national standards, the reformed Drinkaware trust and alcohol disorder zones.
- An investigation into how the different parts of the industry relate to each other on social responsibility issues.
- A study of the influence of the industry within the policy process.
- An examination of facilitators and barriers to socially responsible practice within the industry.

- A comprehensive study of the impact of alcohol education campaigns.
- An investigation of different models of research governance in the alcohol field.
- An assessment of the impact of self-regulation in specific fields including advertising, marketing and promotion, the drinking environment and underage drinking.
- An evaluation of training schemes and how they contribute to self-regulation, socially responsible practice and law enforcement.
- Finally, a comprehensive review of the impact of partnership working on alcohol misuse at local level.

About the project

The research took the form of a literature search for industry initiatives on alcohol misuse, self-regulation and partnership-working. In addition, 25 semi-structured interviews were carried out with respondents from the drinks industry, the voluntary sector, professional organisations, academia, government and the public sector.

For further information

The full report, **Alcohol strategy and the drinks industry: a partnership for prevention?** by Rob Baggott, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of the Drug and Alcohol series (ISBN 978 1 859355 41 1, price £13.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk.

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