



FACT SHEET 3:

CHEAPLY AVAILABLE ALCOHOL, IRRESPONSIBLE PROMOTIONS AND DEEP DISCOUNTING

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1. INTRODUCTION

Alcohol sales generate £7.9bn annually for the Government¹, while £20bn is spent on alcohol-related illness, crime and debilitation². The cost of alcohol has remained relatively constant since 1996, but in reality became cheaper as income increased.^{3,4} This relative decrease is likely to have increased alcohol-related harm: in Finland after a year of tax cuts (where the price of alcohol fell by 22%), eight additional alcohol-related deaths per week were recorded.⁵ In the UK, supermarket discounting has encouraged home drinking while on-trade sales (pubs, clubs) have decreased slightly.⁶⁻⁸ Although the British Retail Consortium claims that supermarket customers buy alcohol to drink over time or at family events,⁹ cheap

KEY POINTS

- Alcohol has become relatively cheap over the past decade and excessive consumption has resulted in increased harm.
- Licensed premises, particularly supermarkets and off-licences, compete through price cutting strategies and value own brand products to attract customers.
- Lower alcohol and alcohol-free drinks are more expensive than standard alcoholic drinks in a supermarket: non-alcoholic cider can be over four times more expensive than standard cider.
- With the average North West weekly pocket money of £9.73, 12-16 year olds can buy 57 units of cider from a supermarket (a quantity which would be harmful for an adult male).
- Internationally, a decrease in the price of alcohol leads to an increase in consumption and alcohol-related harm, and vice versa.
- There are a number of ways to adjust price such as tax increases, promotion bans, removing the tax exemption in place for cider, and tax incentives for lower strength products. These should be sustained in line with inflation, and be proportional to alcohol content.
- Modelled data show a 10% price increase would reduce the number of deaths from alcohol specific conditions by 29% for males and 37% for females.
- An alcopops tax would not tackle underage consumption because they are far from the only drink consumed by young people and those drinking can switch to cheaper products.

alcohol may fuel binge drinking,¹⁰ and may be used for home consumption prior to a night out (pre-loading). Pre-loading has been linked with experiencing significantly higher levels of harm, such as violence, as some arrive into nightlife environments already drunk.^{11,12}

Young people are particularly at risk. Low prices of alcohol, promotions and adverts for alcohol outlets have been directly associated with increased binge drinking on US college campuses.¹³ Furthermore, teenagers' expendable income is strongly associated with binge drinking,¹⁴ and as the average pocket money has dramatically increased (from £1.80 per week in 1996 to £8 in 2006 for UK 12-16 year olds),¹⁵

so has the potential to buy large quantities of alcohol. An online supermarket review shows the amount of alcohol potentially purchasable with the North West average weekly pocket money (£9.73 in 2007; Table 1). The cheapest drink was own brand value cider (17p a unit). Thus, a North West 12-16 year old could buy 57 units of alcohol per week, a quantity deemed harmful for an adult male.¹⁶ Drinks such as cider are particularly

