

# **Reducing the Strength Evaluation**

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**Public Health & Wirral  
Intelligence Service**

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**Content overview**

<b>Reviewers</b>	Sarah Kinsella, Gareth Hill, Robert Minshall, Rachael Musgrave, Beverley Murray (all Public Health), members of RtS steering group
<b>Abstract</b>	Evaluation of a local alcohol harm reduction initiative, 'Reducing the Strength'
<b>Intended or potential audience</b>	<b>External</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Local NHS organisations</li><li>• Merseyside Police</li></ul> <b>Internal</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Public Health</li><li>• Trading Standards</li><li>• Environmental Health</li><li>• Community Safety</li></ul>
<b>Links with other topic areas</b>	Alcohol, Crime, Community Safety, Urgent Care

## Executive Summary

- Reducing the Strength is a voluntary scheme aimed at reducing alcohol related harm, under which local retailers voluntarily agree not to sell high strength alcohol; 100 local retailers are currently signed up, concentrated in the Birkenhead area
- Alcohol specific admissions in the 7 Beats area showed a decrease compared to previous time periods and compared to the previous upward trend. In Wirral overall, the trend remained flat, showing no decrease over the same time period
- The Wirral Residents Survey highlighted that only Birkenhead and Wirral South showed decreases (between 2015 and 2017) in the proportion of residents identifying that people being drunk or rowdy in public places was an issue (8% decrease in Birkenhead, 3% decrease in Wirral South)
- The Residents Survey also showed that the proportion of Wirral residents who reported feeling safe during the day increased between 2015 and 2017, in 3 of the 4 Constituencies in Wirral. Birkenhead –Reducing the Strength’s ‘heartland’, and Wallasey showed the greatest increases in people feeling safe
- There were also increases in the proportion of residents feeling safe at night (largest increases in Birkenhead), albeit from a lower starting point
- The availability of super strength (as monitored via a proxy measure) in the Birkenhead area, has showed a downward trend over time
- The scheme continues to foster joint working as demonstrated by the well supported Reducing the Strength steering group, the Town Centre User Group, the ‘Custodians’ scheme (which has arisen from the original RtS scheme) as well as several awards won by the initiative
- Case studies highlight that in addition to uncovering the sale of illicit alcohol, other criminal activity has been identified and followed up by various other agencies (e.g. UK Border Force, HMRC) as a direct result of the RtS scheme
- Other crime data (although not included as an initial outcome measure) have been less conclusive. Reductions in ASB were observed in both the 7 Beats and Wirral overall for example, but a forthcoming evaluation to be carried out by Merseyside Police may shed more light on any potential impacts on crime arising from the scheme

## Introduction

Starting in 2015, “Reducing the Strength” (RtS) was a campaign for alcohol retailers to voluntarily not sell cheap, high strength lagers, beers and ciders of ABV 6.5% or more, modelled on [work initially carried out in Ipswich, Suffolk](#). Based in several Police patrol or ‘beat’ areas (known collectively as the ‘7 Beats’), the overall aim of the project was to reduce alcohol related harm and alcohol related admissions to hospital, and to improve perception of community safety among older people. RtS also supported two key themes in A Strategy to Tackle Alcohol Related Harm in Wirral 2013-16<sup>1</sup>; reducing alcohol availability and tackling street drinking.

There are currently 95 retailers that have signed up to RtS, with the majority concentrated in Birkenhead, particularly in the initial ‘7 Beats’ area. It is now very difficult to purchase so-called ‘super-strength’ alcohol in this initial area. Super strength alcohol is typically consumed by two groups: street drinkers and teenagers. Consumption of cheap alcohol is correlated with crime, antisocial behaviour and admissions for alcohol related causes.

The proposed mechanism of RtS is that reduced access to the cheapest, strongest alcohol will lead to substitution with weaker alcohol, reducing overall alcohol consumption. We will evaluate the outcomes of RtS by examining the rates of alcohol specific hospital admissions, crime and anti-social behaviour in Wirral, and the volume of super-strength alcohol consumed in Wirral’s Controlled Drinking Environments (CDEs), before and after the introduction of the Reducing the Strength campaign. The 7 Beats area will be compared to the rest of Wirral (where possible), in order to ascertain whether trends or rates are Wirral wide, or area specific.

## How the scheme works

A steering group was set up to oversee development and progress of RtS. This group included representatives from Wirral Council (Public Health, Licencing, Environmental Health, Trading Standards teams), Merseyside Police, local charities (e.g. The Quays) and local CDE teams.

A key area of the campaign was frontline delivery (e.g. working with local retailers to ‘sell’ the initiative and support them to maintain it). Using a ‘bid in’ opportunity, funding was secured from Public Health to release one Trading Standards Officer and one Environmental Health Officer on a part-time basis, to make the key approaches to businesses (later in the project, a Public Health funding stream extending to project end date was negotiated). It was felt these officers had the appropriate experience from working directly with businesses in an advisory and regulatory capacity.

Supporting materials branded with the national RtS logo were developed and particular attention paid to the complexities of competition law, with advice sought from the borough solicitor’s team. This advice ruled out any kind of mass campaigns or launch events and

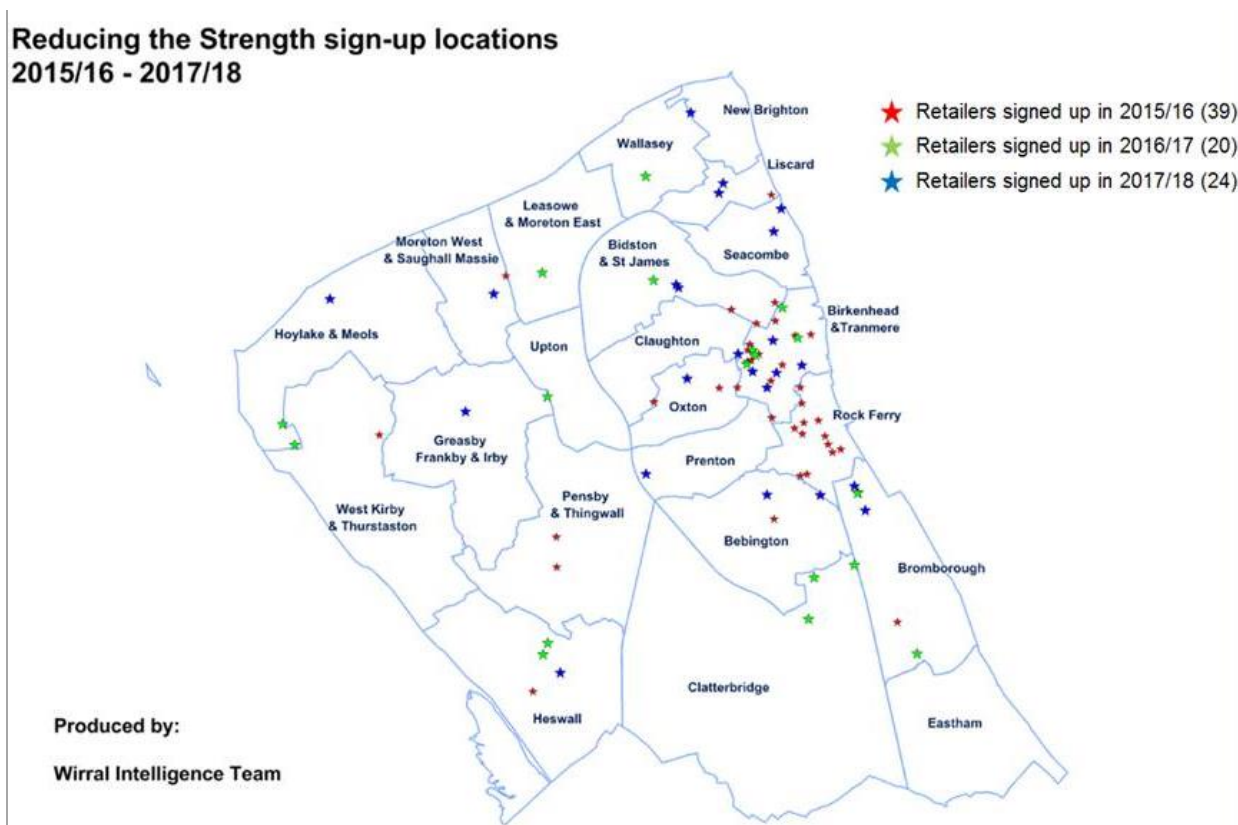
directed that all RtS business must be conducted at individual shop level, with no discussion of competitors' information or intentions.

