

Antisocial

What methods can you use to tackle underage drinking? Cleveland Police is using a combination of strategies to stamp out the problem – including revoking the licences of those who sell to underage customers. John Dean reports

Underage drinkers swigging from a bottle and hanging around on street corners can result in antisocial behaviour. But how do you target the people who sell them the alcohol in the first place and the adults who buy it for them?

Off-licences are being closed down in parts of north-east England in a police campaign aimed at reducing the amount of alcohol sold to underage customers. However, rather than taking offending store owners to court, police have hit at the heart of their businesses by successfully applying for licences to be revoked.

At the forefront of the initiative has been Sgt Tim Robson, of the substance misuse north unit in the north area command of Durham Police, based at Chester-le-Street. In the past year or so, he has been involved in actions that have closed down three off-licences for selling to those underage. Two were small outlets but the third was a supermarket, which also had its licence revoked after police gathered evidence relating to the sale of alcohol to underage teenagers.

According to Sgt Robson, a fifth of illegal sales to underage customers come from such larger outlets. Government research, carried out by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, published last month, found youngsters are now binge drinking from the age of 16 to 24.

Sgt Robson believes that asking council licensing committees to revoke licences is the most effective way of ensuring that traders obey the law. He said: "We will seek the revoking of licences where we think it is required. We have to tackle the nuisance caused by young people who have been drinking and are acting in an antisocial manner. Their actions impact on people and communities. "Alcohol leads to them behaving violently and committing criminal damage. We have had cases of them throwing stones at windows and intimidating older people."

Part of the force approach has been a scheme whereby, having confiscated alcohol from youngsters on the street and taken the children home to warn their parents, officers use



drinking

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manufacturers’ codes on cans and bottles to prove which shop sold it. “Other forces are now adopting this. We know those outlets that are selling booze to underage customers and will confront them. Using the codes means we can prove they sold the alcohol. In appropriate cases, we will ask the licensing committee to consider revoking their licences,” says Sgt Robson.

The force has also employed other measures to tackle underage drinking, including taking fake identification off young people who use documents such as driving licences. This forces them to have to re-apply and endure the awkward questions that follow.

Officers can also thwart the attempts of youths to find other ways round the law, such as hiding alcohol in soft drinks, using a testing stick which can detect the alcohol. In another separate strand to the campaign, several pubs and cafes have also been closed down for other breaches of their licences, including one for overcrowding.

Enforcing standards

Police officers have also provided intelligence to Durham Trading Standards for their current campaign to use volunteers to detect off-licences selling alcohol, cigarettes and items such as video games and aerosol paint to underage customers.

Over the past six months, there have been 66 attempted test purchases where 13 sales were made to teenagers. Now, the campaign is being extended to other age-restricted goods such as fireworks, solvents and butane refills.

According to Karyn Cunningham, a fair trading officer who has been heavily involved in co-ordinating the operation, the close liaison with the force has been crucial.

“We work closely with the police. We use the intelligence they have gathered, as well as complaints from the public, to run operations in areas where we know we have problems. What we are doing has had a deterrent effect and is raising awareness.”

The unit has used child volunteers for a number of years and Phillip Holman, the head of Durham County Council’s Trading Standards department, said:

“The use of child volunteers has been a very effective enforcement tool and deterrent in relation to underage alcohol and tobacco sales. By extending their use to other age restricted products, we hope to reduce illegal sales, protect vulnerable young people and help reduce incidents of antisocial behaviour.”

And Councillor Brian Myers, county council cabinet member for Trading Standards, said: “Our work on prevention and detection of sales of underage products plays an important role in protecting the health of young children and reducing the fear of crime in our communities.



Photography: Gilbert Johnston

Sgt David Ashton: older teenagers are buying for younger ones

But the problem is wider than traders selling to underage customers; tackling the issue of older people buying drink for younger ones was the aim of a police initiative in the market town of Crook, in Weardale, part of the Durham force area.

Prompted by local concerns about youths committing antisocial behaviour, police targeted off-licences they believed were selling drink to youngsters, using information from local officers, trading standards and Crook residents.

Sgt David Ashton, a local beat officer, said: "The use of child volunteers for test purchases is alright as far as it goes but we were having problems with eighteen and nineteen year olds buying alcohol for young people and had to take a different angle."

The police and trading standards can each tackle underage sales but police alone have the responsibility of moving against older people buying for children. This is why Sgt Ashton put together a surveillance operation, the first one at Easter with a follow-up during the summer.

The result was that three people were issued fixed penalty notices for buying for minors. Sgt Ashton said: "I would say that this kind of operation is an effective tool. It can be successful if you can make an example of a few people and we did seize a large amount of alcohol. However, it is just one tool in the toolbox. For instance, we have now set up a watch scheme for local licensees."

Northumbria is another north-east police force taking tough action:

- In one case, a North Tyneside supermarket was required to make more stringent checks on younger customers following action by Northumbria Police and North Tyneside Council.
 - At a Licensing Review held on North Tyneside, a local branch of Morrisons was found to have sold alcohol to children three times since December 2005. Staff members responsible were issued with a £80 fixed penalty notice for each breach. Ch Insp Bruce Storey, of North Tyneside Area Command, said: "We regularly carry out checks with trading standards officers to see if outlets are complying with the law. When they are found to have breached the law, we will demand they take effective measures to prevent this from occurring again.
 - Also in the force area, a scheme to track where underage youngsters are buying alcohol is being pioneered in Newcastle. Bottlwatch uses irremovable stickers, unique to each off-licence, which are stuck to bottles and cans of alcohol popular with underage drinkers. If police seize alcohol or discarded empties with stickers on, officers can trace it back to where it was bought. Community Inspector for the area, Mark Warcup, said: "Although the majority of licensees in the area behave responsibly, they can experience difficulties with adults buying drink on behalf of youngsters. This underage binge drinking is leading to youths getting involved in low-level crime such as disorder and anti-social behaviour, as well as having an impact on their health. This new system provides each store with a unique code so the stickers attached to drink containers can be traced back to them."
- The initiative has received the backing of traders in the area, who are already members of the Off-Watch scheme in which off-licence staff hold regular meetings with police.