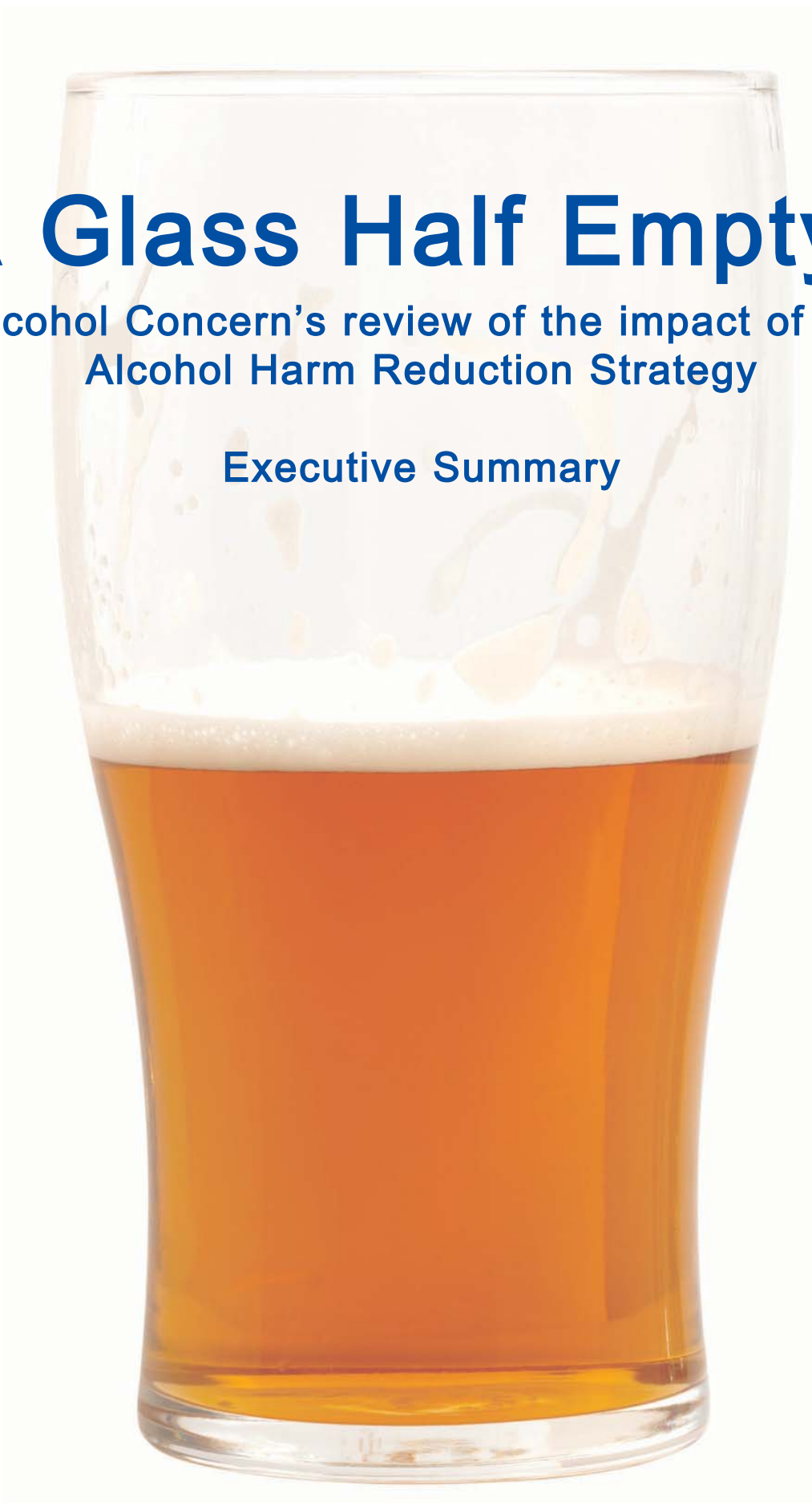


A Glass Half Empty?