With the agreement of the RtS steering group, initial RtS activity was focused on a pre-defined policing area known as the '7 Beats'. This was a grouping of 7 'old style' Police foot beats located in the Birkenhead town centre and near environs which yielded an inordinate proportion of reported crime. Hard work and persistence over the first operational year of RtS (2015/16) resulted in 39 businesses signing up to the scheme.

At this point, 'Affiliate' status was created for businesses which did not sell super-strength products, but who were aware of the scheme and supportive of it.

In 2016, RtS extended its range to Rock Ferry, New Ferry and non 7 Beats parts of Birkenhead (though a handful of further flung businesses had been signed up on a speculative basis before then). Continued growth in the numbers of sign ups led to the scheme being further extended in 2017 to cover Seacombe, Poulton and New Brighton. There are currently 83 retailers signed up to the Reducing the Strength initiative. See Map 1 below showing the number of retailer sign ups by financial year since the beginning of the initiative.

**Map 1:** Location of retailers signed up to the Reducing the Strength initiative, by year of sign up



Operationally, frontline workers decided in what order to approach businesses within agreed areas. They worked strategically to win over the more open-minded businesses creating a momentum which made it easier to recruit the (initially) less willing. Anything between 3 and 8 visits might be required to convince a business to sign up. A 'Round Robin' email system notifying all stakeholders of new potential sign ups was established in order that any business about whom any agencies had concerns would not automatically be given RtS status.

At the start of the project, a concise dashboard detailing sign-ups to the project, dates, licence variations and other key details was created. This has been maintained throughout by frontline workers and has been key in reporting on all aspects of progress to the steering group.

## Methods

This evaluation aims to determine whether the RtS campaign has met the original outcomes, as detailed below, and any additional, unanticipated outcomes. There were seven outcomes outlined in the original RtS specification:

1. Alcohol-related admissions to hospital (Narrow Measure, Public Health Outcomes Framework Indicator 2.18)
2. Older People's perception of community safety (Indicator 1.19)
3. To reduce the availability of damaging super strength alcohol in Wirral
4. To ensure sustained compliance with RtS by retailers via revisits, inspections and monitoring of all participating premises over the time line of the project
5. To develop (in partnership with Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Trust) a high awareness of this campaign amongst the Frequent Attender Group, to ultimately effect a reduction in the frequency of hospital visits in High Intensity User patients
6. Contribute to the achievement of work streams linked to the Wirral Alcohol Strategy 2013-2016 (specifically around sales of illicit alcohol)
7. Contribute to the identification and address the illegal sale of alcohol to underage children

Outcomes 1 and 2 are (or were) also [Public Health Outcome Framework](#) indicators. The first three indicators are quantitative indicators, while the others are qualitative. In the case of the three quantitative indicators, performance on the measure/indicator prior to the introduction of RtS have been compared to the period afterward for potential impacts. In the case of the qualitative measures/indicators, case studies and report/testimony from those involved have been used to illustrate the scope and impact of the initiative. There is a further section where unforeseen or unanticipated impacts are mentioned and where possible, detailed with both data and case studies. These other, or unanticipated outcomes relate mainly to crime and the 'Custodians' project (see page 18 for further details). Each outcome will be addressed in more detail below. Other unintended impacts (such as those on crime) will be also be detailed.

## Outcome 1: Admissions to hospital

We were unable to replicate the original Public Health Outcomes Framework Indicator (Alcohol-Related Hospital Admissions - Narrow measure, Indicator number 2.18) at a small area level, in order to compare the 7 Beats area to Wirral overall. Public Health England (PHE) use Alcohol Attributable Fractions to calculate this indicator, and this is only available at the Wirral level. This is problematic, as it is highly unlikely that a campaign which has been mainly centred on one area of Wirral would have a noticeable impact on overall Wirral figures. Focusing on the specific area in which the campaign had most impact offers the opportunity to more accurately appraise the impact of the scheme.

Consequently, as a replacement for Public Health Outcomes Framework Indicator 2.18, we instead used Public Health Outcomes Framework Indicator 6.02 (Hospital admissions for alcohol-*specific* conditions, all ages, directly age standardised rate per 100,000 population). This is a very similar measure, but one which can be calculated at a more local level, allowing analysis of admissions in just the 7 Beats area.

### *Alcohol-Specific Hospital Admissions in the 7 Beats area*

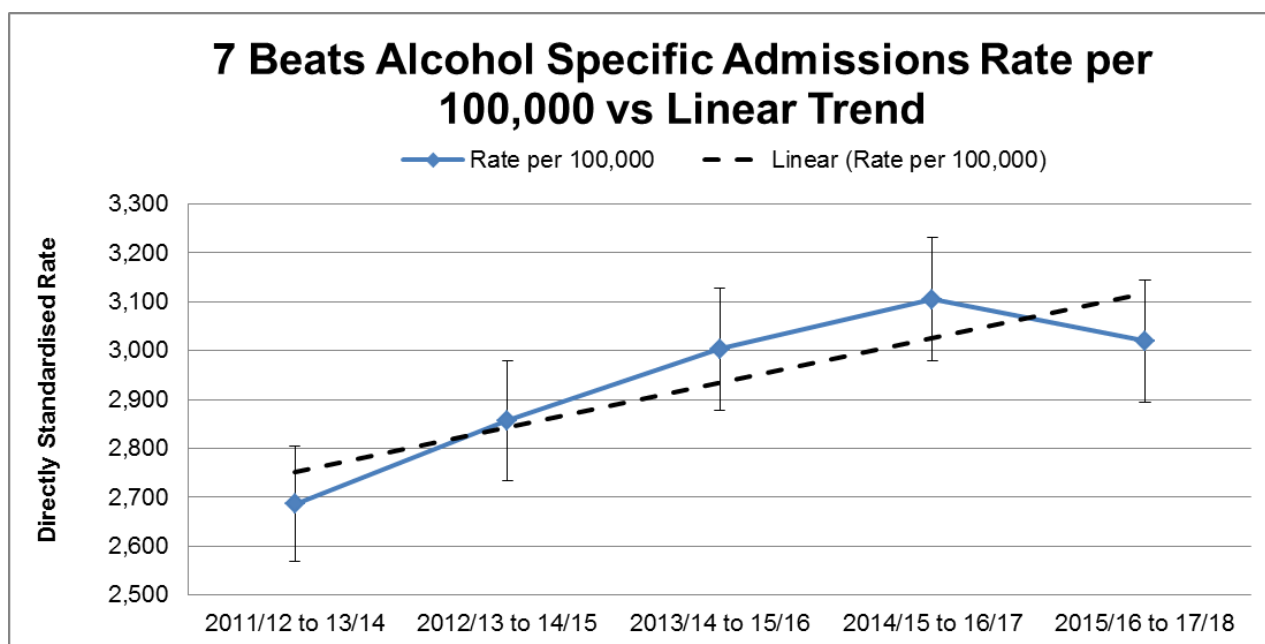
Table 1 and Figure 1 shows the number and rate of alcohol specific hospital admissions before, during and after the introduction of RtS (by 3 year pooled financial years) in the 7 Beats area. The alcohol specific admission rate in the 7 Beats area increased consistently between 2011/12-13/14 and 2014/15-16/17, until 2015/16-17/18 when the rate decreased. This marked a departure from the trend shown in the previous time periods. The linear trend line shows what is likely to have happened if the trend based on the previous time periods had continued.

