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**OLDHAM DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH PLEDGES TO TAKE ACTION OVER
HARMFUL ALCOHOL CULTURE**

The biggest ever survey on alcohol in the North West has revealed that low price and discounts are fuelling an unhealthy drinking culture.

This revealing statistic is taken from The Big Drink Debate carried out earlier in the year in a bid to understand why the region has one of the biggest alcohol problems in the country.

The results, published today reveal that of the 30,000 respondents 80% believe that low price and discounts increase people's drinking; 75% of respondents believe that large measures are key to increased drinking; 68% of respondents say that allowing street drinking increases alcohol use and over half of respondents believe that advertising (56%) and extended drinking hours (54%) are factors that increase drinking.

More than a quarter of respondents drink at harmful and hazardous levels, suggesting that more than a million people drink at this level across the North West. It also revealed that nearly half the respondents avoid the town centre because of the drunken behaviour of others.

Alan Higgins, director of public health for Oldham, who has a joint role with Oldham Council and NHS Oldham, said: "We are pleased that so many people from across the region took part in this debate. We will continue to work hard with all our partners and the public to improve the health and well-being of our residents. We believe that joint action across the region could have a significant impact on shifting our region's unhealthy relationship with alcohol, and we have pledged to prioritise this work over the coming years."

Launched by Our Life in partnership with the Department of Health and Government Office North West, the aim of The Big Drink Debate was to find out what people's views are on drinking and how it affects their health, safety and well being. Results are being presented today at a summit of public sector leaders from across the region.

Dr Alison Giles, Director of Our Life, said: "The results are staggering and as a region we should be asking ourselves - is it acceptable that alcohol is so cheap when it is the cause of so much harm to us as individuals and as communities?"

The Big Drink Debate questionnaire was planned as a first response to the significant harm caused by the way we use alcohol in the North West. This is highlighted by the 73,000 crimes a year in the region (50,000 of them violent) which are linked to alcohol and one person being admitted to a North West hospital every seven minutes with an alcohol related condition.

Dr Giles added: "The next stage of the programme is to share our findings and to work together with our partners, industry and the general public to find new ways to shift this unhealthy culture."

Dr Ruth Hussey, the Region's Director of Public Health, explained: "We all have something to offer as part of the solution. We need to think about how much we ourselves drink, how susceptible we are to discounted drink, and to what extent our behaviour influences those around us.

"Our culture is complex and changeable. Our behaviour is influenced by legal systems and regulations, by market forces and consumer trends, and alcohol consumption is affected by

all of these in one way or the other."

Brenda Fullard, Government Office Public Health specialist added: "We are calling on our partners across the NHS, police, fire, local authorities and voluntary sectors to work together on a region-wide level to ensure that we reduce disease, disorder and deaths from alcohol harm in the short term and to support future generations to live long, healthy and safe lives."

Professor Bellis, Director of the North West Public Health Observatory, said: "There is no such thing as a free drink. The real price the North West is paying for 'buy two get one free' and other cheap booze promotions is poorer health, more violence and, town and city centres seen by many as no-go areas at night.

"In the Big Drink Debate, four out of five people identified cheap alcohol and discounts as driving increasing alcohol consumption. Many people already understand the dangers that such increased drinking represents. The challenge now is convincing drinkers that consuming less and paying more is likely to improve their health and the prospects of the North West as a whole."

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