

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol](#) ar [Isafbris Uned am Alcohol yng Nghymru](#)

This response was submitted to the [Health and Social Care Committee](#) consultation on [Minimum unit pricing for alcohol in Wales](#)

**MUP01 : Ymateb gan: | Response from: Alcohol Change UK**

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# Alcohol Change UK's evidence to the Senedd Health and Social Care Committee's inquiry into minimum unit pricing for alcohol in Wales

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## Introduction

This document summarises the evidence on the effects of minimum unit pricing (MUP) for alcohol in Wales, and Alcohol Change UK's view on the future of the measure. We have used the questions on the Committee's website as a framework, focussing on the questions about which we have some particular knowledge and expertise:

1. The impact of MUP on alcohol-related harm in Wales
2. The impact of MUP on vulnerable and alcohol-dependent people
3. The impact of MUP on children and young people
4. The impact of MUP on low-income households
5. The impact of MUP on the risk of switching to more dangerous substances
6. Other approaches needed to reduce alcohol-related harm in Wales
7. The impact of MUP on retailers and local authorities
8. The effectiveness of communication about MUP
9. Should MUP continue in Wales?
10. Should the current MUP level of 50p be reviewed?

## 1: The impact of MUP on alcohol-related harm in Wales

Decades of research have shown that how much alcohol costs consumers has a substantial influence on how much alcohol is bought and consumed. In 2011 a major review of evidence by Bangor and Wrexham Universities found that “the price and affordability of alcohol is the key determinant of the overall level of consumption amongst all groups in the population”.<sup>1</sup> Evidence gathered since then has only reinforced this conclusion.<sup>2</sup>

Increasing the price of alcohol makes it harder to obtain by making it less affordable. Minimum unit pricing sets a baseline price below which alcohol cannot be sold. In Wales at present, that means that one unit of alcohol – 10ml of pure ethanol – cannot be sold for less than 50p. This has had the greatest impact on the strongest, cheapest drinks, which tend to be consumed by the heaviest drinkers. To cite the two most prominent examples, Alcohol Change UK's own research in Wales has shown that MUP has:

- Removed from sale two- and three-litre bottles of high-strength cider, previously on sale for as little as 18p a unit.
- Removed many of the cheapest spirits from sale, by mandating that a standard-size (70cl) bottle of spirits (containing 26.3 units of alcohol) cannot be sold for less than £13.13.<sup>3</sup>

MUP has also affected some of the drinks consumed by a wider range of consumers, in ways that are conducive to reducing alcohol harm, by:

- Making it more difficult for supermarkets to offer multiple purchase discounts, such as selling three bottles of wine for the price of two. The minimum price does not ban these discounts, but it does mean that they cannot take the price of any item below the 50p per unit threshold.
- In combination with changes to alcohol duty across the UK, apparently pushing some producers to reduce the alcoholic strength of some of their drinks and/or to reduce container sizes. This kind of reformulation has brought benefits in the world of food – with producers removing some fat and/or sugar from foods without adversely affecting the flavour – and it may be a way to help people reduce their alcohol consumption.<sup>4</sup>

We can say with confidence that changes such as these to the alcohol market are likely to bring health benefits. However, in terms of direct evidence of the health benefits of MUP, it is fair to say that the findings have been encouraging at times but are not clear-cut. As the MUP evaluators in Wales and Scotland have noted, the picture is “messy” and the Covid-19 pandemic has been a major confounding factor in any analysis.<sup>5,6</sup>

The most obvious example of this is trends in alcohol-specific deaths in the UK in recent years. In the three years from 2019 to 2022, such deaths increased by 33% – a genuinely unprecedented increase after a long period of stability, and one which can only be explained in terms of the pandemic. This increase was notably uneven between the constituent countries of the UK and was significantly less in MUP areas. From 2019 to 2022, alcohol-specific deaths rose by 36% in England, where there was no MUP; by 32% in Wales, where the introduction of MUP roughly coincided with the first UK lockdown; and by 25% in Scotland, where MUP has been in place since 2018.<sup>7</sup>

However, the most recent alcohol-specific death figures – those for 2023, published in February 2025 – reveal a more ambiguous picture. In the four years from 2019 to 2023 alcohol-specific deaths rose by 25% in Scotland; 42% in England; 52% in Wales.<sup>8</sup> As Public Health Wales have noted, this is a 16% increase in alcohol-specific deaths in Wales from 2022 to 2023.<sup>9</sup> The reasons for this are complex. It may be that we are still seeing the effects of the increases in alcohol consumption during the pandemic amongst people who were already drinking at dangerous levels.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that both gender and deprivation are factors too, given that:

- Men consistently account for more than 60% of the alcohol-specific deaths in Wales and have done so for many years<sup>11</sup>
- Rates of alcohol-specific deaths are consistently higher in the former industrial areas of the South Wales Valleys than in Wales’ rural areas and cities<sup>12</sup>
- Three times as many men in the 20% most deprived areas of Wales die from alcohol as in the 20% least deprived areas.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that MUP is not sufficient on its own to halt deaths from alcohol. For that to happen, Wales will also need to commit to maintaining a range of interventions to support people who are struggling with alcohol issues, as we discuss in more detail in section 6: **Other approaches needed to reduce alcohol-related harm in Wales.**

