General Comments

SAS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this call for evidence and supports the objective of minimum pricing as one measure to support reduced alcohol consumption. SAS supports minimum pricing as a key element of the wider strategy to improve Scotland’s relationship with alcohol and reduce alcohol consumption.

Alcohol puts significant strain on SAS resources and potentially affects our ability to respond to other medical emergencies, as well as affecting the wellbeing and safety of our staff responding to alcohol related incidences. As many as two-thirds of calls to SAS at the weekend can be alcohol-related, ranging from direct harm to the individual from alcohol, and alcohol-related accidents and violence. The latter is also a considerable challenge and threat to the effectiveness and wellbeing of our front-line staff, with impacts on morale and sickness absence rates.

A reduction in alcohol consumption could also help to mitigate unprecedented increases in emergency demand in recent years. There should be benefits of reduced A&E attendances and general health improvement benefits.

Advantages and disadvantages

In terms of advantages, SAS support the view expressed by the national Violence Reduction Unit that if we reduce the accessibility and availability of alcohol, we will likely reduce violence – as well as reducing the considerable burden on our economy and our health service.

SAS would assume that minimum pricing, if effective in reducing consumption, would therefore also have a positive impact on alcohol related emergencies and hence potentially reduce demand on frontline emergency services. In addition, Scotland has seen an increase in serious liver disease in young people some of which may be attributable to a culture of binge drinking in that age group. SAS envisage that minimum pricing is likely to have a positive impact, directly and indirectly, on binge drinking which could subsequently contribute to reducing the incidence of serious liver disease in young adults.

Minimum pricing may reduce alcohol consumption for those dependent upon it. However individuals might resort to other means to ensure they can still source their needs, i.e. theft. Indeed they may become more reliant on other stimulants such as drugs.

Level at which such a proposed minimum pricing should be set

SAS does not have a particular view on the specific pricing levels, other than the level should be set at some such point where evidence exists of a likely
meaningful impact on consumption. However, SAS supports the views from the BMA and others around the evidence of a strong relationship between price and consumption: as price falls, consumption increases. Alcohol has become progressively more affordable, particularly for off-sales. If heavy drinkers are drinking less, friends and family will notice a positive difference in their lives. If young people are drinking less, they will be less at risk of coming to harm themselves and less likely to disrupt those living in the local area.

Scottish Ambulance Service
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