



Adult and Community Service
County Hall, Colliton Park
Dorchester
Dorset DT1 1XJ

Telephone: 01305 221000
Direct line: 01305 or 01202 224388
Fax: 01305 224325
Minicom: 01305 267933
Email: l.johns@dorsetcc.gov.uk
DX: DX 8716 Dorchester
Website: www.dorsetforyou.com

Sara Winter
Riverside House
2a Southwark Bridge Road
London
SE1 9HA

Date: 27 July 2009
Your ref:

My ref: DHSC / AR / LJ

Dear Ms Winter

Ofcom Broadcasting Code Consultation

I write on behalf of the Dorset Health Scrutiny Committee in relation to the above consultation and the findings of a recent scrutiny review undertaken by the Committee of: Alcohol misuse and the risks to young people's health and behaviour.

In light of the Committee's findings the current review of the Broadcasting Code, which only proposes changes to material of a sexual nature, under section 1: *Protection of the under eighteens*, would appear too limiting. I would suggest that a review of section 1. Rule 1.10 and Rule 9.3 is also required.

The Committee's review found that teenagers aspire to be like their older counterparts in the 19 to 25 year old age bracket and the culture of binge drinking among that older age group is more widespread. The Committee feel that work is required at both a national and local level to challenge the notion that public drunkenness, leading to anti-social behaviour, is now a cultural norm and therefore acceptable.

Over eighty young people were engaged in the Committee's work. They said that messages about alcohol were contradictory. Young people noticed the sponsorship of television programmes by certain branded alcoholic drinks particularly over the Christmas period. Soap operas were noted for being centred on the UK's pub culture whilst between programmes public health messages, such as the 'Know your Limits' campaign, could be broadcast giving advice about the dangers of drinking to excess. To young people this combination gives out mixed messages. They commented on the hypocrisy of adults in terms of "don't so as I do but do as I say" and they felt this is reinforced by television.

Alcohol related story lines or discussions may be a reflection of real life and so given editorial justification but the Committee feel that if this country is to see a cultural shift away from the misuse of alcohol the media has a huge part to play. The misuse of alcohol and the consequences of it in programmes that are for family viewing, such as Eastenders, and those aimed at a teenage audience, such as Hollyoaks, need to challenge the "bragging culture" about the good times had whilst drunk and the public acceptability of anti-social behaviour through drunkenness. Similarly, breakfast time radio programmes that encourage the audience to share drinking exploits from the night before or allow the broadcasters to "brag" about theirs reinforce the "bragging culture. Across both radio and television the content might be aimed at those of



Director for Adult and Community Services Steve Pitt
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

drinking age but many of the audience will not be. The Committee believe that in the long term a culture shift is possible in the same way that a move away from smoking has been achieved.

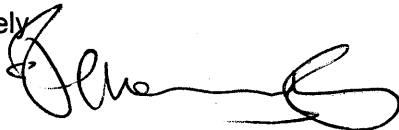
The physical harm that is being caused to young people through their misuse of alcohol was apparent in the Committee's review. Each year 80 young people under the age of 18 are admitted for alcohol related incidents to Accident and Emergency Departments in the hospitals that serve Dorset. Specialist treatment and advice agencies get approximately 35 young people referred to them for help with their alcohol use every three months. Young people spoke openly about ignoring the possible long term damage that their drinking might do to their physical health. That long term damage to health, which may not be evidenced for another 10 years, will be a cost to both the individual concerned and the NHS. The Committee would like to do everything it can to prevent this.

On the Committee's behalf I would ask that as part of the current review of the broadcasting code under Section 1 Rule 1.10 and Rule 9.3 are strengthened to ensure:

- Teenage audiences are never left with the impression that alcohol misuse is "ok" or public drunkenness leading to anti-social behaviour is somehow now acceptable because it is seen so frequently on the streets of the UK and reflected in what is watched on television or talked about on radio.
- Broadcasting ensures that the messages about alcohol are consistent across both programme content and public information campaigns that run adjacent to one another.
- Sponsorship of programmes is not permitted by manufacturers' of alcoholic drinks where the programme is classified for general family viewing broadcast before the watershed. This should be applied strictly and particularly so during festive seasons when children and young people watch programmes aimed at wider audiences'. Consideration should be given to extending the restriction past the watershed during such periods.
- Programme content or discussion should not reinforce the "bragging culture" around alcohol misuse particularly when a younger audience may be watching or listening.

I hope this contribution is of help to the Ofcom consultation and I enclose for your reference a copy of the Committee's report and a summarised version. If you would like further information on the scrutiny review that the Committee conducted then please do not hesitate to contact Lucy Johns on 01305 224388 or by e-mail on lucy.johns@dorsetcc.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely



for

Steve Pitt
Director for Adult and Community Services

CC Chairman - Dorset Health Scrutiny Committee