

# A drinking nation?

Wales and alcohol



Alcohol Concern  
Making Sense of Alcohol



## Alcohol Concern

Alcohol Concern is the national agency on alcohol misuse campaigning for effective alcohol policy and improved services for people whose lives are affected by alcohol-related problems.

## Our work in Wales

Alcohol Concern opened its office in Cardiff in August 2009. Alcohol Concern Cymru is focusing on policy and public health in Wales, acting as a champion for alcohol harm reduction.

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# Contents

	Page
Executive summary	4
Introduction	6
A brief history of alcohol in Wales	7
Alcohol in Wales today	11
Why do we drink? – conversations with drinkers in one Welsh town	17
The future of alcohol use in Wales – discussion and recommendations	19
References	23

# Executive summary



Alcohol has been produced and consumed in Wales for around 4,000 years, and has played a major role in the social, economic and cultural life of the country.

Particularly since the advent of industrialisation in the 18th and 19th centuries, drinking and occasional heavy drinking have become social norms in Wales, leading one historian to refer to alcohol as “the real opiate of the Welsh”. The drinks industry has been ever ready to take advantage of this appetite for alcohol, with three-for-one drinks promotions available as early as 1836.

This drinking culture did to some extent generate a counter-culture in the form of the Welsh temperance movement, and the campaign to secure and maintain Sunday closing of pubs in Wales. However, although these movements sought to portray themselves as guardians of Welsh values, they proved to be largely unsuccessful and unpopular in Wales.

Alcohol consumption in Wales has risen markedly in recent decades, with many people drinking well beyond the recommended guidelines. Overconsumption has manifested itself both in the problem of binge drinking in Wales’ town and city centres, and in a trend towards heavier drinking at home. In the latter case, home drinking seems to be encouraged by a policy of deep discounting of alcoholic drinks by major grocery retailers, with discounts often dependent on bulk purchases.

Alcohol has also become closely linked to the widespread Welsh passion for sport, with major brewers seeking to enhance their Welsh brand by associating themselves with teams and events.

In addition, Wales has one of the most serious problems of drinking amongst young people below the legal age to purchase alcohol, with 54 per cent of 15 year old boys in Wales and 52 per cent of girls of that age saying they have been drunk at least twice.

*“Far from being a nation that enjoys a drink in moderation, all the figures point to Wales becoming a nation binge drinking its way, if not to an early grave, then to a barrage of costly health problems.”*

Madeleine Brindley, 2010<sup>1</sup>

Overall, it appears that a culture of alcohol overuse has developed and is continuing to develop in Wales, with drinking to get drunk becoming increasingly normal and socially acceptable. This was reinforced by responses to our face-to-face interviews with drinkers in one Welsh town in the summer of 2010. These found considerable enthusiasm for a “good piss up”, with heavy drinking often seen as an essential part of a good night out, and people only stopping drinking when they felt they could not drink any more. Regular drunkenness was seen by some as not only acceptable but as something to look forward too, even though it often led to regrettable incidents.

Awareness of the concept of units of alcohol was very low amongst interviewees, with a number of people reporting that they measured the limits of their alcohol consumption by how unwell or out of control they felt: “when the room starts to spin”, “when I have to be put in a taxi”. One other major factor limiting people’s drinking was price, with several people saying they drank according to how much alcohol they could afford to buy.

To address this situation of increasing alcohol misuse, and its increasing normalisation, Alcohol Concern makes the following recommendations. Our aim is to support a shift in drinking habits and drinking culture in Wales towards a situation in which Wales has a healthier relationship with alcohol.



## Recommendation 1

As recommended by the UK's Chief Medical Officers<sup>2,3</sup> and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence,<sup>4</sup> a minimum price of 50p per unit of alcohol needs to be implemented in both the on-trade and off-trade across England and Wales. This needs to be coupled with a new scale of duties incentivising the production and consumption of lower strength drinks.

Given the lack of progress in establishing a minimum price per unit across England and Wales, Alcohol Concern supports devolving the necessary powers to the National Assembly for Wales.

## Recommendation 3

To reduce irresponsible promotions and increase consumer choice, the Mandatory Code for Alcohol Retailers in England and Wales<sup>6</sup> must remain in force and be implemented in full.

## Recommendation 4

Given the current low levels of understanding about sensible drinking in Wales and deep-seated habits of alcohol overuse, targeted and sustained social marketing campaigns are needed to increase understanding of alcohol and bring about a lasting change in the drinking culture in Wales.

## Recommendation 2

In recognition of the growth of alcohol misuse as a public health issue, and in order to enable licensing authorities to properly address this issue, the protection and improvement of public health needs to be established as a fifth objective within the Licensing Act 2003. This has already taken place in Scotland,<sup>5</sup> and if the UK Government is unwilling to make this important change across England and Wales, the necessary powers should be devolved to Wales.

## Recommendation 5

In order to raise public awareness of sensible drinking and the concept of drinking in units, the number of units of each drink should be prominently displayed: on the front of the packaging, bottles and cans for drinks bought in the off-trade, and on menus and pumps in pubs and restaurants.

Given the failure of the drinks industry so far to comply with voluntary labelling codes, such labelling requirements should be mandatory.

# Introduction



Wales' relationship with alcohol has been complex and packed with contradictions. Whilst some commentators have idealised the "temperate Welsh",<sup>7</sup> others have suggested the nation has sunk comfortably into a "Welsh alcoholic way of life".<sup>8</sup>

88 per cent of adults in Wales say that they drink alcohol,<sup>9</sup> and for many of us alcohol is a normal part of a healthy lifestyle. However, statistics show that 52 per cent of men and 38 per cent of women admit to drinking more than the recommended amount.<sup>10</sup> The true figures are likely to be significantly higher since research has shown that surveys of alcohol consumption generally underestimate consumption.<sup>11</sup> The consequences of this growing national habit are reflected in increasing rates of alcohol-related diseases,<sup>12</sup> and alcohol misuse in Wales is recognised as a national public health problem.<sup>13</sup>

This report looks at the long history of Wales' relationship with alcohol, and at how alcohol has played a major role in Welsh culture and continues to do so. It examines past and current trends, and makes recommendations for ensuring Wales has a healthier relationship with alcohol in the future.

