Alcohol Etc. (Scotland) Bill

YouthLink Scotland

1. Introduction

1.1 YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. It is a membership organisation and is in the unique position of representing the interests and aspirations of the whole of the sector, both voluntary and statutory. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament’s Health and Sport Committee call for evidence.

1.2 YouthLink Scotland champions the role and value of the youth work sector, challenging government at national and local levels to invest in the development of the sector. Our aim is that Scotland will have a dynamic and accessible youth work sector, which supports young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

1.3 YouthLink Scotland, its board, membership and staff are working together to achieve the following outcomes:

- Increased awareness and understanding of the contribution made by youth work to achieving key policy agendas.

- Policy and legislation which better reflects the needs and aspirations of the youth work sector and the young people they work with.

- A clear strategic approach to improving youth work practice in Scotland, increasing the quality of youth work opportunities for young people.

- A clear strategic approach to workforce development, increasing the quality and quantity of training opportunities for youth work staff and volunteers.

- Improved communication and networking across the sector, with external stakeholders and the media, resulting in increased recognition of the positive contribution made by youth work and young people.

- Sustainable investment in youth work
2. Context of response

2.1 In September 2008, YouthLink Scotland submitted a response to the Scottish Government’s consultation on ‘Changing Scotland’s Relationship with Alcohol’. This response is based on the views expressed to us by our members at that time.

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

3.1 YouthLink Scotland is in favour of alcohol being priced in a sensible way so that products containing alcohol are not made overly attractive to young people, known as “pocket money” pricing. Care should be taken to think about the price levels for the high alcohol, low price products such as strong white cider or export-strength lagers. For a pricing scheme to be effective, it should make the products known to be most used by young people and heavy users less attractive. However, pricing schemes are less important in solving issues related to misuse of alcohol than education, counselling, and health interventions.

3.2 Some drinks manufacturers sell drinks that are deliberately designed not to taste of alcohol, often known as ‘alcopops’. These products are aimed at people who wish to drink but who do not enjoy the taste of alcohol, and the growth in this market has been clearly targeted at young people. These products lull consumers into a false sense of security that they are drinking a substance as harmless as a soft drink, when in reality they have a high alcohol content. The general message that alcohol is a substance that is harmful is certainly diluted by the sale of such products.

4. 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)

4.1 YouthLink Scotland supports the idea of a social responsibility fee, in principle. However, any fee that is levied must be proportionate in terms of the revenue of the business, the area it serves and the type of retailer it is applied to. Corner shops and small post offices that sell alcohol in addition to providing a vital service for small villages and areas should not face the same proportion of fees as large supermarkets. Many of these establishments already provide services to the communities in which they exist. Premises such as these should be able to apply for a waiver of a fee if they are a small business or a lifeline type service to a small community.

4.2 Any fees should also be diverted directly to good causes in relation to tackling alcohol misuse and alcohol awareness education. It would also be helpful if the fees could be used in the local area where the retail premise exists, as opposed to being diverted to a central fund. Retailers would therefore have the advantage of seeing their fees help local causes and
communities would benefit from an injection of cash and an improved relationship with businesses in their area.

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

5.1 There is a need to distinguish between two different groups in terms of purchasing alcohol. There are those who are under the age of 18 who purchase alcohol, and those over the age of 18.

5.2 Currently, retailers and police struggle to prevent people under the age of 18 from obtaining alcohol and consuming it on the streets. More effort needs to be put in by retailers to ensure young people under the age of 18 are not able to purchase alcohol. Retailers must ensure all people who look under the age of 18 are asked for their ID when purchasing alcohol and refuse to sell alcohol to customers they know to be proxy buying. They must also work with police to inform them when attempts to buy or proxy-buy are taking place. Only when these issues are solved can retailers and police hope to prevent people aged under 18 from buying alcohol.

5.3 Whilst YouthLink Scotland accepts that some anti-social behaviour and proxy buying does go on amongst people aged 18-21, it is a small minority who are involved. The vast majority of young people of this age are aware of their own limits and are able to enjoy a drink sensibly at home with friends and family in social situations, such as parties. Consideration must be taken for the fact that the Scottish Government, in creating this law, will be withdrawing a privilege from young people that was previously in existence. Youthlink Scotland’s Policy Forum felt strongly that the minimum legal purchase age for alcohol should not be raised to 21. Among our members, the Scottish Youth Parliament, in alliance CARDAS, is vociferously campaigning to reject the notion of increasing the age. Should the Government proceed with this initiative it must be able to justify the removal of the rights that this adult population (18 – 21) are currently entitled to.

5.4 The age of majority in the UK varies between 16 and 18, with 18 being the age at which all age restricted activities are permitted. Whilst the law states that these members of society are now old enough to pay taxes, marry and have a family, own property, run a business, vote, fight for their country and hold a driving licence, the Scottish Government considers that they are not responsible enough to buy alcohol from an off-licence and drink it in their own home. This risks marginalising this group of people from the rest of adult society. The Scottish Government must therefore be aware that people of this age will consider this unfair, as, rather than trusting them to make healthy informed choices on their own, it prefers to take the approach of preventing them from making their own choices in relation to alcohol.

5.5 Schemes that prevent young people aged 18 – 21 from purchasing alcohol on Friday and Saturday evenings have known some success. However, any local authority area using this approach must work with all
partners including police, shopkeepers, youth workers and other professionals, and team efforts with positive youth work, street work or diversionary work such as midnight football or blue light discos. Otherwise young people may still choose to engage in anti-social behaviour, not because they are drunk, but because they are bored.

5.6 The Scottish Government must also acknowledge that much night-time economy in Scotland is alcohol related. In many towns across Scotland there are few, if any, social venues that are not alcohol related. The Scottish Government must work with business and Scottish Enterprise to develop non-alcohol related activities that suit the general population, not only young people. Cinemas, bowling alleys, ice rinks, cafes and restaurants in secure areas must be developed in order to counter the pub culture. Only when attractive alternatives are available will people be drawn away from drink-related entertainment.

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

6.1 Alcohol is a form of drug. YouthLink Scotland therefore considers that alcohol should be marketed and sold in a responsible way. Special offers and free of charge alcohol may be attractive to consumers, but alcohol must not be consumed like any other comestible because of its intoxicating effects. Products which can be harmful when consumed to excess must be promoted in an ethical manner, and special offers and below cost retailing does not reflect this need.

6.2 Alcohol is attractive to consumers when it is sold at low prices. The retailers, particularly the large supermarkets, should put an end to loss-leading and special offers on alcohol. These offers simply fuel over-consumption and certainly contribute to higher levels of use and abuse.

6.3 It is clear that alcohol companies wish to advertise and promote their products. However, this should be done in a responsible manner, promoting safe drinking messages, and not promoting alcohol as a means of becoming more attractive to the opposite sex, as a way of having more fun or making ones life more complete in some way. Advertising is a persuasive medium, and should be carefully regulated, particularly when promoting potentially harmful substances, such as alcohol.

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