

DRINK PROBLEM

A new report by the Centre for Mental Health warns that despite dwarfing the illicit drug problem, there is scant provision for the treatment of alcohol abusing offenders. **Sean Duggan** on an imbalance that needs urgent attention.

The misuse of alcohol is one of the most daunting of all challenges for both health and criminal justice services.

This year will see the creation of the new national body, Public Health England, as well as far-reaching changes to the NHS, to drug treatment services and to the criminal justice system. For all of them, responding to the needs of offenders who misuse alcohol remains a major challenge. Almost a quarter of the adult population of England are hazardous drinkers while six per cent are dependent on alcohol. Three-quarters of incidents of domestic violence are linked to alcohol misuse, as well as half of assault cases and almost two thirds of woundings.

The cost to the state of alcohol misuse is some £23 billion, more than £3 billion of which is borne by the NHS. Yet neither health nor drug treatment services are responding adequately to the needs of offenders who misuse alcohol. A window of opportunity to help them to manage their use of alcohol is missed and the risk of further offending is not mitigated.

As with many other public health and community safety issues, prevention is key and the management of problems should be stepped: from basic advice for those with the least serious issues, to more specialised responses to those whose problems are more acute or entrenched. Yet for offenders who misuse alcohol, the responses at all of these levels are woefully inadequate. The absence of support is evident at all levels of need and all stages of the justice system, from first contact with the police to release from prison. The problems of alcohol management for offenders were all too clearly brought into focus during the drink-fuelled riot at Ford open prison in west Sussex on New Year's Eve.



Up in flames: inmates rioted and burned down several buildings after being caught getting drunk at Ford open prison on New Year's Eve

Offenders have told us that their alcohol problems have been ignored by frontline workers to the extent that some are forced to lie about or exaggerate illegal drug use to get any kind of help. Health and criminal justice commissioners struggle to find common ground on which to fund joint services, hindering the development of effective responses to meet different levels of need. There are examples of excellent local initiatives, many of them led by enterprising individuals or user groups, but many exist on a shoestring.

We need action on at least three fronts. Alcohol should have parity with illegal drugs in the provision of services to support offenders. We need a range of responses, from ensuring that all health and justice front line workers are skilled in identification and basic advice to supporting people on community sentences with an alcohol treatment requirement as an alternative to prison.

Health and drug treatment services, the police, prisons and probation need to

come together to achieve this, building alliances with community and voluntary organisations that have developed creative responses to need and listening to the views of offenders about the support they require.

Finally, we need a renewed focus on prevention. Minimum or unit pricing and regulation of the night-time economy are important ways of reducing risk and preventing offending that should not be overlooked for their potential to improve public health.

Alcohol misuse should no longer be a label for exclusion. We need to see collective action to reduce the devastating impact of alcohol misuse and offending on all who are affected by them.

■ **Sean Duggan** is Joint Chief Executive, Centre for Mental Health

See the Centre for Mental Health's 'A label for exclusion' report here:
http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/pdfs/label_for_exclusion.pdf