# A brief history of alcohol in Wales



## 'Fresh mead was their feast'

Alcohol has been a part of Welsh life since the earliest times, and it is likely that the Bronze Age inhabitants of Wales were brewing beer around 2,000 years BC.<sup>14</sup> The oldest surviving Welsh text, the 7th century *Gododdin*, describes an army of ancient Britons taking their fill of mead before a raid on the village of Catterick in modern-day Yorkshire.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, alcohol was such a normal part of Welsh life in the medieval period that the 10th century laws of Hywel Dda made several references to drink as a method of payment for officials, and to royal taxes to be paid in mead or beer.<sup>16</sup>

The joys of drink and frequenting ale houses were celebrated by poets, such as Dafydd ap Gwilym in his 14th century humorous verse *Trafferth mewn tafarn* (Trouble in a pub)<sup>17</sup> and alcohol played a role for centuries in social life and social rituals in Wales. As historian Russell Davies has noted, in 19th century rural Wales the brewing and drinking of strong ales was often linked to key events in the year, such as the harvest.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in 1885 the popular novelist Daniel Owen described the common practice in Flintshire of serving alcohol at funerals, and the strong reluctance to give it up.<sup>19</sup>

Not everyone in Wales, however, has been so enamoured with the benefits of booze, and as early as the 16th century, voices were being raised about the moral dangers of the demon drink. In 1580, Catholic writer Robert Gwyn warned the faithful in Wales that they would find no pubs on the road to heaven,<sup>20</sup> whilst in 1703, Protestant cleric Ellis Wynne wrote contemptuously of the social drinkers of his age as "good companions...with their heads boiling with drunken commotion".<sup>21</sup>

## 'The beer-loving Welsh'

It was perhaps during the 19th century – with increased industrialisation and movement of population into the burgeoning towns – that concerns about the detrimental effects of alcohol misuse on Welsh society first reached a peak. According to historian John Davies, "old rural Wales had been a country in which lord and peasant tipped with enthusiasm. The gentry sobered somewhat in the early nineteenth century, but it was quite otherwise amongst those who flooded into the industrial districts, where almost every feature of life served to intensify the innate beer-loving character of the Welsh".<sup>22</sup> In an age when water was not always safe to drink, workers in the new heavy industries relied on beer to quench their thirst; and more liberal licensing laws from 1830 onwards<sup>23</sup> meant that the supply was well able to keep up with this demand. In 1896, it was reported that Llanelli had one pub per 179 people,<sup>24</sup> although few places could compare with Blackwood, which boasted a hostelry for every five inhabitants in 1842.<sup>25</sup> Amongst this proliferation of alehouses, some early examples were seen of the marketing practices that later became common in pubs and supermarkets. In 1836, one Merthyr Tydfil publican was found to be offering three drinks for the price of one as an early morning special offer.<sup>26</sup>

*"The real opiate of the Welsh was alcohol... Alcohol was a thirst quencher, a reliever of physical pain and psychological strain, a symbol of human interdependence, a morale booster, a sleeping draft and a medicine...The hopelessness of destitution demanded a short-cut to oblivion. People took the shortest route out of Merthyr Tydfil or Swansea or Cardiff or Blackwood or Amlwch."*

Russell Davies, 2005<sup>27</sup>



Drinking and its effects became a topic of public debate and investigation. A report in 1850 on public health in north east Wales stated: “Drunkenness I found complained of, by all parties, as the disgrace of Wrexham”.<sup>28</sup> Just as in the 21st century, the harshest criticism was often reserved for young drinkers. In 1891, Daniel Owen complained that pubs that had once been a home to “old codgers” seeking “harmless conversation and gossip” were now filled with “empty-headed youths, not old enough to shave, drinking like animals and going home in a worse state than any animal”.<sup>29</sup>

### **‘You temperate Welsh’**

The growing drinking culture produced a significant counter-culture in the form of the Welsh temperance movement – a network of local societies aiming to reduce alcohol use and restrict the licensed trade – and by 1835 there were already 35 temperance societies in Wales.<sup>30</sup> The initial focus of temperance campaigners was on what would now be called a ‘harm reduction’ approach. For example, members of the Ebbw Vale Temperance Society were allowed two pints of beer a day, similar to the current recommended maximum for men of 3-4 units per day. Problems arose, however, when some adherents decided to save up their weekly beer allowance in order to knock back 14 pints at the weekend – an early example of the problem now referred to as ‘binge drinking’.<sup>31</sup> In the face of such difficulties, total abstinence seemed like the only sensible course to many.<sup>32</sup>

Although the numerical strength of the temperance movement in Wales declined, for many people abstinence (or moderation at least) were hallmarks of both respectability and Welshness. In his 1957 novel *Wythnos yng Nghymru fydd* (A week in future Wales) Islwyn Ffowc Elis offered two visions of Wales in 2033, one Welsh-speaking and thoroughly civilised, the other Anglicised and blighted by “pubs, chip shops, saloons, dance halls and gambling dens”.<sup>33</sup>

The implicit association between Welshness and temperance was also maintained for many years by the ban on the sale of alcohol at the National Eisteddfod. Like the Welsh Sunday closing legislation (see below) this was regarded as ineffective by many since alcohol was often being consumed surreptitiously at the event,<sup>34</sup> and quite openly by festival goers at nearby licensed premises.<sup>35</sup>

