

Minimum pricing of alcohol: why it matters

The Scottish Parliament is currently considering new legislation that contains far reaching proposals about the sale of alcohol. Some of the proposals contained in the Bill, especially the proposal to introduce a minimum price for a unit of alcohol, are in line with principles supported by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland consistently since 1983. This proposal has attracted opposition from the Scotch Whisky Association as well as the main political parties. The Church and Society Council has produced these campaign materials to support the minimum pricing proposals. They include: **background information on the Alcohol Bill, the political debate, the evidence to justify the proposals and sample letters.**

The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office has produced a more comprehensive briefing about the Bill which is available to download:

<http://www.actsparl.org/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/scpobriefingalcoholdec09.pdf>

What is in the Alcohol Bill?

On 25 November the Alcohol Etc (Scotland) Bill was introduced to the Scottish Parliament by the Scottish Government. The Bill contains a range of proposals intended to reduce alcohol consumption in Scotland, the main measures being proposed are to:

- Introduce a minimum sales price for a unit of alcohol
- Introduce a restriction for off-sales on supply of alcoholic drinks free of charge or at a reduced price
- Make provision in law with respect to the sale of alcohol to under 21s
- Restrict the location of drinks promotions in off-sales premises
- Introduce a requirement for licence holders to operate an age verification policy
- Make provision in law for a social responsibility levy on licence holders

Follow this link to read the Bill:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/bills/34-AlcoholEtc/index.htm>

What are the political parties and alcohol producers saying about the Alcohol Bill?

The majority of these proposals have received wide ranging political support. There has been extensive political discussion around this issue both in Parliament at a Conservative-led minimum pricing debate and in the press. This debate illustrated that while there is political consensus that Scotland's relationship with alcohol is damaging and needs to be changed there is not consensus about how to tackle the problem.

The alcohol industry, in particular the Scotch Whisky Association, is actively opposing the minimum pricing proposals.

The Scottish Labour Party has announced plans to establish a Commission "to consider ways of restricting cheap booze and tackling alcohol abuse" (Statement by Scottish Labour's Jackie Baillie on 26 November 2009). The Liberal Democrats and Conservatives have also opposed the minimum pricing proposals. The Green MSP Patrick Harvie has supported the policy saying: "A minimum price policy isn't a silver bullet, but alongside other sensible changes it could play a very positive part in improving public health." Support for the proposals has also been strong from medical groups however; it is unlikely that minimum pricing provisions will be passed unless there is public pressure on opposition parties and the alcohol industry to do so.

Evidence in support of minimum pricing

Figures from the Office of National Statistics in 2008 demonstrate that alcohol was 69% more affordable in 2007 than it was in 1980. Tackling affordability of alcohol is a significant part of the overall proposals to reduce drinking.

In the current debate the Government is drawing on findings from a study by the University of Sheffield¹ to support their proposals. This study does not include specific recommendations on what the minimum price should be; but rather outlines the estimated percentage decrease in alcohol consumption at a range of prices, and the impact of off-trade promotional sales on the overall level of consumption. As consumption decreases there are corresponding decreases in hospital admissions, crime rates and absence from work. Further information is available at [appendix 1](#).

A study by Queen Margaret University and Royal Edinburgh Hospital researchers, which focused on users accessing alcohol problems services in Edinburgh, concluded that "The lower the price that a patient paid per unit, the more units he/she consumed."² This study found that the average price per unit paid by users accessing alcohol problems services is below the average price per unit paid in Scotland as a whole. That means that people with alcohol problems are purchasing cheaper alcohol than the general population. Therefore minimum pricing is likely to have a higher impact on this group than the population as a whole.

This table illustrates how minimum pricing at 40p and 60p per unit would affect a range of alcoholic drinks. The table highlights that the impact of minimum pricing would vary, for example, many bottles of wine would not be affected whereas cheap bottles of spirits may see significant increases.