**Table 1:** Trend in number and rate (DSR) of alcohol-related hospital admissions in 7 Beats area of Wirral (3 pooled financial year periods, with Upper and Lower Confidence Level, UCL/LCL)

Time period	Number	Rate per 100,000	LCL	UCL
2011/12 to 2013/14	1,995	2686.2	2568.3	2804.1
2012/13 to 2014/15	2,110	2856.5	2734.6	2978.4
2013/14 to 2015/16	2,224	3003.2	2878.4	3128.0
2014/15 to 2016/17	2,297	3105.4	2978.4	3232.4
2015/16 to 2017/18	2,239	3019.8	2894.7	3144.9

Source: Hospital Episode Statistics, 2018

**Figure 1:** Trend in rate (DSR) of alcohol-related hospital admissions in 7 Beats area of Wirral (3 pooled financial year periods, with Confidence Levels) & expected linear trend



Source: Hospital Episode Statistics, 2018

In the 3 years pooled time period of 2015/16-17/18 the alcohol specific admissions rate show a decrease from the previous 3 years pooled time period, this is the first time the rate has dropped and goes against the overall linear trend for the past four (3-years pooled) time periods. The first RTS sign ups occurred during 2015/16. The number of admissions expected if the upward trend in the 7 Beats had continued was 2,300 in 2015/16 to 2017/18. This compares to the *actual* total of 2,239 admissions in this period. The average cost of an emergency admission in Wirral between 2015/16 and 2017/18 was £2,453.64. This means that the difference between the actual and expected level of admissions (n=61 admissions) equates to a potential cost saving of £149,672.04 in the 7 Beats area.

#### *Alcohol Specific Hospital Admissions in the rest of Wirral (excluding the 7 Beats area)*

Table 2 and Figure 2 (below) show the number and rate of Alcohol Specific Hospital Admissions before, during and after the advent of the Reducing the Strength initiative (by 3-year pooled financial years) in other areas of Wirral, *excluding the 7 Beats area*.

**Table 2:** Trend in number and rate (DSR) of alcohol specific hospital admissions in other areas of Wirral *excluding* 7 Beats area (3 pooled financial year periods, with Upper and Lower Confidence Levels, UCL/LCL)

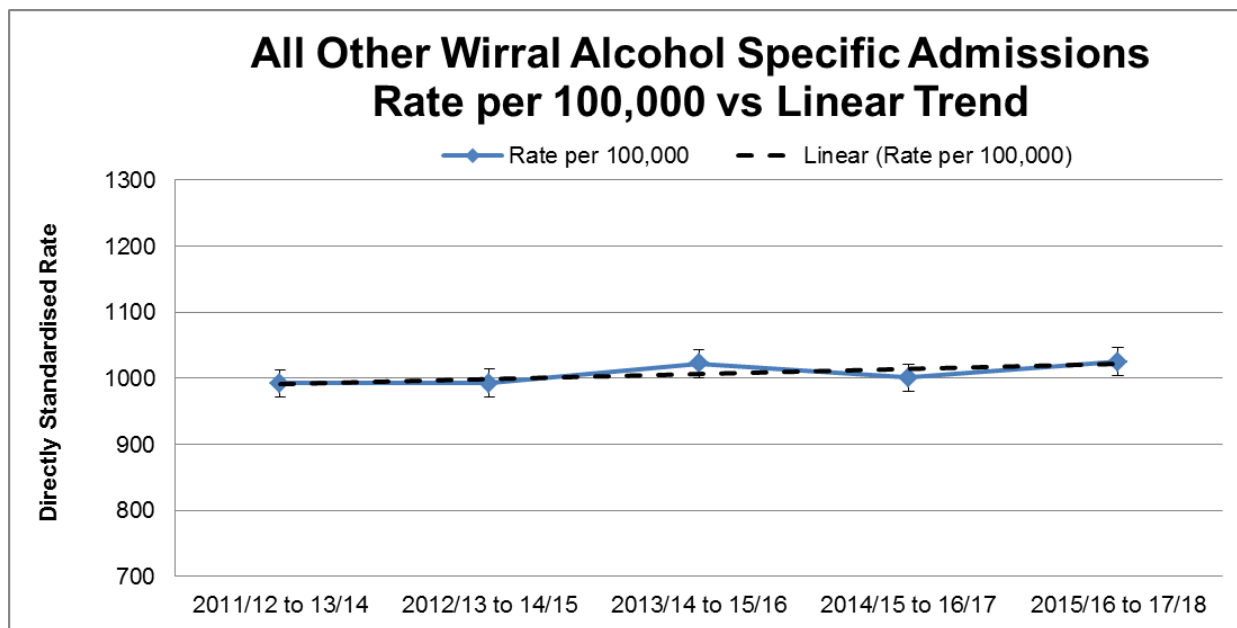
Time period	Number	Rate per 100,000	LCL	UCL
2011/12 to 2013/14	8,573	992.4	971.4	1013.4
2012/13 to 2014/15	8,596	992.9	971.9	1013.9
2013/14 to 2015/16	8,878	1022.5	1001.2	1043.8
2014/15 to 2016/17	8,740	1000.8	979.8	1021.8
2015/16 to 2017/18	8,991	1025.2	1004.0	1046.4

Source: Hospital Episode Statistics, 2018



As the table and chart show, alcohol-specific admissions rates have fluctuated over the previous five 3 year pooled time periods, but have remained fairly flat. There has been a slight overall increase shown by the broken linear trend line. The rate for the latest 3 year pooled time period of 2015/16-17/18, the rate has been the highest it has ever been during the five 3-years pooled time periods. This is in contrast to the 7 Beats area, which has shown a decrease over the time period, albeit from a much higher starting point.

**Figure 2:** Trend in rate (DSR) of alcohol specific hospital admissions in all other areas of Wirral *excluding* 7 Beats area (3 pooled financial year periods) with Confidence Levels



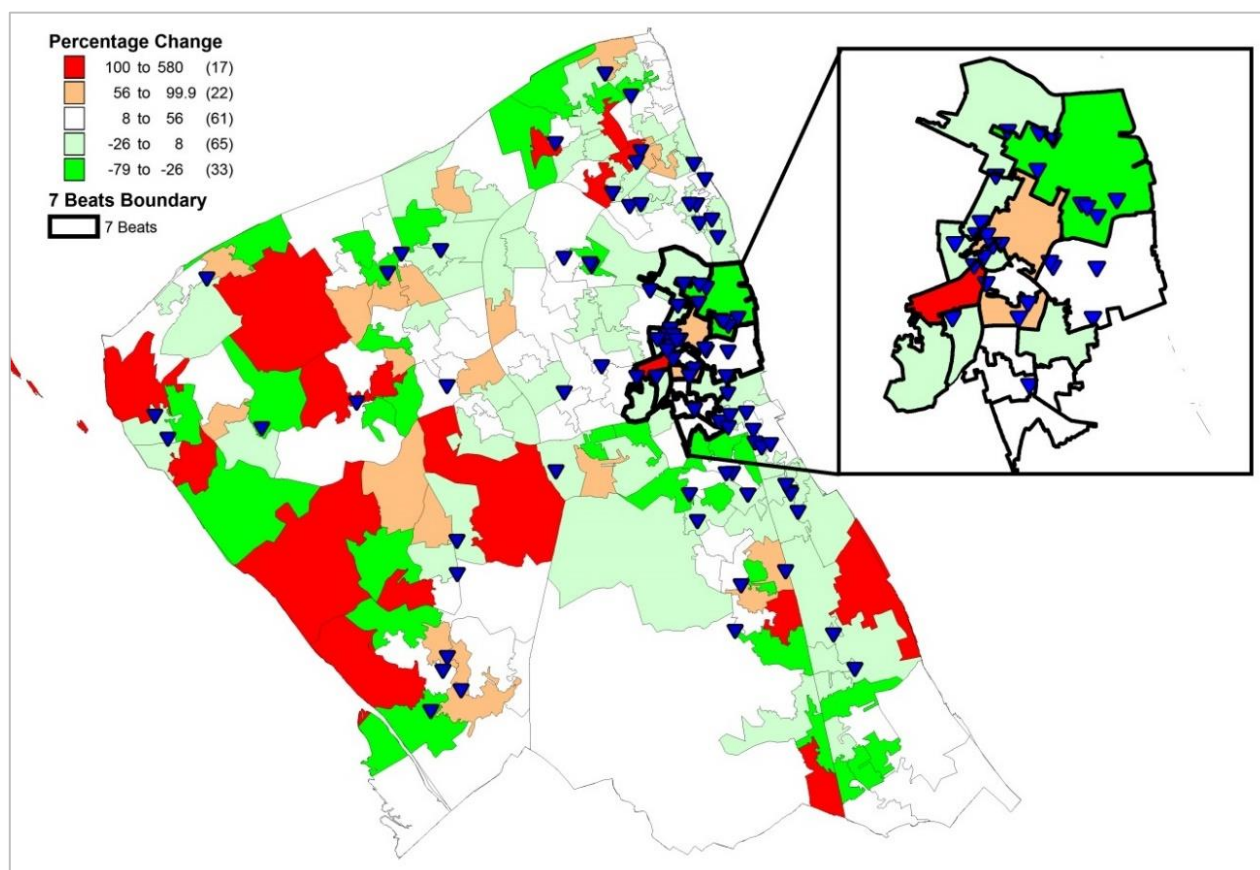
Source: Hospital Episode Statistics, 2018

*Change in alcohol specific hospital admission rates by LSOA*

Map 1 below shows the percentage change in alcohol specific hospital admission rates 2011/12-2014/15 versus 2015/16-2017/18.

