



CITYWIDE DRUGS CRISIS CAMPAIGN

June 2024

Implementing the Recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs

Step 1 Change the Law, Change the Culture

Step 2 Invest in addressing broader social context

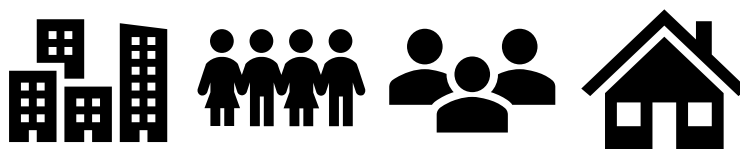
Step 3 Invest in services on long-term and consistent basis

Step 4 Invest in Community Participation

Step 5 Open up a discussion about the impact on our communities of the current legal framework under which drugs are controlled

Step 6 Challenge Drug-related Stigma and its Underlying Causes

Step 7 Ensuring Implementation of the Oireachtas Committee Recommendations



NOTE: 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 Oversight Committee of the National Drugs Strategy (NDS). **More info and contact:** www.citywide.ie info@citywide.ie [@drugscrisis](https://twitter.com/drugscrisis)

Background and Introduction

The Oireachtas Committee on Drugs has been established by government to produce a plan for the implementation of the Recommendations from the [Citizens Assembly on Drugs](#). The full set of CA recommendations can be read on pages 9-18 of the Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use

https://citizensassembly.ie/wp-content/uploads/CADU_Volume1.pdf

The members of the Oireachtas Committee are as follows:

Michael McNamara TD	Ind (Chair)
Paul McAuliffe TD	FF
Jennifer Murnane O'Connor TD	FF
Thomas Gould TD	SF
Mark Ward TD	SF
Josepha Madigan TD	FG
David Stanton TD	FG
Neasa Hourigan TD	GP
Matt Shanahan TD	Ind
Sen Mary Seery Kearney	FG
Sen Marie Sherlock	Lab
Sen Lynn Ruane	Ind
Sen Mary Fitzpatrick	FF
Sen Malachai O'Hara	GP

<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/committees/33/drugs-use/membership/>

This short document sets out a series of key actions that we believe are crucial to how we implement the main recommendations in the Citizens' Assembly report for the benefit of all of us in Irish society and, in particular, for the people who are experiencing the most serious harms as a result of our current approach to drugs.

A Vision for our National Drugs Strategy

Our starting point for implementing the Citizens' Assembly recommendations is to set out an inclusive Vision for our National Drugs Strategy in which **people who use drugs are seen, not as somehow different or separate to others, but as full and equal members of our society**. An example of this kind of vision is set out in the current National Drugs Strategy of Portugal which aims to promote people's ability 'to deal with the challenges that daily life poses for them, so they can have an experience as close as possible to fulfilment and well-being' and recognises that 'the ability to deal with challenges in our lives is shaped and influenced by the broader social and environmental context in which we live.'

Step 1 Change the Law, Change the Culture

Ending the criminalisation of people who use drugs will finally allow us to shift the focus away from moral judgement of individuals - and the blame and shame that goes with it - to recognising and understanding that problems relating to drugs arise from the wider social situation in which people live their lives, mainly but not exclusively, situations of poverty, inequality and discrimination.

Recommendation 5 calls for a comprehensive health-led response to possession of drugs for personal use and the Citizens' Assembly highlights the need for "significant changes to laws governing penalties for possession of drugs for personal use, effectively amounting to decriminalisation." If our approach is to be "comprehensive" and "health-led", decriminalisation cannot be discretionary, time-limited, or conditional. **The most effective way to achieve this is to remove the offence of possession of drugs for personal use by repealing Section 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act.**

In preparation for ending criminalisation, An Garda Síochána (AGS) should be supported in the development of clear and practical protocols for engaging with people in possession of drugs, that make it clear for everyone involved where policing responsibility begins and ends and where other agencies need to take on responsibilities. People who use drugs need to be partners in developing the protocols.

As first responders the police will continue to have a role in preventing harm and reducing the impact of drug use on the street, and if they are to be effective in that

role, it is crucial that referral options such as Outreach Harm Reduction Teams and Drug Consumption Rooms are available and accessible when they are needed.