*“By the way lads, where is the Eisteddfod? Saturday night, we were shouting like idiots out of the car windows on the way into Cardigan, after drinking all the way down. The ‘Owen Glyndwr’ in Machynlleth, ‘Skinners’ in Aber, the ‘Feathers’ in Aberaeron – we went through the lot, and by half past ten we were all blotto, just to set the pattern for the week, yeah?”*

Goronwy Owen, 1978<sup>36</sup>

Polls by Eisteddfod organisers in 2001-03 found that between 60 and 65 per cent of visitors wanted to see a bar on the field, and from 2004 the sale of beer and wine was permitted adjacent to food outlets.<sup>37</sup> This controversy revived in 2010 over plans (eventually carried out) to permit the sale of alcohol with food at the Urdd Eisteddfod youth festival.<sup>38</sup>



## Never on a Sunday

Undoubtedly the greatest victory for the Welsh temperance movement was the 1881 Welsh Sunday Closing Act. This rare example in the pre-devolution period of legislation specific to Wales was an explicit recognition that Welsh opinion on alcohol issues was seen as different to that in England.

The legislation prohibited the sale of alcohol in pubs in Wales on Sundays. It became a totem of Welshness for some, but was seen as hypocritical by many since it largely targeted the working classes, who tended to drink in pubs, whilst middle classes drinkers often drank at home or in private clubs and were free to continue doing so. Several ingenious attempts to circumvent the law were seen, such as Cardiff's notorious Club de Marl or Hotel de Marl in the 1890s: a gathering of up to 2,000 men on Sunday mornings at a disused clay pit where barrels of drink were provided free of charge in return for a 'voluntary' fee.<sup>39,40</sup> Drinkers also made use of a clause in the legislation allowing the provision of drinks to genuine travellers, by walking to the next parish for a pint. Those in eastern districts had the option to travel to neighbouring English towns where Sundays were still 'wet',<sup>41</sup> in what was described by one Archbishop of Wales as the "Sunday trek across the English border for drinking purposes".<sup>42</sup> One enterprising brewery sought to take advantage of the ban by selling 'Sunday sustainers': two pints flagons of beer that could be bought on Saturday to drink the next day.<sup>43</sup>

The Act was extended to Monmouthshire in 1921,<sup>44</sup> but during the 20th century it became increasing seen as an anachronism, and as a hindrance both to tourism and to the social life of the Welsh themselves. Following a referendum in 1961, many areas in Wales allowed Sunday opening, including most major centres of population, and in a series of local votes from 1975 to 1996 all of Wales gradually went 'wet' on Sundays.<sup>45</sup>

## The local option

On the back of the Sunday closing legislation in 1881, further attempts were made to control the availability of alcohol in Wales, again on the grounds that anti-alcohol attitudes were felt to be much stronger in Wales than in England. In 1891, the young politician David Lloyd George claimed that three quarters of people in Wales favoured a complete ban on alcohol sales.<sup>46</sup>

*"This is what we say about the drinks trade; the trade...is damaging to body and soul; and because of this, society has a right to intervene in it, to restrain it, and to set boundaries to it."*

Thomas Jones, 1898<sup>47</sup>

One proposal was to establish a 'local option' whereby the residents in any district in Wales could vote to reduce the number of pubs in the area, or to ban them altogether – with a simple majority of 50 per cent or more needed to close a quarter of the pubs, and a two-thirds majority sufficient to secure a total ban.<sup>48</sup> Four Local Option Bills were introduced into the House of Commons between 1887 and 1893, although none passed into law.<sup>49</sup>



Further restrictions on pubs did come into force in parts of Wales in 1915 as part of emergency wartime legislation, with the effects being felt most strongly in the key ports of Cardiff, Newport and Barry. In designated towns, pubs were allowed to open for only five and a half hours a day, and buying in rounds was banned.<sup>50</sup> These restrictions were partially relaxed in 1921, but pubs were still obliged to stay closed in the early morning and the afternoons, a situation that remained unchanged until 1988.<sup>51</sup>

*"We are fighting Germany, Austria and drink; and as far as I can see, the greatest of these three deadly foes is drink."*

David Lloyd George, 1915<sup>52</sup>

Rugby also went hand in hand with drink, with alcohol providing a means both to relax during the game and to celebrate victory or obliterate the pain of defeat. The period from 1964 to 1979, when Wales' rugby heroes won seven Triple Crowns and England failed to record a single victory in Cardiff, led according to John Davies to "a redefinition of the characteristics of the Welsh" from "puritan chapel-goers" to "muscular boozers who were doubtful whether there was life beyond the dead-ball line". The negative consequences of this could be clearly seen during the 1970s, when Cardiff police regularly made up to 50 arrests for alcohol-related offences at international games, and in 1980 spectators were banned from bringing their own alcohol into Cardiff Arms Park in an effort to stem drunken violence.<sup>57</sup>

*"The rain eased last night five minutes before the excursion train to Scotland for the Welsh rugby match was due out of Swansea. The men who had been pretending they were waiting for the rain to ease ran from the ex-international's pub across the station yard swinging their flagons or carrying their crates like soldiers rushing ammunition to the guns."*

W John Morgan, 1955<sup>58</sup>

## A sporting nation

One fairly constant factor in Wales' relationship with alcohol has been the national passion for sport. During the 16th and 17th centuries, drinking often accompanied traditional sports such as cnapan – a violent form of inter-parish football, played with a wooden ball, and goals several miles apart.<sup>53</sup> This pattern continued into the 20th century with the rise of association football and rugby union. As Martin Johnes has noted, professional football since its earliest day has been associated with drinking, with pubs applying for extended licenses on match days, and overindulgence commonplace amongst spectators.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, in 1925, one Swansea magistrate publicly expressed his surprise that he had no cases of drunkenness to deal with the day after a major soccer game in the town.<sup>55</sup>

