



STATEMENT FROM CITYWIDE DRUGS CRISIS CAMPAIGN 20 Feb 2023

Comment on Motion re Citizens' Assembly on Drugs

Citywide welcomes the motion to set up a Citizens Assembly on Drugs, a forum which will provide us with a crucial opportunity to change how we as a society view the drugs issue and how we shape our response to it. A recent cross-party motion in the Dáil and Oireachtas Justice Committee Report show a clear consensus across all political parties and groupings that we need to move away from the punitive approach to drugs. Quite clearly this approach is not working; for many people in our communities it is making things a lot worse.

Following our seminar in 2021, Citywide has been setting out the key priorities for our communities that we would like to see addressed at the Citizens Assembly on Drugs. This statement sets out how we think the Terms of Reference can facilitate us in delivering on these priorities; quotes from the Terms of Reference are included in italics.

In considering the *“drivers, prevalence, attitudes and trends in relation to drug use in Irish society”*, we need to begin our discussions by looking at the underlying causes of our current drugs problem. The evidence of the link between poverty, marginalisation and drug-related harms remains persistent and consistent throughout the lifetime of several National Drug Strategies.

It is essential that we frame this discussion in the context of a broader response to addressing poverty, inequality and marginalisation, and to recognising that the stigma and discrimination associated with drug-related issues is fundamentally linked to poverty and inequality.

We also know that the drugs issue is now impacting across all levels of society and in all communities, urban, rural and regional, and this will be reflected in the discussions at the Citizens' Assembly on *“the harmful impacts of drug use on individuals, families, communities and wider society”*.

It will be an opportunity to examine why our current punitive approach, which has been shaped by a history of inequality, stigma and discrimination, cannot be effective in addressing the harmful impacts of drugs on anyone in our society, regardless of their background or circumstances.

In considering *“the efficacy of current strategic, policy and operational responses to drug use”* and *“the opportunities and challenges of reforming legislation, strategy, policy and operational responses”*

We need to build on the clear consensus evident in recent Oireachtas publications to look at how we can finally bring to an end the current legal situation where, in spite of commitments to a health-led approach, people who use drugs continue to be criminalised. The Assembly will also provide a space to consider the evidence of the

serious consequences for individuals, families and communities of the current legal framework under which substances are prohibited, how this is causing further harm and what changes should be made to this legal framework.

The Citizens' Assembly provides a crucial opportunity to have these discussions in a calm, rational and thoughtful way without the blaming and shaming that too often characterises the public debate.

In considering *“Best practice in promoting and supporting rehabilitation and recovery from drug addiction”*

We need to build on the crucial role of our Community Drug Projects in responding to the needs of individuals, families and communities and recognise the need for significant and increased investment in community and voluntary projects. This discussion will include how to rebuild a strong independent role for Drug & Alcohol Task Forces as drivers of a community-led interagency response at a local and regional level.

We will also have an opportunity to consider *“International best practice and practical case studies in reducing supply, demand and harm, and increasing resilience, health and well-being”* and to hear about *“international, European Union, national and local perspectives”* that can contribute to informing our discussions.

At the heart of the work of the Citizens' Assembly, we need to hear the voices of people who have been most impacted by the drugs problem – people who use drugs, their families and communities.

The Terms of Reference recognise this, referring to *“the lived experience of young people and adults affected by drug use, as well as families and communities.”* If we are to do this in a real and meaningful way, we need to recognise the extreme barriers that are created for people in using their voices by the current context of criminalisation and stigma and to recognise the limits of current means of consultation used by state bodies.

It is essential that community and peer organisations have a lead role in facilitating and supporting these voices to be heard.

As with other key social issues in Ireland over recent years, it is time now for the era of stigma, shame, blame and punishment around the drugs issue to finally come to an end. It is time for us to put in place a drugs policy that is based on principles of social justice and equality and the Citizen's Assembly provides us with the opportunity to start doing this work now. We look forward to working together to make sure this can happen.