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NOTE

from: Presidency
to: Horizontal Working Party on Drugs
Subject: Drugs, young people and party venues

1. Introductory remarks

Party life, nocturnal or otherwise, has both positive and negative features. It is an important part of the lives of teenagers and young adults and provides them with some of their formative experiences.

The positive features for young people include building of social contacts, strengthening of the sense of belonging to a shared culture, and improved social cohesion, whilst society as a whole benefits from what is a fully-fledged economic sector, which creates wealth and contributes to social and cultural development.

The negative features for young people include the occasional abuse of substances, which has been described as a tendency "inherent" in young people¹ and leads to risk-taking behaviour liable to cause physical harm and damage to health by inducing road accidents, deaths through overdose, drug dependency, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), unwanted pregnancies, injuries and deaths resulting from physical violence. Cumulatively, the resulting health damage produces social problems with lasting effects. In the long term, this represents a social cost both for young people and those close to them.

2. European Union

Preventive and risk reduction measures have been taken in many European countries over the last ten years targeting young people and partygoers as well as party organisers and their employees. The measures have generally resulted from cooperation between NGOs and local or regional authorities.

Many of the players involved exchange experience through two networks supported by the European Commission: Healthy Nightlife Toolbox (linked to the European Forum for Urban Safety) and Club Health: Health and Safer Nightlife of Youth. The Brussels-born "Quality Nights" project belongs to the first of those networks.

The picture is clear: there is a European partygoing culture that is providing a great many young people with formative experiences. Excess use of drugs is certainly not alien to that culture, either for shaking off inhibitions or for stimulation and sustaining energy levels throughout the night. Some of these substances are illegal whilst others (such as alcohol) are not. Though crackdowns reduce the circulation of illegal drugs, they are not doing enough and accidents are commonplace. In response, health players have been adopting a range of strategies.

¹ Cf. title of a Workshop on Drugs and Young People: "Addressing the use of illicit drugs as part of the **risk-taking behaviour inherent in young people**", DG SANCO, 3/2/2010.

3. The Brussels strategy

In 2001, a study by Modus Vivendi, an NGO specialised in risk reduction measures, combined with reports on a large number of fatal accidents from the emergency department of a Brussels hospital, led the *Commission communautaire française* (CCF, French Community Commission) to consider the need to establish drug prevention measures at party venues.

A first initiative aimed at getting party venue owners to follow a set of rules was therefore launched. However, since the action was taken in a hurry and without adequate consultation, it proved impossible to obtain any real engagement from the discotheque owners and party organisers. The reasons behind the failure were the lack of consultation of the stakeholders and the focus on the use of illegal substances, which created a negative image for the party venues.

Thanks to the involvement of the CCF and Modus Vivendi in one of the two European networks, the case was reviewed and a genuine participatory process with broader health promotion objectives was set in motion.

As a result, the CCF provided funding to Modus Vivendi to devise a strategy with the key aim of reducing the group of risks linked to young people's health whilst allowing party life to play its social cohesion and wealth creation roles.

Various targets were set to that end and included, as far as drug use is concerned:

- prevention of consumption via health promotion programmes and preventive measures, involving peers and targeting the youngest partygoers;
- prevention and reduction of damage to health directly linked to drug taking methods (dehydration, overdoses, etc.);
- prevention and reduction of risk-taking behaviour owing to the impaired judgement that can be caused by the use of certain substances (driving accidents, STDs, violent acts, unwanted pregnancies);

- early detection and reduction of the risk of drug dependency by providing easier access to specialist assistance and care;
- counselling and help for problem users who do not acknowledge their dependency.

The implementation of the strategy is centred on the "Quality Nights" label, which party venues can obtain provided they meet the requirements listed in a "*Charte de bien-être en milieu festif*" (Well-being Charter for Party Venues). Compliance with the charter is monitored by the staff of Modus Vivendi and young partygoers, who can easily send in messages via the dedicated website.

