ChildLine in Scotland

ChildLine is the free 24-hour helpline run by NSPCC for any child with any problem throughout the UK. Last year, ChildLine in Scotland\(^1\) provided a counselling service for around 27,000 children and young people who called about a wide variety of issues including physical abuse, sexual abuse, family relationship problems, bullying, sexual health and wellbeing issues, depression and mental health. ChildLine in Scotland also hears from a significant number of children every year about the impact of alcohol on their lives. As we stated in our 2008 response to the Scottish Government’s discussion paper: Changing Scotland’s relationship with Alcohol, the overwhelming number of these calls over the last ten years relate to the impact that parental harmful drinking has had on children’s lives.

ChildLine in Scotland do not propose to comment in detail on the terms of the draft Bill, however we strongly support the Scottish Government’s aim to reduce overall alcohol consumption across the whole population, and in particular, measures set out in Part 1 (sections1-4) of the Bill to regulate the price and availability of alcohol. International evidence, reviewed by Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems in a report published last year,\(^2\) demonstrates a clear link between per capita alcohol consumption and the level of alcohol-related harm a country experiences and also established that increasing alcohol price is one of the most effective single policy measures that governments can take to reduce harm.

Over the last 40 years, alcohol consumption has doubled from under 6 litres of pure alcohol per person in 1960 to almost 12 litres in 2007. Excessive drinking is no longer a minority problem as 44% of men and 36% of women in Scotland report drinking above the daily recommended limits on their heaviest drinking day in the previous week. Another change in drinking behaviour is the shift away from drinking outside the home to more drinking at home – just over half of alcohol sold is now consumed at home. As our consumption has gone up, the harm caused by alcohol has increased. Alcohol-related deaths have increased by 150% in a generation, and are twice as high in Scotland as they are in England and Wales. With the general rise in consumption and harm, and the shift towards drinking at home, it is likely that more children and young people will be negatively affected by someone else’s drinking. A report to the European Union a decade ago pointed to clear benefits for families and children of policies that reduce alcohol consumption:

\[\text{In reality, alcohol problems in families are affected by the same factors as affect alcohol problems in general: at both the individual and the population level, the likelihood of experiencing such problems increases with the amount of alcohol consumed and with the frequency of intoxication. Policies that}\]

\(^1\) For the purposes of brevity, NSPCC’s ChildLine Service in Scotland will be referred throughout this response as ChildLine in Scotland.

\(^2\) Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems set up by Scottish Royal Medical Colleges 2006
increase alcohol consumption are thus likely to increase family problems, problems that can impair and destroy families.

Equally, family influence and family break-up can increase the likelihood of alcohol and other substance abuse problems in both adults and children. For these reasons, policies that reduce alcohol problems are likely to strengthen and support families, and policies that strengthen and support families are likely to reduce problems. (Alcohol Problems in the Family: A report to the European Union; 1998)

Untold damage - Children's accounts of living with harmful parental drinking

ChildLine in Scotland and SHAAP carried out a research study in 2009 which documents children’s experiences of living with harmful parental drinking. The study highlights children’s accounts of a wide range of severe negative impacts including emotional stress, physical abuse and neglect. A copy of the research can be found at:

http://www.shaap.org.uk/news/131,Untold_Damage%3A_Children%27s_accounts_ofliving_with_harmful_parental_drinking.html

The research follows on from an earlier study by the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) which found that the most frequent concern for children talking to ChildLine about the health and well-being of their parents and significant others was parental alcohol problems. The CLS/SHAAP study is based on the analysis of over 300 calls records of children who talked to volunteer counsellors about harmful parental drinking and also draws from the experiences of ChildLine in Scotland counselling volunteers and staff who, between them, have many years experience of working with children on the helpline.

Children rarely call ChildLine about parental alcohol as their main concern but rather are likely to call about the impact it is having on their lives – most commonly physical abuse and family relationship problems, and in some cases, sexual abuse. Children describe multiple impacts on their home and family life including violence and conflict in the home, neglect and isolation. Children also talk to volunteers about how parental drinking affects their lives outside the home, describing a range of impacts such as social isolation, bullying and difficulties at school. Many children describe feeling chronically worried or depressed about their parents drinking, of self-harming and some mention having suicidal thoughts. The long term negative impact of parental harmful drinking on the mental health and wellbeing of children affected is all too clear.

