

CITYWIDE DRUGS CRISIS CAMPAIGN CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE ESTABLISHMENT OF OIREACTHAS COMMITTEE ON DRUGS TO IMPLEMENT CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY RECOMMENDATIONS

CityWide Drugs Crisis Campaign has today called for the immediate establishment of an Oireachtas Committee on Drugs tasked with implementing the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly report.

CityWide's Anna Quigley explained that every day in Ireland we lose two people to a drug-related death, leaving behind shattered families, friends, neighbours and communities.

"We cannot waste one more day in bringing about the change that is so urgently needed, as has been set out clearly through the work of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs. The intent of the members of the Assembly, clearly expressed by its Chairperson Paul Reid and in its recommendations, is to bring about a fundamental change in how we currently address the drugs issue in Ireland."

Ms Quigley said that a crucial recommendation is that people who use drugs should no longer be treated as criminals, namely decriminalisation.

"By using the criminal justice system to deal with drug use we have been saying to people – you are doing something bad and we have the right to punish you for it. We are now recognising that this approach is not only ineffective, it is making things worse. We need to fundamentally change this message, and this requires not only that we end criminalisation but that we also remove the threat of criminalisation that can be held over people in diversion-based approaches."

Anna Quigley said that the Citizens' Assembly is clear that it is the responsibility of the Oireachtas to work out how to implement the recommendation on decriminalisation and to consider the legal issues involved.

"The most obvious way is to remove the offence of 'possession' from the existing drugs legislation, and while a previous Government Working Group described this as difficult to do, the Oireachtas Committee can now consider it in more detail and look at how any such difficulties can be addressed and overcome."

"Removing this current moral judgement of drug use as 'bad' is a crucial step in ensuring the effective implementation of all the other Citizens' Assembly recommendations, as it frees us up to focus more clearly on the broader underlying causes of drug-related harms. We know that people from all walks of life use drugs and that many people do not experience problems as a result, but we also know that the greatest impact of drug-related harms continues to be in poor and minority communities, and that this impact continues to be devastating."

Ms Quigley explained that the intention of the Citizens' Assembly is that the implementation of its recommendations will result in fundamental change for the better in the lives of people in our communities.

“The Citizens’ Assembly has called for the drugs issue to be a policy priority as part of an overall socio-economic strategy and this approach must be central to informing the work of the Oireachtas Committee. It is crucial that the new Drugs Strategy is aligned with and underpinned by a national anti-poverty strategy supported by a major investment in community development.

“Our many years of experience tell us that the most effective way to respond to the impact of drugs in our communities is to ensure that people who use drugs, their families and the wider community are fully engaged in the decision-making processes at local, regional and national level. In recent years this community development approach to drugs has been more or less removed from our drugs strategy, resulting in centralised decision-making that is not primarily focused on community needs. The Citizens’ Assembly recommendations recognise how crucial this stakeholder engagement is and the need to adequately support it.”

Anna Quigley concluded by saying that the Citizens’ Assembly’s report is proposing very significant and fundamental change in how we are currently responding to the drugs issue and this requires strong and informed political leadership. The government needs to show this leadership now by immediately convening the Oireachtas Committee and supporting it every step of the way in getting its crucial work completed without any delay. It is literally a matter of life and death, Ms Quigley said.