Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

Glasgow Caledonian University

The Institute for Society & Social Justice Research at Glasgow Caledonian University in collaboration with the Medical Research Council’s Public Health Sciences Unit at The University of Glasgow are currently conducting a study funded by the Alcohol Education Research Council (now Alcohol Research UK) entitled ‘Shop servers’ experience of alcohol-related issues and interventions in socially contrasting neighbourhoods’.

The study aims to give a voice to shop workers and small retailers (off-sales and convenience stores’ staff), serving varied localities (deprived and non-deprived), re their concerns on issues affecting their work and community. These issues range from the threat of violence in the workplace to the business threats posed by the major supermarkets. The proposed alcohol minimum pricing policy is relevant in both these regards.

The study has two components:

1. Qualitative interviews were conducted with shop workers in the most socially contrasting neighbourhoods of Glasgow city. Specifically 12 interviews were conducted in shops serving the most deprived parts of the city (according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) and 12 in shops serving the city’s least deprived areas. A control group of staff from 12 unlicensed convenience stores was also interviewed (6 in the most deprived, 6 in the least deprived parts of the city). Data collection from this phase of the project is now complete.

2. A quantitative postal survey is currently being conducted covering all community off-trade outlets in Glasgow. At the time of writing we have delivered questionnaires to just over half such shops in the city. To date, 82 questionnaires have been returned. Once all these licensed shops have received a questionnaire, a second postal survey will recruit a control group from unlicensed convenience stores across the city. Our is aim for a minimum of 100 licensed (and 50 unlicensed) shops to comprise a final quantitative survey sample (although given the response rate so far, we anticipate the eventual number of licensed stores participating will be greater than this).

Data collection is due to end in January 2012, with a report to Alcohol Research UK to follow in the springtime. The issue of minimum pricing, and shop servers views on this policy, will be addressed in detail by our final report.

The advantages and disadvantages of establishing a minimum alcohol sales price based on a unit of alcohol

The quantitative (postal) survey phase of our research included the following question:
4.2 Are you supportive of the proposed alcohol minimum-pricing policy?

Yes  
No

Why do you think this? [please write in space below]

To date, with 82 questionnaires returned, 45 (55.6%) respondents have said ‘yes’ – they do support the policy, while 34 (42.0%) have said ‘no’ they do not support it, with a further 2 (2.2%) stating that they did not know yet (one did not answer this question).

Thus their views are fairly evenly split at present, and it will be of interest to see if those ‘for’ or ‘against’ the policy vary in any systematic way (early indications is that there is no significant difference in supporting the policy between shops located in deprived or non-deprived parts of the city).

To date, reasons given for supporting the policy included; that it would affect the supermarkets (n=16), that it would level the business playing field between shops (n=6), that it would reduce alcohol problems in Scotland (n=6), that it will affect under-agers (n=4), that there will be less trouble from drunks in shops (n=3), and that small shops like theirs would profit from the policy (n=3).

To date, reasons given for not supporting the policy included; that it will make no difference to alcohol problems in Scotland (n=7), that it will affect responsible drinkers (n=4), that there would be more trouble from theft in shops (n=3), that supermarkets would profit from the policy (n=3), that it would not affect the supermarkets (n=3), that it will affect small shops like theirs (n=2), that it will reduce profits (n=2), or harm the economy (n=2).

From the above response pattern, it might be suggested that some small retailers did not fully grasp the reasoning behind the policy and how it might affect their job / business. This was also apparent during the qualitative interviews, where in-depth discussion of the issue tended to foster more positive considerations of alcohol minimum pricing.

The following comprises some illustrative examples of shop workers views on the policy. The quotes given below are the verbatim responses made by interviewed licensed shop staff when asked directly for an opinion on the proposed minimum pricing policy. For example, as is illustrated by the first two comments below, some interviewees felt that the policy would not affect them / their shop, because their customers were not part of the problem, and/or their clientele favoured the more expensive beverage ranges which they stocked.

