

7th November 2017

Minister Catherine Byrne T.D.
Dept. of Health
Hawkins House
Dublin 2

c.c. Susan Scally, DPU

Dear Minister Byrne

We are writing to you as Chairperson of the National Oversight Committee (NOC) in our capacity as National Community Representatives on the NOC. We very much welcome your confirmation at the first NOC meeting on 29th September that the allocation of the additional resources available for the National Drugs Strategy in 2018 would take place through the NOC. This role in allocating resources is in line with and a core part of the role of the NOC role in giving leadership, direction, prioritisation and mobilisation of resources. It is also in line with the Taoiseach's strong statement in the NDS document which supports our role as community representatives on structures that have the power and authority to make decisions.

You will understand our concern therefore when we read the content of a Dáil debate on 12th October and the response to a parliamentary question on 17th October. The transcript of the Dáil debate sets out in some detail decisions that appear to have already been made about how the additional money for 2018 will be used. We make the point very clearly that we are not taking issue with the need for, or the importance of, the services to be funded as set out in the transcript. However, it clearly raises a question for us about how the process for allocation of resources will actually work under the new NDS structures, as there has been no discussion whatsoever at the NOC of these or any other allocations and no notification to members of the NOC that these allocations have been decided.

This is already causing us difficulty in our position as members of the NOC; as you will be aware, during the finalisation of the NDS document, we looked for and received commitments that the new NDS structures will operate as a genuine interagency partnership and we have in turn communicated those commitments to our community representatives. We have quoted the Taoiseach's statement about the participation of communities in decision-making structures. However we are now in a position of having to explain to these representatives across the country that the first we heard of the detail of these allocations for 2018 was in reading the Dáil transcripts, similar to every other member of the public.

A further point of serious concern that arises from the Dáil documents is the side-lining of the role of Drug and Alcohol Task Forces, despite statements in the NDS setting out their crucial role. We are in the process of meeting with community reps in all 24 TF areas across the country to discuss how we can work together in revitalising their role and the role of Task Forces overall. Yet in the Dáil debate

on 12th October, there is no reference to the role of the Task Forces in driving the implementation the NDS at local and regional level, and the PQ answer on 17th October doesn't take account of either the role of the Task Forces or of the NOC. Instead, it states that "the key health-related priorities for 2018 and associated resource requirements will be determined in the context of the HSE National Service Plan and the amount of funding available to each Task Force, Project and Programme in 2018 will be determined by the Dept. of Health in conjunction with the HSE." This approach takes no account of the Task Force responsibility to develop a collective plan that is agreed by all of its members, of which the HSE is one, for the implementation of the NDS. The approval of these plans and the allocation of resources for their implementation require the same collective interagency approach at a national level and should therefore be the responsibility of the NOC, with the HSE as one of its members.

In addition, it has been brought to our attention by Community Reps that Task Forces are being informed by the HSE that in 2018 there is likely to be some additional funding available for Regional DATFs and no additional funding available for Local DATFs. We very much welcome an indication of additional funding for the RDATFs, as for many years they have faced huge challenges in covering large regions with very limited resources, while at the same time having to respond to a range of different drug problems and contexts within these regions. Further to our previous point about the responsibility of the Task Forces, it is essential that each RDATF is now mandated to develop a collective plan for their regions to be used as the basis for allocation of these additional resources as they become available.

At the same time as the indication of an increase for RDATFs is very welcome, it is absolutely unacceptable and without justification that there is no indication of an increase in funding for LDATFs. The evidence clearly shows that the worst impact of the drugs problem continues to be in urban disadvantaged communities, the majority of which are located in LDATF areas. As Minister, you are aware of the crucial work being carried out by the Community Drug Projects who work on the ground in these communities across a whole range of services - providing treatment, rehabilitation, recovery, harm reduction, stabilisation, after care, alcohol services, counselling, therapies, childcare, family support, young people's programmes, education, community awareness, community policing - to meet the needs of their local communities.

You are aware from the many visits you have made to these projects of the struggles they face on a daily basis to continue doing this work, in particular in light of the seven years of funding cuts they experienced from 2008 to 2014. Not only does it seem there will be no additional funding available for the work of these projects in LDATF areas, there is not even a step on the road to restoration of the funds they have lost due to cuts. And while staff in statutory agencies are having their wage levels gradually restored, no resources are being provided to restore the wages in community projects. This already has and will continue to result in highly trained and experienced staff being lost to the community services.

We are bringing these concerns to you now so that we can carry out our responsibility as national reps to provide informed reports to our community reps and to respond to the concerns that they raise

with us. Following the launch of the new NDS we wrote to Taoiseach Leo Varadkar welcoming his commitment to a whole-of-government approach that requires services to work together and to the participation of communities in key decision making structures. The Taoiseach's Department has assured us of his ongoing support for the implementation of a genuine interagency partnership approach to addressing the issue of alcohol and drug misuse, and it is essential that our actions in implementing the NDS are consistent with this approach.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Fergus McCabe

Anna Quigley

National Community Sector Reps