



Minimum Unit Pricing of alcohol in Scotland – one year on

1st May 2019 marks the 1st anniversary of the implementation of minimum unit pricing of alcohol in Scotland. Scotland was the first country in the world to introduce a minimum unit price for alcohol (MUP), following a ten year campaign.

The minimum unit price was set at 50 pence per unit, meaning that since 1st May 2018 no alcohol can be sold in Scotland below this price. This is a licence condition for all shops, pubs, restaurants and clubs which sell alcohol. In practice on-sales prices in bars, restaurants and clubs have largely been unaffected as most prices were already well above 50 pence per unit. The impact on prices has almost exclusively been in the off-trade where, prior to MUP, nearly half of alcohol sold (47%) was sold below 50p per unit.¹ High strength, low-cost products such as strong ciders and lagers and cheap spirits have been particularly affected as some retailed for as little as 18p per unit before MUP.²

Why do we need minimum pricing in Scotland?

Alcohol consumption levels are linked to the price of alcohol – when alcohol gets cheaper, consumption levels generally increase (and vice versa).³ Prior to MUP, alcohol was much more affordable than it was 40 years ago, and people in Scotland bought the vast majority (73%) of their alcohol from shops and supermarkets, where it has been cheapest.¹ The more people drink, the more alcohol-related diseases and social problems increase. Alcohol-specific death rates are more than twice as high as they were in the 1980s.¹

Scotland has a particular problem with alcohol which can be seen when compared to other parts of the UK. In Scotland alcohol consumption and deaths are significantly higher; we drink 14% more in Scotland than in England and Wales,¹ and our alcohol-specific deaths rates are almost double those south of the border.⁴

What is MUP expected to achieve?

Sheffield University undertook extensive – and internationally recognised – modelling on the expected effects of a 50 pence MUP in Scotland. Their work suggests that at full effect (20 years) the policy will reduce alcohol consumption in Scotland by 3.5%.⁵ Reductions in consumption are expected to be greater, at around 7%, amongst the heaviest drinkers because they have tended to drink more high-strength, low-cost alcohol.⁵ This reduction in consumption is expected to deliver significant health and social benefits. It was estimated that the policy would save around 60 lives and reduce hospital admissions by around 1,300 in the first year alone, building over time to save around 120 lives and reduce admissions by around 2,000 each year by full effect of the policy.⁵

One year on, has MUP achieved this?

The simple answer is that it is too early to say. Some partial and limited data has been issued from some market research companies which suggests that the amount spent on alcohol in Scotland has increased and that people are swapping drinks. The Sheffield model anticipated that this will

happen so this is not unexpected.⁶ What the currently available data does not tell us is whether the amount of pure alcohol sold in Scotland is going up or down because the data are based on ‘natural volumes’ i.e. they count a litre of weak beer the same as a litre of whisky (for more on understanding the data see the NHS Health Scotland 6 month [briefing](#)). The key question on sales is: have the numbers of units sold decreased? The first round of units data – for January to December 2018 – will be published in the NHS Health Scotland MESAS (Monitoring and Evaluating Scotland’s Alcohol Strategy) Annual Report, due in June 2019. More importantly the currently available data does not tell us whether alcohol harm - such as deaths, hospitalisations and crime - is going up or down.

When will we know if MUP is effective?

MUP will be one of the most thoroughly evaluated policies ever implemented in Scotland. The MESAS programme, led by NHS Health Scotland, is an extensive set of independent research studies which will look at both the intended and unintended consequences of MUP and will publish its final report in late 2023. A number of reports covering findings from different elements of the evaluation programme will be published before then. The first report, on compliance by licence holders, will report in mid-2019. A report describing sales based consumption since MUP was introduced is due in late 2019. More information about the evaluation, including the full list of studies and when they are expected to report can be found [here](#).

Do we really have to wait until 2023 to know whether MUP has worked?

Routine data on sales and harm will continue to be published annually in NHS Health Scotland’s annual monitoring report. The next MESAS Monitoring Report, due in June 2019, will include data on the amount of pure alcohol sold in Scotland in 2018 (as MUP was introduced in May 2018 the data will cover four months pre- and eight months post-MUP) and the price that alcohol was sold at. Annual statistics on alcohol-specific deaths are published by National Records of Scotland in June (again the figures for 2018 will cover four months pre- and eight months post-MUP). Annual statistics for alcohol-related hospital admissions are published by Information Services Division of NHS National Services Scotland towards the end of 2019 (the figures for 2018-19 will cover 1 month pre- and 11 months post MUP). While these data may give some early indication of the impact of MUP, care should be taken when interpreting year-on-year changes as these can occur by chance. The MUP evaluation will undertake statistical analysis on longer term trends to increase confidence that any changes observed are due to MUP.

What if MUP doesn’t work?

The Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act 2012 contains what is known as a ‘sunset clause’. This means that it will expire after the sixth year of implementation (30 April 2024) unless the Scottish Parliament votes for it to continue. To inform this decision there is a ‘review clause’ requiring Scottish Ministers to present a review report to parliament on the impact of MUP as soon as possible after five years of its operation. The MESAS research programme and its final report will be important in informing this decision.

¹ Giles, L. & Robinson, M. (2018) *Monitoring and Evaluating Scotland’s Alcohol Strategy: Monitoring Report 2018*. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland. <http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/1863/mesas-monitoring-report-2018.pdf>

² Alcohol Focus Scotland (2016). *Scottish Alcohol Price Survey 2016*. Glasgow: Alcohol Focus Scotland. <http://www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk/media/152485/Scottish-price-check-2016.pdf>

³ Anderson & Baumberg (2006) cited in Österberg, E. (2012). *Pricing of alcohol. Alcohol in the European Union: consumption, harm and policy approaches*. Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 96-102.

⁴ Office for National Statistics (2018). *Alcohol-specific deaths in the UK: registered in 2017*. London: ONS.
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/bulletins/alcoholrelateddeathsintheunitedkingdom/registeredin2017>

⁵ Angus, C., Holmes, J., Pryce, R., Meier, P. & Brennan, P. (2016). *Model-based appraisal of the comparative impact of Minimum Unit Pricing and taxation policies in Scotland An adaptation of the Sheffield Alcohol Policy Model version 3*. ScHARR, University of Sheffield.

⁶ Purshouse, R., Meng, Y., Rafia, R., Brennan, A. & Meier, P. (2009). *Model-based appraisal of alcohol minimum pricing and off-licensed trade discount bans in Scotland: A Scottish adaptation of the Sheffield Alcohol Policy Model version 2*. ScHARR, University of Sheffield.
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.95608!/file/scottishadaptation.pdf