“I think we have the loyalty of the customers and they like their wines and things and they come in and they buy it whether it’s a different price or not.” (non-deprived area)

“I think it would probably be good though for the younger alcohol product type things. Probably where we are based, probably not a whole lot
because it’s more kind of mid-level drinks that people are buying.” (non-deprived area)

Some interviewees were against the policy because they felt it could be bad for business.

“Something [I’m] against. I think fair competition is fine, eh, competition is for all products; could be a tin of beans you’re selling, Drum [tobacco], alcohol. You need the competition to keep people coming into the shops and if the price is all the same everywhere then, no offence, I get people from along the road coming to me because I’m a wee bit cheaper than he is.” (non-deprived area)

“I think it will have quite a big affect. I think it is mostly going to hit the ciders and stuff like that, isn’t it? The high volume stuff. I think it most definitely will hit us. I wouldn’t say really hard but I think we will feel a bit, because it’s not like we only sell a few bottles a week, we sale 15 cases of Frosty Jack a week just on 3 litres alone, which is quite a lot for a wee convenience store.” (deprived area)

Others saw the advantages that the policy could have for small businesses such as theirs.

“This minimum pricing for alcohol, I agree with that but only in a business sense. It would stop them putting in the big offers and taking the business away from the convenience stores, because clearly we cannae match that.” (non-deprived area)

“Can I tell you something? I would just give business a boost here, honestly. See small business like this? It would put money back into the community again.” (deprived area)

In particular, those who supported the policy felt it would affect the major supermarkets to the benefit of smaller shops serving local communities, such as theirs.

“Well, if you are living here and you get same price as supermarket and same price at us the chances are you will come here. You might go for the service or find other things, but without the price difference there is less incentive.” (deprived area)

“I think it is good idea because if the prices is fixed every shop selling the Tennent’s lager. If one shop is selling for £1 less, like ASDA selling for 99p, they get a fine. All shops prices the same is good because ASDA and Tesco is selling the booze cheaper than Cash and Carry! A lot of shop keepers buy from them!” (non-deprived area)

Some interviewees felt that it would not reduce alcohol problems in Scotland.
"A minimum price for alcohol? It's like this banning happy hours, or something. If you drank 10 pints you would save 30p, or something like that, banning it, you know what I mean? It's not what's causing the problem; it's the politicians just go for the same thing all the time, you know? So they look like they're doing something." (non-deprived area)

"See, again I read the early guidelines set for minimum pricing and they were going to actually, they weren't going to hammer Buckfast and I think they've got it totally wrong, you know?" (non-deprived area)

Others believed minimum pricing would help reduce alcohol consumption in Scotland, and some were supportive, even though it may have a (small) negative impact on their business.

"Make it expensive, so expensive that it is only meant to be for special occasions rather than, 'it's a gorgeous day, come on let's go any buy a cheap bottle of cider'… It probably would [affect our profits], but at the same time I think people are drinking too much anyway, so anything that cuts it down is a good thing at the end of the day." (non-deprived area)

"Maybe sell a bit less alcohol. It probably won't affect us too much because we're backed by a reasonable company, but the smaller independent shops might suffer." (deprived area)

We hope that our research has given a voice to a group who may have been neglected in the debate around alcohol minimum pricing – specifically those who work in off-sales premises and will have deal with the introduction of the policy at first hand. Thus we believe it is important to bring community off-sales workers onside, as potential agents of alcohol harm reduction. Unlike the major supermarkets, our interviewees knew their individual customers and the problems of their communities.

Although still ongoing (due for completion in springtime 2012), on balance at this point, our findings to date imply that smaller off-trade outlets could be supportive of the minimum pricing policy, especially if it is seen as helping their communities. As they see it, the advantages of establishing a minimum pricing policy are that it could help small businesses to survive in the face of competition from the major supermarkets, and that it might reduce alcohol problems including the drunken abuse which they face while on duty. Against this, potential disadvantages they foresee include reduced profits, increased theft and the belief that factors other than price are primarily responsible for Scotland's alcohol problem.

This submission was prepared by Dr Alasdair Forsyth of Glasgow Caledonian University, who is the lead investigator on the above project. Any views expressed here are his alone.

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