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NO EXPLANATION NEEDED



A festive season guide to belonging, boundaries and behaviour

You don't need to drink to belong

A free guide from MCG



BEFORE THE INVITATIONS GO OUT

The way you plan this year's festive celebrations tells every colleague whether they belong. Team lunches, client drinks, the office party and the end-of-year dinner are, for many people, the highlight of the working year.

For a significant number of colleagues, the season is also one of the hardest. People in recovery, people who don't drink, and people whose drinking has become a way of coping with pressure can find a calendar built around the bar something to get through rather than enjoy. A lime and soda is not a plan.

This guide isn't about removing alcohol from the festive season, or telling anyone how to celebrate. Being alcohol-smart doesn't mean banning drinks. It means designing events where everyone feels they belong, whether they're drinking or not, so that the culture your organisation shows in December is the one it wants to be known for in January.

Who this guide is for:

partners, senior leaders, HR, people and inclusion teams, wellbeing leads and Charter champions, and anyone organising a festive event this year.

How to use it:

start with who's in the room, work through the organiser's checklist before each event, and share the guide with anyone planning a celebration on your organisation's behalf. If you lead on wellbeing in your organisation, use this guide to start a conversation with your senior leaders.

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Why this guide, and why this year

Every year, as the festive season approaches, the questions at our talks change. People ask how to get through the office party in recovery, how to turn down a drink without explaining themselves, and how to look out for a colleague who is struggling. More and more, organisations ask us to help them plan the season itself. This guide is a starting point.



"Client events were very difficult, because they were always built around drinking. I felt I could not speak to anyone, because it simply was not a workplace conversation. That silence was as damaging as the drinking itself."

Steven McCann, Founder, MCG

Why this year?

This is the first festive season under a stronger legal duty in the UK. From late October 2026, the Employment Rights Act 2025 requires employers to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment, and makes them liable for harassment of their people by third parties, including clients.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission is clear that "risk can be heightened during the festive season" and that "alcohol lowers inhibitions and can lead to inappropriate behaviour." Almost one in three UK managers (29%) have witnessed inappropriate behaviour or harassment at past work parties.

One organisation we spoke to this year had to let three people go after its Christmas party. A well-planned event protects people, and protects the organisation. So what do "all reasonable steps" look like at the office party, or at client drinks?

This guide is general information, not legal advice.



Who's in the room

Every festive gathering brings together people with very different relationships with alcohol, and some of those differences are invisible.

Figure	What it tells us	Source
1 in 6	UK adults who never drink, a share that rose by a third between 2018 and 2025	The Forward Trust and Crest Advisory, 2026
40%	UK adults who think they need to change their drinking habits.	The Forward Trust and Crest Advisory, 2026
c. 700,000	People in the UK in recovery from substance use	The Forward Trust and Crest Advisory, 2026
64%	UK workers who drink for work-related reasons, such as stress, anxiety or pressure	Alcohol Change UK
36%	UK workers who find it easier to talk about mental health at work than alcohol	Alcohol Change UK
42%	UK managers who say work social events should centre on activities that don't involve alcohol	Chartered Management Institute, 2023
59.1%	UK legal professionals with poor mental wellbeing	LawCare, Life in the Law, 2025



Someone might not be drinking this season for many reasons, and none of them should need explaining at a work event:

- **They are in recovery**
- **Their faith means they don't drink**
- **They are a carer and need to stay alert, or be ready to leave**
- **They are neurodivergent, or alcohol affects their anxiety or mental health**
- **They are managing their health or taking medication**
- **They are pregnant or trying to conceive**
- **They are driving or have an early start**
- **They simply choose not to**

People who don't drink are not a niche group. They are a growing one, and you won't always know who they are.



Some colleagues will be drinking to cope with the pressure of the year. The festive season can make that harder to spot, because heavier drinking briefly becomes the norm rather than the exception. High performers are often the best at hiding it, and some would rather risk their reputation than tell their team they aren't drinking.

Reflection:

Think about your last festive event. Who might have found it hard to take part fully, and what would have made it easier for them?

The organiser's checklist

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Work through this list before every festive event, from the team lunch to the firm-wide party. Each tick makes it easier for everyone to take part on their own terms.

Event	Date	Organiser	Senior lead at event	Finish time

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Before the invitation goes out:

- [ ] Frame it as an end-of-year celebration everyone can join, rather than a night built around drinking
- [ ] Word the invitation around the occasion, not the drink: "let's get together", not "let's grab drinks"
- [ ] Ask your team what kind of celebration they would enjoy
- [ ] Check the date against religious and cultural observances *(Hanukkah runs 4 to 12 December this year)*
- [ ] Make attendance optional in practice, with no pressure or follow-up for anyone who declines
- [ ] Offer more than one format where you can, such as a lunch, an activity or a daytime option alongside an evening event

Venue and timing

- [ ] Choose a venue where the bar isn't the centrepiece
- [ ] Check accessibility, including step-free access and a quieter space to step away to
- [ ] Set a clear finish time and share it in advance
- [ ] Avoid a long drinks reception before any food is served

