Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

YouthLink Scotland

1. Introduction

1.1 YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. It is a membership organisation and is in the unique position of representing the interests and aspirations of the whole of the sector, both voluntary and statutory. We are pleased to have the opportunity to submit evidence on this Bill, and welcome the fact that strategies to tackle alcohol misuse are being discussed. This response focuses on the implications of minimum pricing on young people, and considers whether the proposals will have a positive impact on reducing harm and changing attitudes and behaviours.

1.2 There is an urgent need to address Scotland’s deeply problematic relationship with alcohol. A range of evidence suggests that the cost of alcohol misuse to Scotland’s economy and society is staggeringly high. Alcohol Focus Scotland’s figures suggest that 17.5% of all deaths in the 16-24 age group in Scotland were estimated to be caused by attributable alcohol conditions.¹ This is clearly unacceptable and we welcome any measures that can potentially contribute to a reduction in damage to young people.

2. Young people, alcohol and minimum pricing

2.1 The modelling provided in the Explanatory Notes for the Bill is based on the level of 45p per unit. The effect of the 45p per unit minimum price will be to increase the cost of cheap, high-strength drinks such as white cider, supermarket own-brand vodka and super-strength lager. There is evidence that these drinks are the most likely to be consumed by the heaviest drinkers and that there will be a fall in consumption among this group if a minimum price is introduced.

2.2 Some studies suggest that young people and the heaviest drinkers are most ‘price sensitive’², as they have limited spending power. However, we need to look at what young people are drinking in order to ascertain whether a minimum price will have a significant effect on their consumption patterns.

2.3 Young people aged 13-16 are most likely to consume alcopops, with beer being the second most popular drink. This is borne out by both the latest available Scottish Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey (SALSUS) of around 10,000 Scottish pupils³ and a 2011 Joseph Rowntree Foundation study of 5,700 13-16 year olds.⁴ The 2009 Being Young in Scotland survey asked young people what was most appealing about

² Independent Review of the Effect of Alcohol Pricing and Promotion Part A DoH 2008
³ http://www.drugmisuse.isdscotland.org/publications/abstracts/salsus.htm
alcoholic drinks, with the most popular answer being ‘taste/flavour’ (69% of 17-25 year olds; 36% of 11-16 year olds). ‘Low price’ was cited by only 22% of 11-16 year olds, behind taste and ‘friends drink it’ (28%). 17-25 year olds were more influenced by price with 42% saying low cost was the factor that made drink appealing, making this the second most popular response. 5

2.4 The alcopops and beer consumed by young people are typically not as cheap or as strong as drinks such as white cider, own-brand vodka and super-strength lagers. The SALSUS 2008 report found that most young people reported drinking normal strength beer as opposed to strong beer. 6 If the 45p minimum price per unit was adopted then the minimum price for a 700ml bottle of alcopops at 5% ABV would be £1.57. Our market research suggests that supermarkets are already typically selling alcopops at this price, or above. If the minimum price is set above the 45p level then it may be the case that this will have an impact on young people who purchase alcohol, however many young people obtain alcohol in their homes and do not directly purchase it themselves.

2.5 There is a need to investigate the role of marketing and its influence on young people’s alcohol choices. Alcohol advertising is not devolved, whereas tobacco and food safety are. The Changing Scotland’s Relationship discussion paper notes that France has seen a reduction in alcohol consumption over the past 20-30 years (para 20). Although there are many factors implicated in this reduction, advertising restrictions have been identified as contributing to the decline. French legislation aims to protect children and young people from alcohol advertising by banning alcohol promotion on television before 9 pm and internet adverts which feature disguised alcohol marketing. We believe that the Scottish Government should pursue the issue of devolving powers in relation to alcohol advertising with the UK Government. The glamorisation of alcohol through sport must also be tackled by the Scottish and/or UK Governments, and alcohol endorsement of sports competitions should, we believe, be removed.

2.6 Minimum pricing, while a welcome measure that is likely to impact on the heaviest drinkers, is only one measure in the strategic approach to tackling alcohol misuse. It could be argued that people will continue to drink problematically, whatever the price, and that minimum pricing doesn’t address the reasons behind why people are doing so.

2.7 According to a study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation of 5700 young people aged 13-16 7, the most significant factors in young people’s drinking patterns are: peer influence; family influence (lack of parental supervision and witnessing family drinking/drunkenness); attitudes and expectations (positive attitudes towards drinking); easy access to alcohol (most young people surveyed accessed alcohol in the home): and the local context (social norms about excess drinking and drunkenness). In our nation

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5 CELLO mrük research, Being Young in Scotland 2009
6 http://www.drugmisuse.isdscotland.org/publications/abstracts/salsus_national08.htm p.95
there is a culture of excessive drinking and a view that drunkenness is acceptable, and our young people are not immune from these views.

2.8 We believe that in addition to minimum pricing the Scottish Government must focus its strategic framework on the key predictors that can be most easily influenced. Reducing the ease with which alcohol can be purchased by making it less affordable, while an important measure, is unlikely to have a significant impact alone.

