

Off the rails?



Alcohol and public transport in Wales

Introduction

Alcohol misuse in Wales is a subject of major public and political concern. Drinking in Wales, as in the rest of the UK, has increased markedly since the 1960s.¹ 52 per cent of men in Wales and 38 per cent of women say they drink more than the recommended amount,² and the true figures are likely to be even higher, since research shows that surveys consistently underestimate alcohol consumption.³ The consequences of this national habit are to be seen in a range of health problems,⁴ and also in crime and disorder in public spaces, including on public transport.⁵ At least one train operator in Wales has reported that the majority of assaults on its staff are alcohol-related.⁶

Current policy and practice

It is common practice on public transport in the UK and internationally to reserve the right not to carry passengers who are under the influence of alcohol, particularly if they are also disorderly or aggressive. It is not clear, however, to what extent such bans are enforced, with the responsibility for enforcement often falling upon transport staff in addition to their other duties. In an attempt to

tackle the root causes of alcohol-related disorder on public transport, attention has been focused in recent years on measures to better manage the supply and consumption of alcohol on trains and buses and at stations.

In Wales alcohol consumption on public transport is already prohibited on certain occasions, and on some routes at all times, in an effort to minimise disorder:

- Drinking is banned on all trains between Pontypridd and Treherbert, Aberdare and Merthyr Tydfil, and Caerphilly and Rhymney in the south Wales valleys.⁷
- National Express long-distance coaches, who run services to a number of Welsh towns, do not permit the consumption of alcohol on their coaches or at their coach stations.⁸
- One of Wales' largest bus companies, Arriva, has a policy that passengers may not "consume any type of alcohol or items of food or drink which may make other passengers' journeys unpleasant or otherwise cause offence".⁹ However, policies of this kind can prove problematic in that they often rely on bus staff to implement them, and leave room for dispute about what is actually deemed unpleasant or offensive.



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- Under the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol) Act 1985¹⁰ alcohol can be banned on special trains to designated sporting events. For example, alcohol was not allowed on any trains to and from Cardiff City's play-off game at Wembley in May 2010.¹¹

Elsewhere in the UK, a range of approaches have been tried. For example, following concerns about the close association between winter sports and heavy drinking, Eurostar have placed limits on how much alcohol can be taken on board their ski trains from London, and anything above these limits may be confiscated and destroyed.¹²

"We're all for raising a toast to your journey, but we're not so keen on hell-raising drinking sessions and rowdy roistering in our carriages. We want to make sure everyone can enjoy their journey in peace. So, with the help of some experts, we've put a few reasonable limits in place."

Eurostar, 2010¹³

Probably the most comprehensive and most publicised alcohol ban was that introduced by the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, in 2008. Under the terms of this ban, alcohol cannot be drunk and open containers of alcohol cannot be taken at any time on London Underground trains, as well as trams and buses in the city and on the Docklands Light Railway.¹⁴ (The ban does not prevent people travelling with closed containers of alcohol which they intend to drink elsewhere).

"I firmly believe that banning the drinking of alcohol on London's public transport will create a better travelling environment for all Londoners and that if we drive out antisocial behaviour and so called minor crime then we will be able to get a firm grip on more serious crime."

Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, 2008¹⁵

The ban was introduced as one of Transport for London's (TfL) conditions of carriage, making it a civil matter between the company and its passengers, rather than an arrestable offence. It was intended to work through voluntary compliance by passengers. However, anyone who refuses to adhere to the terms of the ban may be refused permission to travel and asked to leave the train or station. The number of instances where TfL staff have had to ask someone to stop drinking has not been recorded but the company has said that the evidence so far is that the vast majority of people do comply willingly. TfL have emphasised that they do not ask their staff to put themselves at risk in order to remove passengers and that any incidents of serious anti-social behaviour are dealt with by the police.

Statistics provided by TfL indicate that:

- 89% of travellers are aware of the alcohol ban
- 89% support the ban, with 64% supporting it strongly.

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The three most common reasons for supporting the ban are:

- Reduced likelihood of threatening behaviour (37%)
- It creates a nicer, more pleasant environment (31%)
- People generally feel safer (16%).¹⁶

At the time the London ban was introduced there was some discussion of the possibility of banning alcohol on all forms of public transport.¹⁷ This aroused some strong opposition, and was not taken forward, although in 2009 the Department for Transport did consult on whether alcohol consumption should be banned on public buses.¹⁸ With a change of government at Westminster in May 2010, there has been no further movement on this issue nationally.

