Author's response to reviews

Title: A minimum price per unit of alcohol: A focus group study to investigate public opinion concerning UK government proposals to introduce new price controls to curb alcohol consumption

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Re-submission of manuscript to BMC Public Health

Please find attached our second revised version of the manuscript entitled “A minimum price per unit of alcohol: A focus group study to investigate public opinion concerning UK government proposals to introduce new price controls to curb alcohol consumption” for consideration for publication in BMC Public Health. The manuscript is co-authored with Drs. Adam Lonsdale and Sarah Hardcastle.

We have endeavoured to respond to both of the referees’ comments and outline them in red font alongside the original comments in the itemised list below.

We declare we have no competing interests and that the manuscript has not been submitted for publication or published in its current form elsewhere.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Martin Hagger, PhD  
Professor of Psychology
Response to Reviewer Reports

REVIEWER 1: John Holmes

REVIEWER 1’S COMMENT 1: This is a much-improved version of the paper and the majority of my concerns have been addressed.

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE: We would like to express our gratitude to the reviewer for his positive feedback. We have outlined our responses to each the reviewer’s comments below and in the revised manuscript in red-coloured font.

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS:

p5: A 25ml shot of spirits contains 1 unit but 1 unit is 10ml of pure alcohol

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE: We have made this change accordingly (please see page 5, last line).

p6. Consumption reductions from Sheffield modelling are for minimum pricing + an off-trade discount ban. This should be noted or preferably amended to the figures for minimum pricing alone. It should also be noted that these are figures for Scotland.

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE: We have made this change accordingly (please see page 6, paragraph 1).

p6. The £9.7bn figure is for England I believe and again this should be noted. In both cases, the reports on which these figures are based are different to those cited as Refs 10 & 18 and the correct refs should be used alongside quoted figures.

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE: This has been changed and the correct references inserted alongside the figures (please see page 6, paragraph 1).

p7. Neither the Scottish or English governments have proposed a figure for the minimum price in their most recent policies.

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE: This has been changed to reflect the recent development that the Scottish Executive has passed the Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill and set the minimum price at 50p per unit (please see page 6, paragraph 1).

p10. Young binge drinkers do not generally drink cheap alcohol as they primarily purchase in the on-trade where prices are higher. Sheffield’s model demonstrates this by the relatively small impact of minimum pricing on 18-24 year old hazardous drinkers compared to other hazardous drinkers. I appreciate that this was the information given to participants and I acknowledge the government has also presented minimum pricing as a solution to binge drinking but some acknowledgement of this incorrect provision of information to the participants should be made and reflection given on the impact it may have had on the
results. If participants are told beer won't be sold for less than £1 a pint, they are understandably going to conclude it will have no impact on binge drinking in pubs selling beer at £3 a pint.

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE: This is a good point and we have augmented our manuscript accordingly. In our response we also suggest that young binge drinkers do drink a substantial amount of alcohol at home prior to going to pubs (known as ‘pre-loading’ or ‘pre-partying’) and may not be reflected in the 18-24 age group in the Sheffield modelling data. We have acknowledged this in a footnote on page 10 of the revision.

p32. I disagree with the recommendation to raise public awareness of the damaging effects of binge drinking as a means to improve the acceptability of minimum pricing. Minimum pricing's primary affect is on off-trade alcohol and overall levels of consumption. Higher levels of, largely off-trade, consumption in 'not-young' people is also where the largest burden of health harms is coming from - not youth binge drinking. Some recognition of this should be in the paper at some point and reflected in policy recommendations in the discussion.

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE: This is a point well made and we have modified this section to focus on hazardous drinking rather than binge drinking and acknowledge that it is overall consumption rather than binge drinking that should be the focus of such messages (see page 32, paragraph 1).

Discretionary Revisions:

p32. The authors make a good point about the need for educational campaigns as a key finding was the low levels of understanding around minimum pricing and this appears to be a key policy recommendation. I feel it could be more strongly stated in the discussion perhaps with a little extra reflection to highlight the misunderstandings.

