

License to swill

Cardiff's binge-drinking culture has been the focus of a wave of unwelcome press attention recently.

Rebecca Lees looks at the role the city's licensing regulations are playing in the battle with cheap alcohol.

Well known for its rugby and its choirs, Wales' capital has acquired an uglier tag lately. Cardiff now has a reputation for binge drinking and drunken brawling. In April last year, a journalist for the *Wall Street Journal* described it as a scene from zombie flick, *Night of the Living Dead*, with "drunken young men and women stumbling through streets fouled with trash and broken glass". Weeks before, veteran Welsh broadcaster John Humphrys strongly criticised Cardiff's "hideous" drinking culture in a special BBC report on the city. And in 2009 Polish photographer Maciej Dakowicz published a collection of images of shocking drunken carnage called *Cardiff At Night*.

But does Cardiff really deserve its badge of shame – and is enough being done to dilute the effects of binge-drinking?

There is no doubt that politicians, the police and frontline NHS staff are all too aware of the damaging effects alcohol has on society. This is true not just in Cardiff but across Wales, where the Welsh Assembly Government wants to increase the powers of licensing decision-makers. In Scotland, where licensing is a devolved matter, a new Alcohol Act has been introduced, although there is disappointment it does not include a proposed minimum price per unit. Campaigners in Wales want to see a minimum price of 50p per unit here, but can the genie be put back in the bottle?

A late-night stroll around the "saturation zone" of St Mary Street and its surrounding venues does seem to confirm the unflattering descriptions. In Westgate Street, which flanks the Millennium Stadium, drinkers spill off the pavement, some stumbling perilously close to passing traffic. In nearby Mill Lane, rope cordons feebly

attempt to regiment a jumble of kerbside tables and chairs, which are frequently lurched into by glassy-eyed customers. In St Mary Street itself – which is closed to traffic other than emergency vehicles and taxis – packs of chanting lads and teetering women form sprawling queues outside nightclubs such as Liquid and Reflex.

Admittedly this scene has been exacerbated by the smoking ban, which has simply brought outdoors a liveliness hitherto contained behind pub doors. But another factor is undeniably the sheer increase in readily-available cheap alcohol. Until recently, anyone aiming to get drunk had the option of either "preloading" – drinking cheap supermarket alcohol at home before going out – or drinking in pubs and clubs. But there is now a third option, "reloading", where bargain-price alcohol can be bought from off-licences in the heart of pub land.

In 2010, Sainsbury's applied to sell alcohol from 7am until 11pm at its St Mary Street store in the saturation zone. The council's licensing committee allowed sales until 6pm. But Sainsbury's appealed and, although the committee's decision was backed by police, assembly members, councillors and experts, city magistrates extended licensing hours until 9pm.

"The decision was a disaster for St Mary Street," says surgeon Professor Jonathan Shepherd, an expert witness at the hearing. For the last 25 years Shepherd has researched violence and the "major part" he says alcohol plays in it.

"It's not just Sainsbury's; the decision to allow the Spar to sell alcohol at a similar time was also very much to be regretted. The risks have gone up; I don't think there is any doubt about that. We

know that cheap alcohol is at the root of increased harm. On the day of the appeal, Sainsbury's promotions included their own brand of cider for 21p per unit. I think that's an irresponsible promotion in anyone's language.

"St Mary Street tops the violence league table in Cardiff and has done so for a number of years. In my clinic last week I saw a guy attacked with a vodka bottle reportedly bought in one of these supermarkets. I find the availability of cheap alcohol late into evening hugely depressing and I know there is a lot of support for this view, certainly within the NHS and the police." Shepherd says the legal battle between the big supermarkets who want to extend licenses and those representing the local area is an unfair one. "The supermarkets bring down a crack team of lawyers from London and the city is represented by a council solicitor. It's like Rommel versus a community support officer." He said local agencies needed to get organised in putting forward their case, rather than dealing with cases on ad hoc basis.

