Killer tactics

How tobacco, alcohol, and unhealthy food and drink industries hold back public health progress

Obesity Health Alliance

ALCOHOL HEALTH ALLIANCE

ash.
action on smoking and health

Introduction

Businesses are vital to the economy and can make an important contribution to health improvement. However, unhealthy product industries cause ill health and impede economic growth. This report draws on evidence to highlight some of the common strategies and tactics used by the tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink industries to delay and disrupt policies that improve health and outlines what needs to change. Whilst the examples below are focussed on the industries linked to the three biggest killers in the UK (tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink), they present a common playbook used by other health-harming industries such as gambling and fossil fuels.

Action on Smoking and Health, Obesity Health Alliance and Alcohol Health Alliance are calling for public health policymaking to be protected from the vested interests of the tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink industries. We are calling on UK members of parliament to:

1. Avoid conflicts of interests and reject corporate hospitality (such as tickets to sporting or cultural events) from unhealthy product industries

2. Stand up for your constituents' health and call on the government to adopt transparent principles for engagement and interaction with unhealthy product industries

3. Equip yourself to challenge common industry arguments that undermine public health

How serious are the health harms caused by these industries?
Industries will often claim that action only needs to be taken to address the harms from those who 'over consume' their products but the impact of harms from tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink are far-reaching across society. The harms from these products extend beyond the person consuming the products and affect loved ones, families and whole communities.
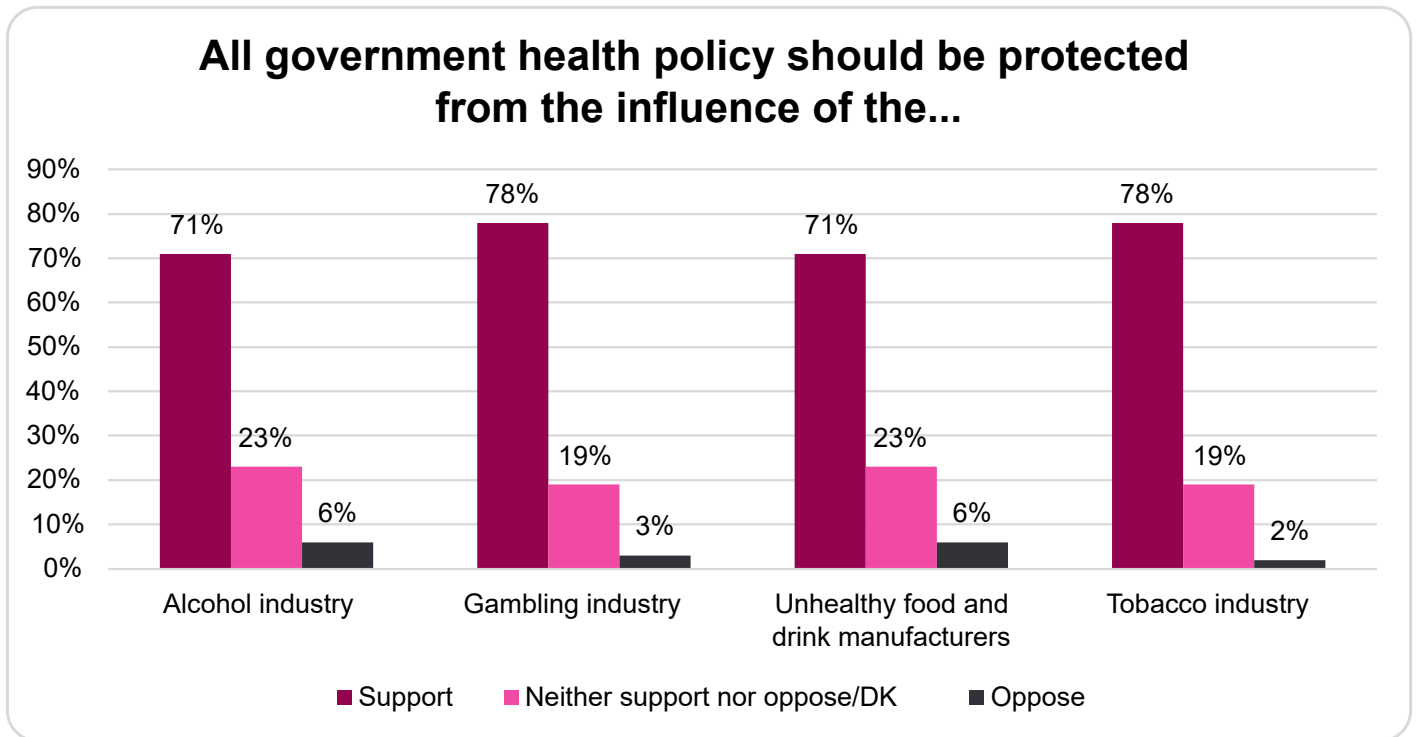
- The poor health caused and exacerbated by consumption of tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink is responsible for the majority of premature death in the United Kingdom. [1]

