

ALCOHOL MORE WIDELY AVAILABLE THAN EVER

MORE THAN 320 ADDITIONAL OFF-LICENCES ISSUED LAST YEAR

New figures show that alcohol is being sold more widely than ever with a large increase in the number of off-licences more than compensating for the continuing decline in the number of pubs.

More than 320 additional off-licences were issued last year compared to 2006, according to figures compiled by the Revenue Commissioners. The total number of off-licences issued was 4,261, which is an increase of 530 in two years.

The massive expansion in the number of convenience stores, garage forecourts and supermarkets selling alcohol has been blamed in some quarters for the rise in drink-fuelled antisocial activity.

Minister for Justice Brian Lenihan will shortly announce measures to tackle the problem, which are widely expected to include restrictions on the sale and marketing of alcohol by off-licensed premises.

Late last month, he received the report of the Alcohol Advisory Group, which was set up to advise the Government on more effective ways of tackling alcohol-related problems.

The Convenience Store and Newsagents' Association (CSNA), which represents many of the retail outlets holding new off-licences to sell alcohol, rejected claims of a link between the more widespread availability of drink and antisocial activity.

"Where alcohol is sold is not the issue, how it is marketed is," said Vincent Jennings, Chief Executive of CSNA. "In many parts of Ireland, forecourt shops now provide an essential community service for local consumers, and there is no reason why alcohol should not form part of their product range."

The Revenue figures show that 1571 fewer pub licences were issued last year than in 2006. In just two years, pub licences have declined by more than 600. Many rural pubs have shut down and sold on their licences as business dropped because of the smoking

ban and the stricter enforcement of drink-driving rules. In the cities, pubs located on valuable urban sites have been redeveloped as apartment blocks.

Paul Stevenson, president of the Vintners' Federation of Ireland, welcomed the slowing down in the rate of pub closures. "We think we're over the worst now. Those who have decided to leave the trade have done so, while the rest of us are getting on with new ideas for our businesses."

He said the figures, when taken into account with growing antisocial problems, showed that pubs were the safest places in which to consume drink. "We don't serve a person 24 pints, and then give him another 24 pints free," he said in reference to "buy one, get one free" promotions of beer trays by some retailers. "We pull one pint at a time, and we see how it goes before serving another".

The fall in the number of pub licences has been most dramatic in the Border Midlands West (BMW) region, which has seen a reduction of almost 300 licences in two years. Over the same period, Leinster has lost 115 licences, Dublin just 20 and the South-West 172.

In contrast, the number of off-licences issued in Leinster in the same period grew by almost 300. Dublin has over 160 more off-licences since 2005 and the South-West has over 100 additional off-licences. On the BMW region has seen the number of off-licences fall, by over 30.

The county which has lost the most pubs since 2005 is Mayo at 107, while Co Galway lost 56 and Co Tipperary 51.