A new way of tackling public under-age drinking

Community Alcohol Partnerships
Summary

People in Britain are forced to live with the effects of alcohol misuse on a daily basis. The actions of a minority affect the lives of ordinary people in towns and cities across the United Kingdom. Public opinion research has shown that people across the country – the people who have to live with the effects of alcohol misuse – want targeted action rather than broad brush measures that penalise the responsible majority.

The Retail of Alcohol Standards Group (RASG) and Cambridgeshire Trading Standards recently conducted a successful pilot project in the market town of St Neots, Cambridgeshire. The project combined enforcement, education and community involvement to tackle under-age drinking in a holistic way.

The benefits of the scheme are still being seen. Since its inception the scheme has delivered the following:

- 42 per cent decrease in anti-social behaviour incidents in the St Neots area from August 2007 (pre-project) to February 2008 (post-project)
- 94 per cent decrease in under-age people found in possession of alcohol
- 92 per cent decrease in alcohol-related litter at key hot spot area
- Amount of alcohol found on young people in St Neots was significantly lower than expected or in comparison with similar locations, such as Huntingdon
- No new hot spot problem areas created (i.e. no ‘balloon’ effect)
- Changed enforcement activity was cost-neutral
- Better relationship between retailers and enforcers
- Public perception that public spaces were more pleasant than previously – cleaner and fewer incidents of group drinking
A BETTER WAY: THE ST NEOTS PROJECT

In September 2007, RASG and Cambridgeshire Trading Standards began a new initiative – a Community Alcohol Partnership (CAP) – to reduce alcohol-related disorder. They aimed to bring about a cultural change by improving information-sharing between off-trade retailers, the local police and Trading Standards officers. St Neots, a small market town in central Cambridgeshire with a history of anti-social behaviour and youth-related disorder, was selected for the project.

St Neots has a population of 30,585 (10.4 per cent of which are aged between 10 and 17), with two secondary schools, a bowling centre, skateboard park, youth club and leisure centre. There are 20 off-licence premises in the town, ranging from small independents to large national retailers.

One of CAP’s main purposes was to **break down the barriers between shopkeepers and police** which have, until now, made it more difficult to find solutions to under-age drinking. It aimed to improve recognition amongst enforcement authorities and the wider community that retailers are in fact often the victims of attempted under-age purchasing and should be seen as the **front line of enforcement** rather than the cause of the problem.

‘This has been the first time in the country that such a joint approach has been piloted and our initial results show it has been positive. The main thing to take from this is that each individual element is not innovative, but the way we have all taken responsibility and brought a holistic approach to the problem has had the greatest effect.’

- Charlotte Wilson,
  Cambridgeshire County Council Trading Standards
**Structure**

*Duration*
September 2007 to January 2008

*Objectives*
- Reduce harm to society and victims through better enforcement of the existing legislative toolkit
- Deliver cultural change within Cambridgeshire through better education
- Challenge and change public perceptions

*Delivery partners*
RASG, Cambridgeshire County Council Trading Standards, off-licence retailers, the police, local authorities, local secondary schools, youth clubs, local charity Drinksense, the local press and the local community itself.

> ‘This is the new way of doing business, it’s the way forward and it’s not going to change. **This is about the long term health of our children.**’
> - Mark Hopkins, Assistant Chief Constable, Cambridgeshire Constabulary

> ‘It is simply a new way of working, firstly in joint patrols and activities with Trading Standards, secondly bringing retailers on board rather than making them the enemy. It is about intelligence gathering as much as enforcement, and is revenue neutral. It does not cost any extra money; it is just a smarter way of working, rather than increased work... We will continue to run patrols as it’s what the community has asked for.’
> - Mark Woolner, St Neots and District Police Inspector
**Actions and Results**

*Joint working between police, Trading Standards and retailers*

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<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
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<td>Trading Standards worked with store managers (visiting them during the day) and positioned themselves in retail outlets to advise any alleged offenders (young people or proxy purchasers) of the reason their purchase was refused. 129 young people were stopped and searched by the police.</td>
<td>Police, Trading Standards and retailers</td>
<td>First nine joint enforcement operations: 32 young people found to be in <strong>possession of alcohol</strong>. Tenth enforcement operation: 1 person in possession. Eleventh enforcement operation: 2 in possession. <strong>Overall decrease of 94%</strong></td>
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**Publicity**

