




IRELAND

# Ireland's first public health alcohol law:

## A PROMISING CROSS-SECTORAL APPROACH

SEPTEMBER 2023

In 2018, Ireland introduced the Public Health (Alcohol) Act, the country's first policy aimed at reducing alcohol consumption at a population level. Faced with a particularly high prevalence of alcohol consumption of 10.8 L of pure alcohol per capita, compared to an average of 8.7 L per capita for all OECD countries<sup>1</sup>, the Irish government opted to address the problem using a cross-sectoral approach. The law includes five main areas of intervention:

- 
1. a minimum price on alcoholic products based on alcohol content;
  2. a mandatory warning label on alcoholic beverage containers;
  3. restrictions on public advertising and sponsorship of alcohol products;
  4. a reduction in the visibility of alcohol products at points of sale;
  5. restrictions on the sale and supply of alcohol products<sup>2</sup>.

This law complements other measures previously introduced in Ireland, such as a blood-alcohol concentration limit of 50 mg per 100 ml of blood (0.05%) for drivers<sup>3</sup>. While there is still little evidence of the law's effects given its recent adoption, its comprehensive approach integrates several policies proven to be effective in reducing the purchase and consumption of alcohol, making it an inspiring example of public policy<sup>4,5,6,7,8</sup>.

### Context surrounding legislative changes

Alcohol consumption is a long-standing problem in Ireland. In 2009, the Irish Government put together a Steering Group tasked with documenting the risks associated with alcohol consumption and the leading public policies for preventing and reducing alcohol-related harm<sup>9,10,11</sup>. The Steering Group's recommendations were used as a basis for the public health bill initially presented in 2013<sup>11</sup>. Due to several complicating factors, it took five years for the bill to be signed into law. Notably, the fact that alcohol and related issues affect 11 different ministerial departments, including health, finance and road safety, made it particularly challenging to implement a truly cross-sectoral policy<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, lobbying by the alcohol industry, which wields considerable political influence in various sectors such as tourism and economy, also proved to be a significant obstacle<sup>10</sup>. The industry strongly opposed the adoption of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act, calling for several changes to the proposed bill and campaigning to delay its implementation. They used tactics including forming coalitions with retailers and mobilizing influential political partners to achieve their goal of slowing down the bill's enactment<sup>9</sup>.

## Overview of the Act and its provisions

Ireland's Public Health (Alcohol) Act presents a comprehensive strategy based on best practices in public policy aimed at reducing alcohol consumption and its associated risks<sup>2, 4, 5, 6, 7</sup>.

The use of a cross-sectoral approach at the national level is proving to be one of the most promising solutions in the field of public health, because it allows the implementation of a common vision through concerted action from different government sectors (e.g., finance, tourism and health) whose interests might otherwise differ when it comes to alcohol<sup>9</sup>.

The areas of intervention and their implementation date are detailed in Table 1. The government has put a monitoring system in place to ensure compliance with the legislation. Infractions can result in penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment in certain cases<sup>2</sup>.

## Impacts

Due to the Act's recent adoption, only one study conducted in 2021 has attempted to measure the impact on the public's perception of advertising in public spaces and the level of alcohol

consumption across the country<sup>14</sup>. While a decrease in perceived exposure to advertising was noted following the implementation, these results should be viewed with caution, as restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic may also have contributed to reducing exposure to marketing methods in public places<sup>14</sup>.

The gradual implementation makes it difficult to assess the overall impact of this legislative change. Nevertheless, the policies contained in this new law have proven their effectiveness internationally and are considered to be the most impactful in reducing the purchase and consumption of alcohol at the population level<sup>4, 5, 6, 7</sup>. For example, a 3% reduction in the sale of alcohol products has been noted in Scotland following the introduction of a minimum price on alcohol sold since 2018<sup>15</sup>.