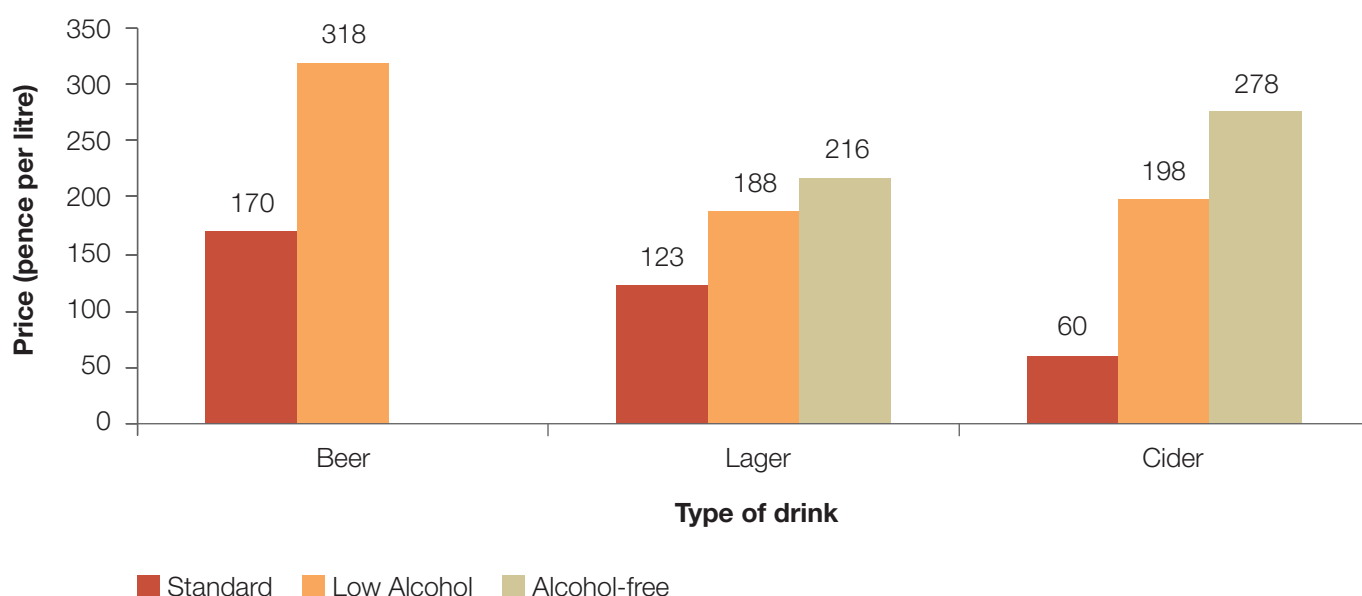
appealing as they enable rapid intoxication cheaply^{17,18} whereas alcopops represent a relatively expensive drink at 89p per unit. Worryingly, cider consumption has more than doubled since 2005 (although this has also been linked to brand remarketing).^{19,20} The same survey also found that low alcohol versions of drinks are up to 4.6 times more expensive than standard drinks (Figure 1).

TABLE 1: COST OF A UNIT OF ALCOHOL FROM A LEADING SUPERMARKET AND NUMBER OF UNITS A NORTH WEST 12-16 YEAR OLD CAN BUY WITH WEEKLY POCKET MONEY (£9.73)*

Type of drink	Promotion type	Alcohol by volume (ABV)	Cost of alcohol per unit	Number of units that can be bought with £9.73
Own brand (value) cider	nil	4.2%	17p	57.2
Own brand (value) vodka	nil	37.5%+	24p	40.5
Scrumpy Jack Strong cider	nil	6%	29p	33.6
Sepia Vin De Pays white wine	Half price	13.5%	29p	32.3
Own brand Special Reserve whisky	nil	40%	32p	30.4
Sandiman Cream sherry (fortified wine)	Save.....	17.5%	32p	30.4
Gordons Dry London gin	Save...	37.5%	38p	25.6
Harveys Stamps S.Cabernet red wine	Save...	13.5%	39p	24.9
Leffe Blond beer	2 for 1	6.6%	42p	23.2
Boddingtons beer	2 for 1	4.1%	47p	20.7
Bacardi Breezer	2 for 1	4%	89p	10.9

* The survey was conducted on 3rd February 2008, through Tesco online shopping facility. Brands selected represent choices available of own brands and price promotions.

FIGURE 1: COST OF STANDARD ALCOHOLIC, LOW ALCOHOL AND NO ALCOHOL SUBSTITUTE DRINKS IN A LEADING SUPERMARKET*



* The survey was conducted on 3rd February 2008, through Tesco online shopping facility. Brands selected represent choices available of own brands and price promotions. Alcohol-free beers were not available to purchase on the site.

Strategies aiming to increase the price of alcohol (Section 3) are amongst the most effective interventions available to combat alcohol harm²¹ and are supported by the Chief Medical Officer,²² police officers²³ and various bodies.^{10,24,25} Although public opinion surveys conducted in the 25 European Commission Member States show limited support for price increases, 38% of young people believe higher prices would restrain young and heavy drinkers.²⁶ Such strategies were unpopular in Ireland, but the subsequent impact has been beneficial (Section 3). The European Court of Justice permits increasing tax to meet public health objectives, as occurred for tobacco.²⁷ The UK Government has commissioned an independent review into whether, and to what extent, alcohol price and promotion result in harmful consumption.²⁸

2. HOW PRICE WORKS

The price of a product is dependent on a number of factors:²⁹⁻³³

- Production, distribution and retail costs;
- Profit margins sought;
- Value Added Tax (VAT; where tax is added to the cost of goods and services at the point of purchase by the consumer);
- The level of demand (increased demand increases prices);
- Supply (ready availability decreases prices);
- Excise duty (this specifically affects alcohol; Box 1);
- Deliberate price reductions, for example when competing with other companies (discounts can attract customers and increase total sales); and
- Size of company (large companies can offer cheaper products by selling large quantities and extracting discounts from producers).

