

## Local Government and Public Service Reform

# The Relationship between Off-sales and Problem Drinking in Scotland

Human Factors Analysts Ltd.

This report presents the results of a study carried out by Human Factors Analysts Ltd. for the Scottish Executive during 2006 on 'The Relationship between Off-Sales and Problem Drinking in Scotland'. The project involved exploring evidence of the existence and nature of any links between off-sales and binge and excessive drinking in Scotland, the effects of off-sales promotions on consumers' purchasing behaviour and alcohol consumption patterns, and any net subsequent personal and social consequences that may be attributable to off-sales.

## Main Findings

- Long term solutions to alcohol related antisocial behaviour need to come from better community engagement with young people. The off-sales sector must be included and focus must move beyond responsible selling, for example, off-sales could be encouraged to link with wider social regeneration programmes.
- The licensing changes offer an opportunity for engaging better with the off-sales trade and communicating local concerns. However the industry feels that issues concerning display and hours of opening have not necessarily been thought through sufficiently.
- The off-sales sector is the increasingly dominant sector for obtaining alcohol in the UK. Price is a strong force within this market with discounting playing an important role in developing market share for larger grocers. There is also increasing price differentiation between alcohol sold via on-sales compared to off-sales.
- Promotions are dominated by price discount and are seen as the norm; they are expected as part of buying alcohol, especially when it is event driven.
- Promotions do not necessarily focus particularly on the young, but they relate to price, which is one of the major points considered by young people purchasing alcohol.
- There is considerable debate on the issue of consumption rates and this needs to be properly explored to gauge when off-sales purchases turn into consumption.
- Front loading was thought to be an increasing trend and associated with under 25s behaviour. This practice may begin to change aspects of the overall night time economy.
- This study witnessed no conclusive selling to underage youngsters and the qualitative evidence gathered suggests it was not as prevalent, especially in larger outlets (in contrast to the AMEC test purchasing results). However, selling to third party agents purchasing on behalf of underage individuals was seen as the key issue that needed to be addressed.
- Alcohol related antisocial behaviour is of great concern; however, there is limited evidence that it is concentrated in and around off-sales premises. The study participants' focus was on antisocial behaviour that is 'nuisance'/noise related concerning young people congregating in other 'hotspot' public places.

## Project Aims

The overall aims for this project were to:

- collect and analyse evidence about purchase and consumption trends in the off-sales sector and the links between the two;
- investigate any links between promotions in off-sales in Scotland and purchase, consumption and subsequent behaviour;
- estimate the net behavioural impact and other consequences of such promotions and, as far as possible, the off-sales sector as a whole; and
- consequently, based on the findings and analysis in relation to off-sales and binge and excessive drinking, provide recommendations to inform the Executive about which policy tools, if any, should be applied to the sector at a national, local and individual premises level as appropriate.

## Methods

The research entailed:

- a literature review covering the links between off-sales purchasing and alcohol related harm;
- collection of industry and marketing data;
- interviews with Strategic Key Stakeholders across health, industry and retail representatives; and
- a localised study of off-sales purchasing and related behaviour in six areas across Scotland, with particular focus on two of these areas highlighted as case studies.

The localised study included interviews with off-sales Staff, Area Key Stakeholders (e.g. police, councillors, GPs etc), and a series of focus groups (2 in each area). The case studies also included an observational strand.

## Findings

### Literature Review

Prior to commencing the fieldwork, a literature review was undertaken which examined the depth and range of evidence available with regards to off-sales, the effect promotions have on the selling of alcohol, and antisocial behaviour in the community.

Overall the research concluded that alcohol consumption per se is a significant contributory factor when examining a range of (violent) offences and antisocial behaviour. However, literary evidence into the effect of off-sales on antisocial behaviour is limited, particularly in comparison to on-sales research. Further, the worth of the current literature is restricted by methodological flaws, and a number of reports fail to incorporate basic and consistent material suitable for meta-analytic review, therefore ultimately, an overall paucity of studies exists specifically examining the relationship between antisocial behaviour and off-licence sales.

### Fieldwork

#### *Alcohol and the Community*

- Alcohol use is an accepted and important part of our culture throughout Scotland and is used as part of many positive aspects of our lives.
- The selling of alcohol within a community has to be placed within this context, with off-sales being a part of this culture.
- It is also recognised that when misused, alcohol causes considerable damage to society.
- Any changes to behaviour need to be driven by social acceptance/ unacceptance.
- How young people consume alcohol has changed. Alcohol is now consumed to 'get smashed', rather than 'get merry'.
- Across many of the research participants, alcohol was viewed as an 'ordinary' commodity similar to general groceries.
- Health Strategic Stakeholders thought responsibility for change must come from government with a consistent and concerted approach.

#### *Off-Sales and Licensing*

- In general, manufacturers and retailers take responsible selling of alcohol seriously.
- The new Scottish Licensing Act is seen as a positive step by Health and Community Key Stakeholders.
- More focus must be placed upon the issues surrounding off-sales, e.g. third party selling and price discounting.

## **Purchasing and Off-Sales**

- Lager/beer and wine are the largest sellers in Scotland mirroring the UK off-sales trend.
- It is difficult to ascertain the time between purchase and consumption for most off-sales purchases other than those bought for 'front-loading'.
- Pre-mixed drinks and lager/beer were more popular with those under 25 whereas spirits and wine were more popular with those over 25. The notable exception was vodka, which was popular with young females. However, it must be noted there were variable, localised consumption patterns across the six study areas.
- More people are accessing off-sales, with the main reason due to the cost of alcohol. On-sales alcohol was viewed as increasingly expensive in comparison to off-sales alcohol, hence frontloading was a popular activity.

