Alcohol etc. (Scotland) Bill

COSLA

1. COSLA welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Health and Sport Committee on the Alcohol Etc (Scotland) Bill. The submission has been delayed by the need for the issues to be considered by COSLA leaders at their January 2010 meeting. MSPs will be aware of the political sensitivities surrounding some of the Bill’s proposals and in these circumstances it was felt inappropriate to submit views in advance of the meeting.

2. The following comments have been informed by the views of COSLA member councils but do not attempt to summarise individual council submissions.

General

3. COSLA recognises that one of the key aims of the Bill is the need to effect cultural change in Scotland’s drinking culture and that there is no simple solution, or single effective approach, to changing the existing deep-rooted relationship with alcohol. Rather, a combination of public education and awareness raising; clear information and labelling; responsible advertising, promotion and sale of alcohol; appropriate legislation, licensing and enforcement; alcohol treatment and support services; prevention and early intervention services; along with a range of other approaches and resources are all essential. Equally important is a segmentation of the different profiles of “alcohol misusers” and a differentiation of the reasons for “alcohol misuse” with appropriate prevention, intervention and support measures in place necessary to meet the wide range of needs – as usual, one size will not fit all. The status quo is not an option.

Positive Outcomes

4. COSLA would wish alcohol legislation to achieve a number of positive outcomes including:

- a culture which fosters responsible drinking across Scotland;
- flourishing drinks, hospitality and retail sectors which support responsible drinking;
- confident young people who seek challenge and self-expression in ways which improve their mental, physical and emotional health and wellbeing;
- savings and benefits across Scotland to individuals, communities and public sector organisations from more responsible alcohol consumption.

Economic situation

5. The potential implications of the Bill for Scotland’s economy, given the current budgetary pressures, require full consideration. The cost of irresponsible drinking to the Scottish economy has been well documented, as has the potential saving to the public purse of the introduction of the Bill’s proposals. However, as with the health benefits of most policies impacting on
health (eg smoking cessation), the positive benefit and financial gains may not be felt for many years. A long term view is therefore required.

**Minimum Pricing**
6. Views differ as to the best approach with regard to minimum pricing. It is recognised that although minimum pricing would not be a solution to all harmful drinking, as one of a range of measures, it has the potential to address certain specific problem alcoholic drinks. Other matters that need to be addressed include the alcohol strength of some drinks and also the impact of combining high caffeine level energy drinks with alcohol (and indeed alcoholic drinks that contain high levels of caffeine).

**Social Responsibility Levy**
7. It is noted that the Bill proposes a power for Scottish Ministers to impose a Social Responsibility Levy and that any Regulations will be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. Many points of operational detail have been raised in individual responses to the SRL proposals and it is assumed that these will be considered fully. It is further assumed that in the event of the levy proposals being progressed, there will be full consultation regarding the final form of the levy’s operational arrangements, to include aspects such as local flexibility, whether the levy should be restricted only to pubs and clubs, and the timing of its introduction in relation to economic pressures. It is recognised that drinkers often consume significant amounts of alcohol at home before going to a pub/club and that this fact, outwith the control of pubs/clubs, can contribute to problems.

**Sale of Alcohol to Under 21s**
8. According local flexibility to individual licensing boards to raise the legal alcohol purchase age in their area to 21 is welcomed as providing councils with the flexibility and discretion to respond to local circumstances.

**Role of promotional offers**
9. The damaging effect of promotional offers is recognised as an area that needs to be addressed.

**Oral evidence**
10. COSLA would be happy to provide oral evidence to the Committee when it begins its detailed consideration of the Bill.

COSLA
1 February 2010