

Briefing Note: Under-aged purchasing of alcohol online

Highland Licensing Forum 9th February 2016

At the meeting of the Licensing Forum on the 17th 2015, concerns were raised that in rural communities young people may be purchasing alcohol online, unchallenged.

Survey Results

The Highland Lifestyle Survey provides a snapshot of young people's lifestyles and is carried out every 2 years. It was completed in May 2015, by 3637 (51%) pupils in Highland Schools. Included in the survey was the question:

"Where did you get the alcohol from?"

The majority of those drinking alcohol (55.93%) were doing so at home with their parents with a further 22.60% asking an older friend to buy alcohol for them. 11.52% asked a parent or carer to buy the alcohol for them and 6.98% took the alcohol from the parents without them knowing. Just 2.97% of respondents purchased alcohol themselves.

There was also an open-ended option of "other", where pupils could describe where they got their alcohol from. Analysis of all responses has shown that none of the pupils obtaining alcohol were doing so online.

The most recent National (Scotland) Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey (SALSUS) report was published in 2013 and again shows no evidence of pupils obtaining alcohol online.

The European-wide survey on Health Behaviours in School-aged children does not ask the question on where alcohol is purchased.

Wider Research

While a number of press articles had been published around the issue of online alcohol sales and under aged drinking, these date back to around 2011/2012.

In 2013, Alcohol Concern published a study into underage access to alcohol via home delivery services in Wales. It summarised results of a survey of 1000 young people in Wales aged 14 and 17 and found that approximately 10% had successfully bought alcohol online. Recommendations from the report were:

- Supermarkets and other online traders should review their age verification processes;
- The UK Government should review licensing law to ensure it protects children
- Further research was needed to determine the proportion of young people purchasing alcohol in this way.

There do not appear to be any research publications into the issue in Scotland and no tangible evidence that online purchasing is taking place in rural areas in particular.

Both the Lifestyle survey and SALSUS report surveyed pupils aged 13 and 15. There is a lack of evidence on the behaviours of 16 and 17 year olds.

Barriers to online purchasing of under aged drinkers.

Amazon has a number of policies to safeguard against the illegal purchase of alcohol. Their terms and agreement states that:

"We do not sell products for purchase by children. We sell children's products for purchase by adults. If you are under 18 you may use the Amazon Services only with the involvement of a parent or guardian".

Alcohol cannot be delivered outside of mainland UK, to PO Boxes, or to BFPO addresses. Alcohol is never gift wrapped and is sold in manufacturers original packaging. In addition Amazon state that:

"You may not misuse the Amazon Services. You may use the Amazon Services only as permitted by law. The licences granted by Amazon terminate if you do not comply with these Conditions of Use or any Service Terms".

Tesco is another large online retailer in Highland and their terms and conditions state that:

"All goods must be signed for on delivery by an adult aged 18 years or over. Tesco follows a "Think 25" policy, so if the person receiving the goods looks under 25, proof of age will be requested".

To purchase alcohol online you would need a bank card to do so. Young people over the age of 16 may hold a bank card and have funds in their bank account to cover this. Alternatively, they may have to rely on an older person's bank card to carry out the transaction, with or without their knowledge.

There would be no way of knowing with certainty that a delivery company would not ask for signature, especially when you consider that the size and weight of the manufacturers packaging would be likely to make the contents evident to them.

Also, there would be no guarantee that a parcel left in a secure place, would remain undiscovered.

Conclusion

There would appear to be an increased risk of being caught, and higher repercussions as a result of being caught, should teenagers choose to purchase alcohol online in place of more popular methods, such as getting someone older to buy it for you.

There is no evidence to suggest that this is a current problem amongst teenagers aged up to 15 years of age in Highland, nor anything to indicate that the problem is greater in more rural communities. However, the findings presented do not include the behaviours of 16 and 17 year olds and therefore more research may be required.

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