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<td>The local press provided with regular news stories on the project (e.g. number of seizures of alcohol)</td>
<td>Police, Trading Standards and local press</td>
<td>Public perception that <strong>public spaces were more pleasant</strong> than previously – cleaner and fewer incidents of group drinking. Anecdotal evidence and feedback of <strong>improved community confidence</strong>. Local MP Jonathan Djanogly commented in <em>St Neots Town Crier</em> (1 May 2008) that he currently receives <strong>fewer letters of complaint</strong> about ASB issues in one of the key hot spot areas than he did previously.</td>
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## Enforcement and Education

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<td>Regular police patrols of hot spot areas, confiscating alcohol from under 18s</td>
<td>Police, Trading Standards, retailers, Drinksense and schools</td>
<td>Number of <strong>anti-social behaviour (ASB) incidents</strong> across the pilot area in Aug 2007 (pre-pilot): 335</td>
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<td>Retailers were provided with telephone numbers of Trading Standards and police staff at times of enforcement operations to immediately report attempted under-age or proxy purchasing</td>
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<td>Number of ASB incidents across the pilot area in Feb 2008 (post-pilot): 196</td>
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<td>Trading Standards and neighbourhood policing teams visited schools to talk to pupils about the legal and criminal issues relating to alcohol</td>
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<td><strong>Overall decrease of ASB incidents of 42%</strong></td>
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<td>Provision of education to students at the local colleges about the law relating to young people and alcohol and the penalties for committing crime</td>
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<td>Decrease in alcohol-related litter at St Neots skate park: 21 bottles and 86 cans of beer/cider/alcopops on first weekend of project, 1 bottle and 8 cans found on final weekend. <strong>Overall decrease of 92%</strong></td>
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<td>Drinksense facilitated an alcohol awareness workshop for parents</td>
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<td><strong>The number of youths congregating in the area reduced</strong> as a result and crime in nearby Buckden has more than halved in the three months following the rollout of the project. In particular, a series of incidents of criminal damage and vehicle crime has ceased</td>
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<td>Letters and leaflets distributed to explain the law in this area and the implications of breaking it</td>
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All of the above enforcement activity was **cost-neutral** and **did not create any new hot spot problem areas** (i.e. no ‘balloon’ effect).
Learning the lessons from St Neots

The St Neots CAP showed what can be done with the existing tools for enforcement. It engineered cultural change so that all partners focused their activity on tackling the wider problems of under-age drinking. It demonstrates the success of a collaborative process in tackling alcohol-related crime and misuse.

But it is only a starting point. If CAP shows anything, it is that collaborative working allows a community to take control of its destiny and solve problems of public under-age drinking at a local level. It recognises that towns and cities throughout the UK will each have different demographic and social problems. This model therefore deliberately stays clear of offering prescriptive solutions. Instead, the CAP partners have identified some key principles and potential barriers and how to overcome them, whilst maximising the drivers for success.

The Government should heed the wide-ranging endorsements of those who have seen the benefits of the St Neots project at first hand by adapting and replicating this model across the country. Through targeted enforcement and focused education – all of which is cost-neutral and simply re-allocating existing resources – it is possible to effect lasting cultural change and bolster the self confidence of local communities.

RASG and Cambridgeshire Trading Standards have prepared a toolkit of the model and would be happy to speak to any organisation in any part of the UK (and regardless of whether based in the public, private or not-for-profit sector) to pass on lessons learned, share knowledge and advise on best practice for tackling alcohol misuse and under-age drinking, based on the CAP experience.

‘Shop staff have acted as our colleagues on the frontline and helped us to really bring home the impact of under-age drinking to the youngsters. We are never going to be able to cure under-age drinking completely but we believe with this scheme we can make a real difference. We hope that our work in St Neots will act as a blueprint for launching CAPs across Cambridgeshire and beyond.’

- Leon Livermore, Head of Cambridgeshire Trading Standards
The Retail of Alcohol Standards Group (RASG) was set up in 2005 to seriously drive down under-age sales. For the first time competitors in the high street agreed to work together, sharing best practice and common signage to deliver robust policies designed to curb what had up to then been unacceptably high levels of sales. The Government has publicly welcomed the fall in illegal sales but RASG has not been complacent. Indeed it is clear that more than ever, retailers need to be in the forefront of a campaign to stop young people from drinking in public and causing social nuisance. This is a continuing blight in so many of our market towns and city centre spaces.

The Wine and Spirit Trade Association (WSTA) provides the secretariat for RASG. Members include WSTA, BRC and ACS affiliated companies.

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