Current Reducing the Strength premises are overlaid (shown by blue triangles). Those LSOAs with the largest percentage increases in alcohol specific admissions between the time periods 2011/12–14/15 to 2015/16–17/18 are shown in either red or orange. Areas where the percentage of admissions has decreased are shown in green. Areas in white show only a small percentage increase

**Map 1: Percentage Change in Number of Alcohol-specific Hospital Admissions 2011/12–2014/15 vs 2015/16–2017/18 (Overlaid with RTS Premises)**



Source: Hospital Episode Statistics, 2018

As the map shows, the majority of LSOAs which are worsening appear to be in west Wirral, with a few pockets in south Wirral and Wallasey. In the Birkenhead area where Reducing the Strength retailers are concentrated, there is only one LSOA which has shown a large percentage increase (red). The Hamilton Square LSOA, which is where several homeless hostels are located in Birkenhead and has historically always had one of the highest high rates of hospital admissions in Wirral is one of those areas which has shown a large percentage decrease. This was the first area in Wirral which Reducing the Strength was introduced. Hamilton Square LSOA is within the 7 beats area (which has been enlarged on the map for greater clarity).

### **Outcome 2. Older People's perception of community safety (Indicator 1.19)**

Unfortunately, the Public Health Indicator 1.19 has been discontinued by Public Health England and is no longer included on the Public Health Outcomes Framework (PHOF). It was, in any case, a very high level indicator for the whole of Wirral which was unlikely to show an impact from a targeted campaign such as Reducing the Strength.

We still wished to address the issue of community safety, and so substituted the PHOF indicator with an indicator from the local Residents Survey (conducted annually in Wirral by Ipsos MORI on behalf of Wirral Council), containing information on perceptions of

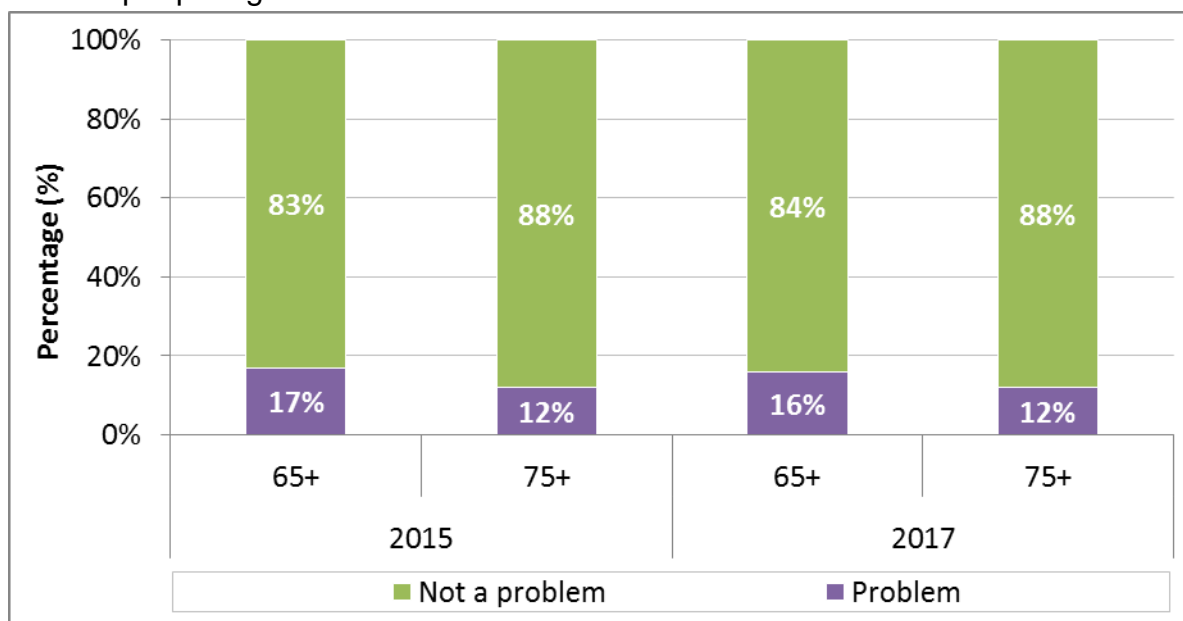
people being drunk and rowdy and community safety, by age group. Responses are only available at Constituency level or by age (not by both), which may not be low level enough to show an impact from this project. Nevertheless, differences between 2015 and 2017 on the perceptions of safety (both in the day and at night) and how much they thought drunkenness and rowdiness in public was an issue in their area are shown below.

*Perceptions of drunk or rowdy behaviour by age and constituency*

The question relating to alcohol was, “Thinking about this local area, how much of a problem do you think people being drunk or rowdy in public places is?” Answers to this question are shown below analysed by both age (responses in people aged 65+ and 75+) and where available, by area (constituency of residence).

As the chart shows, there was little difference between 2015 and 2017 in terms of responses to this question. In 2015, 12% of people aged 75+ thought that people being drunk or rowdy in public places was an issue and the figure in 2017 was still 12%. In the 65+ age group, the figure showed a very small decrease from 17% thinking it was an issue in 2015 to 16% in 2017.

**Figure 3:** Comparison of responses to Wirral Residents Survey question, “How much of a problem do you think people being drunk or rowdy in public places is?” in 2015 and 2017 in older people aged 65+ and 75+

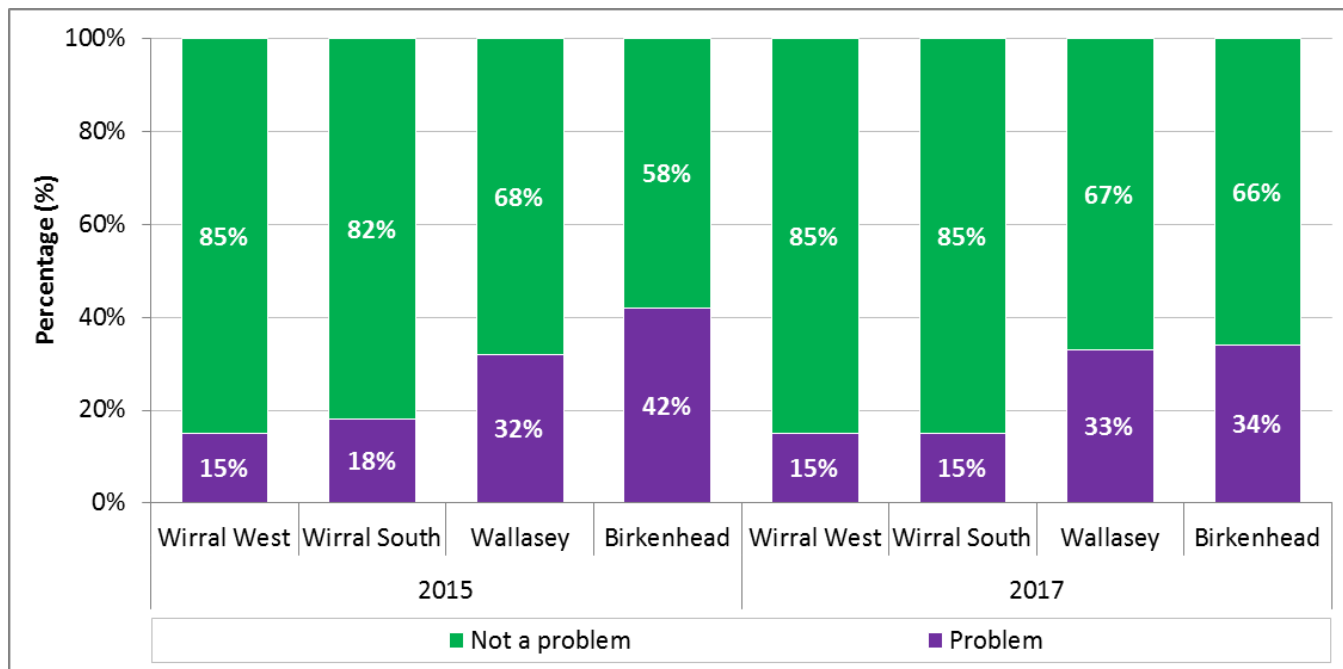


**Source:** Ipsos MORI, Wirral Residents Survey, 2015 and 2018

**Note:** Excluding no opinion, not stated and don't know responses

Answers to the same question are shown in Figure 4 by Wirral Constituency (over page).