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The majority of children who talked to ChildLine about these issues are aged 11-15. They are overwhelmingly ‘hidden’ children, unknown to children’s services and in many cases having shared their problems only with friends or close family. Their age range indicates that these children may be a low priority for statutory services, from whom many are reluctant to seek support. In many cases they are getting by as best they can, often trying to cope with their parents drinking against a backdrop of family separation and loss, which many link directly to parental drinking either as a contributory factor or as a result.

ChildLine in Scotland’s key aim is to offer a service to every child who needs help and support. Our privileged position of hearing from large numbers of children on the issues that impact on their lives also gives us a powerful responsibility to raise their voices with those who can make a difference. As well as documenting children’s experiences, Untold damage: Children’s accounts of living with harmful parental drinking contains a wide range of recommendations for action for the Scottish Government and local authorities based on children’s experiences and needs, including confidential, self-referral services for children and alternative models of support for families, especially in times of crisis (family separation and loss having emerged as a strong theme throughout children’s calls). It also calls for policy measures to reduce alcohol consumption in the whole population in order to reduce harm and impact positively on the lives of children and young people living with harmful parental drinking.

Given the substantial body of evidence linking increased alcohol consumption in the population with an increase in harm to health and social harm, the overall approach a government takes to alcohol policy is central in efforts to improve outcomes for children and young people. Although alcohol may not ‘cause’ child abuse, harmful parental drinking is clearly associated with an increased risk of abuse and neglect, as well as a range of other negative impacts on children and young people. Policies which aim to reduce overall alcohol consumption in the population will improve the lives of children and young people who are experiencing abuse. ChildLine in Scotland hears from many children every year who have suffered physical abuse (10% of calls in 2008/09) and also from those who have suffered sexual abuse (9% of calls 2008/09). The CRFR research on 2005 found that there was a clear link between parental harmful drinking and abuse leading the research team to comment that they were “alarmed by the level and severity of the abuse”. This finding was also reflected in the 2009 ChildLine in Scotland / SHAAP research where physical abuse was the most common main problem called about when talking about harmful parental drinking (two fifths of calls).

ChildLine in Scotland believes that pricing controls and other measures to limit the availability of alcohol are a crucial aspect of government policy to reduce alcohol related harm in Scotland. However it is vital that they are accompanied by a wide range of other measures to support families experiencing difficulties and children and young people howsoever affected by harmful drinking. As previously stated, the measures we are calling for, based
on children experiences of living with harmful parental drinking, are documented fully in Untold Damage.

As ChildLine in Scotland emphasised in our earlier response, it is imperative that any parental advice and/ or public information campaigns aimed at parents about their own drinking are not limited to cases where there are serious child protection issues, but address all age groups and ‘classes’, who may be under the impression that their consumption is ‘normal’ or ‘under control’, and having little idea of the effect of their drinking on their children. The government has made some headway in recent years in getting the message across to parents about the impact of their own smoking habits on their children - not simply as regards the risks from ‘passive’ smoking - but also from learned behaviour patterns. Campaigns on domestic violence have also focussed on the effects on children as well as on adults. ChildLine in Scotland would enormously welcome the same approach being taken as regards alcohol.

The current draft Bill before us deals only with one aspect of policy to address the problems in Scotland caused by alcohol. Nonetheless we would reiterate that ChildLine in Scotland strongly support the measures set out in sections 1-4 of Part 1 of the Bill and indeed any other measures that are aimed at reducing overall consumption of alcohol in the population and related harm to children and young people. We are happy to provide evidence on our position, based on our caller databases and counsellors’ experiences, during the progress of the Bill and would welcome the opportunity to contribute further to the debate on this crucial issue.

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Policy and Information Officers
NSPCC’s ChildLine Service in Scotland
20 January 2010

NSPCC’s ChildLine Service in Scotland offers a free, 24-hour confidential telephone helpline for any child or young person with any problem and provides a counselling service to around 30,000 children and young people every year. The majority of calls are from children between the ages of 11 and 15 years. Volunteer counsellors listen to children and young people and offer support, advice and protection where appropriate. The service aims to give voice to the children and young people who contact ChildLine to talk about the issues that are affecting their lives. The service is delivered in Scotland by CHILDREN 1st