

# Reducing underage access to alcohol in the UK

## Test purchasing in the UK

In the UK, enforcement activity in the form of 'test purchasing' is used as part of routine practice by Trading Standards authorities\* and police. Test purchasing involves underage volunteers attempting to buy alcohol to enable authorities to identify retailers who sell alcohol to customers below the legal minimum purchase age (18 years). It is used to both deter underage sales and enable prosecution of those who break the law.



Test purchasing is conducted in both on- and off-licensed premises, and can be implemented randomly or targeted at high-risk venues. Underage volunteers visit licensed premises and attempt to purchase alcohol under the instruction and supervision of the authorities. A successful sale can result in sanctions including fines, prosecution and review of the premise's license to sell alcohol. Persistent sales of alcohol to minors (e.g. three sales committed within a three month period) can result in a fine of up to £10,000 for the retailer and a three month license suspension. Individual staff that sell alcohol to minors can receive an on the spot fine of up to £1,000.

Guidelines on test purchasing<sup>1</sup> highlight the need for careful selection of underage volunteers, consent from parents or guardians and protection of the anonymity of the child, often meaning that operations cannot take place in an area that the child may be recognised. Underage volunteers are fully trained and briefed on each operation to ensure that they are in no danger, and officers are always on hand to intervene in case of problems. Generally, volunteers are given a set amount of marked money to use to attempt to purchase alcohol from a retailer and are told exactly what to say in each case. An officer may accompany the child into the premises where closer supervision is required to protect the welfare of the volunteer. On attempt to purchase alcohol, if asked for age identification the volunteer is usually instructed to answer truthfully then leave the premises. If an alcohol sale is made, officers take immediate action against the retailer.

Assessing the effectiveness of test purchasing operations can be difficult as operations are often targeted at high risk premises rather than conducted randomly. However, a series of national campaigns have shown reductions in underage sales following sustained test purchasing operations. In 2007, the national Tackling Underage Sales of Alcohol Campaign<sup>2</sup> used new legislation to prosecute licensees for underage sales under the Licensing Act 2003. High risk premises were identified and subjected to a test purchase operation every two weeks, with the threat of immediate prosecution, penalty fines and license reviews. Across the three month campaign the test purchase failure rate was reduced from 25% to 15%. This built on findings from a previous campaign, where the failure rate was approximately 50%.

\* *Trading Standards is the organisation responsible for enforcing legislation and regulations governing the sale of goods and services, including alcohol.*

1. LACORS. A Practical Guide to Test Purchasing. London: LACORS, 2006
2. Home Office. Tackling Underage Sales of Alcohol Campaign (TUSAC). Available from: <http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/tvcp/tvcp01tusaccampaign.doc> (Accessed November 2009).