

Alcohol health body in crisis as four quit over 'conflict of interest' with drink industry



Government ignores complaints that business representatives lead licensing group discussions

EXCLUSIVE BY PAUL HUTCHEON

A HEALTH body organised by the Scottish Government is in disarray after senior figures quit over the presence of representatives of the alcohol industry on the group.

Four public health members of the National Licensing Advisory Group (NLAG) resigned after warning it was "not appropriate" for the producers and sellers of alcohol to sit on the body.

The Scottish Government Alcohol Industry Partnership – comprising civil servants and the drinks industry – set up the group to explore issues relating to licensing.

The licensing system is a key tool in minimising alcohol-related harm, as it can control the sale of drink in supermarkets and pubs.

However, the Sunday Herald can reveal NLAG – for which government and industry jointly provide the secretariat – has struggled badly due to tensions between senior figures.

Four public-health campaigners – Alcohol Focus Scotland chief executive Dr Evelyn Gillan, Eric Carlin, the director of Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems, public-health consultant Dr Catherine Chiang, and Nicholas Smith of the Edinburgh Alcohol and Drug Partnership – sat on it.

However, the key representative bodies in the alcohol and licensed trade industries were also on the group.

These included the Scottish Retail Consortium (SRC), the Scottish Licensed Trade Association and the Scottish Grocers' Federation.

It is understood the two sides found it impossible to work together, even disagreeing on what constituted scientific evidence.

In November, the four health experts put their concerns in writing

to Mary Cuthbert, a civil servant and NLAG chair: "As you know, the public health and NGO representatives on the group have, from the outset, expressed concern that the current structure of the NLAG does not sufficiently protect the public interest," they wrote.

The quartet added: "In our view, it is not appropriate for the producers and retailers of alcohol to be involved in determining the conditions of their own regulation in the manner that the NLAG's membership and work programme entails."

They called for the NLAG to be made up of licensing regulators and not industry reps. As the dispute grew, Cuthbert resigned as chair.

The same four individuals wrote to Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill, arguing there was an "obvious conflict of interest" in the NLAG. They added that Cuthbert's resignation was evidence of the "urgent need to review this group as it is currently constituted".

MacAskill insisting the group offered a "valuable fresh perspective", after which the four experts resigned.

Gillan told the Sunday Herald: "The health partners have expressed our serious concern to the Government about the composition of this group. We proposed an alternative structure whereby the group would have been led by the people responsible for regulating licensing. This would have resolved the conflict of interest issue, enabled the full participation of health partners

and ensured that the public-interest purpose of licensing was protected.

"We are disappointed that the Government decided that the group would continue to be led by the alcohol industry and, consequently, the health partners have informed the Government that we will not be participating in the group."

Scottish Labour justice spokesman Graeme Pearson said: "I am not surprised a number of experts have walked out of this group. It would seem odd indeed to have those being regulated sitting on an advisory group about their own regulation.

"Kenny MacAskill has clearly shown the same sort of tact and sensitivity to these experts who asked him to think again as he's shown to lawyers, judges, police officers, police staff, his fellow SNP MSPs and everyone else who has disagreed with him."

David Martin, head of policy at the SRC, said: "The health partners believed they could not be seen to be round the same table as us. I think it's unfortunate they couldn't get past a dogmatic viewpoint. Industry bent over backwards to have them round the same table."

A Scottish Government spokeswoman said the Government believes it useful to bring together a broad mix of stakeholders to discuss the issues around alcohol licensing.

She added: "We regret that public-health representatives felt that they were unable to participate. However, they remain welcome to return to the group."



Kenny MacAskill said the group with representation from drinks firms gave a fresh perspective