

Scotland's radical alcohol policy agenda provokes national debate in UK

The Scottish government's programme for 2008/09

Consultation on the Scottish government's discussion paper 'Changing Scotland's relationship with alcohol: a discussion paper on our strategic approach' closed on 9th September. Subject to the consultation results, measures such as prohibiting off trade sales to under 21s; minimum pricing; introducing social responsibility fees; and alcohol-only checkouts, may be delivered through planned criminal justice and licensing legislation. The proposals on alcohol are part of a Health Bill; one of 15 bills that the Scottish government plans to introduce. England's 'Safe. Sensible. Social' Alcohol Policy consultation is open until the 14th October, offering less radical yet serious implications for all sectors of the industry.

The proposal to ban alcohol off-sales to under-21s has been condemned as unfair or unworkable by many associations and companies including the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), Diageo, the Wine and Spirit Trade Association as well as consumer affairs groups and adults of the 18-21 age group. Many have highlighted the consequences of such a measure whereby 18 –21 year old Scots would buy alcohol over the internet or over the border in England. Issues such as the potential criminalisation of adults who may marry, vote, fight for their country, own a house, yet potentially not be able to buy alcohol, have been extensively discussed.

Consultation responses

FSB Scotland spokesman Colin Borland said the organisation's members had spent a lot of time and money complying with the latest licensing laws — getting architects' plans for their shops, sending staff on courses and paying for other professional services. "The blunt instrument of blanket regulation, no matter how well-intentioned, gives rise to unintended consequences and lumps everyone – the exemplary trader and the utter rogue – together," he said. "The priority for any new policy has to be tackling the damage done by the abuse of alcohol and requires some sharp, targeted action at the root causes and biggest perpetrators".

The WSTA called on the Scottish Government to enforce current laws around alcohol and end its 'nonsensical policy' of raising the purchasing age, arguing that "It is by getting police out on the streets enforcing the law that we will make our communities safer"

Diageo stated that the Scottish government offered 'no evidence' to support its view that minimum pricing will reduce alcohol related harm. Higher prices may affect consumption, but not necessarily among the groups the Government wishes to target, they argue.

Benet Slay, managing director of Diageo Great Britain, states "We are disillusioned with the Scottish Government's paper and frustrated that Government is trying to place responsibility for tackling alcohol misuse on the shoulders of the drinks industry and thus failing to recognise that everyone has the responsibility - individuals, Government, civil society and industry... We believe the most effective approach to promoting the highest standards of responsible behaviour across industry and for every consumer, is through a fair, transparent and effective system of co-regulation."

Diageo's consultation response outlines a new system of co-regulation for alcohol promotions. It suggests the Government sets overall objectives and mandatory standards across a range of alcohol issues whilst the industry should be free to develop a "sensible and easy-to-work system of regulation and practice to meet Government's objectives."

Evelyn Gillan, project director of Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems, an independent lobby group established by the Royal Medical colleges, says Scotland is pioneering in its acknowledgement that alcohol is a problem for the whole of society. "What the government has done, crucially, is call for an overall reduction of the consumption of alcohol. It is saying that we can no longer afford to see this as an individual problem. We all need to drink less. That's a fairly critical shift."

Jack Law, chief executive of Alcohol Focus Scotland (AFS), states that Scotland is breaking new ground in its licensing law, which includes a public health principle. "Decisions in licensing will have to be made in relationship to public health, not just in business and commercial interests." The charity supports the establishment of a minimum price and alcohol only check outs and a social responsibility fee. "This document is trying to reinforce the view that the enforcement of licensing regulation starts at the point of sale with the licensee, not the police," commented Law. AFS believes 18 to be the correct legal purchase age for Scotland.

CARDAS

The Coalition Against Raising the Drinking Age in Scotland (CARDAS) a group of local and national youth and student representative organisations has coordinated one of the most complex responses. Membership includes NUS Scotland, the Scottish Youth Parliament, NUSSL, and Northern Services, along with a broad range of local student representative organisations from across Scotland.

CARDAS provides an impressive evidence base as to why 'the proposal to raise the minimum purchase age for off-sales alcohol purchases from 18 to 21, which we believe is at best ineffective, and at worst counterproductive – and a clear infringement on the rights of responsible adults' would not work.

CARDAS is supportive of many of the consultation papers' proposals such as the prevention of the sale of alcohol as a loss leader, an end promotions offering free alcohol or quantity discount for bulk buying, the introduction of smaller standard measures of wine at 125ml and spirits at 25ml and the students representatives call for mandatory and clear unit information to be presented on drinks menus. CARDAS also calls on the Scottish Government and Local Authorities to deliver and develop alternative activities for young people to prevent alcohol misuse, as activities focusing on alcohol are not surprising when there is little else available in the community for under age youth to do at present in Scotland. The organisation also supports a ban on televised alcohol advertising before the 9pm watershed and in cinemas for films with a certificate below age 18.

To access the report, visit http://www.cardas.org.uk/downloads/CARDAS_consultation_response.pdf

Public responses to the call for the off trade purchase age to rise to 21

- In an ongoing poll on the BBC website, of the 26,896 people who had responded as of 21st August 2008 to a poll question asking 'Should the legal drinking age be raised to 21?', a majority of 53.10% answered 'no' 44.27% who answered 'yes'.
- In an ongoing e-petition on the Scottish Parliament website, as of the 27th August 2008, over 2100 people had signed the e-petition calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to 'drop its proposal to raise the age for off-sales alcohol purchases from 18 to 21'.
- In a similar ongoing e-petition on the Scottish Parliament website, as of the 25th August 2008 627 people had signed the e-petition calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to 'reconsider its plans to raise the age for off-sales alcohol purchases from 18 to 21'.
- As of 21st August 2008, a protest group on the social networking website 'Facebook' called 'Don't raise the drinking age' - referring specifically to the Scottish Government proposal to raise the minimum purchase age - had 2,984 members.
- As of 21st August 2008, a similar protest group on the social networking website 'Facebook' called 'If they raise the drinking age to 21 in Scotland....I'm leaving' - had 1,050 members.
- In an ongoing poll on the Alcohol Focus Scotland website, of the 652 people who had responded as of 21st August 2008 to a poll question asking 'Should the purchase age of alcohol be raised to 21?' a majority of 58% answered no, 42% answered 'yes'.

A survey conducted by Ace Fieldwork on behalf of supermarket giant Asda, included more than 10,000 customers interviewed at more than 30 stores across Scotland. The survey results were issued on the final day of a consultation by the Scottish Government.

Two-thirds disagreed with proposals to ban promotions, such as three-for-two offers and 61% rejected the idea of the introduction of minimum pricing levels. Almost three-quarters objected to the installation of separate checkouts for alcohol, forcing them to queue twice during their weekly shop and 60% said that neither

Alcohol Consumer Profile (UK Shoppers)

Men account for the majority of alcohol consumption – especially 45+ year olds

