

**Response to the Department of Health and Social Care's  
consultation on low alcohol descriptors**

*May 2018*

**Introduction**

- 1 The Nuffield Council on Bioethics is an independent organisation that examines and reports on ethical issues arising from developments in biological and medical research that concern the public interest.
- 2 The Council's response draws on the conclusions and recommendations of our 2007 report *Public health: ethical issues*<sup>1</sup> which considers the ethical and social issues that arise when designing measures to improve public health. Our response focuses on one of the case studies addressed in our report, which examines the ethical and policy issues associated with the use of alcohol and tobacco.
- 3 Our report takes the position that the state has a duty to provide conditions that allow people to lead a healthy life. Everyone should have this opportunity, and therefore governments should try to remove inequalities that affect disadvantaged groups or individuals. In addition, there should be greater protection for potentially vulnerable groups, including children. To support this position, our report proposes a 'stewardship model' that outlines the ethical principles that should be considered by public health policy-makers, and sets out a series of public health goals. We also present an 'intervention ladder' as a useful way of thinking about the acceptability and justification of different health policies. Interventions that are higher up are more intrusive and therefore require a strong justification.

**Do you agree with the Government's preferred option of providing guidance working with industry and other stakeholders to describe low alcohol descriptors rather than legislate after 13 December 2018?**

- 4 At the time of our report's publication, there was a lack of evidence of the effectiveness of warning labels on alcoholic drink containers producing a direct change on drinking behaviour, though the World Health Organization study that examined this noted that the warning labels studied were small and relatively obscure. However, there is clear evidence of the health harms of excessive alcohol drinking. Legislation in this area would bring labelling alcoholic drinks into line with that for tobacco products and meet what we believe is the Government's

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<sup>1</sup> Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2007) *Public health: ethical issues*, available at <http://nuffieldbioethics.org/project/public-health>

responsibility to promote health by providing information and advice under the stewardship model. Despite 'sensible drinking' messages being framed in terms of number of units, it has not often been clear how many units are contained in an alcoholic drink.<sup>2</sup>

- 5 As representatives of the people, in the context of public health, politicians are expected to enact laws and implement policies that enable people to live healthy lives. In addressing the question of whether guidance rather than legislation is appropriate, the Department might therefore consider whether guidance is 'enough' in order to fully meet this expectation.

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<sup>2</sup> See Box 6.2 in Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2007) *Public health: ethical issues*.