Product	% vol	Current price	Minimum price at 40p per unit	Minimum price at 60p per unit
70cl bottle of Gin, Sainsbury's own brand	37.5	£6.29	£10.50	£15.75
70cl bottle of vodka	37.5	£7.78	£10.50	£15.75
Four 587ml cans of Stella Artois	5	£4	£4.48	£6.74
75cl bottle of Buckfast	15	£7	£7	£7
2l bottle of Tesco value dry cider	4.2	£1.21	£3.36	£4.94
70cl bottle of Famous Grouse	40	£12	£12	£16.80
La Giosa Pinot Grigio (Tesco)	12	£3.79	£3.79	£5.40
Tesco California Merlot	13	£3.79	£3.79	£5.70

Source: The Scotsman, "Whisky Industry welcomes Labour vow to scupper minimum pricing", p2, Thursday 26 November 2009

¹ "Model-Based Appraisal of Alcohol Minimum Pricing and Off-Licensed Trade Discount Bans in Scotland: A Scottish adaptation of the Sheffield Alcohol Policy version 2", <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/09/24131201/0>

² Black, Gill and Chick (2009), "Alcohol units consumed and price paid per alcohol unit by patients of the Lothian Alcohol Problems Services, with a comparison to wider alcohol sales in Scotland", SCHAAP

What has the Government already done about the purchasing of alcohol?

The Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005 provisions have now come into force, including bans on promotions in pubs and clubs such as happy hours, multi-buy discounts and "all you can drink" events. However, although some aspects of the 2005 Act impact on off-licenses and supermarkets, such as location of alcohol displays, and shorter selling hours; the majority of the burden was put on pubs and clubs. This, therefore, means that there are still ways in which the Government could take a firmer stance on the selling of alcohol in "off-trade" premises.

What should the church do to support the introduction of minimum pricing legislation?

The General Assembly discussed and supported the principle of minimum pricing in 1983, 1986 and 1987 and reaffirmed this position in 2009. Over this 27 year period the basic arguments have remained the same; there is a body of evidence from medical and academic sources that indicates that there is a direct relationship between the availability of cheap alcohol and excessive, and therefore harmful, drinking.

The alcohol industry, in particular the Scotch Whisky Association (SWA) are opposing the minimum pricing policy. They suggest that minimum pricing will damage sales at home and internationally. The SWA re-affirm that the industry has an "ongoing commitment to discourage the misuse of alcohol and help tackle Scotland's problem drinking culture."³ The SWA claim that the Government will be "penalising the majority in order to discourage the minority that drink excessively"⁴.

Taking an approach to excessive drinking that focusses purely on individual behaviour fails to acknowledge that we live in a society in which the consequences of excessive drinking are shared by us all. The social costs of increased health problems requiring NHS resources, increased violence in our towns and cities and damage to family relationships are borne by us all. If an increase in the minimum price of alcohol will reduce consumption of alcohol and reduce the resulting problems for individuals and our society then it is not a case of penalising the majority in order to discourage the minority. This is a choice that we, as a society, could make in order to improve our collective health and wellbeing.

What can you do?

Write to alcohol producers

You can write to the five biggest distillers calling on them to live up to their commitment of promoting responsible drinking by acknowledging the weight of evidence that suggests that minimum pricing does have an impact on people who drink excessively. The benefits of minimum pricing for society as a whole far outweigh the losses to us as consumers and to them as producers. After all, the increases in revenue from the minimum price will go straight to the producers and retailers of alcoholic drinks and not the Government – this is not a tax.

Please urge these distillers to work with the Scottish Government to support the introduction of an effective minimum pricing policy. A sample letter is attached.

For more information about whisky producers and brands visit the Scotch Whisky Association Website at <http://www.scotch-whisky.org.uk/swa/89.html>

³ "Scottish Legislative Programme - SWA Response"

<http://www.scotch-whisky.org.uk/swa/files/ScotLegProgramme09.pdf>

⁴ *ibid*

Write to your MSPs

The SNP Administration which is introducing minimum pricing legislation is a minority government. In order for this section of the proposed legislation to be passed by the Scottish Parliament, MSPs from other parties will need to support the legislation. None of the main parties have expressed support for the policy.

MSPs are our representatives. If we think that the best interests of our society as a whole are served by the introduction of minimum pricing then it is our responsibility to join the public debate and support moves to introduce minimum pricing.

Please write to your MSPs urging them to support the introduction of minimum pricing. A sample letter is attached.

Sample letter to distillers

Please write to the following distillers:

- Paul Walsh, Chief Executive, Diageo plc, 8 Henrietta Place, LONDON, W1G ONB
- Stella David, Chief Executive, William Grant and Sons, Phoenix Crescent, Strathclyde Business Park, Bellshill, Strathclyde, ML4 3AN
- Christian Porta, Chief Executive, Chivas Brothers Ltd, 111-113 Renfrew Road, Paisley, Renfrewshire, PA3 4DY
- John Beard, Chief Executive, Whyte and MacKay, Dalmore House, 310 Street Vincent Street, Glasgow G2 5RG
- Ian Curle, Chief Executive, Edrington Group, 2500 Great Western Road, Glasgow, Scotland, G15 6RW

Dear

As a member of a Church of Scotland congregation I am writing to encourage you to work with the Scottish Government and support the Alcohol Etc (Scotland) Bill recently introduced in the Scottish Parliament. In particular I urge you to support the minimum pricing measures included in that Bill. I am delighted that your company promotes responsible drinking and therefore it is with some disappointment that I note that you have not chosen to support the introduction of minimum pricing as it is a crucial mechanism for reducing alcohol consumption.

