

## The Drinks Industry

**The drinks industry's new partnership role combating alcohol misuse is becoming more and more apparent, with industry representatives the latest must-have speakers at alcohol conferences. A new report explores the industry's perspective on alcohol problems and its impact on the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy.**

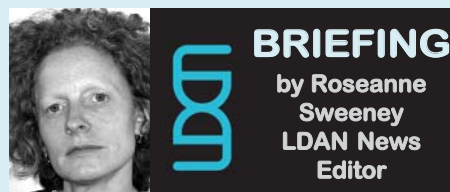
**What's the background to the report?** The report was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation following concern that the alcohol industry was having undue influence on the Government's alcohol policy. The Government identified the alcohol industry as a key partner in tackling alcohol problems in the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy, but critics have voiced doubts about its willingness to engage in genuine partnership working and put health concerns before its commercial interests. *Alcohol Strategy and the Drinks Industry a partnership for prevention* is based on a literature review and 25 interviews with representatives from the drinks industry, Government, voluntary sector and medical profession. It looks at the nature of the industry, its perspective on alcohol problems and at the influence it is having on Government policy.

**What does it say about the industry?** The drinks industry is economically important, worth about £40 billion annually. In recent years, it has undergone significant change, with production now concentrated in large multinationals like Diageo and Pernod Ricard, whose brands include a range of beers, wines and spirits. Both the market power and political leverage of these drinks giants have increased with their size. The retail sector too has undergone change with the transfer of many brewery owned pubs to pubcos, and an increase in supermarket and off-licence sales at the expense of pubs.

This large and diverse industry is far from united. It is represented by a raft of trade associations all with their own traditions and regulatory codes - the British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA) is the largest and most effective, while the recently diminished Portman Group only ever represented producers -

and is inclined to fragment in the face of alcohol-related problems. "Hence producers tend to complain about poor retail practices, pub landlords blame off-licences for under-age sales and cheap alcohol, and off licence proprietors see binge drinking as chiefly a problem for pubs and bars."

**How does it view alcohol-related problems?** The industry acknowledges that a range of individual and social problems are associated with alcohol, but it views these as a consequence of misuse by a minority of people. Crucially, it does not accept the growing body of public health evidence that points to the risks



attached to even low levels of consumption. It supports initiatives then aimed at individuals and at risk groups but is loathe to accept interventions targetted at the whole population, especially those aimed at curbing overall consumption levels. However, the industry is concerned at the growing media coverage around alcohol misuse, not just because of the prospect of Government intervention, but because of the potential damage to their brands and the industry as a whole. Led by the multinationals, it is increasingly coming around to the idea that it needs to be socially responsible.

**What influence has it had on alcohol strategy?** One of the key proposals in the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy was a three-part national social responsibility scheme for drinks producers. This covered the promotion of good practice in product development, branding and advertising; the setting up of

an independent fund for alcohol projects financed by the drinks industry; and a code of good practice for retailers at local level, covering the likes of proof of age requirements and sensible drinking messages.

After discussions with the industry, the proposals changed. The industry objected to the idea of an independent fund, viewing it as "a rather underhand way" of increasing their contributions to corporate social responsibility projects. A compromise eventually resulted in the setting up of the Drinkaware Trust, based on the Portman Group's charitable arm and funded by voluntary industry donations. The Government did bring out a national standards document in November 2005 outlining good practice in the production and sale of alcoholic drinks. But critics were disappointed that this did not replace the existing raft of self-regulatory codes, covering different aspects of the drinks industry. Nor did it set clear benchmarks against which the industry's efforts could be judged or have a mechanism for subjecting the scheme to scrutiny.

**What about ADZs?** The alcohol strategy also proposed that the industry should contribute financially to managing alcohol related crime and disorder. Again, this was vehemently opposed by the industry and was not introduced. However, following renewed concern about binge drinking and alcohol-related violence, the Government introduced legislation to enable local authorities and the police to take action at local level by designating persistently problematic areas, alcohol disorder zones or ADZs. The Violent Crime and Disorder Act made it onto the statute books in December 2006. Included in its provisions, is the right to force licensed premises in ADZs to contribute to the cost of policing alcohol-related crime in the area. **Download at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)**