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE: In our discussion section of the revised manuscript we have highlighted the need for public health messages to dispel misunderstandings of the effects of minimum pricing on alcohol consumption. These discussions appear on page 30-31 (final/first paragraphs) and page 34 (paragraph 1).

Discussion/Conclusions: The discussion has been rewritten and conveys important information. However, the conclusion seems to repeat much of this and, in my view, could be greatly shortened to concisely state the key messages.

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE: We feel that the key messages appear to be repeated because we have re-stated the key findings to accompany our recommendations for future research. This is important in order for it to be clear to readers that the recommendations specifically address the key findings of the current research.
REVIEWER 2: Tai Pong Lam

REVIEWER 2’S COMMENT 1: This manuscript is on the minimum unit price policy of alcohol in the UK. The authors attempted to investigate ‘public opinion’ using focus group methodology. Despite the large number of participants of 218 in 28 focus groups and the huge amount of work involved, it is an inappropriate method to address the research question.

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE 1: We strongly disagree that focus groups are an inappropriate method to investigate perceptions of members of the public to the minimum unit price policy in the UK. Although, we cannot, on the basis of this single study, seek to generalise to the wider population, we believe that qualitative research can be informative to the extent to which emergent themes can be applied and transferred to other contexts. Given our attempt to recruit a range of participants across age, gender and socioeconomic groups, we believe that the emergent themes provide a reasonable overview of prevailing beliefs regarding minimum pricing that may represent the wider population.

REVIEWER 2’S COMMENT 2: Because of the way participants are sampled and the limited number of them, focus groups can be useful in public opinion study by providing ‘selected’ in-depth understanding of ‘selected’ opinions. For a topic like minimum unit price for alcohol, certain groups e.g. sixth form students and university students are likely to have sets of opinions influenced by their own circumstances. It therefore would not allow the authors to come to the conclusion that ‘little evidence to suggest that people would support the introduction of a minimum price per unit of alcohol policy’. Such a conclusion would have to come from a quantitative survey. The same point stated by the authors, ‘This meant that any generalization made on the basis of the present findings should be viewed as speculative because of the comparatively small sample and the investigative approach...’

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE 2: We agree that focus groups are primarily aimed at providing in-depth data on key themes that emerge but we disagree that such data cannot be transferred to other people and other contexts. It is true that sixth form students and University students are likely to have very different opinions to others, which is why a number of different groups were selected for the focus-group discussions. Within the present study, the overwhelming theme across groups and age was scepticism towards such a policy. We have added a passage to the ‘analytic approach’ section (please see page 12, last paragraph) to explain our stance on transferability and a passage under the ‘limitations and future research’ section (please see page 36, paragraph 2) to outline the potential and caveats for transferability of our findings. We make the point that we are unable to comment on the ‘typicality’ of people or environments in which the focus groups took place and that in order to assess the extent to which findings may be true of other people in other settings, similar projects conducted across different groups and settings would be worthwhile. Nevertheless, the current study is the first to explore attitudes towards minimum pricing and, therefore, offers a ‘baseline understanding’ with which findings of subsequent research should be compared.
The individual testimonies from the participants in the present study serve as examples of views from the broader group, and as a result the notion of transferability should not be ignored. As with all qualitative approaches, the onus is on the readership to decide the extent to which findings may relate to other situations and people. Investigators have the responsibility to provide sufficient contextual information about the data and processes of collection to enable the reader to make such a transfer. In this vein, we have attempted to offer detailed description (in the provision of lengthy quotes) to allow readers to develop a proper understanding of the context and emergent themes. We recognise that we are unable to comment on the typicality of the people or environments in which the focus groups took place and that further qualitative research would be valuable. However, in the absence of other comparative research, the current investigation offers a baseline understanding with which findings of subsequent research should be compared.

REFERENCES