Introduction

UNISON Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the call for evidence from the Scottish Parliament’s Health and Sport Committee on the above Bill.

UNISON Scotland has over 160,000 members in Scotland. Our members work in public services across the NHS, Local Government and Justice where they will have to deal with the effects of alcohol abuse.

General Comments

UNISON Scotland welcomes the moves by Scottish Government to reduce the impact of alcohol misuse and over consumption has on Scottish society.

Alcohol misuse has a significant impact on public services in Scotland.

We note that;

There were 42,000 hospital discharges in 2007-08 due to alcohol related illness and injury. Mortality as a direct result of alcohol has more than doubled since the early 1990s. Recent research has estimated that alcohol is a contributory factor in 1 in 20 deaths in Scotland with a quarter of male deaths and a fifth of female deaths in the 35 to 44 year old age group being alcohol attributable;

Scotland has one of the fastest growing rates of chronic liver disease and cirrhosis in the world, leading the Chief Medical Officer to add alcoholic liver disease to the list of ‘big killers’ alongside heart disease, stroke and cancer;

49% of Scottish prisoners (including 76% of young offenders) said they were drunk at the time of their offence and two-thirds of those accused of homicide in 2007-08 (and whose drug status was known) were either drunk or on drink and drugs at the time of their offence;

Scotland has one of the fastest growing rates of chronic liver disease and cirrhosis in the world, leading the Chief Medical Officer to add alcoholic liver disease to the list of ‘big killers’ alongside heart disease, stroke and cancer;

Estimated annual costs to the NHS are £405 million and to the police of £288 million.
We recognise however that this is a complex issue which will require a multifaceted approach to be tackled effectively. Regarding the principal measure in the Bill, UNISON Scotland can see that there may be merit in the minimum pricing proposal but would like to see more evidence before expressing a definite view. UNISON Scotland is of the view that whatever measures are adopted should be monitored to establish their level of effectiveness.

Consultation Questions

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

UNISON Scotland can see that there may be merit in the minimum pricing proposal but would like to see more evidence before expressing a definite view on this. We are encouraged that the issue of alcohol misuse is being taken seriously by the Scottish Government and that a definite proposal for action has been made. We agree with the thrust behind the Bill that there would be an advantage to Scottish society in reducing the consumption of alcohol. However while minimum pricing per unit may contribute to this, as part of a wider package of measures, we have concerns it may not be the most effective or useful method of doing this.

One of our concerns is the impact of a minimum price on the families of problem drinkers. This is a group whose habits are not price sensitive, hence price rises would impact more on their families in terms of reduced income than on the quantity of alcohol consumed.

Another of our concerns is that any revenue from a minimum pricing regime would accrue to supermarkets and other retailers rather than being available to the health and other services which are impacted on by alcohol misuse. If price were to one of the elements in a strategy to tackle alcohol we believe it should be done via tax in order to help pay for the public services for which alcohol creates a demand.

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

One of the main issues with the abuse of alcohol is its availability – of which price is only part. We would be in favour of a stricter selling regime for alcohol particularly off sales.

UNISON Scotland sees much to recommend in the Scandinavian model of state monopolies in the selling of alcohol.

The hours when alcohol can be sold, responsible sales policies could be enforced and sensible pricing policies would all be easily set and self enforcing.
Systembolaget, the Swedish alcohol monopoly operates as a non-profit making business. They maintain that this allows them to promote a healthy drinking culture without the need “to try to persuade customers to buy as much as possible”.

The advantages and disadvantages of introducing a social responsibility levy on on-sales and off-sales licence holders in Scotland (e.g. pubs, clubs, off licences shops etc)

UNISON Scotland would have no objection in principle to a measure of this nature. Whilst not as direct a measure as taxation it would make some contribution to the public purse in recognition of the demands alcohol misuse places on public services.

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

UNISON Scotland sees no justification for raising the purchase age for alcohol. Problem drinking should be tackled whatever the age of the problem drinker. Equally non problem drinkers should not be penalised because of their age.

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

UNISON Scotland believe that such offers and material are a factor in the misuse of alcohol. We would support local licensing authorities making full use of existing powers to ban promotions they believe to be irresponsible and would consider supporting an extension of these powers.

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