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Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer
HM Treasury
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February 12, 2021

Dear Chancellor,

Men died from alcohol-related conditions at a higher rate in 2020 than in any year since records began in 2001, with a total of 3,639 of men dying between January and September of that year. New ONS data show that men continue to die of alcohol-related causes at twice the rate of women.

This tragic trend makes clear the importance of tackling alcohol harm as part of the COVID-19 pandemic policy response. Ahead of the Budget in March, I am writing on behalf of the Men's Health Forum to urge you to increase alcohol duty by 2%. Taking this step, the evidence shows, would significantly reduce alcohol-related harm and save money for our public services, whilst generating additional revenue.

Treasury estimates show that alcohol duty cuts and freezes since 2012 are costing £1.3 billion annually in lost revenue – the equivalent of the salary of 41,000 nurses. This additional income could help our country to recover from COVID-19. The public supports such a step: in a YouGov poll prior to last year's Budget, alcohol duty was the joint second most popular tax for the Chancellor to raise. Only increasing tobacco duty was more popular, with alcohol duty as popular as corporation tax, and more popular than increasing capital gains tax, income tax, national insurance, or VAT amongst others.

On top of this, increasing alcohol duty reduces alcohol harm, which in turn reduces pressures on and costs for the NHS and public services. There are 1.3 million alcohol-related hospital admissions each year in England, with 80 deaths a day linked to alcohol use across the UK. This has only been aggravated by COVID-19: analysis has found that the number of adults drinking at high-risk levels increased from 4.8 million to 8.5 million between February and September 2020. Increasing alcohol duty has had proven success in the UK. Alcohol-specific deaths peaked with the introduction of the duty escalator in 2008, stalling whilst it was in place and rising again since its repeal. This was also the only period when rising affordability in the off-trade was curbed.

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A regular increase in tax levels is needed to ensure that alcohol does not become more affordable over time due to inflation. This has already occurred with beer duty 19% lower in 2020 than in 2012/13 and cider and spirits 12% lower. These cuts to alcohol duty have increased alcohol harm, leading to 2250 extra deaths and more than 122,000 additional crimes in England and Scotland between 2012 and 2019/20.

Preferably these duty increases should be the stimulus for investigating the introduction of a wider package of measures to tackle alcohol harm, including minimum unit pricing (MUP), following its success in Scotland.

The ongoing alcohol duty review is a welcome opportunity to create a simpler, fairer system that protects our health and helps generate urgently needed revenue. To do so it needs to be proportionate, consistent, scaled and regularly updated - and part of a wider range of measures to tackle alcohol harm, including MUP - not least because evidence suggests that duty increases and MUP are actually most effective in combination. On a wider level, we also need investment to tackle the mental health issues brought on by COVID that have contributed to the mental health problems and stresses that can lead to the abuse of alcohol.

However, until a new system is in place, we can save lives, reduce alcohol harm and raise revenue by increasing alcohol duty by 2% above inflation.

Yours sincerely,

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