- They contribute to a wide range of chronic diseases, including cancers, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and dementia, as well as having significant mental health impacts. [1]

- Socially disadvantaged groups and people who have pre-existing health conditions suffer more harms. For example:

  ○ Tobacco is responsible for up to half the difference in life expectancy between the highest and lowest socioeconomic groups. [2]

  ○ Deaths caused by alcohol are more than twice as high in the most disadvantaged areas of England than in the least disadvantaged areas. [3]

  ○ 46% of year six children in England who live in the most disadvantaged areas are currently living with overweight or obesity, compared to 26% in the least disadvantaged areas. [4]

- The risk of poor health increases when people use more than one product, such as combining tobacco and/or alcohol and unhealthy food and drink. [1]

The public want health policies protected from health-harming industries
Outside of tobacco, there are few rules which guide how governments engage with industries that harm in relation to health policy. The role of the tobacco industry is restricted through the UK's commitments

as a party to the World Health Organisation treaty on tobacco, The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. [5] Public Health England had rules for engaging with industry [6] that went beyond tobacco but when the agency was closed this guidance was not adopted by Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID).

The lack of guidelines other than for tobacco is out of step with public opinion. In a recent poll [7], most people supported the protection of government health policies from the tobacco industry (78%), the alcohol industry (71%) and the manufacturers of unhealthy food and drinks (71%). The public support similar protections for health policy from the gambling industry too (78%).

All government health policy should be protected from the influence of the...

Industry	Support	Neither support nor oppose/DK	Oppose
Alcohol industry	71%	23%	6%
Gambling industry	78%	19%	3%
Unhealthy food and drink manufacturers	71%	23%	6%
Tobacco industry	78%	19%	2%

Tactics used by unhealthy industries

Common tactics have been identified across different industries to challenge regulations and policy that will curb unhealthy levels of consumption. Taken together they impact on the political, media and public narrative and shape our norms. It is in the interests of these industries for individuals, the media and politicians to think about unhealthy consumption as a matter of personal choice rather than as something shaped by people's environments and the marketing strategies of industry. This choice narrative also overlooks that most people want to live healthier lives, and this is made harder by the tactics used by health-harming industries to promote their products.

1. Deny or play down the evidence of harms linked to their products.

> **"If [cigarettes] are behaviorally addictive or habit forming, they are much more like ... Gummi Bears, and I eat Gummi Bears, and I don't like it when I don't eat my Gummi Bears, but I'm certainly not addicted to them." [8]**
> President and CEO of Philip Morris (1997)

Smoking is addictive. Two thirds of those who try smoking will go on to be regular smokers. [9]

> **"The scientific evidence certainly doesn't warrant the direct link between alcohol and cancer . . . on the contrary low consumption was beneficial to health." [10]**
> Alcohol Beverage Foundation of Ireland (ABFI) (2018)

The International Agency for Research on Cancer defined alcohol as a Group 1 carcinogen decades ago. [11]

> **"As well as being oh-so chocolatey and tasty, this crunchy breakfast cereal is made with wholegrain and is a source of vitamins and minerals." [12]**
> Nestle launching new KitKat breakfast cereal (2023)

Nestle withdrew its claims that Kit Kat cereal is 'nutritious' after public and political outcry. [13]

2. Position themselves as part of the solution.

- Governments have been slow to implement policies and regulations that could threaten the profits of these industries, despite their wider damage to the economy – for example in lower productivity and higher public service costs. [1,14]

