

Low/No Alcohol Products – AHA Holding Statement

Background

Low and no alcohol products are becoming increasingly popular. From a low base in the UK, the growth has been rapid and alcohol companies are looking to exploit their commercial potential.

The government has also noticed this phenomenon and the growing market for these products was highlighted in the Prevention Green Paper as a development which could be encouraged to help reduce alcohol harm.

Inevitably, these developments have also attracted significant attention from the media. It has become apparent that the AHA needs to have a view on the growing popularity of this new market.

The AHA's Steering Group is of the view that further research is required into how low/no alcohol products are being used and how they are being marketed by the industry. In the meantime, the AHA has developed the following holding position should its view be sought by government, media, stakeholders or the wider public. This position is based on various considerations which can broadly be summarised as follows:

- Low and no alcohol products appear to offer a significant opportunity to help people reduce their alcohol consumption by providing palatable adult drinks to replace alcohol-containing drinks. There are reports that they are being used for this purpose.
- These products have the potential to make not drinking more culturally acceptable and to reduce the social pressure to drink alcohol. However, by seeing people drink what essentially looks like alcohol, these products also risk normalising drinking even more, especially in traditional non-drinking situations.
- There are mixed views about these new products from the recovery community and from those who support people with alcohol problems. There are reports that some in recovery find them useful, while others are worried that they could be a path back to alcohol.
- People have also expressed concern that the development of the no/low alcohol market is presenting opportunities for alcohol companies to market their brands to children and young people, giving them a 'taste' for alcohol.
- Both, new companies with no affiliation to existing alcohol companies as well as existing alcohol corporations and brands, have been making use of the opportunities presented by the rise of no/low alcohol products. As a result, we are seeing products emerge which have no link to existing alcohol brands, as well as no/low versions of existing alcohol brands.
- Where a brand has alcoholic and no/low variants, marketing and expansion of the low/no alcohol version further increases brand salience and visibility. Moreover, in such cases it is possible for consumers to be sold the 'wrong' version inadvertently, especially in a social setting such as a pub.

- In some cases, these new products are being used to take existing alcohol brands into what have so far been taboo drinking occasions. Some existing alcohol brands have been clear that they want their no/low alcohol products to take market share from tea, coffee and soft drink companies rather than replace alcohol consumption.
- These products can potentially provide a higher profit margin because they are subject to little or no alcohol duty, which could incentivise pubs, bars and retailers to stock and promote them. However, there are also reports that people drink fewer of these drinks per drinking occasion, creating the opposite incentive.
- There are further concerns that these products might contribute to health inequalities, as they are more likely to be purchased by young and affluent people.
- Some are concerned that the government will turn to promoting no/low alcohol products as the way forward to reduce alcohol-related harm, to the exclusion of more evidence-based, targeted population level measures, such as action on price, availability and marketing.

HOLDING POSITION

“The recent explosion in the availability of low and no alcohol products may well turn out to be a useful tool in reducing the high levels of alcohol harm we see in the UK. There is some evidence that some people drinking at risky levels are finding them a useful way of reducing consumption and that is to be welcomed.

“However, we need to understand in more detail how these products are being used and by whom. We understand some people in recovery find them useful, while others worry that the taste, smell and look could be a trigger that puts them on the path back to alcohol.

“We also have a real concern that these drinks could be used as gateway products to introduce children to alcohol, especially where the same brand is used for both alcoholic and low/no alcohol versions of a drink. Promotion of these low/no alcohol products further increases brand salience and visibility of alcohol brands. Sections of the alcohol industry already have a poor record in protecting our young people from their marketing activities.

“In addition, the AHA is concerned that some brands are using these products to expand into non-traditional drinking occasions and into the markets for tea, coffee and soft drinks, rather than as a substitute for products containing alcohol.

“The AHA is calling for more research into low and no alcohol products to help us understand what role they could play in reducing alcohol harm, what impact they might have on health inequalities, and what we might need to do to protect children and others from any adverse consequences. Producers could help inform this research by making their sales data available to researchers.

“Meanwhile, we would urge the government to focus on what we already know works to reduce alcohol harm: reducing the affordability and availability of alcohol, restricting marketing, and investing in alcohol treatment services must be at the heart of an effective alcohol strategy.”