

Alcohol policy rooted in partnership can deliver long-term change

By Jeremy Beadles, Chief Executive of the Wine & Spirit Trade Association, UK

The pioneering Public Health Responsibility Deal represents a welcome shift away from the well-worn path to ever greater regulation of the alcohol industry. Under the Deal, launched in March, The British Government, businesses and non-government organisations (NGOs) have come together to tackle obesity, alcohol misuse, lack of exercise and health at work through a series of voluntary commitments.

In just six months, a significant amount of progress has been achieved. More than 170 organisations have signed up to the Deal as a whole, with 90 businesses supporting the seven collective alcohol pledges. These pledges include an agreement to achieve clear unit labelling on over 80% of alcohol products on shelves by 2013; unit awareness campaigns in both the on and off-trades and a commitment to further industry support for local initiatives tackling alcohol-related issues.

As co-chairman of the Deal's Alcohol Network - the group of government, industry and health representatives charged with taking forward the alcohol strand - I consider the pledges agreed so far a considerable achievement in such a short time, especially given the multiplicity of interests within the industry.

The work does not stop here. Over the months ahead, the on-going Responsibility Deal process offers us the chance to do much more. The Alcohol Network has prioritised three areas for the development of new pledges: retail practices, lower alcohol products and alcohol education.

These subjects raise challenging issues for consideration: what can retailers do to maximise opportunities in-store to help people make more informed choices about alcohol consumption? How can businesses overcome technical and regulatory hurdles to develop and promote lower alcohol alternatives, which can break through consumers' enduring scepticism about these products? What should businesses do to support education about responsible drinking for the under 18s without becoming directly involved? What does success look like when it comes to these kind of educational programmes? There is no doubt that navigating the way forward on these issues will be a challenge_ but the industry must seize this opportunity.

Of course, the Deal is not without its critics. Firstly, the alcohol pledges have been attacked for not being ambitious enough to deliver real change, in large part due to the omission of price-based interventions. However a single-minded focus on price as the solution to tackling harmful drinking is not only wrong, it means that nothing the Deal could ever deliver would be judged to have gone far enough. The issue of pricing was explicitly excluded from the start to avoid commercial conflicts of interest and the legal implications of this.

Furthermore, the Deal only represents one element of government activity and should not be viewed in isolation, as the lone policy response to the complex issue of alcohol misuse. The Government is also pursuing wide-ranging reform of the licensing system, the ban on below-cost sales and a new alcohol strategy, to come later this year.

Secondly, there are some who do not wish to see the alcohol industry at the policy-making table at all. However, I strongly believe that a partnership approach is right both in principle and in practice. We all share the consequences of alcohol misuse as individuals and as a society: surely it is right that we collectively - government, business, the third sector and individuals - share responsibility for change.

A fundamental part of this is helping individuals to make better decisions about their consumption in the first place. Just as the problem of alcohol misuse is rooted in poor personal choices, then the solution must be focussed on encouraging better, more informed choices. The only way we can achieve a permanent, long-term shift to a widespread responsible drinking culture is to help people make the right decisions for themselves, rather than forcing them to change through the blunt instrument of legislation.

And industry is well-placed to help support people live healthier lives. Businesses can reach consumers in ways that government cannot. Regulation is costly and slow. For example, significant changes to legislative requirements on labelling would necessitate an EU-level approach, meaning at best a lengthy wait before UK consumers would see any benefit. Voluntary action can achieve better results without the need for damaging, less effective

Alcohol Pledges

“We will foster a culture of responsible drinking, which will help people to drink within guidelines”

A1. Alcohol labelling – We will ensure that over 80% of products on shelf (by December 2013) will have labels with clear unit content, NHS guidelines and a warning about drinking when pregnant. The Drinkaware Trust is a charity established to change consumer attitudes and behaviour to reduce harm from alcohol. It is supported by voluntary donations from across the drinks industry. This pledge commits the industry to maintaining agreed levels of cash and in-kind funding of Drinkaware through to 2013.

A2. Awareness of Alcohol Units in the On-trade – We will provide simple and consistent information in the on-trade (e.g. pubs and clubs), to raise awareness of the unit content of alcoholic drinks, and we will also explore together with health bodies how messages around drinking guidelines and the associated health harms might be communicated.

A3. Awareness of Alcohol Units, Calories & Other Information in the Off-trade – We will provide simple and consistent information as appropriate in the off-trade (supermarkets and off-licences) as well as other marketing channels (e.g. in-store magazines), to raise awareness of the units, calorie content of alcoholic drinks, NHS drinking guidelines, and the health harms associated with exceeding guidelines.

A4. Tackling Under-Age Alcohol Sales – We commit to ensuring effective action is taken in all premises to reduce and prevent under-age sales of alcohol (primarily through rigorous application of Challenge 21 and Challenge 25).

A5. Support for Drinkaware – We commit to maintaining the levels of financial support and in-kind funding for Drinkaware and the “Why Let Good Times Go Bad?” campaign as set out in the Memoranda of Understanding between Industry, Government and Drinkaware.

A6. Advertising & Marketing Alcohol – We commit to further action on advertising and marketing, namely the development of a new sponsorship code requiring the promotion of responsible drinking, not putting alcohol adverts on outdoor poster sites within 100m of schools, and adhering to the Drinkaware brand guidelines to ensure clear and consistent usage.

A7. Community Actions to Tackle Alcohol Harms – In local communities we will provide support for schemes appropriate for local areas that wish to use them to address issues around social and health harms, and will act together to improve joined up working between such schemes operating in local areas as:

- Best Bar None and Pubwatch, which set standards for on-trade premises
- Purple Flag which make awards to safe, consumer friendly areas
- Community Alcohol Partnerships, which currently support local partnership working to address issues such as under-age sales and alcohol related crime, are to be extended to work with health and education partners in local Government
- Business Improvement Districts, which can improve the local commercial environment

legislation. Let’s be clear: this is not a ‘soft’ option for the industry: the onus is on us to make good on our commitments. The Secretary of State has not ruled out reverting to legislation if the Deal fails to deliver.

The Responsibility Deal presents a valuable opportunity for the industry to build on the good work it has already delivered in recent years to encourage responsible drinking and tackle alcohol harm. Industry has demonstrated its commitment to the partnership - and I am confident it will continue to do so.

For more details on the responsibility deal and partners, visit <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publichealth/Publichealthresponsibilitydeal/index.htm>