Some of the new Act's sections have yet to be implemented, including restrictions on broadcasting alcohol advertisements on radio and television as well as the introduction of warning labels on all alcohol products sold in the country. Although some alcohol companies already provide warning labels on their products, several studies have shown that this form of self-regulation by the alcohol industry is insufficient in terms of prevention<sup>16</sup>. Indeed, the messaging on these industry labels often addresses only certain risks of alcohol and lacks uniformity<sup>16, 17</sup>. Implementing this measure as part of a comprehensive public policy is a promising approach reducing the harms associated with alcohol. With its comprehensive and cross-sectoral approach, Ireland's Public Health (Alcohol) Act is an inspiring example of public policy in alcohol harm reduction. ■

... a decrease in perceived exposure to advertising was noted following the implementation...



**Table 1: Areas of intervention of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 and implementation timeline<sup>2</sup>**

<b>October 2018</b>	Enactment of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act in Ireland	
<b>November 2019</b>	Restrictions on the use of alcohol brands and advertising in public places	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prohibition of advertising of alcohol products at screening of movies in cinema (with exceptions), in parks, in public spaces, in public transport and within 200 m of schools, daycare centres, and public playgrounds</li> <li>• Ban on all children’s clothing promoting brands of alcohol products</li> </ul>
<b>November 2020</b>	Reduced visibility of alcohol products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduction in the visibility of alcoholic products in “mixed retail outlets” (e.g., behind counters or not visible up to a minimum height of 1.5 m)</li> </ul>
<b>January 2021</b>	Prohibition of certain promotional methods	<p>Prohibition of several sales methods, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering alcohol products at a reduced price or free with the purchase of another product or service</li> <li>• Loyalty cards for the purchase of alcohol products</li> <li>• Short-term reductions on the price of alcohol products (3 days or less)</li> </ul>
<b>November 2021</b>	Restrictions related to sporting events and sponsorships	<p>Prohibition on promoting alcohol products during:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sporting events, events aimed at children or events in which the majority of participants are children</li> <li>• Events involving driving or racing mechanically propelled vehicles</li> </ul>
<b>January 2022</b>	Minimum pricing of alcohol products based on grams of alcohol per unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A cost of 10 eurocents/gram of alcohol was implemented to reduce the consumption of products with high alcohol content. Considering that in Ireland, a standard drink of alcohol contains 10 g of pure alcohol, each standard drink should cost a minimum of 1 euro<sup>12</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Coming</b>	<p>Warning labels on all alcohol products sold</p> <p>Reduced airtime for alcohol-related advertisements on radio, television and printed medias</p>	<p>January 2023: authorization from the European Commission for the introduction of warning labels on alcohol products to inform consumers about the health risks of alcohol consumption<sup>13</sup></p> <p>In accordance with the Act, warning labels on alcohol products sold in Ireland will have to include three elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a statement that alcohol is a carcinogenic agent</li> <li>• a statement that it is associated with liver disease</li> <li>• a logo representing the risks of consumption of alcohol during pregnancy<sup>18</sup></li> </ul>



