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## Commission adopts Communication on reducing alcohol related harm in Europe

The European Commission adopted a Communication setting out an EU strategy to support Member States in reducing alcohol related harm on the 24th October. The Communication addresses the adverse health effects of harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption in Europe, rather than alcohol per se. The communication makes clear that member states have different cultural habits related to alcohol consumption and responsibility for national alcohol policy lies with each member state. 'Acknowledging the role of Member States in this policy area the Commission does not intend to propose legislation at European level'.

European Health and Consumer Protection Commissioner Markos Kyprianou said: "Binge drinking, under-age drinking and drink-driving are real public health issues in Europe, especially among young people. The Commission is not targeting moderate alcohol consumption, but seeks to actively support Member States measures to reduce the harm caused by alcohol abuse. This Communication aims to promote discussion and cooperation at European level more actively by creating an to exchange of good practices. I also believe that industry can do more to reduce alcohol harm, promote responsible drinking and improve consumer information. The Commission is committed to supporting this process by bringing the relevant actors together,

promoting cooperation and funding projects in this area."

The EU acknowledges that alcoholic beverages are important economic commodities. They also represent a cultural value for several regions in Europe. The production, trade and marketing of alcohol contribute to economic growth in the EU. Nonetheless, in order to tackle the health issues, effective alcohol policies are necessary and require European Union support and coordination. The Commission considers that its main contribution to the strategy should be based on the existing approach of complementing national strategies in this area and therefore does not intend to implement the strategy through specific new legislative proposals. The Commission will report regularly on the implementation of measures to tackle harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption, as well as on the impact of the EU strategy set out in this Communication, based on regular reporting from Member States.

The priorities identified in the Communication are to:

- Protect young people and children;
- Reduce injuries and deaths from alcohol-related road accidents;
- Prevent harm among adults and reduce the negative impact on the economy;
- Raise awareness of the impact on health of harmful alcohol consumption

- Help gather reliable statistics and establish an alcohol and health forum.

The Commission has identified areas where the EU can support the actions of Member States to reduce alcohol related harm, such as financing projects through the Public Health and Research Programmes, exchanging good practice on issues such as curbing under-age drinking, exploring cooperation on information campaigns or tackling drink-driving and other Community initiatives. The Communication also maps out actions which Member States are taking, with a view to promoting good practice, proposes an Alcohol and Health Forum of interested parties and sets out areas where industry can make a contribution, notably in the area of responsible advertising and marketing.

### Commission action

#### *Efforts to reduce binge drinking*

In cooperation with Member States and stakeholders, the Commission will develop strategies aimed at curbing under-age drinking, by exchanging good practice on issues like selling and serving, marketing, and the image of alcohol use conveyed through the media.. It will support the monitoring of young people's drinking habits, with a focus on the increased drinking of alcohol among girls and binge-drinking.

#### *Consumer Education*

The Commission will explore, in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders, the usefulness of developing efficient common approaches throughout the Community to provide

adequate consumer information. 'Such reflections are particularly important as some Member States are planning to introduce warning labels (e.g. on alcohol and pregnancy in France). It will support Member States and stakeholders in their efforts to develop information and education programmes on the effect of harmful drinking. Through the EU Research Framework Programme, the Commission will launch research on young people's drinking habits in order to analyse current trends and motivations for drinking, as well as the wider determinants of youth drinking.

**Mapping out national action with a view to promoting good practice**

Member States have the main responsibility for national alcohol policy. The Commission's role is to encourage cooperation and coordination between Member States, and to complement their activities, for example through the funding of projects. The Communication maps out measures adopted by Member States to tackle alcohol related harm, which can facilitate the dissemination of good practice across the EU. Examples of national measures identified in the Communication include: action to improve consumer information at point of sale, on products or at the workplace; action to better enforce age limits for selling and serving alcohol; education of young people and parents; introducing a lower or zero blood alcohol concentration limit for young or inexperienced drivers, and for professional drivers; and enforcing counter-measures against drink-driving.

**Follow-up and consistency with other policies**

1) The Commission will set up an "Alcohol and Health Forum" by June 2007, to support, provide input and monitor the implementation of the strategy outlined in the

**Key data stated in the communication**

- Hazardous drinking is defined as above 20g a day for women and 40g for men. Fifty-five million adults are estimated to drink to hazardous levels in the EU.
- Harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption is stated as a net cause of 7.4 % of all ill-health and early death in the EU.
- In the age group of 15–29 years over 10% of female mortality and around 25% of male mortality are attributed to be due to hazardous alcohol consumption.
- Alcohol is stated as a cause in 16% of cases of child abuse and neglect.
- 25% of road accidents are attributed to alcohol consumption, and approximately 10,000 people are killed in alcohol-related road accidents in the EU each year, according to the study.
- The economic impact, including work absentees and premature death, is calculated to be £84bn by the report.
- Harmful alcohol consumption is estimated to be responsible for approximately 195,000 deaths a year

