

Self Regulation is no Regulation

European Policy Seminar demands political leaders grasp a ‘once in a decade opportunity’ to strengthen child health protection measures

Alcohol Action Ireland and EuroCare hosted yesterday (Wednesday) a policy seminar to discuss the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), currently before the EU institutions, which represents an important opportunity to strengthen measures to protect children from alcohol marketing.

Europe has one of the highest levels of alcohol consumption in the world and since the non-renewal of the EU Alcohol Strategy which expired in 2012, action to reduce alcohol harm has been effectively left to individual member states. The AVMSD therefore presents a rare opportunity to implement EU wide measures to protect children from exposure to alcohol marketing.

It is well established that advertising influences alcohol consumption and the appeal of and exposure to alcohol advertising is a contributor to underage drinking – a significant risk to the mental and physical health of children.

Effective regulations to limit children’s exposure to marketing of unhealthy products will better protect children and help empower parents in their efforts to educate children about healthy lifestyles. While the Directive has many positive aspects such as the recognition of exposure as problematic, it relies on weak policy measures like self-regulation, and fails to provide effective protection of children from commercial communications.

Speaking ahead of the Seminar, Mariann Skar, Secretary General, Eurocare said:

“We are deeply disappointed by the voting in the European Parliament and the General approach adopted by the Council in May. Knowledge gathered over the years, clearly states that restricting alcohol advertising is one of the crucial steps we can take to protect children. We sincerely hope the Member States will take this scientific evidence into account while negotiation Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) revision in the coming weeks. There are simply small changes that could be made to protect children from alcohol marketing and it not too late. This is one in a decade opportunity which European Institution have to grab and deliver strong protection”

The seminar was addressed by the EU Commissioner for Health and Food, Vytenis Andriukaitis, who in commending progressive public health initiatives and legislative programmes in Member States, such as those in Ireland, said:

“while there is no one silver bullet that can specifically stop the problems of children drinking so early, there is clear evidence from many international studies and institutions, that multi policy reforms across taxation, pricing, health labelling and robust restrictions on advertising and marketing online sales, are necessary”.

Ireland’s Minister for Health Promotion, Marcella Corcoran Kennedy TD, addressed the challenges in progressing such innovative public measures, especially in the absence of any significant policy framework that could rigorously protect children:

“Alcohol marketing is a powerful and sophisticated influence on children and young people's drinking behaviour and expectations. The current regulatory system does not protect children from exposure to alcohol marketing. Available research suggests that children and young people are exposed to positive images of alcohol on a daily basis; there is consistent evidence to link alcohol advertising with the uptake of drinking among non-drinking young people, and increased consumption among their drinking peers. The Public Health (Alcohol) Bill, currently progressing through the Irish parliament, is a start in legislating to protect children and adolescents from such marketing by alcohol companies.”

Addressing the Estonian plans for their forthcoming EU presidency, Maris Jesse, Deputy Secretary General Ministry of Social Affairs Estonia, outlined that Estonia had selected two central themes for its health priorities –alcohol related harms and e-health. Mindful that Member State initiatives on public health can often be diluted by cross border marketing, Ms. Jesse, said:

“Reducing alcohol related harm is vital to contributing to a healthy workforce and controlling the impact on our health services. Though generally regarded as a Member State competence, public health matters are not easily solved at a national level. During our Presidency, Estonia aims to address the cross-border issues of alcohol policy and promote the further co-operation of Members States on these matters”.

The seminar also heard from academics and policymakers from across the Union, who outlined the many obstacles experienced in developing viable measures that can address societal high-risk alcohol consumption and protect children from the related harms.

Marjatta Montonen, Special Adviser, National Institute for Health and Welfare, Finland outlined the lessons Finland had learned from its process of liberalising the alcohol market in the mid 1990's and how it had revisited the issue of alcohol marketing, and in particular, took steps to control the exposure of children. Most recently, two techniques common in the marketing of alcohol products through social media – gamification and social influence advertising - have been prohibited.

Myriam Savy ANPAA - L'Association Nationale de Prévention en Alcoologie et Addictologie, France, highlighted the presence in France of seemingly some of Europe's strongest legislation, once regarded as a model for alcohol marketing restrictions, but that has now been “weakened on several occasions under pressure from the alcohol industry”. Ms. Savy commented: “without a strong political will, across government and just at the Ministry of Health, reducing alcohol related harm will remain a long-term struggle”.

ENDS

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AVMSD #RegulateAlcohol

Editor Notes:

The EU's Audiovisual Media Services Directive governs EU-wide coordination of national legislation on all audiovisual media, both traditional TV broadcasts and on-demand services.

Last week (23rd May), the EU Culture Ministers adopted a General Approach on the revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) despite opposition from some Member State delegations. The decision paves the way for 'trilogue' negotiations between the Council, the European Parliament and European Commission on the directive which sets out the basic rules for the European audiovisual sector, including for TV and video-on-demand advertising and alcohol and food advertising, as well as advertising to children and self-regulation.

Goals of EU coordination

- providing rules to shape technological developments
- creating a level playing field for emerging audiovisual media
- preserving cultural diversity
- protecting children and consumers
- safeguarding media pluralism
- combating racial and religious hatred
- guaranteeing the independence of national media regulators.

Areas of EU coordination

The AVMSD governs EU-wide coordination of national legislation in the following areas:

- General principles
- Incitement to hatred
- Accessibility for people with disabilities
- Principles of Jurisdiction
- Major Events
- Promotion and distribution of European works
- Commercial communications
- Protection of minors

<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/audiovisual-media-services-directive-avmsd>

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 harm in Ireland and improve public health, safety and wellbeing.

We campaign for the burden of alcohol harm to be lifted from the individual, community and State, and have a strong track record in campaigning, advocacy, research and information provision.

Eurocare: European Alcohol Policy Alliance is an alliance of non-governmental and public health organisations with around 60 member organisations across 25 European countries advocating the prevention and reduction of alcohol related harm in Europe. Member organisations are involved in advocacy and research, as well as in the provision of information and training on alcohol issues and the service for people whose lives are affected by alcohol problems.