- Voluntary partnerships with these industries do not work as there are clear commercial conflicts of interest [14] with an estimated £53 billion in revenue coming from consumption at levels which cause health harm. [1]

Example: The Public Health Responsibility Deal (PHRD), adopted by the UK Coalition Government 2010-2015, proposed a partnership approach with industry to reduce health harms, rather than regulation. An independent evaluation showed no public health benefits resulted from the initiative. Rather, documents show how the Responsibility Deal allowed alcohol industry bodies to shape the policy agenda and remove measures such as alcohol minimum unit pricing, from the table. [15]

Since the PHRD was introduced, there have been over a decade of programmes to get the food industry to remove sugar, salt and calories voluntarily. Despite repeated commitments from industry and reassurances that the industry "knows best" how to address these issues, every single target has been missed and the vast majority of products have shown no significant improvement. In comparison, the single mandatory measure (the Soft Drinks Industry Levy) has delivered large-scale reformulation in a fraction of the time. [16, 17]

3. Distort the science about their products.

- These industries influence the processes, methods, findings, and perceptions of science and scientific research in ways that ultimately harm the public. [14]

- They influence every step of the scientific process, from the ways in which research topics are selected and framed, to the design, conduct and reporting of research, despite clear conflicts of interest. [14]

Example: Coca-Cola funded a research institute at the University of Colorado designed to persuade people to focus on exercise, not calorie intake, for weight loss strategies, despite evidence that exercise has only a minimal impact on weight, compared with what people consume. [18]

4. Distort messaging about health risks and harms.

- These industries influence education and public messaging to emphasise use of unhealthy products as social norms. [1,14]

- They stress the need for personal responsibility, ignoring structural and commercial factors and shifting the burden of blame for harms away from companies and onto individuals, parents, children and young people. [1]

- They deflect attention from industry practices and products, and a failure to regulate these effectively, as major drivers of harm. [19]

- They support educational and information programmes that contain misinformation, including about cancer risks. [1,14,19]

Examples: Three school alcohol education programmes, delivered with support of alcohol industry funds - Drinkaware for Education, The Smashed Project (funded by Diageo), and Talk About Alcohol (Alcohol Education Trust, now called the Talk About Trust) – were selective in presenting harms, including

misinformation about cancer, emphasising personal responsibility, the normalisation of alcohol as a consumer product, while ignoring the impacts of alcohol and the industry on inequities. [21]

In the 1980s and 1990s, when it was becoming clear that second-hand smoke was harmful, the tobacco industry funded and created science that attempted to obscure that harm. [22]

5. Use legal threats and actions to interfere with and delay implementation of effective policies to protect public health.

Examples: In 2012, the Scottish Parliament passed legislation to introduce minimum unit pricing (MUP) for alcohol. The implementation of the legislation was delayed till 2018 because the global alcohol industry flexed its corporate muscles and financial power to block its implementation through legal challenges, fronted by the Scotch Whisky Association. The evidence since implementation shows that MUP has saved lives, especially among disadvantaged groups. [1,1,16]

In 2017, the UK Supreme Court refused British American Tobacco, Imperial Brands, Japan Tobacco International (JTI) and Philip Morris International permission to appeal against the implementation of legislation for plain packaging of cigarettes. This paved the way for the new regulations, which had passed into law in 2015, to be put into force. [23]

KFC has challenged at least 43 English councils over their planning policies that restrict new premises, successfully overturning local efforts to champion children's health in more than half of cases. [24]

6. Use Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to signal their virtue at the expense of public health and wellbeing.

- Under the guise of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), the tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink industries fund and support charities, community groups, and research and educational programmes, deflecting attention from the harms that they cause, promoting industry-friendly framings of harms and solutions to those harms, such as individual responsibility and self-regulation, and simultaneously promoting their brand. [14]

Example: Tesco has partnered with the commercial baby food company Ella's Kitchen to give customers coupons aimed at encouraging children to consume more vegetables. The campaign serves primarily as an opportunity for Ella's Kitchen to market their baby and toddler foods through new means, to new customers. These products do not support public health recommendations for infant feeding due to their very high levels of sugar. [25]

7. Use proxies to communicate their messages without always being transparent about their funding.

- Many vocal and seemingly independent opponents of regulations have financial ties to industry
- Some groups are established by industry to oppose specific campaigns while others are intended to shape the narrative over the longer term

