

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

9th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Tuesday, 1 March 2022

Stakeholder evidence session: Tackling Alcohol Harms in Scotland

Note by the Clerk

Introduction

1. At its meeting today, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee will take evidence on tackling alcohol harms in Scotland, from stakeholders representing the sector.

Background

2. In November 2018, the Scottish Government published its [Alcohol Framework 2018: Preventing Harm – next steps on changing our relationship with alcohol](#) which set out three strands of action to tackle alcohol harms.
3. In 2018 the Scottish Government and COSLA also set out six [Public Health Priorities for Scotland](#). The 4th priority was for “A Scotland where we reduce the use of and harm from alcohol, tobacco and other drugs”.
4. Under ‘Prevention and promoting active, healthy lifestyles’, the Scottish Government’s [2021-22 Programme for Government](#) committed to driving forward its Alcohol Framework. Specific actions include evaluating minimum unit pricing policy, improving alcohol labelling and consulting on potential alcohol advertising restrictions during 2022. It also commits to strengthening alcohol treatment and support services, with implementation of UK-wide clinical guidelines, improved staff training, and work to address complex needs.
5. On 22 February 2022, Public Health Scotland published a report on [Alcohol sales and harm in Scotland during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).
6. Minimum unit pricing of alcohol came into force in Scotland on 1 May 2018 under the terms of the [Alcohol \(Minimum Pricing\) \(Scotland\) Act 2012](#). A review of the policy which was due to take place in May 2020 was delayed as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. Legislation on minimum unit pricing contains a 'sunset clause' which requires the Scottish Government to evaluate the policy's effect five years after its entry into force and to report to the Scottish Parliament.
8. In preparation for today's evidence session, the Committee wrote to the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport requesting an update on implementation of the Minimum Unit Pricing policy and received a response on 16 February 2022. This response is attached at Annexe A.

Clerks to the Committee

24 February 2022

Annexe A

Letter from the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport to the Convener of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

16 February 2022

Dear Gillian,

Update on implementation of Minimum Unit Pricing of alcohol

I would like to thank the Committee for giving me the opportunity to respond to the issues raised around Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP).

As the Committee is aware, alcohol consumption is linked to alcohol harm – the more we drink, the greater the harm. It is not just the drinker that suffers harm – it is their family, friends, colleagues and communities that suffer too. I am immensely proud to be part of an administration that was prepared to take such a bold step in introducing a world-leading measure to tackle the high levels of harms we see in Scotland.

Implementation of MUP

The minimum unit price for alcohol was set at 50p by the Alcohol (Minimum Price per Unit) (Scotland) Order 2018, which came into force on 1 May 2018.

PHS carried out a [study into compliance with MUP by licensed premises](#), which was published on 1 August 2019. The study involved qualitative interviews with 20 practitioners with a role in licensing enforcement in Scotland, around 4 to 6 months after implementation. It found that compliance among licensed premises was high.

Following the implementation of MUP and prior to the pandemic, the early signs of its potential impact were encouraging. We saw a 2% reduction in alcohol sales in the off-trade in the 12 months following the introduction of MUP, and a 3.5% reduction in the same period when compared with alcohol sales in the off-trade in England & Wales¹. Sales are widely accepted as a proxy for consumption so these results were positive. However, there is a time lag in any reduction in consumption feeding through to reduced harms. In 2019, the [alcohol specific deaths figure](#) was 10% less than the previous year, and a reduction of this scale only happened on three other occasions since 1979. More data would have been required to see if this was a trend. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the significant impact of the pandemic.

¹ [Using alcohol retail sales data to estimate population alcohol consumption in Scotland: an update of previously published estimates \(publichealthscotland.scot\)](#), page 14, Total off-trade alcohol sales

Ongoing evaluation

As you know, Public Health Scotland (PHS) are leading the evaluation of MUP and I understand they write to the Committee on an annual basis to keep you informed of progress. The most recent letter, [dated 9 August 2021](#), sets out a summary of findings from studies published since the previous letter ([dated 29 April 2020](#)). I understand the next update is scheduled for May.

Sunset and five year report

As the Committee highlighted in its letter, section 2 of the Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act 2012 (“the 2012 Act”) provides that minimum unit pricing provisions will cease to have effect 6 years after the Act came fully into force (which it did on 1 May 2018), unless an affirmative Order to continue those provisions is approved by Parliament.

Section 3 of the 2012 Act effectively prepares us for that vote. It requires the Scottish Ministers to lay a report in Parliament as soon as practicable after 30 April 2023 evaluating the impact of MUP over the first five years of the policy being in force. Work on that evaluation has been ongoing since the policy came into force.

As required by section 3 of the 2012 Act, the five year report will assess the impact MUP has had on the five licensing objectives: preventing crime and disorder; securing public safety; preventing public nuisance; protecting and improving public health; and protecting children and young people from harm. The impact on alcohol licence holders and producers must also be considered, as may the impact by key characteristics of age, gender, socioeconomic deprivation and alcohol consumption, if feasible.

In preparing the report, representatives of the interests of alcohol producers and licence holders, and those with a function in relation to prevention of crime, health, education, social work and children and young people, will be consulted.

The five year review will require the synthesis of evidence from different types of study, with different purposes and on different outcomes. The review will incorporate studies funded or undertaken through the Monitoring and Evaluation of Scotland’s Alcohol Strategy (MESAS), the separately funded studies that are part of the portfolio and other suitable published studies. The review will need to ensure that findings, which might not all be consistent, from different study designs, different population group and different time points are taken into account. Work on collating and evaluating third party studies is ongoing.

We will also be carefully assessing the evidence of the impact MUP has had on the hazardous and harmful drinking by those whose drinking has the greatest impact on society.

The impacts of the pandemic, and to some extent Brexit, will make the interpretation of this review more challenging. The pandemic in particular caused people’s drinking habits to change and we will be doing work to establish whether those changes were short-term or more permanent.

This five year report is clearly very significant not only in looking back over the impact that MUP has had in its first five years but it will also be very influential in determining whether we seek to continue MUP as a policy .

Timings

As is required by the 2012 Act, we will be laying and publishing the 5 year report as soon practicable after 30 April 2023, however we will need to allow some time for the latest data from the last few months of that 5 year period to come through.

We then intend to consult on the future of MUP. This would be a full public consultation and we will of course be consulting directly with our stakeholders too.

If we go ahead with an Order to continue MUP that Order is subject to the affirmative procedure, so will need to be laid in Parliament by early February 2024 at the latest.

As regards reviewing the level of MUP, it is currently too early in the process to make a decision at what that might be set at and when this might happen.

I hope the Committee finds this information helpful. If they wish further information on any aspect, I am happy to provide this.

Yours sincerely,

Maree Todd MSP