The strategy operates as follows:

- The stated aim of the strategy, which has been in place since 2004, is to be participatory. All the stakeholders are involved in the construction and effective implementation of the project. The approach is based on "win-win" principles, so each of the stakeholders (the political authorities, businesses in the party sector and partygoers themselves) needs to benefit from it.
- The concerns of discotheque owners and party organisers, as business people, are twofold. Firstly, tackling drugs involves admitting that drugs are consumed on "their" premises, which is potentially interest-damaging. Secondly, whilst the focus on "health" is admirable, it should not be allowed to spoil the party. So an approach focusing on promoting health and well-being was more likely to win their support. The awarding of a label, which stands for public recognition of their achievements, thus becomes a business incentive.
- The strategy is also based on making changes at the venues. Certain physical features are brought in to prevent accidents as far as possible, such as easy access to water to prevent dehydration.
- A further approach is to offer partygoers devices that reduce risks linked to parties. Condoms and ear plugs are provided at affordable prices, for instance.

- The strategy provides a service to discotheque owners enabling them to organise their events better. Their staff have to attend awareness-raising sessions on the occupational risks at their workplace both for themselves and the visitors (first aid, drug use, noise, legality issues). The sessions are run by Modus Vivendi and the programme is tailored to the specific circumstances of each participating venue.
- Another feature of the approach is to send casual student workers and permanent staff from Modus Vivendi to the party venues, where they carry out targeted prevention and risk reduction measures whilst coordinating with another partner in the project, the "Modus Fiesta" community centre.
- Indeed a key component of the strategy is having a meeting place away from the party venues as such. It is not just about damage limitation at the venues themselves; the aim is also to allow young people who are in good health but who know little about the risks of using certain substances to meet healthcare professionals and counsellors from the network of specialists supporting addicts in the Brussels region.
These meetings take place at the Modus Fiesta drop-in centre, which is jointly staffed by employees of Modus Vivendi and specialists prepared to work outside the more traditional medical appointment system. The medium-term objective is to make early drug users aware of the risks of drug consumption and of their responsibilities. The focus is on relatively early intervention aimed at preventing the development of addiction and the resulting social and health problems. It also targets those young people, who despite being addicts, have not contacted specialist services dealing with addiction on their own initiative.

The strategy has a long-term perspective. The number of accredited (labelled) party venues has increased since 2005, keeping pace with the awareness-raising sessions that need to be organised and attended (a precondition for entering the label system).

Since January 2009, the Walloon region has been sponsoring a similar programme with the same NGO, thereby adopting the same strategy, logo and charter. It has also been a partner, for the purposes of this programme, in a European cross-border project, Interreg IV, which has become the local actor in the regions of Mons, Tournai and Lille (France). Further initiatives are planned for other regions (Namur, Charleroi, etc.).

Since June 2009, Modus Vivendi, supported by the CCF, has been a member of the European Network for Safer Party Labels: "Party+". The network is still in its infancy.

4. Conclusion and proposal

Belgium would like party venues to become a concern for the European Union and to be treated as locations requiring programmes and interventions geared to promoting and protecting young people's health.

We would recall that the EU objectives include in particular the "demand reduction" section of the EU Drugs Action Plan for 2009-2012. Objective 5 of the Plan is to "*prevent the use of drugs and the risks associated with it*", and the ongoing action prescribed for achieving this is:

*"to promote innovation in and systematically make available evidence-based and evaluated universal prevention programmes and interventions in different settings (e.g. **towards young people in youth centres and schools** and towards adults in workplace and prison), aiming to prevent or delay first use of drugs. Prevention should also cover poly-drug use (combined use of illicit and licit substances, in particular alcohol) as well as drugs and driving".*

While examples of target settings do not include party venues, these are in fact more common venues for drug use than schools, for instance. In that sense, the proposed approach is innovatory at a European institutional level. To achieve the objective of preventing or delaying first use of drugs and of tackling the risks associated with drug consumption, the measures implemented need to provide for a continuum between prevention, risk reduction, health care and research. The research could lead to a better grasp of the venue-substance-young user triangle and of the associated drug taking and communication methods.

Though the Member States and party venues are very diverse, it is desirable to promote and develop a transversal approach involving all the actors. Indeed, the existing local partnerships and exchanges of good practice ought to be developed on a Europe-wide scale. It would, lastly, be helpful to look at party venues from a European perspective and, having assessed the situation, to work out some agreed rules and a shared understanding of the specific features of this sector.

A better understanding of party venues at European level could also provide a useful input to the Early Warning System.

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