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Fears over widening gap in alcohol tax

Latest official figures from HMRC have prompted calls for urgent action

SIMON BANKS

Retailers have raised concerns over the growing illicit alcohol trade in the run up to Christmas, as the latest report from HMRC shows a widening of the alcohol tax gap.

Official figures from the Tax Gaps report revealed the alcohol gap increased from £1.3bn in 2013-14 to £1.8bn in 2014-15, while the illicit market share in beer alone increased from 9% in 2007-08 to 15% in 2014-15, the highest percentage recorded this century.

The 'tax gap' is the difference between the amount of tax that should, in theory, be collected by HMRC, against what is actually collected.

Amit Patel, owner of Belvedere Food and Wine in South East London, said: "I am worried that illicit trade will harm our sales of alcohol, particularly in the run up to Christmas, because if customers can get products cheaper elsewhere then they will, leaving honest responsible retailers to miss out on trade."

Amit said he was hopeful the introduction of the Alcohol Wholesaler Registration Scheme next year would address the issue of illicit alcohol sales. He added: "I hope once the Alcohol Wholesaler



HMRC has reported a surge in the illicit alcohol trade, with illicit beer market share increasing to 15%

Registration Scheme is in full swing then this tax gap will gradually drop, but at the moment I expect the next six months to be challenging as [illicit] wholesalers will be pushing stock onto the market."

Lionel Cashin, of The News Shop, Market Weighton, Yorkshire, said budget cuts were taking their toll on policing the illicit trade. "The police need to be able to crack down on the sources of illicit products, but budgets are being cut so they simply don't have the numbers to make any difference."

WHOLESALE REGISTRATION SCHEME

The Alcohol Wholesaler Registration Scheme (AWRS), which will come into force in April 2017, would start the process of restoring the supply chain to responsible

distributors, according to the Federation of Wholesale Distributors (FWD).

The AWRS will list approved wholesalers online, allowing retailers to check their source is registered.

FWD chief executive James Bielby said: "AWRS is an easy way to ensure retailers are trading within the law and to avoid the risk of having stock seized and potentially losing their licence."

Mohammad Afzal, owner of a Nisa store in Oxford, warned retailers to be vigilant. "If someone comes to your store in a white van and offers something that is too good to be true, then it most definitely is and you can be sure that the products on offer are not legal," he said.

OPINION

Tough sanctions

“There just aren't strict enough measures to sufficiently punish irresponsible retailers. These retailers should have their premises licence revoked - this would send out a powerful message.”

Harj Dhasee, Nisa Village Stores, Mickleton

“We continue to call on the government to impose stricter sanctions on retailers found to be selling illicit alcohol, such as revoking their licence.”

James Lowman, Association of Convenience Stores chief executive