

Getting the balance right

Mark Oaten, LibDem MP, considers ways of putting across drink and drugs messages to young people, without preaching.



Connecting with young people can be a real problem for politicians, says LibDem MP Mark Oaten who, at just turned 40, is considering how to get healthier lifestyle messages to teenagers who 'can drink and drink' with no thought about the effects.

'The minute politicians start suggesting things, it's a turn-off,' he says. 'But there are lots of interesting things that can be done in an evening that don't involve eight pints of lager... seeing live bands, playing music, a café culture where people can sit and chat over coffee in a really buzzy environment, like you see in mainland Europe.'

Oaten is the first to admit that we're a long way off a café culture in Britain. According to his teenage constituents, they would be happy to loll about on comfy sofas with the newspapers, making a cappuccino last two hours, but are 'shoved on after half an hour, and told we want the seats'. Poor competition, it seems, to happy hour in the pub across the road.

Back in March, when the alcohol strategy was launched, Oaten went on record as saying that the government really needed to tackle the problem at its root, instead of running scared of the alcohol industry.

While he believes that a ban on advertising would be 'a step too far', he believes in the need to talk to industry about issues to do with happy hour, pricing of drinks, and making non-alcoholic drinks available at cheaper rates.

He would like to see a levy imposed on pubs and nightclubs, as a contribution towards policing, and calls for a dialogue with the drinks industry – about health implications, as much as the 'job culture problem'.

Another slice of responsibility he gives to schools, believing in the need for

'sensible' talk about drugs and alcohol. He would, however, feel 'hostile' to the Conservatives' proposal for random drug testing in schools, seeing it as a step too far:

'I wouldn't want my children to be randomly tested. I think it would create quite a peculiar climate,' he says. What he does want, is 'for teachers to be able to spot the signs of people taking drugs, and be able to deal with it on a pupil basis – targeting those pupils, rather than just randomly testing everybody'.

The LibDems were the first major party to openly support legalising cannabis and have called for ecstasy to be downgraded from class A to B – policies which Oaten calls 'tough' for 'facing the reality of what's going on'.

Reclassifying ecstasy is the only way of being taken seriously by young people, he says, who need to learn to treat 'the absolute killers, heroin and cocaine' as in a different league:

'Ecstasy is taken by two million people a year and obviously that is wrong, and I regret that that happens,' he says. 'But I don't want people to assume that because they've taken ecstasy, it's equally right that they can look at other drugs in the same category and think "oh well, ecstasy, heroin, crack cocaine, they're all in the same category. I'll have some of that as well".'

The LibDem message is not soft on drugs, he says, but 'grown-up, mature and a tough policy decision to get a tough message across'.

Voicing support for his political opponents' promises of increased resources for rehabilitation, Oaten is keen to add his party's support for 'ASBO plus' – where treatment accompanies any anti-social behaviour order for a drug-related issue.

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He's also keen to get to vulnerable individuals 'through the youth system', before they get involved in crime, identifying 12, 13 and 14-year-olds, looking at their truancy and social services records, and identifying where problems could arise before they have actually happened.

The model is a positive one, he says, getting these youngsters involved, getting them to meetings, talking to them: 'you nip it in the bud before it's even happened, by identifying who's likely to fall into that category before they have.'

Oaten says he is wary of stereotyping young people, but keen to reach those who are at risk. Throughout his discussion of young people, drugs and alcohol, he seems aware of the need to hit the right note, or lose the audience – that tricky feat for a politician:

'You can't have politicians pretending to be something they're not, wearing baseball caps backwards to try and get the message across,' he says. 'It's painful and it backfires.'