Step 2 Invest in addressing broader social context

A crucial lesson from over 20 years' experience of implementing the Portuguese Drug Policy Model is that ending [criminalisation must be matched with investment in services](#). Portugal invested not just in harm reduction and treatment services, but also in a wide range of social and community supports, in particular for housing and employment, as part of an approach that aimed to address the wider issues of poverty and inequality.

In its recommendations the CA also recognises the need to address the relationship between poverty and drug-related harms. Recommendation 8 calls for drugs to be prioritised as a policy priority as part of an overall socio-economic strategy while Recommendation 13 calls for drug policy to prioritise the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups and disadvantaged communities.

If we are to make progress on these challenging ambitions, we need to [re-establish a Combat Poverty Agency independent of government and with the power to hold government to account](#). Previous experience has shown how the work of the Combat Poverty Agency has made a crucial contribution to engaging communities in a genuine partnership approach to developing and implementing effective responses to poverty-related issues, including drugs, at local and national level.

Step 3 Invest in services on long-term and consistent basis

Challenges that are currently being experienced in Portugal around drug use are not an outcome of decriminalisation but have come about because of [disinvestment in services](#), and in particular, the integrated social services that are needed to address long-term quality of life issues. A crucial message that we bring back from Portugal, based on their experience from 2000 to date, is that [we cannot and will not be effective in addressing our problems relating to drugs unless we commit to long-term, consistent, and sustained investment in public services in our communities well into the future](#).

The CA recommendations are clear in identifying the need for more funding to be made available. Recommendations 16 and 17 highlight the need for significant additional funding to be allocated on a multi-annual basis to services across statutory, community and voluntary sectors. Recommendations 3 and 4 call for funding for enhanced services in criminal justice settings. [The need for a move to multi-annual funding has been discussed for way too long now, it is time to go ahead and put it in place!](#)

We have a unique model of Community Drug Projects that aim to deliver integrated services to support people across all the issues impacting on their lives, and also support them to have their voices heard on the issues that affect them. We need to invest in this model so we can realise its potential; it is very hard to understand why this potential has not been properly recognised and supported to date.

Step 4 Invest in Community Participation

Community participation at local, regional and national level has been a fundamental principle of our NDS since 1996, but it has not been actively supported in recent years. The CA Recommendations provide the opportunity to reinstate community voices at the heart of our NDS, including families and people who use drugs, supported and facilitated by our community networks, such as Citywide, UISCE, Pavee Point and National Family Support Steering Group.

Recommendations 12 and 15 call for effective stakeholder involvement in a whole of society approach to drug-related issues and Recommendation 14 states that drugs policy design should be informed by people who use drugs as well as family members, with provision of supports to enable this involvement.

The Portuguese experience reinforces the call here in Ireland, supported by recent peer-led research, for greater engagement and empowerment of People who use Drugs in all aspects of service development and delivery. [Payment for Peer Workers has been in place in Portugal since 2011 and has proven to be really positive, not just for the individual worker but also for how services are run.](#) The Committee should consider a similar model for implementation in an Irish context.

We need to make sure our networks are inclusive of all minority communities, including Travellers, other Ethnic Minority and Migrant communities, LGBTI+ and Trans communities, and also inclusive of the specific experiences of Women. The Oireachtas Committee should consider a specific initiative to support and facilitate an

independent voice for young people that is ongoing throughout the life of the next NDS.

Recommendation 26 talks about building resilient and sustainable communities through local partnerships in both urban and rural settings and recognises the need for providing support to communities to engage in this process. It is striking that the recommendation makes no reference to the Drug & Alcohol Task Forces that have been in place for many years to carry out the very role that is being described! It is essential that the Oireachtas Committee looks for and receives clarification from government that it will restore the independence of the DATFs to carry out their key role as community-led interagency partnerships advocating and campaigning for the needs of their communities.

Step 5 Open up a discussion about the impact on our communities of the current legal framework under which drugs are controlled

A number of issues were raised at the CA relating to the drugs trade and the serious harms being experienced under our current approach by people using drugs, their families, and the wider community. However, these issues were not addressed in any detail at the CA and there was no in-depth consideration of the wider impact in our society of current drug control policies.