BOX 1: EXCISE DUTY

Excise duty on alcohol is governed by the EU and varies by beverage (for example, reduced rates for wine can be sought). While the EU has harmonised product definitions and agreed minimum duties, they vary widely by country. This is because other taxes can be used if they: pursue community objectives (such as public health); use objective criteria to differentiate drinks (such as strength); and do not discriminate or protect competing domestic products.

Cost is a primary determinant of alcohol consumption:³² price increases lead to a decrease in consumption and vice versa.³³ The effects of this are measured through the price elasticity (PE) index (Box 2). **In the UK, alcohol has a PE of -1.39: if prices increase by 1%, consumption decreases by 1.39%.³¹** Spirits are the most responsive to price change and beer drunk on-premises the least. However, price increases should not be restricted to the most responsive drink, as this could lead to individuals choosing alternative, cheaper drinks (Section 3).

BOX 2: PRICE ELASTICITY OF DEMAND^{29-31,33}

A price elasticity (PE) of -0.5 means that if prices are increased by 1%, consumption will decrease by 0.5%. PE varies by:

- Type of alcohol;
- Country;
- Consumption in on-licensed premises or away from the premise;
- Standard of living; and
- Over time.

3. PRICE INTERVENTIONS AND THEIR EFFECTS

The regulation of alcohol price is internationally the most popular strategy used to control alcohol consumption and related harm.³³ Numerous examples show that such a strategy has beneficial effects. The Northern Territory (Australia) introduced a special tax on alcoholic beverages that are stronger than 3%ABV^a together with the Living With Alcohol (LWA) programme.^{b,34} Subsequently, there was a 22% reduction in per capita consumption in four years and a reduction in hazardous drinking, and related morbidity and mortality.³⁴ In Ireland between 2001 and 2002, cider tax increased by 87% (to €0.83 per litre for those with a maximum alcohol content of 6%) and spirits by 42% (to €39.25 per litre of pure alcohol). In 2002/03, Ireland experienced:

- 11.3% reduction in cider sales and 21% reduction in spirits sales;
- 6% fall in per capita total alcohol consumption;
- 14% fall in alcohol poisoning deaths; and
- 6% fall in public order offences.^{35,36}

^a The levy for beer and pre-mixed spirits became \$0.20/litre, wine and cider \$0.48/litre, and spirits and fortified wines \$1.60/litre.³⁴

^b The LWA programme, established in 1992, focused on education, increased control of the availability of alcohol, rehabilitation and treatment to tackle excessive alcohol consumption.

Other studies show that tax increases decrease consumption and related harms such as liver cirrhosis and fatal car crashes.³⁷⁻⁴⁰ In addition:

- A 1% price increase decreases the probability of wife abuse by 5%;⁴¹
- A 10% increase in tax on beer reduces rape by 1.32% and robbery by 0.9%;⁴²
- A 10% increase in excise tax on beer reduces the chance of severe child abuse by 2%;⁴³ and
- Increased tax in Australia raised \$4-5 million annually for alcohol prevention and treatment.³⁴

