Alcohol etc. (Scotland) Bill

Action for Children Scotland

Action for Children Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s Health and Sport Committee for its Stage 1 consideration of the Alcohol (Scotland) Bill (“the Bill”). Action for Children Scotland’s evidence draws upon our experience of working with vulnerable and difficult to reach children and young people, many of whom have been affected by alcohol and substance misuse. Action for Children services that provide such support include the Inverclyde GAP Project, and the Gael Og Positive Options Project in Inverness. We also work with families who have been affected by alcohol misuse, including parental alcohol misuse, through the Dundee Families Project and the services provided by our Families in Partnership Project in the Highlands.

Action for Children Scotland notes the recent NHS Scotland statistics confirming that the Scots are the heaviest drinkers in the UK; (Source: Analysis of alcohol sales data 2005-2009, NHS Scotland, 16 January 2010). We are also aware of new NHS research findings which suggest that one in 20 Scots dies from alcohol related causes, and that one Scot dies every three hours from such causes (Source: ‘Alcohol attributable mortality and morbidity: alcohol population attributable fractions for Scotland’, NHS Scotland, Information Services Division, 30 June 2009). Action for Children Scotland is concerned that so many children start drinking at a young age. According to the Scottish Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey (SALSUS), for example, “52% of 13 year olds, and 82% of 15 year olds, have had at least one alcoholic drink” (Source: SALSUS, 23 June 2009). Against this background, Action for Children Scotland welcomes the Scottish Government’s commitment to tackle alcohol misuse, which blights the lives of thousands of children, young people and their families throughout Scotland.

Advantages and disadvantages of minimum pricing

Action for Children Scotland notes the provisions in the Bill designed to introduce a minimum pricing framework to cover the sale and purchase of alcohol in Scotland. We take the view that the Bill will not, by itself, be sufficient to significantly reduce the level of alcohol misuse in Scotland, particularly amongst young people. We believe that the Bill should be accompanied by a package of measures designed to raise awareness about the health risks of alcohol misuse, and by the development of services to support those affected by alcohol misuse and its underlying causes. It is also essential that a joined-up approach is taken, which highlights the interface with other key Scottish Government strategies and programmes, including GIRFEC – Getting it Right for Every Child and the Early Years framework. We, therefore, welcome the recent acknowledgment of the Cabinet Secretary for Health & Wellbeing that setting a minimum price for alcohol will be “a key weapon in the battle against alcohol misuse”, rather than being “the whole
Tackling excessive drinking: alternatives approaches to minimum pricing

Action for Children Scotland believes that the effectiveness of the Scottish Government’s efforts to tackle alcohol misuse will require a package of long-term measures to complement, and to reinforce, the provisions in the Bill. Delivery of these measures will require a joined-up, multi-agency approach by the Scottish Government, local authorities, NHS Boards, the police, the voluntary sector and by other agencies working with children, families and young people affected by alcohol misuse. We believe such an approach is necessary to secure real progress in addressing the underlying causes of alcohol misuse such as, for example, deprivation, ill health, and poor emotional wellbeing and resilience. It will also help to ensure that a more consistent approach is taken to risk assess the impact of parental alcohol misuse on dependent children, and to put in place interventions aimed at supporting children.

Challenging the cultural and peer group influences which support excessive drinking must be at the heart of this process. Action for Children Scotland believes that more should be done within the education system to challenge these influences, and to raise awareness about the health risks, and the associated social costs, of alcohol misuse. This should start at the nursery and primary school levels, and continue throughout secondary school and further and higher education when more young people will have greater access to, and more opportunities to experiment with, alcohol. Action for Children Scotland recommends that early intervention in the education system to address the underpinning cultural influences encouraging excessive drinking should be reinforced by publicity campaigns to increase the general public’s awareness of the dangers of alcohol abuse. There should also be greater recognition that the education system has an important role to play in helping to link key services to children and young people affected by alcohol misuse.

