Six months on from the implementation of MUP, what can we say about changes in alcohol sales in Scotland?

Key points

- It is too early to assess the impact of MUP on alcohol consumption in Scotland. NHS Health Scotland is leading a comprehensive evaluation to assess the impact of MUP on a range of outcomes, including alcohol consumption. The complete findings will be reported in 2023. We will continue to present trends in per-adult alcohol consumption, for both Scotland and England & Wales, in our annual monitoring reports.
- We will use retail sales data to assess the impact of MUP on alcohol consumption in Scotland. We will focus on the volume of pure alcohol sold per adult in Scotland as our primary outcome measure. This allows for changes in the population and the strength of products to be taken into account. Changes in total value sales do not offer a good measure of the impact of MUP on alcohol consumption as total value is influenced by changes in average price.
- We will compare changes in sales in Scotland to those in areas where the legislation does not apply. Comparing how sales change in Scotland to a geographical area where MUP has not been implemented allows us to account for other factors that could influence alcohol sales independent of MUP. This will give us a more robust assessment of the impact of MUP than comparing over time in Scotland alone.
- We will look at volume sales across all alcohol and by drink category. Looking at sales in this way will give a more balanced assessment of the impact of MUP on consumption than focusing on the sales of specific products.

Purpose of this briefing

Minimum unit pricing (MUP) was implemented in Scotland on 1 May 2018. The purpose of this briefing is to:

- describe some of the available data sources, the measures available from those sources and what they show in the 6-month period post-MUP
- describe the data that will be used in the evaluation of MUP being led by NHS Health Scotland.

Definition of terms

Sales or purchases

Different sources use different methodologies to collect their data, which can in turn impact on the sales estimates reported.[1] In this briefing we distinguish between alcohol sales and alcohol purchase data as indicators of alcohol consumption.

- Alcohol sales data: based on actual Electronic Point of Sales data collected from retailers that sell alcohol.
- Alcohol purchase data: usually based on data collected from a consumer panel – a sample of households that scan all products purchased and taken into the home.

Volume sales, value sales or average price

Alcohol sales and purchases are commonly reported in terms of volume, value or average price.

[1] www.thegrocer.co.uk/buying-and-supplying/categories/grocery-data-explained-how-do-kantar-worldpanel-nielsen-and-iri-work/573939.article

- Volume (litres): the total volume of products sold/purchased in the given period. We refer to this as natural volume and it represents the total volume of products sold/purchased, not the total volume of alcohol in those products.
- Value (£): the total value of off-trade alcohol sales/purchases in the given period.
- Average price (£): the average price of products sold/purchased across all stores.

What the reported data tell us so far

Nielsen

Nielsen, a market research company, reported on changes in alcohol purchases in the 3-month period following MUP implementation compared to the same period last year. This data came from Nielsen's HomeScan Consumer Panel. Nielsen reported a 14% increase in total value purchases across all alcohol in Scotland, partly due to a 10% increase in average prices. They also reported that volume purchases increased by 4% in Scotland. They provided a comparison with England & Wales where, over the same time period, there was an increase of 8% in value purchases, an increase of 7% in volume purchases, but a decline in average prices.

Retail Data Partnership

The Retail Data Partnership, a supplier of EPOS machines, issued data that showed value sales in Scotland in the period May to July 2018 increased by nearly 15% compared with the same period last year.[2] The Retail Data Partnership has

[2] www.retaildata.co.uk/news-updates/wales-minimum-unit-pricing/

particularly good coverage of smaller convenience retailers; this research was based on sales in 129 stores. However, there was no comparison with England & Wales.

They also released information on value sales of Frosty Jack's cider in Scotland between May and September 2018 compared with the same period in 2017. They reported that value sales of Frosty Jack's fell by 70% in their sample of stores.

IRI

Aston Manor, a cider producer, analysed sales data from IRI, a market research company that estimates alcohol sales in Scotland and the rest of Great Britain. IRI alcohol sales estimates are based on EPOS data collected from most major supermarkets and a sample of smaller stores and off-licences. The analysis included data on an increase in Buckfast sales which became the focus of a number of press articles. The data showed that value sales of Buckfast had increased by 17% in Scotland in the 24-week period post-MUP compared with the same period in 2017.