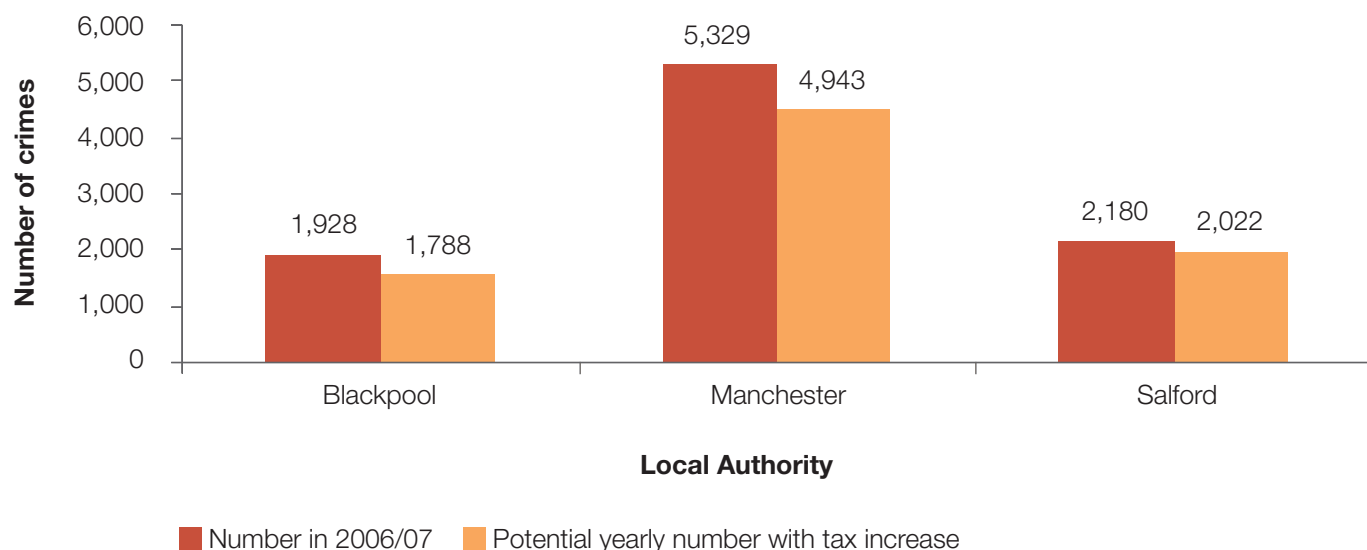
A number of models show the impact of increasing alcohol price via taxation:

- In the USA, a 17% tax increase for a six pack of beer would reduce alcohol-related deaths by 3.3% (that is by 1,490 deaths annually).⁴⁴
- In Sweden, a 10% price increase would reduce sales by 1.7%.⁴⁰ However, if the rise was restricted

to expensive drinks, sales would increase by 2.8% (consumers would buy cheaper beverages and more of them). If the increase was for cheap drinks, sales would decrease by 4.2%.

- British data show a 10% price increase would reduce male and female liver cirrhosis mortality by 7% and 8.3% respectively, victims of murder by 5% and 7.1%, and deaths from alcohol specific conditions (such as poisoning) by 29% and 37%.⁴⁵
- If the price of beer in England and Wales was sustainably increased by 1% above inflation, the number of violent injuries would decrease by 7.25% (2,200 a month).³⁹ Using 2006/07 data on the number of alcohol-related violent crimes,¹⁶ this equates to a fall from 49,970 to 46,347 of such crimes in the next year in the North West. Figure 2 shows the anticipated effect for Blackpool, Manchester and Salford (where the highest rates of such violence are experienced regionally).¹⁶

FIGURE 2: POTENTIAL REDUCTION IN ALCOHOL-RELATED VIOLENT CRIME IF BEER PRICE WAS RAISED BY 1% ABOVE INFLATION FOR BLACKPOOL, MANCHESTER AND SALFORD^{16,39}



However, price changes must be sustained. In Ireland, the 86% tax increase led to an initial 11% decrease in cider sales in 2002, after which sales subsequently increased by 1% in 2003 suggesting that a single tax

increase does not lead to a continuous reduction in consumption.³⁵ Thus, tax increases should be in line with inflation.⁴⁶ Price can be adjusted in a number of other ways (Table 2).



