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New French law requires breathalysers be provided in nightclubs and bars

Charles Bremner, Paris

President Sarkozy's Government is to decree the measure, effective from early next year, as part of a package that includes a ban on the sale of alcohol at petrol stations and promotes the use of automatic breathalysers for drivers of school buses.

Announcing the law after 17 road deaths over the weekend, Jean-Louis Borloo, the Environment Minister, said managements would have to offer a police-standard electronic breath-test to departing customers. The scheme is supposed to alert drivers who have more than 0.5 grammes of alcohol per litre of blood but landlords and safety organisations have questioned whether it would deter intoxicated customers from driving.

The Government has been running a "blow and you'll know" campaign for months, encouraging self-testing with kits that are available in supermarkets. There has been no noticeable impact on the drink-driving rate.

A police campaign and the arrival of thousands of speed cameras halved the 9,000 annual road death rate from 2000-2007 but the decrease has halted and drivers are said to be falling back into old Gallic driving habits.

The police crackdown and increasingly harsh advertising campaigns have done little to change France's traditional tolerance of alcohol on the road. Young drivers are a particular target because of a rise of what France calls "British-style binge drinking". About 2 per cent of drivers on French roads are estimated to be over the alcohol limit, under the influence of cannabis or both. They cause more than a third of road deaths, studies show.

France's road-safety adverts have dropped the soft and playful tone of old. A series of TV and radio commercials that began this week features actors playing parents and spouses receiving telephone calls informing them of the deaths of loved ones.

Safety campaigners welcomed the new measures but said that they did not go far enough to wean the French away from their tolerance of drinking and driving.

Nightclub and bar owners gave a mixed welcome to the breath-test law.

They complained about the price — up to £2,000 — for the appliances and grumbled that they were being singled out after being required to impose a smoking ban from January 1.

Bernard Cartier, the head of the national federation of bars, cafés and discos, said that the Government should focus on supermarkets, where young drinkers obtain most of their alcohol.

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