

Fingal Community & Voluntary Forum

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The Secretary,
Government Alcohol Advisory Group,
5th Floor, Block 1, Irish Life Centre,
Lower Abbey Street,
Dublin 1

27.01.2008

Re: Call for submissions to the Government Alcohol Advisory Group

Dear Sirs,

The Fingal Community & Voluntary Forum wish to have the following submission taken into consideration in delivering your report and recommendations to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

Forward

We welcome this review as it has been apparent to many in the general community throughout Ireland for some considerable time that we have major societal and economic damage being caused by the excessive and illegal use of alcohol.

The historical caricature of the Irish as a nation of drunks is one we have all worked hard to dispel. During the period 1989-2001, Ireland had the highest increase in alcohol consumption among EU countries. That trend has greatly accelerated in the past six years.

After nicotine, alcohol is second most deadly drug and abuse substance in Ireland, killing thousands each year. As an abused substance it far surpasses other 'illegal' drugs (heroin, cocaine etc) as a cause of death and hospitalisation each year (see appendix 1).

Whilst we may have developed our economy and progressed our social thinking in many areas in the past decade, we have, in our view, taken a retrograde step backwards in our approach to the use and enjoyment of alcohol. Binge drinking has been the norm for some years now, alcohol dependency is on the increase and the health and societal impacts are increasingly evident. At a time when our Health services are under constant strain, it is regrettable that so much of those limited resources have to be diverted to deal with the consequences of alcohol abuse.

Like the pebble thrown into the still pond these consequences ‘ripple’ across society – from anti social behaviour, crime, family crises, adverse economic impacts suffered by business and the exchequer.

We sincerely hope that on this occasion we embrace the need for change in our attitude to alcohol use and put in place the range of measures that will help to educate people in how to enjoy alcohol in a responsible manner and for those who chose to ignore societal norms, deterrents that will have meaning and impact.

We have chosen to present our recommendations to the Advisory Group under the following headings:-

Political

It is felt that this problem of alcohol abuse has been widely acknowledged as an ever increasing problem in our society for over a decade now. A number of excellent reports were commissioned during that period that dealt with the substance of the matter – to date none of these have been acted upon by our elected representatives.

Also in the community and society in general there have been many instances of voices being raised in order to highlight the need for a proactive and holistic approach to the issue of alcohol abuse.

Despite the evidence Government repeatedly failed to put in place measures to deal with the various issues arising from the problem of excessive alcohol consumption.

It is believed that the reasons for political inaction are rooted in the deep influence and lobby power of the alcohol industry and publicans.

Perhaps the best example of this influence was the introduction of the ‘liberalisation’ approach which led to an extension of opening hours, the rapid growth in the number of off license premises, increased number of ‘special exemptions’ etc. This opening up of the market came about despite the well known problems which our society were then and still are experiencing. We ignored the obvious harm to the greater good in order to allow benefit accrue to a relatively small number of persons.

To ensure that we deal effectively with the multitude of issues arising from alcohol abuse we must first be given a clear and unambiguous commitment from government to deal with this area and that they will on this occasion support and act on the recommendations and findings of your group.

Actions:

- The government took a pioneering and very successful approach to the use of tobacco, Ireland’s number one addictive drug and cause of premature deaths, in our society. To assist its various measures set up the Office of Tobacco Control.
We are of the opinion that an **Office of Alcohol Control** needs to be established along similar lines (and independent from the Dept. of Health). This Office would be responsible for education, enforcement of national regulations / laws governing alcohol use and consumption.
- Reversal of liberal approach to licensing laws.
The Community Forum suggests the following be implemented

