

Alcohol Sales (Regulation of Prices and Promotion) Bill

Sally Keeble MP

Some of the strongest arguments for greater legislative controls on the retailing of alcohol came from the industry itself.

During the discussion around the introduction of powers to establish alcohol disorder zones the pubs and clubs lobby argued strongly that they were not the prime culprits in the increase in drink related crime. They argued that greater regulation of the on-licence trade wouldn't touch the big problem of the sale of large quantities of cut-price alcohol through the off-licence trade.

Where was the justice, they asked, in penalising a pub for selling a pint of beer to someone who came into the bar already drunk on cut-price superstrength lager bought in the local supermarket and drunk at home.

They had a point. In one of the more spectacular and tragic consequences of the ready supply of cheap alcohol, last December a young woman was brutally killed by a gang of drunken youths. One of the youths, aged only 15 admitted that before the killing he had drunk two litres of cider, a bottle of extra strong beer and 'quite a lot of' peach schnapps.

At today's prices, that amount of alcohol would have cost him, buying at our major supermarkets, just £1.42 for two litres of superstrength cider, 33p for the beer, and just £1 for his share of the £5.99 bottle of schnapps – so a total of under £3 for at least 20 units of alcohol – twice the level even for a binge drinker. The boy probably could not have afforded to drink that much in a pub or club.

This killing was a dramatic headline. Behind it are more sobering statistics in crime, health and education, demonstrating the big price that public services have to pay for our alcohol consumption.

Alcohol is a factor in 50 per cent of street crimes, 33 per cent of burglaries and 30 per cent of sexual crimes. One

in ten assault victims treated in UK casualty departments has been injured in a fight involving glasses and bottles. An estimated 14,380 road casualties in 2006 were as a result of drink driving.

The impact on the NHS is huge. Almost 70 per cent of admissions to casualty wards between midnight and 5 am on weekends are alcohol related. Both men and women are 13 times more likely to contract liver disease if they binge, and liver disease is now appearing in people as young as 25 according to the British Medical Association. Death rates in the UK due to acute intoxication have doubled in the last 20 years for both men and women.

For schools, binge drinking causes a problem, with 62 per cent of 16 to 17 year olds reporting that they binge drink at least once a week. The National Association of Headteachers is concerned about the impact on children's education.

The figures also show that the increase is particularly in binge drinking which now affects 23 per cent of men and nine per cent of women. Compared with other European countries, we drink less frequently, but drink more at a sitting. UK drinkers consume an average 6.3 units of alcohol on a single occasion, compared with the European average of 5.1 units.

Managing these problems is a challenge for the whole industry, and the Alcohol Sales (regulation of prices and promotion) Bill sets out proposals for some modest controls on both the on- and off-licence trade but more especially the latter.

The most substantial proposal, of setting a minimum price for a unit of alcohol, is something that could only be done by legislation. Retailers agreeing a minimum price among themselves would be open to accusations of price fixing. A retailer going it alone could be committing commercial suicide, given the importance of alcohol sales for both



supermarkets and convenience stores.

Although the debate about a minimum price has focused on the impact on the retail trade, it would also affect the on-trade. It would mean an end to special offers and happy hours, especially important since the breakdown of the industry's voluntary code.

In addition to price, availability has been seen as one of the major factors in the increase in problem drinking, which is why the bill included proposals on promotion of alcoholic drinks in shops whose primary purpose is not the sale of alcohol. This would mean that both supermarkets and convenience stores would have to stock and promote their alcoholic drinks only on specified and clearly labelled shelves. It would prevent the pepper potting of alcohol throughout shops, or the linking of certain foods with alcohol, and also the stacking of piles of cut price alcohol in front of the tills just before the bank holiday weekend.

Also in the bill are proposals for labelling, and the establishment of an industry council to recommend to the Government the minimum unit price, and the detailed regulations on the promotion of alcohol.

Already major health, education and law and order agencies favour the introduction of greater regulation of the retailing of alcohol, and have supported some of the detailed measures in the Alcohol Sales Bill. The big challenge it would seem for the industry is to work with these powerful public interest groups to ensure that any legislation coming out of the Government's current review are effective in rolling back the tide of binge drinking.

The Alcohol Sales (Regulation of Prices and Promotion) Bill was introduced by Sally Keeble MP in the House of Commons on 10th June under the ten-minute rule.