The long-standing unofficial engagement between rugby and beer grew into a commercial marriage in 2004 when Cardiff-based Brains brewery became sponsors of the Welsh national side.<sup>59</sup> According to Brains themselves, the partnership has proved a lucrative one, with more than a week's worth of beer sales being recorded in 24 hours when Wales clinched the Grand Slam in March 2005.<sup>60</sup>

# Alcohol in Wales today



Alcohol consumption in Wales, as in the rest of the UK, has risen markedly in recent decades.<sup>61</sup> In 1978, men in England and Wales drank an average of 15.5 units of alcohol per week, and women 4.2 units per week,<sup>62</sup> well within what are now recognised as the recommended maximums of 21 units per week for men and 14 for women. Figures for 1987 found a small fall in the average number of units consumed,<sup>63</sup> but within this average figure many people were drinking over the recommended amounts – 28.8 per cent of men and 9.5 per cent of women in 1988.<sup>64</sup> Reflecting growing concern around this issue, in 1997 the Secretary of State for Wales announced a target to reduce the number of men consuming more than the recommended number of units per week to 18 per cent by 2002, and the number of women exceeding the limit to 7 per cent by 2002.<sup>65</sup> In spite of these good intentions, drinking trends in Wales have gone very much in the opposite direction, and data published in May 2010 showed that 52 per cent of men and 38 per cent of women admitted to drinking more than the recommended weekly amount.<sup>66</sup> The true figures are likely to be even higher than this, since research shows that surveys consistently underestimate alcohol consumption.<sup>67</sup>

## Facts and figures

- Alcohol accounts for 1,000 deaths in Wales per year<sup>68</sup>
- 15 per cent of hospital admissions in Wales are due to alcoholic intoxication<sup>69</sup>
- 30,000 hospital bed days are related to the consequence of alcohol consumption<sup>70</sup>
- There were around 14,545 referrals for treatment of alcohol misuse in Wales in 2009-10, including 1,249 for patients aged 19 and younger<sup>71</sup>
- The estimated health service cost of alcohol-related chronic disease and alcohol-related acute incidents is between £70 million and £85 million each year<sup>72</sup>

As Professor Martin Plant has noted, drinking cultures can be defined either ‘wet’ or ‘dry’:

- Dry cultures, such as in much of Scandinavia, are characterised by low per capita consumption, harsh restrictions on sales, but also bouts of very heavy drinking at weekends
- Wet cultures, as found in much of southern Europe, involve generally high consumption throughout the week, coupled with permissive attitudes and legislation.

In this context, the UK has a mixture of elements of both ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ cultures, with high consumption and general social acceptance of drinking, alongside a strong culture of binge drinking,<sup>73</sup> and this is reflected in drinking habits in Wales.



## Drinking in public

A great deal of attention has been focussed in recent years on excessive drinking in the pubs and clubs of major towns and cities in south Wales,<sup>74</sup> with one American journalist comparing Cardiff's St Mary Street with the "night of the living dead",<sup>75</sup> and online footage of drunken brawling in Swansea's Wind Street attracting considerable comment and criticism.<sup>76</sup> A YouGov survey of adults in Wales in 2009 found that 45 per cent felt that their local town centre had become a no-go zone due to alcohol-related problems.<sup>77</sup>

*"There were gangs of pissed-up boys and girls all over the place: gangs queuing up to get in and out of the dozen or so theme pubs and clubs in St Mary's Street, gangs roaming Caroline Street in search of dangerous-looking food...and gangs just throwing up in every alley and doorway. The benefits of two bottles of Hooch for the price of one before eleven p.m., no doubt."*

John Williams, 2000<sup>78</sup>

Although we cannot ignore the issue of 'preloading' – drinking at home before going out (see below) – much of the responsibility for the drunkenness seen in many town centres must be also attributed to irresponsible promotions in the on-trade. A survey of pubs and clubs in Wales in 2009 found that:

- Around half of venues were offering some form of promotion on alcoholic drinks, whereas only 12 per cent offered discounts on non-alcoholic drinks
- Alcohol was sometimes cheaper than the cheapest available soft drink
- Some venues offered pints for as little as £1, and some offered spirits, sometimes in double measures, for just £1

- Two-for-one and three-for-one deals were available in a number of venues.<sup>79</sup>

Whilst some such promotions have since been banned under the Home Office Mandatory Code,<sup>80</sup> discount pricing and buy-one-get-one free offers remain legal.