TABLE 2: OTHER METHODS OF ADJUSTING PRICE BEYOND SIMPLE TAXATION

Route	Details	Impact
Tax linked to cost-of-living indices	The real value of fixed taxes can reduce over time because of inflation, so taxation should be linked to cost-of-living indices. ^{33,46}	An adjustment of beer tax for the rate of inflation from 1951 to mid 1980's would have reduced total road traffic fatalities by 11.5% and fatalities in 18-20 year olds by 32.1%. ⁴⁷
Minimum price	Canada has a minimum beer price in order to contribute to public health and order. ⁴⁸	Raising the minimum beer price in Canada contributed to a reduction in car accidents (PE -1.2) and traffic offences (PE -0.5). ⁴⁹ However, a minimum price in the UK would breach UK and EU competition law.
State control via monopolies	In places such as the Nordic countries, North America and Eastern Europe, the state may control alcohol production, import and sale. Here, price can be easily adjusted. ³³	Increased levels of consumption among young people in Finland were curbed by increasing prices. ⁵⁰
Tax linked to strength	In France, a social security tax is imposed on beverages with a high alcohol content. ⁴⁶ Tax can also be imposed specifically on high strength drinks such as spirits.	Targeted tax on spirits in Ireland successfully reduced consumption by 21%. ³⁵ If prices increase only for some types of alcohol, however, consumers may switch to cheaper alternatives, ⁴⁰ as happened in Sweden. ⁵¹
Tax incentives for lower strength drinks	In Australia, low and mid-strength beer comprises 41% of the beer market. They have been encouraged by tax exemptions and subsequent price reductions of 20-40% compared with full-strength beers. ⁵²	Low strength beer consumption is significantly associated with lower levels of serious alcohol-related harm. Following the tax incentive in Australia, per capita alcohol consumption fell by 24% (1980-2002) but rose 31% in the UK. ⁵³
Removing the cider regulations	Due to historic laws in England, tax for cider is lower than for beer (26p and 65p per litre respectively). This was to protect local orchards but five producers now make 70% of UK cider.	Cheap strong cider in shops and off-licences appeals to vulnerable groups, such as young people. ¹⁷ The number of children (14-17 years) drinking cider doubled between 2005 and 2007, and trebled in 18-21 year olds. ¹⁹
Ban day time drinks reductions	Ireland strengthened licensing laws and prohibited the sale of reduced price liquor during the day (banned happy hours). ³⁵	The total alcoholic drinks market declined by 3% in volume terms in 2005. ⁵⁴ See Section 3 above for other policies and effects.
Banning deep discounting	The Competition Commission investigated loss leading in supermarkets because of the potential impact on on-licensed premises (not public health, as this is not their remit).	The Competition Commission recommended that deep discounting and loss leading on alcohol should not be banned based on competition reasons. ⁷

3.1 TARGETING AT RISK GROUPS

3.1.1 YOUNG PEOPLE

Changes to price particularly affect young people,^{33,55-57} and potentially could have a long-term effect on their consumption (reducing immediate consumption can lessen the impact of alcohol's addictive nature).⁴⁶ Amongst US college students, the lower the price of beer in the surrounding community, the higher the binge drinking rate.¹³ An alcopops tax is being considered in some European countries to tackle excessive consumption in young people (particularly those who are underage)²⁹ and has been called for in the UK,⁵⁸ as alcopops are seen as the main drink for young people. Such strategies may not be effective in the UK because drinks such as cider and lager are more popular⁵⁹ (drinks such as high strength cider are popular because of their low cost and quick intoxication)^{17,18} and because alcopops are already a more expensive option (Table 1). Internationally, the relationship between price

of beer specifically and young people is also particularly compelling.⁶⁰ American examples of how price influences consumption and related harm show:

- Increases in beer prices significantly reduce underage drinking⁵⁵ in terms of frequency, probability of binge drinking and the potential for long-term addiction.^{61,62} Modelled data show a 10% increase in the price of beer reduces the number of school aged binge drinkers by 2-5%.⁶¹
- Increases in beer prices significantly reduce binge drinking among female college students.⁵⁵

However, increasing tax for only one alcohol type must be done with caution because this can lead individuals to substitute an alternative cheaper drink (Table 2). It is possible that significant price increases for alcohol could lead young people to seek alternative recreational activities such as illegal drugs. Unfortunately, studies documenting a reduction in alcohol consumption after price rises have not specifically monitored the impact on consumption of other harmful substances.^{35,46,51,52}

However, because risky behaviour is often clustered,^{59,63} monitoring the effect of higher priced alcohol on consumption of other substances should be undertaken.

3.1.2 HEAVY DRINKERS

Alcoholics and heavy drinkers are responsive to price changes:^{56,64,65} the PE for this group is -1.49.⁶⁶ Thus, higher prices could combat dependence and abuse. Examples of price influencing consumption and behaviour include:

- A 10% increase in the price of spirits would decrease consumption by 1.11% amongst those described as hard liquor drinkers in Los Angeles;⁶⁷ and
- Heavy drinkers doubled their consumption during happy hours compared with controls, but suppressed drinking when normal prices were reinstated.⁶⁸

4. SUMMARY

In summary, international experience and research evidence confirm that price increases on alcohol products reduce alcohol consumption, abuse and related harm. Reducing exposure of the young to heavy alcohol consumption is particularly important to prevent long term addiction and harm. Evidence suggests that partial or selective price increases may prompt drinkers to substitute for cheaper drinks, suggesting a universal rise is preferable. Price increases need to be sustainable and in-line with inflation. In addition, because of the links with young people's consumption, the low tax on cider needs to be withdrawn.

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