

# **CITYWIDE DRUGS CRISIS CAMPAIGN**



## **SUBMISSION ON THE YOUTH JUSTICE STRATEGY 2020-2026**

**29TH JUNE 2020**

## **Introduction**

Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign is a national network of community organisations that are involved in addressing the drugs issue and it represents the community sector on the National Committees for the National Drugs Strategy (NDS). Issues relating to young people and drug use are a core part of the agenda for our networks of Drug and Alcohol Task Force (DATF) Community Reps and Community Drug Projects and in recent years the issues around young people's involvement in the drugs trade have developed as a key area of concern. Our submission will focus in particular on responding to issues relating to young people's drug use and engagement in the drugs trade.

## **Guiding Principles**

We very much welcome the Guiding Principles set out in relation to Children and Young People; *that young people in conflict with the law will be treated as children first, with due respect for their rights, in a way that promotes their reintegration and strengthens their capacities, and that reinforces respect for the human rights and freedoms of others, that the development of policies, programmes and systems will be informed by the voices of children and young people, and that young people should be diverted from the formal youth justice system to the greatest extent possible, with due regard for the welfare of communities and society in general.*

## **National Policies**

**1.3.1 – We will work collaboratively to ensure that the prevention of offending behaviour is mainstreamed into all Government policies affecting children and young people (and their families)**

Based on our experience as members of the National Committees for the NDS, it is crucially important to have a strong pro-active engagement by the Dept. of Children and Youth Affairs in the delivery of the Drugs Strategy. In the past when the Young People's Facilities and Services Fund was considered as a core part of the NDS, the Dept. of Children was an active participant in the work of the NDS national policy committees and this role needs to be reinvigorated and strengthened. It is also crucial that the engagement of the Dept. of Justice with the NDS incorporates a focus on youth justice issues, as well as on the core policing issues.

## **Legislation**

**1.6 We will provide statutory backing for collaboration between agencies based on principles of the best interest of children and young people.**

**1.6.1 - We will provide for a positive duty for agencies to cooperate in relation to children and young people, including those in situations more likely to give rise to offending behaviour**

We very much welcome the proposal to provide statutory backing and to make it a positive duty for collaboration between agencies. While collaboration and interagency working are regularly stated as key principles in our policy documents, this type of working does not happen in practice without strong leadership at the highest level in all relevant agencies and departments. Statutory backing will ensure the required level of prioritisation at senior level to ensure that it happens.

## **Training and Frontline Support**

**1.8 We will work to enhance the capacity of all those working directly with young people (and their families) to provide appropriate support and guidance, particularly in relation to risks of offending behaviour**

**1.9 We will provide specific training for professionals involved in the criminal justice system to underpin the provision of effective services**

We also very much welcome the commitment to training, as this will be an essential support for workers across the statutory, voluntary and community services who are charged with a role in implementation of the actions of this strategy. Joint training across the sectors also has a key role to play in supporting the development of collaboration and interagency working.

## **Voices of Children and Young People**

**1.5.1 - We will involve children and young people as active partners in the development of systems and programmes and document how this is done in reports from Departments and agencies.**

We very much welcome the commitment to engage in a conversation with young people and to hear their voices. The Citywide research (see below) highlighted the need to speak directly to young people themselves and to ensure that their accounts are at the centre of public discourse on this issue. Young people are growing up with the “normalisation” of the reality of an organised drug economy operating in their community and so becoming involved in the drug economy does not seem strange or shocking to them. There is a need for a balance between intervention and research to capture the issues and to shape a public conversation in relation to the effects of drug use and drug markets on young people’s daily lives, valuing their experiences as an essential first step in shaping our responses.

### **Research and Evidence**

**1.10.5 - We will prioritise research and pilot initiatives on a) harder-to-reach groups, including those subject to grooming and coercive control by criminals**

Research is an essential tool in helping us to understand how young people are experiencing the impact of the drugs issue on their lives. Citywide has led a piece of exploratory research with practitioners in the Community Drugs Projects and Community Youth Services in collaboration with Dr. Matt Bowden (Technological University of Ireland) to look at the experience of working with young people involved in the illegal drugs trade and a number of points in this submission are based on the findings of the research.

