

Alcohol Industry Must do More to Tackle Underage Sales

18 October 2006

The Government today urged the alcohol industry to do more to stop the sale of alcohol to children as new figures show that, despite recent progress, too much of the licensed trade is still illegally selling alcohol to under 18s.

The figures from the fourth Alcohol Misuse Enforcement Campaign (AMEC) show that nearly one in three minors taking part in trading standards operations were able to buy alcohol in bars and pubs, and one in five were able to buy alcohol in off-licences.

The test purchase results show widespread variation between individual companies and regions. For example, on-licence premises in Wales sold alcohol to 48 per cent of young people taking part in test purchases, while those in the North East sold to 18 per cent.

Home Office Minister Vernon Coaker and Department for Culture, Media and Sport Minister Shaun Woodward met with representatives of the licensed trade industry this week to discuss the results of the Government's fourth campaign to clamp down on alcohol related disorder.

Home Office Minister Vernon Coaker said:

"I am disappointed with these test purchase results. The problem of alcohol fuelled crime and disorder is an issue of major public concern and we are all responsible for tackling it.

"We have given police new powers, such as fixed penalty notices, to deal with alcohol related disorder. However the licensed trade need to build on the real progress they have made to drive down sales to young people even further. I am heartened by the industry's assurances that they are committed to achieving this but I have made it clear to them that we expect to see real improvements in their performance. I will continue to monitor the situation to ensure this happens."

Licensing Minister at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport Shaun Woodward said:

"Too many supermarkets, bars, clubs and pubs continue to sell alcohol to under 18s. This is not acceptable.

"We've given police and local authorities tough new powers to deal with premises that break the law - if you sell alcohol to children you face having your licence revoked or a £5,000 fine."

The results also show that the police continued to clamp down on alcohol related disorder, visiting over 30,000 licensed premises and issuing 7,300 fixed penalty notices.

Mike Craik, ACPO lead on alcohol issues and Chief Constable of Northumbria Police said:

"Taking firm action against retailers who flout the law by selling alcohol to young people, will help the rest of us to enjoy responsible 'grown-up' drinking without fear of our socialising being ruined by drunken louts.

"The message to retailers is loud and clear; flout the law by selling to those underage and you can expect to be hit financially through a suspension or revocation of your premises license.

"This campaign demonstrates the good work of police officers who are working hard to clamp down on irresponsible retailers. We will continue to develop the strategy of this campaign into mainstream policing so we can build public trust and confidence in our ability to tackle alcohol related disorder throughout the rest of the year."

Representatives of both the on-licence and off-licence industries had constructive discussions with Ministers at meetings this week to look at the measures they were taking forward to build on the substantial progress already made.

Rob Hayward, Chief Executive of the British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA), said:

"BBPA and the British Entertainment and Dance Association (BEDA) are fully committed to working closely with the Government to reduce underage sales. Progress has been made in bringing down test purchase failures from 45 per cent to 29 per cent since summer 2005. However, we recognise that more needs to be done.

"Companies are tackling these issues head on, by developing new and innovative ways of ensuring managers, licensees, bar staff and the public are aware of our determination to tackle underage sales.

"Our Challenge 21 poster campaign, designed to raise awareness of the critical nature of ID checking, continues to gather pace with more than 180,000 posters issued to venues across the country. In May, we discussed with Government new initiatives, which will target not just underage sales, but a host of other drinks retailing standards. We expect to see the results of these initiatives coming through in future test purchase figures."

Nick Grant, Chair of the Retail of Alcohol Standards Group, commented:

"We're pleased the trend is very much going in the right direction.

"The Retail of Alcohol Standards Group (RASG) has achieved an enormous amount since it was formed a year ago. Test purchase failure rates have fallen from 36 per cent to 21 per cent for the 'off-trade' in general and from 50 per cent to 18 per cent for supermarkets in particular.

"Members are committed to tackling under age sales. They devote considerable resources to measures including staff training, research, IT and public information and, clearly, there's more to do. This is about delivering long-term, lasting results and we are confident we can bring the failure rate down even further."