



# Dancing at the Disco

**A case for Revising the Intoxicating Liquor Bill (2024) to provide for Regulation and Safeguarding of Underage Events on Licensed Premises.**

A report for Alcohol Forum Ireland by Paula Leonard & Dr Grainne Ketelaar





## Foreword

The teenage disco has, for over forty years, been a staple in the social lives of Irish teenagers. Despite this, very little attention has been paid to the regulation and governance of these events by Government Departments or statutory agencies; with only one national policy document in 2007 making reference to the need to mitigate the risks for children associated with their operation. The past 20 years has seen these events grow in both number and scale and they have become a key income generation stream for a dwindling nigh-club scene.

This report highlights the risks to children attending large scale discos on licensed premises, and makes recommendations on what provisions should be considered in the proposed Intoxicating Liquor Bill (2024) to mitigate these risks. It is the third in a series of reports from Alcohol Forum Ireland and the Irish Community Action on Alcohol Network on the Sale of Alcohol Bill (2022). The first, from leading global alcohol policy expert, Professor Emeritus Thomas Babor was published in May 2023. Drawing on sound scientific evidence from research on the late-night economy conducted across the globe, Babor's report focused on the negative health impacts likely to result from an extension to hours of trading, increased numbers and types of venues for alcohol sales, lack of regulation of drink deliveries and the removal of limits on the number of on-licenses. The second, from children's rights and legal scholar, Assistant Professor Dr Ollie Bartlett was published in October 2023. It concluded that the effects of many measures proposed in Ireland's Sale of Alcohol Bill will have a negative impact on lives of children in Ireland, particularly those living in homes where parental alcohol use is a significant issue.

This third report will be of interest to media, policy makers and, in particular, to parents. My role as CEO of Alcohol Forum Ireland regularly takes me to events in communities across the country where I have the opportunity to hear concerns about underage alcohol consumption and harm. Particularly in regional provincial towns across Ireland; parents and teachers regularly express significant concern about the health, safety and well being of young people attending large scale discos on licensed premises. However, those concerns have, prior to the publication of this report, fallen on deaf ears. They have been paid little attention by Government and policy makers and no specific provisions are included in the Department of Justice's proposed reform of alcohol licensing to safeguard children attending these events.

The Intoxicating Liquor Bill in 2004, created the conditions for teenagers to be permitted on licensed premises without a parent or guardian being present so long as alcohol was not being sold at the time. Twenty years later, the Department of Justice has an opportunity to prioritise the rights and well being of children through providing for effective regulation of and fit for purpose child safeguarding measures at these events.

While we continue to advocate and lobby on the wider aspects of the proposed changes to the licensing code in Ireland, this report focuses on one aspect of the proposed reforms. We have permitted and normalised the growth of large-scale events for children on licensed premises without adequate safeguarding or regulation. The Department of Justice needs, as a matter of urgency, to take the opportunity provided by the reform of licensing to address this issue. Quite simply, Ireland needs to do better.

**Paula Leonard**

CEO, Alcohol Forum Ireland

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### Executive summary

The General Scheme of the Sale of Alcohol Bill (2022) was published by the Department of Justice on October 25th, 2022. Many provisions of the proposed legislation have the potential to increase alcohol availability and facilitate access to increased drinking opportunities. This is of grave concern to communities, to experts and clinicians across the island of Ireland. In early 2024, Minister for Justice Helen McEntee indicated her intention to separate the Sale of Alcohol Bill into two Bills, bringing forward the first of these as the Intoxicating Liquor Bill (2024). She has indicated that this shorter Bill will contain the key measures including those designed to liberalise alcohol licensing law in Ireland, extending opening hours to 12.30am every day for both on and off licenses and introducing an annual late bar permit (to 2.30am) and an annual nightclub permit (serving alcohol to 5am, with a 6am closing time).

In 2023, Alcohol Forum Ireland published two separate expert reports which provided expert analysis and opinion on how the provisions of the Bill would contribute to alcohol harm through an upward trend in alcohol consumption and alcohol harm and increase the range of risks to the rights and wellbeing of children.<sup>1</sup>

This current and third report specifically highlights risks to children attending large scale discos on licensed premises, and makes recommendations on what provisions should be considered in the Intoxicating Liquor Bill (2024). To date, no meaningful consideration has been given in the various licensing laws to the safety, wellbeing and protection of children attending large-scale events on licenced premises.