[https://www.citywide.ie/download/pdf/2019\\_the\\_drug\\_economy\\_and\\_youth\\_intervention\\_s.pdf](https://www.citywide.ie/download/pdf/2019_the_drug_economy_and_youth_intervention_s.pdf)

### **Coordinated Services**

**1.4 We will develop effective systems for collaboration by agencies and funding programmes in the design of youth, family and child services, coordinated at the point of delivery, designed around the needs of children and young people rather than Departmental responsibilities and funding lines**

**1.4.1 We will identify oversight arrangements to ensure that children and young people in situations that are more likely to give rise to offending behaviour are fully included in Prevention and Early Intervention programmes and services, particularly in situations where it is more difficult for services to engage. This will include examining if the work of CYPSCs, Local Drugs Task Forces (LDTFs) or other service coordination mechanisms can be better aligned**

Action 1.2.8 of the NDS aims to 'improve services for young people at risk of substance misuse in socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods' by 'developing a new scheme to provide targeted services for young people at risk' The new scheme UBU – Your Place Your Space - currently being rolled out by the Dept. of Children is in fulfilment of this action . There was very limited consultation with the NDS structures at national or local level in the design of this scheme, so it is essential that this is improved on by having structured, effective and meaningful collaboration through the DATFs in relation to its implementation and monitoring.

In the lives of children and young people the factors that may contribute to them being at risk and/or becoming involved in offending behaviour are usually present in their lives from an early stage and there is no predetermined or set point at which they will move from being at risk to being directly involved. We believe that a model of integrated services, where youth justice interventions are located as part of mainstream youth services, will best serve to ensure that young people have access to the supports that are most relevant for them, whether that be around prevention, early intervention or addressing more persistent offending behaviour. We have positive examples in our communities of where GYDPs are located as part of broader Youth Services and we need to build on the evidence of the effectiveness of this approach.

We can see, for example, that young people who become involved in the drugs trade may have different pathways in relation to their involvement. Youth Workers participating in the Citywide research described the young people who are involved in selling drugs as falling into two different categories. The *resilient* (with jobs, education and prospects) see drug work as means of accessing cash to 'party'; this is part of the fast moving, globalised, consumer world where status is what you are wearing and how you can show off on social media all the nice

things that you have. For the *vulnerable*, it is more about basics – clothes, food – and young people coping with unstable home lives find that the drug market becomes a viable alternative for meeting their needs. The type of interventions required by young people involved in the drugs trade may be quite different depending on whether they are in the resilient or vulnerable group and services that are integrated at the point of delivery will enhance our capacity to put the appropriate interventions in place.

### **Prevention/Early Intervention**

**2.1 We will enhance service delivery through collaboration across agencies and programmes to deliver integrated services for children and young people in situations that are more likely to give rise to offending behaviour, designed around the needs of children and young people rather than Departmental responsibilities and funding lines, including education, mental health and drugs services**

**2.7.2 Establish clear interagency procedures, working with community partners and the Probation Service, to address the situation of children and young people involved in offending behaviour, especially those unsuitable for Diversion, incorporating pilot project and programme initiatives**

We very much welcome the recognition that services should be designed around the needs of young people rather than departmental responsibilities and funding lines and in particular welcome the commitment to collaboration between services for young people and drug and mental health services. Our local youth services have a key role to play in responding to the risk factors that impact on young people in relation to drug use and in delivering drug awareness and education as a core part of youth work. Often young people who have begun using drugs don't see themselves as having a problem and don't see the need to access drug services. While our Community Projects report significant levels of use of cannabis/weed use and of street tablets amongst young people, they young people do not relate this to what they see as the traditional profile of the 'drug user'- injecting heroin, lying in doorways or on balconies, having serious physical health issues.

It is essential that youth services and young people's addiction services should be supported to work in partnership, to ensure the needs of our young people are responded to at the earliest possible stage and in a way that is appropriate to their needs. The strong

interconnection between mental health issues and drug use is also now well recognised and both Drug Projects and Youth Services report high levels of anxiety and stress amongst young people for which they are self-medicating through their drug use.

The Citywide research highlights the need for drug awareness and prevention work to include education on how debt and credit work in the drugs economy. Providing credit or ‘fronting’ drugs to young people for re-distribution or consumption is viewed as a widespread practice and this is seen as the underlying financial structure that underpins drug selling. Youth workers expressed serious concern that – in the context of peer-to-peer drug distribution – this credit can be misunderstood by young people, *‘that day-to-day supply through friendship connections is not a gift, it’s an economic bond’*. Helping young people to develop a critical practice around credit and debt is seen as key in this respect: in the context of peer-to-peer drug distribution, young people need to understand that credit is an economic bond and not an altruistic act. Threats and physical violence are the means used to recoup debts and systemic intimidation is a critical experience for young people and their communities as captured in the interviews.

It is crucial that we recognise and address the reality of drug-related intimidation and violence as being part of the lives of some of the young people who are involved in drug use and/or the drug trade. The recent EMCDDA and Europol report found that drug distribution networks in Ireland appear to be structured as a three-tier hierarchy: (1) a lower tier of highly disadvantaged young people generally involved in bullying, assaulting, stealing, vandalising and spreading fear on behalf of the network; (2) a middle tier of young people typically engaged in high-risk, low-reward activities, such as transporting, holding or dealing drugs, carrying guns, and conducting shootings, beatings and serious intimidation; and (3) a higher tier of serious players, often formed around a kinship core, which controls the other tiers.