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Food and drink

- [ ] **Offer alcohol-free drinks* of the same quality as the alcoholic ones, served in the same glasses**
- [ ] **Include drinks that aren't imitations of alcohol, such as good soft drinks and mocktails, alongside any 0% beer and wine**
- [ ] **Serve substantial food, early and throughout**
- [ ] **Brief bar staff to serve alcohol-free drinks without comment**
- [ ] **Agree a limit or cut-off time rather than an open-ended free bar**

**Alcohol-free isn't always the answer. For some people in recovery, a 0% version of their old drink may present as a trigger.*

On the night

- [ ] **Appoint a senior lead to oversee the event and set the tone**
- [ ] **Brief leaders to offer a choice of drinks rather than hand them out, and never to push a drink or ask why someone isn't drinking**
- [ ] **Never top up, swap or "liven up" anyone's drink**
- [ ] **Name a welfare contact, so anyone who feels unwell, unsafe or uncomfortable knows who to go to**
- [ ] **Make sure everyone knows how to raise a concern, on the night or afterwards**
- [ ] **Plan a focal point that isn't the bar, such as awards, a quiz or live music**

In our substance use and addiction awareness talks over the past 36 months, we've heard more than one story of someone in recovery having alcohol slipped into their soft drink at a work event. It happens, and it matters.

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Getting home

- [ ] Share transport options and the finish time in advance
- [ ] Consider booked taxis or travel support for late finishes
- [ ] Remind those driving to plan for travel and parking
- [ ] Have a plan if someone has had too much, so a named person makes sure they get home safely
- [ ] Make clear when the event ends. Unofficial after-parties are where things most often go wrong, and they still reflect on the organisation

Client events

- [ ] Apply the same principles when clients are in the room
- [ ] Tell client-facing teams plainly that not drinking with clients is fine, and that leaders back them
- [ ] Make sure no one feels they have to drink to win or keep business
- [ ] Let clients and guests know what is expected of behaviour at the event

After the event

- [ ] Ask for feedback, including anonymously
- [ ] Handle any concerns promptly, privately and in line with your policies

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Language that Includes

Instead of	Try
"Go on, just one."	*"What can I get you?"*
"Why aren't you drinking?"	Nothing at all. A drink order needs no explanation.
"You're quiet tonight, have a proper drink."	*"Really glad you could make it."*
"Come on, don't be boring."	*"Great to see you."*
"Aren't you ever tempted?"	Nothing. Change the subject: *"Any plans for the break?"*
"Are you pregnant?"	Nothing at all. There are many reasons someone isn't drinking, and some of them are painful.

"I want to help, but I don't know what to do, and I don't want to get it wrong."
- the question we hear from most HR teams.

The moments that matter most are the ones no checklist covers:

- What do you say when a colleague tells you, mid-party, that they are struggling?
- What should a senior lead do when a client crosses a line?
- What do you do when someone says "I'm fine", and you're not sure they are?

These are the conversations we work through with organisations, using the practical approach we developed with the Law Society of Scotland, and lived experience of addiction and recovery within professional services.

Where to find support

If you are worried about yourself or a colleague this season, you don't have to work it out alone.

- **LawCare** offers free, confidential support to everyone in the legal community: lawcare.org.uk
- **Your Employee Assistance Programme**, if your organisation has one, offers confidential support, often around the clock.
- **Your GP** is the right starting point for any health concern, including alcohol and mental health.
- **Alcohol Change UK** has practical information on alcohol and on changing your drinking: alcoholchange.org.uk
- **Alcoholics Anonymous** offers free support for anyone who wants to stop drinking: alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

If you're supporting someone, you don't need to have the answers. Noticing, checking in and pointing towards help is enough.





Going further with MCG

This guide covers the essentials.

Organisations that work with us also receive the full workbook, which takes everyone through the whole season: a personal plan for every colleague, ready-to-use inclusive invitation templates, guidance for senior leaders on setting the tone, how to check in with someone who might be struggling, and an organiser's reflection to carry into the new year.

Our session, Belonging, Boundaries and Behaviour, is built for this moment, timed around year-end parties and social events. Delivered as a lived experience keynote or an interactive workshop, it covers safe conversations, signs of concern, boundaries, signposting and psychological safety, and how colleagues can respond constructively without needing to be clinicians.

The session can stand alone, or form part of **our three-part series and CMAR**, our year-round Corporate Mutual Aid Recovery programme. Missed December? The same session works in January, while the season is still fresh.

December dates are limited. To book for December, get in touch by Friday 20 November.

Tell us about your audience, preferred format and timing, and we will send a one-page outline.

hello@mcgonline.co.uk

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Cultural shift, not crisis management.

Law Society of Scotland Approved Supplier 2026

MCG is an Approved Supplier to the Law Society of Scotland, working with the Society to develop its Safe Conversations Toolkit

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