Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

The Methodist Church in Scotland

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the call for evidence for the consultation on your proposed “Alcohol Minimum Pricing (Scotland) Bill”. Traditionally, the Methodist Church has taken a strong stance against the misuse of alcohol and campaigned to reduce its adverse effect on our society and resultant persistent practical problems (Attachment 1 lays out our stated guidance to members). Therefore, we are very supportive of this initiative and welcome it as a clear indication of the Scottish Government’s serious intention to tackle not only the obvious problems associated with alcohol misuse but also the underlying culture by which the promotion of alcohol consumption is a persistent problem in our society.

In this we stand shoulder to shoulder with many other denominations in Scotland and throughout the UK. We are confident this is also in line with public opinion and with the advice and recommendations from most of the professional bodies directly involved in picking up the pieces that fall out of excessive drinking. Therefore, we welcome the proposed Bill being placed before the Scottish Parliament to help tighten up on the 2005 and 2010 legislation, and address an area of concern that failed to gain sufficient support in previous legislation. The Methodist Church continues to work closely with the Salvation Army to campaign against the misuse of alcohol. It has also recently revised its position on alcohol and together with the United Reformed Church and Baptist Union has restated its position and this can be found at:

An Overview:

http://methodism.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=opentoworld.content&cmid=1927

One Too Many - a briefing on alcohol misuse:


It is a well established fact that cheap alcohol, drunk in an unrestricted manner in the privacy of the home or on the street often leads onto increased domestic disturbances and anti-social behavior as well has having a devastating effect on the health and well being of those who drink in excess. While alcohol in moderation can add to social occasions and be pleasurable the misuse and over indulgence in alcohol damages all of us.

While we have sympathy with some critics of this proposed legislation that minimum pricing could be better exercised through setting specific duty levels across the UK we are convinced a specific minimum pricing policy is essential. Firstly we recognise that increased duty would require Westminster to legislate when they appear to be reluctant to do so. Secondly, by simply increasing duty this would not preclude the sale of below cost alcohol as an irresponsible “lost leader” by supermarkets and others. Therefore, we are
supportive of the Scottish Government’s stance in taking this forward within its own devolved powers and continue to encourage the Westminster Government to tackle the scourge of low priced alcohol that each year, relative to other products, appears to become even cheaper.

We are concerned by the comments by various political parties and elements of the drinks and related retail industries challenging the principle of a minimum price per unit of alcohol. While they clearly have their own motives for taking their stance, we see no justification in delaying such a measure. Not only will minimum pricing set out a strong message but will also force all of us especially the young and financially disadvantaged, two sectors of our community where heavy drinking are especially damaging, to reconsider our own drinking patterns and attitudes to alcohol.

As a Church with a strong desire for social cohesion we have long held the view that the measure proposed in this proposed new Bill is overdue. However, we see this as only part of a package of measures to more fully address the problem. We along with our partners in the Baptist Union of Great Britain and the United Reformed Church, are calling for a number of policy changes with regard to alcohol across Britain:

- Introduce a minimum price for alcoholic drinks, based on a similar scheme in Canada, and end loss-leading sales in supermarkets and happy hour promotions
- Make it compulsory to put unit information and recommended limits on bottles
- Review the Licensing Act 2003 (England) and 2005(Scotland) and see what further measures are required to tackle binge drinking, including allowing licensing authorities to take into account the impact on public health and the number of licensed premises already in the area.
- Provide more resources for general and targeted public education campaigns on alcohol misuse
- Introduce a mandatory code of conduct for alcohol retailers, with penalties for breaches

One key pillar of this is the need for minimum pricing a policy supported by almost all medical opinion, the courts, police and other professional directly involved in addressing the damage caused by over consumption of alcohol. As well as damaging those directly affected by its consumption, by association the misuse of alcohol can damages the reputation of businesses involved in its production and distribution. This policy will have a very marginal negative financial impact on those on lower incomes (where alcohol is consumed sensibly) and should have a minimum negative effect of most sectors of the drinks industry which avoid recklessly promoting their product. However, it should be welcomed by all as a step on the road to creating a culture where alcohol is consumed more sensibly. Until unit prices exceed 50p there is unlikely to be much of an impact other on very cheap own brand spirits, cheap
own brand beer and white cider which are often the drinks of choice of those drinking to excess from off-licence sources. Therefore we would encourage the Scottish Government to think carefully of the level per-unit price at which alcohol needs to be set to have the desired impact. We would encourage this level to be set as high as can be argued to be realistic but would not wish to be overly prescriptive and leave this to expert advice and relational considerations which will change with time.

The proposed legislation is welcomed by the Methodist Church which supported the Scottish Government’s previous overall package and saw the minimum pricing as a key element. Not only does it address the issue of access to overly affordable alcohol but it sends out a strong clear message that the dangers of alcohol to our society must be addressed if we are to reduce the damage it causes to individuals, families and society in general.

Dr William M Reid
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The Methodist Church in Scotland
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Methodist Recommendations in Relationship to Alcohol

Recommendations as to Methodist Practice in Relation to Alcohol:

The Conference of 2000, in the context of the debate upon Alcohol on Methodist Church Premises, directed that the following recommendations as to Methodist practice from the 1987 Report of the then Division of Social Responsibility “Through a Glass Darkly” should be made more widely known throughout the Connexion.

That all Methodists:

(1) consider seriously the claims of total abstinence;

(2) make a personal commitment either to total abstinence or to responsible drinking;

(3) give support wherever possible and by appropriate means to those who suffer directly or indirectly from alcohol misuse;

(4) unite to support pressure on government and public opinion for a programme designed to control consumption and reduce harm;

(5) recognise the importance of example and education in family life;

(6) where they practise total abstinence take special care to avoid authoritarian attitudes which may be counter-productive;

(7) where they practise responsible drinking take special care to demonstrate that this also involves self-control.

That the Methodist Church

(8) actively engage in the promotion of responsible attitudes to alcohol and in the support (whether directly or indirectly) of those suffering the harmful consequences of their own alcohol misuse, or that of others.