Participants identified how drug related intimidation (DRI) and drug debt intimidation (DDI) are key to how drug distribution networks are organised, involving ‘disciplinary intimidation’ as a way of controlling those involved in distribution networks and ‘successional intimidation’ in how young people are recruited.

While this research is identifying very serious challenges for our work with young people, the research interviewees are passionate in presenting a strong message that there is hope for

the young people involved. The research shows that many young people involved in selling drugs can be reached by services and are open to finding alternatives.

It is vital to build on the existing projects and services at community level that are already embedded with these issues. The Health Research Board's evidence review (Murphy et al, 2017) highlighted a number of trialled models that have shown promise in dealing with drug related intimidation based upon universal, selected and indicated interventions. These approaches can be adapted to deal with the Irish context in a way that builds on the work of practitioners in local communities. Specific investments need to be made to support practitioners and projects that are currently engaging young people who are involved in the drug economy, including the 'Easy Street' model identified earlier. Further evaluation and dissemination of their experiences, practices and impacts are also recommended.

## **Diversion**

**2.8.1 - The Department of Justice and Equality will develop and fund sustained community-based interventions for the most serious and prolific young offenders and their families, and for those who are at significant risk of becoming serious and prolific offenders, designed around the needs of the children and young people rather than Departmental responsibilities and funding lines .**

**2.9.5 - Assess the potential of specialised youth projects (or similar) to provide suitable diversionary programmes for the 18- 24 years age group, with a view to developing pilot initiatives with DJE with DCYA, DRCD, AGS Probation Service Scoping Paper within 6 months 25 community partners, including social enterprises and aligned with community development and employment and training strategies**

## **Key elements of a potential model**

As part of the Citywide research, Youth Workers were asked to identify key elements of a model for working with young people involved in the drugs trade. They see it as critical that, as those involved in the drugs trade are involved in relationship building with young people,



so must services focus on the importance of providing young people with alternative positive relationships within their communities.

Initiation to the drug economy goes unrecognised and can materialise from what appears to be 'random', innocent or innocuous connection or request e.g. being asked to run an errand to the shops. This was referred to by some as a type of inculcation which can begin in an unconscious way and progress to testing loyalty to more fully conscious and active grooming. While there was a reluctance to suggest that such initiation was active or conscious 'grooming', it was nonetheless seen as a type of relationship building that might progress towards requests to holding money, drugs or weapons.

The research identifies the quality of the relationships that young people have with youth workers and drug services, together with family and other advocates, as crucial to enabling them to disengage from the drugs trade. Participants see that critical incidents serve as a means of creating insight which can ignite the disengagement process and open up an alternative conversation with young people about what the future might hold. In this context, they said that the 'gangland' narrative on the drugs trade is especially unhelpful to finding workable and practical solutions for these young people, as it tends to present them as outside of the bonds of normal human relationships, rather than open to influence from positive relationships. The services strongly reject the view that young men, in particular, are "untouchable" and listening to and understanding their experiences is an essential first step in addressing their situation. As part of these conversations, we need to recognise that there are specific ways that young women are engaged in or impacted by the polydrug economy. Further evidence and practice developments need to focus on these gender differences specifically. The Citywide research also highlights the need also to incorporate a curriculum on relationships into approaches to drug education and prevention.

The Youth Projects in the Citywide research are building models drawing on their own experience and learning from the experience of others elsewhere. One approach that has been adapted for use by Irish Community Projects comes from the *Lugna Gatan* ('Easy Street') model developed by the Fryshuset group in Sweden. The model involves young outreach workers acting as 'stewards' or hosts who intervene to prevent crime, mediate conflicts, and engage marginalised young people. The approach is based on outreach and bridging – making

contact on the streets, building trust and then acting as a connecting node to enable young people to build wider social networks beyond the drug dealing / consuming groups they are currently in. There is also an emphasis on pro-actively building more positive relationships between young people and members of their own communities who have been damaged by their behaviour. This approach can also engage older young people for whom standard youth work approaches might not be appropriate. Investment is needed in the Community and Youth services that are developing and delivering these approaches on the ground and in evaluation that will enable us to learn from the work they are doing.

Finally, the research notes that we cannot speak about drug markets, distribution and consumption without talking about issues of health, housing, education and training. The current polydrug markets are providing an alternative stream of income and occupation that appear meaningful for young people and our research participants all stressed the need to create opportunities and pathways to enable young people to make the transitions to both education and labour market participation, with the chance to earn a decent living. They also stressed that the young people involved in the drugs trade are neither out of control nor untouchable and that as a society it is worth investing in them and including them.

## **References**

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