

On Monday 11 May 2009, David Poley, Portman Group Chief Executive, spoke at an event at the House of Commons, organised by Alcohol Concern, on the merits of a minimum price for alcohol. David made these opening remarks:

"I am no fan of very cheap, strong alcohol. One might call it "functional alcohol" - the sort of alcohol whose chief appeal is that it delivers a strong hit for a cheap price. I can understand why the public health lobby would like to get rid of it and have some sympathy with them. The issue, however, is less to do with problem drinks and more to do with problem drinkers. No matter where you set the price bar, there is always going to be a cheapest on display. And if someone is alcohol-dependent, or is determined to get drunk, they will continue to seek out such products. Making alcohol more expensive might deter some people but it is not getting to the root of the problem. Indeed, if stopping alcohol misuse was all about raising price, the UK would already be the sensible drinking capital of Europe.

"You might say that, even if it is only going to help a few people, why not introduce a minimum price. My answer is that it is not only people who misuse alcohol who buy cheaper drinks. In particular, people on low incomes will tend to choose cheaper drinks. And these people will end up being punished.

"My other, and most significant, concern is that once the principle of a minimum price has been introduced, what happens then? The CMO currently advocates a 50p minimum price per unit because, according to Sheffield, that will save 3,393 deaths per year. Whether it does, or whether it doesn't, you can be sure that that alcohol deaths will not be eradicated therefore there will be calls to increase the minimum. Of course there will. Why wouldn't the CMO want to save lives? The Sheffield report already claims that even more lives would be saved with a minimum price of 60p 70p, or more. But once you start down this route of tackling misuse in a way that gets everyone, sensible drinkers as well, to drink less, you are on a slippery slope and we all know where it ends.

"In case there is any doubt, let me say that while I have no objection to supermarkets selling alcohol at competitive prices, I think it is wrong to sell alcohol at a loss. That is not competitive pricing, it is anti-competitive pricing. But that is chiefly a competition issue rather than a social responsibility issue. Minimum pricing, in the form of a flat rate per unit of alcohol, is not the appropriate way to prevent this."