In Cardiff, partner agencies work tirelessly to make the night-time streets safer. Cardiff Council, South Wales Police and the Licensees' Forum hold regular meetings, while the creation of the saturation zone has eased an over-concentration of licensed premises in the St Mary Street area. A 'traffic light' system is in use, allowing police to intervene at potentially problematic premises at an early stage. These agencies believe that Cardiff's drinking culture has been unfairly highlighted, yet there is frustration at licensing regulations that allow common-sense decisions to be overturned.

"We have a vibrant night-time economy and drinking establishments are a major part of that," says Cardiff

Licensing Committee chair Councillor Ed Bridges. "We've probably had to work harder than some other authorities to manage the issues this brings but I think we've been more successful than many other authorities in making Cardiff a largely pleasant place to be after dark.

"There have been several instances recently where big-name supermarkets have applied for licenses within the St Mary Street saturation zone. As a committee, we judge all applications on a case-by-case basis. However, we did have – and do have – major concerns about off-licenses in the city centre, and the police share these concerns.

"We have been disappointed by the lack of support we have received from the magistrates' court when these applications have gone to appeal. From our point of view, it seems counter-intuitive to have a saturation zone which is seen as hugely successful, only for magistrates to tell us that it shouldn't apply to off-license premises. We felt let down by the magistrates because of that and it has undoubtedly made our life – and that of the police – more difficult."

Sainsbury's is described by its press office as an "active" supporter of sensible drinking, removing single bottles and cans of beers, lagers and cider from the shelves of its St Mary Street store. Beers, lagers and cider with alcohol-by-volume percentages of more than 5.5 are also no longer on sale.

"It is important to remember that the overwhelming majority of our customers buy alcohol as part of their weekly shop and drink responsibly in their own home," says a Sainsbury's spokesman.

"We encourage our customers to make informed choices about the alcohol they purchase by printing the units of alcohol per glass or bottles on all our own label beers, wines and spirits. Last year we moved from a Think-21 policy to a Think-25 policy across all our stores to help prevent alcohol being passed to minors. We are also an active supporter of Drinkaware, a charity that increases awareness of the results of alcohol abuse and helps individuals to make informed choices about their drinking."

But campaigners remain wary. Alcohol Concern Cymru policy manager Andrew Misell says: "The argument that both Sainsbury's and Tesco have used is that they are selling alcohol to the professional person on their way home from work who wants a small drink with their evening meal. I would certainly say if that's who Sainsbury's think they are selling to, they don't need to be selling at 11 o'clock at night. After 8pm, any

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alcohol bought is usually drunk on the spot."

Mr Misell is the author of *A Drinking Nation? Wales and Alcohol*, a report published in November. The report points to a "massive" rise in alcohol consumption in Wales in recent decades, with many people now indulging in heavy drinking at home with cheap alcohol from supermarkets. Those interviewed said heavy drinking was an essential part of a good night out and that they often only stopped drinking "when the room starts to spin" or when they "have to be put in a taxi".

The assembly government has estimated the cost to the economy in health terms alone to be between £70m and £85m in Wales. "On top of that there are policing costs and local authority clear-ups," says Mr Misell.

"We sympathise with the council, who are trying to do their best to improve the reputation of the city and minimise harm. But a lot of us want to see less drinking in the city centre."

The officer in charge of policing Cardiff city centre, Inspector Tony Bishop, paints a positive picture. "Statistics show that there has been a year-on-year decrease on reported crime in Cardiff," he says. "It is probably due to luck as well, but also to a number of partnerships such as with the street pastors, who look after potential victims of crime and those who could be involved in committing crime.

"We also have mobile medics in the city centre, who free up cops who would otherwise be waiting 45 minutes



MACIEJ DAWOWICZ



Unrecognisable: St Mary Street by day and by night

for an ambulance to arrive. Violent assaults have fallen dramatically over the years. You will see a lot of drunken people about, but how many are actually committing criminal offences?

"If we have more than 10 arrests on a normal Friday or Saturday, that's a busy night. First impressions are usually lasting impressions and we are always looking at ways to improve the image but Cardiff is not going to change from a binge drinking culture to a cafe culture overnight."

Cardiff magistrates were given the opportunity to respond but did not give a statement.

■ **Rebecca Lees** is a freelance journalist and a former reporter at the Cardiff-based South Wales Echo.