

Position statement

Alcohol minimum pricing

July 2016

Introduction

Social Work Scotland (SWS) is the professional leadership body for the social work and social care professions. We are a membership organisation which represents social workers and other professionals who lead and support social work across all sectors.

Cheap alcohol has had a devastating impact on many individuals, families and communities across Scotland. Our members work every day to support people who have been negatively affected by the misuse of alcohol, and SWS supports setting a minimum unit price (MUP) on alcohol as part of a wider policy framework to tackle this social problem.

Background

Social workers play a vital role in dealing with the immediate and long-term effects of alcohol abuse. According to recent research in this area, 'Social workers are ideally placed to offer a holistic approach to understanding the relationship between the person's substance use and their family, home and community'.¹ It is important to understand that irresponsible drinking affects not only individuals, but families and communities as well. The results of alcohol misuse are felt in a variety of areas including domestic abuse and violent crime, public health, and children and young people.

Approximately one-third of domestic abuse occurrences involve people being under the influence of alcohol.² While the consumption of alcohol does not cause domestic abuse, it can heighten the severity and regularity of such incidents.³ In terms of violent crime more broadly, victims have reported that 59% of violent crimes in Scotland are committed by persons under the influence of alcohol.⁴ And hundreds of

¹ Galvani and Forrester, 2011: http://www.socialworkscotland.org/doc_get.aspx?DocID=458

² Scottish Women's Aid, 2010:

www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk/sites/www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk/files/DomesticAbuseandAlcohol.pdf

³ Galvani, 2005: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/domestic-violence-substance-use.pdf>

⁴ Scottish Crime and Justice Survey, 2012-13: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/03/9823/6>

serious road traffic accidents are caused every year by drink driving across the UK.⁵ Research by the Scottish Prison Service showed that 45% of young offenders used alcohol at the time of committing their offence.⁶ Having an offending history, in turn, can prevent future life opportunities like pursuing higher education, finding employment, affording a home, and building a family.

The government's Children Affected by Parental Substance Misuse (CAPSM) Steering Group estimates that 65,000 children in Scotland are impacted by their parents' alcohol abuse.⁷ Parents play a central role in the upbringing of their children, and parental alcohol misuse will inevitably affect children's ability to reach happy and healthy adulthood. Teenage drinking is also a significant problem. More than 10,000 fines are issued in the UK every year to 16-19-year olds for drunk and disorderly conduct, and nearly half of all young people who are excluded from school are regular drinkers.⁸

Three people in Scotland die every day because of alcohol misuse, and there has been a 52% increase in the number of liver disease diagnoses since 1998.⁹ Alcohol misuse during pregnancy can cause long-lasting negative health impacts on children including cerebral palsy, learning disorders, and organ problems.¹⁰ Children born with the effects of foetal alcohol syndrome are more likely to require care and social services throughout their lives. Underage people are also at higher risk of suffering long-term physical effects of drinking alcohol because their bodies and brains are still developing. In addition to the troubling human costs, the government has estimated that alcohol misuse in Scotland comes at a price of £3.6 billion every year, with over £250 million in additional spending for social services.¹¹

Lastly, we should reflect on cultural attitudes toward alcohol in Scotland. In many families and communities around the country, drinking alcohol is not just accepted, but expected. This is in contrast to society's negative views towards other behaviour altering substances, which are widely seen as unacceptable. But it is important to reaffirm that while alcohol is a legal drug, the very fact that it is legal does not make it safe. Alcohol can be extremely dangerous when it is misused, and as these facts and statistics demonstrate, it can result in terrible consequences for people, their families, and their communities.

⁵ Department for Transport, 2014: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/ras51-reported-drinking-and-driving>

⁶ Scottish Prison Service, 2013: http://www.sps.gov.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?fileName=14th_PRISONER_SURVEY_2013_-_Main_Bulletin.pdf

⁷ CAPSM, 2010-12: <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/protecting/child-protection/capsm/strategy>

⁸ Alcohol Concern: <https://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk/help-and-advice/statistics-on-alcohol/>

⁹ Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP): <http://www.shaap.org.uk/health-costs.html>

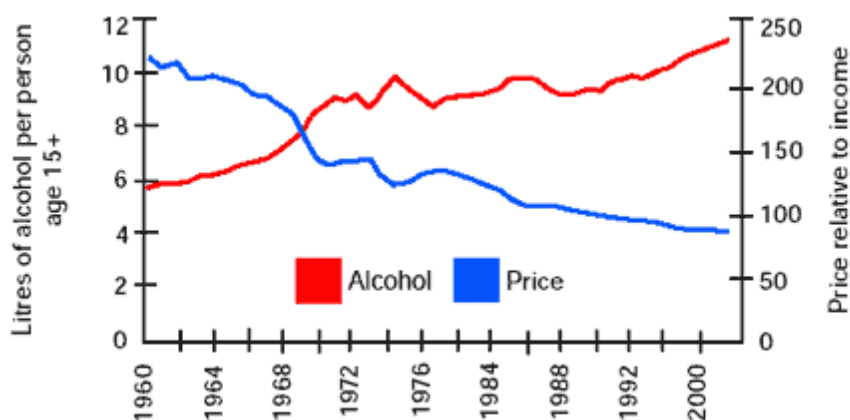
¹⁰ NHS, 2015: <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/foetal-alcohol-syndrome/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

¹¹ Scottish Government, 2007: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2009/12/29122804/11>

Policy

Minimum pricing has the potential to be an important part of the public strategy to tackle alcohol misuse. Academic research has found that the 50p MUP policy could reap enormous benefits in Scotland with 318 fewer alcohol-related deaths, 6,500 fewer hospital admissions, and 3,500 fewer crimes every year.¹² Figure 1 shows the clear inverse relationship between the falling price of alcohol and increased levels of consumption from 1960-2002.

Figure 1: Relationship between price and alcohol consumption, 1960-2002¹³



In 2012, the Scottish Parliament passed legislation to set a minimum unit price (MUP) of 50p. However, the European Court of Justice ruled that MUP may be a violation of EU law if tax increases on alcohol could be used instead. The MUP law, therefore, remains unenforced. Social Work Scotland welcomes the government's ongoing commitment to establish a minimum price on alcohol as part of a much wider strategy of tackling the misuse of alcohol.

MUP is Social Work Scotland's first preference to deal with the high cost of cheap alcohol. Given the current legal ramifications, SWS backs the principle of MUP. Our organisation supports the prevention of misusing cheap alcohol as part of a comprehensive strategy to deal with alcohol abuse in Scotland.

Summary

Social Work Scotland supports minimum pricing on alcohol as part of a wider strategy to reduce the harm that alcohol misuse has on individuals, families and communities.

¹² Hill-McManus, 2012: <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/media/307262/hillmcmanus.pdf>

¹³ Tighe, A. (ed.), 2003, *Statistical Handbook 2003*, Brewing Publications Limited as cited in Scottish Government, 2008: <http://www.gov.scot/publications/2008/06/16084348/7>