Taking an approach to excessive drinking that focusses purely on individual behaviour fails to acknowledge that we live in a society in which the consequences of excessive drinking are shared by us all. If an increase in the minimum price of alcohol will reduce consumption of alcohol and reduce the resulting problems for individuals and our society then it is not a case of penalising the majority in order to discourage the minority. This is a choice that we, as a society, could make in order to improve our collective health and wellbeing. I also note that minimum pricing is not a tax and therefore any additional revenue earned will go directly to producers and retailers.

Therefore I ask you, as a significant participant in the Scottish economy, to consider the wider social interests of our society and support this measure.

Yours sincerely,

Sample letter to MSPs

You have one constituency MSP and 7 regional MSPs, it is helpful for you to write to all your MSPs. You can find the names and contact details of your MSPs using the postcode search on the Scottish Parliament website here:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/msp/membersPages/MSPAddressPostcodeFinder.htm>

You can write or email your MSPs equally effectively, however, if you do email your MSP please remember to include your home address and postcode in your email so the MSP knows you are a constituent and is able to reply to you.

Dear

As a member of a Church of Scotland congregation I am writing to urge you to support the the Alcohol Etc (Scotland) Bill recently introduced in the Scottish Parliament. In particular I urge you to support the minimum pricing measures included in that Bill.

Responsible drinking by individuals is of course a significant part of any strategy to tackle excessive alcohol consumption. However, taking an approach to excessive drinking that focusses purely on individual behaviour fails to acknowledge that we live in a society in which the consequences of excessive drinking are shared by us all. If an increase in the minimum price of alcohol will reduce consumption of alcohol and reduce the resulting problems for individuals and our society then it is not a case of penalising the majority in order to discourage the minority. This is a choice that we, as a society, could make in order to improve our collective health and wellbeing.

Therefore I ask you to consider the wider social interests of our society and support this measure.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix 1

Evidence in support of minimum pricing

The "Sheffield Alcohol Policy Model" was applied to Scottish data taken from the 2003 Scottish Health Survey. Although subsequent figures have been released since Sheffield University conducted their research indicating that alcohol consumption has decreased since 2008, the Government has indicated that the analysis can be run again using the 2008 data, although both the academics at Sheffield and the Government maintain that the difference between the 2003 and 2008 figures is very small and should not, therefore, significantly alter any findings.

The main findings of the Sheffield University study are summarised in this table:

Policy scenario Minimum price	Change in consumption (%) <i>(with off-trade discount ban)</i>	Health impact: Hospital admissions- year one (%) <i>(full effect)</i>	Crime outcomes - total crimes (%)	Work outcomes- Days absence (%)	Work outcomes - unemployment (%)
25p	-0.2 (-3.2)	-0.0 (-0.2)	+0.2	-0.2	-0.1
30p	-0.5 (-3.5)	-0.1 (-0.7)	+0.1	-1.3	-0.2
35p	-1.3 (-4.1)	-0.4 (-1.8)	-0.3	-4.7	-0.4
40p	-2.7 (-5.4)	-0.8 (-3.6)	-1.1	-11.6	-0.8
45p	-4.2 (-7.1)	-1.5 (-6.0)	-2.5	-21.7	-1.2
50p	-7.2 (-9.2)	-2.2 (-8.9)	-4.2	-34.6	-1.7
55p	-10.0 (-11.7)	-3.0 (-12.0)	-6.2	-49.9	-2.2
60p	-12.9 (-14.3)	-3.9 (-15.1)	-8.3	-66.1	-2.6
65p	-15.9 (-17.1)	-4.8 (-18.2)	-10.4	-83.5	-3.0
70p	-18.9 (-20.0)	-5.7 (-21.3)	-12.7	-101.0	-3.3

Source: summary of findings of Sheffield University (adaptation of tables 3.7 and 3.8)

40p is the minimum price which is often cited as an example, although there has never been any confirmation, of the threshold the government would set. The Scottish Government are publicly consulting on the Bill until 20 January 2010, one of the consultation questions asks about "the level at which such a proposed minimum price should be set and the justification for that level".