Discussion

Although there is a general consensus that alcohol misuse on public transport has become a serious problem and is creating difficulties for both passengers and staff, there is little agreement about effective solutions. As noted in this briefing paper, a range of policies has been tried on various bus and train routes, with varying degrees of success.

British Transport Police have said they are not in favour of banning alcohol on all trains across the rail network and have highlighted the fact that much alcohol-related disorder is caused by people who are already drunk before boarding a train.¹⁹ However, both British Transport Police and the Metropolitan Police supported the introduction of an alcohol ban on London's public transport in 2008.²⁰

“Your right to a good time stops when it affects other people’s comfort and safety. What you may think is harmless partying, can be intimidating for other passengers. Everyone has the right to travel without the fear of intimidation or being hassled.”

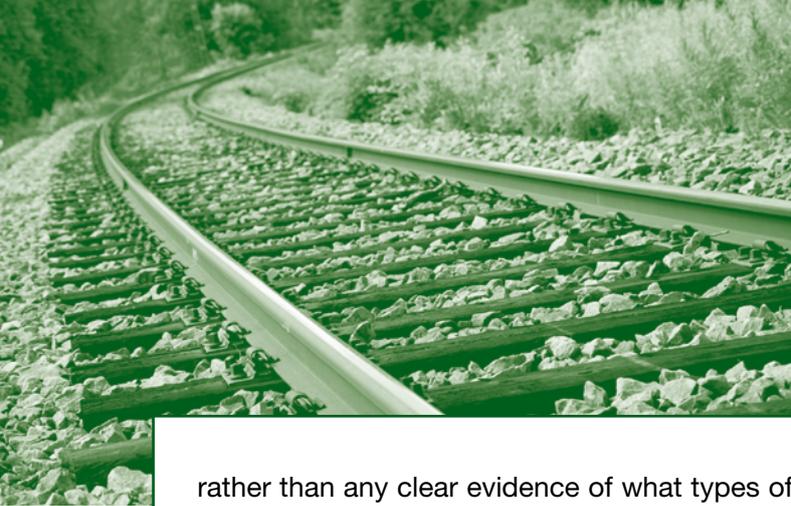
British Transport Police guidance, 2010²¹

Concerns have been expressed by the Police Federation about how their members would enforce any comprehensive ban on consuming alcohol on public transport without addition resources.²² Similarly, worries were voiced at the time of the London Underground ban that already busy transport staff would be obliged to confiscate alcohol from unwilling, and possibly aggressive, drinkers.²³

“We need a sensible cross-industry approach to violence and anti-social behaviour, with everyone involved in finding the solutions, including the unions who represent the workers who are on the receiving end of it. A good first step would be to recognise that we need more staff on stations and guards back on all trains.”

Bob Crow, RMT, 2008²⁴

Opponents of a complete ban have also said that it will penalise people who may wish to drink sensibly, particularly on long journeys. The example has been cited of those wishing to “enjoy a glass of wine with a meal”,²⁵ in contrast to the popular image of rowdy beer drinkers, usually young men. This idea, however, is based largely on perceptions of types of drinker



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rather than any clear evidence of what types of drinking are linked to anti-social behaviour on public transport.

An additional argument against further restrictions on drinking on public transport is that it may push more people back into using their cars when they are going out drinking, or have already been drinking. Indeed, the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England, published in 2004, placed a particular emphasis on the benefits of arranging public transport more effectively in order for people to travel home safely after drinking.²⁶

Recommendations

If alcohol misuse and the associated crime and disorder are to be effectively controlled on public transport, a more strategic approach is needed. Alcohol Concern recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government and the UK Government collaborate on the following initiatives:

- Information should be collated on the effectiveness of current restrictions on alcohol use on public transport and on any obstacles encountered in their implementation.
- In particular, an assessment should be made of the viability and desirability of a comprehensive ban on the consumption of alcohol, and the possession of open containers of alcohol, on local bus and train journeys.
- For longer journeys, consideration should be given to the practicality of emulating the Eurostar model of setting specific quantitative limits on the amount of alcohol that passengers may have with them.

- Any further restrictions on alcohol consumption on public transport need to be considered in the context of the resources available to implement them. This needs to involve discussions with transport operators, local police forces and British Transport Police, and transport workers' unions about the implications for their staff/members of any new policies.

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About 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. We are a membership body working at a national level to influence alcohol policy and champion best practice locally. We support professionals and organisations by providing expertise, information and guidance. We are a challenging voice to the drinks industry and promote public awareness of alcohol issues.

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