Our own analysis of data from Nielsen Scantrack, which is also based on EPOS data, shows that Buckfast value sales had increased prior to MUP implementation. Across Great Britain, value sales increased by 13% between May and October in 2017 compared with the same period in 2016. It is also worth noting that fortified wine (the category that includes Buckfast) accounted for only 2.8% of the volume of pure alcohol sold in the off-trade in Scotland in 2017.

The MESAS MUP evaluation

NHS Health Scotland is currently leading a comprehensive, impartial and robust evaluation to assess the impact of MUP on a range of consumption, health, social and economic outcomes. This is being delivered as part of its Monitoring and Evaluating Scotland's Alcohol Strategy (MESAS) work programme.

In relation to sales/purchases and consumption it is important to understand the outcome measures that we will use to evaluate the impact of MUP on consumption in Scotland and how these may differ from some of the available measures already discussed. We will use the volume of pure alcohol as our primary outcome measure, converted from the natural volume using appropriate alcohol by volume (ABV) values and expressed per adult. This will be based on Nielsen Scantrack alcohol sales data. The impact of MUP on pure alcohol volume sales will be assessed at beverage category level, rather than for specific products.

This approach takes into account a number of factors that reporting total value and natural volume sales do not. These include:

- the impact of an increase in price on total sales when measured by total value sales
- differences in the population size in the two comparator periods
- reformulation (changes to the strength) or repackaging (changes to the size) of alcoholic products post-MUP implementation.

As well as the measures we use, we must also consider the context in which alcohol sales/purchases have been made. The data reported so far have been for a relatively short time period – the 3- or 6-month period following the implementation of MUP. This period included an unusually hot summer across the UK in which a number of occasional events took place compared with the same period in 2017 (e.g. men's football World Cup), which will have had an impact on alcohol sales/purchases. The evaluation will cover a much longer time period and so such factors will have less of an impact on the findings overall. The evaluation will look at off-trade sales over a 3-year post-MUP period in order to assess the impact of MUP on consumption. We will also compare alcohol sales in Scotland with those in England & Wales, where MUP has not yet been implemented. This allows us to better understand the impact of MUP over and above those external factors that may affect alcohol sales in both areas. We are aware that MUP is planned to be implemented in Wales in 2019, and we will take measures to account for this in our analysis.

Summary

A number of findings from different sources have been reported on changes in alcohol sales/purchases in Scotland since MUP was implemented on 1 May 2018. Reported increases across all alcohol categories in Scotland appear to be smaller than those reported for the same time period in England & Wales. They are based on different measures and/or data sources to those that we will be using in the formal evaluation. Changes in total value sales/purchases do not offer a good measure of the impact of MUP on consumption as this is influenced by the increase in average price. Volume measures, particularly those that account for changes in the strength of products and changes in the population size, allow much more robust comparisons pre- and post-MUP and to other geographical areas to be made. Similarly, focusing on sales of specific products is not a useful measure in determining the impact of MUP on consumption. Total volume and drink category sales will give a more balanced assessment of the impact of MUP overall.

It is too early to provide a robust assessment of the impact of MUP on alcohol consumption in Scotland. The evaluation of the impact of MUP being led by NHS Health Scotland will be based on a comprehensive assessment that takes into account underlying trends, its impact on the amount of pure alcohol sold across all products, and a comparison with England & Wales. It will also assess the impact on health, social and economic outcomes with the complete findings being reported in 2023. We will continue to present trends in per-adult alcohol consumption, using retail sales data, for both Scotland and England & Wales, along with data on price, affordability and related harms, in our annual monitoring reports.[3]

Authors

Lucie Giles, Public Health Intelligence Adviser, NHS Health Scotland
Mark Robinson, Public Health Intelligence Principal, NHS Health Scotland
Clare Beeston, Public Health Intelligence Principal, NHS Health Scotland

[3] www.healthscotland.scot/health-topics/alcohol/monitoring-and-evaluating-scotlands-alcohol-strategy