## 2: The impact of MUP on vulnerable and alcohol-dependent people



**The largest container of super-strength cider on sale in Wales before MUP, and the largest on sale now**

By far the biggest change resulting from MUP has been to the price of the cheapest strongest ciders (known as “white ciders”) which are mostly consumed by alcohol-dependent drinkers.<sup>14, 15, 16, 17</sup> As the name suggests, white cider is much paler than traditional cider. It is also much stronger and much cheaper, and researchers have found that “professionals working with homeless and dependent street drinkers have expressed concern for many years that white cider...seems to have a particularly damaging effect on the health and behaviour of the people they work with”.<sup>18</sup>

Prior to MUP, three-litre bottles of 7.5% white cider were on sale in Wales for as little as £3.99, or 18p a unit. With MUP at 50p a unit, those bottles – which contained 22.5 units of alcohol – could not be sold for less than £11.25. At that price, they became unsaleable and disappeared from the shelves.<sup>19</sup>

Today in Wales, three-litre and two-litre bottles of 7.5% cider have been replaced in the shops by 500ml cans.

This may appear a small change, but it’s a significant harm reduction measure. Reducing container size by this much greatly increases the number of “drinking increments” – the number of stages in the drinking process – for the alcohol-dependent drinkers who are the typical consumers of white cider.<sup>20, 21</sup>

In order to get 22.5 units of alcohol in the form of white cider now, a drinker not only has to find £11.25 instead of £3.99; they also have to buy six 500ml cans. That’s six purchases and six drinking decisions. Put another way, it’s six inconveniences and six pauses for thought – six points at which it may not seem worth getting another can. This pausing and slowing of the drinking process both reduces harm and creates opportunities for professionals to come alongside people and support them into recovery.<sup>22</sup>

## 3: The impact of MUP on children and young people

The independent evaluation of MUP in Wales is focussed on the adult population. However, there is consistent evidence that young people are sensitive to price when purchasing alcohol, and that they are consumers of super-strength ciders, which were consistently the cheapest way to access alcohol in Wales prior to MUP.<sup>23, 24, 25, 26, 27</sup> It is therefore reasonable

to assume that MUP has had some impact on underage drinking in Wales, but more research is needed on this.

We also know that a substantial number of children are living in households with one or more alcohol-dependent parents, and alcohol-dependency is regularly recorded as a risk factor in child welfare cases.<sup>28, 29</sup> Any reduction in alcohol consumption by alcohol-dependent parents as result of MUP is likely to improve the situation of their children. However, there are so many other complicating factors at work that the evaluators are quite correct to assert that the evaluation of MUP in Wales should continue and that “this should include regard for the impact of [MUP] on children, young people, and families”.<sup>30, 31</sup>

#### **4: The impact of MUP on low-income households**

The independent evaluation report noted that MUP in Wales has had “a negative impact of increasing financial strain” on low-income people who are drinking heavily, and that this has sometimes led to “going without food or [not] paying other bills”.<sup>32</sup> The evaluators emphasised, however, that this is not a new problem and did not begin with the advent of MUP.<sup>33</sup> We have known for many years that people who are alcohol-dependent are often underfed, underweight and malnourished.<sup>34, 35, 36</sup> We also know that the answer to this problem is not cheaper alcohol; it is better food support for people with alcohol problems, and we have discussed this in more detail in section **6: Other approaches needed to reduce alcohol-related harm in Wales**.

#### **5: The impact of MUP on the risk of switching to more dangerous substances**

Encouragingly, the evaluation found very little evidence of switching from alcohol to illegal drugs; nor of a rise in cross-border alcohol shopping; nor renewed enthusiasm for home brewing.<sup>37</sup> Overall, the evaluators concluded that “the period of the evaluation has not seen any of the initially perceived fears of adverse harm materialise in any significant manner”.<sup>38</sup>

Following the publication of the evaluation report in January 2025, there were some suggestions in the media that MUP in Wales had “pushed problem drinkers away from cheap cider and towards strong spirits”.<sup>39</sup> This claim should be treated with some caution and needs to be balanced with two important facts. Firstly, spirits have always been a popular choice amongst alcohol-dependent drinkers.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, MUP has not, in fact, made spirits cheaper than cider, and it is important to remember that it is not possible to sidestep the minimum price: there is no way of getting extra units more cheaply by buying stronger drinks. As noted above, with MUP at 50p per unit in Wales, it is not possible to buy a standard-size (70cl) bottle of spirits for less than £13.13.

Prior to MUP, one of the most attractive features of white cider was its price. One study of people who drank white cider found that three-quarters of them said that its low price was their main reason for buying it; whereas its flavour was bottom of their list.<sup>41</sup> Since MUP has brought the price of white cider closer to other, more palatable drinks, it is no surprise that some people are now opting for other drinks instead it.