## Drinking at home

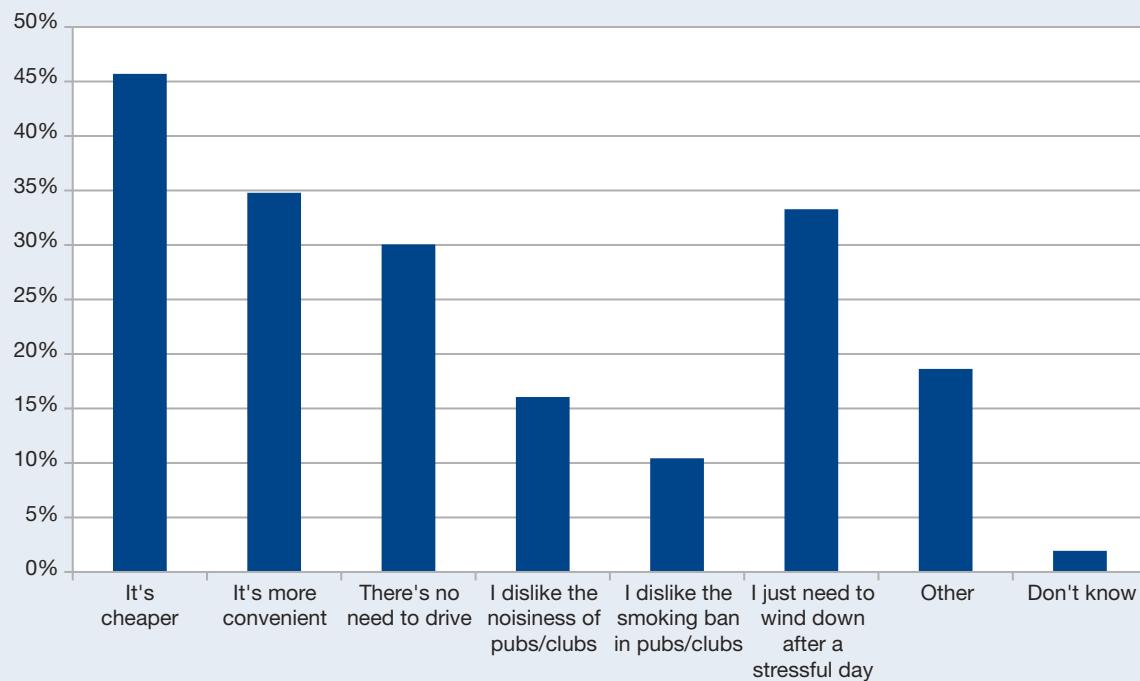
An excessive emphasis on drinking in the on-trade, and the associated crime and disorder, however, overlooks the crucial fact that more and more people in Wales are drinking alcohol at home. Official data for England and Wales in 1987 found that 30 per cent of men and 42 percent of women drank alcohol mostly at home, a significant increase in home drinking compared with 1978.<sup>81</sup> This trend has continued, and of 1,000 drinkers in Wales questioned in 2010, 50 per cent said they drank only at home, and an additional 21 per cent drank equally at home and in the pub.<sup>82</sup>

As the graph below shows, people's reasons for drinking at home are varied, but cost and convenience are major factors, as is the idea that alcohol can help us to unwind at the end of a stressful day.



**Figure 1:**

### Reasons for drinking at home



Source: YouGov survey of drinkers in Wales on behalf of Alcohol Concern, 2009

The relative cheapness of drink in much of the off-trade is clearly a big reason that so many of us are forsaking the pub for the supermarket when buying alcohol. Test purchases by Alcohol Concern staff in Cardiff and Llandundo in 2009 found the following discounts available:

- 16 litres of cider (67 units of alcohol) for £9.68 – equivalent to 14p per unit, or roughly 30p a pint
- Three bottles of wine (32.7 units) for £10.00 – 31p per unit – including a discount for buying three bottles
- Two boxes of cans of lager (54 units) for £15.00 – 28p per unit – including a 50 per cent discount on the second box.<sup>83</sup>

Discounts based on multiple purchases – where the price of alcohol products decreases if more than one product is bought – are common place in the off-trade, and unsurprisingly a YouGov survey of drinkers in Wales in 2009 found that 61 per cent said they had bought more alcohol than they intended when shopping because of a promotion or special offer.<sup>84</sup>



Concerns about the rise of home drinking prompted a Welsh Assembly Government advertising campaign in 2009 focussing on this issue. Launching the campaign, Chief Medical Officer for Wales Dr Tony Jewell highlighted the lack of awareness of the problem amongst home drinkers: "They consider themselves safe and sensible drinkers and don't associate themselves at all with the images we see in the media of binge-drinking and anti-social behaviour. However, this doesn't preclude them from suffering the same effects of excessive alcohol consumption as those who are obviously overdoing it".<sup>85</sup>

As researchers at Liverpool John Moores University have shown, drinking large amounts of alcohol at home may also be a prelude to further town centre drinking – the phenomenon of 'preloading' – and this is encouraged by the large price differentials between pub and club prices and the price of heavily discounted alcohol in supermarkets.<sup>86</sup> As such, it is not possible, or sensible, to make too clear a distinction between issues of home and town centre drinking.

*"If people are already drunk on cheap alcohol before they reach town and city centres this can represent an unfair burden on on-licensed premises to tackle problems stemming from alcohol purchased elsewhere."*

Karen Hughes, 2007<sup>87</sup>

## Making an early start

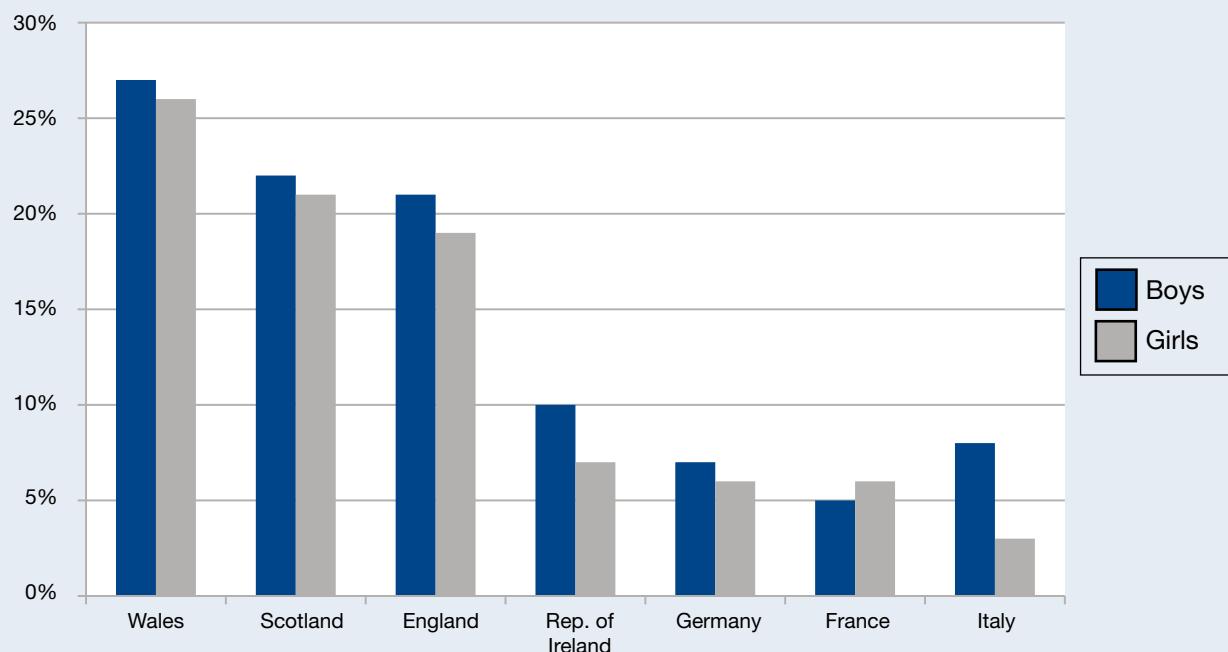
It is now widely recognised that Wales has one of the most serious problems in Europe of alcohol misuse amongst young people. Research into the health behaviours of school-aged children in forty countries across Europe in 2005-06<sup>88</sup> found that:

