

Submission to the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications on Alcohol Sponsorship of Sports

June 2013

Introduction and Background

Alcohol Action Ireland is the national charity for alcohol-related issues. We work to raise awareness of alcohol-related harm and the solutions needed to reduce that harm.

Ireland has a very harmful relationship with alcohol. It currently costs the State an estimated €3.7 billion every year, with alcohol-related health and crime costs alone each accounting for around €2.4 billion of that total figure.

The human costs are also high, with three people dying each day from an alcohol-related illness. The situation is not improving. Chronic alcohol-related conditions are becoming increasingly common among younger age groups in Ireland, including men and women in their 20s who have been drinking heavily since their mid-teens.

The Steering Group Report on the National Substance Misuse Strategy contains 45 recommendations to reduce alcohol-related harm in Ireland. These recommendations form the basis of the proposals being brought forward by the Department of Health for inclusion in the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill.

One of these proposals is to phase out all alcohol sponsorship of sports by 2020, with no new contracts allowed from 2016. Though the Committee's considerations on this matter relate specifically to this one proposal and its impact on our sporting organisations, it is important to point out that we at Alcohol Action Ireland do not see this proposal alone as the answer to tackling alcohol-related harm in Ireland – there is no single answer.

However, breaking the link between the alcohol industry and our sporting organisations is undoubtedly a crucial part of our response as a country to this complex and multi-faceted issue, if we are to finally make a real and lasting difference to our harmful relationship with alcohol.

Why does the alcohol industry sponsor sporting organisations and events?

There are few things in Ireland that can evoke feelings of passion, pride and unity like sports can. For those who participate in them, particularly our children and young people, they are also healthy activities and ones from which they can learn a lot about important values, such as fairness and teamwork.

Unfortunately, our sporting organisations are now also one of the primary vehicles through which the alcohol industry markets its products to the people of Ireland. We have to ask ourselves why this is – why does the alcohol industry pay so much money to be associated with our sporting organisations?

- Pairing a healthy activity, such as sport, with an unhealthy product, such as alcohol, makes that product seem less unhealthy and more acceptable and normal. It creates a culture where children and young people perceive alcohol consumption as a normal everyday part of life and see it as something associated with having fun and sporting success
- Alcohol sponsorship of sporting events, particularly those which are televised, also allows the alcohol industry to bypass regulations prohibiting alcohol advertising during times when large proportions of children and young people may be watching television
- Another feature that attracts the alcohol industry is sport's ability to evoke strong emotions and social identification among us. Products presented within these contexts at sporting events are more likely to be remembered, liked and chosen

Overall, alcohol sponsorship of sport works in terms of increasing sales and, as a result, alcohol consumption. If it didn't, the alcohol industry simply would not be spending so much money on it.

What is the impact on children and young people?

There is a significant body of evidence that shows that children and young people are not only exposed to a large amount of alcohol marketing through advertising and sports sponsorship, but that their behaviour and beliefs are influenced by these positive messages about alcohol and its use, increasing the likelihood that they will start to drink and drink more if already using alcohol.

This has been confirmed by several comprehensive studies, including one systematic review which included over 38,000 young Europeans. Further details on the evidence base are included with this submission.

Young people's drinking patterns have a direct effect on their health, development and welfare both in the short and long term and to say that children and young people are not influenced by alcohol sponsorship of sports is equivalent to saying that they only begin to see and hear on their 18th birthday.

Before the Committee earlier this year, the sporting organisations themselves acknowledged that their close links with the alcohol industry were not "ideal" and in "a perfect world" they would not allow themselves to be used to promote unhealthy products that cause so much harm, in so many ways, to the people of Ireland, particularly the young people who are most at risk from them.

Can sponsorship be secured from other sectors by sporting organisations?

This proposal does not seek an immediate ban, but that the sponsorship deals are phased out by 2020. We believe the country will recover economically over the next seven years, probably sooner, and that our sporting organisations will be afforded ample time to secure alternative sponsors.

The argument has been made that there are no other sponsors out there to come in and we are undoubtedly in a very challenging financial environment, but the fact remains that we are talking about some of the most popular and most watched activities in this country and they will always have the ability to attract sponsors.

[Recently published research into the Irish sponsorship market](#), shows that the number of sponsorship deals reported in Ireland for the first six months of 2013 is double the level of 2012, while the average term of these deals is also being extended. The research found that the Airline, Energy, Insurance and Retail sectors all look set to increase their sponsorship spend this year.

One of the biggest deals this year was that struck by the GAA with Liberty Insurance, which has replaced Guinness as one of three main sponsors of the All-Ireland Hurling Championship (joining Etihad and Centra), as well as becoming the principal sponsor of the Camogie Championship. There is now no GAA competition with an alcohol sponsor.

