Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

Scottish Episcopal Church

On behalf of the Church in Society Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church, I write with a short submission in relation to the general principles of the Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced by the Scottish Government on 31 October 2011.

The Committee seeks to support the principle of minimum pricing for alcohol but within an overall strategy for the reduction of alcohol consumption. Further, the Committee urges the Scottish Government to consider the wider issues involved when developing the Bill in its desire to change the culture of drinking in Scotland.

Our support for the principle of minimum pricing is based on:

- The requirement to reduce consumption and the purchase of alcohol generally in Scottish society;

- The requirement to reduce harm, resulting social problems and the cost to individuals and society caused by excessive consumption of alcohol due among other things to its current low price;

- The hope that a decline in the overall rate of drinking may contribute to cultural change and the current supposition that excessive consumption is acceptable; saving health service resources, increasing economic productivity and offering the benefits of reduced alcohol consumption to all, especially young people.

We consider an overall strategy for the reduction of alcohol consumption requires:

- Continued investment in social and educational programmes to support children, families, parents and young people;

- A direct and positive challenge by government to the existing cultural norms, social attitudes in Scottish society and the peer expectations for young people in relation to alcohol;

- Offering those addicted to alcohol the necessary assistance and guidance for them to find a solution-based focus for improvement;

- Giving proper and direct support and treatment for those who need to reduce alcohol consumption and addiction, in addition to the current voluntary access programmes;

- Aiming legislation to protect children and young people from alcohol advertising by banning alcohol promotion in media targeted for this age group.
On behalf of the SEC, the Committee urges the Government to recognize other concerns as the Bill is considered:

- There is a requirement to ascertain whether a minimum price will have a significant effect on consumption patterns, especially amongst the young and those who consume the most alcohol. Popular “Alcopops” would not increase greatly in price, yet sales volumes may increase.

- Consumers may respond to a rise in the cost of alcohol by purchasing variations: the same amount overall but buying fewer alcoholic products; continuing to buy the same products and increasing their spending; or switching to alternative products. Minimum pricing may lead to a decrease in consumption but an increase in spending for stronger and more hazardous and harmful products.

- Scotland-only minimum pricing may create the climate for a ‘white van trade’ from Carlisle, Berwick and Northern Ireland across border routes with cheaper alcohol being sold in clandestine locations.

- The legitimate trade in alcohol being bought from non-Scottish outlets via telesales and E-sales, even warehoused and distributed in Scotland, may be encouraged reducing any positive effect of minimum pricing in this country.

- The current minimum pricing proposals may ensure Supermarkets gain more from withdrawing alcohol as a “loss leader” to the position of better guaranteed prices and subsequent higher profit.

- Maximum benefit of a minimum price per unit would be greater to the UK as a whole and Scottish society, if it was calculated as a tax to the exchequer rather than profit to the trade in Scotland alone; thereby releasing more funds for the necessary rehabilitation, health and education programmes needed to support those affected by alcohol.

- Minimum pricing may work better in Scotland if it was supported across the UK and in Ireland.

- A rise in the cost of alcohol may be disproportionately felt by those on low incomes and their children, when an increasing amount may be spent on alcohol but less on other household items.

- Minimum pricing may not affect all problematic drinkers equally, for those with greater spending power will be able to adapt without beneficial changes to their alcohol consumption.

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12 December 2011