Alcohol Concern's review of the impact of the
Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy

Executive Summary



Alcohol Concern
Making Sense of Alcohol

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Executive Summary

The climate of public opinion has never been more receptive to government initiatives to tackle alcohol-related harm. Public concerns about alcohol harms have gone well beyond fear of alcohol-fuelled violence and binge drinking. The media and the public are waking up to the damage alcohol can cause to their health and also to the well being of their children. Never has there been a greater opportunity for government to leave a lasting legacy on this crucial issue.

As the Government reviews its Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy and considers its next steps, this paper summarises Alcohol Concern's vision of how society can achieve a more healthy relationship with alcohol. It sets out:

- A review of the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England 2004
- The principles which should underlie the new strategy
- Recommended aims and objectives to achieve lasting change
- Alcohol Concern's recommended solutions

Review of the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy

Action to reduce crime

Government has taken many actions to reduce alcohol related crime, including encouraging further use of Fixed Penalty Notices and campaigns to discourage under-age purchases. Overall, recorded alcohol-related crime is down although it is difficult to know if this is related to the additional use of Fixed Penalty Notices, which are not recorded. Nearly half of victims of violent crime continue to report that their assailant was under the influence of alcohol and the Licensing Act 2005 does not appear to have reduced alcohol-related offences at closing times as intended. Important work promised in the strategy to give more support

to domestic violence victims has not been achieved nor have there been any steps thus far to encourage greater use of arrest referral schemes -both promised in the strategy.

Measures to reduce alcohol related crime have thus far focused primarily on clamping down unacceptable behaviour, however only by introducing structured support and interventions for offenders at each point in the criminal justice system will offenders be offered the opportunity to alter their thinking and behaviour to make long term changes. Similarly a new strategy would need to address the fact that much alcohol-fuelled anti-social behaviour is underpinned by society's implicit acceptance and encouragement of drunkenness. This will need to be actively challenged to engender culture change.

Measures to reduce alcohol-related health harms

Government has issued several documents under the strategy intended to reduce health harms in relation to alcohol misuse. The publications of Models of Care for Alcohol Misuse, the Alcohol Needs Assessment Research Programme and the Screening Research Programme (SIPs) have been positive steps. However, a lack of any strategic approach across public health to tackling health harms has contributed to a 178% increase in alcoholic liver cirrhosis in 9 years. Additionally, there has been an upward trend both in the affordability of alcohol and an 18% rise in alcohol related mortality since 2002. Importantly, a lack of specific targets to reduce harm has hampered efforts to encourage Primary Care Trusts and Councils to act on the guidance issued.

In addition, the lack of ring-fenced funding; absence of alcohol from GPs' Quality

Outcome Framework and poor local monitoring systems have allowed alcohol-related health conditions to spiral. Any future strategy needs to explicitly acknowledge the link between excessive drinking and risks to health and ensure a strategic focus across all departments, linking public health to price, regulation, awareness campaigns and treatment. The primary aim of any future strategy should be to drive consumption down and change the culture of heavy drinking, with specific targets to ensure all primary care staff routinely ask about consumption levels and provide advice where needed.

Binge Drinking and Young People

Although both the Licensing and Violent Crime Reduction Acts aimed to curb alcohol related disorder, the Strategy did not aim to reduce rising alcohol consumption levels among young people. Consumption has almost doubled amongst 11-13 year olds who drink. Promised research on appropriate interventions has not materialised and although the Know Your Limits campaign came out in 2006, the indication is teenagers are now drinking earlier and more heavily, with disastrous effects on their health and wellbeing. 20 children a day are now admitted to hospital due to excessive drinking per year. In order to reduce the effects of alcohol harms to children, Alcohol Concern advocates a change in the law to make it illegal for children to drink before the age of 15. Further support is needed for parents, teachers and youth workers to spot the signs of early alcohol misuse and provide support and advice. In addition, alcohol education should become part of the National Curriculum.

