

**HOUSE OF COMMONS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY  
INQUIRY INTO THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR ALCOHOL GUIDELINES**

**RESPONSE OF THE PORTMAN GROUP  
14 SEPTEMBER 2011**

1. The Portman Group is the responsibility body for drinks producers in the UK. Our role is:
  - To **regulate** the promotion and packaging of alcoholic drinks sold or marketed in the UK
  - To **challenge** and encourage the industry to market its products responsibly
  - To show **leadership** on best practice in alcohol social responsibility through the actions of member companies.

**Declaration of Interest**

2. We are a not for profit for organisation funded by nine member companies<sup>1</sup> who represent every sector of drinks production and collectively account for more than half the UK alcohol market.

**Summary**

3. The Portman Group welcomes a timely review of the evidence base underpinning the Government's guidelines on sensible drinking.
4. We advocate strongly for the continued provision of clear and consistent information about the recommended daily unit guidelines for UK consumers, based on the best available evidence, so people can make informed decisions about sensible drinking.
5. As a result of this promotion by Government and industry, the guidelines are becoming more widely known and understood in the UK. Between 1997 and 2009, the proportion of people who had heard of alcohol units increased from 79 per cent to 90%.<sup>2</sup> Over the same period, the proportion of people who could correctly identify the recommended daily limit for men increased from 35% to 44% and for women it increased from 39% to 52%.
6. We would therefore recommend caution in making any changes to the guidelines unless there is compelling and unequivocal scientific evidence to do so. The risk of undermining the progress made thus far in terms of

---

<sup>1</sup> Current member companies are: AB InBev; Bacardi Brown-Forman Brands; Beverage Brands; Carlsberg; C&C Group; Diageo; Heineken; Molson Coors; and Pernod Ricard.

<sup>2</sup> Office of National Statistics, *Omnibus Survey Report: Drinking: Adults' Behaviour and Knowledge in 2009, 2010*, Table 4.1

people's understanding of sensible drinking guidelines should be considered very carefully.

### **Terms of Reference – Detailed comments**

*What evidence are Government's guidelines on alcohol intake based on, and how regularly is the evidence base reviewed?*

7. The existing guidelines are based largely on the recommendations contained in a report of an inter-departmental working group published in December 1995. The working group included medical experts and in devising its recommendations the working group took account of the most relevant and up-to-date research at that time. Further relevant research will, however, have been published since then and we therefore consider it is timely to undertake this inquiry into the evidence base.

*Could the evidence base and sources of scientific advice to Government on alcohol be improved?*

8. We do not propose to comment on this point.

*How well does the Government communicate its guidelines and the risks of alcohol intake to the public?*

9. Respective governments have made some efforts over the years to communicate the guidelines through ad hoc public health campaigns, such as the "Know your limits" campaign. .
10. The industry, meanwhile, has increasingly sought to complement the Government's activity by communicating the guidelines to consumers. For example, Portman Group members were some of the first to include information on alcohol unit content on product labels. These days, the majority of drinks labels include such information. The alcohol industry as a whole has pledged to feature information on unit content, the Chief Medical Officers' guidance on responsible drinking and a warning against drinking during pregnancy on 80% of drinks' labels on UK shelves by the end of 2013 as part of the Government's Public Health Responsibility Deal<sup>3</sup> agreed in March 2011. The supporting labelling guidelines<sup>4</sup> drawn up by the Portman Group encourage companies additionally to feature a responsible drinking message and the Drinkaware website alongside these elements.
11. The alcohol industry also funds an independent charity, Drinkaware, which is the leading source of sensible drinking advice and has high level of awareness across the population. The Drinkaware website, which is

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publichealth/Publichealthresponsibilitydeal/Pledges/index.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.portmangroup.org.uk/assets/documents/Alcohol%20labelling%20compliance%20and%20monitoring%20process%202011.pdf>

promoted on billions of drinks containers and in millions of pounds worth of brand advertising annually, provides consumers with facts about alcohol and raises awareness of the Government's guidelines. The website receives over 2 million visitors a year.

12. As a result of this promotion by Government and industry, the guidelines are becoming more widely known and understood in the UK. Between 1997 and 2009, the proportion of people who had heard of alcohol units increased from 79 per cent to 90%.<sup>5</sup> Over the same period, the proportion of people who could correctly identify the recommended daily limit for men increased from 35% to 44% and for women it increased from 39% to 52%.
13. It is not yet fully clear the extent to which all this activity has had a direct impact on drinking behaviour but it is noticeable that since 2004 there has been a noticeable decline in levels of alcohol misuse in the UK<sup>6</sup>
14. Despite this progress, however, there is still much more work to be done to educate consumers about responsible drinking with many people still not knowing or understanding at what point their alcohol consumption may start presenting a significant risk to their health.

*How do the UK Government's guidelines compare to those provided in other countries?*

15. Direct comparisons are not easy, not least because the definition of an alcohol unit tends to vary between countries. Therefore, one has to convert any national advice on unit consumption into the equivalent grams of alcohol to make a comparison. Our understanding, however, is that the UK guidelines fall broadly mid-field being higher than some countries (e.g. the USA) but lower than others (e.g. Spain and Italy).

**Portman Group  
14 September 2011**

---

<sup>5</sup> Office of National Statistics, *Omnibus Survey Report: Drinking: Adults' Behaviour and Knowledge in 2009, 2010*, Table 4.1

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.portmangroup.org.uk/assets/documents/Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Summary%20of%20UK%20Alcohol%20Trends%20\\_2\\_xPDFApril2011.pdf](http://www.portmangroup.org.uk/assets/documents/Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Summary%20of%20UK%20Alcohol%20Trends%20_2_xPDFApril2011.pdf)