Examples: The Institute of Economic Affairs has opposed most public health legislation linked to tobacco, alcohol and obesity. While the IEA does not disclose its funding sources, British American Tobacco (BAT) has disclosed its funding in response to questions from activist shareholders [26] and the IEA has 'indirectly' acknowledged it receives funding from the alcohol industry. [27]

The tobacco industry has long funded groups which have the appearance of being grassroots but are in fact astroturf. For example, Forest claims to be advocating for the 'rights of smokers' but is almost entirely funded by big tobacco companies [28]. The Tobacco Retailer's Alliance similarly claimed to be advocating for small retailers but was funded and operated by the Tobacco Manufacturers' Association. [29]

Drinkaware claims to be an independent charity yet receives the majority of its funding is from alcohol industry sources. Independent analyses of its public messaging have found it to be misleading and biased, including material provided to schools that present children with statements like "drinking alcohol makes you happy" for them to discuss. [14]

8. Give gifts, benefits and hospitality to MPs attempting to win their favour.

- It is common for industries to approach MPs with offers of gifts and hospitality as a means of gaining access to them. Since 1974, MPs have been required to register their financial interests (including gifts, benefits and hospitality) in a transparent way where this exceeds £300. While in many cases MPs may perceive there to be little harm in accepting a ticket for a sporting event or passing on a concert ticket to a staff member – there is no such thing as a free lunch. Businesses are spending money because they believe it will be in their financial interests. It can give the appearance of a conflict of interest for MPs amending and voting on legislation that will impact these businesses. [30]
- Appearances plainly do matter and it's been reported that industry also try to 'work around' the transparency of the register of interests, for example by hosting events in parliament where free gifts can be taken but aren't directly sent to the office of an MP, by giving gifts that fall under the £300 threshold (for example large bars of Cadbury chocolate) or offering site visits to local factories where free gifts are given, but not tracked or publicised. The register can be regarded as the tip of the iceberg and although activities are allowed as part of the lobbying process it is important to be mindful of how this shapes views of industry and policy change. [31]

Example: Former MP for Clacton, Giles Watling, registered a 'business lunch' and attended 'annual celebration' with Japanese Tobacco International Ltd in early 2024 with a total value of £351.04. In May that year he tabled a number of amendments to the Tobacco and Vapes Bill including to make the restrictions on sales apply to those under the age of 21, rather than those born after 2009, reflecting tobacco industry priorities. [32]

INDUSTRY ARGUMENT BINGO

Some common arguments that are presented to policymakers by the alcohol, tobacco and unhealthy food and drink industries are laid out below. Listen out for these arguments that are often used to try to undermine effective health policies.

"This will affect the poorest the hardest." Fact: Those on low incomes are most likely to suffer health harms and die early due to consumption of alcohol, tobacco and unhealthy food and drinks. Health inequalities are reduced by public health regulations.	**"More regulation will lead to job losses."** Fact: There is no evidence, internationally, showing that marketing restrictions have had a negative impact on jobs and/or the economy. In fact, the opposite is true.	**"These issues are very complex."** Fact: There is robust, longstanding evidence that regulations to restrict marketing and availability and to reduce affordability of alcohol, tobacco and unhealthy food and drinks save lives. The greatest barrier to implementation is the opposition of these industries.
"This industry forms the backbone of the economy and should be supported." Fact: The health costs and loss of productivity due to alcohol, tobacco and unhealthy food and drinks far exceed tax revenue generated.	**"Harms from these products affect a small number of people."** Fact: Harms related to consumption of tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drinks affect families, not just the individual consumer.	**"This policy interferes with individual choices – this is the 'nanny state'."** Fact: People become dependent on nicotine, alcohol and many unhealthy food and drinks, making healthier choices for individuals less likely.
"Industry should be encouraged to regulate itself." Fact: Over many years, it has been consistently found that voluntary codes of practice are ineffective.	**"Most people can consume responsibly and safely."** Fact: Decisions are greatly affected by the affordability, accessibility and acceptability of healthier options. There is no risk-free way to consume alcohol or tobacco.	**"We just need better and more education."** Fact: All studies show that education can only be part of the solution. Actions to restrict availability and marketing and to reduce affordability are generally more effective than education.

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