



*Centre for Criminal Justice
Studies*

*‘How Alcohol Policy
works in practice: A
recent study in
England’*

**AERC Alcohol Academy Workshop
Yorks and Humber Region
Leeds, 11 November 2009**

Aims:

- To explore the workings of alcohol policy in England:
 - partnership working and policy networks
 - policy convergence and diversity
 - effectiveness
- To look at both ‘steering’ (top-down policy directives from government) and ‘rowing’ (grass roots solutions to local problems)
- To explore the role of other agents such as drinks retailers and local communities

Challenges for alcohol policy

- Involves many different regulatory frameworks and areas of jurisdiction
- Requires multi-agency and multi-disciplinary approaches: criminal justice, public health and treatment, licensing and enforcement, town planning, research and evaluation, environmental health, transport policy, NGO and community involvement
- Despite the ‘official line’ of risk management by professionals, alcohol remains a morally charged issue toward which people often hold strong and opposing views
- Issues of economic interest and political acceptability loom large at both local and national levels.



‘Night-time economies’ feature prominently in popular understandings of the alcohol issue and are linked to criminal justice and urban governance concerns...

How alcohol policy works in England; a research study and analysis

'The Orientation and Integration of Local and National Alcohol Policy in England and Wales' AERC Alcohol Insights library

<http://www.aerc.org.uk/libraryInsights.html>

- The Policy Landscape
- Tensions between the centre and the peripheries
- Tensions within and between 'core' statutory partnerships
- Relations between statutory partners and other non-statutory policy actors such as the drinks industry and local residents
- The role of the Private Sector
- Contradictions within Policy Formulation and Implementation
- The Limitations of Alcohol Policy
- The report examines the numerous challenges facing the successful delivery of effective alcohol policy



The Policy Landscape

- Polarisation between local and national policies – centralisation of directives and guidance, but significant divergences in practice, eg. in licensing, approach adopted by Oldham and Westminster;
- Detectable 'fault lines' in the development and implementation of alcohol policy where public health/treatment and criminal justice/urban governance concerns were not well integrated.

Steering Towards Crime

- In England and Wales, 12 significant new powers have been introduced since 1998 to tackle crime, disorder and public nuisance related to alcohol- more in prospect through the Policing and Crime Bill.
- By contrast, the objective of 'improving public health' -present in Scottish licensing law - was omitted from the Licensing Act 2003 and is absent from public sector statutory obligations and centrally-imposed performance indicators save in relation to reducing the 'rate of alcohol-related hospital admissions' (Public Service Agreement 25).



Treatment or prevention?

- Our interviewees spoke of a focus on brief interventions and arrest referral rather than proactive prevention
- Actors involved in alcohol treatment raised concerns over 'queue jumping' in which clients became prioritised for treatment in direct relation to their offending history, rather than the seriousness of their drink problems

A focus on the acute rather than the chronic? Many interviewees were critical of the persistent focus on the most visible aspects of the alcohol problem – esp. binge drinking in public places by young people - rather than longer term health impacts across the community, such as what James Morris has recently termed ‘middle class drinking’ involving ‘hazardous’ and ‘harmful’ drinking by older people at home.

Effective targeting of resources? Many central government initiatives to address alcohol-related crime and anti-social behaviour were seen to involve untested and little evaluated measures, sometimes considered inappropriate or superfluous to the needs of local partnerships. Relatively little emphasis was placed upon providing the necessary funds to improve enforcement of existing laws.

Industry influence ‘Cautious optimism’ was expressed regarding the positive impact of certain legislative measures and an increasing recognition of the need for a firmer government stance towards aspects of industry regulation. More recent events, such as the scrapping of the proposed ‘mandatory code’ point to the continued influence of economic agendas.

Responsive regulation is not de-regulation re-labelled

Self-regulation does not always produce the desired outcomes – see recent KPMG report for the UK Home Office:

<http://drugs.homeoffice.gov.uk/publication-search/alcohol/alcohol-industry-responsibility/>

The findings of this research fed into the drafting of a national mandatory code of practice for alcohol retailers and remain pertinent

A New Taste for Intervention?

- Cumulative Impact Policies
- Alcohol Disorder Zones
- Discretionary local licensing conditions
- Mandatory codes of practice (now shelved?)



Many of these powers remain ‘in prospect’ and it remains to be seen if they transform into concrete action.

A fear of litigation – evidenced in the low uptake of licence reviews and prosecutions for serving drunks and underage drinkers

Future prospects: responding to cultural and economic change

- Responses to alcohol need to be attuned to the changing ways in which young people are communicating and socialising. For example, as the formal 'night-time economy' becomes more heavily policed, regulated and expensive, there are signs that young people in a number of countries may be choosing more informal settings for nightlife and drug and alcohol consumption, such as festivals and free parties, as well pre-loading on alcohol before their nights out.
- The phenomena of 'flashmobs' organised on social networking websites is a good example of this. These factors are likely to provide new challenges in years to come as they elide many of the more recent harm minimisation efforts focused on manipulating physical and managerial aspects of identifiable licensed drinking settings.



Alcohol policy: the importance of the local

- **Localities vary considerably in the range of issues that emerge, as well as in their professional resources, political histories and economic needs.**
- **Partnerships quite rightly tend to think locally and work from the bottom up, as well as following one size fits all solutions offered by central government or exported from other areas.**

For example:

- **In relation to the 'night-time economy', it may be more fruitful to direct action toward the development of suitable strategies for different 'types' of place, eg.: 'holiday resorts', city centres, 'student areas', rural towns and suburbs, rather than to rely upon more general national, regional or city-wide directives which cross-cut various drinking settings.**

‘Creative Rowing’



- Local ‘policy networks’ – which include statutory partnerships and other stakeholders such as drinks retailers and local residents’ groups – have sometimes struggled to keep pace with the tide of new policies and proposals from central government.
- They often struggle to retain some autonomy from national directives, whilst at the same time attempting to secure central funding for locally-prioritised action.
- The need to develop creative solutions stems from the nature of the many practical problems encountered.

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