



Ein cyf/Our ref VG/03298/20

Janet Finch-Saunders MS
Chair, Welsh Parliament Petitions Committee
Government.Committee.Business@gov.wales

11 June 2020

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter of 19 May regarding the petition you have received from Mr Raymond Mainwaring in relation to the Public Health (Minimum Price for Alcohol) (Wales) Act 2018 ('the Act').

This legislation is a crucial part of our work in tackling substance misuse across Wales. There are a number of actions within the Welsh Government's Substance Misuse Delivery Plan 2019-22, that take forward work to tackle alcohol related harm in Wales. We are investing almost £53m a year to support our substance misuse agenda. Minimum pricing for alcohol forms part of this wider and continuing programme of work.

The intended effect of this legislation is to tackle alcohol-related harm, including alcohol-attributable hospital admissions and alcohol-related deaths, by reducing alcohol consumption in hazardous and harmful drinkers. The impact of alcohol-related harm in Wales is significant. In 2018-19, there were nearly 60,000 hospital admissions attributable to alcohol and in 2018 alone, 535 alcohol-related deaths in Wales. Every one of these deaths is preventable. Alcohol-related issues also cost the NHS approx. £159m each year.

The Act made provision for Welsh Ministers to specify a minimum unit price (MUP) for which alcohol must be sold in Wales. The Welsh Government consulted on its preferred level of a 50p MUP in September 2018, which ran for 12 weeks. The MUP of 50p was subsequently agreed by the then National Assembly for Wales on 12 November 2019 and introduced on 2 March 2020. All of the main parties in the National Assembly of Wales were supportive of the legislation being introduced.

As detailed in the Act's Explanatory Memorandum, evidence from around the world shows the price of alcohol matters - as the price of alcohol increases, consumption falls, which in turn has a positive impact on health outcomes. There is strong national and international evidence from countries that have already increased the selling price of alcohol to suggest that the introduction of an MUP will reduce levels of consumption and save lives.

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:
0300 0604400

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd • Cardiff
CF99 1SN

Gohebiaeth.Vaughan.Gething@llyw.cymru
Correspondence.Vaughan.Gething@gov.wales

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

In addition, research commissioned by the Welsh Government and carried out by the University of Sheffield in 2018, estimated there would be 66 fewer alcohol-attributable deaths per year and 1,281 fewer alcohol-attributable hospital admissions per year, based on a 50p MUP.

The aim of the legislation is to combat those high-strength drinks, which are sold at rock-bottom prices and are drunk in large volumes, putting people at long-term risk of cancer, stroke, heart disease, liver disease and brain damage. Hazardous and harmful drinkers across all income groups consume some low-cost, high alcohol content products. However, people in the lowest socioeconomic groups who are harmful drinkers have the highest risk of alcohol-related harm. The MUP can potentially reduce levels of hazardous and harmful drinking in these groups, meaning the risk of alcohol-related harm would be reduced. They will therefore accrue the greatest health benefits from the policy.

I note that Mr Mainwaring refers to the implementation of MUP in Scotland. Scotland brought in MUP almost two years ago and early indicators have shown a reduction in the volume of pure alcohol in drinks sold, as well as a reduction in the number of alcoholic drinks sold at unacceptably low prices.

The final reports from the evaluation of the implementation of MUP in Scotland have not yet been published. Interim reports however, show that some progress is being made. For example, a report published in January this year which covered the first analysis of off-trade alcohol sales over the full year following the introduction of MUP showed the volume of pure alcohol sold per adult in Scotland fell by 3.6%.

Compared to the twelve months which preceded implementation of MUP in May 2018, the volume of pure alcohol sold per adult in the off-trade in Scotland decreased from 7.4 to 7.1 litres. In England and Wales – where MUP had not been implemented – the volume of pure alcohol sold in the off-trade during the same year increased from 6.3 to 6.5 litres.

A report on research with small retailers in Scotland was published in late May 2020. The authors at the Institute for Social Marketing at the University of Stirling reported that in the retailer audit interviews carried out for this study, few negative potential consequences of MUP implementation, such as increased confectionery thefts or an increase in the local illicit trade, were reported. In addition, this study included an analysis of retail trade press, the authors reported that following implementation, several articles reported a positive impact of MUP on the ability of small retailers to compete with supermarkets, profit margins, and the value of overall alcohol sales. There were very few reports of hostile customer reactions, and some indication that antisocial behaviour around premises may have been reduced when low price high strength alcohol products were no longer sold. A predicted shift in customer purchasing towards online, cross-border, or illicit sales was not reflected in retail trade press articles after MUP implementation. There were no reports of consumption switching to non-beverage alcohol or to drugs.

Further reports on various aspects of the Scottish evaluation are being published over the course of the next few years, with the final report for Scotland being published late 2023.

Here in Wales, prior to implementation, officials commissioned a research study to explore the potential for substance switching following the introduction of minimum pricing for alcohol in Wales. The research gathered the views and opinions of both service providers and drinkers using a combination of qualitative interviews and online survey questionnaires. The final report from this work was published in October 2019. The first key message was that for the majority of drinkers, the only switching or change in use is likely to be alcohol related and largely an adaptation of existing behaviour within the new pricing framework (e.g. a switch in type of alcohol or a change in purchasing behaviour).

This was suggested because it was felt that for many drinkers, alcohol is a clear drug of choice and crossing over to drugs, and especially towards the margins of legal/illegal activity, was just not an option.

We have also commissioned our own evaluation, including further work building on the above study. Interim reports from those studies will be available around two years after implementation and the final reports will be available to inform the report on the operation and effect of the Act to be laid before the Senedd as soon as practicable after the end of the five year period. Officials are also carefully monitoring the findings coming from Scotland. It is therefore too early to draw any conclusions at this point.

I hope you find this response helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vaughan Gething". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Vaughan Gething AS/MS

Y Gweinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Minister for Health and Social Services