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Panel on Health Services

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Dutiable Commodities (Amendment) Bill 2017

According to the World Health Organization ("WHO"), alcohol consumption is associated with major non-communicable diseases such as cancers, cardiovascular diseases and diabetes. Alcoholic beverages are classified as a Group 1 carcinogen (cancer-causing to humans) by the International Agency for Research on Cancer of WHO, the same grouping as tobacco smoke, asbestos and ionizing radiation. Alcohol particularly affects the developing brain in adolescence, including impairing the memory and affecting the development of the nervous system as well as reducing self-control ability. In 2010, the Sixty-third session of the World Health Assembly¹ endorsed a global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol. A policy option and intervention proposed therein is to establish an appropriate minimum age for purchase or consumption of alcoholic beverages and other policies in order to raise barriers against sales to, and consumption of alcoholic beverages by, adolescents.

2. In Hong Kong, alcoholic beverages are available for sale at retail points (such as liquor stores, convenience stores and supermarkets) and on premises granted with liquor licence. For the latter, the Dutiable Commodities (Liquor) Regulations (Cap. 109B) has introduced a liquor licensing system since 2000 to regulate the sale or supply of intoxicating liquor for consumption on the premises. Under regulation 28, no licensee shall permit any person under the age of 18 years to drink any intoxicating liquor on any licensed premises. However, there is currently no restriction on sale of alcohol to persons aged below 18 in retail stores and in licensed premises for off-premises consumption.

¹ The World Health Assembly is the decision-making body of WHO.

3. According to the Department of Health ("DH"), among students who attended its Student Health Service Centres and completed a self-administered questionnaire in the school year 2015-2016, as of March 2016, the percentage of students who had ever binge-drunk and those who binge-drunk at least once a month were respectively 3.4% and 1.2% in Primary Four and 12.1% and 2.0% in Secondary Six students. Separately, the Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Study Pertaining to Alcohol Consumption among Adults in Hong Kong 2015 commissioned by DH involving over 2 500 local adults aged 18 to 64 revealed that, of the 1 630 who had ever drunk alcohol, 43.1% reported to have had their first sip of alcohol under 18 years old. In addition, 16.6% of 1 087 respondents who drank alcohol in the past 12 months said that they had developed a drinking habit below the age of 18 years.

4. To reduce alcohol-related harm for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases, a Working Group on Alcohol and Health ("the Working Group") was set up under the Steering Committee on Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases² in June 2009 to advise on the priority areas for action and to draw up targets and action plans related to alcohol-related harm for the Steering Committee's consideration. The Working Group drew up an Action Plan to Reduce Alcohol-related Harm in Hong Kong ("the Action Plan") in October 2011³ which recommended, among others, the relevant authorities to review and consider the feasibility of imposing age restrictions on off-premise sale of alcohol. The Administration plans to introduce a legislative proposal in the latter half of the 2016-2017 legislative session to prohibit the sale and supply of alcohol in the course of business to persons under the age of 18 years. The proposed regulatory regime will cover all forms of commercial sale and supply of alcohol, including internet sale. Separately, DH launched on 15 December 2016 a publicity campaign "Young and Alcohol Free" to step up efforts to combat underage drinking.

² The Department of Health published a strategy document entitled "Promoting Health in Hong Kong: A Strategic Framework for Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases" in 2008 to set out the strategic directions for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases. To implement the strategies, the Steering Committee on Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases was set up in the same year. Chaired by the Secretary for Food and Health, the Steering Committee is responsible for steering the work on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases and overseeing the work progress.

³ The Action Plan has set out a total of 17 specific actions, which are grouped under five priority areas (i.e. generate an effective information system to understand the epidemiology of alcohol-related harm and to provide advice and support on prevention and control of alcohol-related harm; strengthen partnership and foster engagement of all relevant stakeholders; build the capacity and capability to prevent and control alcohol-related harm; ensure a health sector that is responsive to the non-communicable diseases challenges and to improve the healthcare system; strengthen and develop supportive health promotion legislation) and 10 recommendations.

5. The Administration will brief the Panel on the above legislative proposal on 25 April 2017.

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