**Figure 4:** Comparison of responses to Wirral Residents Survey question, “How much of a problem do you think people being drunk or rowdy in public places is?” in 2015 and 2017 by Wirral Parliamentary Constituency



**Source:** Ipsos MORI, Wirral Residents Survey, 2015 and 2018

**Note:** Excluding no opinion, not stated and don't know responses

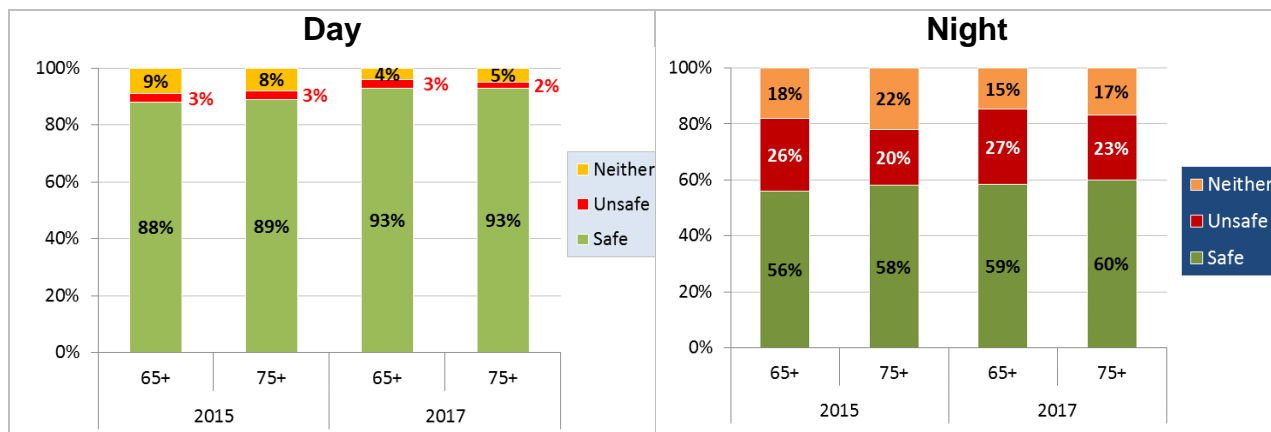
There was only one Constituency where there was an increase in residents identifying people being drunk or rowdy in public places was an issue, but it was negligible (an increase from 32% to 33% in Wallasey).

There was no change in Wirral West (15% in both 2015 and 2017). Birkenhead and Wirral South however, both showed decreases. In 2015 the proportion of Birkenhead residents identifying that people being drunk or rowdy in public places was an issue was 42%, by 2017 this had reduced to 34% - an 8% decrease. In Wirral South, the proportion of residents reporting this was an issue decreased from 18% to 15% between 2015 and 2017.

Birkenhead, where the largest decrease was observed, has also been the location for several initiatives (one of which has been Reducing the Strength) to decrease anti-social behaviour and improve the image of the area over the last few years. The decrease cannot of course, be attributed to any one initiative (or any initiative at all, it may just be chance), but it is nonetheless, worth noting.

*Perceptions of safety (at night and in the day) by age and constituency*

**Figures 5a & 5b:** Comparison of responses to Wirral Residents Survey question, “How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area during the day/night?” in 2015 and 2017 by age



**Source:** Ipsos MORI, Wirral Residents Survey, 2015 and 2018

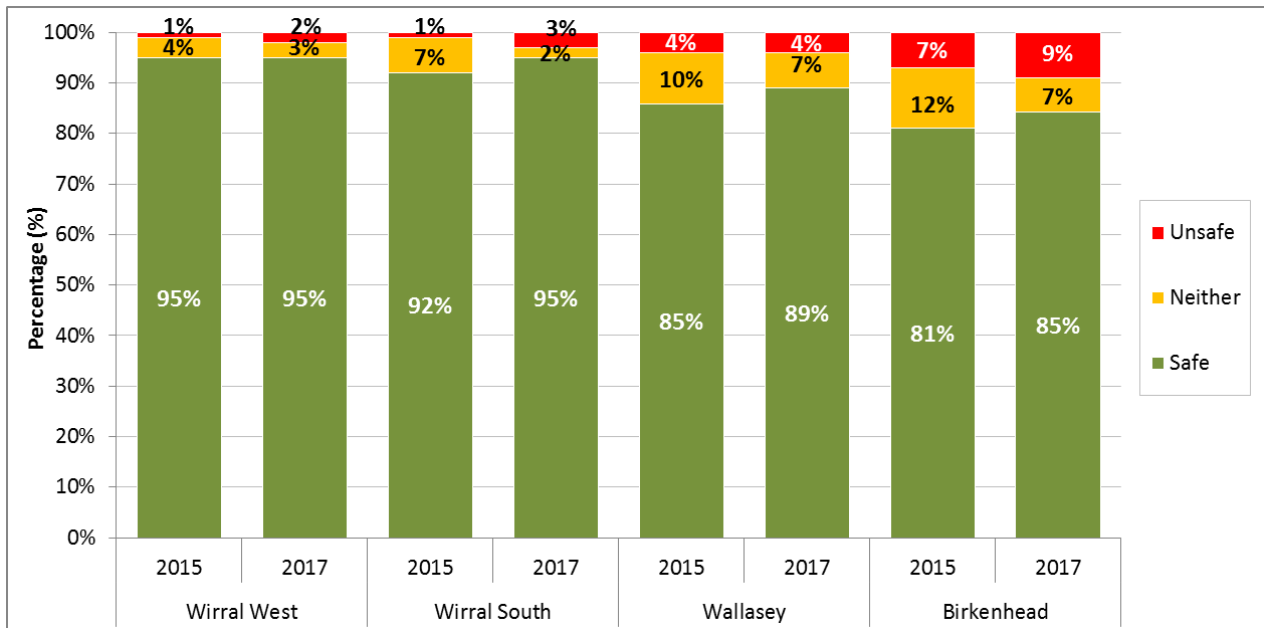
**Note:** Excluding no opinion, not stated and don't know responses

As the charts show, older people reported feeling safer in much greater numbers in the day compared to the night at both points (2015 and 2017). In both the 65+ and 75+ age groups and both in the day and at night, the proportion of those who said they felt safe increased between 2015 and 2017.

How safe people felt **during the day** depending on where they lived (Parliamentary Constituency) is shown in Figure 6 below.

