

Thames Reach's response to the Government Alcohol Strategy Consultation February 7, 2013

Introduction

This briefing paper contains Thames Reach's response to the Government's Alcohol Consultation which includes plans to introduce minimum pricing at 45p per unit.

Thames Reach supports this proposal in a bid to curb the health problems and anti social behaviour linked with the manufacture and distribution of cheap super-strength drinks.

Thames Reach – Services and Super-Strength Campaign

Thames Reach provides a range of services to vulnerable and socially excluded people, many of whom have suffered homelessness. The organisation's roots lie in working with rough sleepers in London and it has, since inception in 1984, considerably diversified its services and increased the number of people it supports and the range of need it actively addresses. The services that Thames Reach now provides include:

- Street outreach services
- Hostels
- Specialist accommodation for people with substance misuse and mental health problems
- Tenancy support services
- Learning and employment programmes
- Day services offering a range of advice and assistance

Thames Reach works with thousands of individuals who are struggling with alcohol problems. Invariably, the products being abused are super-strength lagers and ciders.

Thames Reach manages a series of specialist alcohol services where we help people seek treatment and get their lives back on track.

We have also campaigned relentlessly since 2005 to raise awareness of the terrible problem caused by super-strength lagers and ciders.

Thames Reach has lobbied both political parties and the drinks industry in a bid to increase the price and reduce the availability of these drinks.

We called on the Government to increase the taxes on super-strength drinks as the vast majority of scientific studies prove that people's drinking habits are affected by price.

An Early Day Motion was tabled in Parliament and received cross-party support.

The Treasury invited Thames Reach to comment on and propose changes to the alcohol and taxation review in summer 2010 and we were delighted that the Government introduced a tax adding 25p to cans of super-strength lager.

We have worked closely with the media on the super-strength scandal and helped develop a series of BBC TV programmes and influenced national newspaper coverage with news articles and features on the subject appearing in the Sun, Sunday Mirror, Times, Guardian, Observer and Independent.

We have also put pressure on the drinks industry to behave in line with corporate social responsibility expectations. Here there has been one major success when Heineken withdrew from the super-strength cider market following a visit to a Thames Reach hostel.

We support the introduction of minimum pricing at 45p per unit.

Factors and evidence backing the minimum unit price for alcohol

Thames Reach is particularly concerned at the damage caused by the relatively cheap and very strong super-strength lagers and ciders – both in terms of people’s health and life expectancy and their impact on people’s conduct and the concurrent violence and anti-social behaviour.

According to our research, super-strength drinks are killing more homeless people than heroin or crack cocaine.

Virtually all the available evidence indicates people’s behaviour with respect to alcohol consumption follows price so we believe the introduction of a minimum price of 45p per unit would see consumers switch to weaker and less harmful products.

We are confident this would in turn encourage manufacturers to switch away from the manufacture of super-strength drinks.

Recently, Heineken behaved admirably and showed great responsibility by removing super-strength drinks from their portfolio, after visiting a Thames Reach hostel for homeless people.

Sadly, other companies such as Carlsberg have bought into the super-strength market by buying out Skol Super, whilst wholesale companies are flooding off licenses with super-strength ciders such as White Ace – containing a massive 22.5 units of alcohol for as little as £3.99, only 17p per unit and less than half of the Government’s proposed minimum price.

Which other people, organisations or groups could be particularly affected by a minimum unit price for alcohol?

We have run a seven year campaign to highlight the impact of super-strength lagers and ciders on the health of homeless people.

We’ve helped many individuals through encouraging treatment or a switch to weaker products, but six former rough sleepers in a single hostel died over the course of 12 months. Across all our projects, 50 homeless people died in three years. Brain damage and liver failure have become commonplace.

In addition, a group of middle aged people entitled the ‘young olds’ have emerged with health problems commonly associated with people past retirement age – memory loss, poor mobility and incontinence.