It should also be acknowledged that many young people fall into excessive drinking and offending behaviour due to what they perceive as a lack of social, leisure and cultural opportunities within their local communities. This is the clear message which has emerged from successive surveys of young people focusing on the areas they believe should be prioritised by the Scottish Government, local authorities and by other key policy makers. “Having more to do” was one of the priority areas identified by young people in the Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People’s consultation aimed at identifying young people’s key issues to inform SCCYP’s future work (26.5% of the 16,000 young people voted for this issue). Providing young people with more leisure and cultural opportunities was also one of the key messages from the Hear our voice! survey. This was conducted by Action for Children Scotland and Young Scot, in partnership with Dundee City Council, East Ayrshire Council, Highland Council and Scotland’s Commissioner for Children.
and Young People. Against this background, Action for Children Scotland believes it is vital that young people are offered more opportunities to access affordable leisure, cultural and social opportunities in their local communities. We consider that increasing these opportunities across Scotland can help to reducing the risks of young people getting involved in alcohol misuse, offending and other challenging behaviour including truancy and exclusion from school. This would also contribute to significant improvements in young people’s health and wellbeing.

Against this background, Action for Children Scotland believes that more targeted interventions, and services focusing on early intervention and diversion, should be developed to improve the support available for those affected by alcohol misuse, particularly children, families and young people. Action for Children Scotland considers that community based projects can make a significant contribution in helping to divert young people from alcohol abuse and offending behaviour by increasing access to affordable leisure, cultural and social opportunities. Action for Children Scotland’s Gael Og Positive Options project in Inverness, for example, is using street football and other leisure and social activities to divert young people from making negative life choices. The Gael Og Positive Options project is supporting young people to become/remain drug and/or alcohol free by involving them in more productive, healthy activities. Our services also aim to help to maintain and promote a healthy, safe and sustainable environment, to enhance and strengthen community safety initiatives; and to provide advice and information to parents and carers.

The project works in partnership with Highland Council, Northern Constabulary and local communities across the Highlands to provide information and advice, and to deliver street football and arts and crafts activities. These activities are delivered in the evenings, and at weekends, and at other vulnerable times for the difficult to reach young people accessing our services. Working in partnership with Highland Council’s Education, Culture and Sports Departments we have linked our street football unit into the council’s summer programme. We have also worked with the Northern Constabulary to use the street football programme to improve the intergenerational relationships between young people and adults within their local communities. This has helped to promote community safety, as well as having a positive impact in helping to reduce the number of young people involved in substance and alcohol misuse. Between September and December 2009, for example, 273 young people have accessed the advice service receiving information on harm reduction, and being sign posted onto relevant services. It is also estimated that, over the same period, 484 young people have engaged in healthy and creative diversionary activities receiving information on diet, exercise and the importance of a healthy lifestyle, and have been encouraged to access mainstream activities, youth clubs and community centres.

Community based projects can also make an important contribution to diverting young people from getting involved in alcohol misuse and offending behaviour, and into employment. Action for Children Scotland’s Youthbuild
has been successful in securing training and employment opportunities in the construction industry for difficult to reach young people, many of whom have had issues around alcohol abuse and offending behaviour. Youthbuild was piloted in Glasgow and Inverclyde, and an independent evaluation found:

- a 70% success rate for helping young people move into employment;
- high completion rates for those involved in the programme; and
- considerable savings from diverting young people from trouble - the annual cost for a male in a youth offenders’ institution is estimated at £15,000.

Together with our partners, we have now rolled Youthbuild out to four other local authority areas, including West Dunbartonshire, Edinburgh, Clackmannanshire and East Ayrshire.

Action for Children Scotland also works with many children and their families affected by alcohol misuse at projects such as the Dundee Families Project, and the Families in Partnership project in the Highlands, which is funded and supported by the Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland and Highland Council. The Families in Partnership project offers intensive support to families affected by alcohol and substance misuse through a package of services ‘tailored’ to meet the needs of the parents and children. The attached case study illustrates the type, and level, of support available through the service to support children and families affected by alcohol misuse. The project’s main objectives are to increase the success and inclusion of children, to support parents to sustain recovery, to improve lifestyles and opportunities for families, to improve the confidence and self-esteem of children and parents and to increase parenting capacity and understanding. Most of the work is undertaken with the parents with the aim of supporting them to increase their parenting abilities via home visiting and parenting input on an individual and/or group basis. We also support parents to address their substance misuse issues by linking them to relevant services, transporting them to attend appointments and signposting them to the services which will be able to improve other important aspects of their lives, such as the housing service and the benefits agency. We support them to access local community based services such as playgroups and leisure facilities so that they are able to reduce their own and their family’s isolation.