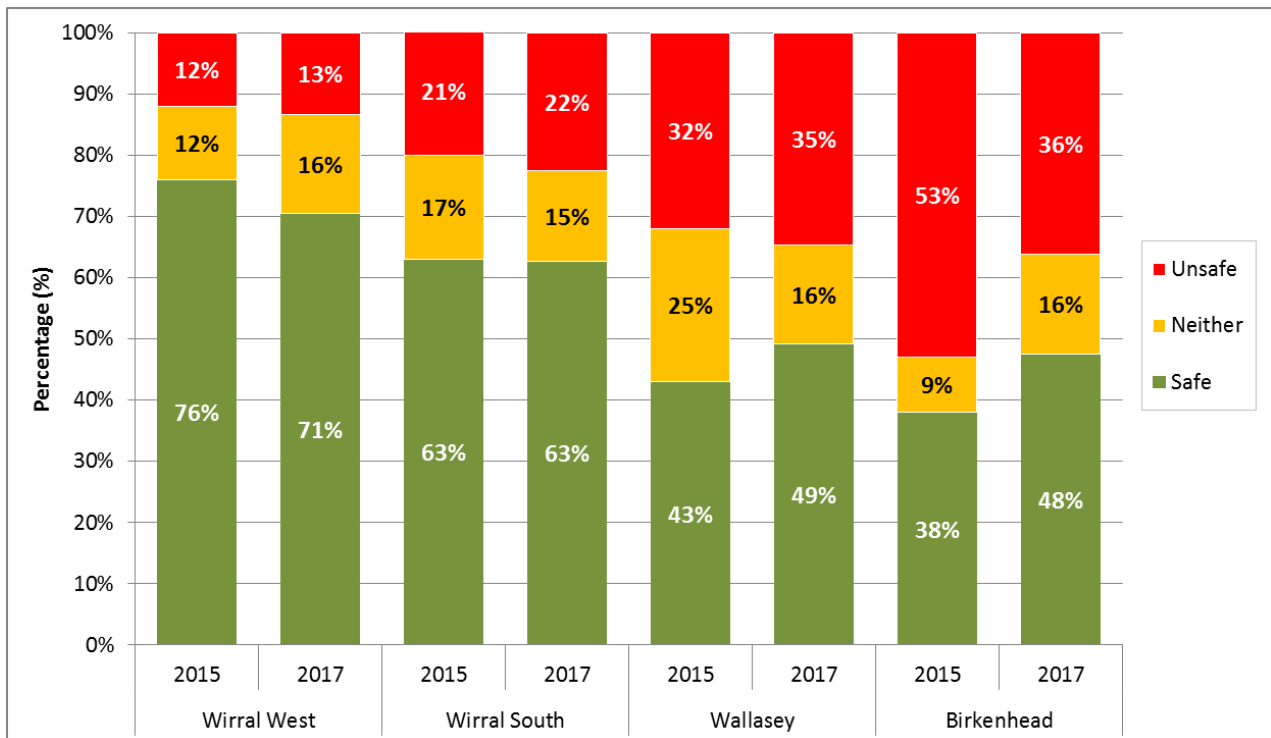
Similarly to the previous chart, the proportion of Wirral residents who reported feeling safe **during the day** increased between 2015 and 2017, in all areas of Wirral except Wirral West, where it stayed the same. Birkenhead and Wallasey showed the greatest increases. See Figure 6.

**Figure 6:** Comparison of responses to Wirral Residents Survey question, “How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area **during the day?**” in 2015 and 2017 by Parliamentary Constituency



**Source:** Ipsos MORI, Wirral Residents Survey, 2015 and 2018  
**Note:** Excluding no opinion, not stated and don't know responses

**Figures 7:** Comparison of responses to Wirral Residents Survey question, “How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area **at night?**” in 2015 and 2017 by Parliamentary Constituency



**Source:** Ipsos MORI, Wirral Residents Survey, 2015 and 2018  
**Note:** Excluding no opinion, not stated and don't know responses

Figure 7 shows that perceptions of safety **at night** increased in all areas except Wirral West between 2015 and 2017. The largest improvements however, were seen in Birkenhead Constituency, where the proportion of those feeling safe increased from 38% in 2015 to 48% in 2017. Wallasey also saw an increase from 43% to 49% (a 6% increase). Both of these constituencies however, had low starting points and still, after improvements, had less than half the population reporting that they felt safe in their area after dark. Improvements are still positive however, and it is notable that these improvements were mainly concentrated in Birkenhead and Wallasey.

### **Outcome 3. To reduce the availability of damaging super strength alcohol in Wirral**

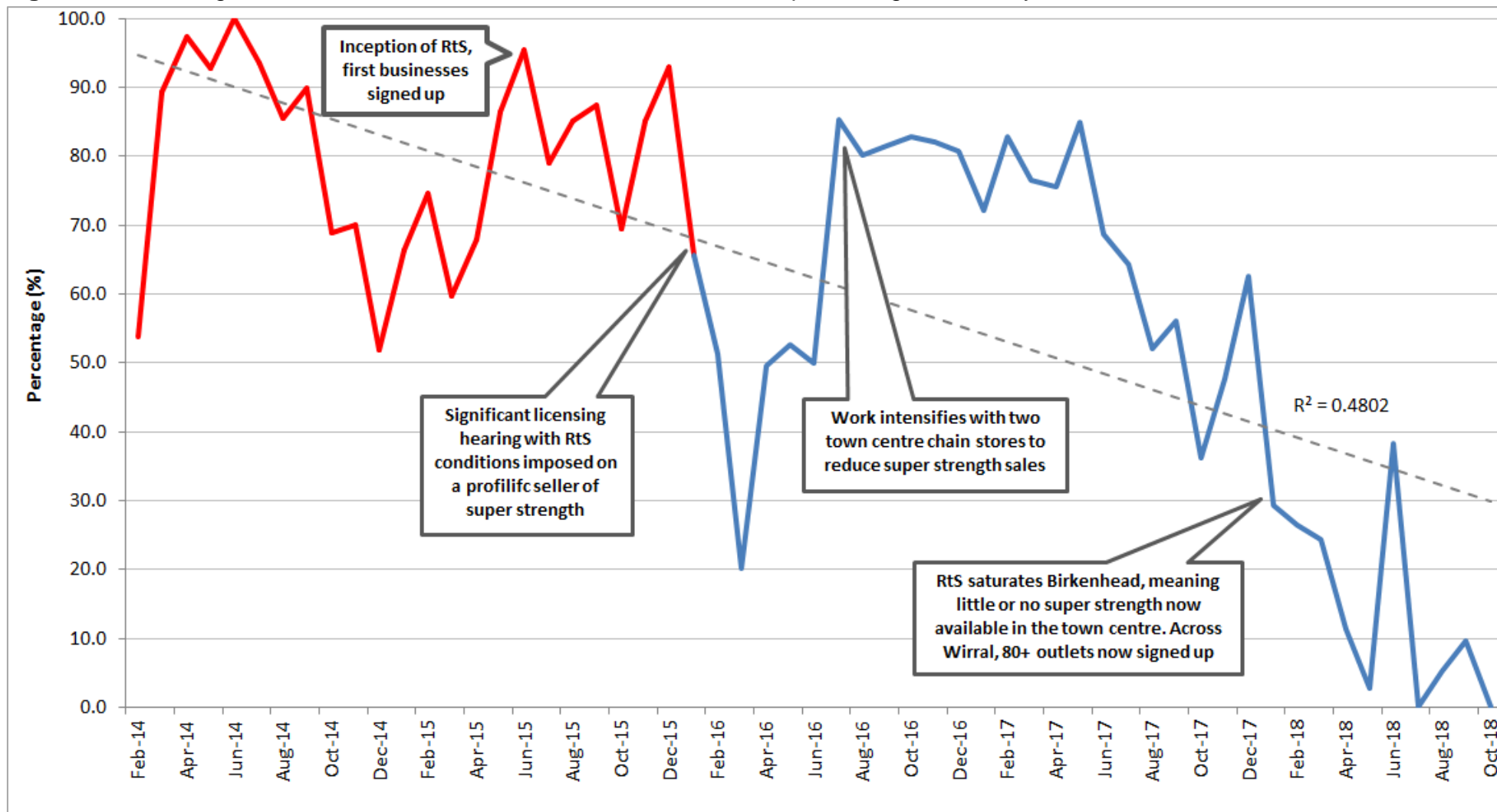
Reducing the availability of super strength alcohol is difficult to measure. For this evaluation, we used a proxy measure; what proportion of all the alcohol consumed in Wirral's Controlled Drinking Areas was super strength? There are two homeless hostels in Wirral which have controlled drinking areas or 'wet rooms' where street drinkers can drink in a safe environment where they are monitored and encouraged to engage with public health commissioned interventions. Individuals hand in their alcohol which is then given back to them in plastic glasses. The type of alcohol and the volume handed in by each person is logged in a database.

Staff employed in the CDE recorded all alcohol brought in by clients for consumption (volume and type), and all alcohol that was handed over to staff by users of the CDE has been carefully logged for over three years.