- Amongst 11 year olds in Wales, 7 per cent of boys and 4 per cent of girls said that they drank alcohol at least once a week. For 13 year olds, this figure rose to 23 per cent of boys and 20 per cent of girls
- Wales had a higher percentage of 13 year olds drinking alcohol at least once a week compared to England and Scotland, and of the 40 countries included in the survey Wales had the fourth highest percentage amongst boys and the third highest amongst girls
- 8 per cent of 11 year old boys and 4 per cent of 11 year old girls in Wales reported that they had been drunk at least twice. Amongst 13 year olds in Wales this figure rose to 27 per cent of boys and 26 per cent of girls, the highest percentage of all 40 countries surveyed
- Amongst 15 year olds in Wales, 54 per cent of boys and 52 per cent of girls reported being drunk at least twice.



**Figure 2:**

**Percentage of 13-year olds in selected countries who reported having been drunk at least twice**



Source: World Health Organisation Health Behaviour in School-aged Children 2005-06

The results of this pattern of early alcohol misuse are reflected in NHS statistics: in 2006 in Wales, 215 boys and 295 girls under 16 years old were admitted to hospital for alcohol-related conditions.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, of the 14,545 referrals to treatment agencies for alcohol misuse in Wales in 2009-10, 1,249 were referrals for people aged 19 and under.<sup>90</sup> Excessive drinking amongst young people is also associated with a range of problems including anti-social behaviour, violence, accidents, physical and mental health problems and poor school performance.<sup>91,92</sup> Given the tendency for alcohol to reduce inhibitions and impair judgement, there are suggestions of a link between high rates of alcohol consumption amongst young people and Wales' high rate of teenage pregnancies.<sup>93</sup>

Concern about unhealthy drinking habits being established early led in 2010 to new guidance for parents from the Chief Medical Officer for Wales on setting children a positive example of alcohol use,<sup>94</sup> and also to the local social marketing campaign Explain Alcohol in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil.<sup>95</sup> Like the CMO's guidance, this campaign focussed on the positive and negative effects parental behaviour and advice can have on young people's future drinking patterns.



Concern has also been expressed about unhealthy drinking patterns becoming increasingly common amongst Wales' student population. Particular attention has focussed on the role of events targeted at students and marketed in ways that suggest heavy or rapid drinking – such as Cardiff Students' Union's The Lash<sup>96</sup> and Drink the Bar Dry<sup>97</sup> – and most notoriously, the student pub crawls organised by Carnage UK in Cardiff,<sup>98</sup> Bangor<sup>99</sup> and Swansea.<sup>100</sup>

*"Alcohol has largely become synonymous with university, and is now said to be as ingrained in university culture as going to lectures."*

Emma McFarnon, 2010<sup>101</sup>

# Why do we drink? Conversations with drinkers in one Welsh town



Drinking patterns, and the reasons why we drink, vary greatly between individuals. However, increasing concerns have been expressed that a strong culture of alcohol overuse has developed, and is continuing to develop in Wales, with drinking to get drunk becoming increasingly normal and socially acceptable for many people.

*"Some people will tell you that excessive alcohol intake is somehow part of our character, just the way it has always been. That is a message of defeat – it suggests that we should just focus our attention on picking up the pieces, rather than tackling the root causes. I do not accept this analysis. Alcohol has always been part of our culture, but it has not always dominated it in the way it now seems to. It is not the case that we have always drunk so much."*

Edwina Hart AM, 2010<sup>102</sup>

To find out more about the ways we drink and our motivations for drinking, we commissioned a series of interviews with people in one Welsh town whilst they were enjoying a night out. Our researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with 124 drinkers in Aberystwyth in August 2010, including a mix of people of different ages in various types of pubs and bars. The aim was to collect qualitative information, rather than quantitative data, and give a human face to the facts and figures about drinking in Wales.<sup>103</sup>

We asked people first of all to define what, for them, would be a good night out. Unsurprisingly, alcohol featured in many people's answers. Whilst some people said they enjoyed "a few drinks, music and a nice meal" or a "quiet drink with friends", there was plenty of emphasis too on the pleasures of a "good piss up", "getting really drunk" and "getting mashed with my mates". Alcohol is widely regarded in the UK as an essential social lubricant, and most interviewees said that socialising was the main thing they enjoyed about going out for a drink. A number also said that alcohol made them more outgoing and helped them overcome their inhibitions: "[it] makes me more confident", "[you're] not frightened talking to people you don't know", "[I'm] more at ease in social situations".

When asked whether there was anything wrong with getting drunk regularly, a number of people felt that getting drunk every weekend was acceptable, and even something to look forward to. Several people who had had experience of relatives with alcohol-related health problems said they did think about what alcohol could do to their own health; as did people involved in sport or regular exercise, who said they noticed the effects of alcohol on their performance: "[I] play rugby so I can tell the difference", "when I go to the gym I can feel it". However, drunkenness was only seen as a problem by some others if it led to violence: "I don't attack people or get crazy".

