

Policing and Crime Bill 2008-09 Briefing Paper The ethics of public health: alcohol

The Policing and Crime Bill proposes to make it an offence for children to possess alcohol in public more than three times in 12 months and tightens restrictions on selling alcohol to children. In advance of the Committee Stage debates in June and July 2009, this paper outlines the Nuffield Council on Bioethics' guidance on developing public health policy, as set out in its report *Public health: ethical issues*.

The duty of the state

People often reject the idea of a 'nanny state', but the state has a duty to help everyone lead a healthy life. Everyone should have a fair opportunity to lead a healthy life, and therefore governments should protect vulnerable groups in the community, such as children, and seek to remove inequalities that affect disadvantaged groups or individuals. The Nuffield Council has proposed a 'stewardship model' which sets out guiding principles for making decisions about public health policies.

The Stewardship Model

Public health goals should include:

- reducing the risks of ill health that result from other people's actions, such as drink-driving and smoking in public places;
- reducing causes of ill health relating to environmental conditions, for instance provision of clean drinking water and setting housing standards;
- **protecting and promoting the health of children** and other vulnerable people;
- helping people to overcome addictions that are harmful to health or helping them to avoid unhealthy behaviours;
- ensuring that it is easy for people to lead a healthy life, for example by providing convenient and safe opportunities for exercise;
- ensuring that people have appropriate access to medical services; and
- reducing unfair health inequalities.

At the same time, public health programmes should:

- not attempt to coerce adults to lead healthy lives;
- minimise the use of measures that are implemented without consulting people; and
- minimise measures that are very intrusive or conflict with important aspects of personal life, such as privacy.

Nuffield Council on Bioethics' recommendations on alcohol

- Given the harm caused, the Government should implement tougher measures to tackle excessive alcohol consumption, such as increasing tax on alcohol and restricting outlets and hours of sale.
- Producers, advertisers and sellers of alcohol should take more responsibility for preventing harm to health. They should not understate the risks, or exploit the desirability of drinking, especially to young people.