

NEWS RELEASE

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New report calls for overhaul of “ineffective” alcohol marketing regulation

In a new report published today (6 July 2018) a leading alcohol charity is calling on the UK Government to undertake a thorough review of how alcohol marketing is regulated.

Following a detailed analysis of the industry-funded regulator, the Portman Group, the report highlights inconsistent decision-making, lack of scrutiny, and an apparent failure to address how modern alcohol marketing works.

The report, **Fit for Purpose? An analysis of the role of the Portman Group in alcohol industry self-regulation**, has been written by the charity formed by the merger of **Alcohol Concern** and **Alcohol Research UK**. It highlights the results of an investigation into 12 years of regulatory decisions (from January 2006 to December 2017) by the Portman Group’s Complaints Panel, on the naming, packaging and promotion of alcohol products. The investigation found that:

- The Panel’s decision-making has been inconsistent, meaning that neither producers nor consumers can rely on it for guidance about what’s acceptable and what’s not.
- Its decisions often appear to be based on opinion rather than real-world evidence about how people drink.
- The Portman Group lacks accountability. When decisions are made and enforced, there is little or no means to amend or reverse them, nor any other body to appeal to.
- The purpose of the Portman Group is not well-defined, other than a vague statement about ‘responsible marketing’ and in particular its role in reducing alcohol-related harm is neither clear nor explicit.

The report also draws attention to the artificial separation between regulators of the various elements of the alcohol marketing mix. Bottles and cans are regulated by the Portman Group without reference to the adverts that promote them, which are reviewed by the Advertising Standards Authority. Alcohol industry sponsorship of television programmes is a matter for Ofcom. For drinks companies, all these elements are linked together and support each other. The regulators look at them in isolation, meaning that none of them is seeing the full picture.

The report suggests that a thorough overhaul of alcohol marketing regulation should form part of the UK Government’s new national alcohol strategy, which was announced in early May.

Lee Mack, an ambassador for Alcohol Concern/Alcohol Research UK, said:

“Alcohol advertising and marketing is all around us. We’re constantly being told to buy booze, whether we’re at home relaxing in front of the TV, or out and about shopping or socialising.

“Creating an environment which encourages us all to drink more isn’t good for us, or our kids. So I think it’s reasonable for us to expect to have a fair, transparent system in place that works in the interests of us all and is independent of the very industry doing the marketing.”

Dr Richard Piper, CEO of the new charity formed by the merger of Alcohol Concern and Alcohol Research UK, said:

“With roughly one person in the UK dying as a result of alcohol every hour, alcohol is no ordinary commodity, and we as a society have the right to set boundaries on the ways in which it is promoted.

“The current regulatory set-up doesn’t work. The UK Government could change that by initiating an independent review. The aim must be to make alcohol regulation fit for purpose, and ensure that regulators have a clearly defined remit and standards of evidence-based decision-making. Such a review offers the perfect opportunity to better integrate the various regulatory strands, so they can be brought together to create stronger protections for all consumers.”

The report, **Fit for Purpose? An analysis of the role of the Portman Group in alcohol industry self-regulation**, is available [here](#).

Ends.

Notes to editors

1. The Portman Group was established in 1989 and has been a key regulator of alcohol marketing since 1996. The group hosts an Independent Complaints Panel which adjudicates on complaints against the naming, packaging and promotional materials for alcohol products according to a Code of Practice.
2. From 2006 to 2017 the Portman Group published a total of 99 decisions by its Complaints Panel, in response to complaints by 104 people or organisations about 160 alleged breaches of the Code.
3. **Alcohol Concern** and **Alcohol Research UK** merged in April 2017 to form a major independent national charity, working to reduce the harms caused by alcohol. For more information visit: www.alcoholconcern.org.uk and www.alcoholresearchuk.org.

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Interviews can be arranged with Andrew Misell, a director at Alcohol Concern.