2.9 Peer and parental influence are of paramount importance. We believe that efforts to improve alcohol misuse among young people are best directed at supporting youth work opportunities and educating parents. The forthcoming National Parenting Strategy needs to address Scotland’s drinking culture in an honest and frank manner which is not stigmatising, in order to resonate with the widest possible audience. It is important to promote parental responsibility and positive role-modelling in order to foster a healthy attitude towards alcohol. The impact will be limited if it is left until the antenatal stage. The educational work on parenting should start early, and be embedded within Curriculum for Excellence and use a variety of delivery methods including a youth work approach which engages with young people on their own terms.

2.10 Since peers are a key influence, there is a clear need to encourage young people to engage in positive activities. The Changing Scotland’s Relationship framework states that the Government’s intention is to “continue to support a number of third sector organisations to provide youth work and/or diversionary opportunities.” CashBack for Communities funding is cited in the framework as the Government’s main tool for delivering activities that expand young people’s horizons and increase the opportunities they have to develop their interests and skills in an enjoyable, fulfilling and supported way. YouthLink Scotland is a delivery partner for the administration of the CashBack funds and we agree that the CashBack funding has had a considerable impact on improving the capacity of youth work organisations to deliver positive opportunities for young people. However this short-term, project-based funding is not the same as long-term investment in the youth work infrastructure.

2.11 Youth work cannot achieve the aims stated by the Government in the framework if it is not properly resourced beyond the short term. In line with the Government’s focus on prevention, investment must be made in generalist services which are available to all young people, not just targeted interventions for those who are identified as being ‘at risk.’ Young people should be able to access youth work opportunities which meet their needs, but this right is not being met as young people do not have equal access to youth work provision across Scotland. The positive words expressed by the Government in relation to reducing the harm to young people caused by alcohol must be matched by action, in terms of funding and resources for youth work services across the country.
2.12 The Social Responsibility Levy and Public Health Levy could go some way to helping address this inequality and we urge the Scottish Government to develop its plans for these levies, ensuring that proceeds are invested in preventative measures and young people’s services in particular. We believe that investment in youth work will help prevent negative behaviours and attitudes towards alcohol as well as providing positive opportunities, diversionary activities and early intervention. We welcome the decision by the Scottish Government to appoint a Minister for Youth Unemployment, as increasing levels of unemployment among young people may lead to more people turning to drink and other drugs as a means of ‘escaping’ from their problems.

3 Advantages and disadvantages of minimum pricing – general arguments

3.1 A reduction in harmful drinking will contribute to positive health outcomes, a reduction in crime, less harm being caused to children and young people and more prosperity as people are able to enter or re-enter the workforce and take up training and educational opportunities. A decline in the overall rate of drinking may, in turn, contribute to a cultural change in relation to the acceptability of excessive consumption.

3.2 Studies of consumer behaviour cited in the Policy Memorandum suggest that people may respond to a rise in the cost of alcohol by spending the same amount overall but buying fewer alcoholic products; continuing to buy the same products and increasing their spending; or switching to alternative products. The modelling indicates that minimum pricing will lead to a decrease in consumption and an increase in spending among hazardous and harmful drinkers.

3.3 It could be argued that a rise in the cost of alcohol will be disproportionately felt by those on low incomes. Not all those who are on low incomes and who purchase cheap alcohol are problematic drinkers, however there is a potential risk of a negative impact on children and young people in families where an increasing amount is being spent on alcohol but less on other household items.

3.4 There is a question over whether minimum pricing will have any impact on the ‘middle class drinkers’ who are consuming at problematic levels but who buy more expensive alcoholic products which will not be affected by the price increase. Families are affected by problematic drinking regardless of social class and levels of income, and one disadvantage of minimum pricing is that it does not affect all problematic drinkers equally.

3.5 The indicators of the social value that will accrue from reduced levels of alcohol consumption are very encouraging – but will it will also be necessary to address the root causes of problematic drinking in order to maximise the social value created by minimum pricing. Overall, however, we are persuaded by the evidence in favour of minimum pricing in terms of the positive social and economic benefits it is likely to bring.
4. Conclusion

4.1 YouthLink Scotland welcomes the decision to introduce minimum pricing and is of the view that it will help reduce alcohol consumption levels in Scotland, which is to be welcomed. A reduction in consumption will create social value in the form of savings to health services, a reduction in crime and an increase in productivity. Most importantly, it has the potential to reduce harm to young people and to contribute to a change in socio-cultural attitudes to alcohol consumption. Minimum pricing was supported in a statement issued by the Youth Commission on Alcohol, which was jointly established by the Scottish Government and Young Scot in 2009.

4.2 Minimum pricing will have the most direct effect on the heaviest drinkers, who tend to consume the cheapest, strongest alcohol drinks. It is also likely to have an impact on those on lower incomes and the strategic framework needs to address measures to foster attitudinal and behavioural change in all income groups across Scottish society.

4.3 Research suggests that while young people may be price-sensitive, this is not the only factor influencing their drinking behaviour. Therefore, we suggest that the national parenting strategy must substantially address alcohol and that youth work opportunities for young people must be provided and funded at an adequate level so that all young people in Scotland have equal access to positive activities that are appealing and engaging, and that can help equip them with the skills they need to develop their self-esteem and confidence. In turn, this will help them to build positive relationships with their peers and stand up to negative influences.

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