

## **SUBMISSION TO THE WORKING GROUP ON SPORT SPONSORSHIP BY THE ALCOHOL INDUSTRY**

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### **ALCOHOL ACTION IRELAND**

**25<sup>th</sup> June 2009**

Alcohol Action Ireland is the national charity for alcohol-related issues. The following is in response to the Chief Medical Officer's invitation to submit our views on the issue of the alcohol industry sponsorship of sports and the submission has been structured around the questions we were asked to consider.

We would preface this submission by acknowledging the vital role sport plays in Ireland both on a local and national level and the positive health associations and social capital dividends it provides. It is for these very reasons that we would argue the following:

- The public association of alcohol products and sports obscures the connection between alcohol and mental and physical harms
- These harms disproportionately impact on children and young people
- Sport appeals to audiences across age – it enables alcohol producers to circumvent advertising restrictions and penetrate the youth market largely through increasing brand awareness

While much of the argument around the alcohol industry's sponsorship of sports pivots on the revenue generated by the sporting organisations and the development opportunities this revenue affords, the following observation seems relevant: this is a business transaction not an exercise in altruism – it is a mutually beneficial financial exercise for both parties.

It would be remiss to not acknowledge the legitimate concerns sports organisations have in relation to the potential loss of revenue if alcohol producers were to cease the sponsorship of sports. It would be equally remiss, however, not to acknowledge the costs of alcohol-related harm to those who participate and watch sports. The following submission will detail particular areas of concern but top-line these include: a 30% increase among young girls for alcohol-related hospital admissions; youth alcohol use topping the list of problems faced by 85% of Garda Youth Diversion Projects with alcohol as a key factor in 50% of youth crime, the vast majority community and public order based; suicide is the leading cause of death in young Irish adults and although many factors are involved in suicide, the link between alcohol use and suicide has been well established.

In 2005, Alcohol Action Ireland commissioned leading market research firm Millward Brown to carry out a national survey on attitudes to alcohol. The question asked whether the sponsorship of sports by the alcohol industry should be brought to an end: 39% of respondents said yes and 35% said no with 26% undecided. A fairly even split, that provokes the following questions:

- Will the general public want to continue to absorb the health, social and financial costs associated with alcohol – how acceptable will alcohol sponsorship of sports be in a deteriorating economic environment?
- In the context of social capital and the dividends sports delivers – is it good for long term development of sporting associations to be financially dependent on a product that deliver real harms to individuals, families and communities?
- What is the ethical/ financial basis of government and statutory bodies supporting the financial relationship of a product that causes significant harm to citizens and is a massive financial draw on the public purse particularly at a time when vital services are facing cut backs?

Our intention in posing these questions is to contribute to constructive debate around the issue. We have a choice to make and each choice will bring costs and benefits, the question is who will bear the costs and who will derive the benefits.

### ***Alcohol Sponsorship and Alcohol Use***

The promotion of alcohol products through sponsorship reaches the sports audience regardless of age, shaping and influencing the attitudes and preferences of children and adults alike. Alcohol sports sponsorship embeds alcohol products in the daily life and activities of consumers and potential consumers, tapping into activities that reinforce cultural identity.<sup>i</sup> A recent Irish study considered the views of 119 children aged 10-11 years on 'what it means to be Irish'. Sport was described as a key feature of 'Irishness' by over 40% of boys, the main association being with Gaelic games. With regard to images of 'the Irish as we see ourselves', one in seven of the images created by the children contained a reference to drinking.<sup>ii</sup>

Sports sponsorship by the alcohol industry is a marketing practice which associates alcohol with sporting activities that attract young men, the group most likely to be the heavier consumers of alcohol. The effectiveness of linking alcohol, masculinity and sports was demonstrated in US study more than 20 years ago which showed that male teenagers consistently preferred beer advertisements with sports content. Correlations were found between liking such advertisements, levels of drinking and future drinking intentions.<sup>iii</sup> Children aged under 16 thought more positively about beer following the beer promotions televised during European Championship football in 2008. A survey of 1,688 12-15 year olds found that children who watched many football games had a higher intention to drink alcohol in the following months than children who watched games less frequently.<sup>iv</sup> The study also found that European Championship promotional items were very popular. Current research shows that children who own more items promoting alcohol, drink more alcohol, i.e., a positive relationship between brand ownership and alcohol consumption.<sup>v</sup>

A key consideration is the use of alcohol sponsorship in sports as part of an integrated marketing strategy, where different forms of communication are used to reinforce the marketing message to consumers and potential consumers, thereby creating a cumulative effect. Such effects are difficult to track and quantify, particularly when the marketing mix includes 'below the line' activities to promote alcohol products. A recent Irish report on youth exposure to alcohol marketing found that the majority of young people reported seeing the same alcohol products promoted through a number of media channels.

