

## **House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee inquiry into the evidence base for alcohol guidelines**

1. Children in Scotland welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to this Committee inquiry into the evidence base for alcohol guidelines. We recognise that health is an issue devolved to the Scottish Parliament, but believe that it is important that Chief Medical Officers and health professionals across the United Kingdom offer the same recommendations and provide the same advice in relation to alcohol as a public health concern of great importance.
2. The UK Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) currently recommend that men should not regularly drink more than 3–4 units of alcohol a day and women should not regularly drink more than 2–3 units a day. They also advise having at least 2 days a week where no alcohol is consumed or taking a break of 48 hours after consuming a lot of alcohol. While we will not comment on the scientific evidence base for the advised number of units, it should be noted that more guidance and explanation is needed - both on labeling and as part of public health campaigns on what actually constitutes a unit of alcohol -- as many people underestimate how many units they are consuming.
3. These should be easy to understand – perhaps including pictorial as well as written information. Instead of measuring intake in these units perhaps recommended limits could be conveyed with examples – e.g. 3-4 units is the equivalent of a pint and a half of regular beer, and 2-3 units is equal to a 175ml glass of wine. The calorie content of alcohol would also be a useful measurement to communicate, as this is also commonly underestimated, and important to factor into planning a healthy lifestyle.
4. Pregnant women or women trying to (or likely to) conceive are advised to avoid drinking alcohol, or if they do choose to drink, not to drink more than 1-2 units of alcohol once or twice a week. We support messages that encourage these women to avoid alcohol as a certain way of preventing fetal alcohol harm. The message 'avoid alcohol if pregnant or trying to conceive' or 'consuming alcohol while pregnant or trying to conceive may damage your baby' or the 'French logo' (pregnant women with a wine glass with a line through it) are recommended inclusions on alcohol labels. In addition to this, we would also support further

messages encouraging consumers to seek support and advice - for example, a link to Drinkaware.

5. While a fair number of people are aware of the message that drinking should be reduced or avoided altogether during pregnancy, there is much less awareness of the reasons why – and of the risks involved for the health and long-term well-being of their child. This lack of public understanding about the potential consequences significantly reduces the impact of the warning itself. For example, it is not common knowledge that tens of *thousands* of children and adults in the UK already have been negatively affected (and have had their lives compromised) by Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) -- or the wider Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. The brain damage and other problems caused by exposure to alcohol in utero are irreversible and can lead to serious lifelong health, educational and behaviour difficulties.
6. The evidence base supporting the public health message about not consuming alcohol if pregnant or trying/likely to conceive is robust. However, it is more extensive in North America and other OECD nations than in the UK. Several pathways into this evidence base are provided at the end of this consultation response. There is every reason to believe that this evidence fully applies throughout the UK, as the evidence (clinical and laboratory) demonstrating that alcohol is a teratogenic agent that can cause developmental abnormalities and serious brain damage *in utero* is not limited to particular people or places.
7. Having strong consistent messages delivered by public health professionals and other groups working with people of child-bearing age is one way of increasing awareness of, and altering attitudes toward, the risks of drinking in pregnancy. Labelling alcohol products is one (but only one) way of creating a greater societal awareness of these risks.
8. Messages delivered about the risks and realities of alcohol consumption need to be consistent across the UK, and kept up to date, with old information removed from publications and websites to reduce the current level of misinformation and confusion about what the best available international evidence indicates is true.
9. The Department of Health advises that children are not given any alcohol until they are at least 15 years old. Again, if this is the agreed message this needs to be widely and consistently delivered across the UK.
10. Much as labels on cigarettes and other tobacco products warn of the potential dangers to the self and to others; alcohol products and public health information should warn of the possible health risks, such as the increased risk of developing various cancers, posed by consuming these products, and why suggested daily unit guidance is in place. The

professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies and services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents more than 400 members, including most of Scotland's local authorities, all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and Europe.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Government, local authorities and practitioners. It also services groups such as the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People (with YouthLink Scotland). In addition, Children in Scotland hosts Enquire - the national advice service for additional support for learning, and Resolve: ASL, Scotland's largest independent education mediation service.

