

30th October 2019

ALL FORMER DRUGS MINISTERS UNITE TO CALL ON GOVERNMENT TO RESTORE CONFIDENCE IN NATIONAL DRUGS STRATEGY

Former Ministers express concern and frustration at failure of Government to honour its commitments to work in partnership with community groups

All of the country's former Ministers of State with responsibility for the National Drugs Strategy have united together to call on the Government to restore confidence in the National Drugs Strategy in particular because the partnership approach which underpins the Strategy is in danger of collapse. The statement by the former Ministers will be made today at an event organised by Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign in Dublin's Buswells Hotel.

The statement was signed by all of the former Drugs Ministers between 1996 and 2016 including Pat Rabbitte, Chris Flood, Eoin Ryan, Noel Ahern, Pat Carey, John Curran TD, Róisín Shortall TD, Alex White and Senator Aodhán Ó Riordáin.

Pat Rabbitte explained that the former Ministers are calling on the Government to act as a matter of urgency to restore confidence in the National Drugs Strategy which has been in operation since 1996.

"Having been adopted by the State in 1996 as a radical new approach to drugs policy in Ireland, the partnership approach, which underpinned the National Drugs Strategy, has been reaffirmed by every successive government since – recognising that community participation and interagency working is crucial to an effective response to an increasingly complex and challenging drugs problem," Mr Rabbitte said.

"When launching its new National Drugs Strategy *Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery*, in July 2017, the current Government recommitted to this approach, stating that '*partnership between the statutory, community and voluntary sectors was a major factor in the success of previous strategies and will continue to be the cornerstone of the new strategy*'. In particular, the Taoiseach, in his foreword to the Strategy, stated '*It recognises the importance of supporting the participation of communities in key decision-making structures, so that their experience and knowledge informs the development of solutions to solve problems related to substance misuse in their areas*'.

"Two years on from the launch of *Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery*, we, as former Ministers, are concerned and frustrated at the failure of Government to meet these commitments. At national, regional and local level, decision-making authority is being taken away from the Strategy's partnership structures and is reverting to the Dept of Health and the HSE, who now make the key decisions centrally and without consultation with communities," Pat Rabbitte explained.

Pat Carey said that the role of the Drug and Alcohol Task Forces in delivering on the Strategy at local and regional level is being undermined, with Task Forces being treated as if they are HSE-led projects rather than interagency partnership bodies with a collective responsibility to respond to local needs.

“Communities are being devastated by the impact of the drugs problem. Drug-related deaths in Ireland are at the highest level ever; new drugs appear regularly on the illicit market while familiar drugs such as cannabis are becoming more potent, and far too many people are living daily with the nightmare of drug-related intimidation and violence. The worst impact of drug-related harms continues to be in the most disadvantaged communities that have the least resources to respond. Now, more than ever, we need our National Drugs Strategy to work.

“We are calling on the Taoiseach to appoint representation at a senior level from his own Department to the National Oversight Committee (NOC) to ensure that the partnership structures, i.e. the NOC, its sub-committees and the Task Forces, are supported at the highest level of Government to do the job that is set out for them in the National Drugs Strategy. This also requires an immediate re-investment of resources in the Strategy so that budgets lost to local areas between 2008 and 2014 are restored,” Pat Carey said on behalf of the former Ministers.

Speaking at the same event, the University of the West of Scotland’s Dr Aileen O’Gorman, supported the former Ministers’ call for community-based drugs services to be at the heart of the National Drugs Strategy.

“Community drugs services have a long and impressive tradition of responding to the needs of people experiencing drug-related harms in their communities. On a daily basis, they work with people with multiple interdependent needs — a legacy of unmet needs by the State. Unfortunately they are having to do so in an increasing hostile policy environment that often refutes the value of their approach and work, while continuing to create the needs community services strive to address.

“The drug-related harms communities witness are largely social and are inseparable from broader structural and systemic problems. In this context, people’s problems with drugs and alcohol cannot be reduced to a disease of the individual to be treated with medical intervention alone. Nor, can they be addressed in isolation. Community drug services unique contribution to the public good is their capacity to address drug-related harms through a broader ‘whole person’ and ‘whole community’ approach and to provide accessible, inclusive, and safe spaces to deliver trauma informed care,” Dr Aileen O’Gorman concluded.

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