Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click here to see Sarah Live

Should we not address not only the issue of parents sending children away to places such as Newquay with alcohol but the supply of alcohol that is routinely provided in children’s own homes? Indeed, should we consider making it an offence for parents knowingly to supply other people’s children with alcohol at parties on their own premises, which we would otherwise call proxy buying?

Stephen Gilbert (St Austell and Newquay, Liberal Democrat)

My hon. Friend has opened a can of worms by raising the responsibilities that parents have to not only their own children but other people’s children in their homes. Parents often underestimate their influence over their children, whether it involves setting an example or supplying alcohol for parties. She has made an excellent point, and I hope that the Minister will respond to it when he winds up the debate.

We know from research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which published a paper on this issue in June, that if a young person finds alcohol easy to obtain their chances of drinking excessively increase fourfold. Equally, if a young person sees their parents drunk, it doubles the chance that they themselves will get drunk. In that report, parents emerge as one of the crucial influences on teenage drinking. Shockingly, that research, which was based on a survey of 5,700 children, found that one in five children claim to have been drunk for the first time by the age of 14 and that half of all 16-year-olds report having been drunk.

Last weekend, further research from the schools health education unit showed that children as young as 12 say that they drink the equivalent of 19 glasses of wine per week. In that survey, 83,000 school pupils were questioned, and 4% of 12 and 13-year-olds said that they consume 28 or more units of alcohol a week, which is more than the maximum amount suggested in the adult weekly guidelines for alcohol. Clearly, it might not be possible or appropriate to use legislation to solve this widespread cultural problem, but we must ensure that legislation passed by this House does not create an opportunity for the problem to get worse. I welcome the steps that the Government are taking to crack down on people who sell alcohol to children, including the doubling to £20,000 of the fine for under-age alcohol sales and the extension of the period of closure that can be given as an alternative to prosecution when premises are found to have been involved in supplying alcohol to children.

I want the Minister to touch on a number of issues that continue to cause me and the police concern. The first is section 149 of the Licensing Act 2003, which prohibits the proxy purchase of alcohol by adults for children. The section has been successfully used in Newquay in a campaign supported by Crimestoppers, with a number of individuals being prosecuted when there was evidence that alcohol has been bought by an adult and supplied to a child. There is a clear problem, however, with parent dealers, who when questioned by the police often say that they did not buy the alcohol for their children—they just
happened to have it and handed to them. Any well-prepared brief could drive a coach and horses through the attempted prosecution of a parent under that legislation.

Another legal avenue at our disposal are child neglect provisions, but they would apply only to under-16s, leaving a hole where the slightly older, but still vulnerable, 17 and 18-year-olds are. Will the Minister, therefore, undertake to review section 149, and look at tightening up rules on parental supply, perhaps stipulating that parents must be on hand to supervise the drinking of any alcohol that they supply to their children?

A second legislative hole is in the Confiscation of Alcohol (Young Persons) Act 1997, which provides the police with the power to confiscate but to make an arrest only if the request to hand over the alcohol is not complied with. Because of the significant pressure on local police forces, it is often not possible for them to make an arrest even if such action is desirable, and their power in that regard must be strengthened.

I firmly believe that we must look again at alcohol pricing, and I have raised the issue in the House. Even with the changes recently announced by the Government, supermarkets’ ability to sell alcohol at prices that are so much cheaper than in pubs and clubs causes genuine concern to many people.

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