



Alcohol Etc. (Scotland) Bill: CHILDREN 1ST Response to Health and Sport Committee Call For Evidence

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1. General Comments

For 125 years CHILDREN 1ST, the Royal Scottish Society for Prevention for Cruelty to Children, has been working to give every child in Scotland a safe and secure childhood. We support families under stress, protect children from harm and neglect, help them recover from abuse, and promote children's rights and interests. We provide 44 services in 28 local authority areas throughout Scotland, including ParentLine Scotland which is a free, national telephone helpline for parents and carers, and ChildLine Scotland, which we operate on behalf of the NSPCC.

Through our work, CHILDREN 1ST has evidence that parental alcohol misuse is one of the most pressing problems affecting vulnerable children in Scotland. This is reflected in our strategic priority to develop projects related to substance misuse so that our services are shaped to meet these needs. In addition to our specific projects, every one of our 44 services works regularly with children or families who are affected by alcohol misuse. This response draws on the experience of these families, and the expertise of our staff in working with them.

CHILDREN 1ST welcomes the Alcohol Etc. (Scotland) Bill and its recognition of the impact of alcohol misuse upon the whole of Scottish society. If we want to improve the life chances of our most vulnerable children and ensure that every child in Scotland has a happy and safe childhood, it is imperative that we address our negative and damaging relationship with alcohol. CHILDREN 1ST believes the proposals in this Bill represent a welcome commitment toward this end, therefore we are happy to support the Bill.

Below, we will address the following points put forward by the Committee for the purpose of inviting views on all aspects of the Bill:

2. The advantages and disadvantages of establishing a minimum alcohol sales price based on a unit of alcohol

CHILDREN 1ST strongly supports any whole-population measure that evidence suggests will reduce overall alcohol consumption as one of the key ways to tackle parental alcohol misuse in Scotland. Given the available evidence clearly states that minimum pricing will lead to an overall reduction in alcohol consumption, we welcome minimum pricing as one means to begin to address parental alcohol misuse. We believe that minimum pricing will represent a step towards reducing heavy drinking by parents, currently a common feature of children's lives.

Parental alcohol misuse is a blight on our society, damaging the lives of 65,000 children in Scotland whom we know to be living with parental alcohol misuse, and the many more children living in these circumstances who remain hidden. We know that the impacts on children of parental alcohol misuse are many, including: neglect; increased home violence; lack of supervision; lack of safety; children taking caring responsibility for their siblings and

parents; chaotic lifestyles; lack of healthy food; unpredictable parenting; less educational attainment; less self-esteem and self-confidence; aggression, abuse; and many more. Children living with parental alcohol misuse also often grow up to learn that binge-drinking is the norm, and are more likely to adopt similar problematic attitudes towards alcohol.

In light of this, we strongly urge the Government and MSPs to acknowledge the significant link between the whole-population measure of minimum alcohol sales pricing, and improving the lives of thousands of children across Scotland, many of whom are invisible to statutory services.

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

CHILDREN 1ST believes that alcohol misuse is endemic and entrenched in Scottish culture and identity, where it is often seen as necessary and the 'norm' to drink to excess for relaxation and for socialising. We believe that much needs to be done to change this negative relationship with alcohol, and we support any actions to this end, including steps to increase the cost of alcohol and make it less easily accessible to help prevent excessive drinking. For this reason, **we support the whole-population approach** of the Bill's minimum alcohol pricing proposal and consider it to be an appropriate rationale for tackling problem drinking across all levels of Scotland's social strata. Changing Scotland's relationship with alcohol requires a clear message that alcohol is to be consumed within limits, and minimum pricing will be one vehicle for putting across this message.

Below is a recent sample of quotes collected from CHILDREN 1ST services, including our Fraserburgh Families Service for mothers affected by alcohol misuse, the Chill Out Zone healthy living centre for young people, ParentLine, and ChildLine (operated on behalf of the NSPCC), which are information and support lines for parents and children. These quotes exemplify the pervasiveness and harm of seemingly normal, cultural drinking amongst adults and young people in Scotland. We hope these quotes will illustratively support the rationale behind the use of minimum pricing as a tool to address all types of problem drinking by reducing consumption levels across Scottish society.

'When the kids go to their dad's at the weekends, I get really drunk to cope with the loneliness.' – Parent.

'My kids refuse to visit me because of my drink problem.' - Parent.

'My husband is drinking heavily. I have two young children who are starting to notice his behaviour.' – Parent.

'I am being bullied by my 14 year old daughter. My ex-partner was an abusive alcoholic. I'm worried she's repeating his behaviour.' – Parent

'Last night mum hit me on my leg and on my arm. I feel scared and sad but think she won't do it again as she was just drunk'. 8-year-old girl.

'Dad went out last night to the pub and he's not back yet; what will I do?' 12-year-old boy

'I am a loner at school. I hid in the cloakroom so the teacher couldn't find me. Mum is an alcoholic and is never in.' 9-year-old girl

My parents drink and are never around. They go to work then the pub, then come home drunk. 15-year-old girl.

'Alcohol makes me more likely to do sexual things that I might regret'. 15-year-old boy.