## **Promotions**

- Knowledge of promotional activity is commonplace and it was accepted by all study participants that promotions are a regular feature of grocery shopping in general in Scotland.
- Promotional strategies to increase purchasing are a common and expected phenomenon within our consumer culture. The sale of alcohol is no different with various strategies being employed to encourage additional and/or unplanned purchasing.
- The collated evidence supports a theory that whilst people may be *brand* switchers they do not tend to switch between *types* of alcohol. This, in part, may be because promotions are now so common place there is not the necessity for people to switch from the type of alcohol favoured because consumers will, in general, always manage to access a deal on their favoured type of product.
- General opinions expressed during this research suggest that consumers are more affected by price-discounting than multi-buy offers.
- Measuring the relationship between purchasing and consumption patterns with regards to off-sales is extremely difficult because it is difficult to monitor whether alcohol is consumed immediately or stockpiled.

- The primary technique used for the promotion of alcohol in off-sales is price discounting (in particular ramped discounting), and is often event driven.

## **Behaviour**

- Frontloading is an accepted practice by both young and old, but the clearest examples of this come from those under 25 years.
- Antisocial behaviour in and around off-sales is limited. The perception of considerable alcohol related antisocial behaviour may more accurately be labelled as young persons' nuisance behaviour.
- Direct underage purchasing is not as prevalent in off-sales as third-party purchasing for those underage.
- Whilst concerns about specific drinks or brands may be warranted in some areas, it may be more beneficial to concentrate on the wider category of low priced, budget alcohol.

## **Case Studies**

Locations A (urban) and B (accessible rural) were selected as they gave insight into a wider range of issues associated with alcohol, off-sales selling and problem drinking.

In both locations possible underage consumption of alcohol was observed but selling of such alcohol was not categorically observed. All stores that participated in the study operated 'Think 21' policies. Third party purchasing of alcohol is evidently a key issue to be addressed in the future.

Both locations had hotspot areas where people would consume alcohol outdoors, and such areas were well known to community residents. It also appeared that the outdoor consumption of alcohol is, in some way, managed locally not just by Police but by the whole community with regards to what is seen as acceptable and tolerated behaviour.

Although community youth activities were offered in these areas, it is clear that there will remain a quota of young people who do not wish to take part in supervised activities and therefore will seek out alternative ways to spend their time. Further, in all but one of the six store sites, no outdoor drinking was observed (directly outside shops), indicating that people tend to seek out less visible places to drink outdoors. The main types of antisocial behaviour observed were youths congregating and litter. No violence was observed.

## Recommendations

At a wider societal level there needs to be further concerted local action on addressing community attitudes to drinking and acceptability of drunkenness. This should include the better engagement of local licensees across the range of off-sales outlets within communities.

Therefore as part of the responsibility of the Licensing Standards Officers and/or Fora in each area a better interaction and connection to local groups such as community planning partnerships or community safety groups needs to be encouraged.

In addressing alcohol related antisocial behaviour within communities the literature does suggest that there should be more alcohol education offered within the school environment. This should be welcomed but it must focus on challenging behaviour and concepts of risk with specific attention given to the role and interaction with off-sales.

There needs to be stricter enforcement through the courts with regards to those selling to underage persons and those buying on behalf of underage youngsters. The level of action against those has in the past been minimal. Without criminalising young people unnecessarily, licensing laws and regulations should ensure that age restrictions are effectively enforced, as well as perhaps addressing the consistency of laws surrounding public drinking.

Training of Staff (especially in smaller outlets) should move beyond a primary focus of a 'Think 21' policy and the responsibility on purely selling to those underage. Much more focus should be placed on the importance of tackling third party buying for those underage as part of the training remit. In general, good practice suggests refresher training sessions are necessary to prolong the basic impetus of ID checks.

The training and development of staff within the off-sales sector should include more detailed and realistic contexts in

the experience of dealing with the public. There may be scope to enforce a stipulation on staffing within off-sales that new staff have to be supervised by an experienced colleague for a specific time period. The aim should be to enable the building of confidence in young and inexperienced staff to interact and engage clearly with those purchasing, allowing them to make better informed decisions.

In addition to this, an agreed national Proof of Age and No Proof No Sale scheme should be further investigated with developments in technologies potentially offering more options.

Wider health promotion and media focus should be addressed with challenges to the culture of third party buying of alcohol. Responsibilities of underage selling should not just focus on off-sales staff, but a wider campaign questioning the acceptance of adults buying for those underage.

From the evidence in this report, local action on the promotion of alcohol is not necessarily worth pursuing unless the issue of the overall price of alcohol is addressed.

It should be noted that within the literature there is evidence that increasing the price of alcohol may be an effective method of reducing its use by young people. There are instances of targeted taxes in a number of countries, namely in response to young people's preference for certain types of drinks. France, Switzerland, Germany and Denmark have employed this intervention with relative success.

This project has been an initial step in understanding the impact of off-sales and the selling of alcohol within communities but what is apparent is that considerable amounts of popular alcohol brands are very cheap, affordable and accessible. Price promotion and discounting were seen by industry, health and community voices as key issues that needed to be addressed, however, they could only be resolved by serious discussion involving market leaders, the alcohol industry and government.

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The full research report "The Relationship between Off-Sales and Problem Drinking in Scotland" which is summarised in this research findings is a web only document and is available on the publications page of the Scottish Executive website at:

[www.scotland.gov.uk/publications/recent](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/publications/recent)

The literature review undertaken as part of this research is also available as a web only document on the publications page of the Scottish Executive website at:

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ISBN 978-0-7559-6492-5