Other sponsorship deals within the GAA this year included Chill.ie and Cork GAA, while Hunky Dorys extended its sponsorship of Tyrone GAA to include the women's senior and minor football and camogie teams. Avonmore, Carroll's Ham and Donegal Creameries all renewed their GAA sponsorships this year, while Brady Family Ham took on the title sponsorship of Kildare GAA.

Other significant sports sponsorship deals this year included Bank of Ireland and Munster Rugby (they will replace Toyota as Munster's main sponsor from July). Bank of Ireland is already main sponsor of Leinster and Ulster Rugby, while Connacht Rugby's main sponsor is Mazda.

In May 2013, mobile phone network Three announced that they are to increase their sponsorship of the Irish soccer team and the FAI in a deal that will be worth an extra €4 million up to 2016, adding to the already committed investment of €7.8 million to the FAI by Three.

The proposal to phase out alcohol sponsorship also concerns the sponsorship of sporting organisations and competitions by alcohol brands specifically, so would not impact on those sporting entities, such as local clubs, sponsored by the outlets which sell alcohol (e.g. pubs, hotels and supermarkets).

In that regard we believe the Department of Health proposal to phase out alcohol sponsorship of sports is proportionate and the right thing to do.

Conclusion

Many young Irish people are drinking and, when they do, drinking to get drunk. Adding to this worrying situation is the fact that alcohol is now very cheap and widely available.

As Dr Bobby Smyth pointed out when addressing the Committee in April: “In addition to making changes to pricing and availability in order to apply a brake on Ireland's runaway drinking, we must also take our foot off the accelerator, and alcohol promotion, via advertising and sponsorship, is that accelerator.”

The same was true for tobacco advertising and sponsorship in sport and few would now question the decision to end that association.

It should also be noted that this Committee's predecessor, the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Sport, Community and Gaeltacht Affairs - in its 2010 report “[Combating Underage Alcohol Through Sport](#)” - states that:

As a matter of priority, the Government should examine the feasibility of phasing out, in as short a time as possible, alcohol sponsorship of sport. The problem is that this sponsorship provides valuable income for sporting organisations. However, these organisations should be encouraged to seek sponsorship from alternative sources and so break the close association between sport and alcohol consumption.

We would urge the Committee not to take a step backwards, but to recognise the clear and unhealthy impact of alcohol sponsorship of sports on our young people and their drinking habits, and the many problems that this causes for us as a society, by supporting the proposal to phase out alcohol sponsorship of sports.

The Evidence Base

There is a strong evidence base showing that alcohol marketing, including advertising and sponsorship, increases the likelihood that a young person will begin drinking earlier in life and, if they are already drinking, to drink more.

Some of the key studies in this regard are as follows:

[Report on the impact of European alcohol marketing exposure on youth alcohol expectancies and youth drinking](#): "Alcohol-branded sport sponsorship (similar to alcohol marketing practices in other media channels) can be seen as a serious but avoidable danger to adolescents' health."

[Does marketing communication impact on the volume and patterns of consumption of alcoholic beverages, especially by young people?](#) "Alcohol marketing, including advertising, sponsorship and other forms of promotion, increases the likelihood that adolescents will start to use alcohol, and to drink more if they are already using alcohol."

[Impact of Alcohol Advertising and Media Exposure on Adolescent Alcohol Use: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies](#): "This review found consistent evidence to link alcohol advertising with the uptake of drinking among non-drinking young people, and increased consumption among their drinking peers."

For further comprehensive studies and reports on alcohol marketing and its impact on the drinking habits of young people (as well as reports and studies on the extent to which children and young people are consistently exposed to positive, risk-free images of alcohol through advertising and sponsorship) please see the [Alcohol & Marketing Reports](#) section of [Alcohol Action Ireland's website](#) or call us on 01-8780610 for copies of the reports.

Statement to the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications by Alcohol Action Ireland

Dr Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist and Board Member of Alcohol Action Ireland:

We have a major alcohol problem in Ireland. It kills 1,200 people per year. There are 2,000 Irish people in hospital beds today due to alcohol use. The harms generated by alcohol are felt not just by the drinker, but by those around them also. 10% of Irish children say their lives have been adversely affected by their parents drinking. More starkly, it is estimated that parental drinking accounts for one sixth of all cases of child abuse and neglect. How strange these innocent victims of our drinking culture must find it looking out into an Ireland that chooses to bombard them with positive images of alcohol, linking it to fun, social and sporting prowess.

Alcohol Action Ireland was one of a vast number of stakeholders on the National Substance Misuse Strategy steering group. As you do, that group recognised that this is a complex health & social problem with many factors influence consumption, and therefore requires a multi-pronged approach. Today we are discussing just one of the dozens of recommendations from that report, in isolation. There is a danger of failing to see the big picture. In addition to making changes to pricing and availability in order to apply a brake on Ireland's runaway drinking, we must also take our foot off the accelerator, and alcohol promotion, via advertising and sponsorship is that accelerator.