Promotion of the Sensible Drinking Message

The Strategy promised to reassess the sensible drinking message and make it more prominent. In reality, the original message has become diluted or confused in many publications. Over the past five years general household

expenditure on alcohol has gone up by 21% and the alcohol strength of wines and lagers has risen while pub measures have become larger. In contrast to the Strategy's aim to increase awareness of the sensible drinking message, consumers continue to be largely unaware of the unit content of their drinks and in some cases are potentially encouraged to drink at upper limits. In addition, the production of the Know Your Limits campaign implies that binge drinking is largely the preserve of young people, whereas middle-age adults are repeatedly drinking above safe levels. A future alcohol strategy should ensure that awareness campaigns are sustained and targeted at different age groups and that point of sale information is mandatory at all outlets.

Support for Alcohol Treatment Services

New research carried out by Alcohol Concern shows that treatment services have received very little benefit as a result of the Alcohol Strategy. In some cases, services are seeing more clients in return for less funding. In addition over 60% of services surveyed stated that commissioners had not planned adequate service provision in their area for all problem drinkers, as guided by Government. A future strategy should make it mandatory for PCTs to carry out local needs assessments, set targets for harm reduction in Local Area Agreements and ensure that all problem drinkers in their locality have access to treatment. Crucially, resources spent nationally on alcohol harm reduction should always equal 10% of alcohol tax revenue.

Industry Responsibility, Regulation and Advertising

The Alcohol Strategy successfully oversaw the setting up of the Drinkaware Trust to encourage increased industry action to help change public behaviour around alcohol and encouraged greater responsibility by the drinks industry with the publication of the Principles and

Standards document. However, there has been no evaluation of any outcomes from corporate social responsibility measures across the industry or of outcomes as a result of the Principles and Standards document. Unfortunately, expenditure on alcoholic drinks advertising continues to completely outstrip sensible drinking campaigns by over 96% and from our own research this year, we are aware that supermarket alcohol adverts were shown twice as often before the 9pm watershed as compared to after. Children are also exposed to alcohol adverts and sponsorship through sports and music promotions.

Alcohol Concern advocates a pre-watershed ban on alcohol adverts, an end to sports and music sponsorship and a mandatory measure to ensure that 10% of industry advertising expenditure is used to promote independently evaluated harm reduction initiatives. We also recommend independent regulation of the drinks industry.

Price and Taxation

The Strategy preferred not to take any action to increase the price of alcohol, in spite of good evidence supporting the benefits of doing so.

The low price of alcohol in relation to income, supermarkets selling alcohol as loss-leaders and continued drinks promotions by both the on and off trade continue to make alcohol more affordable to heavy drinkers and young people. Increased consumption by children has increased harms to their health. Alcohol Concern therefore recommends a 16% increase on alcohol tax, with no alcohol able to be sold as a loss.

Has the Strategy succeeded in reducing harms?

In spite of the Strategy's welcome aims to reduce alcohol-related harms, the measures outlined within it were not sufficient in themselves to reduce overall health harms or to change the heavy drinking culture that permeates British society. To have achieved this, the strategy would have had to introduce more strategic measures which acknowledge the interconnectedness of culture, price, regulation and public health. A future strategy should use the politically courageous measure of price and availability as levers to reduce heavy drinking and to set public health targets for PCTs to reduce alcohol harms. Additionally, Government needs to take a lead on changing culture, in the same way it has done on tobacco and obesity.

Alcohol Concern Recommendations

Alcohol Concern makes the following recommendations to achieve lasting change. We believe Government should subscribe to the following goals and targets in order to realistically reduce the harms caused by alcohol misuse and provide communities with the adequate support needed to drink responsibly and safely. **For a complete set of proposed actions please see our full report.**

Goal 1

Overall aim: Reduce alcohol consumption

Specific objectives:

- Reduce per capita consumption to 1970s levels
- Reduce to nil consumption of alcohol by children aged 15 or under

Action Required

- Tax on alcohol will increase by 16% and the link will be established between alcohol taxation and public health policy
- No alcohol will be sold at a loss, either by a producer or a retailer
- It will be illegal to supply children aged 15 or under with alcohol

- There will be no alcohol advertising before the watershed or in cinemas when showing films with an under 18 rating

