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## SDACT Response to Draft Licensing Laws

The Southern Drugs and Alcohol Co-ordination Team (SDACT) is a multi agency partnership with responsibility to support the implementation of the New Strategic Direction on Alcohol and Drugs (DHSSPS 2006) drug and alcohol policy at Southern Health and Social Services Board level. The Team works with a wide range of agencies and community organisations to tackle drug and alcohol misuse in a manner appropriate to local needs and situations. SDACT welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation document in January 2006 and to consider the proposed changes.

### **1. Proposed extension of opening times to 2am**

- SDACT wish to express their opposition to this proposal
- The extension of opening hours to 2 o'clock will not do anything to eliminate the problem of large numbers of people coming on to the streets all at once, merely extend this process by one hour. This proposal will lead to further increased pressures on:-
  - Local hospital services (particularly A&E resources)
  - Quality of life for local residents
  - Ambulance and other emergency services with obvious financial implications for the agencies concerned.
- In Northern Ireland we are currently struggling with high levels of binge drinking, accidents and road deaths associated with people under the influence of alcohol, and high levels of work absenteeism. Increasing licensing hours during the week will only add to these problems. Extending opening hours to 2 am on all week days will decrease the timescale allowed for drinkers to metabolise alcohol before attempting to drive to work in the morning. Consequently, more people may be inadvertently attempting to drive to work under the influence of alcohol than ever before.

While SDACT supports the licensing objectives for N.I, ie.

- Promotion of Public Health
- Promotion of Public Safety

- Prevention of Crime and Disorder
- Prevention of Public Nuisance
- Protection of Children from Harm
- Fair Treatment of all Stakeholders

we fail to see how the proposed legislation seriously promotes the first 5 of these objectives.

## **2. Children's Certificates**

We are concerned that relaxation of the existing 9pm on children in licensed premises and registered clubs increases the potential exposure of young people to inconsistent and inappropriate messages on drinking. In this regard we would recommend that these family events be held away from main bars and lounge areas to prevent young people from exposure to inappropriate behaviour, language, etc. Furthermore, underage drinking is a major concern which must be reflected in any final decisions.

## **3. Exceptional Permitted Hours**

Our comment is "we feel that allowing premises to have extended opening at any time between 11pm - 11.30 am for the purpose of screening of sporting events and other special circumstances is open to abuse and excesses. We feel that very strict monitoring and enforcement of all agreed occasional extended hours is paramount".

## **4. Enforcement**

SDACT members felt that appropriate levels of enforcement are an absolute necessity. We support a tiered system of penalty points. We would seek appropriate consultation between PSNI and Council Licensing Officials regarding fixed penalties and/or suspension of licenses. To this end, we would recommend that appropriate agreed protocols are put in place. SDACT membership would like to see the introduction of test purchasing powers for Councils similar to those for cigarettes put in place as an effective deterrent.

## **Conclusion**

It must be accepted that some of the new legislation will give more structure and controls over licensed premises and, if strictly enforced, would be welcomed.

However, the increase in licensing hours as presented in the new legislation will serve no useful purpose other than to increase availability of alcohol. This in turn will increase alcohol-related problems and will be detrimental to the promotion of public health. Under the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs 2006-2011 (DHSSPSNI) there is an emphasis on decreasing the harms caused to both individuals and society from alcohol consumption and this will not be realized with an increase in licensing hours.