'I am black-affronted. £2.5k each month and an off-shore job kept me in my heavy drinking lifestyle. It took the baby being born to make me realise I had to do something.' – Parent.

“Having a drinking problem for nearly 10 years my children were eventually placed with their grandparents. Devastation! Without support from CHILDREN 1ST I would not have them back with me today. I have grown in confidence and am now looking to do some volunteer work in the local charity shops.” - Parent

4. Possible alternatives to the introduction of a minimum alcohol sales price as an effective means of addressing the public health issues surrounding levels of alcohol consumption in Scotland

CHILDREN 1ST believes minimum alcohol pricing will lead to a reduction in alcohol consumption in Scotland, which will have a positive impact on improving the lives of children and young people affected by parental alcohol misuse. Therefore, we fully support the proposal for minimum pricing, and wish to recommend the introduction of additional support measures to compliment and reinforce the Bill’s intended aims. We are aware that introducing these complimentary support measures will cost money. For this reason, we would suggest that monies accrued from an increased cost in alcohol should be earmarked for these and any other measures designed to promote a change in Scotland’s drinking culture.

Promote and facilitate services that address the needs of the whole family affected by substance misuse: CHILDREN 1ST’s experience is that the best way to help vulnerable children is to also work with their parents and wider family. We therefore urge the Government to work with local authorities and other funders to develop ‘whole family’ services around parental substance misuse, where work to treat parents’ alcohol problems is integrated with services to protect their children and look after their welfare. Additionally, where a service provides help only to adults with alcohol problems, the service must, in every case, consider the parental rights and responsibilities of that person in relation to any children.

Work with COSLA to provide ‘easy to access’ supports for parents in every community, that include information and support around substance misuse: CHILDREN 1ST believes that provision of universal supports for parents in every community in Scotland is essential to prevent many of the issues associated with parental alcohol misuse. Services need to be available sooner to help people at crisis points and at times of loss, so that families do not turn to alcohol in order to cope. Where parents are experiencing difficulties which may lead to alcohol misuse, or where they are struggling to cope with alcohol problems, such universal supports can help them access support easily, talk through any problems, and be signposted on to more targeted services as appropriate. Without such universal support being available, many of the families where alcohol is an issue will remain unidentified and children will continue to cope with the negative impact of this without any support. We further note that Health Visitors play an important role in universal provision for families in a child’s early years. However, recent policy shifts have reduced Health Visitors’ universal provision in favour of targeting, thereby limiting their ability to play this important preventative role.

Raise parents’ awareness of the impact of their alcohol use upon their children: CHILDREN 1ST believes that parents need far more information around the impact of their own drinking upon their children. We recommend that the Government initiate an awareness campaign to specifically address this issue. This campaign should highlight all negative impacts of alcohol misuse upon children, for example, the impact of a hangover on parenting abilities. We would be happy to provide further information or evidence from ParentLine Scotland to help with development of such a campaign. A campaign similar to that which made drink driving unacceptable should be launched – making drunk parenting equally unacceptable and encouraging parents to think about the risks and negative effects on their children.

Promote an increase of services that directly support children of alcohol mis-users: There is a significant shortage of alcohol services, with alcohol misuse often seen as a specialist area which universal services are not willing to identify or tackle. The Government needs to commit to longer-term funding for alcohol projects. In addition to this, Scotland needs more services for young people that are truly accessible, not part of the establishment, and that address the cause not the symptoms of alcohol misuse. We believe ChildLine,

Befriending Services, Midlothian Young Carers and the Chill Out Zone are examples of such recommended services. We urge the Government to consider what would help create more opportunities for children to open up about alcohol problems with adults that they know. For example, increased training and guidance for teachers and other professionals around parental alcohol misuse and how to respond to this problem, may be a useful step.

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

CHILDREN 1ST adopts a definition of a child as being anyone up to age 18 years old, who are thereafter considered an adult. We question whether introducing a significantly different age threshold for one specific aspect of alcohol purchasing would respect young adults' rights, be workable or clear. Instead, more could be done to increase prosecution of those who buy alcohol for those under-age, noting that there were only 88 such prosecutions in Scotland in 2006-07.

CHILDREN 1ST notes that a message is being conveyed through this proposal that alcohol misuse is a particular issue for young people. Alcohol is in fact an issue across ages and indeed children and young people learn their drinking behaviour from adults. It is too easy for adults to point the finger at young people without taking their responsibility. The measure relating to alcohol purchase age would reinforce this view. We would therefore urge caution in the interpretation of this measure to avoid a disproportionate emphasis on young people as drinkers, which could in turn detract from the design of measures more accurately reflective of evidence-based reality.

Many of the Bill's proposals are aimed at reducing young people's drinking levels. We highlight that young people need, and want, more positive leisure and social activities, and that provision of these would contribute towards reducing the social norm of young people binge-drinking. Indeed, children identified 'things to do' as the priority for the work of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People.

We therefore recommend that the Government works closely with Local Authorities to address the scarcity of positive leisure and social opportunities for children and young people in Scotland. We urge the Government to encourage the development of a wider range of diversionary activities that reflect the interests and needs of the whole population of young people.

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