Some recounted how heavy drinking had led to conflict with those around them: "[it] was my dad's birthday and I fell out with my best mate", "sambuca makes me argue". Some also spoke of sexual episodes they regretted, embarrassing behaviour – "[I] fell asleep outside the Spar and lots of people said they saw me" – and injuries: "[I] fell over and split my eye open".



The interviews provided clear evidence that concept of a binge as it is officially defined – drinking more than twice the recommended daily amount<sup>104</sup> – is not widely understood. According to the official definition, a binge would mean more than 8 units (roughly 4 or more pints of normal strength lager) in a single session for a man, and more than 6 units (3 or more pints of lager) for a woman. People's answers to the question of what constitutes a binge were sometimes quantitative – "over 10 drinks", "being out for more than 6 hours" – but were often much more subjective: "drinking until you're ill", "drinking shedloads like tonight", "when people keep drinking until they pass out and be sick". Similarly, very few people gave a quantitative answer to a question about how they knew when they had had enough to drink. More typically, respondents said they thought they'd had enough when they lost control or felt unwell: "when the room starts to spin", "when I can't see any more", "when I have to be put in a taxi".

In general, awareness of the concept of units of alcohol was very low. Only three people gave an answer in units to the question about binge drinking, and only two of these answers were correct, with one person possibly confusing the recommended weekly and daily amounts by defining a binge as "going out [and] having 20 units a night". Similarly, another respondent said they would be drinking "up to my limit – 14 units" that evening.

Interestingly, given discussions in recent years about the price of alcohol, many people said that price was a major limiting factor in how much they drunk, and several said that they felt they had had enough when their money ran out. A number of people said they drank alcohol at home before going out in town and generally said they did this because it was cheaper: "to get more drunk for less money", "to get in the mood [and] save money". Similarly, respondents who said they drunk mostly at home, instead of in town, often said they did this because it was cheaper.

# The future of alcohol use in Wales – discussion and recommendations



*"Alcohol isn't the problem – it is our attitude to it that counts. Drinking can be an enjoyable part of our social life but not when we abuse it – harming ourselves and others. The challenge is to change our own thinking and the prevailing culture and attitude in Wales which equates a good night out, or even a good night in, with drinking to excess."*

Barry Morgan, Archbishop of Wales, 2008<sup>105</sup>

## Getting the price right

Alcohol consumption in the UK has risen markedly since the 1960s,<sup>106</sup> with only a small fall in recent years still leaving it at very high levels.<sup>107</sup> At the same time, the price of alcohol relative to average income has steadily declined,<sup>108</sup> meaning that alcohol is now 75 per cent more affordable than it was in 1980.<sup>109</sup> Evidence shows that raising the price of alcohol can be one of the most effective ways to encourage responsible drinking, with alcohol sales responding to price increases like most consumer goods on the market: when other factors remain constant, an increase in the price of alcohol generally leads to a decrease in consumption, and vice versa.<sup>110</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that a growing number of organisations have stated their support for setting a minimum price for alcohol in the UK, including the BMA,<sup>111</sup> RCN<sup>112</sup> and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE).<sup>113</sup>

*"The literature has produced a clear scientific consensus... The most effective (and cost-effective) policies involve controlling the price and availability of alcoholic beverages."*

Professor Martin Plant, 2009<sup>114</sup>

The issue of alcohol pricing was recently discussed by the Rural Development Sub-Committee of the National Assembly for Wales, who concluded that “the availability of cheap alcohol in supermarkets contributes to irresponsible drinking, especially among young people”, and noted that a number of representatives of the Welsh drinks industry were in favour of a minimum price as a means of “tackling binge drinking and irresponsible alcohol consumption”.<sup>115</sup> A minimum price would eliminate the most irresponsible promotions, including the end of deep-discounting in supermarkets, whilst having very little effect on the cost of drinking for moderate drinkers. Research carried out by Sheffield University suggests that a minimum 50p per unit would mean an increase in cost of only 23p per week for moderate drinkers, but could bring savings in healthcare costs in England of £1.37 billion over 10 years.<sup>116</sup> In Wales, this would equate to savings of £79 million over the same period. In contrast, proposals from the UK’s Coalition government to “ban the sale of alcohol below cost price”<sup>117</sup> would still not eliminate many irresponsible discounts, and may well prove too complex to implement. Given this, a mandatory minimum price represents a more practical and effective solution to issues of irresponsible discounting across the on- and off-trade.

A minimum price needs to be accompanied by a revised system of duties on alcoholic drinks, taxing drinks more accurately according to strength, and thereby encouraging the production and consumption of drinks with a lesser alcohol content.



## Protecting public health

The Licensing Act 2003, which came into force in England and Wales in 2005, sets out four objectives for local authorities when judging whether to grant licenses. Authorities are expected to grant licenses unless doing so would be contrary to one or more of these:

- prevention of crime and disorder
- prevention of public nuisance
- public safety
- protection of children from harm.<sup>118</sup>

Alcohol Concern has argued for some time now that the protection of public health needs to become an additional objective of the Licensing Act in England and Wales, as it already is in Scotland.<sup>119</sup> Coupled with the collection of robust local health data, this would allow local authorities to make licensing decisions based on the impact of the alcohol sales on local residents' health.

