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Opening statement to Oireachtas Committee on Justice re Sale of Alcohol Bill

Background

Alcohol Action Ireland is the independent advocate for reducing alcohol harm. We do not receive or solicit any funding from the alcohol industry.

We have previously made a submission to the Department of Justice public consultation on the proposed Sale of Alcohol Bill in January 2022. We have also submitted evidence to the Oireachtas Committee on Justice in December 2022 on our concerns about the General Scheme of the Bill.

Statement

I would like to thank the members of the committee for the opportunity to make comments on the Sale of Alcohol Bill. We welcome efforts to bring together licensing regulations in a coherent manner. Our view is that this is an opportunity to make clear that the purpose of licensing of alcohol should be one of protecting public health. This should be stated clearly in the Bill.

It is also an opportunity to make statutory provision for the systematic collation of relevant data around alcohol. For example, disclosure of the level of annual alcohol sales should be a condition of licensing. Equally there should be statutory monitoring of harms such as alcohol-related assaults, domestic and gender-based violence, public order offences, ambulance call outs, admissions to emergency departments etc. These should be done with particular reference to location. Coupled with evidence of alcohol sales in specific areas this would allow for informed decision making about the granting or renewal of licenses.

We are also concerned that in a Bill which was ostensibly about the streamlining of legislation, there has also been a sudden move to increase both licensing hours and density of outlets. There is an assumption that to have enhanced cultural experiences and night-life there must be additional provision for alcohol sales. We challenge this view. Indeed, the success of the very family friendly Culture Night shows that this is not the case. Likewise, there is a view that tourism is dependent on the pub. Pubs are unique but are not central to the tourist offering and Failte Ireland visitor surveys confirm this.

Alcohol Action Ireland Directors Prof Frank Murray. (Chair), Catherine Brogan, Pat Cahill, Paddy Creedon, Michael Foy, Dr Jo-Hanna Ivers, Marie-Claire McAleer, Dr Mary O'Mahony, Dr Colin O'Driscoll, Dr Bobby Smyth, Tadhg Young

Patron Prof. Geoffrey Shannon

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The evidence from multiple jurisdictions is clear as outlined in our written submission to the Committee. Increasing alcohol availability whether through longer licensing hours or increased density of outlets leads to a range of harms. For example, a 1-hour extension of alcohol outlet closing times in Amsterdam's nightlife areas was associated with 34% more alcohol-related injuries, while a study in Norway found that each additional 1-hour extension to the opening hours was associated with a 16% increase in violent crime.

There is also a close association with increased levels of domestic violence. The corollary is also true. Restrictions can reduce both parental alcohol consumption and violence towards children. For instance, in the USA, it has been estimated that one less alcohol outlet per 1,000 people would reduce the probability of severe violence towards children by 4%. Such knowledge cannot be ignored in a country where every day 200,000 children live with the trauma of alcohol harm in the home.

Alcohol is responsible for 4 deaths every day – a third of them from accident or incident. It costs Ireland at least €3.7 billion annually, including €1.2 billion to the justice system. Without a change our GDP will be nearly 2% lower on average between now and 2050. Consideration should be given to a polluter pays principle and, like the measures in the Gambling Regulation Bill, include provision for a Social Impact Fund in relation to the licensing of alcohol sales.

We urge the committee to reflect on the facts and act to put public interest above vested interest.

Thank you.

Dr Sheila Gilheany
CEO Alcohol Action Ireland