There is a unique opportunity to rectify the risks to young people through careful consideration of the recommendations for inclusion in the Intoxicating Liquor Bill (2024) set out herein. In summary, the following clarifications would mitigate risks to young people attending events in licenced premises:

1. Explicit inclusion of the requirement for venues to adhere to National Vetting and Child Protection legislation. Currently licensing applications and renewals make no explicit reference to the requirement for security staff to be both Garda Vetted and Child Protection trained.
2. Revise the rules and conditions under which children can be on a licensed premises without being accompanied by a parent/guardian. Currently, children of 11 can attend the same venue as young people of 17 without any age restriction for attendance.
3. Explicit inclusion of adult to child ratios required by venues who operate these events. Currently there is no explicit reference to ratios in the legislation in regard to teenage discos which often cater for over 1000 young people. In addition, there is a need for male to female gender ratios to be stipulated for staff working at these events.

## The Sale of Alcohol Bill (2022) and the Intoxicating Liquor Bill (2024)

**The General Scheme of the Sale of Alcohol Bill (2022) was published by the Department of Justice on October 25th, 2022. Many provisions of the proposed legislation have the potential to increase alcohol availability and facilitate access to drinking opportunities.**

This is of grave concern to experts and clinicians across the island of Ireland. In February, 2024, Minister for Justice Helen McEntee indicated her intention to separate the Sale of Alcohol Bill into two Bills, bringing forward the first of these as the Intoxicating Liquor Bill 2024. This is a shorter Bill which contains the key measures including those designed to liberalise alcohol licensing law in Ireland, such as;

- The standardisation of opening hours for pubs and off-licences allowing licensees to trade from 10.30am to 12.30 am each day of the week
- The introduction of an annual late bar permit and an annual nightclub permit.
- The inclusion of new grounds of objection in line with the Zero Tolerance Third National Strategy to Tackle Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence.
- Strengthening of the powers of An Garda Síochána to ensure that public safety and order are maintained.
- To provide that licensing applications, which are currently heard in the Circuit Court, will move to the District Court.
- The inclusion of the provision for outdoor seating.



**‘Hmm craziness like, you wouldn’t have a got a seat because they would have been on the couches as they called them. It was just crazy. Like for that age group.... 14-15 they are going to engage in behaviour like that, but I think at the same time, I think it could be controlled better in there.....And I think what happened inside is one thing but what happened outside after is also more advanced and not always safe. I think so, yeah it’s crazy’. – Young adult**

## Dancing at the Disco – A right of passage for the Irish teenager

**Government and policy makers have a duty of care to children and young people, which necessitates that legislation and policy provide for effective regulation of the environments within which young people socialise. That duty must extend to ensuring that the principles and standards of child protection and safeguarding are applied to the spaces and places in which young people socialise.**

Here in Ireland, the teenage disco has long been a staple in the recreational, social and cultural lives of teenagers. The disco symbolises a rite of passage, marking the transition from one stage of life to another. There is a history of teenage discos in Ireland dating back to the late 1970s in both urban and rural settings. Throughout the eighties and ninties, these were predominantly events organised by local volunteers, youth organisations and sports clubs; in the main held in venues that did not have an license to sell alcohol. During this period, events were relatively small in nature with larger events accommodating up to a couple of hundred teenagers. In a study published in the Economic and Social Review in 1984, Irish teenagers identified a ‘sporting activity and going to discos as their favourite leisure interests’<sup>2</sup>.

In the intervening years, Ireland has gone through a period of rapid social, cultural and economic change. Legislative changes created conditions within which the teenage disco experienced a period of untethered growth. The disco for today's teenager is a highly sexualised, loosely supervised and large-scale event where, for many young people, alcohol and other drugs feature as part of the ritual of getting ready.

Thousands of young people now attend large scale events on a regular basis. Despite repeated concerns and occasional news reports about issues arising before, during and after some of these events; successive governments have paid little attention to the need for regulation or to the safety of children attending. There is also a paucity of research on this significant element of the social lives of young people in Ireland. There is anecdotal, but no formal research evidence on stakeholder views and experiences of the teenage discos. Anecdotally concerns have been raised about the underage discos from a range of professions; including health professionals, youth workers, sexual assault services, and the Gardai. There is also a lack of research exploring young people's views and experience of the teenage discos.

