Thames Reach Robertson hostels across London are home to over 150 former rough sleepers who get support and encouragement from staff to prepare for a healthier and more independent lifestyle.

Many of the residents are suffering from serious health problems resulting from the consumption of high-strength ciders (7.5% ABV) and super-strength beers (up to 9% ABV). Staff encourage residents to give up alcohol entirely or to switch to weaker products which cause far less damage.

Our figures, taken from a variety of homelessness projects across London, indicate that 98 per cent of people struggling with alcohol problems drink cans and bottles of these high-strength ciders and super-strength beers such as White Ace and Carlsberg Special Brew.

Super-strength drinks have become one of the biggest causes of premature death among homeless people in the UK, and our figures indicate that super-strength drinks are doing more damage than both heroin and crack cocaine.

A survey of deaths in Thames Reach hostels showed 11 of 14 deaths over a year (78%) were directly attributed to super-strength drinks.

We’ve also seen the emergence of the ‘young old’s’, people in their 30s, 40s or 50s with the physical and mental health problems experienced by people past retirement age – liver failure, organic brain damage, mobility issues and double incontinence.

We support a responsible drinks industry and we recognise the importance of Britain’s cider and beer making tradition. High-strength ciders and super-strength beers are however a breed apart. They are not only very strong but relatively cheap. A single three-litre bottle of White Ace cider contains a massive 24 units of alcohol but retails at only £3.99. (The UK Chief Medical Officers’ guideline is that to keep health risks to a low level it is safest not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis.)

We have been campaigning for over a decade to raise taxation on these dangerous drinks and calling on the drinks industry to behave more responsibly.

We have had some significant successes including the consumption of 9% super-strength beer falling by a quarter after the creation of a higher rate band duty in 2011.

Credit must also go to the drinks manufacturer Heineken, which removed all its 7.5% high-strength ciders from sale in the UK after visiting one of our hostels.

We are now working in partnership with the Alcohol Health Alliance UK (AHA), an alliance of more than 40 non-governmental organisations, which work together to promote evidence-based policies to reduce the damage caused by alcohol misuse.

The aim is to highlight the dangers of cheap high-strength 7.5% white ciders, the very low levels of duty on these drinks, and to press for an additional band of duty, at a significantly higher rate, between 5.6 and 7.5% ABV.

Our aim is to encourage existing drinkers to switch to weaker products and to prevent a new generation of people, including teenagers experimenting with alcohol for the first time, from falling victim to these dangerous drinks.
**Super-strength drinks campaign**

Thames Reach has been campaigning relentlessly since 2005 to get super-strength drinks taxed more heavily as medical studies indicate that people’s behaviour with respect to drinking is heavily influenced by the price of the products available. The campaign is not anti-alcohol but focuses on the fact that super-strength drinks are a breed apart from regular and premium strength drinks and aimed at people with drink problems.

Communications Manager, Mike Nicholas, said: “Thames Reach is aware of over 50 deaths directly attributable to super-strength drinks among the homeless people we help in the past three years alone. Super-strength ciders and lagers have become one of the biggest killers of homeless people in the UK. They are responsible for the deaths of more homeless men and women than either heroin or crack cocaine.”

“In wider society they are responsible for anti-social behaviour, crime and spiralling health costs. A single can of 9% lager contains a massive four and a half units of alcohol. It only takes one can to exceed the Government’s daily recommended safe alcohol limit of three to four units for men and two to three units for women.”

There have been some major successes – recently, the Coalition Government increased the tax on super-strength lagers, a move we welcome and one which follows on from talks Thames Reach had with the Treasury. Thames Reach has also been calling on the drinks industry to behave more responsibly and behave in line with their corporate social responsibility policies.

Mike Nicholas, said: “Again there have been some successes with Heineken removing White Lightening – known as White Frightening among street drinkers – and super-strength Strongbow Black from their range of drinks, citing its poor reputation for being linked with problem drinkers. This follows on from a visit by their staff to one of our hostels which houses former rough sleepers with drink issues. It’s a brave move and one that we applaud, especially at a time when the recession threatens profits.

“However there is still a big problem with other super-strength ciders white ciders.” The producers of white cider are exploiting tax breaks intended to help the cider industry develop orchards growing traditional cider apples, whilst sometimes using importing apple concentrate from abroad. The result has been extremely cheap super-strength white ciders at 7.5% becoming the drink of choice for many.

