



One Year On: Alcohol Minimum Unit Pricing Mythbuster

1. The press have reported sales figures that show that MUP isn't working

The sales data which has been published so far is very partial and limited. It is based on 'natural volumes' which means that it counts a litre of weak beer the same as a litre of whisky. To really understand what is happening we need information on how many units of alcohol have been sold rather than simply the total number of litres sold of all alcoholic drinks. 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.

2. People are just swapping their drinks. They were drinking cider, now they're drinking stronger drinks like vodka and whisky.

We're starting to hear anecdotal evidence of changes in what people are drinking. For example, some people appear to be switching drinks and moving away from cheap, high strength white cider, which was an expected outcome of MUP.¹ If those people are spending the same amount of money on other types of drinks they will be consuming fewer units of alcohol.

3. Is MUP not unfair to people living in poverty, who aren't able to afford to drink now?

No. It is people in our poorest communities who suffer the effects of cheap, high strength alcohol the most, so they have the most to gain from minimum unit pricing. Around 46% of the lives that will be saved by minimum unit pricing will be amongst hazardous and harmful drinkers living in poverty.² People in these communities are currently suffering huge health inequalities from alcohol: they are eight times more likely to die or be hospitalised due to alcohol than people in our most affluent communities.³ That's because people in our poorest communities who drink heavily tend to drink significantly more than heavy drinkers in more affluent communities⁴ and are more likely to have other compounding factors such as smoking, poor diet or general health issues.⁵

4. Are there any plans to increase the price?

At the moment there are no plans to increase the minimum unit price. However, due to inflation, the effectiveness of the 50p unit price may have declined in the seven years or so since the Parliament approved the MUP legislation. The Scottish Government have committed to reviewing the price after the second anniversary to ensure the benefits of MUP are fully realised.

5. Aren't people just buying online and/or across the border / people are cashing in by purchasing cheap alcohol in England and selling it up here (illegally)

There's limited evidence that this is happening. It seems that a few individuals may be crossing the border to buy cheaper alcohol, but there's no indication of this happening on a large scale. Anyone selling alcohol in Scotland requires a licence and would be committing an offence to sell below the minimum unit price.

Most alcohol bought online prior to MUP was already above the 50p minimum unit price. Supermarkets have complied and adjusted their website for sales in Scotland accordingly.

6. Dependent drinkers will just turn to other substances or drugs instead of alcohol if it is too expensive.

A small number of individuals may use other substances, but the majority of people are more likely to be changing what they are drinking, or drinking less of what they were drinking before. We know that there has been an increasing trend in drug use over the past year or so.

It is important that help is available to support those with alcohol and/or drug problems to recover.

7. Won't people steal the alcohol if they can't afford it now?

This isn't true. The majority of people will respond by changing what they are drinking or how much they are drinking. We haven't heard of any increased levels of theft.

8. Aren't people just switching to drinking Buckfast?

Buckfast sales were rising in Scotland before minimum unit pricing and the price of Buckfast has been unaffected by MUP as it was already above 50p per unit. However, people drinking Buckfast are also likely to be drinking other alcohol products too. The impact of alcohol on people's health and well-being is linked to how much they are drinking, not what they are drinking.

9. Surely dependent drinkers can't cut down so they - and their children - will go without food?

In some cases, household budgets may feel a strain, and we know that it's already a difficult time for many people financially. But we also know that even very heavy drinkers will change how much they are drinking in response to price increases. Research estimated that heavy drinkers would reduce their drinking by 7% per year on average as a result of MUP, bringing significant health benefits.⁶

Minimum unit pricing will not only encourage those who already have alcohol problems to reduce how much they drink but, importantly, it will help prevent those of us at risk of developing problems in future from increasing our drinking.

10. MUP punished moderate drinkers for the excessive drinking of a few.

Moderate drinkers aren't being punished because they don't tend to drink the cheapest, strongest alcohol like white ciders and own-brand spirits that are most affected by this policy. The effect on moderate drinkers is therefore quite small - it is estimated they will spend just an extra £2 per year on average.⁷ This is a small price to pay for a policy that will save hundreds of lives and improve thousands more.

11. Does MUP affect the price of a pint down the pub?

The vast majority of alcoholic drinks in pubs and restaurants cost more than 50p per unit before the introduction of MUP so won't have changed under minimum pricing; in 2017 the average price per unit sold in the on-trade was £1.80 compared to 54p per unit in shops and supermarkets

was.⁸ The impact on alcohol consumption and harm is expected to be significant however, as the majority (73%) of alcohol is bought from shops and supermarkets for consumption at home.⁹

12. Won't MUP will damage the Scotch whisky industry?

According to the Scotch Whisky Association Scotch whisky topped UK exports in 2018, growing 7.8% in value terms to £4.7bn.¹⁰ Exports account for around 93% of whisky production meaning only around 7% of whisky is produced for sale within the UK.¹¹ As only products sold in Scotland are subject to MUP there should be no damage on the Scotch whisky industry as a whole.

¹ 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

² Angus, C. (2017). Why minimum unit pricing is not a tax on the poor. Institute for Alcohol Studies

<http://www.ias.org.uk/Blog/Why-minimum-unit-pricing-is-not-a-tax-on-the-poor.aspx>

³ Giles, L. & Robinson, M. (2018). [*Monitoring and Evaluating Scotland's Alcohol Strategy: Monitoring Report 2018*](#). Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland

⁴ Bardsley, D. et al (2017). *The Scottish Health Survey 2016 Edition, Volume 1, Main Report*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

⁵ Angus, C. (2017), op cit.

⁶ Angus, C. (2017), op cit

⁷ Angus, C. et al (2016), op cit.

⁸ Giles, L. & Robinson, M. (2018). [*Monitoring and Evaluating Scotland's Alcohol Strategy: Monitoring Report 2018*](#). Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland

⁹ Giles, L. & Robinson, M. (2018), op cit

¹⁰ Scotch Whisky Association (12 February 2019). Scotch Whisky Exports on the up in 2018. Accessed 16/04/2019 from <https://www.scotch-whisky.org.uk/newsroom/scotch-whisky-exports-on-the-up-in-2018/>

¹¹ BBC News (20 February 2017) Single malt Scotch whisky exports top £1bn for first time. Accessed on 25.04.19 from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-business-39022740>