Figure 8 uses data from the CDE located within the 7 Beats area (The Ark, located near to Hamilton Square and within the Hamilton Square LSOA) and shows the percentage of all alcohol consumed in the CDE that was super-strength, by month since February 2014 (prior to the introduction of the Reducing the Strength scheme).

There is a significant variation in the percentage of alcohol that was super-strength consumed in the CDE over time. Anecdotal evidence from staff of the CDE, Trading Standards and Public Health involved in the project indicates that this could be partially due to specific outlets stopping selling super-strength, followed by an initial dip before drinkers eventually find alternative sources. There is, however, a general downward trend over time. Since the summer of 2017, the amount of super-strength consumed, has decreased considerably.

**Figure 8:** Percentage of all alcohol consumed in Wirral CDE that was super-strength, February 2014 to October 2018



Source: The Ark Controlled Drinking Area (CDE), 2018



## Outcome 4. Compliance with RtS by retailers

Ongoing compliance is vital to RtS' success. Case study 1 shows regular follow up has been carried out by core RtS workers based with the Environmental Health and Trading Standards teams. Additionally, Licencing Officers, other Trading Standards staff and Environmental Health Officers and Police/PCSOs (all of whom have been kept fully up to date with RtS progress as active members of the RtS steering group) are also engaged in this via their core, day to day working.

### *Case Study 1: Reducing the Strength activity to ensure continued compliance with licensing and campaign conditions*

In accordance with outcomes proposed at the start of this project, all RtS premises have been monitored regularly to ensure compliance. Three elements have contributed this:

- Regular routine checks/ catch up visits
- Visits/checks based on intelligence received from other stakeholders including other retailers
- Participation in the follow up 'Custodians' project\* has strengthened ongoing contact and monitoring of businesses

An example of one of the above is where 3l large, plastic bottles of cider were spotted on sale in an RtS off-licence by one of our stakeholders. A next day investigation revealed the products to be regular strength cider –not super-strength products after all. Throughout the lifetime of the project, no business has had their RtS status revoked despite this level of scrutiny.

\* see case study on page 17 for further detail on 'Custodians'.

## Outcome 5. Awareness of the campaign amongst the Frequent Attender\* Group

Initially, this outcome was fulfilled with the key agencies attending this group being made aware of RtS both within and beyond meetings. The Frequent Attender Group was however, discontinued soon after the RtS implementation. A new forum, the Public Health led Town Centre Group formed soon after. The overall aim of this group is to bring multiple agencies together to improve the overall amenity of Birkenhead town centre. All the agencies represented at Frequent Attenders now attend the Town Centre Group.

Thus, the Town Centre Group has become a credible, alternative forum at which to raise and maintain awareness of RtS and a place where the campaign, as it relates to highly needy individuals, can be regularly discussed in a holistic way. Agencies regularly attending the Town Centre Group include: Merseyside Police; Wirral council including the ASB team; Cheshire and Wirral Partnership (NHS); Substance Misuse Liaison Nurses (WUTH, NHS); various housing associations; the Whitechapel Centre; local drug and alcohol services; street pastors and the Chamber of Commerce.

\*The Frequent Attenders Group was established to formulate ways to prevent and support individuals in Wirral who attend A&E regularly, often due to significant substance misuse issues. There are relatively few of these individuals, but they are often very vulnerable, chaotic and place considerable pressure on A&E and other urgent care services.

## Outcome 6. Contribute to the achievement of Wirral Alcohol Strategy work streams

The Wirral Alcohol Strategy 2015-2020<sup>2</sup> recognised, and aims to tackle, the proven link between the ease of availability of alcohol and increased consumption. Illicit alcohol was recognised as a particular danger due to its cheapness and often dubious source. In 2018, the sale of illegal alcohol costs the UK around £1.2 billion per year with much of the fake or illegally produced alcohol containing potentially dangerous chemicals<sup>3</sup>.

Though not included initially as an element of Wirral RtS, it quickly became apparent that the regular presence of RtS officers (from Trading Standards and Environmental Health backgrounds) in shops was a very good additional way of identifying illicit alcohol for sale. Over the operational year 2017-18, the 'Incidents of alleged offences' RtS log indicates 14 incidents identified and followed up by RtS workers. Some such follow ups have included significant, multi-agency actions (Case Study 2).

### *Case Study 2: Reducing the Strength activity leading to the detection and cessation of various forms of harmful criminality (including illicit alcohol sales)*

Acting upon intelligence received from a local Controlled Drinking Environment, two Reducing the Strength workers visited shop X hoping to sign up the business to the campaign.

Upon visiting Shop X, concerns were noted regarding possible duty divert tobacco and unrealistically cheap alcohol (an indicator of illicit alcohol). Reflecting on this information, RtS workers liaised with other organisations and teams including Merseyside Police, HMRC, UK Border Force, Wagtail (sniffer dogs), various utility companies, Trading Standards and Environmental Health. This joint team visited Shop X and over a lengthy stay (5pm to 3am the next day), unearthed 10,000 cans of duty divert (illicit) alcohol, 100 bottles of wine, a large supply of duty divert cigarettes, counterfeit medicines and counterfeit perfume. Special transport was required in order to remove the illegal goods. In addition, two individuals were identified working at the premises whose legal right to remain in the UK was unclear.

## Outcome 7. Contribute to the identification and address the illegal alcohol sales to underage children

Since the inception of the project, RtS intelligence has informed a number of further/other activities. Observations and concerns arising from individual shop level RtS visits have helped decide which businesses are targeted for Trading Standards follow up –often in the form of test purchasing visits. This has not just benefited the alcohol agenda as

concerns of laxity around tobacco sales have also translated from RtS visits into test purchasing activity.

Over the period of 2015 to the present, Trading Standards have carried out 53 alcohol focused test purchase attempts of which 9 resulted in sales to minors. Resulting from this, 8 warning letters were issued to businesses and one official caution given.

The simple existence of RtS and presence of officers in individual premises have also impacted on this. RtS has become a desirable status for a responsible business to have. However, no business about whom any RtS stakeholder has a concern can achieve this status. If the Police or Trading Standards have a concern about a business's conduct, RtS status will not be granted until this is resolved. Any concerns about selling of alcohol to minors would exclude a retailer from RtS. The additional presence of officers in businesses has also facilitated a degree of informal advice and reminders on correct practice which would otherwise not have happened. Improving practice without resorting to formal action is a constructive outcome.

## Other outcomes

RtS has yielded several unforeseen benefits. Whilst the central focus remained upon persuading retailers to voluntarily no longer sell the cheap yet potent super-strength products, several other gains were quickly recognised.

In addition to uncovering the sale of illicit alcohol, other possible criminal activities were identified and followed up appropriately –often in conjunction with other agencies such as the Police, Border Force and HMRC. Over the year 2017-18, 'Incidents of alleged offences' identified by RtS workers included; selling to minors, energy theft (gas and electricity), immigration status issues, and child sexual exploitation. Beyond the multiagency visits, warnings and prosecutions brought by this activity, RtS has helped foster a stronger sense of sharing and joint working as is constantly demonstrated at the well supported Reducing the Strength Steering Group.

Case Study 3 refers to 'Custodians', an unplanned extension of RtS which stemmed from RtS workers chancing upon an informal arrangement between an off licence owner and a customer whereby they both agreed to a limit on the customer's overall purchases. This eventually developed into a scheme under which 68 off-licence workers have now been trained to identify seriously problematic drinking and safely signpost individuals into services. As well as the obvious benefits of Custodians, the scheme also served to further strengthen joint working and partnerships –in this case with our local drug and alcohol services provider, Change, Grow, Live.

Birkenhead's two CDEs have also become much closer partners via RtS. An example of this is the ARK CDE, with support, making their first representation at a licencing hearing. In the opinion of many present, their case relating to the harms generated by the easy availability of cheap and potent alcohol was pivotal in the eventual decision of the Licencing Committee.

### *Case Study 3: Reducing the Strength benefits linked to the 'Custodians' programme and harm reduction in dependent drinkers*

Custodians is an extension of the Reducing the Strength scheme whereby off-licence staff are trained to recognise seriously problematic drinking amongst their customers, safely broach that issue with them and then, signpost into local alcohol services. Custodians help people in need of help to reach out from a familiar and very non clinical environment.