According to Mike Nicholas: “The last Government pledged to tackle the growing menace but instead of targeting super-strength white ciders, hit the whole cider industry including the regular strength ciders sold in pubs, with a 10% above inflation tax hike. The result was an outcry which led to the plans being dropped. Probably rightly so, but this has led to the more unscrupulous elements of the drinks industry being able to exploit this to carry on producing these dangerous super-strength white ciders at extremely cheap prices.”

In the recent years, wholesale companies have flooded corner shops and off licences across the UK with very cheap and very strong super-strength ciders.

Unlike the big drinks companies, these wholesale companies appear to be entirely unregulated. None of them are signed up to the Portman Group, the drinks industry self-regulatory body, and don’t appear to have any corporate social responsibility guidelines. Companies such as Bestway have flooded their local markets across the UK (including London) with their own products such as White Ace. Although they don’t advertise to the public via TV ads, they aggressively market these drinks at heavily discounted prices to off licences and corner stores. See attachment.

The result is these stores stacking large quantities of these super-strength ciders which become the drink of choice for many. Only 20 years ago these drinks simply weren’t available and cider was generally much weaker in strength. Mike Nicholas, added: “Are we happy as a society for these super-strength drinks to receive tax breaks and be so widely available, with the appalling consequences that this entails?

“Critics would argue that any campaign to hit the trade in super-strength drinks would see a switch to other dangerous drinks. Our own experience in our projects where we try to encourage people to either give up alcohol or minimise the harm they are doing to themselves through alcohol consumption, has in fact seen real improvements in people’s health and behaviour when they switch to regular and premium strength drinks.”

20,000 rough sleepers have been helped off the streets by homelessness charities in London over the past ten years. Many ended up on the streets because of an addiction to alcohol. The vast majority of the homeless people with alcohol addictions were super-strength cider and lager drinkers. Sadly many have died. Others, perhaps in their forties and fifties, are now coined ‘the young olds’ as their physical and mental health is more typical of people much older – liver disease, brain damage and double incontinence are typical problems.

Mike Nicholas, said: “We have a well-established beer and cider drinking culture in the UK and we don’t wish to challenge that. We just don’t think that super-strength drinks should be so cheap and so strong and marketed towards people with drink problems. Super-strength white ciders are far cheaper than alcopops which the media often focus on. Of course alcoholism won’t completely disappear if these super-strength drinks disappear but we can rescue future generations of teenagers from developing dangerous drinking habits.”
Alcohol consumption and street drinking

Pubs face a challenge in terms of their public health role and alcohol. On the one hand, the vast majority of people who enjoy alcohol do so responsibly and without causing immediate harm to either themselves or others. Furthermore, alcohol and the wider hospitality industry make an extremely significant contribution to the national and local economies through bars, pubs, clubs and restaurants.

Yet there is also a clear body of evidence demonstrating that drinking habits are harming the nation’s health as well as contributing to problems on the streets of towns and cities. The Health and Social Care Formulation Centre estimates that about 1.6 million adults in England are dependent on alcohol, and alcohol misuse can lead to a wide range of conditions, including cancer, heart disease, strokes and, of course, liver disease. It is also believed to be a factor in about half of all violent crime and domestic abuse and is estimated to cost the country £1 billion a year in terms of criminal justice (including £21 billion when health and loss of productivity is taken into account).

A balance of these two realities, the most effective approach for councils to take in managing alcohol will be to use their health id licensing roles to target specific issues id problems arising from the consumption of alcohol, rather than taking a universal approach that affects those who are drinking responsibly. Reducing the strength schemes of the local authority is one of a range of tools used to tackle alcohol-related harm.

Defining street drinking

Street drinkers are defined as a person who drinks heavily in public places and, at least in the short term, is unable or unwilling to control or stop their drinking, has a history of alcohol misuse and often drinks in groups for companionship (Lamb, 1995). People who are street drinkers are likely to be at an increased risk of causing harm to themselves and others and may be involved in antisocial behaviour such as begging, or rowdy drunken behaviour that can be intimidating or even violent. Street drinkers are often, although not exclusively, associated with homelessness; homeless charity Thames Reach has stated that strong and cheap alcohol is responsible for more deaths among the homeless than heroin or crack cocaine combined.

Street drinking can have an extremely damaging impact on local communities and peoples’ perception of them, including on businesses in close proximity to places where street drinkers congregate.

This paper was written for Thames Reach by Claire Goodwin, a research assistant at the University of Surrey.