- The introduction of tougher penalties for breaches of the licensing and related alcohol abuse laws. We would encourage the setting of a much lower threshold for the loss of licence for breaches of the licensing laws.
- Reversion to a more restricted opening hours regime for licensed premises.
- Reduction in the number of outlets that are permitted to sell alcohol and a reduction in the times outlets/off licences are permitted to sell alcohol.
- Bring about a material reduction in frequency of special exemptions.
- In relation to breaches of the law in this area we wish to see much harsher sanctions being applied to those who breach the law in relation to providing alcohol to under age drinkers. A new offence of **facilitating the acquisition of alcohol for the purposes of supply to a minor** should be introduced. Heavy fines should apply on conviction.
- Ensure that an effective detection and enforcement regime is put in place.
 - Review of Planning laws and regulations to ensure that licensed premises and off licences are suitably located and not in close proximity to public open spaces, schools and other social amenities.
 - Reduction in the permitted level of alcohol drivers can have in their system.
 - Introduction of a new category of offence, whereby a manslaughter/murder charge can be brought where someone is killed by a driver, who is under the influence of alcohol or drugs whilst operating a vehicle.
 - A system is designed as a priority to ensure that ALL persons who exceed the permitted limit of alcohol for drivers can have their driving licences suitably endorsed (currently non national drivers escape enforcement because we have no effective method for recording points on their licences).
 - Consideration of confiscation of a vehicle where certain limits/ thresholds for alcohol in the blood are exceeded for drivers convicted of operating a vehicle whilst under the influence of alcohol.
 - To combat anti social activity associated with drinking in public open spaces it is recommended that the Community Gardaí be tasked and importantly, resourced, to increase patrols in areas where 'knacker' drinking is likely to occur.
 - To counter anti social type behaviour, the Gardaí should be instructed to more regularly enforce the provisions of bye laws in the various functional authority areas throughout the country (**Prohibition against the Consumption of Alcohol in Public Places**).

Economic

We believe that the explosion in alcohol consumption here is on the one part due to our improved economic circumstances, it is also due in no small part to the relative 'cheapness' of the product.

It is our opinion that by making alcohol more expensive we will restrict its attractiveness to our most vulnerable users, the under age consumer.

The cost to the exchequer, business, and society of alcohol related illness, harm, and loss of or diminution of economic output is enormous.

Government policy over recent years has been moving towards the implementation of the polluter (user) pays principle across a wide range of areas.

We for example have now a policy of ensuring that the elderly contribute towards their own nursing home care.

Accordingly, we believe that fiscal policy should now directed towards recovering from the users of alcohol the enormous costs that society are burdened with as result of the willing abuse of alcohol by its users.

Actions:

- Eliminate below cost selling of alcohol by vendors. Promotions also to be covered by this initiative. No happy hours. Under age users and third level colleges students are vulnerable to these selling techniques.
- Increase taxes / duties on alcoholic products, paying special attention to products which are favoured by under age drinkers. Whilst we are aware of the impacts on the Consumer Price Index of tax increases we believe that this can be overcome with the proper management of the suggestion.
- Introduce a special charge by the Health Services Executive for alcohol related treatment in the Accident & Emergency units in hospitals.
- In the longer term consider how alcohol abuse related patients can be made to contribute towards their own medical care cost.

Socio Cultural

As a Nation we have a problem with the excessive consumption of and abuse of alcohol.

Since the mid 1990s we have been receiving a large number of immigrants, many from countries who also have a reputation for being able to consume alcohol. However, in chatting to a number of these new arrivals (who are not shy of alcohol) over the years they are amazed at our destructive attitude towards alcohol usage and enjoyment.

Drinking to excess or binge drinking is alien to many other cultures, in Ireland (and UK it must be said) it is increasingly the norm.

We need to prioritise and address this problem amongst our younger members of society as it is they who are most affected by this trend.

Many believe that the opportunity to undertake continuous drinking (no longer any 'Holy Hour' to enforce a break) is leading to and fuelling the increase incidence of alcohol related harm to persons (assaults, public order related offences).

Members of the Community Forum executive have received feedback from affiliated groups of the growing social problems associated with the very significant increased levels of **Home Drinking**, particularly amongst women with families.

We believe the proliferation of outlets permitted to sell alcohol (and the extended opening hours) has greatly contributed to this unwelcome development.

We need to counter the impression that alcohol is associated with glamour in society and tell it as it is with regards to the effects of excessive consumption and impacts on society from its abuse.

We believe that the study group should recommend that restrictions should be placed on the Irish television media/ production companies on the permitted amount of occasions that scenes are shot in licensed premises. The current position is that we seem to display very few options on Irish television as to where people can go to socialise, and even then, all the 'craic' seems to be in the pubs(on TV that is). TV3 has regularly (once a week at least) devoted an early morning slot to alcoholic beverages!

