

# Public Health England has failed to learn lessons over partnership with drinks industry

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Public Health England (PHE) has failed to learn the lessons over its partnership with the drinks industry, warn public health experts in *The BMJ* today.

Last week, Ian Gilmore, a senior government adviser on [alcohol policy](#), stepped down from his role at PHE after the agency partnered with Drinkaware, an [alcohol](#) education charity that receives funding from industry, for a new campaign encouraging [middle aged people](#) to have more alcohol-free days per week.

In an editorial for *The BMJ*, Gilmore and colleagues John Britton and Linda Bauld point out that voluntary agreements with the tobacco industry in the second half of the 20th century served to "undermine, dilute or constrain measures designed to curtail their activities."

By entering into a voluntary agreement with Drinkaware, "PHE appear to have fallen victim to the delusion that a new partnership with the alcohol industry will somehow avoid the same fate," they write. "In so doing they tread a path that, at least to those who have worked in tobacco policy, is depressingly familiar," they add.

They question the campaign's two alcohol-free days per week target as "a somewhat modest interpretation of current UK Chief Medical Officers advice, which refers to 'several' alcohol-free days each week."

And they note that the campaign is badged as part of the broader One

You campaign, which includes advice on smoking, physical activity and other 'lifestyle' determinants of health, "thus linking an alcohol industry-funded body with wider health messaging."

Finally, they point out that senior PHE managers do not appear to have asked themselves why the alcohol industry is happy to fund a campaign that ostensibly aims to reduce alcohol consumption. Had they done so, they say the answer would be because it thinks the campaign will be ineffective, or will divert attention from other more effective policies to reduce [alcohol consumption](#) that the industry fears more, such as minimum unit pricing.

More importantly, however, through Drinkaware, "the [alcohol industry](#) gains valuable engagement with PHE, establishes working relations with PHE staff, and may even secure a seat at the table when other alcohol harm initiatives are planned and executed," they explain.

It is right that the alcohol and other harmful commodity industries pay to prevent and treat harm caused by their products, they say, but payment "must be made through statutory levies, not voluntary agreements."

This new [campaign](#) backed by high profile individuals telling drinkers to drink less "is all well and good," says Tony Rao, Visiting Researcher at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London, in a linked article. "But skirting around and dumbing down the specifics of existing guidelines does not bode well for providing a consistent [health](#) message to the public."

He warns that, if we cannot maintain our government to observe the principle of being at 'arm's length' from the drinks [industry](#), "we wander into a storm that has the potential to capsize [public health](#) and all that it represents."

**More information:** Editorial: Public Health England's capture by the alcohol industry [www.bmj.com/content/362/bmj.k3928](http://www.bmj.com/content/362/bmj.k3928)

Opinion: Calling time on dumbing down our drinking culture  
[blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2018/09/20/t...ur-drinking-culture/](http://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2018/09/20/t...ur-drinking-culture/)

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