

Response ID ANON-K1B8-6APP-D

Submitted to **A Consultation on Low Alcohol Descriptors**

Submitted on **2018-05-10 16:50:32**

Introduction

1 What is your name?

Name:

Habib Kadiri

2 What is your email address?

Email:

hkadiri@ias.org.uk

3 Which of these best describes you/your profession?

charity/third sector

If other, please state:

4 Are you responding as an individual or as part of an organisation?

Organisation

Individual or organisation:

The Institute of Alcohol Studies

England

where are you or your organisation based.:

5 If you're answering as an individual please tell us your ethnic origin

Not Answered

If other, please describe your ethnic origin:

Not Answered

If other, please give details of your ethnic background.:

Not Answered

If other, please enter details of your ethnic background:

Not Answered

If other, please give details of your ethnic origin.:

Not Answered

If other, please provide details of your ethnic background:

Prefer not to say

6 What is your organisation?

7 How we will use your response

Yes

Yes

Your response, Your organisation's name

Low Alcohol Descriptors

1 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?

No

If no, please provide a reason why:

No. We believe that the government should introduce a mandatory regime of descriptors.

The developing market in no- and low-alcohol products has significant potential to support behaviour change. Recent research carried out by Alcohol Concern / Alcohol Research UK and Club Soda found that 91% of its respondents bought no- or low-alcohol drinks because they were trying to reduce their alcohol consumption overall. However, the ability of people to move to lower strength products is being hindered by inconsistencies in labelling. Whatever regime of descriptors is decided upon therefore needs to be regulated by law, so that consistency can be assured.

In addition, previous examples of voluntary regulation suggest that the alcohol industry is incapable of delivering the information consumers need. For example:

- A review of previous industry-agreed labelling standards found that only 47% of labels met best-practice standards (Campden BRI (2014)).
- In 2017, the Portman Group guidance no longer recommended that products contain the updated CMOs' guidance on low-risk drinking.

In a market which, as this consultation demonstrates, is characterised by significant potential for confusion, it is essential that clear, enforceable, mandatory rules are put in place so that consumers can know, with confidence, what they are purchasing.

2 Do you have any evidence to support the claim of introducing new alcoholic drink descriptors above 1.2% ABV?

No

If Yes, please provide the descriptor name(s), research and evidence to support and at what level of % ABV they relate to.:

We are not aware of evidence to support the case for introducing new descriptors, and believe that there ought to be no more than two descriptors in total, to save confusion. However, we are aware of evidence suggesting that the public may perceive 'low alcohol' products to be higher than 1.2% ABV (see our response to Question 3).

If there are any documents you feel are relevant and would like us to consider, please attach them here.:

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3 For something to be 'low alcohol' the amount of alcohol needs to be 1.2% or less. Do you think the Government should keep this guideline?

I don't know

Additional Comments:

In terms of what the public expect this descriptor to mean, there is conflicting evidence.

The Behaviour and Health Research Unit at Cambridge University looked at perceptions of various alcohol descriptors. 1,600 members of the UK public took part in the research, which found that 'a majority of participants perceived the alcohol content of products labelled with low descriptors as far higher in strength than the currently legislated cap of 1.2% ABV for any product using a label "low" in relation to alcohol content.' The average (based on the median) perceived strength of 'low alcohol' products in the study was around 2.8% ABV. In short, this research suggests the public would expect 'low alcohol' products to be up to 2.8% ABV.

However, research by Alcohol Concern / Alcohol Research UK and Club Soda found that fewer than 20% of consumers expect 'low alcohol' to signify products at 1.2% ABV or above. This research was based on a survey of 556 Club Soda members, of which 530 had bought no- or low-alcohol products in the past.

It could be said that the opinions of Club Soda respondents – a group focused on being mindful about their drinking – were exceptions to the general population. However, it is clear from the differing results of both studies that we need to know more about how the public perceive where the 'low alcohol' descriptor level should be set.

We would also like to see research done on what impact changing this descriptor would have on drinking levels and levels of alcohol-related harm, and whether setting the descriptor at a level such as 2.8% ABV could make it more difficult for consumers looking to consume products closer to the 1.2% level. We would encourage the government to commission this research.