It is also important to acknowledge that Irish children make a significant contribution to profits from alcohol sales in Ireland. The Office of Tobacco Control estimated that Irish 16 and 17-year-olds spend an estimated €145m on alcohol each year.<sup>vi</sup> This figure does not include estimates of the spend by children younger than 16.

### ***Is it possible to establish the extent of alcohol sponsorship by the alcohol industry in Ireland?***

Alcohol Action Ireland suggests that the alcohol industry be requested furnish the working group with figures detailing their spend on alcohol sponsorship in Ireland. It would also be useful for the working group to be provided with any cost-benefit analysis data from the industry regarding the return on their investments in sponsorship of sports.

Qualitative data on the ways in which sports sponsorship is believed and shown to exert influence on consumer behaviour, as well as how impact on consumer behaviour is tracked by the alcohol and/or advertising industries, would also be helpful in answering the above question.

### ***Impact of Alcohol Use on Children and Young People***

Alcohol marketing and advertising, including sponsorship, increase the likelihood that adolescents will start to use alcohol, and to drink more if they are already using alcohol.<sup>vii</sup> This finding by the Science Group of the European Alcohol and Health Forum was described by the authors as “*all the more striking*” given that they had only studied a small element of the total marketing strategy.<sup>viii</sup>

When we consider the disproportionate impact of alcohol on the health of children and young people, as well as the increased risks of additional alcohol-related harms, our responsibility to better protect children from the promotion of positive images of alcohol and its effects through sponsorship becomes clear. The following points outline some of the main risks and impacts of alcohol use on children and young people:

- A teenager needs only half the amount of alcohol as an adult to experience the same negative effects<sup>x</sup>
- Girls and women metabolise alcohol at a slower rate than boys and men: it takes less alcohol to cause the same levels of physical damage, both in the short and long term<sup>x</sup>
- Alcohol use by children and young people can cause long term and irreversible damage to the developing brain.<sup>xi</sup> In January this year, the UK’s chief medical officer, informed by recent research on the serious affects of alcohol on the developing brain in adolescence, advised that children under 15 should not drink any alcohol.
- Alcohol use can also damage mental health.<sup>xii</sup> The teenage years are considered to be a time when lifestyle patterns are established. Using alcohol to change mood, mental state, or to cope, can mean children and young people pass up more learning opportunities to acquire helpful coping and social skills. Worryingly, the ESPAD 2007<sup>xiii</sup> found that, compared to other countries, Irish children were more likely to say alcohol resulted in positive consequences such as ‘forgetting troubles’ and ‘feeling relaxed’. In addition, a recent study of Irish third level students who were regular, heavy drinkers found that they were less likely to use positive coping strategies when feeling anxious or depressed.<sup>xiv</sup>
- Suicide is the leading cause of death in young Irish adults, with Ireland having the fifth highest rate of suicide among 15-24 year olds in the EU. Although many factors are involved in suicide, the link between alcohol use and suicide has been well established.
- Alcohol use increases the risk of injury, accident and assault. One in six 15 and 16 year olds said they had an accident or injury as a result of their alcohol use with about one in seven saying they got into a physical fight.<sup>xv</sup>

The 2007 ESPAD study warns “there is still a major issue about drunkenness” among Irish 15 and 16 year olds who reported being drunk more often than their counterparts in most other European countries.

***In acknowledging the existence of various codes on advertising and sponsorship by the alcohol industry what further practical steps might be taken to reduce the exposure of young people to sponsorship?***

Children and young people cannot be viewed in isolation from the world in which they live. If we are to reduce the exposure of young people to sponsorship by the alcohol industry, we need to reduce the levels of sponsorship viewed by all. Children and young people cannot be expected to simply ignore alcohol sponsorship until they reach the legal age for purchasing alcohol. If we wish to prevent the exposure of children to the promotion of alcohol through sport sponsorship, we need to establish a timeline for action to end alcohol sponsorship of sports.

