

Many in the hospitality industry expressed the view that aggressive promotion by supermarkets and the pricing of cheap alcohol had played a major part in the acceleration of drinking away from licensed premises.

There was a widespread sentiment that the tendency towards 24 hour trading had made alcohol-related harms worse.

There were many supporters of limiting the hours of off-licences and on-licences at a national level. The latter was much more controversial than the first.

There was a great deal of criticism of spirit-based drinks or RTDs as providing a gateway to adolescent drinking. This issue attracted heated debate at our meetings. While acknowledging that on the face of it these products were simply a convenient form in which to drink light spirits, many expressed the view that their high sugar contents, packaging and price were designed to mimic that of popular non-alcohol beverages.

No single issue galvanised the public to such a degree as the alcohol advertising and sponsorship issue. The Commission's treatment of the issue in its Issues Paper included the tentative suggestion that the current system of self-regulation under the Advertising Standards Authority should be largely left alone. This met with widespread criticism.

In many of the larger public forums there was strong support for applying a tobacco "smoke-free" model to alcohol with a ban on all advertising and a staged withdrawal of all alcohol sponsorship. There was extensive concern about how advertising helped shape a culture where drinking was seen to be the key to social and sexual success.

In many communities we found evidence that the communities themselves were taking action against what they thought was excessive use of alcohol. And indeed community is an important place for such actions to start, in the view of the Law Commission.

Many of the people at these meetings wondered why there was no requirement for advertisers and manufacturers to provide basic consumer information, such as the

number of standard drinks in a bottle, the recommended maximum intake and risks to pregnant women and the young.

Many believed that the widespread availability of alcohol at prices lower than many basic commodities was contributing to the culture of excessive drinking. In the late night entertainment precincts of the major cities it is clear that the majority of people visiting bars and clubs have already consumed shop-bought alcohol before coming into town.

This trend, referred to as front-end loading, is being driven in part by the relatively high cost of on-premise alcohol compared with off-premise alcohol.

When it came to price, there was quite a lot of support for increasing the price as being the most efficient way to reduce consumption and therefore harm.

But the publicans who attended our consultations were certainly not keen on this.

The need for increased personal responsibility in both consumption and sale of alcohol was a clear theme that emerged from the public consultation in every centre. Many expressed a strong appetite for the reintroduction of the offence of being drunk in a public place. This provision was repealed in 1981.

The current law allows the Police to take a person who is intoxicated and poses a risk to themselves to their home or a place of safety, often the cells. They did this on more than 21,000 occasions in 2007/2008.

We heard a lot about the problems with liquor bans. There are more than 160 by-laws around New Zealand that impose liquor bans and they have spread very rapidly.

Conclusion

Whatever policy recommendations the Law Commission makes, we are under no illusion that they will not change the New Zealand drinking culture overnight. The law cannot do that alone. It can help. It can nudge people towards a different way of looking at things.

But social attitudes, parental upbringing, personal beliefs and individual choices are the forces that drive the drinking culture. The law can shape and influence aspects of the culture but it cannot control it.

I have not wanted to paint a dismal picture of New Zealand in these observations based on our consultations. There are many positive aspects to recreational drinking in New Zealand.

It needs to be recognised that those who were moved to attend consultations meetings were often those with a story of personal or professional interest in the issues.

Their views are not necessarily representative of wider New Zealand.

That said, strong indications from media reports and opinion polls suggest that many New Zealanders believe the pendulum of reform may have swung too far.

Our challenge is to devise a suite of policies that may bring us back to a place where alcohol is no longer singled out as the number one problem for New Zealand Police.