Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

Scottish Women’s Convention

Background

The purpose of the Scottish Women’s Convention (SWC) is to communicate and consult with women in Scotland to influence public policy. Through the Convention’s policy work, roundtable and celebratory events the SWC strives to have contact with women and relevant organisations. The SWC aims to provide an effective way of consulting with a diverse range of women in Scotland.

The Scottish Women’s Convention has a network of over 300,000 women throughout Scotland.

Introduction

The Scottish Women’s Convention engages with women using numerous communications channels including Roadshow events throughout Scotland, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups.

Discussions with women reveal the majority are in agreement that overall Scotland’s relationship with alcohol is problematic and challenging. Most also concur that the misuse of alcohol in our society is having a detrimental impact on our economy, health and overall societal wellbeing.

Reactions as to how this should be tackled by the Scottish Government do nevertheless generate a greater variation in opinion. This submission paper reflects the diversity of views provided by the women consulted by the SWC.

Opening Comments

The SWC welcomes, in principle, the Scottish Government’s commitment to tackle the issues initially set out in the 2009 Framework for Action – Changing Scotland’s Relationship with Alcohol. The SWC also fully acknowledges evidence available in the public domain which highlights the seriousness of the problem in Scotland.

The SWC response to the previous consultation undertaken by the Health and Sports Committee re the Alcohol Etc. (Scotland) Bill in January 2010 underlines our position in respect of a number of overarching challenges confronting Scottish society, public services and policymakers in tackling alcohol misuse. The following submission reiterates and expands on this view, specifically with regards to minimum pricing.
The Advantages and Disadvantages of establishing a minimum alcohol sales price based on a unit of alcohol?

Advantages

- The expected aim of the proposed legislation is to reduce alcohol consumption in Scotland. If successful, it may assist public services by a reduction in alcohol fuelled antisocial behaviour and decreasing the impact of alcohol misuse on health services.

- The practice of “frontloading”, where individuals consume cheaper alcohol from off sales premises to drink at home before going on to clubs or pubs, might be reduced by enforcement of a minimum price per unit.

- Setting a minimum price will influence the price of cheaper alcohol drinks such as own brand spirits etc. This could have a beneficial influence on reducing the culture of binge drinking, particularly amongst underage groups. Women express concern that young people who are disposed to “getting drunk” are able to buy alcoholic beverages cheaper than equivalent volumes of soft drinks or water.

Disadvantages

- Lower wage earners who consume alcohol responsibly may be unfairly penalised.

- There is no one single policy measure that on its own will solve the problems associated with harmful drinking.

- The focus on minimum pricing may be seen as an insufficient measure if applied in isolation. Women indicate that price mechanisms by themselves will fail to deter harmful drinkers. A package of other measures, including a concerted campaign to address social and cultural patterns of behaviour, is thought to be as imperative.

- Opinions are mixed regarding the potential increased profit margins a minimum price could provide to retailers. Apart from a slight increase in VAT, the increased revenue will remain within the industry. Many women see this as counterproductive as it will not increase funding for public services to support alcohol related issues.

- Women suggest, within both rural and urban communities, that it is becoming easier to acquire alternative stimulants or intoxicating substances. Imposing a minimum price on alcohol could potentially divert individuals towards illegal drug use.

- Retailer promotions which provide alcohol as part of the deal are providing mixed messages to the public. Powerful marketing promotions are thought
to have the potential to neutralise any positive aspects of minimum pricing.

- Women suggest that penalising all consumers for the attitudes and actions of harmful drinkers is ‘an easy option’. It has been suggested that drinkers will continue to ‘find the money to drink’ even with a suggested minimum of around 45p per unit. Money may be diverted from household budget to the detriment of children and overall family wellbeing.

The level at which such a proposed minimum price should be set and the justification for that level

The SWC does not believe we have sufficient evidence to comment on what level of minimum price would produce optimum results. Input from a wide range of stakeholders should be considered together with commissioned academic research. If a minimum price is imposed by legislation the SWC believes a review period will allow for impact assessment evaluation.

Any other aspects of the Bill

There is a tendency among policymakers to confuse ‘symptoms and causes’ when discussing alcohol related issues. If Scotland is to successfully tackle problems in its relationship with alcohol, there must be resources provided to support communities and individuals dealing with the associated issues as well as legislation. A lack of affordable and available social alternatives can exacerbate dependence relationships.

Imposing minimum prices may be a worthy initiative. Nevertheless, education about responsible drinking is vital to support a long term social change. It must not be assumed that those misusing alcohol are predominantly those living in social or economic exclusion.

If you require further information or copies of this report please contact Isabelle Lannon.

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9 December 2011