

## Why do we need minimum unit pricing in Northern Ireland?

*In January 2022, the Republic of Ireland introduced minimum unit pricing (MUP) of alcohol. This policy targets the cheapest and strongest products on the market to curb heavy drinking. In this blog, Andrea Trainor, Support Officer at the [Northern Ireland Alcohol and Drug Alliance \(NIADA\)](#), makes the case for why MUP is needed in Northern Ireland.*

Alcohol harm deeply impacts thousands of families and communities across Northern Ireland. Every day, many individuals must deal with the fallout from alcohol harm; be it illness, hospitalisation, domestic violence or family breakdown. If we expect to see any positive change, the consequences of heavy drinking can no longer be ignored.

As well as physical and mental harm, alcohol is costing taxpayers millions every year.

Health Minister Robin Swann MLA, said: “Alcohol and drug use is one of the biggest public health and societal issues facing Northern Ireland. The cost of alcohol related harm alone is estimated to be as much as £900 million every year. Add in the cost of the harms from other drugs and the figure could be well over £1bn annually.”

But where do we begin in our journey to tackle alcohol harm?

There is certainly no silver bullet, no quick-fix solution that will solve all our alcohol problems.

Fortunately, there are a number of public health policies recommended by the [World Health Organization](#) which work together to reduce alcohol harm. One of which is minimum unit pricing (MUP).

This policy – which ensures that the strongest drinks always cost the most by setting a minimum price for each unit of alcohol the drink contains – has already been implemented in Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

In Scotland and Wales, each unit of alcohol cannot be sold for any less than 50p. This means that a can of lager containing two units of alcohol must cost at least £1 and a two-litre bottle of cider of 6% strength must cost at least £6.00. In the Republic of Ireland, the minimum price for one standard drink (10g of alcohol) costs €1.

Following the recent implementation of MUP in the Republic, the Department of Health in Northern Ireland have launched a consultation on the policy.

The evidence is building for the success of MUP. After the policy was introduced in Scotland, alcohol consumption fell to the lowest level seen in 25 years and in 2020, alcohol sales reached their lowest level since 1994.

Modelling for Northern Ireland estimates that 50p MUP would:

- Reduce alcohol consumption by 5.7%
- Lead to a reduction of 63 alcohol-related deaths per year (after 20 years when the full effect of the policy will be felt) and a reduction of 2,460 alcohol related admissions to hospital
- Save an estimated £956m over 20 years

These outcomes look promising, but for us to truly tackle existing alcohol harm, we need to go much further.

[Figures](#) show that Northern Ireland had its highest rates of alcohol-specific death in 2020, accounting for 2% of all deaths registered in 2020. Since 2001, the alcohol-specific death rate has risen significantly for both men and women it is vital to tackle this issue.

MUP will not be the silver bullet to the increasing alcohol problem but will play a huge part in the bigger picture. This should be implemented along with:

- Higher tax on those alcohol products causing the most harm, or preferred by adolescents
- Stricter enforcement around sales, advertising and marketing
- A shift in culture where most events are planned around drinking and socialising
- Recognising the link between MUP and social deprivation, health inequalities, past trauma, poor mental health and the use of other harmful substances

Ideally an all-Ireland approach to alcohol harm reduction would have been advantageous however this was not the case. But it is not too late for us to join the Republic of Ireland, Wales, Scotland and Jersey in implementing MUP.

To reduce alcohol harm and save lives, we'd encourage everyone to submit a response to the [MUP consultation](#), which closes 17 May 2022.

**Written by Andrea Trainor**

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