4 Should the Government keep the existing descriptor dealcoholised?

No

If No, do you believe another descriptor could be used in its place and if so, what should this descriptor be called?:

We do not believe this descriptor is needed, and that products currently in this category should not be classified separately from other alcohol products.

The term 'de-alcoholised' is not common parlance, and what matters to consumers is the strength of the drink they are consuming, not how the product has been manufactured.

5 Do you agree the term non-alcoholic should be permitted to be used otherwise than in connection with sacramental and communion wines?

Yes

If No, please provide a reason why.:

We are not aware of the need for a separate descriptor for sacramental and communion wines. We believe these products should be classified according to their strength in the same way as other products.

There is no meaningful difference between the terms 'alcohol free' and 'non-alcoholic', so to avoid confusion only one of these terms should be used. We would be happy to accept either term.

6 Do you agree that Government should maintain the descriptor alcohol free, and for this to continue at 0.05% ABV?

No

If No, please provide a reason why and alternative suggestions.:

We believe that this descriptor should be named either 'alcohol free' or 'non-alcoholic'. The use of both descriptors is likely to confuse the public.

We are content for this descriptor to remain at 0.05% ABV. Ideally, this descriptor would signal 'absolutely no alcohol'. In practice it is very difficult to produce fermented products that have absolutely no alcohol, and a number of products not designated as wine, beer or spirits contain alcohol at this level of above (see Gorgus, E., Hittinger, M. and Schrenk, D. (2016). Estimates of ethanol exposure in children from food not labelled as alcohol-containing. *Journal of Analytical Toxicology*. 40, 537-42).

In terms of the name of this descriptor, we suggest that 'non-alcoholic' is probably the better term to use. We believe that the use of 'alcohol free' for products which still contain small amounts of alcohol is confusing to the public. The term 'non-alcoholic' may still cause confusion, but we believe it may be less likely to do so.

There is also a case to be made for this descriptor to be expanded to 0.5% ABV. This is because under section 191 of the Licensing Act 2003, only products containing more than 0.5% ABV are defined as alcoholic. In addition, it is very difficult to consume alcohol products at 0.5% ABV or below more quickly than the alcohol is metabolised by the body.

If the purpose of this descriptor is to direct consumers to products in which alcohol is at such a level that it would be very difficult to consume more quickly than it is likely to be metabolised, then a 0.5% ABV level would appear reasonable.

However, if the purpose of this descriptor is to direct consumers to drinks where alcohol is contained at only trace levels, than the current descriptor, at 0.05% ABV, should remain in place.

7 Do you have any further comments?

Further comments are welcomed for consideration on this consultation.:

In summary, we believe that:

- The government should introduce a mandatory regime of descriptors. Guidance to producers is not sufficient
- There should be 2 descriptor names:

'low alcohol'

either 'alcohol free' OR 'non-alcoholic' – we suggest 'non-alcoholic'

- There is a case for increasing the 'low alcohol' descriptor to 2.8% ABV, but we would like to see more evidence on this question, as well as evidence on the impact of changing this descriptor on levels of drinking and levels of alcohol-related harm
- We think the 'non-alcoholic' descriptor can be placed at either 0.05% ABV or 0.5% ABV, depending on the government's aim for this descriptor
- The 'de-alcoholised' descriptor is not needed
- We are not aware of the need for a separate descriptor for sacramental/communion wines

We would add that, overall, there is a lack of information around what the public understands by these various descriptors, and what impact on drinking behaviour any changes to them would have. It is therefore challenging to state definitively what the best approach to these descriptors should be. Moving forwards, we would expect the government to gather further evidence around the public understanding of these descriptors and what the impacts are of any changes.

Finally, we believe that alongside this work on no- and low-alcohol descriptors, the government should introduce a mandatory regime of labelling across all alcohol product labels, whereby all labels must provide the ABV and unit content of products, as well as the Chief Medical Officers' low-risk weekly drinking guidelines. Product labels should also contain warnings of the harms associated with alcohol consumption. The font size of these various label elements should be prescribed.

If there are any documents you feel are relevant and would like us to consider, please attach them here:

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