When it comes to supporting young people transitioning from childhood to adulthood, responsibility for managing the safety and wellbeing of young people as they navigate this transitional phase is shared by families, parents, schools, a range of statutory services and government.

## Teenage Discos – an important income stream for nightclubs

**Ireland has seen the numbers of nightclubs reduce significantly in recent years. Some estimates have suggested that there remain less than 100 late night disco venues in Ireland, down from over 500 twenty years ago, to 300 in 2009.**

Several factors have contributed to the decrease in the numbers of night clubs including cost; the significant price gap between drinking in a licensed premises and at home and the knock-on impact this has had on patterns of alcohol consumption where most alcohol is now consumed in the home. For young adults, that has translated to a proliferation in home drinking and house parties, where staying in is the new going out.

Against this backdrop, the teenage disco has become an important revenue stream for night club operators in Ireland. Tickets retail at around 20 euro, many events sell out in advance and venues often cater for over a thousand young people. In this context, it is of critical importance that measures to ensure the security, safety and protection of any individual under 18 years of age are explicitly provided for in the licensing code.

## Where's the Harm? Alcohol consumption and Irish teenagers

**As early as 2006, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern "about the high level of alcohol consumption by adolescents' and called on Ireland to 'strengthen its efforts to address alcohol consumption by children".**

While recent studies have pointed to the reduction in the number of young people in Ireland who are consuming alcohol, less attention has focused on self-reported levels of consumption among those who are drinking<sup>3</sup>. According to the HRB young people in Ireland are beginning to drink alcohol at a later age – but problem drinking remains a major issue among 15–24-year-olds. The average age of first use increased from 15.6 years in 2002 to 16.6 years in 2019. Moreover, more young people now abstain from alcohol (increased from 11% in 2002 to 26% in 2019). However, one-in-three drinkers aged 15–24 years participating in a population survey has an alcohol use disorder (AUD) (38%)



and, despite a decrease in the prevalence of binge drinking, adolescents in Ireland rank 7th out of 35 European countries for reports of being drunk<sup>4</sup>.

Using substances at a young age increases the likelihood of developing problems with alcohol and other drugs later in life. There are physical health risks associated with alcohol and other use, and adolescents who use substances expose themselves to those risks over a longer period of time. Family circumstances, socio-economic status and a lack of educational attainment can be underlying reasons for early substance use, and substance use in adolescents frequently overlaps with other mental health problems.



**'I remember even just like walking around and the boys would just be grabbing you and slapping your ass and it was just seen as 'oh, maybe he likes her'. And I'm like, well, he's actually violated me right now, like it's just it's crazy.'** – Young adult

## Legislative Context – Teenage Discos in Ireland

**The licensing code in Ireland is governed by numerous Acts, Statutory instruments and court rules, covering the period 1833 to the present. Licences for the sale of alcohol exist to regulate who may sell alcohol, from where they may sell it and how they may sell it.**

Intoxicating liquor may only be sold by a person holding a licence for a specified premises. There are myriad regulations to which the holder of an alcohol on–license must adhere, including public liability, fire safety, security and provisions relating to when, with whom and under what conditions people under 18 can be permitted to be on a licensed premises.

It is an offence to sell alcohol to a person under 18, to buy alcohol for a person under 18, to purchase alcohol under 18 and to drink alcohol in a public place under 18 years of age. The Intoxicating Liquor Act 1988 (s34) set out that no child was allowed on licenced premises unless accompanied by a parent or guardian. This restriction was amended by the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003(s14) which permitted young people aged 15 to 18 years to be in licenced premises up until 9pm, either accompanied by their parent/guardian (Intoxicating Liquor Act 1988 s34(2a)) or on their own (1988 s34(3)).

In the years that followed, a variety of licensed premises began to host teenage events to mark the release of academic results for the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificates.

In 2003 there were several warnings issued by Gardaí to licenced premises, because under their interpretation of the law, as licenced premises, the latest time at which 15 to 18 year olds could be in such premises was clearly stated as 9pm. There are some reports of garda prosecutions of venues/ proprietors of venues hosting such events where 15–18 yr olds were on the premises past 9pm, but where proprietors stated that no alcohol was being served. The DPP took a case to the High Court seeking a clarification of the law. The DPP's understanding of the 2003 Intoxicating Liquor Act was that children under 18 years of age could not be on licenced premises after 9pm. However Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, at the time, Mr McDowell and the Attorney General concluded that the 9pm watershed does not apply to teenage discos held on licensed premises when alcohol is not being sold at the time and in the section of the premises where the event is being held<sup>5</sup>.

