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

The Dumfries and Galloway Alcohol and Drugs Partnership (ADP) agree in principle with the proposal to introduce a minimum alcohol sales price based on a unit of alcohol. We believe that this will have minimal effect on the costs borne by responsible drinkers but will effect the price of e.g. high alcohol ciders, bargain basement offers and multi-pack purchase. It will also impact on ‘loss-leader’ promotions, deep discounting and other forms of what may be described as irresponsible promotions. We further believe that the positive effects of unit pricing will target younger people and irresponsible drinkers, two groups which are of major concern to services and Government. Various research has shown the direct links between cost of alcohol and amount purchased and to regulate costs in this way is therefore seen as a positive step in reducing purchase and consumption.

The ADP were slightly concerned that this measure may produce unwanted consequences such as increased trafficking of cheap alcohol from the European mainland and possible unemployment in the cheap-end alcohol production industry and would advise Government of these concerns.

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

Much of the debate and examples given have been around a minimum unit price of 40p. The ADP believes that this should be the absolute minimum but that the higher the minimum price set the greater the short, medium and long term benefits will be. The ADP believes that, if minimum price can be set then it can be re-set or changed as circumstances dictate. We would prefer the minimum price to be set at around 50p per unit but would advise that Government reserve the authority to vary this as the evidence of effect is accumulated over time.

The rationale behind the use of minimum pricing as an effective tool to address all types of problem drinking.

As mentioned above, there is an abundance of national and international research which demonstrates a direct correlation between the price of alcohol and consumption rates. As prices have fallen in Scotland in real terms over the past twenty years, then there have been corresponding rises in consumption. We believe that the direct effect of introducing minimum pricing will be on younger, inexperienced drinkers, whose ability to purchase will be directly influenced. We also believe that the cohort of problem drinkers in
Scotland will be directly affected as their (normal) drink of choice, high strength ciders or lagers or cheaper brands of spirits become less affordable. Over time we would expect to see a downward shift in the mean consumption of alcohol across the population.

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

The ADP believes that Government should not be considering alternatives but should see minimum pricing as one of a necessary range of measures aimed at tackling alcohol misuse in Scotland. Those other measures would include:

- Ongoing, nationwide public awareness campaigns targeting the whole population and target groups within the population
- Incentivising alcohol free activities
- A comprehensive alcohol education policy involving schools, parents and the media.
- More focussed prevention campaigns, including proxy purchase, street drinking and trafficking.

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

The ADP has sympathy with the notion that ‘the polluter pays’ and that the true costs of the problems associated with alcohol misuse are in some ways reflected in its price and availability. With specific reference to a levy we believe that this may encourage each outlet to ‘up its game’ and therefore we would see a rise in minimum standards across the sector. However, we believe that the current proposals are unmanageable in their present form. Often problems occur in and around fast food outlets or taxi-ranks and it would be difficult to attribute this to the nearest alcohol outlet. If levies were based on usage or call-outs of emergency services or police this may dissuade outlets from doing so, thus exacerbating already difficult situations. Would the levy be retrospective? How would we apportion costs viz a viz size of premises, length of opening times, late licenses etc. In general, we believe more detailed proposals need to be developed before this can be taken forward.

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

The ADP believes that raising the legal purchase age to 21 would produce positive effects if applied across the population. Positive effects would include (we believe) a reduction in proxy purchasing, a reduction in underage purchase and a consequential rise in the mean age of young people purchasing alcohol. If this is targeted solely at off-license outlets it may
influence more young people to purchase alcohol in pubs or clubs. There would need to be an accompanying raising of standards in these outlets so that some messages regarding responsible drinking become part of this culture. However, the ADP firmly believes that the underlying principles of raising the legal purchase age are sound, but that there needs to be a consistency of approach at least within and across local authority areas, but most probably Scotland wide. The ADP would advise that if this measure is to be introduced it should be as legislation which is applied nationally.

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

The ADP agrees that the promotional offers and materials currently witnessed do encourage people to drink more than perhaps they had intended. We believe that the introduction of minimum pricing will have a positive effect on promotional offers and will, effectively, see the end of e.g. happy hours, two for one and other such offers. Basically the price you see will be the price you pay. We believe that the Government should commission a full review and evaluation of alcohol promotion both within alcohol outlets and across the media. Lessons can be learned from the ban on tobacco advertising and should be applied to alcohol.

Any other aspects of the bill

The ADP wish to make the following comments:

- Irresponsible promotions should not be allowed in any type of alcohol outlet (Ref S19 of the Bill)
- ‘Tasting sessions’ should be more carefully controlled and regulated.
- Government should consider what will happen to the extra revenue generated by ‘minimum pricing’ and discuss ways of returning this to treatment providers, control of public order issues and raising standards.

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18 January 2010