

**PORTMAN GROUP RESPONSE TO THE WELSH ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT
“THE SUBSTANCE MISUSE STRATEGY FOR WALES, 2008-2018”**

General comments

The Portman Group commends the Welsh Assembly Government for its determination to reduce alcohol harm and this enhanced strategy. The Portman Group strongly supports the stated strategic objectives in the strategy of reducing harm to individuals, their families and wider communities from the misuse of alcohol and the greater priority on education, prevention and treatment services related to alcohol.

Unfortunately, for too many people drinking alcohol excessively is a way of life. Problems of alcohol misuse are deeply rooted in society, prevalent in communities, damaging people’s health, relationships and careers. Portman Group member companies, the largest drinks producers, are united in their commitment to change this.

The Portman Group does, however, believe that harm reduction policies should be targeted at the significant minority of the population who regularly drink above the UK Government’s recommended levels. Population-wide control policies, including restrictions on availability and price, would be ineffective because they would fail to address the underlying problem in the UK which is that drunkenness is socially acceptable.

Instead, public policy strategies should focus on tackling the UK’s drinking culture. Drunkenness is tolerated, often celebrated, unlike in many other countries where it is socially unacceptable. Better education and effective law enforcement can change this. Very importantly, the industry has pioneered a unique partnership, the Drinkaware Trust. The Trust is funded entirely by industry but governed by a board comprising representatives of the industry, alcohol voluntary sector and health. Its role is to help change the UK drinking culture in a positive way through campaigning and education.

Education must be accompanied by proper enforcement of alcohol laws. The importance of effective law enforcement and the responsibility of the police forces should feature more prominently in this strategy. Many police forces continue to fail to exercise the extensive range of powers at their disposal to tackle alcohol-related problems. For example, it is astonishing that fewer than forty under-18s were cautioned or prosecuted for trying to buy alcohol in England and Wales during 2005.

Alcohol is enjoyed in moderation by the vast majority. Moreover, drinking trends suggest that the sensible drinking message is starting to get through. According to the General Household Survey, published by the Office for National Statistics, the number of adults drinking harmfully in Great Britain has fallen since 2001. Crucially, this positive trend is mirrored among young adults, an age group commonly associated with heavy drinking.

Despite these statistics, the enormity of the challenges posed by alcohol misuse cannot be disputed, in particular, the negative consequences for public health and society caused by the behaviour of a significant minority of the population.

Specific observations

On page 6, reference is made to “strengthening the Code of Conduct for the alcohol industry.” There is no overall Code of Conduct for the alcohol industry; instead, the industry abides by a series of statutory codes, self-regulatory codes and best practice guidelines. We would appreciate clarification from the Welsh Assembly Government on the specific area of the industry’s activity that it believes should be subject to strengthened regulation.

The Portman Group operates, on behalf of all drinks producers, a Code of Practice on the Naming, Packaging and Promotion of Alcoholic Drinks. The Portman Group’s Code applies to all pre-packaged alcoholic drinks and the promotional activities of drinks producers. The Code covers a drink’s name and packaging, press releases, websites, sponsorship, sampling, branded merchandise, advertorials and all other promotional material. It does not apply to alcohol advertising which is regulated by the Advertising Standards Authority nor does it cover drinks retailer promotions.

The Code rules are set by the Portman Group in consultation with government, the wider industry, alcohol charities and health campaigners. The Code, for example, prohibits the marketing of alcoholic drinks to under-18s; the alcohol content of a drink must be made absolutely clear; its alcoholic strength should not be dominant; there must be no association with illegal drugs, bravado, aggression or anti-social behaviour and any suggestion that the drink will lead to sexual success or increased popularity are also banned. The 4th edition of the Code, which was introduced at the start of this year, also prevents producers from encouraging consumers to drink rapidly and producers are not be able to display their company’s branding on children’s replica sports shirts under sponsorship agreements signed from 1 January 2008.

The Code is supported by retailers who do not to sell any product found in breach of the Code by the Independent Complaints Panel. Over the last ten years more than 70 drinks have been removed from sale following decisions made by the Independent Complaints Panel.

On page 15, reference is made to the Welsh Assembly Government “pressing the case for legislative change with Whitehall Ministers, as it has done on alcohol advertising for example.” The implication is that the Welsh Assembly Government supports tighter restrictions on alcohol advertising.

Drinks producers have, for a long time, abided by tough marketing regulations. Advertising is strictly controlled by the Advertising Standards Authority and all other drinks producer marketing by the Portman Group.

The effect of alcohol advertising is to influence consumers' brand choice rather than encourage harmful drinking or increase total consumption. The UK Government has commissioned an independent review into the impact of price and promotion, including advertising, on alcohol-related harm. This outcome of this review should inform alcohol harm reduction policies which, as stated on page 1 of the strategy, should be based on sound evidence, not assumptions.

Furthermore, advertising can be a powerful force in changing social attitudes, as demonstrated by the success of anti-drink drive initiatives in changing societal attitudes.

Alcohol producers are actively promoting sensible drinking to consumers. Increasingly, alcohol advertising features reminders to drink responsibly; and there are ubiquitous references to a website, www.drinkaware.co.uk, where consumers can find comprehensive information about responsible drinking. Additionally, a number of drinks companies run their own social responsibility programmes and educational campaigns. A selection of these can be viewed in our recent brochure, *Setting the responsible drinking agenda*, an electronic copy of which is attached.

On page 43, reference is made to reducing demand by increasing the price of alcohol through taxation.

The policy of using price to control harmful drinking is fundamentally flawed. Ordinarily, of course, lower prices may result in increased overall demand for a product and vice versa. But it is irresponsible drinking by certain individuals that we need to address, not the amount the nation is drinking as a whole. In fact, international evidence suggests that people who misuse alcohol are least likely to moderate their drinking behaviour following alcohol prices rises.

Price does not appear to be the main factor in irresponsible drinking. For example, in many European countries including France, Spain and Italy, alcohol is cheaper but alcohol-related problems are fewer. The UK Government's independent review mentioned above will examine the extent to which price has an impact on people's harmful drinking. If this review does, however, find a definite connection, the UK Government would have to consider minimum pricing legislation to navigate the minefield of competition law.

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