In Oireachtas debates during the deliberations of the Intoxicating Liquor Bill 2004, consideration was given to extending the time at which 15 – 18 yr olds could be on licenced premises with the bar selling alcohol from 9pm to 10pm for some months during the summer. These proposals however were not included in the legislation. Other discussions focused on the wording needed to facilitate bar counters to be open so that proprietors could continue to serve soft drinks and operate tills. from the bar counter, as reflected in Mr McDowell's comments during the Committee and Remaining Stages of the Oireachtas debates:

*I was persuaded by their view that in future I should not act to inhibit somebody making use of the bar counter, basins, water supply, ice making machine, glasses and cash register in the context of an alcohol-free disco where the children would line up at the bar counter for something to drink. Sections 1(1) to 1(4) make it clear that no offence will be committed in future as long as the owner completely removes alcohol from that part of the premises and securely locks it away<sup>6</sup>.*

Since 2004, there has been a growth in the number and geographic distribution of teenage discos with events now regularly taking place across Ireland. A preliminary web search found between 8 to 15 teenage discos regularly being advertised around Ireland. The frequency of the teenage discos has increased in some localities since the covid restrictions ended. Some teenage discos are held in what appear to be smaller venues associated with sports clubs including football hurling and rugby. Others are specifically held in what are ordinarily adult only venues, (pubs and nightclubs, and in hotels) and some of these have a very large capacity, e.g. 2000 in Letterkenny.

## Mind the Gap: The Disco in children's policy in Ireland

**Ireland has a myriad of legislative and policy documents which govern how social, educational, sporting and recreational supports and services are delivered to children and how children are safeguarded when they are accessing them. However, there is a significant gap in both policy and legislation when it comes to the regulation and management of teenage discos.**

Significant progress has been made in Ireland since ratification of the UNCRC by the Irish Government in 1992. The Children First Act 2015 was enacted on 19th November 2015 and commenced in full on December 11th 2017. Since then, both the National Children's Strategy 2000– 2010 and Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures provided the policy context and leadership for the development and delivery of a range of supports and service to children<sup>7</sup>. In 2012, the referendum relating to children's rights was approved, ultimately recognising and affirming the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children for the first time. In 2023, the 'Young Ireland' policy framework for children and young people aged 0–24 was launched. It covers the period from 2023–2028, and envisages an Ireland in which all children and young people can fully access their rights.

The National Drug and Alcohol Strategy, 'Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery' (DOH, 2017) outlines a policy commitment to 'Prevent use of drugs and alcohol at a young age (Objective 2.1)<sup>8</sup> Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 16, the national policy framework for children and young people, 2014–2020, provides an additional context for this strategy to promote and protect the health and wellbeing of children and young people. In particular, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures commits to a whole-of-Government and whole-of-society approach to supporting children and young people achieve good physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing to make positive choices to be safe and protected from harm and realise their potential.

The broad and various policy programmes across Government Departments and statutory agencies make very little, and in the main, no reference to the operation, safety and risk management of teenage discos in Ireland. The only national strategy which has paid any attention to the need for effective management and regulation of teenage discos in Ireland was the 2007 National Recreation Policy for Young People (OMC 2007:64)<sup>9</sup>, a policy



which was not extended or replicated in the intervening years. This policy document estimated that, at that time 'about one quarter of young people attend discos on a weekly basis' and highlighted the fact that 'Discos can pose challenges for those involved in their organisation and management – challenges such as health and safety issues, or appropriate adult involvement'. It proposed that the approach taken by the GAF Health Advice Café in Galway which organised a teenage disco for 450 young people on Junior Cert Results Night in 2005 be considered. The measures outlined included the following:

**The Gaf Health Advice Café in Galway organised a disco for 450 young people on Junior Cert Results Night 2005.**

**The organisers considered the following factors were instrumental in its success:**

- The event was run in partnership with schools, the Gardaí, City Partnership and local youth services.
- Application forms were sent out through the schools.
- Forms had to be signed by parents and contact numbers provided.
- Parents were informed of policies and procedures prior to the event.
- Teenagers had to register on the night.
- Parents were informed if their teenager had alcohol on them on arrival at the venue.
- There was appropriate adult supervision at the event.

