Alcohol etc. (Scotland) Bill

Angus Alcohol and Drugs Partnership (AADP)

Alcohol continues to cause problems across Angus and elsewhere in Scotland. The AADP has established the Focus on Alcohol Angus project that aims to challenge the cultural acceptance of heavy drinking in Angus. Despite the positive impact of this project, a problematic relationship with alcohol still exists in sections of the community. This approach to addressing the misuse of alcohol within our community has been embraced by the Angus Community Planning Partnership and the content of this Bill has relevance for all key partners.

Research conducted by Sheffield University shows clearly that the introduction of minimum pricing can reduce harm in the areas of health, employment and crime. Research also suggests that moderate drinkers are only minimally affected by price increases. There is also compelling evidence that shows that alcohol consumption has increased as prices have decreased. Instances of cirrhosis of the liver have increased in Scotland as the price of alcohol has reduced. It is the opinion of the AADP that a clear advantage of the Bill would be to reduce alcohol consumption across the Scottish population.

Opposition to the Alcohol Bill from the retail and drinks industry must be balanced with the need for action on alcohol issues across Scotland as it is clear alcohol causes significant problems in our communities. Studies conducted by Aberdeen University show that the introduction of minimum pricing might lead to a drop in sales, but that this would be off-set by the increase in price.

The explanatory notes accompanying the Bill suggest a minimum price of forty pence per unit of alcohol. It is the view of the AADP that a minimum price would have to be higher than forty pence per unit to see the desired decrease in consumption across the population. Alcohol Focus Scotland has suggested that the minimum price be set between forty five and fifty five pence and we would support this recommendation. The AADP strongly supports the introduction of minimum pricing and believes there are more advantages than disadvantages from introducing this legislation.

The committee also ask for views on the rationale behind the use of minimum pricing as an effective tool to address all types of problem drinking. Research suggests that in Scotland there are around 1,172,000 hazardous/harmful drinkers and roughly 200,000 dependent drinkers. It is the view of the AADP that minimum pricing will impact most upon those people reporting hazardous drinking, which is the largest group of problem drinkers. Minimum pricing will have less initial impact on those people dependent on alcohol, due to the nature of dependence, but it might positively impact upon people in recovery from alcohol dependence. A reduction in the availability of cheap alcohol will be helpful to some in their fight to abstain from alcohol once in recovery.
The AADP believe that there are no alternatives to minimum pricing that will so effectively address the public health issues surrounding alcohol consumption in Scotland. A report commissioned by the World Health Organisation, Alcohol No Ordinary Commodity 2003, showed clearly that the most effective measures to reduce alcohol consumption were price and availability. In addition to that, it is necessary to protect young people from the broad range of ‘under the radar’ marketing activity for alcohol. This has recently been evidenced by the Institute of Social Marketing, Stirling University, as a powerful method within which to provide a range of powerful multi-media messages around alcohol to influence the choices that young people take around alcohol.

The AADP are supportive of the Bill empowering licensing boards to raise the legal purchase age for off sales in their area. It is recognised that this section of the Bill has been controversial, the argument being that we should not only target young people but the whole population. However, we foresee several benefits to the inclusion of this section of the Bill. Eighteen to twenty-one year olds would be encouraged to drink in licensed premises, where there are a mix of age groups and trained staff making it a more controlled and safer environment. Hopefully the effects of pre-loading, where young people drink cheap alcohol from off sale premises prior to entering licensed premises, will be reduced. It is possible that the number of 18-21 year olds acting as agents (buying alcohol for those under age) will be reduced.

On the issue of social responsibility fees, the AADP are supportive of this section of the Bill but believe any such fee must be introduced fairly and recognise and reward responsible licensees. It seems fair that those who produce and sell alcohol and profit as a result should contribute to the huge financial costs of clearing up our town centres as well as the cost of treatment services and A&E departments that are associated with the misuse of alcohol. However, it needs to be recognised that some licensed premises, particularly in rural areas, act as community halls and allow the use of rooms to community groups. In Angus we have some licensed premises that offer alcohol free discos for young people where safe drinking messages are promoted to those attending. A license holder who offers support to community groups and offers diversionary activities for young people on a regular basis should have their social responsibility fee reduced or possibly have no fee to pay. If the fee was to be waived there would need to be a mechanism of monitoring the use of the premises to ensure this is used frequently by community groups and not just once or twice a year. In addition to this there are ten local authority areas currently participating in the Best Bar None scheme led by the Scottish Business Crime Centre (SBCC). This good practice initiative for the trade is growing in Angus and indeed has increased three fold over the last three years. Premises accredited with the Best Bar None scheme award should also be recognised as non-fee paying premises.

In conclusion the AADP are in support of all the points raised by the committee for specific comment. We believe that the introduction of this Bill would have a very positive impact on the Scottish population’s relationship with alcohol.
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