

Controlled Drinking Zones

Local authorities in London are busy setting up controlled drinking zones in an attempt to curb street drinking and the anti-social behaviour associated with it. On the eve of the local elections on 4 May, this LDAN briefing looks at the restrictions they impose, why they are so popular with local councils and what outreach workers think of them.

What are Controlled Drinking Zones?

Controlled Drinking Zones, or Designated Public Places Orders (DPPOs) to give them their official title, place restrictions on drinking alcohol within a designated area. Introduced under the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001, they do not impose a blanket ban on alcohol consumption, but give the police and community support officers the power to confiscate alcohol at their discretion. Depending on how this is interpreted, this can result in the setting up of de facto no-alcohol zones in areas popular among street drinkers. Anyone who refuses to hand over alcohol, including unopened cans and bottles, after being asked to by the police, can be fined or arrested. According to the legislation, before introducing a controlled drinking zone, local authorities must be satisfied that antisocial behaviour associated with alcohol consumption is present in the area. They must also consult with police and licensees in the area affected, and publicise the zone. Implemented at first in relatively small areas, controlled drinking zones are now being rolled out across entire London boroughs.

How numerous are they?

According to a list published by the Home Office, as of last December there were over 300 DPPOs in England and Wales, and about 30 in London. The numbers though are growing. For example, Southwark are looking at introducing a borough-wide controlled drinking zone. Ealing has just introduced one in the Ealing Broadway area, following on from one set up in Acton a year ago. Hounslow introduced one in January as a result of a research project into street drinkers in the borough. Camden, meanwhile, which along with Westminster, was one of the national trailblazers for controlled drinking areas, is extending restrictions on drinking, currently in operation in Camden Town to the rest of the borough. Unlike most DPPOs, which

are targeted at street drinkers, Camden says this will be used to curb excess among leisure drinkers as well.

Why are they so popular?

Both the police and councils say DPPOs give them the power to tackle problematic street drinking quickly and effectively. They maintain controlled drinking zones allow them break up established drinking schools and reclaim public spaces long out of bounds to most of the community because of littering and fouling, and sometimes noisy and intimidating behaviour. The police say they can also allow them tackle drug use and criminal activity. Given that public sympathy for street drinkers is low, and the number of complaints from local residents and



BRIEFING

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businesses often high, local authorities can with some justification claim there is popular support for the zones.

Mindful of criticism that DPPOs do not tackle the source of the problem, but merely move it on, councils are usually keen to point out that enforcement measures are accompanied by coordinated outreach work, which has seen impressive results among some very entrenched street drinkers and rough sleepers. Treatment aside, they say the measures and publicity around them, are making street drinkers more aware of the impact of their behaviour on others, and that some are modifying their behaviour as a result.

Where's the evidence base?

Asked for hard facts and figures to prove the benefits of drinking control areas, Home Office Ministers usually just point to the high take up rate among local authorities. Local police figures can show a dramatic decrease in the number of alcohol related arrests in an

area after the imposition of a no-alcohol zone but even supporters admit, this is generally because those targetted simply move into other areas. Borough-wide zones are now being introduced in an attempt to stop displacement, but this raises issues about police and outreach resources, and will not stop displacement into neighbouring boroughs. The other point worth making is that, given widespread discriminatory attitudes towards street drinkers, perception has a key role to play when it comes to assessing the impact of controlled drinking zones. Implement controlled drinking zones without raising awareness about street drinkers lifestyles, problems and rights among the "suited and booted", and local authorities run the risk of simply highlighting an age old phenomenon, they are unlikely to be able to stop.

What do outreach workers think?

Outreach workers interviewed had mixed views on the impact of DPPOs. One said the carrot and stick approach worked if the zones were properly and fairly policed, and outreach work was well resourced. Where this happened, outreach teams worked closely with the police sharing information, preempting problems and getting street drinkers support and treatment. "If they are done properly rather than being a high visibility political operation" they can provide support agencies with a "window of opportunity" with some very difficult clients, he said, adding that adequate resourcing of outreach work was crucial. But another worker said a no-drinking zone in his area merely resulted in some very vulnerable people getting fined and imprisoned. Many street drinkers are happy with their lives, choose to drink in public places and do not want to change, he said. The only way forward is to build up trust with them over a period of time in case they change their mind and ask for help. He said this process was made more difficult when accompanied by the threat of sanctions.