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No formal national implementation and enforcement approach to the management of teenage discos has been implemented since these recommendations were published back in 2007.



**'And so, definitely I'd say they'd need more bouncers in the toilets, and around the nooks and crannies, but as like, regards the whole event like, I don't know if they ever had the like, you know, a count on how many people or if there's too much people. I don't really remember them ever turning people away, but sometimes it ...the line would feel very like if you feel like you're gonna get, like, smothered or trampled, like sometimes it felt very like there's too many, too many people here'. – Young adult**

## Teenage Discos – media reporting

**Given the lack of any robust research regarding the experiences and risks associated with young people attending teenage discos in Ireland, this section of the report relies on a review of media reporting (2016–2023). The teenage discos around Ireland have come to the attention of the press for a wide variety of reasons, and sporadically. A web search, using the terms ‘teenage discos’ or ‘underage discos’ and ‘Ireland’ conducted by Dr Grainne Ketelaar in 2023 yielded numerous news reports. In this section, news reports from 2016 to 2023 are briefly summarised.**

### 2015 – 2016

Starting with the earliest reports, dating back to 2016 from the sample of hits returned in the web search; one news report refers to court case involving a rape of a 14 yr old girl by 15 yr old inside the Pulse disco in Letterkenny, which resulted in a jury conviction after a lengthy court case (Brennan, 2016<sup>10</sup>). In 2016, the Impartial Reporter<sup>11</sup> covered the use of breathalysers on young people attending the Switch teenage disco in Monaghan, after a 16yr old boy was hospitalised after arriving on a bus from Fermanagh to attend in a severely intoxicated state. The venue, Switch, is reported as having a capacity of 1,000 but frequently having more than 1,000 young people turning up to attend events (1400–1500 young people), with many arriving from buses from Northern Ireland (Tyrone, Fermanagh and Armagh) as well from across Monaghan county; and a result of that the venue eventually moved to become a ticketed event. Eight incidents of young people turning up too intoxicated to enter the disco were reported in 2015, with two Red Cross ambulances required to attend.

### 2017 – 2018

Several media reports from 2017 and 2018 related to events in Dundalk and Cork, highlight concerns about young people accessing alcohol before attending teenage discos (Donegal Democrat, 2017<sup>12</sup>; Moonan, 2018<sup>13</sup>) with reports highlighting the dangers of young people arriving dangerously inebriated. In Feb 2018, several media outlets covered a story where Gardai and health services reported substantial emergency service resources being required to deal with levels of under-age alcohol abuse at a teenage disco in Bandon Rugby Club. Three ambulances had to be dispatched to the scene and some teenagers were so drunk they needed immediate medical attention and help to breathe. Two critically-ill children were admitted to Cork University Hospital (CUH)<sup>14</sup>.

Further reports covered the hiring of a private ambulance by Bandon Rugby Club for a July disco after the furore caused by the February hospitalisations as reported by the Southern Star (2018<sup>15</sup>).

### 2019

In 2019 following the Bandon Rugby Club incident, and the submission of 3 licence applications for teenage discos in the context of concerns about underage drinking, Judge James McNulty, issued recommendations to organisations hosting teenage discos. As reported by Baker (2019<sup>16</sup>) these recommendations included: “parents having to sign ‘Parental Responsibility Commitments’, including a commitment for parents to be contactable by mobile phone; that they should be personally involved in the travelling arrangements for their child and that they will be required to accompany their child to the Garda Station for interview and to any court hearing in the event their child is found using or in possession of any drug”. Baker (2019) further reports on the judge’s recommendation that breathalyser tests of young people are carried out in circumstances where it is really necessary. The three licence applications were granted by Judge McNulty at this time.

## 2020 –2021

In 2020 and in 2021, several events linked to teenage discos in Letterkenny were reported. In 2020 a young man was physically assaulted by other young men as he made his way to the bus at the shopping centre car park after midnight. All young men had attended the teenage disco, and it was reported that words had been exchanged between them at the disco (Highland Radio, 2020<sup>17</sup>).

