Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

**ChildLine in Scotland**

ChildLine is the free 24 hour helpline and on-line service for any child or young person with any problem. Volunteer counsellors work with individual children and young people on the telephone and on-line, offering them support, advice, comfort and protection. ChildLine is a service provided and funded by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). CHILDREN 1ST (RSSPCC) delivers the ChildLine service in Scotland on behalf of the NSPCC.

ChildLine in Scotland have followed closely, and contributed to the public debate on alcohol policy since the Scottish Government published its discussion paper in 2008. We have consistently supported proposals by the Scottish Government to tackle Scotland’s problematic relationship with alcohol across the whole population, as opposed to targeting specific social groups and anti social behaviour. We would encourage a similar approach as has been taken to reducing smoking, namely persuading adults to consider the impact of their own drinking on their children.

We have taken this stance because we have a responsibility to represent what children and young people tell us, to those who can bring about improvements in their lives. When this debate was first ignited, young people tended to be mentioned by politicians and the media only as part of the problem. Excessive alcohol consumption was seen mainly as the preserve of under 25s and the term “binge drinking” more often than not was preceded by the word “teenage”. Since 2008, these perceptions has been challenged and eroded, largely as a result of campaigning efforts by the children’s sector, not least ChildLine in Scotland. We are gratified that there now seems to be fairly wide agreement in Scotland that this is a societal problem that it is not confined to any particular age group or social class, and also that many children and young people are victims rather than perpetrators of the problem of harmful drinking.

ChildLine hears from some of these children. Hundreds of young people across the UK talk to the helpline every year about living with harmful parental drinking; calls from children in Scotland are disproportionately high. Children talk about violence and conflict in the home, isolation, lack of parental attention and care, damage to friendships, trouble at school. Worst of all can be the chronic fear and worry that they are living with – at home, at school, at play. Around a third of ParentLine Scotland’s Child Protection calls involve alcohol and 39% of those are a result of abuse of alcohol by adults.

Since the inception of ChildLine in 1986 we have heard from many thousands of children whose lives have been blighted by harmful parental drinking. ChildLine published the ‘Beyond the Limit’ report in 1996 which detailed the

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1 UNTOLD DAMAGE: Children’s accounts of living with harmful parental drinking Childline in Scotland / SHAAP, 2009
2 Beyond the Limit: children who live with parental alcohol misuse ChildLine, 1996
suffering, misery and despair experienced by large numbers of children throughout the UK as a result of their parents’ or carers’ drinking. In 2005, a collaborative study with the Centre for Research into Families and Relationships (CRFR) into the concerns of children and young people about the health and wellbeing of their carers highlighted that the most frequent concern by far that children and young people presented was parental alcohol misuse. In a high proportion of the calls, on which the study was based, physical abuse was either the main or an additional problem (over 40%). In 2009 this finding was investigated in more depth by a qualitative study by ChildLine in collaboration with Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP). Again the study sample showed that the vast majority who talked to ChildLine about harmful drinking had called to talk about violence in the home.

ChildLine in Scotland have no doubt that parental alcohol misuse is a significant factor in many cases of abuse, neglect and emotional harm suffered by children in Scotland. Whilst relatively few children contact us to raise the problem of parental drinking as a primary concern, it is abundantly clear from the database that it is a significant factor in thousands of contacts every year where the primary concern is physical abuse, family relationship problems, partner relationship problems, domestic violence and sexual abuse. It is also mentioned in relation to emotional harm, problems with friends, problems at school, depression, self-harm and suicide. **UNTOLD DAMAGE** highlighted not only that many children and young people were adversely affected, but also that in many cases, the child or young person understood their parents’ drinking to be a reaction to stress and life events such as bereavement, separation, loss of employment.

The public health arguments for reducing consumption across the whole population have been well made and are, we feel, unarguable. ChildLine in Scotland strongly support any measure likely to lead to an overall reduction in consumption as we are of the view that any reduction is likely to lead to better outcomes in the long run for children and young people. Whilst there has been some disagreement over whether minimum pricing is the best way to achieve a reduction in consumption and the social harm caused by excessive drinking, research has shown that public education campaigns are of little effect on this subject, if not backed up by controls on price and availability. Only time will tell what the effects of this legislation will have on excessive levels of consumption in Scotland, and the accompanying social ills. ChildLine in Scotland are under no illusion that the Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) Bill is the complete answer to the problems caused in Scotland by harmful drinking. Not only are many children and young people living with harmful parental drinking and multiple negative impacts on their lives; they are also

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3 *Children’s concerns about the health and wellbeing of their parents and significant others CRFR / ChildLine Scotland, 2005*

4 *Every time a trained volunteer responds to a contact by a child, they note the main problem presented by the child (primary concern), any additional concerns raised, any details revealed on family and the living circumstances of the child, and a narrative of the discussion*

5 *UNTOLD DAMAGE: Children’s accounts of living with harmful parental drinking Childline in Scotland / SHAAP, 2009*
learning from the behaviour of adults that using a mind altering substance is the only, or at least an acceptable, way to deal with stress, sadness, and loss. The normalisation and ubiquity of alcohol compared to illegal drugs makes it all the more difficult for children and young people to get help and support when dealing with family problems caused by alcohol. We believe the Bill is an important first step in alleviating alcohol related social harms, and we would urge the Scottish Government to back up this legislation with a range of measures to support children and families experiencing difficulties, such as:

- alternative models of support for people experiencing loss, bereavement and other major life events
- improved data collection on the contribution of alcohol to family break up, child neglect etc
- improved access for children and young people to support services without the need for formal referral including self referral services and in-school counselling
- alcohol education in schools sensitive to the needs of children and young people affected by harmful drinking being expanded to provide information about alcohol as a social as well as a health problem
- training for school staff and other professionals in identifying and supporting children and young people affected by harmful parental drinking and introduction of peer support schemes in schools

ChildLine in Scotland welcome the opportunity to comment on this proposed legislation, and would be happy to contribute further, for example, by providing case studies.

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