

“There are fine businesses out there...”

– *Evelyn Jones*

Pat Nolan talks to Evelyn Jones, NOffLA's new Chairperson.



Evelyn Jones has taken on Chairmanship of the National Off-Licence Association from previous incumbent Jim McCabe. Well-known to all in the off-trade, having been a NOffLA stalwart for many years now, she has little difficulty identifying her priorities today.

“Firstly to protect and promote the independent off-trade,” she says, pointing out that, “There are fine business out there capable of thriving into the future”.

Some are at the top of their game. To name but a few she cites old family ties Callens, Deveneys, Dicey Reillys, McCambridges, O'Briens, O'Donovan's and Redmonds.

That's why she believes it's important to get some support from the Government in the form of proactive legislation as opposed to the restrictive sort, “... to allow us to sell our product without the constant fear of getting it wrong - mandatory ID, mandatory training and modern legislation to deal with e-commerce. The internet has been around now for 15 years... How long can it take to draft something up?”.

NOffLA has just launched a new online training course for *all* alcohol retailers, not just NOffLA members – a matter, she feels, that a responsible off-trade has little choice in.

“This is vital in light of the multiples, convenience stores and petrol stations. It's unbelievable that the Government have allowed the proliferation of alcohol retailing with no training structures. It's like allowing someone with no training to open a chemist and sell something like valium over the counter”.

She feels it similarly important to work with the other strands that make up the drinks industry tapestry.

“We are only as strong as our weakest link and I would like to identify common areas where we can work together and show a united front -- and where this is not possible, to address the issues within the industry. It's too easy to take pot shots at each other but where does that get us as an industry? It leads to negative exposure all round”.

And negative exposure is a sensitive issue right now. *Primetime* has just broadcast an excoriating ‘home deliveries to minors scandal’ edition and it would be fair to say that people have a very poor perception of the off-trade right now.

But Evelyn sees ‘poor perception’ as an industry issue, not simply one for NOffLA and the multiples.

“It's a problem for takeaways, taxis, convenience stores and petrol stations and it's the result of a complete disregard for the law and a total lack of enforcement,” she says, “We have invested substantially in the last 10 years in developing and refining the Responsible Trading in the Community (RTC) project and in particular in enhancing its training aspects. The aim of the training course is to give owners and staff working in alcohol retailing the skills and knowledge necessary to trade alcohol in a ‘responsible’ manner.

“*Primetime* highlighted that we are just in the nick of time with this. It is illegal to accept cash at the door. It is vital to ask for the Garda Age Card. As someone in the trade, I wondered how one could be driven to jeopardise your licence in this manner and it's irresponsible. It has to come down to lack of training.”

Economic factors had to come into play in this, she believes, “... such as the 10 o'clock closing which hit many businesses badly, the bank converting overdraft to term loans, tightening credit from suppliers and the taxman himself (via the need for a Tax Clearance Cert).

“It is a lot of pressure but not an excuse!”

Similarly, she rejects allegations that

underage alcohol abuse in Ireland is higher than most other countries in Europe, citing a 2006 *Drunkenness among schoolchildren in Ireland* survey by HBSC conducted in collaboration with WHO.

In it, the percentage of 15 year-olds who've been 'really drunk' in Ireland comes at the lower end of the international spectrum, she points out.

"Those figures point to the fact that perception is not reality."

But in the case of adults, she believes that the perception of there being a deep-seated acceptance of alcohol abuse across all age spectra in Ireland – is.... well.... *correct*.

"I've always had a bee in my bonnet about this," she says, "We put out a press release in September '09 requesting that parents do their bit. It wasn't taken up by any of the media. No one wants to talk about it, the reason being that most people have children. Most people drink - at times, more than they should... and possibly in front of their children.

"So how can adults take the high moral ground? So nothing is done and the cycle continues."

But this does not excuse suppliers and retailers from responsibility.

"We are the last stop in the supply chain before the consumer and suppliers need to support the education of this 'last stop'; it's socially irresponsible of them if they don't. Suppliers need to invest in the education of the channel, especially in terms of responsible trading for the retailing of their product; otherwise, they are taking a short-term view and exploiting the channel for pure profit.

"If we sell their product irresponsibly then everyone's on a hiding back up the chain. There's a certain amount of 'washing-of-hands' going on amongst certain suppliers. They deliver the product in with absolutely no thought for the impact it will have on the end-user if sold in an irresponsible manner."

Evelyn is also aware that a lot of legislation can be seen hurtling down the tracks. NOFFLA needs to monitor this.

"Alcohol was included in the National Drugs Strategy in March 2009. It's based on five pillars: supply reduction, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and research.

"Under 'supply reduction' they're



looking at reducing demand by use of taxation and pricing, they're looking at regulating and restricting availability and at regulating marketing. In terms of the first two, there's nothing about the Government's current policies that suggests that this is going to happen. So the impact here is going to be with the suppliers in terms of regulating marketing."

She agrees that in the UK, the Con/Lib-Dem government has been making some noises about reigning-in below-cost selling in the supermarkets via a minimum unit price. Here however the situation is less optimistic.

"We lobby constantly - in particular on the point that VAT is used to subsidise the cost of below-cost selling which is being used as a selling tool to drive footfall," she stops to ponder before continuing, "... You know, I could put this to music and it wouldn't matter as we're seen as having a vested interest. "Brand owners are watching their brand equity being irreparably damaged. They are caught between a rock and a hard place because of the volumes the large multinationals can drive through their stores."

She has no doubt it's getting out of control.

Fully-committed to the specialist off-trade, her interests in this direction continue to expand although her background originally lay in commerce and accountancy. She worked as an auditor before opening the Vintry in her native Rathgar in 1991.

"I like retailing and meeting people

and I do wine education courses. I enjoy being able to keep my own financial records and I do a lot of wine writing on a blog that a few of us have. The friends I have made within the industry are made of stern stuff but are really a great bunch.

"Have a look at my Executive in NOFFLA. There are some really strong people there: three ex-Chairpersons with huge experience as well as two founder members, a group, a franchisee, a mixed trader and then we have several exciting innovators there too.

"We have some great discussions, but in the 15 years that I have worked on the Executive I've never seen a falling-out. We reach a consensus and I admire the way they can step outside the box.

"The specialist off-trade business has a heritage and we need to work on converting that into a common message. Again, education on everything we sell could be improved, especially in the beer and spirits sector which has tended to be neglected.

"And brand owners have a role to play here in conveying knowledge," she stresses.

"When I started getting involved with NOFFLA it was with a view to improving the perceived image of alcohol retailers," she reflects as we pack up to go, "Sometimes I think we are getting there but inevitably you get setbacks."

Evelyn, a "mad badminton player" describes it as "chess on legs" before adding, "It's a complete mind game.... And I dare anyone to mention business to me when I'm playing it!!"