As Covid restrictions began to ease in 2021, some venues had begun to run teenage events again including the Pulse nightclub in Letterkenny. That year, Donegal Daily reported on a young girl who had travelled to an event in Letterkenny by bus, from Belleek, Co. Fermanagh and was refused entry as she was, according to the report, mistakenly accused of being drunk. Campbell (2021<sup>18</sup>) reported that despite efforts by her parent to communicate with the venue operators, she was denied entry; and had to wait almost 3 hours outside for the bus. Gardaí offered the girl and a friend who stayed with her the possibility of waiting in the garda station. The parent tried repeatedly to make contact with the venue by phone and social media and received no response. A journalist also emailed the venue, but likewise received no response. A report in Donegal Daily November 2021 announcement in Donegal Daily (Bonnar, 2021<sup>19</sup>) stated that in November, just a month after the aforementioned event, the Pulse had to issue a notice of temporary closure due to the Covid-19 restrictions.

## 2022

The sexualised environment, the risks associated with social media and inappropriate sexual activity are themes reported on in media in 2022. Calhane (2022<sup>20</sup>) reported in the Dundalk Democrat on cyber bullying which resulted from a TikTok account posting photos of teenagers at a teenage disco in Cork where users were asked to 'rate' the young people based on appearance. The Dundalk Democrat (2022) reported that Rev Discos in Cahir, Co Tipperary, issued a statement regarding assaults of teenage girls at one of their events: The statement reported on "a number of lads on Monday night (11 April 2022) going around touching girls' bums and smacking them.... This is not tolerated and this is assault". The report continues "Can we ask parents to speak to all your sons about respecting girls. Smacking and touching girls' bums is assault.

**In Extra.ie, DeBrun (2022<sup>21</sup>), reports concerns of a mother who emailed the Ryan Tubridy show (RTE Radio 1):**

*'Many of the girls go all out with fake tan and make up... Once you're at the disco the expectation is that you'll "meet" [kiss] someone... The "meet" is useless to you if you haven't been videoed by friends and shared on social media,' she wrote. The mother went on to say that videos are used as 'proof' to show 'you're desirable'. With boys expected to 'meet as many girls as possible, film it and then compare tallies'.*

## 2023

In an article in Irish Farmers Journal (Lenahan, 2023<sup>22</sup>) Anjelica Foley, the then 19 year old Welfare Officer for Irish Second-level Students' Union is quoted "it's very important to talk to both boys and girls about relationships, consent and boundaries as we are aware that non-consensual kissing and groping is a common issue at teenage discos".

# Summary of Research on Teenage Discos in Donegal and Monaghan

**In 2023, AFI commissioned a piece of qualitative research on the teenage discos in Donegal and Monaghan which was carried out by Dr Grainne Ketelaar (report forthcoming). The rationale for the research was to address the lack of research on the teenage discos in Ireland. Two case studies in Donegal and Monaghan were undertaken and these sites were selected on the grounds that the teenage discos running in these locations have been in operation for some time, and both have fairly large regular attendance by young people. In both areas, Gardai and a number of other stakeholders have been actively involved in local initiatives to provide for safer and more effective management of these events.**

Semi-structured interviews with a range of statutory and voluntary sector professionals who work with young people (15 interviews in total) and semi-structured interviews with 7 young people aged 19 –22 years old (6 female, 1 male) were conducted throughout 2023. The brief summary here outlines some of the key findings from those interviews.

The majority of the professionals recognised that whilst the discos are a source of much enjoyment for young people; they also involve a degree of risk for young people. Some professionals expressed concerns about young people being intoxicated and vulnerable, and also expressed concern about levels of sexualised behaviour amongst young people. Other concerns included a perception that the safety of young people is not always prioritised, with different risks presenting before, during and after the discos; that age verification checks are not carried out, and some also shared concerns around a lack of capacity to effectively supervise the numbers of young people at these large scale events.

The young people interviewed broadly agreed with the views of the professionals. In both locations, the young people who had attended the teenage discos when they were younger recounted witnessing very young children (as young as 10 years of age) in attendance at the discos and young people being intoxicated. The young people interviewed also confirmed that sexualised behaviours were occurring, which some of the participants reflected that in hindsight they had viewed these as normal, but which they now, a number of years older, view as more problematic.

Pre-drinking in various locations, and various strategies used by young people to circumvent detection to gain entry to the teenage discos were discussed; and all participants expressed the view that this is an ongoing issue with young people.

Overall, although the sample sizes are small, the in-depth insight into the participant's views and experiences raises some serious questions about what kinds of experiences we as a society are allowing, perhaps even facilitating, young people to have at the teenage discos; and whether there is sufficient grounds for believing that we are placing children's rights first, and ensuring their best interests are paramount in how the teenage discos have been allowed to develop and operate across Ireland. It is apparent that differential adult:child ratios apply in the public service sector than have been permitted in these commercial licenced premises; an oversight which poses significant risk to young people.