- in the EU, due to e.g. accidents, liver disease, cancers etc.
- Harmful alcohol use is stated as the 3rd biggest cause of early death and illness in the EU, behind tobacco and high blood pressure.
- Harmful alcohol use is stated as being accountable for some 60 different diseases and conditions, including lung diseases, breast cancer, mental and behavioural disorders, gastrointestinal conditions, cardiovascular problems, and foetal and reproductive disorders.
- Whereas 24% of Britons and 8% of Spaniards are weekly binge drinkers, the male binge figure for Poland is 38% and for Hungary it is 30%, according to the report.
- Europe is sited as the world's heaviest drinking region, with total adult alcohol consumption averaging 11 litres of pure alcohol each year. This, however, is lower than in the 1970s, when the level was 15 litres.
- According to the Commission, the total tangible cost of alcohol to EU amounted to 1.3% of GDP in 2003, equivalent to tobacco.

**European data in context**

**Percentage change in European alcohol consumption trends**

Country	per capita consumption 2003 (litres of pure alcohol)	% change 1980-2003	% change 2002 -2003
France	9.3	-37	-10
Italy	6.9	-47	-6.8
Spain	10	-27	3.9
UK	9.6	31	0.1
Portugal	9.6	-13	-0.6
Denmark	9.5	4.1	0.4
Ireland	10.8	47	0
Germany	10	-10.8	-2.2
Greece	7.7	-24	-1.5
Poland	6.7	-23	1.8
Hungary	11.4	-2.2	2.8
Belgium	8.8	-18.7	0
Netherlands	7.9	-11	-1.1
Czech Rep	11	14.6	2.1

Source: World drink trends 2005, AC Nielson and statistical handbook 2006

Communication. The Forum will focus on topics such as research, information and data collection, and education.

2) The Commission will improve coordination between drink-driving and road safety actions including those supported by the Public Health Programme and the Action Plan on Road Safety, to help reduce alcohol-related road accidents, and with a particular view to combating drink-driving. This will in particular address the issue of novice and young drivers.

3) The Commission services will work with stakeholders to create sustained momentum for co-operation on responsible commercial communication and sales. The main aim will be to support EU and national/local Government actions to prevent irresponsible marketing of alcoholic beverages, and examine data about trends in advertising. One aim will be to reach agreement with stakeholders on a codes of commercial communication implemented at national and EU level.

### *Responses to the strategy*

#### **EFRD**

EFRD Welcomes Alcohol Strategy But Concerns Remain:

“There is much to be welcomed in this Strategy, in particular a focus on alcohol misuse rather than alcohol per se and the reassurance that different cultural habits are respected through recognition of Member State subsidiarity” said Alan Butler, of Diageo, EFRD Chairman. “The Commission is to be applauded for rejecting attempts to hijack the Strategy by those who advocated a biased view of the evidence base and for recognising the positive role that

industry can play in being part of the solution to alcohol related harm. Concerns remain though that warning labels and de facto restrictions on commercial communications could surface during the implementation phase. We urge the Commission to exercise caution in compiling the evidence base in support of these policy options and reject such arbitrary measures.”

EFRD plans to address the needs of Europe’s policymakers by commissioning an independent Annual Review of European drinking patterns.

#### **WSTA**

WSTA broadly welcomes revised EU strategy to support member states in reducing alcohol related harm

Wine & Spirit Trade Association Chief Executive Jeremy Beadles commented:

“We are pleased that the European Commission has recognised both that the issue is not alcohol itself but addressing misuse and harmful drinking behaviour by consumers and that there are different cultural habits related to alcohol consumption in the various Member States.

It is clear that the Commission does not intend to implement the strategy through specific new legislative proposals, but rather by encouraging Member States to take action at a local level on a number of priority alcohol-related themes, including young people and children, road accidents and impact of alcohol misuse on the workplace.

We support the European Commission’s view that information, education and awareness campaigns are all important and agree that there is a need for better and more standardised data”

#### **CEPS**

Jamie Fortescue, Director General of the European Spirits Organisation - CEPS states: “We believe that the strategy offers a positive way forward. We welcome the recognition the Communication gives to the role the alcohol industry can play in reducing alcohol related harm, most notably in terms of promoting responsible consumption, and we for one will play our part in its implementation.”

#### **Brewers of Europe**

The Secretary-General of The Brewers of Europe, Mr Rodolphe de Looz-Corswarem, commented:

“The brewing sector is involved in numerous initiatives designed to tackle alcohol misuse, in partnership with EU member state governments and other stakeholders.

“The identification and sharing of the widespread good practice that exists and continues to be developed in countries throughout Europe will help in the process of learning what can work and encouraging the adoption of tailored and targeted solutions in member states.

“We have a positive role to play as part of the solution to misuse and promoting responsible consumption patterns within society. We look forward to working constructively with the European Commission and other partners in developing this process.”