## Références

1. OECD. Health at a glance 2021: Alcohol consumption among adults [Internet]. Paris: OECD Publishing; 2021. Available from : [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/health-at-a-glance-2021\\_33f1adad-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/health-at-a-glance-2021_33f1adad-en)
2. Government of Ireland. Public Health (alcohol) Act 2018 [Internet]. 2018, No. 24. Available from: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2018/act/24/enacted/en/pdf>
3. Government of Ireland. Road Traffic Act 2010 [Internet]. 2010. Available from: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/act/25/enacted/en/pdf>
4. Esser MB, Jernigan DH. Policy Approaches for Regulating Alcohol Marketing in a Global Context: A Public Health Perspective. *Annu Rev Public Health*. 2018 Apr 1; 39:385-401. Doi: 10.1146/annurev-publhealth-040617-014711. PMID: 29608872. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29608872/>
5. Gilmore W, Chikritzhs T, Stockwell T, Jernigan D, Naimi T, Gilmore I. Alcohol: taking a population perspective. *Nat Rev Gastroenterol Hepatol*. 2016 Jul;13(7):426-34. Doi: 10.1038/nrgastro.2016.70. Epub 2016 May 18. PMID: 27188823. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27188823/>
6. World Health Organization. Tackling NCDs: 'best buys' and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases. [Internet] 2017. Available from : <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/259350>.
7. World Health Organization. 10 areas governments could work with to reduce the harmful use of alcohol [Internet]. 2019. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/10-areas-for-national-action-on-alcohol>
8. Stockwell T, Giesbrecht N, Vallance K, Wettlaufer A. Government Options to Reduce the Impact of Alcohol on Human Health: Obstacles to Effective Policy Implementation. *Nutrients*. 2021 Aug 19;13(8):2846. doi: 10.3390/nu13082846. PMID: 34445006; PMCID: PMC8399748. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34445006/>
9. Lesch M, McCambridge J. Waiting for the wave: Political leadership, policy windows, and alcohol policy change in Ireland. *Soc Sci Med*. 2021 Aug; 282: 114-116. Doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114116. Epub 2021 Jun 10. PMID: 34192619; PMCID: PMC8287590. Available from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953621004482>
10. Lesch M, McCambridge J. Understanding the Political Organization and Tactics of the Alcohol Industry in Ireland 2009-2018. *J Stud Alcohol Drugs*. 2022 Jul; 83 (4): 574-581. Doi: 10.15288/jsad.2022.83.574. PMID: 35838435; PMCID: PMC9318702. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35838435/>
11. Steering Group Report on a National Substance Misuse Strategy. Steering group report on a national substance misuse strategy [Internet]. Department of Health, Ireland; February 2012. Available from: [https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/12388/2/Steering\\_Group\\_Report\\_on\\_a\\_National\\_Substance\\_Misuse\\_Strategy.pdf](https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/12388/2/Steering_Group_Report_on_a_National_Substance_Misuse_Strategy.pdf)
12. Movendi. Alcohol Minimum Unit Pricing Has Come into Effect in Ireland with Boost [Internet]. 2022. Available from : <https://movendi.ngo/news/2022/01/05/alcohol-minimum-unit-pricing-has-come-into-effect-in-ireland-with-boost/>
13. Conlon, C. Alcohol labelling is about letting consumers know the truth [Internet]. *Journal Irish Examiner*. 2022. Available from : <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-41048657.html>
14. Critchlow N, Moodie C. Awareness of alcohol marketing one year after initial implementation of Ireland's Public Health (Alcohol) Act and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *J Public Health (Oxf)*. 2022 Dec 1;44(4):e537-e547. Doi: 10.1093/pubmed/fdab353. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34632497/>
15. Public Health Scotland. Evaluating the impact of Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) on sales-based alcohol consumption in Scotland at three years post-implementation: briefing paper [Internet]. 2022. Available from : <https://www.publichealthscotland.scot/media/16357/briefing-evaluating-the-impact-of-mup-on-sales-based-alcohol-consumption-in-scotland-at-three-years-post-implementation-english-november2022.pdf>
16. Alcohol Health Alliance. Contents unknown: how alcohol labelling still fails consumers [Internet]. 2022. Available from: [https://ahauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Labeling\\_Report\\_2022.pdf](https://ahauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Labeling_Report_2022.pdf)
17. Houghton, F., O'Mahony, C. Ireland's inadequate alcohol warning labelling legislation. *Ir J Med Sci*, 2022; 191, 2263-2265. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11845-021-02831-9>
18. The Lancet Gastroenterology Hepatology. Distilling the message: Irish plans for alcohol warning labels. *Lancet Gastroenterol Hepatol*. 2023 Mar;8(3):199. Doi: 10.1016/S2468-1253(23)00014-6. PMID: 36773608. Available from: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langas/article/PIIS2468-1253\(23\)00014-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langas/article/PIIS2468-1253(23)00014-6/fulltext)

