Alcohol etc. (Scotland) Bill

Church of Scotland

1. The advantages and disadvantages of establishing a minimum alcohol sales price based on a unit of alcohol

The Church and Society Council of the Church of Scotland strongly support the introduction of a minimum price per unit of alcohol. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland discussed and supported the principle of minimum pricing in 1983, 1986 and 1987 and reaffirmed this position in 2009. Over this 27 year period the basic arguments have remained the same; there is a consistent body of evidence from medical and academic sources that indicates that there is a direct relationship between the availability of cheap alcohol and excessive, and therefore harmful, drinking.

The social costs of increased health problems requiring NHS resources, increased violence in our towns and cities and damage to family relationships are borne by us all. If an increase in the minimum price of alcohol will reduce consumption of alcohol and reduce the resulting problems for individuals and our society then it is not a case of penalising the majority in order to discourage the minority. This is a choice that we, as a society, could make in order to improve our collective health and wellbeing. Taking an approach to excessive drinking that focuses purely on individual behaviour fails to acknowledge that we live in a society in which the consequences of excessive drinking are shared by us all. It is up to us, as a society, to say that an individual does not have a right to unlimited access to cheap alcohol when such access is detrimental to the common good.

The Church and Society Council of the Church of Scotland have launched a campaign to raise awareness of the evidence in support of minimum pricing and encourage church members to lobby alcohol produces and MSP in support of this policy. We do not believe that it is appropriate for the alcohol industry to be driving health policy as there is clearly a conflict of interest between their business and the needs of society.

2. The level at which such a proposed minimum price should be set and the justification for that level

This is a matter for experts to decide, however, it is important that the minimum price set is high enough to have an impact on purchasing.

3. The rationale behind the use of minimum pricing as an effective tool to address all types of problem drinking
4. Possible alternatives to the introduction of a minimum alcohol sales price as an effective means of addressing the public health issues surrounding levels of alcohol consumption in Scotland

It is acknowledged that the introduction of minimum pricing will not, in isolation, resolve the current alcohol related problems in Scotland. We continue to call on the Government to invest in social programmes to support families, generate attitudinal change which will enable positive choices about the role of alcohol in our lives and improve support and treatment for those who need it. However, we welcome the introduction of minimum pricing as a significant step in the right direction.

5. The advantages and disadvantages of introducing a social responsibility levy on pubs and clubs in

The Church of Scotland agrees that there is a need for additional resources to be available for locally determined initiatives to respond to the effects of alcohol misuse. We also agree that it is reasonable to ask businesses which benefit from alcohol sales to share the responsibility of dealing with the consequences of misuse. Therefore we welcome the inclusion of an enabling power to allow the possibility of introducing a social responsibility levy.

6. The justification for empowering licensing boards to raise the legal alcohol purchase age in their area to 21

The Church of Scotland does not support the proposal to enable licensing boards to raise the legal alcohol purchase age in their area to 21. It is legal to purchase alcohol aged 18 and over, while this remains the case it would be discriminatory to allow some licensing boards to limit off-sales premises to people aged 18-21. Measures to enhance age verification policies and prevent purchase of alcohol by those who are underage are welcomed. However, legal measures to limit alcohol consumption can only be part of the solution to Scotland's excessive drinking. Individual and collective responsibility for our alcohol consumption are essential to tackle the issues we face, therefore it is important that people aged 18-21 retain the right to be treated as responsible adults on an equal basis with other adults.

7. The role of promotional offers and promotional material in encouraging people to purchase more alcohol than they intended

The Church of Scotland agrees that alcohol is not an ordinary commodity and that it is appropriate to limit promotions which encourage people to buy more alcohol than they intend. Drinks promotions in on-sales premises have already been restricted, it is therefore appropriate to introduce similar restrictions to off-sale premises.
8. Any other aspects of the Bill

Chloe Clemmons  
Church & Society Council  
Church of Scotland  
20 January 2010