Children have a right to be protected from the marketing of alcohol. The WHO's European Charter on Alcohol (1995) calls on member states to create alcohol policies and programmes that give expression to five key ethical principles and goals, one of which is specific to children and adolescents. It states that

*All children and adolescents have a right to grow up in an environment protected from the negative consequences of alcohol consumption and, to the extent possible, from the promotion of alcoholic beverages.*

However, Irish children are continuously exposed to alcohol marketing which creates and reinforces positive images and attitudes towards alcohol and its use, free from any negative consequences for the drinker or for those around them. The journey to school alone can expose a child to alcohol sports sponsorship on a bus shelter, on advertisements for alcohol sponsored sports and teams on the bus or DART, as well as in magazines and newspapers, and in outdoor advertising for alcohol sponsored sports events.

***Conclusion***

Alcohol Action Ireland fully supports the phasing out of alcohol industry sponsorship of sports. Alcohol can cause a range of serious harms to children and young people and carries increased risk of harm when compared to alcohol use by adults. Alcohol Action Ireland believes that children and young people need and deserve protection from alcohol sponsorship of sports, a practice which promotes positive and risk free images of alcohol, and one which influences attitudes to alcohol and alcohol consumption.

As such, there exists the need to develop an action plan to begin phasing out the sponsorship of sports by the alcohol industry, one which will include a deadline for a complete ban of alcohol sponsorship of sports. Alcohol Action Ireland would like to see such a ban put on a legislative basis.

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<sup>i</sup> Buchanan and Lev (1989) cited in Babor T et al (2003) *Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity – Research and Public Policy*. World Health Organisation & Oxford Press

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- <sup>ii</sup> Waldron, F. & Pike, S. (2006) *What does it mean to be Irish? Children's construction of national identity*. Irish Educational Studies 25:2, 231-251
- <sup>iii</sup> Slater et al (1996,1997) cited in Babor T et al (2003) *Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity – Research and Public Policy*. World Health Organisation & Oxford Press
- <sup>iv</sup> EUCAM.com (09.02.09) *Beer Promotion During EC Football Popular Among Youth Under the Age of 16*
- <sup>v</sup> McClure, A.C., Stoolmiller, M., Tanski, S.E., Worth, K.A. & Sargent, J.D. (2008). *Alcohol branded merchandise and its association with drinking attitudes and outcomes among U.S. adolescents*. To be published in Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine
- <sup>vi</sup> Office of Tobacco Control (2006) *Children, Youth and Tobacco: Behaviour, Perceptions and Public Attitudes*
- <sup>vii</sup> Scientific Opinion of the Science Group of the European Alcohol and Health Forum (2009) *Does marketing communication impact on the volume and patterns of consumption of alcoholic beverages, especially by young people? – a review of the longitudinal studies*; Anderson, P. et al (2009) *Impact of Alcohol Advertising and Media Exposure on Adolescent Alcohol Use: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies*. Alcohol and Alcoholism, pp.1-15, 2009
- <sup>viii</sup> Anderson, P. et al (2009) *Impact of Alcohol Advertising and Media Exposure on Adolescent Alcohol Use: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies*. Alcohol and Alcoholism, pp.1-15, 2009. This study found consistent evidence linking alcohol advertising and promotion with increased alcohol consumption by young people and earlier onset of drinking among non-drinkers. The study reviewed 13 studies of over 38,000 young people
- <sup>ix</sup> American Medical Association cited in Mongan et al (2007) *Health Related Consequences of Problem Alcohol Use*. Overview 6. Dublin: Health Research Board
- <sup>x</sup> Between 1995 and 2004, there was an increase of 29% in the proportion of teenage girls aged under 18 discharged from hospital for alcohol-related conditions compared to an increase of 9% for males under 18
- <sup>xi</sup> Hope A (2008) *Alcohol-related harm in Ireland*. HSE – Alcohol Implementation Group
- <sup>xii</sup> Mental Health Foundation (2006) *Cheers? Understanding the Relationship Between Alcohol and Mental Health*
- <sup>xiii</sup> Hibell B, Andersson B, Bjarnason T, Ahlström S, Balakireva O, Kokkevi A, Morgan M (2009) *The ESPAD Report 2007. Alcohol and Other Drug Use Among Students in 35 European Countries*. The Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN) and the Pompidou Group at the Council of Europe. Stockholm: Sweden
- <sup>xiv</sup> Hope, Dring & Dring (2005) *CLAN (College Lifestyle and Attitudinal National) Survey*. Health Promotion Unit, Department Health and Children
- <sup>xv</sup> Hibell et al