Action for Children Scotland takes the view, based on our experience of providing such services, that tackling the ‘hidden harm’ of parental alcohol misuse will require a cultural shift in attitudes towards alcohol across all age groups. Part of this process should be the development of more services in communities across Scotland which focus on early intervention, and on intensive family support, where parental alcohol abuse is an issue. The official figures quoted below by Nicola Sturgeon MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Well-being, in a letter to the Scottish Parliament’s Local Government and Communities Committee for its child poverty inquiry highlight the scale of ‘hidden harm’ and the need for such services: “Best current estimates suggest that between 50,000 and 60,000 children may be affected by parental drug misuse (of whom, 10,000-20,000 may be living with one
parent with a drug misuse problem), and 65,000+ children may be affected by parental alcohol misuse”;
(Source: Letter from Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Well-being, Nicola Sturgeon MSP, to Local Government and Communities Committee for its child poverty inquiry, 28 March 2009).

Raising the legal age of alcohol purchase age to 21

Action for Children Scotland believes that, although raising the legal age of purchase to 21 and introducing minimum pricing could make it more difficult for some young people to access cheap alcohol, these measures will not necessarily stop young people at risk of alcohol misuse from drinking excessively. In this context, many of the young people we work with rely on adults to purchase alcohol for them as they are already under-aged. The young people will often ‘tip’ the adult to make the purchase on their behalf in a local shop, pub or supermarket. Action for Children Scotland believes that raising the age of purchase, and introducing minimum pricing, will not, therefore, deter many of these young people from drinking to excess.

Against this background, we believe that a more consistent approach should be taken across Scotland by the police, courts and local authorities to detecting purchases of alcohol by adults on behalf of children, and in prosecuting those responsible. Retailers must also be encouraged to ensure they refuse to sell alcohol, where there are reasonable suspicions that an adult is making the purchase on behalf of under-age young people. Action for Children Scotland believes that the Scottish Government, local authorities and NHS Boards should raise public awareness about the adverse impact such sales can have upon the lives of young people to deter adults from purchasing alcohol on behalf of children and young people. In addition, steps should be taken by these agencies to increase awareness amongst retailers about the consequences of such sales for some young people. Action for Children Scotland believes these measures would have a far greater impact in helping to deter adults from purchasing alcohol for young people, than raising the age of purchase.

Please do not hesitate to contact Louise Warde Hunter, Strategic Director of Children’s Services - Scotland & Northern Ireland, Action for Children, or Robert McGeachy, Policy & Public Affairs Manager, on 0141-550-9010 if you require more information about any of the issues raised in Action for Children Scotland’s briefing paper.

Families in Partnership Project – Case Study

A is aged 4. Both her parents have problems with their use of alcohol, and have had long periods of abstinence and then, in times of crisis, overuse of alcohol as a coping strategy. A’s parents recently split temporarily, and the Social Work referral showed concern that the parents’ alcohol use had impacted adversely on Anita’s emotional wellbeing.
The Families in Partnership worker has/is providing:

- Play activities for A;
- Encouragement for A to initiate play activities, and to be able to lead the play;
- Signposting for parents to local Alcohol Counselling Service;
- Support for mother (during split) to consider times of crisis and alternative ways of managing difficulties;
- Attended Core Group Meeting Review; and
- Weekly Home Visits now reduced to fortnightly telephone contact which leaves the door open for family to access support if necessary from the Families in Partnership worker.

Outcomes:

- Both parents have accessed CPN services, and father is involved with a recognised Recovery programme;
- Parents have reunited, and plan to remain together as a family unit; and
- Alcohol use has reduced

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