

CITYWIDE DRUGS CRISIS CAMPAIGN 17TH July 2017

PRESS RELEASE ON THE LAUNCH OF THE NEW NATIONAL DRUGS STRATEGY (NDS)

The community sector representatives have actively participated in developing the new NDS over the last year and the document being launched today sets out some important key principles which are supported by Citywide. We welcome the setting up of a Working Group to look at alternative approaches to the possession of drugs for personal use, which represents an important next step towards ending the situation where people who use drugs are treated as criminals.

We also welcome the commitment to an integrated drugs and alcohol strategy as a key priority. However we retain our significant concern that this commitment has been often stated over the years, but has not yet been introduced in practice, and is a commitment that will continue to be opposed by the alcohol industry .

While welcoming these key development in our drugs policy, Citywide has stated consistently that neither of these policy changes can be implemented effectively without significant investment in services. The Strategy sets out a 3 year Action Plan 2018-2020 which includes a range of actions which aim to address issues that are crucial for the delivery of services in our communities, but we have significant concerns about how these actions will be implemented.

The interagency partnership approach has been crucial to implementation of the NDS since 1996 and the Strategy document states that this partnership approach will remain a cornerstone of the new NDS. However it is our view, and we have highlighted this many times in recent years, that interagency partnership on the drugs issue is no longer working effectively at either national, regional or local level and that the key policy decisions are now made within government departments and agencies and not in the interagency structures on which communities are represented.

We have argued for a strong and pro-active National Committee that holds all stakeholders to account for their delivery of NDS actions and provides support for the crucial role of Drugs Task Forces at a local and regional level. It is crucial that the proposed new structure delivers on this from the very first meeting.

One of the most serious barriers to effective implementation of the new NDS remains the failure to adequately address the underlying causes of our serious community drug problems. The Rabbitte report in 1996 recognised that serious problem drug use is concentrated in communities experiencing large-scale social and economic deprivation and marginalisation. Analysis carried out for this new strategy confirms the close connection between the level of problem substance misuse and levels of deprivation still persists today over 20 years later.

In the years since 1996, the drugs problem in these economically marginalised communities has become chronic, deep-rooted and embedded, impacting negatively on all aspects of

community life. Intimidation associated with the drugs trade is experienced by communities both on a low level and through incidents of serious violence. If we are serious about tackling the impact of problem drug use in our communities we need to address the underlying issues that have persisted throughout the lifetime of all of our drug strategies.

The final element for effective implementation of the NDS actions is realistic and adequate costings. Many of the actions involve expansion and/or development of existing services or setting up new ones. Given that existing services are still operating on budgets that have not recovered from six years of cumulative cuts, a significant investment of resources is required for implementation of the three-year Action Plan 2018-2020. There is huge potential to build on the work of our Community Drug Projects in delivering local services and this needs to be prioritised in the implementation of NDS actions.

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