

Edwina Hart MBE OStJ AM

Y Gweinidog dros Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Minister for Health and Social Services

Our ref: EH/01014/11

Your ref: P-03-283

Christine Chapman AM
Chair, Petitions Committee
petition@wales.gov.uk



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28 March 2011

Dear Christine,

Thank you for your letter dated 18 March about Petition P-03-283 Charging for Alcohol Related Incidents.

You have asked about discussions I have had with the UK Government in relation to the supply, availability and price of alcohol.

'Working Together to Reduce Harm: The Substance Misuse Strategy for Wales 2008-2018' describes how the Welsh Assembly Government will tackle substance misuse in Wales. In relation to alcohol, it sets out our determination to tackle the inappropriate availability of alcohol, including stricter rules on the promotion of alcohol and tackling the excessive availability of cheap alcohol through minimum pricing and increases in taxation. We also called for changes to the Licensing Act (including making public health a statutory objective of the Act), the strengthening or mandating of the code of conduct for the alcohol industry and better promotion of low strength alcoholic drinks (possibly through reductions in tax) and low priced soft drinks.

The strategy recognises the need to work with and lobby the UK Government on these non-devolved issues. Welsh Ministers have consistently lobbied both the previous and current UK Governments on these issues since the strategy was published in 2008 and whilst there is always more that can be done, I believe that our efforts have influenced the UK Government to begin to take a more robust approach to alcohol.

A mandatory code of conduct for the alcohol industry is now in place, which prohibits some of the most irresponsible promotion practices which encourage binge drinking. The UK Government has recognised that cheap alcohol is an issue: it is introducing a ban on below cost selling and increasing the taxation on alcohol, whilst seeking to reduce the levels of taxation paid on low alcohol beers. The Police Reform Bill currently before Parliament makes some significant changes to the Licensing Act, which will rebalance the Act in favour of police forces, local licensing authorities and local communities.

Nonetheless, we still believe that the UK Government could and should do much more. Although any initiative that seeks to tackle cheap alcohol is a positive step, the practical effect of the ban on below cost selling will in our view be very marginal and we continue to strongly support the introduction of a minimum price, set at a level that will impact on excessive alcohol consumption.

We are also disappointed that the UK Government has made no firm proposals for the inclusion of a public health objective in the Licensing Act, although UK Government Ministers have assured me that they are actively considering this. We would also like to see much tougher controls on the way in which alcohol is advertised and marketed, particularly to protect children and young people. Finally, it remains our view that powers in relation to alcohol licensing should be devolved, and we were very disappointed that the UK Government refused our formal request for such powers last year.

It is clear that there is now a strong consensus for tough action to tackle the harms associated with excessive alcohol consumption and this has been reflected in the representations your committee has received.

I remain committed to pursuing the strongest possible measures to address the excessive and inappropriate availability of alcohol and I am grateful for your continued interest in this matter.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'L. M.', written in a cursive style.