Recommendation 24 refers to prioritising the objective of reducing illicit drugs supply and associated structures at international, national & local level. Recommendation 25 calls for enhanced investment in community-based youth work and community development projects as part of a diversion approach for young people involved in the drugs trade and Recommendation 27 refers to tackling the source and impact of drug-related violence and intimidation.

In considering the issues relating to the drugs trade, the Oireachtas Committee should examine the recommendations made in this regard by the Oireachtas Justice Committee in its report of December 2022. https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_justice/reports/2022/2022-12-14_report-on-an-examination-of-the-present-approach-to-sanctions-for-possession-of-certain-amounts-of-drugs-for-personal-use_en.pdf

The vote at the CA on the regulation of cannabis indicated that there is a significant level of support for at least a discussion of the issues around regulation.

Step 6 Challenge Drug-related Stigma and its Underlying Causes

Drug-related stigma cannot be adequately addressed without recognising and addressing the broader social stigma that exists relating to class, poverty, and inequality; the extent to which poverty-related and drug-related stigma have become intertwined and embedded in our society presents a major challenge that requires a long-term and sustained response.

As we begin to implement a policy in Ireland that will end the criminalisation of people who use drugs, there is an urgent need to develop and implement a high-profile and well-funded National Anti-Stigma Campaign that will be ongoing through the life of the next National Drugs Strategy.

The Committee should look at developing a national campaign that builds on the experience of the Citywide Anti-Stigma Campaign <https://stopthestigma.ie/> and the evaluation by TCD of the SAOL/Citywide Anti-Stigma Training <https://www.citywide.ie/resources/2021-citywide-antistigma-training-report/>

Step 7 Ensuring Implementation of the Oireachtas Committee Report

The need for strong and effective political leadership to prioritise the drugs issue emerges strongly from Recommendations 6 to 11. Recommendation 11 calls for government to assign responsibility at the highest level to provide accountability for implementation of the next Drugs Strategy. Our experience over the years has shown that a Cabinet Sub-Committee and an Office of the Minister for Drugs, with a sole focus on the National Drugs Strategy and not multiple responsibilities, is what is required.

Around 800 people a year are dying from drug-related causes; it is absolutely inexcusable that this is happening and it will be unforgiveable if we end up with yet another report left sitting on a shelf.

It must be an absolute priority for the Oireachtas Committee that it gains government and cross-party support for reinstating meaningful oversight structures with real power to hold stakeholders to account. Experience tells us that without this, there will not be effective implementation of the actions proposed by this Committee.

Summary of Key Actions for Implementation

End the criminalisation of people who use drugs by removing the offence of possession of drugs for personal use by repealing Section 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act.

To support and facilitate policing in this new situation

- I. Clear and practical protocols are needed that make it clear for all involved where policing responsibility begins and ends and where other agencies are required to take on responsibilities.
- II. For these protocols to work, it is crucial that referral options such as Outreach Harm Reduction Teams and Drug Consumption Rooms are available and accessible when they are needed.

A multi-annual funding plan to be agreed across the lifetime of the next NDS with a commitment for significant additional funding to be allocated to services across statutory, community and voluntary sectors.

Re-establish a Combat Poverty Agency independent of government and with the power to hold government to account in relation to progress on tackling poverty.

Support for community development activities to be in place as a core element of implementing the next NDS through partnership with our community networks.

Investment in our unique model of Community Drug Projects that deliver integrated services through a community development approach.

Additional support and investment to be provided to promote the engagement of paid Peer Workers in all drug-related services.

The Oireachtas Committee must look for and receive clarification from government that it will restore the independence of the Drug & Alcohol Task Forces (DATFs) so that they can effectively carry out their role in their communities.

In considering issues relating to regulation of drugs, the Oireachtas Committee should look at and consider the recommendations made by the Oireachtas Justice Committee in its report of December 2022.

As we begin to implement a policy in Ireland that will end the criminalisation of people who use drugs, there is an urgent need to develop and implement a high-profile and well-funded National Anti-Stigma Campaign.

It will be a crucial priority for the Oireachtas Committee to gain government and cross-party support for reinstating meaningful oversight structures with real power to hold stakeholders to account, without this there will not be effective implementation of the actions that are agreed by this Committee.