One example of a successful Custodians sparked intervention involves a 67 year old grandmother caught in a vicious circle of dependent drinking and loneliness. This individual drank 2-3 bottles of wine a day, often as a result of feeling lonely. Unfortunately, her often intoxicated state discouraged people from engaging with her leaving her feeling yet more lonely and dependant on alcohol.

Having been encouraged to take a Custodians flyer from her local off-licence, this woman made contact with Wirral Ways to Recovery (WWtR) by text. WWtR responded quickly with a phone call which led to an assessment and then a key worker being assigned.

The woman engaged in regular sessions at WWtR and was also connected to other services such as Tomorrow's Women Wirral. She is now alcohol free and enjoying her new circumstances.

Finally, RtS on Wirral has won several awards for demonstrating real innovation, multi-agency working and real gains.

In November 2017 at the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) national awards ceremony in London, Wirral Council's Reducing the Strength project received the Excellence Award for "Best Project". The following February 2018, the team again received national recognition at Phoenix Futures New Year's Honours Awards for their "Partnership Working" with Wirral Ways to Recovery in their management and delivery of the Public Health funded Custodians Project. RtS officers have presented on what has been achieved within Wirral at conferences in Cumbria, Lancashire, Merseyside, across Greater Manchester, Cheshire and even at the California Environmental Health Associations (CEHA) 67<sup>th</sup> Education Symposium in Sacramento California discussing the benefits of the Reducing the Strength and Custodians projects.

In October 2018 the team was Commended by Merseyside Police for, 'excellent partnership working and professional proficiency utilising a variety of disruption tactics to target organised crime groups engaged in Child Sexual Exploitation, Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery Networks in Wirral.'

## **Crime**

Although crime was not specifically included in the initial outcomes for RtS, it is a key component of reducing alcohol related harm/outcomes, and several impacts have become apparent during the life of the scheme. Case Study 4 below details impacts

noted by Merseyside Police and Case Study 2 (see page 17 also shows impact on wider crime and illegal activity which may otherwise have remained undetected).

*Case study 4: Reducing the Strength Local Policing Constables, Merseyside Police*

“This (RtS) has had a positive impact particularly in the Birkenhead area, there are several local shops a few minutes walk from the YMCA. There is a controlled drinking area there for residents, street drinkers and other persons with alcohol related problems. These people would often then buy cans of stronger alcohol to drink outside the premises. The problem of street drinking still exists, but this has reduced the antisocial behaviour around the local shopping area in Birkenhead. Several shop keepers in Birkenhead have also stated they have had fewer problems around their premises. In addition, they have seen a reduction in the amount of people attempting to buy strong alcohol who are already drunk”.

*Street drinking*

Street drinking and other linked crime is an issue in specific Wirral communities which are subject to it (mainly in Birkenhead). The data below comes from Merseyside Police and was carried out during a set trial period of a month (in three consecutive years), in just two beat areas within the overall 7 beats area in Birkenhead (beats A342 and A344).

**Table 3:** Street drinking related incidents for three Merseyside Police beat areas (within 7 Beats), 2016-18

Year	Street Drinking incidents
2016	67
2017	30
2018	29

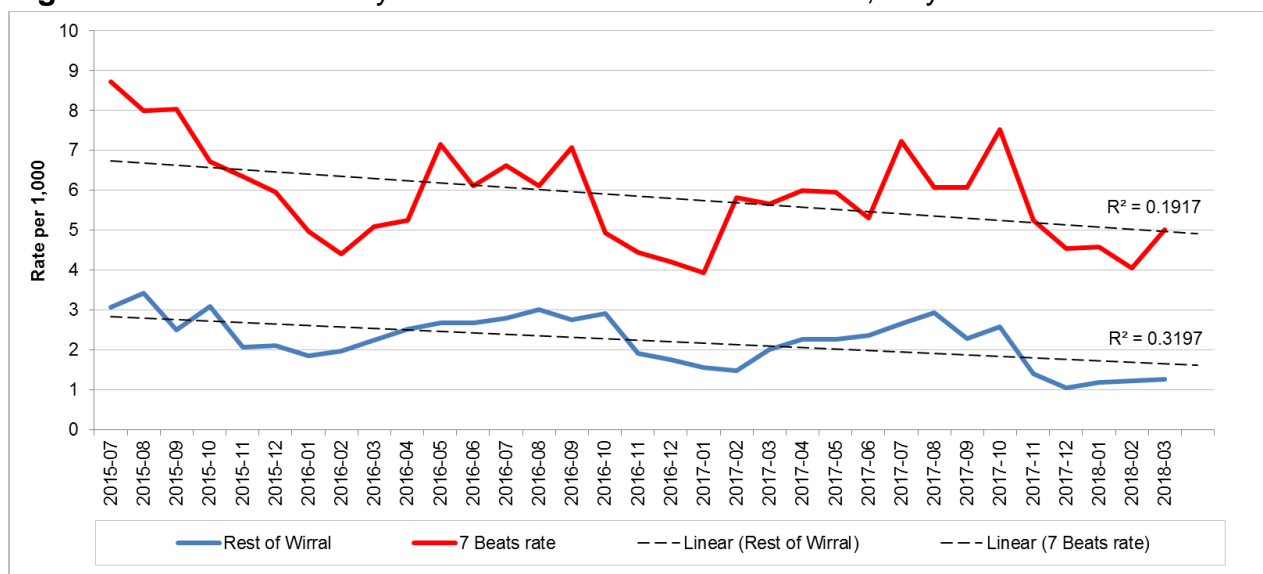
Source: Merseyside Police, 2018

The above table shows that street drinking incidents have halved between 2016 and 2018 in both beats (within the 7 beats). It should be noted that the figures in this table are derived from a trial/audit period and were provided by Merseyside Police. We do not have comparable figures for the whole of Wirral, although it should be noted that street drinking is concentrated in the central Birkenhead area covered by these 2 beats and is negligible in other areas of Wirral.

*Anti-social behaviour (ASB)*

Monthly rates of anti-social behaviour were calculated for the 7 beats area and the rest of Wirral *excluding* the 7 beats, for the time period from July 2015, to March 2018. This information is shown in Figure 9 and shows that rates of reported ASB appear to have declined in both Wirral and the 7 beats area, with some minor fluctuation (peaks around the lead up to Christmas). RtS rates of reported ASB appear to have declined in both Wirral and the 7 beats area, with some minor fluctuation (peaks around the lead up to Christmas).

**Figure 9:** Trend in monthly rate of ASB in 7 beats and Wirral, July 2015 to March 2018



Source: [www.police.gov.uk](http://www.police.gov.uk)

## Recommendations

- Reducing the Strength is a programme that yields demonstrable, beneficial impacts and has engendered a good deal of highly co-operative joint working between multiple agencies. Stakeholder organisations should consider how to mainstream this approach, with appropriate levels of dedicated resource, to continue to maintain and enhance outcomes.
- Any future RtS type schemes should consider the impact on crime at the outset, as these impacts appear to have been significant in this scheme, but were not initially included as outcomes.
- The evaluation also highlights the importance of determining measurable outcomes for evaluation over the life course of initiatives.
- For future working, the Custodians initiatives should be fully integrated into the Reducing the Strength programme.
- The forthcoming evaluation currently being carried out by Merseyside Police to be considered alongside this report, for the reasons stated above.

## Further Reading / Links

- Reducing the strength Guidance for councils considering setting up a scheme. Local Government Association (2016): Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/reducing-strength-guidance-795.pdf>
- Information about alcohol in Wirral from Wirral JSNA: <https://www.wirralintelligenceservice.org/jsna/alcohol/>
- The Dangers of Fake Alcohol. Drinkaware. Available at: <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/advice/staying-safe-while-drinking/the-dangers-of-fake-alcohol/>
- Wirral Alcohol Strategy 2015-20. Available at: <https://www.wirralintelligenceservice.org/media/2261/alcohol-strategy.pdf>



*Members of the Reducing the Strength Steering Group receiving the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) Excellence Award for “Best Project” in November 2017.  
(Left to right: Ian Doig, Gareth Hill, Jon Hardwick, award sponsors)*

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