

# Alcohol policy

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## Can Government tackle Britain's problems with alcohol without penalising the responsible?

It is generally accepted that Britain has an alcohol problem. Our alcohol consumption has been rising since the 1950s, and this has brought consequences for public health and public order.

### LICENSING ACT 2003

Much of the attention has focused on the *Licensing Act 2003*, which brought an end to fixed licensing hours dating from the First World War. The Continental-style "café culture" promised by the architects of reform somehow never arrived, but nor did the explosion of "24-hour drinking" threatened by the tabloid press. In fact, only a tiny minority of licensed premises choose to open for 24 hours. Rather, the effect of ending the "11 o'clock swill" has been to push public order problems further into the night – with resultant strains on the emergency services. Some fear that city centres have become "no-go zones" for families and older people at night and call for the 2003 Act to be tightened.

Politicians are anxious to act on the issues, but standard policy measures risk hitting the good as well as the bad. Government has been keen to safeguard the interests of "responsible" drinkers and to endorse the "great British pub" (where drinking is supervised), especially at a time of economic difficulty when many pubs are going out of business.

Likewise, it is economically and politically expedient to support traditional and regional industries such as manufacturers of whisky,

cider and real ale. Consequently, policy-makers have looked for more targeted measures.

### TARGETED POLICY

In a substantial report published in January 2010, the Health Select Committee identified the main problem as being the availability of cheap alcohol. Supermarket alcohol prices have fallen in recent years. Indeed, some supermarkets have used beer as a "loss leader", especially during bank holiday weekends or major sporting events.

The committee's proposed solutions were to introduce minimum pricing and, in the longer term, to increase duty rates significantly. The Committee recognised that neither solution would work in isolation since the aim must be to discourage consumption of the cheapest alcohol (those types favoured by "binge" drinkers) without simply increasing the profits of supermarkets and the drinks industry.

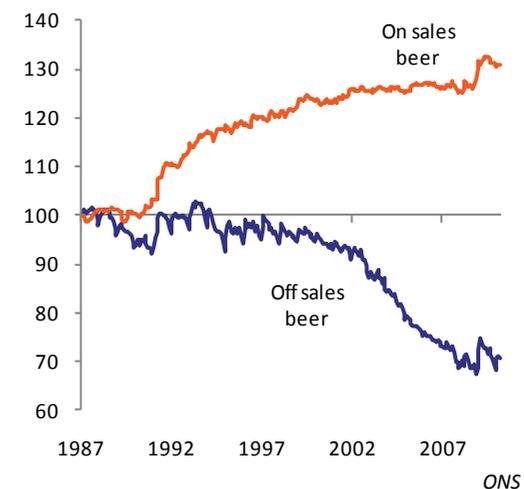
Scotland is in the process of introducing minimum pricing by legislation. The last

### PUB CLOSURES

The British Beer and Pub Association calculates that a net total of 2,365 pubs closed in 2009, a rate of 45 per week. There is, however, evidence that the rate of closures has slowed.

There are now around 52,500 pubs in the UK, compared with 58,600 when the Licensing Act 2003 came into force in 2005.

**The gap between real pub and off-licence beer prices has grown dramatically**  
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Westminster government was lukewarm about minimum pricing, arguing that it was a blunt instrument that would penalise those who drink responsibly as well as the "binge" drinkers who were its intended target. They preferred other options. These included new mandatory conditions on alcohol sales (e.g. banning "all you can drink" offers) and a new power for local authorities to initiate licence reviews when presented with evidence of illegal actions.

There is little hard data pointing unequivocally to an increase in alcohol-related crime since 2005, when the licensing reforms took effect. However, faced with palpable problems on the streets, residents, police and local authorities

have called for more targeted means to deal with alcohol-related disorder. Two legislative measures show the varying fortunes of such initiatives:

- *Designated Public Place Orders*, which give councils the power to ban drinking in specified public places (though not to issue a blanket ban on drinking in the open air) are a clear success: 780 were in force as of March 2010.
- *Conversely, Alcohol Disorder Zones* (empowering councils to surcharge licensed premises associated with disorder) have found no favour: not one has been set up. The difficulty lies in linking disorder to specific premises. The availability of off-licence alcohol facilitates "pre-loading" by drinkers, who may already be well on the way to intoxication when they arrive at pubs or clubs.

### WHERE FROM HERE?

Over the years there have been numerous "micro" measures, some seemingly successful, some evidently unsuccessful, some where the impact is not yet measurable. This is a case for "joined-up" government (between DCMS, the Department of Health and the Home Office) and considered reflection on what has worked. Whether effective and targeted policy can be formulated and enacted in the midst of a tabloid storm and the constant demands to be seen to be tackling a problem is another matter.