We particularly need to decouple the use of sponsorship of sport by the alcohol industry (including the purchase by publicans of football kits for under age players). We have numerous bad examples of how this is affecting our youth.

We need to re-educate people as to how to safely enjoy alcohol.

As part of such a strategy, a regular and creative health promotion campaign needs to be directed at our school children to sow the seeds of responsible alcohol consumption.

We believe that the promotion of sport and alternative supervised local meeting places for our youth is vital in counteracting the 'drink' culture. Examples to work on and develop are those of the **No Name Clubs**. Local Authorities must accept that they must take on the responsibility for managing such clubs and facilities (and central Government must accept that the Local Authorities be funded to do so). Communities cannot be expected to 'volunteer' to operate and be responsible for such facilities. In most progressive EU states such schemes exist and operate successfully.

This section needs to be tied in with the planning of new/existing communities – which to date we have largely failed by failing to provide the necessary social infrastructure to assist the formation of communities in newly built areas. Ever notice how quick we are to provide a local pub in a new area?

Finally many in Ireland believe that it is an acceptable defence or mitigating factor to a crime/breach of the law to be drunk or under the influence of alcohol when committing a crime. The judiciary must not encourage such beliefs and should ensure that the sentencing of an individual is reflective of the seriousness of the crime – alcohol use during a crime should never be accepted as a mitigating factor.

Actions:

- Prohibit the sponsorship of sport by the alcohol industry.
- Offering our youth alternatives to drink/ substance abuse is vitally important.
- Design a health education awareness campaign for the various age groups regarding responsible alcohol usage. Involve relevant user age groups in designing campaigns for each target group.
- Reintroduction of the 'Holy Hour' in order to 'interrupt' continuous drinking.

- A Code of Conduct to be agreed with the Television media here with regards to the portrayal of alcohol on the television.
- Encourage a new ethos in those responsible for law enforcement and the administration of justice that the excessive use of alcohol will not be tolerated as an 'excuse' for breaking the law or used as a mitigating factor where it leads to the harming of another.

Technology

We should be seeking and investigating methods for the exploitation of technology to assist the relevant authorities in policing the alcohol industry and those who assist minors in breaking the law.

Actions:

- Place identification stamps on all alcohol products that are sold over the counter.
- A uniform and secure ID card is introduced to assist in the elimination of under age drinking. Persons under the age of 23 are required to produce the ID card, which would be recorded at the point of sale by a swipe card reader. The card reader will validate a card. If a card is found to be used to assist a minor breaking the law with regard to the obtainment of alcohol, the card will be confiscated and the owner fined if they permitted the party to use it fraudulently.

Summary

As a nation we are suffering a massive 'hangover' on a regular basis.

We need to change our attitude towards the excessive consumption of alcohol.

Whilst we can individually alter our behaviour to adopt a more responsible attitude towards the safe enjoyment of alcohol, we also need the government and other agencies to put in place a regulatory environment that clearly signals that 'time is up' and that 'last drinks are called for' our tolerance of the excesses associated with the abuse of alcohol.

Yours faithfully,

Appendix 1

Most dangerous drug?

Below are descriptions of twenty of the most dangerous drugs evaluated in a new study published in the Lancet medical journal.

The study indicated that the two most dangerous drugs (as measured by deaths) are:-

Tobacco

Street price: from £5

UK users: 10 million

UK deaths: 114,000

Tobacco is an extremely addictive drug responsible for 20% of UK deaths, a 10-year reduction of average life expectancy and 40% of all hospital illnesses.

Alcohol

Street price: from £1

UK users: 40 million

UK deaths/year: 40,000

Alcohol is a depressant but removes inhibitions at low doses. At higher doses, drinkers may experience slurred speech, reduced coordination, nausea and vomiting. Long-term use can damage the heart, liver and stomach.

Source: BBC Horizon TV Programme 5/2/2008

Note: whilst the above figures pertain to the UK – because of the similarities in the UK pattern of alcohol use with those in Ireland we feel that the above figures give strong indication of the extent of the problem here in Ireland