Goal 2

Overall aim: Alcohol will be a public health issue with the same status as tobacco and obesity

Specific objectives:

- All drinkers will understand how to drink safely and know the risks of not doing so
- All social, healthcare and criminal justice professionals will know how to recognise when their client is drinking above safe levels and will have standardised interventions available to support them

Action Required

- All key healthcare professionals will be trained to recognise and provide brief interventions
- Alcohol will be built into the Quality and Outcomes Framework for GPs
- Every hospital ward and A&E department will have access to an alcohol health liaison worker
- The alcohol industry will be independently regulated, with proactive monitoring of compliance with relevant codes
- Government will work with others to conduct a sustained awareness raising campaign

Goal 3

Overall aim: Individual and societal Harm levels will decrease (health, relationships, violence etc)

Specific objectives:

- Government will define "acceptable" levels of societal harm
- Alcohol related domestic violence will fall by 50% over 10 years
- violent crime will fall by 50 % over 5 years
- mortality will be reduced by 50% over

10 years.

- Child admission to hospital for alcohol related conditions will fall to nil

Action Required

- All alcohol dependent drinkers will be able to access treatment services in their area within set waiting time limits
- Arrest referral schemes will be introduced within every borough
- The permissible blood alcohol level relating to drink driving will be reduced from 80mg to 50mg/100ml of blood.
- It will be mandatory for the alcohol industry to spend 10% or more of its promotional budget on promoting harm reduction initiatives
- The government will introduce within the Licensing Act a fifth objective to protect public health

Goal 4

Overall aim: Alcohol will be "integrated" as an issue within the health, social care and criminal justice systems

Specific objective:

- However a problem drinker enters or encounters the health, criminal justice or social care system, they will be picked up and supported to reduce their drinking
- All problem drinkers will be able to access specialist community / residential treatment within two / four weeks

Action Required

- Government will set out clear expectations and timescales relating to national, regional and local alcohol harm reduction
- Teachers will be specifically trained and supported to deliver alcohol awareness education and Alcohol Education will become part of the National Curriculum
- Every Local Area Agreement will assess

- alcohol harm and set targets for reduction,
- Local commissioners will be obliged to assess the degree to which local treatment systems conform to Models of Care for Alcohol Misuse
 - Screening and brief interventions (SBI) will take place in all Tier One services, with ongoing training provided for all tier one professionals

Goal 5

Overall aim: There will be national and local leadership for alcohol

Specific objective:

- There will be national leadership on alcohol to ensure that the new alcohol strategy is delivered
- There will be mandatory targets to assess and reduce alcohol harm locally. Local leadership structures will ensure that local delivery plans are sustained

Action Required

- Government will develop a clear action plan for tackling alcohol, with specific timescales and setting out how the plan will be evaluated
- Government will appoint a national alcohol champion, supported by a central unit, reporting into Number 10.
- Every relevant public service (e.g. hospitals, borough command units) will have a named individual responsible for leading and reporting on alcohol harm reduction for their service
- Primary Care Trusts will have statutory responsibilities to oversee local alcohol strategies and LAA targets to reduce alcohol harms

Government has a real opportunity to change drinking behaviour if it can be brave enough to engage with the public and industry honestly about excessive drinking. This means not only thinking about alcohol in a different way to the previous strategy, but also taking firmer steps to ensure that problem drinking is reduced.

This requires not only the use of necessary levers in terms of price, availability and regulation, but also actively supporting a culture shift to make safe drinking the norm. This will not happen by itself, it requires careful action to engage with professionals, the public and the industry to change the way we all think and act in relation to drinking.

Alcohol Concern Is...

- The national agency on alcohol misuse
- Working to reduce the incidence and costs of alcohol-related harm and to increase the range and the quality of the services available to people with alcohol-related problems
- Acting as the national umbrella body for local agencies tackling alcohol-related harm and offering help to the families and friends of those with alcohol-related problems
- The principal source of information on alcohol to the general public, to the press and to professionals in other fields of activity, including government.

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