A concern from both professionals and young people related to the scale of the events and the distance that many young people are travelling by bus. Bus transport to the events was identified by many as risky with reports of risky sexual behaviours and of alcohol and other drug use. In both Monaghan and Letterkenny, many young people travel distances of over an hour by bus to attend.

# Safe from Harm: Recommendations to mitigate risks and increase the safety of young people attending Teenage discos in Ireland

## 1. Ensure explicit reference is made in the Intoxicating Liquor Bill (2024) to the requirements for venues to adhere to National Vetting and Child Protection legislation.

Under the National Vetting Acts, those who provide social or leisure activities to children must have their employees Garda vetted. Teenage discos, in the main held on licensed premises such as a pub or club containing a bar, should comply with the provisions of the National Vetting Acts as they provide social activities to children.

In addition, under the Children First Act 2015, those who provide a “relevant service”, which again includes providing leisure or social activities to children, must carry out a risk assessment to identify any risks to the welfare of children, draft a child safeguarding statement, and appoint a designated liaison person to look after their obligations under the Act. Those who host underage discos are providing such a relevant service as defined in the Children’s First Act and therefore should comply with these obligations.

Any new legislation should require night club venues to produce Child Safeguarding Statement under the Children First Act and this should be stipulated as part of application for or renewal of a night club where the license holder intends to operate such events for those under 18 years of age. The legislation needs to require night club license holders to outline whether they intend to operate such events and how they will provide for the safety of young people attending. Any license holder found to be in breach of these regulations should be deemed to be guilty of an offence.

## 2. Revise the rules and conditions under which children can be on a licensed premises without being accompanied by a parent / guardian

Currently, the Bill separates children into two categories – a ‘young person’ aged 15–18, and a ‘child’ aged under 15. The rationale for this distinction is not clear from the Bill. It is strongly recommended that Government includes in any upcoming legislation clarity on what age a child / young person is permitted to be at these events on licensed premises, where their parents / guardians are not present and when alcohol is not being sold at the time in the venue. Legislative clarity stipulating the minimum age a young person must be to attend these events on licensed premises and a requirement for proof of age for those attending is recommended. This could mitigate the risks associated with having children as young as 11 at large scale events with often 1000 attendees where much older teenagers are present.

### 3. Revise the rules relating to operation of events for young people on licensed premises to include adult to child ratios.

Due to the number of potential variables, it is not possible to recommend “one size fits all” guidance on adult to child ratios to cover all activities involving children and young people in Ireland. There are, however, ratios for early years, pre-school settings, educational settings and recommended adult to child ratios for youth work settings. While teenage discos are distinct to youth work and educational settings as they are run on a for profit basis, the fact that they target and provide social activities to minors requires operators have a duty of care to the young people attending.

The National Youth Council recommends that ‘a minimum adult/young person ratio in any group should ideally be one adult per group of ten plus one other adult, and allowing an additional adult for each group of ten thereafter’<sup>23</sup>. The teenage disco is a setting in which young people socialise without the presence or supervision of youth workers, parents or teachers and due consideration should be given to what adult: child ratio would be adequate for these events. It is further recommended that the licensing code should stipulate mandatory minimum gender balance of staff working at these events.

The Intoxicating Liquor Bill in 2004, created the conditions for teenagers to be permitted on licensed premises without a parent or guardian being present so long as alcohol was not being sold at the time. Young people have a right to develop their independence and to have spaces and places in which they can socialise. They also have a right to be protected from harm in those spaces and places. With the proposed licensing reforms, the Department of Justice has a unique and long overdue opportunity to prioritise the rights and wellbeing of children through providing for effective regulation of and fit for purpose child safeguarding measures at these events.



**‘I suppose ideally there should be a safe venue for young people to go – my son is now 26 – and he went to one disco with his cousin who is the same age way back....so I drove the two boys down, and I parked the car outside. Young people were going in – they were coming out- they were standing on the street ...there was a crowd of older guys and men.....talking to them, young people went round the back, young people went up the town. I was watching them coming out then (after the disco), and a lot of the young girls were totally paralytic. And my son said he would never to back to it again..... It wasn’t his scene.’ – Parent**



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