

# THINKING ABOUT DRINKING

**Passionate about and dedicated to her role, Drinkaware's chief executive Jean Collingwood understands the root causes of Britain's often unhealthy relationship with alcohol – and is determined to improve it. By Patrick Schmitt**

**YOU'VE PROBABLY** read enough about various lobbyists' proposals to supposedly end Britain's drink-related problems – approaches such as increasing taxation, adding health warnings, banning advertising, or restricting retailing space – so let's leave them aside for the moment. This is not because Britain doesn't have a troubled relationship with alcohol, but because it is doubtful any of these suggestions will actually heal the societal wounds.

Instead, let's talk to someone who recognises the root cause of the UK's oft-destructive link with drink and can actually see a constructive way to improve it. That person is Drinkaware's new chief executive Jean Collingwood.

Firstly, forget the ivory tower. Here is someone who lives in one of Britain's highest-ranking binge-drinking centres – the heart of Hull's student area – despite her London office. "I like to live close to the issues which I am working with," she says, explaining the rationale for a seven-hour daily commute.

## Challenging the culture

Secondly, this is a person defiant in her ability to make a difference – she even sold her "social marketing" consultancy to take up this demanding position in July 2007. "I gave it up for Drinkaware," she says of Ingenious Group, her business, "because, for

me, this is the challenge of the century." And one, as a lecturer in social marketing, she believes she can overcome. "It is possible to change people's views from one to another and measure it," she explains, referring to Britain's drinking culture.

The social marketing method being applied by Collingwood centres on initially understanding where consumer attitudes come

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from and how they influence current drinking trends. Using this knowledge, different sections of society can be identified and various marketing techniques used to influence their behaviour.

Hence Collingwood has spent the last six months amassing as much information as she can on alcohol's role in British society and how attitudes to drinking are changing. "Alcohol has a positive role in our memories and also negative – if you don't drink sensibly. It is part of our social history, it is in our DNA – and we [the British] have a relationship with alcohol that differs from other nations.

"Sadly," she continues, "alcohol

is always portrayed in a negative light in the media – be it its influence on crime or celebrities behaving badly – and you never see the positive relationship, the happy times, when alcohol plays a normal role."

However, Drinkaware's purpose, according to its mission statement, is to "positively change public behaviour and the national drinking culture to help reduce

lifestyle, and they are looking for an independent, anonymous place to say help me to control my consumption."

For such people and others, Collingwood is convinced that Drinkaware can play a significant part in altering attitudes to alcohol. "I do believe we can solve this problem, although it is a massive job."

## Self confidence problem

She reminds that "Britain's relationship with alcohol has changed, but then society has changed, and one would expect our habits to reflect that. We need to ask why people are drinking excessively in the first place. Some say it is stress-related and it is because society seems to expect less of each other. Others say it is because of an increase in disposable income, which can in any case be stress-related, as an increased earning power might require one person to do the job of three." For Collingwood though, much of alcohol misuse in the UK stems from the fact that: "British society has a self-confidence problem, and we use alcohol to lose ourselves." Exacerbating this issue is that "people find alcohol very hard to talk about".

To effectively open up the alcohol debate and influence behaviour, Drinkaware is focusing efforts on two core sectors of British society. "We decided we can't just go to 63

*It's good to talk: Drinkaware's Jean Collingwood sees the benefit of opening a dialogue with young people about drinking*



## WHAT IS THE DRINKAWARE TRUST?

The Drinkaware Trust is a charitable company, voluntarily financed by the alcohol producers and retailers.

It was officially launched in early 2007, and has a projected budget of £12m over three years. Its purpose is to positively change public behaviour and the national drinking culture to help reduce alcohol misuse and minimise alcohol-related harm.

The Drinkaware Trust is governed by a Board of Trustees, comprising four from an alcohol-related, non-industry background, five from the alcohol industry and one independent chair with no professional interest in alcohol.

### THE CURRENT TRUSTEES INCLUDE:

**Carolyn Bradley** – commercial director, Tesco

**Tim Clarke** – chief executive, Mitchells & Butlers plc

**John Dunsmore** – chairman and managing director, Scottish & Newcastle UK

**Professor David Foxcroft** – School of Health and Social Care, Oxford Brookes University

**Nick Grant** – head of legal services, Sainsbury's

**Srabani Sen** – chief executive, Alcohol Concern

**Dr Nick Sheron** – head of clinical hepatology, Southampton General Hospital

**Benet Slay** – managing director, Diageo Great Britain

**Dr Michael Wilks** – chairman, Representative Body, British Medical Association

million people," explains Collingwood, "and so we asked ourselves, who could we, as Drinkaware, make the greatest impact with? And we have chosen under 18s and 'long-term harms'."

"Young people were chosen because they are the people of tomorrow while long-term harms – women drinking 15-35 units per week and men who drink 22-50 – were chosen because they are not necessarily alcohol dependent so they are not being helped by charities. We also chose this section because it is such a large proportion of the population and ▶



**JEAN COLLINGWOOD: CV**

► Jean Collingwood has ample qualifications for the task of changing Britain's attitude to drink, not least her experience as a psychiatric nurse, followed by her series of high profile charitable roles at 4Children, Leonard Cheshire and the Princess Royal Trust for Carers, as well as her position as chief executive of Great British Wheelchair Rugby and ongoing lecturing role in social marketing at London's Southbank University.

In total, Collingwood has more than 15 years experience of social marketing and communication roles in the charity sector. She joined Drinkaware on 23 July 2007.

they are not on anyone's radar." Furthermore, "this is a group that don't self-recognise, they don't know they are putting themselves at risk, and if they don't self recognise, then they won't even begin to listen to any educational messages."

Essentially, with both distinct groups, "we are trying to prevent these people becoming the dependent drinkers of the future."

Collingwood continually stresses the need to get people to "self recognise first" or "get them to talk about their relationship with alcohol" because as she says, exemplifying with an analogy, "you won't listen to an advert for cat food if you don't have a cat". In other words, you will just "opt out" when it comes to binge drinking messages.

Hence Drinkaware will be working to get this section of population talking openly about

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their relationship with alcohol and, "I think in a few years time we will prove that this group can change. I wouldn't be working on this if I didn't think that."

**Debate, not dogma**

As for young people, specifically under 18s, Drinkaware has decided "to empower them, ask them to come up with a solution".

"We want to give them an independent place to go and we are building a new website for under 18s that is being designed by under 18s. They have told us they

want a website with blogs and downloads, they want interactivity (see pages 6-7)."

"And we need to have a debate with young people about alcohol – a lot don't have a negative relationship with alcohol – and we don't want to use the same tone as we have with the general public. For instance, we are asking under 18s, who would you take most notice of?"

Overall, Collingwood is clear on how Drinkaware should approach the alcohol debate. "It is not a case of just sorting the supply of alcohol,

or just sorting the demand – after all, the drinks industry creates products people want. We need to make consumers want what they find valuable in alcohol without the negative issues."

To do this, she realises that "we can't get really heavy on the consequences, as people wouldn't use our site. For instance, in the US, there's a site that teaches you to learn the safe limit of what you drink, and if you go into excess one day, it just advises you to take two days off alcohol".

"Also, our research has shown that 60% of young people are drinking at home and if they are drinking at home then it is not really a supply issue, meaning the likes of PASS [Proof of Age Standards Scheme] won't be effective. In each case it does lead back to the need to understand why? And what would change your behaviour?" ab