

## **Submission by Alcohol Action Ireland to the Public Consultation on Tourism Policy by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.**

Our heritage, history and hospitality are the bedrock of what Ireland has to offer. From our rugged coastline, rural bog lands to inland waterways, tourists can sample a feast of natural attractions. With a rich history which dates back to prehistoric times, Ireland prides itself in offering something for everyone, no matter what your passion. Our vast offerings of museums, magnificent houses and historical sites illustrate Ireland's past in a powerful fashion. Our vibrant cities have so much to offer with great restaurants, wonderful parks, shopping, and family friendly attractions.

The most recent Fáilte Ireland Tourism survey, 2012, stated that 97% of holidaymakers visited Ireland for its friendly hospitable people and 91% for its beautiful scenery. Visitors are also coming here because we are a safe and secure location, we have good range of natural attractions, interesting history and culture among other things. Among the top 8 reasons listed for visiting Ireland, alcohol did not feature in anyway.

Why then, with so much to offer, do we insist on thrusting a pint of Guinness into the hand of every notable dignitary that comes to town?

We all remember the successful visit of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip to Ireland in May 2011. Among their schedule was a visit to the Guinness Storehouse, where the pint of Guinness took centre stage.

That same year US President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle were pictured drinking Guinness in Moneygall.

These aren't the first dignitaries to be subjected to this routine. Former US President Bill Clinton got the same treatment, as did former British Prime Minister John Major and many more besides.

In June of this year, our Department of Foreign Affairs tweeted a photo of the Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper joined by his Minister for Finance Jim Flaherty clutching a pint of beer at the Guinness Storehouse in Dublin.

The tweet read "Sláinte! Canadian PM @pmharper & FinMin Jim Flaherty enjoy some Irish hospitality from our friend @guinnessireland".

Is this really the image of Ireland we want to portray?

We know that 1.5 million Irish drinkers drink in a harmful pattern. In 2011, the average per-capita pure alcohol consumption for everyone over the age of 15 was 11.63 litres; this roughly equates to a bottle of vodka per week per person over the age of 15. Given that 19% of the adult population are abstainers, the actual amount of alcohol consumed per adult drinker is considerably more.

The Government has this year committed to “Healthy Ireland” a new national framework for action to improve the health and wellbeing of our country over the coming generation. This framework calls for a “whole of Government” and “whole of society” approach to improving health and wellbeing’. Healthy Ireland’s target is to reduce the amount of alcohol consumed by people over the age of 15 years to an annual per capita consumption of 9.2 litres of pure alcohol.

Therefore, it seems at odds with this commitment that government departments, official tourism bodies, as well as politicians and public representatives would think it was acceptable to actively promote alcohol in this fashion.

We acknowledge that the pubs are very important to our tourism offering in this country and the popularity of the Guinness Storehouse, but let’s not forget that the drinks industry is hugely profitable so they surely don’t need the State’s support to market their products.

Why persist with this soft marketing tactic of alcohol when evidence tell us that alcohol was responsible for at least 88 deaths every month in 2008 and 1 in 4 deaths in young men were estimated to be due to alcohol.

We know that alcohol is a contributory factor in half of all suicides and in deliberate self-harm; it also increases the risk of more than 60 medical conditions – such as cancers;

We also know that alcohol;

- is associated with 2000 beds being occupied every night in Irish acute hospitals;
- is associated with harms to the baby because of mothers drinking during pregnancy and is a factor in unplanned pregnancies;
- increases the risk of children needing special care with an estimation that adult alcohol problems are associated with 16% of child abuse and neglect cases;
- was a trigger in a third of domestic abuse cases;
- related illness cost the healthcare system €1.2 billion and alcohol-related crime cost an estimated €1.19 billion, both in 2007; the cost of lost economic output due to alcohol was estimated to be €527 million in 2007 and finally, alcohol related road accidents cost an estimated €530 million in 2007.

The Department of Health recently conducted a survey that found – among other things that:

- there is strong agreement (85%) that the current level of alcohol consumption is too high;
- 70% know someone who drinks too much alcohol;
- 78% think that the Government has a responsibility to implement public health measures to address high alcohol consumption;
- 61% believe that the people who drink alcohol should contribute to the health-related costs of excessive alcohol consumption and that 42% believe the alcohol industry should contribute to these costs;

- 6 out of 10 people surveyed support minimum unit pricing of alcohol.

While we welcome and commend the Government's approval of measures to deal with alcohol misuse through the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill, a holistic approach to tackling alcohol misuse has to be taken by our political leaders and official government bodies including Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and Discover Ireland. Each Government Department and State Agency has to take a leadership role on this issue, and not be seen to promote alcohol to the exclusion of almost every other aspect of the Irish tourism product.

We would ask the Government to implement a new policy when devising the schedules of visiting dignitaries and to substitute the traditional photocall of the pint with a visit to an attraction of high heritage, scenic or environmental value. This would help boost the marketing activity of alternative tourism sites less well resourced and also reflect the rationale of visitors who chose to visit Ireland.

With so much more to offer in terms of our culture, history and our amazing scenery, why take the easy option and opt for the pint photocall.

**About us:**

- Alcohol Action Ireland is the national charity for alcohol-related issues. We are an independent voice for advocacy and policy change, working to reduce levels of alcohol-related harm in Ireland.
- We campaign for the burden of alcohol-related harm to be lifted from the individual, community and state, and have a strong track record in campaigning, advocacy, research and information provision.

29<sup>th</sup> October 2013.