## Making the most of the Mandatory Code

The Mandatory Code for Alcohol Retailers England and Wales, published by the previous UK government in April 2010, set out five conditions that apply to all pubs and clubs:

- A ban on irresponsible alcohol promotions, including drinking games, offering large amounts of alcohol for free or at a discount, and offering alcohol as a prize or reward
- A ban dispensing alcohol directly into the mouth – the so-called 'dentist's chair'
- A requirement to ensure customers had access to free tap water
- All premises to have an age verification policy in place to prevent underage sales

- Venues to ensure that customers have the opportunity to choose small measures of beer, cider, spirits and wine. This would mean that beer and cider must be available in half pints, spirits in single measures (25 or 35 ml) and wine in 125 ml glasses. Customers must also be made aware of these measures by displaying them on menus, or being told about them by staff when buying drinks.<sup>120</sup>

There have been suggestions from the Coalition Government, however, that the code could be repealed.<sup>121</sup> The Home Office has stated that "regulation should only be used as a last resort" and has sought views on "the necessity, cost, and impact of the provisions outlined in the mandatory code."<sup>122</sup> Alcohol Concern supports the full implementation of the Mandatory Code in order to promote public health and create a healthier drinking environment in the on-trade.

## Getting the message right

In spite of substantial awareness raising work in recent decades, public understanding of alcohol and its effects remains low in Wales. The challenge for anyone seeking to promote sensible drinking and a better understanding of alcohol is considerable, especially when we bear in mind that the drinks industry spends around £800 million in the UK each year promoting its products.<sup>123</sup> (This compares with just under £2.7 million donated by alcohol producers and retailers in 2008 to support the work of Drinkaware in promoting safe and responsible drinking).<sup>124</sup> Neither government departments nor voluntary sector alcohol organisations can come close to matching the industry's advertising and marketing expenditure. However, there are possible lessons to be learned from the techniques employed by the drinks industry in terms of creating relationships with potential audiences.



*"Social marketing... is often seen as a synonym for social advertising. In reality it is much broader than this. Social marketing has the potential to use all the tools of marketing – including branding, relation building and stakeholder marketing – to advance public health goals. From what we know of the power these tools have had in the hands of Diageo and Philip Morris, it is high time we too made use of them."*

Gerard Hastings, 2006<sup>125</sup>

Campaigns must also be sustained and developed over the long term, and adapted to meet changing perceptions, as in the case of campaigns on the issue of drink driving since the 1970s.<sup>126</sup> A number of recent social marketing campaigns in England<sup>127</sup> and elsewhere<sup>128</sup> provide examples of good practice that may be applicable in Wales.

## Thinking and drinking in units

The concept of thinking and drinking in units is gradually gaining ground, but has not yet become part of the popular mindset. During our face-to-face interviews with drinkers in Aberystwyth, very few people referred to units of alcohol, and those that did had often misunderstood the concept.<sup>129</sup> This reinforces the findings of an Alcohol Concern telephone survey of drinkers in Wales in February 2010, which found that around half said they did not know the recommended daily maximum number of units for a man and a woman, and only around a quarter were able to give the correct figures. Over half were unable to correctly recall the number of units in either a standard pint of beer/lager and standard glass of wine.<sup>130</sup>

Although there have been recent proposals to use alternative measures – such as centilitres<sup>131</sup> – units remain the most viable system of easily quantifying the alcohol in drinks, and have at least attained some level of public recognition. Research suggests that most people in England and Wales have at least heard of the term. In 2007, 92 per cent of men and 89 per cent of women in England reported that they had heard of measuring alcohol in units,<sup>132</sup> whilst a survey in Wales in 2009 showed the majority of respondents (85 per cent) were aware of the concept.<sup>133</sup>

More needs to be done, however, to normalise the wide use and understanding of units, and one key component of this should be improved information on alcohol products and at point of sale. Such information is currently very much lacking. In 2007, the Department of Health reached a UK wide voluntary agreement with the alcohol industry to include unit and health information on labels, but conceded earlier this year that progress had been disappointing.<sup>134</sup> Independent monitoring undertaken in 2009 found that only 15 per cent of labels included all the agreed information, and future plans would mean that only 19 per cent would meet this standard this year. Given that the majority of the alcohol industry has failed to respond to voluntary agreements, proper labelling of all alcohol products must now be made a mandatory requirement. Consideration also needs to be given to displaying unit information clearly in venues where alcohol is not necessarily purchased by the bottle or can, such as on menus in restaurants and on pumps in bars and pubs.



## Recommendation 1

As recommended by the UK's Chief Medical Officers<sup>135,136</sup> and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence,<sup>137</sup> a minimum price of 50p per unit of alcohol needs to be implemented in both the on-trade and off-trade across England and Wales. This needs to be coupled with a new scale of duties incentivising the production and consumption of lower strength drinks.

Given the lack of progress in establishing a minimum price per unit across England and Wales, Alcohol Concern supports devolving the necessary powers to the National Assembly for Wales.

## Recommendation 3

To reduce irresponsible promotions and increase consumer choice, the Mandatory Code for Alcohol Retailers in England and Wales<sup>139</sup> must remain in force and be implemented in full.

## Recommendation 4

Given the current low levels of understanding about sensible drinking in Wales and deep-seated habits of alcohol overuse, targeted and sustained social marketing campaigns are needed to increase understanding of alcohol and bring about a lasting change in the drinking culture in Wales.

## Recommendation 2

In recognition of the growth of alcohol misuse as a public health issue, and in order to enable licensing authorities to properly address this issue, the protection and improvement of public health needs to be established as a fifth objective within the Licensing Act 2003. This has already taken place in Scotland,<sup>138</sup> and if the UK Government is unwilling to make this important change across England and Wales, the necessary powers should be devolved to Wales.

## Recommendation 5

In order to raise public awareness of sensible drinking and the concept of drinking in units, the number of units of each drink should be prominently displayed: on the front of the packaging, bottles and cans for drinks bought in the off-trade, and on menus and pumps in pubs and restaurants.

Given the failure of the drinks industry so far to comply with voluntary labelling codes, such labelling requirements should be mandatory.

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# A drinking nation?

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