While common sense tells us that sponsorship promotes consumption, with typical arrogance the Alcohol Industry, and those in receipt of its money, demand that we provide them with evidence that it does. It is this multi-billion euro industry that should be required to provide proof. If they have proof that alcohol sponsorship does nothing to increase alcohol related harm, than Alcohol Action Ireland would have no issue with this activity.

Although the recession has caused per capita consumption to fall slightly, Irish adult drinkers still consume the equivalent of one bottle of whiskey on average, for each man and woman, per week, this average being well into the range of hazardous drinking. The My World survey in 2012 demonstrated that the majority (two thirds) of young Irish men use alcohol in a manner that warrants a health intervention based upon WHO criteria, the survey using the AUDIT screening instrument. With 72,000[^] babies born each year, our country now functions as a conveyor belt producing very heavy drinkers, each of whom then generates great profits for the alcohol industry.

The sports in receipt of the bulk of drink industry money are rugby, soccer and Gaelic games. These sports are played typically by young men aged 15-29 years. Young men tend to be healthy. The two big things which kill them are suicide and accidents. We all know that alcohol commonly has a role in accidents. We know from Irish research that alcohol is a contributory factor in half of all suicides and that the majority of young men who kill themselves are drunk at the time. Overall, it is estimated that alcohol is responsible for one in every four deaths among young men, the very demographic that plays rugby and soccer. There is **no** product on the planet that causes more deaths and social problems in young men. There is no product on the planet that could more inappropriately be promoted by these sporting organisations. Indeed in terms of the harms experienced by the demographic who play these sports it would make more sense to allow them be sponsored by cigarette companies, as tobacco "just" kills people in their 50s, 60s and 70s.

The age of onset of drinking is now typically around 15 years. There are 60,000 children who are going to start drinking this year. 300,000[^] Irish children are going to commence their drinking careers in the next five years. Because these children are going to grow up to be among the heaviest drinkers on earth by the time they are 20 years old, it is they who are the real targets of alcohol advertising and sponsorship. From a business perspective it is vital to establish brand awareness, and ideally brand loyalty, prior to commencing drinking.

As was pointed out just last weekend by a former President of the GAA, Dr Michael Loftus - through our ridiculously lax advertising and sponsorship guidelines, we facilitate the drinks industry to groom our children, in the interests of profit, to become the next generation of hard and heavy Irish drinkers.

Professor Joe Barry, Public Health Specialist and Board Member of Alcohol Action Ireland:

I would now like to follow on from what Dr Smyth has told you and thank you on my own behalf for affording us the hearing today. We read with interest the transcripts of your interaction with the three main sporting bodies on the 27th of March. I have played sport myself from my early teens and my undistinguished sporting career ended with about 5 years playing in an over 35s Soccer league. I continue to enjoy watching and attending all codes and agree that sporting organisations have a very important part to play in this country. I was therefore saddened to read what the heads of the IRFU, FAI and GAA said to you.

Alcohol marketing and advertising does work and it influences young people's alcohol beliefs and behaviour. The alcohol companies would not spend so much on marketing and advertising if it did not work. We have much evidence that young people exposed to alcohol branding begin drinking at an earlier age and that can lead to dependence in adulthood.

A study commissioned by the Department of health in 2001 showed that alcohol advertisements were the favourite ads among children. In the US in 2006 it was shown that young people who watched more alcohol ads on television were more likely to have ever drunk beer. In both Australia and New Zealand sportspeople exposed to alcohol sport sponsorship had higher drinking scores. Across Europe it has been demonstrated that youth exposure to alcohol marketing is associated with the likelihood that adolescents will start to drink alcohol, and will increase their drinking if already started. Most recently, a study funded by the 7th framework programme of the European Commission and carried out among 6500 children aged 13 to 15 showed an association between exposure to alcohol sports sponsorship and increased drinking in these schoolchildren.

To re-iterate, the sporting bodies and the alcohol industry are incorrect when they state that there is no evidence that sports sponsorship by drinks companies influences children-and that is what they are- to drink.

The measures we are hoping will be brought in in relation to breaking the link between sporting bodies and alcohol marketing are a crucial part of our response as a country. We have a big drinking problem in this country and many of our young people are storing up trouble for themselves and their families in the future. Sport is a very important part of our culture and long may it remain so-but let it not be dependent on alcohol money as now seems to be the case.

I would like to end with an appeal to you all. You are our legislators. Only you can implement some of the recommendations being sought. Self regulation does not work as we have seen to our cost in other

areas of public life.

I am happy to elaborate on any of these points or answer any questions. Thank you for your attention.