

ALCOHOL MINIMUM UNIT PRICING



Background

According to the United Kingdom Government's Alcohol Strategy 2012, there were almost 1 million alcohol related violent crimes and 1.2 million alcohol related hospital admissions in 2011. The strategy also states that the level of binge drinking among 15- 16 year olds compares poorly with the rest of Europe and is one of the 3 big risk factors for disease and death in the UK after smoking and obesity.

Scotland has even more pronounced problems than the rest of the UK. Alcohol related harm in Scotland continues to be at historically high levels. Alcohol related mortality has more than doubled in the last 15 years and Scotland has one of the fastest growing rates of liver disease and cirrhosis in the world. There are substantial health inequalities in Scotland and the Scottish Chief Medical Officer (CMO) has highlighted alcohol as a major influence on this. The CMO, along with CMOs in the rest of the UK, supports Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP).

Hazardous and harmful alcohol use is estimated by the Scottish Government to cost £3.6 billion every year. Cheap alcohol is contributing to the already bad situation. Since 1980 alcohol has become around 45% more affordable with consumption increasing by 11% in Scotland since the mid- 1990s. This increased affordability and consumption is matched by hospital admissions for alcohol related conditions which has followed a similar trend.

The Proposal

- As a condition of a retailer's license, alcohol products of all types must be sold at or above a minimum price.
- The minimum price is proposed at 50 pence per 10ml unit of pure alcohol.
- The proposal will apply to all holders of a license to retail alcohol in Scotland and prevents the setting of a retail price below the MUP. This applies equally to domestic and imported products.

The Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act 2012 was passed in June 2012 but has yet to be implemented due to an ongoing legal challenge from the Scotch Whisky Association. Following a recent judgement from the European Court of Justice the Scottish Government remains confident the legislation will be implemented.

Current Situation

It is possible in Scotland today to exceed the maximum weekly recommended intake for men, 21 UK units, for around £4.

In recent years the Scottish Government has introduced measures aimed at tackling alcohol misuse including:-

- Investing £196 million targeted mainly at prevention and treatment centres.
- Reformed local alcohol and drug delivery arrangements.
- Establishing a youth commission on alcohol.
- Introducing legislation to allow banning quantity discounts and restricting alcohol promotions in off-sales.

These measures form part of a comprehensive alcohol strategy and wider policy initiatives seeking to address the underlying causes of poor health and social disadvantage. Despite these measures, and an economic downturn in recent years, Scotland's alcohol consumption remains at high levels.

Evidence

Minimum pricing effectively targets those individuals who will benefit most from a reduction in consumption. Harmful drinkers drink proportionately more alcohol which is cheaper relative to its strength. This can be targeted by MUP as it is determined by, and directly proportionate to, the number of units of pure alcohol in each product.

Econometric modelling studies by the University of Sheffield estimate that 50 pence MUP will lead to:-

- An overall fall in consumption of 5.9%.
- A reduction of alcohol related deaths by 60 in the first year.
- A reduction of 1600 in alcohol related hospital admissions in the first year.
- An annual reduction of 3500 alcohol related crimes.
- A cumulative value of harm reduction of £942 million by year 10.

The World Health Organisation has identified controls on price and availability as the most effective measures governments can implement to reduce the harm caused by alcohol 'the evidence is strongest for the impact of alcohol prices as an incentive to reduce heavy drinking occasions and regular harmful drinking' (WHO 2011).

Recent empirical evidence from Canada shows that the introduction of MUP has reduced alcohol consumption by 3% to 5%.

One objection to minimum pricing is that heavy drinkers will be unlikely to change drinking habits in response to MUP. Evidence suggests that regular, heavy drinkers do make purchasing decisions based on the price of alcohol and when their income is reduced they will either reduce their consumption or substitute cheaper drinks. MUP will reduce the opportunities for this substitution resulting in a greater reduction in consumption.

Another objection is that everyone consuming alcohol will be affected by this measure to reduce problem drinking. However, moderate drinkers are less likely to consume the cheapest, strongest alcoholic products therefore the impact on their consumption and expenditure will be modest.

Position of Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs

Scottish Families welcomes and strongly supports the MUP proposals. There is a growing body of evidence showing the harms from alcohol to those other than the drinker. Family members supporting a loved one with problematic alcohol use are likely to experience stress, anxiety and financial burdens amongst other issues. Scottish Families has experienced a significant increase in calls to the helpline since the inclusion of alcohol to its remit. Family members calling the helpline are often confused by what a unit of alcohol, as referred to in the guidelines, actually is. MUP should bring clarity to this issue as cost is directly related to units of alcohol.

While all parts of the alcohol industry have declared a commitment to promoting responsible drinking it is clear that the self-regulation approach favoured in the UK has failed to significantly impact harmful drinking and its effects. The public health consequences show there is now a need for government regulation of this market including the introduction of MUP.

The introduction of MUP is an effective mechanism for tackling the upward trend in alcohol related harm and mortality in Scotland. It is a reliable means of price control which focuses on the patterns of alcohol consumption most associated with harm. Following political debate all significant health organisations in Scotland strongly supported MUP and the Minimum Price Bill was passed without opposition in the Scottish parliament in May 2012. There have been several objections by alcohol producers globally to the proposed minimum pricing initiative in Scotland. The policy of minimum unit pricing falls within the category of protecting human health which requires commercial interests to cede to public health considerations. Given the substantial burden of harm caused by alcohol it is essential that the EU, UK and Scottish Governments implement effective alcohol policies.