## **6: Other approaches needed to reduce alcohol-related harm in Wales**

The reduction in the availability of strong, cheap alcohol as a result of MUP will reduce the harm vulnerable drinkers experience; but in order for them to achieve meaningful and sustainable change in their lives, MUP has to be backed up with the support mechanisms that will enable more people to recover from alcohol problems. There has been considerable investment in recent years in developing local services in Wales to help more people into recovery, and this needs to be sustained.

Nor is it sufficient for services to wait for the most vulnerable drinkers to come to them. Heavy alcohol use saps energy and motivation to change, and throws up many other barriers to engaging with support. Indeed, Alcohol Change UK has long emphasised that “requiring motivation of such clients is as sensible as requiring a drowning person to swim to shore for help”.<sup>42</sup> Services therefore need to be engaging in assertive outreach: “making time to work with people in their own settings and build engagement with them through persistent and consistent interactions”.<sup>43</sup>

One particular vulnerability that the independent evaluation report noted in relation to MUP is the risk of alcohol-dependent people “going without food” in order to buy alcohol.<sup>44</sup> As the evaluators stated, the solution to this is not cheaper alcohol; it is improved access to food. Enabling more people to access to food banks and food pantries will be part of that, and also ensuring that people receive all the benefits payments to which they are entitled. There are also practical steps that local services can take to support people with alcohol issues to eat more and better food, and these are set out in detail in the Feeding Recovery Handbook, published by Alcohol Change UK in March 2025 jointly with Barod and the Nelson Trust.<sup>45</sup>

## **7: The impact of MUP on retailers and local authorities**

MUP does not appear to be placing an unreasonable burden on retailers or local authorities. The independent evaluation found that “the policy had also now become embedded in retailers’ everyday business as usual” and that “checking for [MUP] compliance had become a routine part of activity” for local trading standards teams.<sup>46, 47</sup>

## **8: The effectiveness of communication about MUP**

There have been substantial efforts by the Welsh Government, by agencies such as Alcohol Change UK, and by retailers, to make consumers aware of MUP in Wales. Despite this, the independent evaluation report acknowledges that “the level of detailed understanding [of MUP] remained limited across all groups”.<sup>48</sup>

It may be that it is not realistic to expect most consumers to be familiar with the details of MUP, in amongst the mass of information that all of us receive each day. Some consumers may well have noticed increases in the prices of some drinks since 2020; but since the period of MUP in Wales has coincided with increases in alcohol duty and major price inflation, any changes to prices as a result of MUP may have been obscured by a general sense that a range of goods were costing more.<sup>49, 50</sup> It is, perhaps, more significant that the evaluators noted “consistent evidence of policy implementation and compliance”.<sup>51</sup> That is to

say that MUP is in place, has been broadly accepted by sellers and consumers, and is doing what it is intended to do to the prices of drinks.

## **9: Should MUP continue in Wales?**

Price is one the main determinants of alcohol consumption and associated harms.<sup>52</sup> Managing the price of alcohol is, therefore, one of the most effective ways for governments to reduce alcohol-related harm.<sup>53</sup> Minimum unit pricing is the most targeted way of doing this, in that it correlates directly with the amount of alcohol in any drink, and therefore has the greatest impact on drinks sold at the lowest prices relative to their alcoholic strength.

Price controls are certainly not the only way to reduce alcohol harm; and, as the independent evaluation has made clear, MUP is not a perfect policy. In order for MUP to work well, and for any adverse impacts to be minimised, it must be accompanied by a programme of support for people experiencing alcohol problems, as described in section 6: **Other approaches needed to reduce alcohol-related harm in Wales.**

The Welsh MUP legislation includes a “sunset provision”, meaning that, if it is not renewed before March 2026, it will come to an end.<sup>54</sup> With regard to this, it is worth noting that, since the Wales Act 2017 specifically made “the sale and supply of alcohol” a matter for Westminster, if MUP is allowed to lapse in Wales in 2026, it is likely that it could not be reinstated later on by the Senedd without the permission of the UK Government.<sup>55</sup>

## **10: Should the current MUP level of 50p be reviewed?**

Alcohol Change UK’s own research and that of the independent evaluators highlights that the effectiveness of the 50p MUP has been eroded over time by inflation, meaning that to have the same effect in 2026 as it did in 2020, MUP in Wales would need to be closer to 65p – the level to which the Scottish Parliament voted to increase their MUP in 2024.<sup>56</sup> Inflation generally only goes in one direction, and without uprating from 50p at some point, MUP in Wales will inevitably decline in impact and eventually become meaningless.<sup>57</sup>

It is worth noting that an increase in MUP in Wales to 65p per unit would still leave pubs and restaurants unaffected by the measure. According to the latest data from the British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA), the average price of a pint of beer in the UK’s pubs is now close to £5, or around £2 per unit of alcohol.<sup>58</sup> The target of MUP is the cheap, strong drinks that are at the root of so much harm to vulnerable drinkers; not the local pubs and restaurants that are at the heart of so many of our communities.

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